

Iran-Saudi Relations: From Rivalry to Nowhere

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Abstract

Iran and Saudi Arabia are the two main powers of the Middle East. Since Islamic revolution (1979) the competition for power, security and regional dominance has resulted in proxy wars in the region, especially, Bahrain, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Saudi and Iranian rivalry revolves around some key issues such as; their contradictory ideologies (Sunni vs Shiite) Pan-Arab issues like Palestine issue, Saudi inclination towards West, their contradictory policies about energy and desire to become dominant power of entire region. Iran wants regional hegemony, rolling back US influence in the Middle East, empowerment of Shiite in the Middle East through sectarianism. Sectarianism has always been a major focus in the Persian Gulf and beyond for the Iranian regional policy formulation. Peace and stability in Middle East would not be possible till Riyadh and Tehran end rivalry.

Key Words:

Iran, Saudi Arabia, Regional Dominance, Sectarianism, Proxy Wars, Ideology

Introduction

The pre-1979 era, in the Iran-Saudi Arabia relations' context can be marked as a period when both regional powers were espoused in cooperative and friendly terms (Hagood, A. (2010). After the departure of the British in December 1971, the relations between the two countries reached to an all time high. Nixon Doctrine was initiated to promote pro-Western policies and to protect the interest of America. The role of 'Twin pillar' was played by Iran and Saudi Arabia to secure Western interests in the Middle East (Grumet, 2015). The relations were so pleasant that once the Shah of Iran reflected; "I had traveled on several occasions to Saudi Arabia, a country whose integrity and independence is sacred for all Muslims. As a faithful Muslim and Defender of the Faith, I hope that Saudi Arabia will always remain the guardian of these holy places, Mecca and Medina." The Shah of Iran was in complete agreement with the Saudis terms and conditions set for the regional engagements, and that too furthered the western interests, namely those of the Britain and the US. The domestic factors in Iran, especially the Khomeini's group, however, did not agree to the Shah in maintaining relationships

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with Saudi *Arabia* under the terms that nurtured western interests. These Pro-Western policies of the Shah of Iran led to an internal uprising that subsequently turned into a historical Iranian Revolution.

The relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia took a different trajectory just after the historical Iranian Revolution of 1979 that resulted in the political empowerment of Ulema and the imposition of their theocratic doctrine, under the supervision of Khomeini. However, this drift and dormant nature in relationships between the two countries was not that instant. At first, Saudi Arabia was very diligent and felt relieved with the Iranian Revolution as it brought Islam in the mainstream of not only in the Iranian society but also in the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Keeping all these things in mind, Saudi Arabia instantly recognized this newly established Islamic government of Iran with King Khalid of Saudi Arabia sending a letter to Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of Iranian Revolution, welcomed the new Republic and also showed their eagerness to persist the collaboration under the umbrella of the “Islamic Solidarity” that will provide strong and long-standing basis for the relationships between the two countries. This euphoric start in the relationships between the two countries was further strengthened by the historical words of deputy Prime Minister, Prince Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz who once expressed the Islamic bond between Iran and Saudi Arabia by quoting; “Islam is the organizer of our relations. Muslims interests are the goals of our activities and the Holy Qur’an is the constitution of both countries....the fact is that we are very relieved by the Islamic Republic of Iran’s policy making Islam, not heavy armaments, the organizer of cooperation, a base for dialogue, and the introduction to a prosperous and dignified future”(Hussein, 2012).

However, Iran and Saudi Arabia terms changed soon and the statements of Ayatollah Khomeini against monarchy further created distrust between both States. For instance, Khomeini perceived monarchy as un-Islamic and he opposed this system in the entire Middle East which comprise Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Syria and some other small kingdoms that enjoyed monarchy type of government under a king. These States considered Iranian ambitions as a threat for their ideology and perceived that Iran wants to export its revolution at regional level. Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini started an oversee campaign that was aimed to secure a moral, political and religious unity among the small groups based in the rest of the Middle East. Among all the Middle Eastern countries, Iran pick-out Saudi Arabia as a main point of its revolutionary campaign and started assisting groups within Saudi Arabia to lead a similar campaign against the absolute rulers of the Kingdom. He also made public statements that undermined the legitimacy of the Royal Family and augmented the vacuum between the already tense relationships between Tehran and Riyadh. Saudi authorities were greatly angered on what they called as “the flagrant and

destabilizing” policies of the Khomeini which lead to the tensions in relations between the two countries.

Deadly Hajj Incident of 1987

During the Hajj of 1987, few Shiite groups protested against Kingdom but this protest was treated harshly by Saudi Arabia resulted more than four-hundred casualties with the majority being Iranian nationals. In retaliation to the chaos backed by Iran, Saudi government banned Iranian pilgrims from the annual hajj pilgrimage. The angry Iranians backfired by ransacking the Saudis embassy in Tehran, resulting in the death of one of the Saudi’s officials which followed the cutting off in relations by the Saudi Arabia till 1991. Following the Mecca incident, Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini 1987, in response to what they called as the “brutality of Saudi police”, they criticized the Saudi Royal family and monarchy and called it illegitimate and un-Islamic. These vile and ungodly Wahhabis, are like daggers which have always pierced the heart of the Muslims from the back. Khomeini in a speech on 1988 had accused Saudi anti-Shiite policies and also depicted them as Sunni agent who wants to eradicate Shiite. The sword of blasphemy and division, which has been hidden in the hypocritical cloak of Yazid’s followers and descendants of the Umayyad dynasty, God’s curse be upon them, had to come out again from the same cloak of Abu Sufyan's heirs to destroy and Kill(Menashri, 1989).

The Role of Kingdom in Iran-Iraq War

Furthermore, Saudi assistance for Saddam in Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) also worsened the Tehran’s relations with Riyadh. Saudi Arabia provided diplomatic, economic and military support to Iraq during the war and also provided forty billion dollars loan for the reinforcement of Saddam’s military. Besides this, unlike America that repeatedly imposed economic and military sanctions over Iran, the Saudis went for a different way in 1985-86 and increased oil supply in global market that dropped the oil prices. (Okruhlik, 2003a, pp. 113-125). These provocative measures by Saudi Arabia caused an immense dent to the economy of Iran as the fall in oil prices reduced the revenues during the critical years of Iranian war with Iraq. These economic provocations lead to a serious rift in relationships between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Fürtig, 2007, pp. 627-640).

Countering Iran by Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

During Iran-Iraq war in 1981, Saudi Arabia along with other six Gulf countries Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) established Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a security response to the Iranian threat as well as to counter the negative implications of Iran-Iraq War. One key purpose was

to intensify the Saudi pressure on Iran with the establishment of GCC. The charter of GCC initially ruled out any hostile intensions towards Iran and clearly outlined that the formation of GCC is primarily aimed “to effect coordination, integration, and interconnection between Member States in all fields,” mainly for economic affluence and communal defense. However, the political and hostile nature of GCC was revealed when the Secretary-General of GCC Abdullah Bishara said in 1982 that Iranian desire for the dominance is the threat for stability of region (Okruhlik, 2003, pp.113-125). Since then the gulf countries are playing an active role (through GCC) in containing Iran’s political and strategic ambitions from reaching out to the destabilization of the Middle Eastland more specifically to the monarchism.

Restoration of Diplomatic Relations in 1991

Following severe diplomatic crisis between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 1988 that were created by the Mecca incident in 1987, both countries resorted to a bunch of engagements including on humanitarian basis. In 1990, Iran was struck by deadly earthquake that killed almost forty thousand people (Ighani, 2016) and destroyed a huge amount of infrastructure. Saudi Arabia, despite having suspended diplomatic ties, came forward and sent a generous amount of aid to help Iran rebuild their infrastructure. However, the power relation in Gulf was altered with the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990. Iran and Saudi Arabia once again united against their common threat Saddam but the diplomatic relations could not restore till March 19, 1991(Fürtig, 2007, pp.627-640).But finally these cooperative circumstances led both countries to restore diplomatic engagements in late 1991.

Smooth and Flexible Engagements (From 1991 to 2001)

After a dramatic development of restoration of formal diplomatic relationships between Iran and Saudi Arabia, both countries tried to perceive the principle that hostility and flagrant approaches are not going to work and will not only add to the damage of both countries but will also bring deleterious effects on the camaraderie of the entire *Muslim Ummah*. This decade was more genuine in its nature of hilarity and mirth, accompanied by the boisterous gestures shown by the heads of both countries. In 1997, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah attended the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) summit in Tehran. The visit yields more importance because it was a visit by the most senior Saudi official since 1979. In reciprocity to this positive gesture by the Saudis, Iranian President Muhammad Khatami, in 1999, visited the Kingdom and met the Crown Prince Abdullah and discussed matters of mutual concerns. This was also an important visit as it was the first ever since Islamic revolution by an Iranian leader. These positive diplomatic gestures also influenced their relations and brought some major and significant changes to the foreign policies of these two competing powers of the Middle East. Terrorism

was perceived to be a mutual challenge and both countries vowed to continue mutual efforts in combating terrorism and extremism in the Middle East. These developments were formally reflected in 2001 when a security agreement on terrorism and drug trafficking was signed between Tehran and Riyadh.

Saudi-Iran Relation after Saddam Hussain

The antagonistic ties with Iran-Kingdom have been intensified since the fall of Baathist regime. Iran felt relieved with the Invasion of Iraq by US and the ousting of the long-term ruler of Iraq, but also left a ground that was figurative in relation to the proxies of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The most significant thing fostering the rivalry between Iran and the Kingdom was the political enforcement of Shiites that led to the Shiite regime in the Iraqi government. The fall of Saddam was followed by a civil war in which the two countries played a fraudulent game and used Islam to further their political and strategic interests in that part of the Middle East.

The security paradigm of Middle East got changed since the removal of Saddam regime and it also enhanced the power competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The period after 2011 was quiet significant in regards to the relationships between Tehran and Riyadh. During the Arab Spring political crisis in the Middle East, Iran started employing its clandestine assets in waging a proxy war with the Arab monarchies, especially against the Al-Saud family which ultimately augmented the tensions between the two countries. During this time Iran wanted to exploit all those demonstrations that resulted in the “Arab Spring”, for the sole purpose of installing its long-standing revolutionary agenda. Conversely, the Saudi Arabia, being very much concerned with Iranian actions, saw the things reasonably and carefully so as to sustain its moral legitimacy of leadership as well as to counter the Iranian motives. This situation followed some major events that can be more specifically understood by the following timeline.

Saudi Arabia accused Iran for involvement in the demonstrations of Bahrain (2011) and also for Shiite protests in its Eastern Province (2012). Furthermore, Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr was the key figure behind the Saudi protests and he was sentenced to death by Kingdom in 2014. This action of Saudi Arabia was condemned by Iranian government. This followed huge protests in the Iranian capital condemning Saudi in its act. The signing of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was also a significant event in the history of Iran. The world powers P5+1 signed a historic nuclear deal with Iran on July, 2015 that ensured the Iranian commitment of not building a nuclear weapon. Saudi, being a rival country was much concerned about the development. The Saudi press agency reported that King Salman was cautious but then hoped that the agreement would reinforce the stability and security of Middle East.

Main Differences between Iran-Saudi Arabia

Saudis Inclination towards the West

One of the reasons straining the relationships between these two Islamic countries is the close ties between Riyadh and Washington. Saudi Arabia has been very cautious about the increasing influence and presence of Iran in the region and recognized that Iran could produce trouble for the Kingdom in its own borders; therefore, the US has been the strongest ally of Saudi Arabia for the last sixty years, maintaining close economic and military cooperation in the Middle East. The military engagements between the two countries are so strong that even thousands of American troops are stationed in Gulf on the recommendations of Saudi Arabia. Iran, on the other hand, is strongly opposed to any kind of US interference in the Middle East affairs, especially in Iran-Saudi matters, as it accuses the US for interference in the Muslim countries around the world. For Iran, America is a force that has always sought destabilizing policies for the Muslims and is responsible for the rifts among the Muslim nations.

Pan-Arab Issues

Iran has always been criticizing the Kingdom for ignoring the Pan-Arab issue such as Palestine. The Iranian officials are of the opinion that Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia are not doing enough in resolving the issues of Palestine which has long been a serious policy concern for the Iranian government. Saudi Arab, on the other hand, censures the Iranian government and Iranian intelligence for supporting the Jihadist groups within Palestine and Lebanon such as Hezbollah, for threatening the peace and security of the entire region and it will not help to resolve the contentious issue of Palestine and others. Moreover, the Iranians have sometimes used this card for upstaging their national interest by ridiculing the Saudi dynasty. Moreover, Iran is also posing serious challenges for Kingdom and staged them in front of domestic and regional audience especially on pan-Arab issues like Palestine issue (Wehrey, Karasik, Nader, Ghez, & Hansell, 2009).

Contradictions in Political Ideology

Despite having Islam as the basic and fundamental part of their culture and religious affairs, still there are some major conflicting differences between the ideology of Tehran and Riyadh. These Islamic ideologies has now transformed into political ideologies, affecting the governance and governmental structure, adding to the ideological differences between two different Islamic powers. The

Shia-Iran is based on the principle that an Islamic Jurist or a faqih should have the custodianship of the entire Muslim world. The Iranian government is legitimately governed under the sole supremacy of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Iranian Revolution. However, Saudi Arabia is very conservative and religious monarchy which, unlike Iran, does not accede to the revolutionary changes in the national system. Al-Saud family is the sole legitimate owners of the Saudi government which is totally unacceptable to the Iranians as they are calling it as illegitimate and even un-Islamic.

Role of Energy Policies

Saudi Arabia and Iran are two among the most of the most important countries known for the oil production around the world. Both countries are also the founding members of Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) with huge petroleum reservoirs and oil production facilities. However, the energy policies of Iran and Saudi Arabia has always been contradictory and caused severe tensions between the two hostile countries. The oil production of Saudi Arabian oil reservoirs was almost 10,460,710 (bbl/day) as per a report in 2016, surpassing the Iranian oil production of just 1,648,000 (bbl/day). Thus, Saudi Arabia, having huge reservoirs, has always sought to take a long-term view of global oil market and incentive to moderate prices. Conversely, Iran with comparatively smaller reserves has always focused on high prices in short term so as to fulfill the needs of its greater population of almost 80 million with high oil revenues.

Proxy Wars in the Middle East

After the US invasion of Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Iran are actively engaging to control the Islamic world and Middle Eastern region. Both powers are manipulating and interfering especially in the politics of Iraq, Yemen and Syria. Instead of a direct confrontation, both countries heavily relied on the opportunity provided by the events of the Arab Spring to weaken each other by supporting the assorted groups in a number of Middle Eastern countries which can be explained by doing thorough research on each of them. Before Arab Spring the regional rivalry of Iran and Saudi Arabia were mainly engaged in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Bahrain. Arab spring has enhanced this competition and complicated the situation of Middle East. After Iraq, Bahrain now Saudi Arabia and Iran are involved in a more dangerous situation for power struggle in Syria and Yemen.

Proxy War in Iraq

Iran was one among the most important countries that immensely benefited by the US invasion of Iraq and then, most importantly, by the brutal fall of a decade's long leader Saddam Hussain. After the Iranian revolution and especially

in Saddam's era, it was almost impossible for Iran to make their revolution penetrate into the Iraqi society, despite the sixty five percent of Shiite population, as the Baathist Saddam Hussain was known for the brutal repression of protests and revolutionary movements backed by Iran. The US invasion has eliminated the buffer State of Iraq and it enhanced the role of Iran in its neighboring countries (Chubin, 2009, pp165-190).

The fall of Saddam provided a viable opportunity for the Iranians to further their interests in the Shiite dominated Iraq which they could not do in the era of Saddam Hussain. Iraq being a strategically important country was never neglected by the policy makers in Riyadh and was focused on the growing Iranian influence in that Shiite majority Country. Prior to their national interest and strategic goals in the Middle East, Iran started supporting the Shiite insurgent groups within Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussain. This included efforts against the possible installation of a pliant regime by the United States that would threaten the Iranian assets in that region. In the case of Iraq the majority of Shiite population is providing more opportunities for Iran to influence the Bagdad. Saudi Arabia on the other hand remained absent in their efforts in Iraq, especially after the US-led invasion probably because they could not undermine the long-standing ties with the United States. Following the US withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, two major happenings greatly shifted the geopolitics of Iraq, the civil war and then the emergence of Daesh and some other Sunni backed insurgent groups which prompted an immense Iranian support for the Shiite backed groups operating there in Iraq. The Iranian backing for the Shiite rebel groups brought some major outcomes for Iran and today the Iranians enjoy a major share in the domestic and foreign policy making of Iraq.

Proxy War in Bahrain

The Iranian covet for influence and power in Bahrain is very historical in its nature as it is a very small country with majority of Shiite population, numbered as 70-75 percent, but ruled by a Sunni Al-Khalifa family. Before 1970, Iran sought its full sovereignty over the entire Bahraini island but this claim was abandoned by the deal that finalized between the Muhammad Shah Reza Pahlavi and the United Kingdom. After the British departure from the Gulf in late 1971, this small island has always been a crucial point for the rivalry of Saudi Arab and Iran. The study case of Bahrain is very significant in the context of sustaining a strategic rivalry between the Saudi Arabia and Iran; as Bahrain is an ideal play-ground for the Iranians to execute their long-desired ambitions of exporting their revolution into Saudi Arabia and other monarchies in the Middle East region. The two countries have competed immensely for the installation of their political agendas in Bahrain as this Island is prominent in relation to the security of Saudi Arabia especially, when it is connected through a 25 kilometer long King Fahad Causeway to oil rich

Shiite Eastern province of Kingdom(Mabon, 2016). Moreover, Saudis security concerns can be legitimized by the fact that incase of Iranian dominance over that state, it will take no time for Iran in emergency situation to inflict a heavy damage to the Saudis as it is just eight minutes flying time from Iran and thirty from Iraq(Cordesman,1997). So having these security concerns, Saudi Arabia would never like to compromise over the internal politics in Bahrain and so as Iran with regards to their own geo-political and geo-strategic ambitions.

The internal doctrines of Saudi Arabia and Iran are again different here when it comes to the power politics under the umbrella of proxy wars. Iran wants to spread its ideological influence throughout the region at the expense of Kingdom on one hand. On the other hand, Saudi monarchy is mainly depending on status-quo. Therefore, the overthrow of Khalifa family in Bahrain would be a direct threat for Saudi interest, security and its desire to lead the entire region (Downs, 2012). Several attempts made through clandestine backing by the Iranian government including the 1981 failed coup attempt in which Iran incited and supported the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain and tried to install the Shiite theocratic regime led by Hadi-Al-Mudarresi. Moreover, in a similar attempt to dismantle the Khalifa's leadership, during the Arab Spring in 2011, large protests were erupted against the Bahraini regime which prompted the GCC countries to intervene in support of Al-Khalifa. Despite the long-standing struggles by Iran for the internal dominance in the Bahraini politics, even having majority of Shiite population, still the Saudi government is enjoying a favorable and deep penetration into the Bahrain's policy making decisions and this was evident by the cutting off diplomatic ties with Iran by Bahrain in 2016 following the footsteps of Saudi Arabia in protest to the attack on Saudi embassy in Tehran.

Proxy War in Yemen

Over the years, Saudi Arabia and Iran has been fighting intensively over the Yemeni ground for the same cause as they tried to execute in other weak Middle Eastern countries. However, Yemen has always lived under the Saudis sphere of influence before the insurgency in 2014. The proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen was increased after 2011 when the Yemen was on the verge of political crisis and street protests started rattling the President Saleh's government and even lead to the his step down and thus the government was transferred to Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. Contrary to Ali Abdullah Saleh, Mansur Hadi was pro-Arab and anti-Houthis which provided another opportunity to Iran for furthering their support to Houthis against the Hadi's government. For Saudi Arabia, the empowerment of the Houthi rebel group has always been a potential threat to the security of the Kingdom as Houthi is a Shiite group, backed by Iran, and also enjoys popularity among the Yemeni masses. On the other hand, contrary to the Saudis, Iranians has always been a major sympathizer of the Houthi groups and

even provided them with financial and military support against the Yemeni government which the Iranians say is illegitimate and argue that Houthis are the real owners of Yemen.

The relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were strained severely when Houthis, in September 2014, stormed the Yemeni capital Sana'a and declared the self-claimed takeover of the whole country followed by the coup d'état. It is widely argued that the ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh provided a significant support to the Houthis with help of Iranian backing. Saudi Arabia angrily chastised the Iranians for their 'provocative' and illegitimate support to the Houthi rebels during their siege of Sana'a which prompted the denial of Iran. But threat posed by the Houthis power in Yemen was imminent and a serious cause of concern for the Saudis because Yemen shares a long border area with Yemen. Prior to any potential damage to the Saudi security, in March 2015, a coalition was made under the supervision of Saudi Arabia to counter any significant threat from across the border from Houthis as they feared the growing Iranian influence too in that region. The coalition contains almost 39 member states with some providing soldiers while others have pledged logistics and financial support including aircrafts and vessels. The Islamic coalition strikes the Houthi targets mainly in the Saada Governorate and pounds heavy shelling on them in the Houthi concentrated areas in Yemen. The Houthis strikes back by attacking the Saudi check posts and kills Saudi border security. This proxy conflict has caused an immense damage to the local poor population and will do more as the power struggle for Yemen still going on.

Proxy War in Syria

The civil war in Syria was started with the uprising of the local Syrian population against the Syrian regime, but today it has turned out to be a play-ground for the regional and world powers. The Syria War cannot only be attributed to the Proxy conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia but there are some internal dimensions to the war in Syria, which has been obscured by different layers and dimensions of outside interference and political and strategic agendas (Phillips, 2016). Now both Iran and Saudi Arabia have furthered their agendas by waging internal proxies to deliberately counter the strategic assets of each other. The groups that are responsible for driving the Syria conflict are majorly said to have been supported by these rival powers. Unlike many other conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere, the Syrian war is not limited to the conflict between two parties, like Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen, Iraq and Bahrain. The major parties involved here in Syrian conflict have now been broadened to the world powers including the US and Russia with Turkey as a key player being in border with Syria carry out its missions to support and oppose the desired elements. It is often said that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" but actually it doesn't apply here when comes to the conflict in Syria. For example Turkey, which is involved in the

conflict just because of the Kurds, which poses a serious threat to Turkey on Syria-Turkish border, and the Kurds themselves say that they support neither the government nor the opposition but fights Turkey and the Islamic State. At the same time Turkish military also battles the Islamic State along its border with Syria. It means Islamic State is Turkey's enemy but "the enemy of their enemy (Kurds), is also their enemy" the Turks also consider Kurdish Popular Protection Units (YPG) militia in Syria as an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has been fighting the Turkish military for decades. Similarly, the Islamic State fights the Assad regime and wants to overthrow the Syrian government but at the same time it also violently opposes the rebel factions fighting there the Syrian Army. However, still the two major parties fighting silently against each other under the umbrella of proxy war and in disguise of the battle against the Islamic State are the US and Russia with each power supporting Iran and Saudi Arabia respectively on the Syrian grounds.

The Bashar-Al-Assad regime enjoys a widespread support of the Iranians and a very close ally of Iran in the region. The Iranians involvement can also be seen through the lens of strategic interest lying there in Syria because Syria is also the central transit point for the shipment of Iranian weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia sees Iranians ambitions in Syria as a clear threat to her interests in the Middle East and also because Saudis cannot accept the Iranian interference in Syria whose population is predominantly Sunni. Unlike Saudi's response to other uprisings in the Middle East-Bahrain, Egypt and Tunisia-where it acted in such a way that visibly revealed the role of Saudi government as a counter revolutionary actor in the Arab awakening in Syria(Antonius, 2015). Saudi Arabia has supported the rebel groups against the Assad regime which is solely aimed not only to destroy the Syria-Iran alliance but also to further their support against the growing Iranian influence over this strategically important country of the Middle East. Iran considers its role in the Syrian conflict as legitimate one and has called on Riyadh to stay away from the conflict in Syria as once in 2016, the deputy chief of staff Brigadier General Masoud Jazayeri in response to the Saudis act of sending more aircrafts to the incirlik airbase (Turkey) so as to intensify its operations against the Islamic State in Syria. We definitely won't let the situation in Syria to go forward the way the rebel countries want... We will take necessary actions in due time (Barrans, 2016). The war in Syria has turned into a global conflict since it involves multiple parties including world powers on behalf of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The continuous war type situation has almost destroyed the infrastructure and state has been converted into a war torn town with millions of suffered masses sheltering outside their own countries as refugees. Aftermath of Syrian civil war and the destruction caused by the current ongoing rivalry in Syria has inflicted an irreparable damage to the Syrian society which will take decades to return to normalcy. After a thorough study of all these conflicts, it has unfortunately been determined that the so-called war against terror

has turned out to be a war among rival powers with no serious actions against the potential threat of Daesh and other terrorist organizations.

Iran's ambitions in the Middle East

Regional Hegemony

The one that tops the list of Iranian ambitions in the Middle East is its hegemonic nature and expansionism. It has an active contribution of troops and other logistics are being used in two Middle East countries, Iraq and Syria not just to assist the Shiite militia in Iraq and to support the Assad's regime in Syria but in broader context is to advance its strategic hegemonic ambitions in these two strategically important countries in the Middle East. They have been fighting for years against the obstacles in the way of their dominancy in the region, especially against the hostile Arabs like Saudi Arabia and UAE. Iran has a long history of more cultured and sophisticated power especially as a Persian Empire and they are influencing the region since thousands of years (Dabashi, 2001). But today, the Iranians have sought to return the lost hegemony in the Middle East by transforming conflicts and utilizing them to wage proxies in multiple ways so as to restore the effectiveness of its long term objectives in the form of regional dominance or hegemony. Iran is assertively trying to project its power throughout the region also towards Arab world to dominate the region. The domestic politics although differs in many ways with people and the opposition based on the modern Islamic pattern have criticized the hegemonic and expansionist policies that undermines the domestic issues and welfare of the Iranian people.

Choking Israel

Based on the Palestinian occupation by the Israelites and other geo-political differences, there have never been a moment of flexible engagement between Iran and Israel, especially after the Iran-Iraq war where both cooperated in countering the Iraqi offensive in 1980s. Iran has always sought an effective policy of countering the Israeli moves across the Middle East as they see Israel as one of the main obstacles that hinders the long-term regional ambitions of the Iran in the region. Israel is also eyeing a closer look to the Arab region in the north and wants to expand its power in the Arab region so as to effectively monitor the developments and to ensure its territorial security. The Iranian ambitions in the region would certainly demand the restriction of Israel more and more, since it has desperately been working actively in countering Iran by challenging their strong position in maintaining a role in the politics of the Gulf and beyond, in the middle east region.

Empowering the Shiite

Sectarianism has always been a major focus in the Persian Gulf and beyond for the Iranian regional policy formulation. The objectives possessed by the regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran needed a projectile driven by the sectarianism which rose up with the empowerment of Shiite as one of the main element that can, in best way, help in the advancement of the Iranian influence in the Middle East. There have been multiple battlegrounds used for executing a war based on sectarian tussle between the Sunnis and Shiite population in Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen and other Arab and non-Arab states. The conflicts witnessed in Iraq, Syria and other parts of the Middle East are purely based on the sectarianism, exploited by the Iranians to empower the Shiite communities so as to effectively develop leverage in executing the long desired ambitions for power in the region.

In Iraq and Syria, Iran supports the Shiite government against the rebel groups while in Yemen; it encourages the Shiite led-Houthi rebels against the government backed by the Sunnis (Saudi Arabia). Whether it is the backing being provided by the Iranians to the Shiite led government in Iraq or it be the firm military and strategic support provided to the Shiite regime of Bashar-al-Assad in Syria, both cases shows the clear intensions of Iran to empower the Shiite sects in a way that may help in projecting the power in the Gulf for long-term strategic goals. The strategy has so far been successful in its swing of empowering the Shiite community in the middle east as argued by the director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, that the region is returning back to 12th century when Northern Syria and beyond were dominating by Shiite lords of Persia.

Rolling back US Influence in the Middle East

For decades, Iran and the US have been locked in an era of mutual hostility over the power politics in the Middle East. Iran has always sought a middle east order with as much restricted US as they desire in a way so as to establish their foothold in the entire middle east region which would ultimately assist them in enforcing their strategic ambitions across the middle east. The United States shares a mutual understanding with the Saud-led Arabs and holds a greater share in the geo-strategic interest in the Middle East region. It maintains a considerable number of troops in the region but much advance military equipment and logistics that undertake necessary steps towards sustaining their power in the Middle East for which Tehran has recruited tens of thousands of Shiite into an armed network to challenge such an outreach of the Washington. While Iranians, on the other hand, are arrogant in accepting the US military presence in the Middle East, even anywhere in the Muslim world. This gives Iran another front based on limiting the role of the US from the affairs of the Middle East, especially in the war-torn Iraq

and Syria where the Americans, according to the Iranians, are fighting and destabilizing the region in disguise of war against terror and the Islamic State. The US and Saudi bloc backed by the US including Israel are concerned about the rising influence of Iran throughout region (Dabashi, 2017).

Containment of Iranian Ambitions

The ambitions reflected by the Iranian actions in the gulf and overall in the middle east need not a disclosure anymore, the objective is to establish a hegemony in the region so as to inspect the overall situation in the middle east and to counter hurdles coming up to their theocratic and strategic advances. The theocratic dominance in the Middle East, as predicted, concerns the Saudi Arabia since they would never compromise over the regional dominance of the Sunnis. On the other hand, Israel has always been concerned about the strategic aims of Iran which has frequently being disclosed, even by the Iranian officials, to completely destroy Israel, which the Israelis in no way can compromise over a move that undermines their interests and challenges the survival of the State of Israel. However, the strategic threat posed by Iran is not only for Israel but they also threatens the regional kingdoms on the southern shore of the Persian gulf as once the Iranian Defense Minister Hossain Dehghan said that, enemies may want to impose a war on us based on a false calculations and only taking into consideration their material capabilities, such a war would mean the destruction of the Zionist regime (Israel) (Chomksy, & Polk, 2013). Furthering the threat to Saudi Kingdom and its allies in the Persian Gulf, the Defense Minister said; “among other consequences of the war, would be the destruction of the city-states on the southern shore of the Persian Gulf, because they lack popular support The Washington Times, 2016).

The threats coming out of Iran has granted an opportunity to the Arab world and Israel to come together and counter-act what they call as the Iranian “aggression”. The two parties are using all the available means that can provide them with the leverage to effectively undermine the Iranian regional dominance, established especially after the Arab Spring, where it has dominated in the war-torn countries through its proxies. Israel’s efforts in bringing up the regional Arab states with her has so far been successful in the past few years, and perhaps it was the fear of the Iranian strategic expansionism that has made it more than easy job for the Israelis as they were seeking alliances not only in the gulf but across the world that can add to their desire of permanently establishing their statehood. The actions and efforts by both Israel and Saudi Arabia are widely seen as parallel having Iran as a mutual threat. They construe the policy of alliance (although secret) by acting consecutively to counter the Iranians on every ground whether on strategic level or diplomatic, they have continuously did and still doing efforts in countering Iran. During Munich Security Conference in February 2017, Saudi Arabia and Israel called for sanctions against Iran for its assistance for Bashar-al-

Assad regime in Syria (Mintpressnews, 2017). There is much more for Israel to gain from the animosity between Iran and Saudi Arabia and sometimes have triggered the tensions itself between the two countries as evident by the statement Defense Minister of Israel Avigdor Lieberman that Iran is trying to destabilize Riyadh. This has caused further hostile attention of Saudis towards the Iranians.

What if the Israeli-Saudi Alliance Fails? Knowing about the secret alliance or one can say as an unholy alliance between Israel and Saudi Arabia, driven against the domineering ambitions of Iran in the region across the Middle East. The dealings are ranged from the basic intelligence sharing to the active military and strategic ventures, backed by the United States. Multiple parties have shown their interest and even cooperating, in maintaining a strategy that deters Iran's regional but disastrous ambitions, especially for the Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia. The triangular alliance of Israel-Saudi along with the US is considered as the most effective strategy in building up a mutual confidence in hindering Iran's strategic interests, what they argue would "threaten" the regional stability and balance of power. Taking all the possibilities and geo-strategic cooperation among all these powers into account, the thorough analysis of the situation in the Gulf and beyond into the middle east reveals a picture that construe the possible failure of the so-called alliance between Israel and Saudi Arabia aimed to counter Iran's regional influence. The geo-strategic indicators in the Middle East, especially in the war-torn Iraq, Yemen and Syria, are much clear in favoring the Iranian success in gaining the desired dilemma while depicts the listless fracture of the Israeli-Saudi alliance in countering the very ambitions of Iran. While speaking to an Iranian TV in October 2017, the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said that Iran is now stronger than ever [in the Gulf and beyond], while furthering the speech he said; No decisive actions can be taken in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, North Africa and the Gulf region without Iran's consent (Arab News,2017).

One would not be able to challenge the President's remarks in that speech while seeing the real picture of the situation in the Middle East. The Iranian success can be counted with the three prominent developments in the region. Firstly, the Iranian backed group, Hezbollah won in Lebanon. Secondly, the victory of Bashar-al-Assad in Syria against the rebels would be very important for Tehran. Thirdly, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) won in Iraq. While having these developments in hand, the Iranians are on the verge of dominating the Middle East with their effective strategies of not only using the hard power of proxies and military but a soft power that has enabled them to effectively attract the governments in countries like Iraq. Now in face of the alliance between Israel and Saudi Arabia that if fails [in future] then what will be the possible fate of the Middle East in the hands of the Iranians, or in other words, what will be the consequences if the possible Iranian domination embraces its successful victory.

Analysis and Discussion

In today's political landscape of Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran are trying to enhance their power and role and to reduce the influence of their rival in the regional affairs. The possible Iranian domination in the Middle East may totally shift the power politics in the region in relevance to the US and other allies with Saudi Arabia in top. Iran has long been seeking such an ambition of becoming a lord giant of the Middle Eastern region by outsmarting other rivals with their effective strategies. A dominant position in the Middle East politics would certainly allow them to move in it while driving the rivals (Saudi Arabia, UAE and other Sunni states) out of the ground. The alliance that today claims to be the best and well organized with aggressive policies in region is bloc of different States and non-State actors, who are gathered around the Iran, will face a major setback as soon as Iran emerges in the form of a uni-polar regional power with majority of governments in hand. The dominancy of Iran mean is the victory of Iranian backed government in Syria, the rebel groups in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, empowered Shiias in Bahrain, a total collapse of Yemen to the Houthi Rebels and the export of the Iranian revolution to other small states of the Middle East. Having said that, the above mentioned possibilities are observed to be in parallel to what one actually gets from the reality on the ground, which clearly indicates the Iranian victory over the alliance of Israel and Saudi Arabia, made to counter the hegemonic ambitions of Iran and portrays Iran as a future power house of the Middle Eastern affairs.

Discourage the Arabs

The Arabs in the Persian Gulf and beyond have tirelessly added to their efforts when it comes to countering the Iranian regional policies driven by principles that harm the national interests of the Arabs itself. They worked and still working with the western giants such as the US in discouraging Iran from holding a strong position in regional affairs. Moreover, they assume that their prestige and dominant position would get vulnerable because of Iranian actions across the region. The emergence of Iran as a regional giant would definitely threaten these strategies directed by Arabs to counter what they call as the “flagrant” approach of Iran in the Middle East and would ultimately discourage their motives behind restricting and downgrading Iran's role in the regional affairs.

Committed Proxy Warfare

For decades, Iran engineered the policy of proxy wars in the Middle East in pursuit of Iran's strategic goals, with the victims circled around the Sunnis across the Middle East and Israel. Iran is supporting insurgent groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and the Palestinian territories with multiple groups in opposition to

maintain strategic balance in the region. It supports the Shiia militia such as Mahdi army in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) Palestine, Houthi Rebels in Yemen and groups in Syria, assisting the Assad's regime. A dominant Iran in the region would love to engage more effectively through cost effective strategy using proxy groups, especially with a leverage to put Israel on track with the terms and conditions of Iran. The dominancy will grant Iran with a legitimate ground in countries like Syria and Iraq to wage a more committed and organized proxy warfare against the Arabs and Israel.

One of the main reasons, the Arabs always tried to punish Iran, is the habitual interference of Iran in the affairs of the Middle East. They hold Iranians responsible for what negativity appears even in the streets of the Arab world, but the true actually are in their stance as Iran has always sought a closer look into the developments out there in the middle east, as what Iranians say as essential for their security in the hostile neighborhood. As soon as the Iranians gain ground in the Middle East with a more surge in Iraq and Syria, it will be no more difficult for them to have a close up look into the affairs of the neighboring Arabs as Iraq shares a border with Saudi Arabia and so as Syria with Israel. Peace and stability in Middle East would not be possible till the end of rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran. The competition between these two powers has enhanced sectarianism and societal divide in the region. Therefore, efforts to defeat Daesh, bring stability and end to Syrian war, stability in Iraq and end of war in Yemen are getting affected.

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