SAUDI-IRAN RIVALRY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: IMPLICATION TO NATIONAL SECURITY

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ABSTRACT

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has affected the regional security of the Middle East. Since 1979, Saudi-Iranian relations have been tensed due to the rivalry to gain relative power in the Middle East. Saudi-Iranian tensions are at their worst level in decades; not only there is a halt in diplomatic relations, the two countries are also involved in several proxy wars in Yemen, Syria and Iraq, besides the entanglements in the Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict. With these dynamics at play, the study aims to investigate how the Saudi-Iranian rivalry for power has impacted the regional security of the Middle East. Therefore, the study objectives: (i) to examine how Saudi-Iranian rivalry has created crisis in the Middle East, it argues that Saudi-Iranian rivalry has threatened national security in the Middle East. (ii) to investigate the role of external powers, such as the US, in the regional power balance of the Middle East. The study adopted a qualitative research method to arrive at the following findings: (i) the Iran-Saudi rivalry was found as a persistent feature in the politics of the Middle East, and (ii) this rival has destabilized the security and peace of the Middle East. This study provides in-depth insights into Middle East security and the survival strategies of these states.

Keywords: Middle East, Saudi Arabia, Iran, National Security, ISIS, Security, Iraq, Syria, Yemen.

INTRODUCTION

Iran and Saudi Arabia have often struggled for dominance in the Middle East, especially the Gulf area. This rivalry has worsened since the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution and the war between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s. Despite the Islamic stance of both nations, there have been serious differences in their foreign policies (Gause 2014). Saudi Arabia is considered in most aspects as the regional status quo power, while Iran pursues a revolutionary change throughout the Gulf area and the wider Middle East with certain degrees of seriousness (Bensahel & Byman 2004).

The strong ties between Saudi Arabia and the Western nations compelled Iran to consider the United States (US) as its most dangerous enemy. Although these nations (Saudi Arabia, and Iran) are predominantly Islamic nations, they differ in their ideologies. Iran is a Shi'ite state that prides itself as the defender of Shi'ites in the region while Saudi Arabia is a Sunni conservative Muslim Arab state. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has played out in the politics of several states in the region as both countries have always strived to exercise influence in the local politics of the region (Mabon 2015).

Iran is working towards expanding its influence in the Gulf, which is the battleground between the two states, while Saudi Arabia and some Gulf Arab states are working to ensure Iran's quest for dominance in the region is contained. The struggle for Gulf influence has seen Saudi Arabia consistently usurp Iran in terms of political ties with the local states. The

influence of Saudi Arabia in the Gulf cannot currently be overshadowed by Iran, but Iran is mainly fighting to have dominance over the Gulf Arab states, with a special interest in pressuring them to cut down their military ties to the West (Huwaidin 2015).

The Sunni-Shi'ite rivalry in the Gulf has recently been on the increase for certain reasons, reaching a high point with the Saudi led military intervention in Yemen in 2017. The obvious consequence of this heightened rivalry is that the Riyadh -Tehran face-off will intensify soon.

The Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry has seriously had security, economic and political impacts in the region. For Saudi Arabia, the Iranian security threats are the same as those coming from the rest of the Gulf countries. To Saudi Arabia, Iran is a political and ideological threat (Gause 2014).

The other security threats bothering Iran mainly comes from the threats caused by U.S. interference, the growing U.S. military presence in the GCC, and the activity of other external forces in the regions' security. Iran has since the Iranian Revolution, been an asymmetric ideological threat to Saudi Arabia, and the rivalry between them has had an impact in their foreign policy with countries like Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria (Mabon 2015).

For this report, the researcher examines the threat posed by the Iranian and Saudi Arabian rivalry on the national security in the Middle East. These two nations are the leading political and Islamic powers in the region and have seen the tension between them growing recently. Both countries value the idea of how to become the leader of the Islamic world in the ME. Each country differs in their values and political ties with the Western world.

NATIONAL SECURITY CONCEPT

Globally, security issues are a major problem. Both personal, social, national, and economic security are necessary for sustainable societal development. Security is the most important issue in the world today as it does not rely on the level of development of a region or state. Both developed and undeveloped states are susceptible to conflicts, terrorist acts, riots, collisions, and rebellions. As such, every country strives to always ensure the security of its territory at various stages in order to maintain its integrity, peace, and independence (Chandra & Bhonsle 2015).

National security is understood as a relative condition of collective and individual protection of the members of society against to their survival and autonomy. In this sense, the term refers to the vital dimension of individual and collective existence in the context of the modern society of societies, delimited by national states of territorial territory. In the limit, being safe in this context means living in a State which is reasonably able to neutralize vital warnings through negotiation, obtaining information on skills and intentions, through the use of extraordinary measures and the range of options relating to the employment of forces (Chandra & Bhonsle 2015).

The double face of these threats (internal and external) implies some degree of complementary integration between foreign policies, defense, and public order. The national security can be obtained through public policies. Is the main expression for the exercise of sovereignty giving the State the monopoly of the force? The vast majority of institutional orders recognize military aggression, spying, covert operations, and economic blockade as vital external forces, capable of generating proportionate dissuasive responses on the part of threatened states (Baldwin 1997).

Internal threats characteristically are the internal support to those external factors, plus the problematic notion of "their subversion". In the last decade, appeared a new category of

transnational threats such as organized crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism. Despite the definition of national security and legal delimitation of the threats, it is important to note that the means of the term and its practical consequences have extreme variations in different political contexts and institutions (Baldwin 1997).

Barry Buzan and Charles Tilley argued that security relations are inextricable between the different levels of analysis (systemic, state and individual) of international relations. The international system as a whole, its regional and functional systems, unitary actors such as States or intergovernmental organizations, with government agencies and social groups, or more individuals, affect the safety of other miscellaneous elements. Internal political changes in a country, for example, change the diplomatic and military capabilities of that country in the international panorama by changing the distribution of power in the International arena. At the same time, a structural feature of the international system (the world government, or narcissism) produces consequences for the behavior of the systems of the self-help or self-help system, which, in turn, affects groups and individuals in the States (Sorensen 1996).

However, the relevance of the concept of safety varies according to the analysis. This is because security issues refer more directly to political relations of friendship and hostility that accompany the scale of "referential objects" throughout the different levels of analysis. States have primacy as objects of security because their existence is a necessary condition for the realization of any individual or collective value in an international system characterized by the narcissism so that public international law identifies national security with state security. Independent of its differences in relation to any of the four components that define states as a "class of objects", the physical base formed by a population, territory, and government institutions are some ideas that makes those institutions legitimate in the eyes of the population which unfolds in the exclusive exercise of the internal control and control of various flows of interactions with or after sovereign units, all States have as fundamental concerns the continuity of its existence, maintaining its territorial integrity, the survival of its population and independence from other governments (Ayoob 1991).

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objective of this analysis, a qualitative research approach was adopted by relying on secondary sources involved in issues bothering on the Saudi-Iran rivalry in the Middle East and its implication on the regional security. In this study, data was collected from the identified primary sources and other sources such as books, previous studies, and analytical materials. It was ensured that all the sources are either directly or indirectly related to the subject of interest in this study.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The Middle East has arguably experienced the worst security situation since 2003 when the U.S failed to form a strong democratic state in Iraq after its invasion in 2003. The U.S invention in Iraq had led Saudi Arabia and Iran to seek for the superior power in the Middle East. After 2003, the rivalry of Saudi Arabia and Iran has affected the national security of the Middle East and since then, the Saudi-Iranian relations have been tensed due to their position of being political rivals in the region. Both countries vary in their diplomatic relations with the West. This study primarily aims to unravel how the Saudi-Iranian rivalry for superior power in the region has impacted the national security of the Middle East.

The Background Of Saudi-Iranian Rivalry

The Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran was aimed at the overthrow of a pro-American autocratic government and its subsequent replacement with a radical Islamic regime. This is to the dismay of both Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Having achieved power, the new Islamic regime quickly launched itself as strong opposition to both institution of the monarchy (which was just brought to an end in Iran), Saudis' pro-American foreign policy, and the other Gulf Arab states. Immediately after the successful establishment of the Islamic government in Iran, there was serious unrest in November 1979 among the Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. This unrest started with an unauthorized religious match aimed at celebrating the Shi'ite holiday of Ashura. This presumed religious procession was understood to have some political undertone as some of the protesters were carrying pictures of the lead revolutionist, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini; others were displaying signs that denounced the United States and Saudi government. An attempt by the Saudi authorities to disperse the protesting crowds resulted in 3-day rioting that resulted in considerable damage of properties. The drafting of the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) to quell the riot resulted in a high number of civilian deaths. However, Riyadh believed that Iran is the cause of these problems (Jones 2011).

Years after the Islamic Revolution, Tehran directed provocative propaganda towards Saudi Arabia and what the Iranians considered as Saudi's American version of Islam. To complicate the situation, Iranian pilgrims ensured a repeated disruption of the Hajj pilgrimage during the early 1980s to Mecca. The Hajj pilgrimage is a religious duty which all able Muslims must perform at least once in their lifetime. As the Iranian staged a protest in 1987, this situation resulted into a crisis where more than 400 people were killed as protests turned into riots. The incident was blamed on Saudi Arabia and among the invective demanded was that Riyadh should handover the custody of the Holy Places to Iran. Being that the entry of foreigners into the kingdom is largely controlled by Saudi Arabia, they had no option than to accept some Muslims from Iran who are seeking to perform a religious function; however, Riyadh strived to dramatically minimize the number of these Iranians who are seeking to perform religious duties in the kingdom in the aftermath of this crisis (Ramazani 1999).

In 1989, after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, there was an improvement in the Saudi-Iranian relation. Some of the leaders after the death of Khomeini include Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami. These leaders were seen as less contentious compared to their predecessor. Khatami particularly strived to improve Iran relationship with Riyadh, as well as bring to an end the Iranian subversion and covert actions that are targeted at Saudi Arabia. In 1999, Khatami becomes the first president of Iran to visit Saudi. Nevertheless, it was a challenge to both Rafsanjani nor Khatami to have a full control over the hardliners; the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) was still able to conduct covert activities from foreign lands without the consent of the president who they do not regard as the commander-in-chief as they have their Supreme Leader at the top of the IRGC command chain. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a conservative and a suspect of the reform has been the Supreme Leader since 1989 (Ramazani 1999).

President Khatami strived to improve Iranian relations with Saudi Arabia due to the efforts of the U.S. in persuading the Gulf States to increase their participation in the isolation of Iran as a result of Iran's perceived support for terrorism and the suspicions that Iran is building nuclear weapons. There have been increased U.S. diplomatic efforts as concerns have grown over time about the nuclear program, while president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who succeeded Khatami is not interested in improving relations with Riyadh and this seems to have resulted to expectable outcomes. The U.S Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in early 2010 requested the Gulf Arab states to influence

China in persuading Beijing to agree to the tough sanctions imposed on Iran by the United Nations (UN) Security Council. On the part of Saudi Arabia, they are publicly skeptical that such move will slow the propagation of the Iranian nuclear program and as such, showed no public interest in approaching China regarding this issue. Things might have been different if done privately as various sources were suggesting a confidential effort by the Foreign Minister Prince Saud to persuade China to support Iran sanctions. The Secretary of Defense Gates equally stated that there is an increased Saudi readiness to use its commercial relations with China to persuade Beijing not to support Iran. However, Beijing agreed to the 4th round of UN sanctions on Iran, including a total arms embargo which in June 2010 passed through the Security Council (Ramazani 1999). Meanwhile, there were limits to the commitment of China for efforts towards Iran sanction; later, Beijing criticized Barack Obama, the U.S President for signing a bill which imposed more expansive American unilateral sanctions on Iran.

These are unusual events; Riyadh has always been caught up dangling between keeping its foreign policy with the U.S. or to have some normal relationship with Iran. Riyadh is not interested in returning to the deadly relations of the 1980s when Iran was increasingly supporting the subversion directed towards the Arab monarchies. The Saudis and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states also do not intend to be found in a position where they will be automatically drawn into any political rivalry between Iran and the United States. However, there are issues that matter beyond the gamesmanship, and Saudi Arabia is intensely concerned about the Iranian nuclear program. Allowing Tehran to achieve its projected nuclear power will enormously increase their regional standing and boost the prestige of the Islamic Revolution. Various sources have described the damage done to the Iranian nuclear infrastructure by the Stuxnet computer virus/worm as serious, but the extent this assault will keep Iran from nuclear weapon acquisition is unclear. It is not unclear if Iran has really discovered a second major computer virus after the Stuxnet attack; if so, it could be a serious and potentially devastating attack. Allowing Iran access to a nuclear weapon can give them more capability to engage in or threaten both conventional or unconventional military operations since most other states may not be interested in engaging in any confrontation with nuclear power. Furthermore, some of the friendly Arab states might U.S. backing for any disagreement with Iran to be less passionate if Iran is allowed access to a nuclear weapon (Redissi & Al-Rasheed 2008).

The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry In The Middle East Post 2003

To comprehend the current Middle East and the reason for the continuous chaos and violence in this region, it is important to readdress the division that currently exists between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis. There is bound to be sectarianism wherever people of different religious beliefs live together. Sectarianism has been traditionally elucidated as an institutional set of provisions that determines regional, familial, global and local affiliations. Sectarian conflicts have been proven to result in what is identified as sectarian violence by the experts; this implies "a symmetrical conflict between two or more non-state actors that represent different groups." This explanation could also cover violence that exists between members of different sects (inter-sectarian) or different groups within the same sect (intra-sectarian). The Muslim world has recently witnessed an increased level of sectarian conflict which could be attributed to a struggle for political power and the collapse of authoritarian rules; this struggle specifically hinges on the battle for the interpretation of Islam that will influence the society (Costa 1939).

In March 2003, the U.S. launched their campaign in Iraq and the Shi'ite community under the leadership of Iraq's grand ayatollah, Sayyid al-Sistani, mounted no restriction to the

American march to Baghdad, rather, they considered it as an opportunity to use the influence of the Americans to achieve political supremacy. As described in the book authored by Vali Nasr, "the only face of Shi'ism revealed itself to American troops as they entered one of Shi'ism's holiest cities was a distinctly quiescent and even spiritual one" (Nasr 2006). The Americans saw this acceptance as an opportunity to use the Shi'ite community as the ideal ground to implement its interests of ushering in a secular, economically prosperous, and the democratic Middle East. The early alliance of the U.S with the Shi'ites helped to bring down the Saddam regime, reshape Iraq, and end the Sunni rule over Iraq. This "Shi'ite revival" was spearheaded by Al-Sistani who understood that the Shi'ites would have to consolidate on their unified identity to continue to remain powerful.

The ousting of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent Shi'ite rise to power attracted the attention of both Saudi Arabia and Iran. In fact, considering the civil war in Iraq, it could be more interesting to consider it in terms of the aims of Iran and Saudi Arabia and how they keep using Islam as a tool to propagate their political power and assume ultimate control of the Middle East. The ousting of Saddam Hussein and the resulting Iraqi civil unrest changed the security situation in the region as Iran engaged Saudi Arabia in a power struggle. Iraq which was once considered as an aggressive enemy to both Iran and Saudi suddenly become a common concern. None of the states is comfortable with the emergence of another hostile government in Iraq. On the part of Iran, Iraq is very important because most of the Iraqi's are Shi'ite Muslims. Furthermore, the Askari shrine, as well as Najaf and Karbala, two Islamic holy cities, are in Iraq. For the Islamic Republic, these sites are the core of Shi'ite history (Grumet 2015). The Middle East has experienced challenges to Sunni political prominence since the fall of Saddam Hussein. This has made Sunni -controlled states, especially Saudi Arabia, fear that their regional dominance is fading. The forceful end to Saddam Hussein's regime caused a quake within the al-Saud family. Iran has made a substantial improvement in its relations with Iraq and has significantly influenced the established Shi'ite governments. Saudi Arabia is having concerns that an alliance between these Shi'ite dominated governments in Iraq can allow them to strategize tactfully and could even make subversion efforts which may not be to the interest of Saudi Arabia in the region.

Even as Saudi Arabia is greatly worried about the invasion of Iraq by the U.S., they are not really having more influence on the new government in Iraqi. After the 9/11 bombings in the U.S., the relations between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. was severely damaged as 15 of the hijackers were from Saudi Arabia. In an effort to maintain their relations with the U.S., Saudi Arabia made slight adjustment to their foreign and domestic policies to provide and accommodate the U.S. Saudi Arabia showed no concern about the expanding influence of the U.S. in the region, rather, they had reservations about the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the U.S for the fear of the Shi'ites taking over power which will inevitably reduce the Saudi influence and leadership (Terrill 2012). The principal interests of Saudi Arabia can, therefore, be outlined as:

1. Ensure that Saudi Arabia's homeland security is not threatened by the instability and conflict in Iraq.
2. Ensure that the newly dominant Shi'ite government in Iraq repress the Iraqi Sunnis.
3. Curtail the hostile dominance of Iran in the region.

The Nuclear File

Saudi Arabia may be compelled to develop a nuclear program if a "Shi'ite bomb" is developed. A nuclear deal was negotiated between Iran, the US, and other world powers on the 14th of July 2015. This nuclear deal attracted criticism from U.S. and Iranian hardliners, as well as from the other regional allies such as some Arab countries (Grumet 2015). In the

view of Saudi Arabia, this is an act of the U.S. approving Iran's nuclear program. Saudi Arabia as the major strategic and ideological rival of Iran announced its own plan to start a nuclear program with at least 16 nuclear reactors in an effort to close this gap (Samaan et al. 2018). They believed that they have access to nuclear weapons from an external source. Being that Saudi Arabia is known for having a history of clandestine nuclear activities, it is still possible for them to produce a Sunni bomb to counter Iran's Shi'ite bomb. Allowing Iran access to a nuclear bomb is considered a threat to world stability and a move that could bring about the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East.

Iran has since 2003 strived to strengthen the hardline and conservative tendencies in its government and this has specifically been the case since Mahmud Ahmadinejad was elected in 2005 (Samaan et al. 2018). Although the Iranian nuclear program was initiated in the 1970s under Shah's regime, the program was salient under Ahmadinejad. The original plan was to build 20 nuclear power reactors, with research effort focusing on fissile and material production. These initial nuclear efforts were however hindered by the Iranian Revolution.

Iran considered having a nuclear program as a nationalist agenda. As Ahmadinejad assumed power, he tried to revive Khomeini's ideological zeal. Being that Iran benefited greatly from Iraqi overthrow despite being surrounded by adversaries, they were bent on acquiring all the required technologies for a nuclear weapon. Having nuclear weapons will wade off Iranian enemies and also confer vast military, political, and diplomatic power on Iran. Despite claiming that the Iranian nuclear program was mainly for peaceful purposes, Iran kept hiding most of its nuclear programs from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This led to the assumption that Iran was developing nuclear programs. Furthermore, the Iranian government concluded to slowly resume its enrichment program acceleration after months of extended negotiations with Europe. They adopted a step-wise implementation of the nuclear enrichment program per year. For example, Iran succeeded in its effort of converting uranium ore into uranium gas by 2006 with the aim of using it in both nuclear weapons and nuclear reactors. By 2007, they announced an end to its "voluntary" cooperation with the international regulatory agency, IAE, and began to fully produce enriched uranium (Samaan et al. 2018). They restricted the IAEA inspectors from carrying out voluntary inspections and later denied them access to most of their nuclear sites. From the evidence available to experts, Iran currently has 15 power reactors and 2 research reactors which are being constructed. With knowledge gained from past mistakes, Iran strategically cited its nuclear reactor facilities all over the country, with some underground locations in order not to be detected.

Nuclear weapons, In the current nuclear age, dominates strategy, especially the diplomacy of violence. Despite the relative era of nuclear peace in the world due to the deterrence of military strategies, unfortunately, some believed new global developments to be shifting the international system to experience state and non-state actors who do not believe in the concept of the deterrence theory (Green & Wehrey 2009). The current proliferation of nuclear programs has once again pushed the international system into experiencing nuclear states characterized by global radical revolutionary objectives. These objectives will first serve as a threat to their regional foes and thus, binging about proliferation in hostile pairs which can instigate fear into the neighboring states as they become wary of their position in the region. The fear of a nuclear war is becoming more eminent and realistic owing to the numerous unstable forces that dominate the current arena.

The successful development of an Iranian bomb is a threat to the balance between the Gulf States. The politics of the Middle East has over the years focused on non-proliferation of nuclear programs. Saudi Arabia advocated for a Middle East that is free of nuclear weapons in the 1970s as paralleled by Persian Iran and the other Arab Gulf countries. The Non-

Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has Saudi Arabia and Iran as members but due to Saudi's alliance with the US, they are controlled by the U.S. nuclear umbrella. As per Hillary Clinton, the former Secretary of States at the Nuclear Security Summit in April 2010.

Despite these assurance claims, Iran leveraged on the invasion of Iraq by the United States to achieve its national aim of nuclear proliferation. It was the opinion of the experts that allowing Iran to have nuclear weapons will inevitably compel Saudi Arabia to revive their own interest in a nuclear program (Feickert 2013). Saudi Arabia became worried of becoming a pawn in Iran's struggle of becoming the sovereign nation in the Islamic World. Assuming Islamic leadership and regional hegemony would definitely confer on Iran an unparalleled power which the other leading nations would not want to provoke. Saudi Arabia, an arch rival of Iran, is not bothered if Iran is going to deploy the bomb against them, Israel, or the United States. However, the theory of deterrence is still in place, but Saudi Arabia may not allow the diplomatic, political, and military power Iran can achieve if allowed to develop nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia has been forced to reconsider its position in the Middle East and to explore its own nuclear options due to the growing Iranian nuclear proliferation threat, coupled with the antagonistic public utterances and foreign policies of Ahmadinejad. A question of the measures that can be taken to have an international stand in place against Iran if the Iranian government threatens the economic interests of oil-exporting countries was raised.

Despite whether Saudi is considering nuclear proliferation or not, its military expenditure suggests that they are extremely conscious of national security and are making effort to strengthen their conventional army. A U.S. Congressional research service report suggested that Saudi Arabia spent USD 8.7 billion in 2008 on an agreement that borders on arms-transfer and received the first 72 Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft in 2009, while they increased their order for Airbus A330 MRTT tanker/transport from an initial 2 to 6. Furthermore, consensus Military Technology reports are suggesting a clear trend in increased missile defense, suggesting the need for Saudi Arabia to promote deterrence against the devastating threat of an Iranian bomb in the Middle East. There are also indications of billion-dollar deals between Saud Arabia and Russia as they have followed the same missile defense pattern with the purchase of S-300 which has earlier been purchased by Iran. The case of Saudi Arabia is incredibly significant owing to their rich and powerful status, coupled with their continued alliance with the US; they can engage in activities and relations that will ensure national security without the involvement of the US (Feickert 2013). Therefore, the world is yet again witnessing the arms race mentality that was dominant between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War but this time, it is between Saudi Arabia and Iran in a region that is dominated by fanatical religious non-state actors and unstable authoritarian governments.

Yemen War

The Gulf is traditionally the central ground for the Saudi-Iran rivalry. While Saudi Arabia has a high level of political dominance on the local Gulf monarchies, Iran concentrates on the mobilization of the local Arab Shi'ite communities in a move to have an influence on the Gulf governments on issues of interest to Iran. Saudi Arabia has actively sought to have an influence on its neighboring Yemen. The two countries share a 700- mile porous border which is often a route for criminal, insurgent, smuggling, and terrorist activities (Terrill 2012). Saudi Arabia has made many donations to enhancement the Yemeni economy and has offered several financial resources during political upheaval in a bid to ensure its authority (Urban 2013). The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has now been made clear in the ongoing conflict between the Yemeni government and Yemen's Houthis minority.

The Houthis movement emerged from the Believing Youth theological movement which was established in 1992, and as per Ahmed Addaghasi, the Houthis movement is a religious group which has an affiliation with the Zaydi sect of Shi'ite Islam who originally held a broad-minded educational and cultural vision (Al Batati 2015). The group, which is based in the Sa'ada's northern province later split; one side of the fraction become radicalized after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The radicalized faction started chanting anti-government and anti-Western slogans. The movement resorted to arms in 2004 and this resulted in the first encounter with the government. The Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh regarded the Houthis rebel group (officially called Ansarallah -partisans of God) as a threat to his government and started arresting the members of the group in demand for a cessation of their protesting and worshipping activities in mosques in the Yemeni capital. This war between the movement and the government lasted for 6 years until it eventually ended in 2010 through a ceasefire agreement (Lewis 1967).

Saudi Arabia has been highly proactive in their activities to protect Yemen because they are highly suspicious of Iran's motives and dominance over the Shi'ite Crescent. The Shi'ite crescent is the crescent-shaped area of the Middle East with majority Shi'ite population or with a strong Shi'ite minority. Iran has been accused by both Yemen and Saudi Arabia as the sponsor of the Houthis rebels who are a member of the Fiver Shi'ite sect. Rhetorically, Iran has supported the Houthis through advocating for religious solidarity. Being an important issue to the Shi'ite community, many observers believe that Iran is behind the Houthis and is providing them with training, funds, material aid. These claims are strengthened by the fact that the BY summer camps which are attended by the Houthis faction has lectures delivered by Hassan Nasrallah who is the Hezbollah's general secretary. Saudi Arabia is getting more worried as evidence suggest that the Houthi leadership is striving to model its organization to a more radicalized form of Shi'ite Islam and after the Iranian model of Islam (Khoury 2015).

The 2009 intervention of Saudi Arabian militarily in the conflict between the Yemeni government and the Shi'ite deteriorated the conflict. The Saudi borders with Yemen infiltrated Saudi villages by November 2009 and with the consent of the Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia intervened in its largest military engagement since the 1991 Gulf War using airpower and heavy artillery in an effort targeted at destroying most of the Houthis forces. Saudi Arabia has a strategic plan of defeating the residual military forces, but in response, Iran sent Hezbollah to train Houthis forces, in addition to increased assistance to the Houthis rebels. The withdrawal of the Houthis from the Saudi territories and a 2010 cease-fire agreement ended the war. Although this conflict is outside the scope of this work, it is important to it as it does not only pose a grave risk to Yemen's sectarian and political stasis but also portrays the willingness of Iran and Saudi Arabia to be directly engaged in civil conflicts in the region just to assert dominance (Mucha n.d.).

The year 2011 witnessed the arrival of the human rights contagion which has cut across the Muslim world in Yemen. The Yemeni President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, as earlier discussed, was an authoritarian leader with records of economic and civic life repression. Saleh designated the security outfits of the country to his relations to ensure government loyalty. The other relatives were granted monopolies over tobacco trade, hotel tourism, and real estate ventures. The loyalty of non-relatives was ensured via payoffs by both Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni president. To ensure the followers are happy and always submissive, Saudi Arabia keeps pumping money into Yemeni tribal systems (Kirkpatrick 2014). Within the Arab world, Yemen is the poorest state, with the ruling family mainly in control of the government's income with no investment into state institutions or civilian infrastructure. As a result, the level of unemployment rate in Yemen was about 35% with more than 50% of its

population having no formal education (Kirkpatrick 2014). Yemen has in recent years served as the home base of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

With the emergence of the Arab Uprising in Yemen, Saleh found it difficult to retain control of the state apparatus and this resulted in a political transition which began in late 2011. Despite the defeat of the Houthi movement in 2011 by Saudi forces, the movement had already been transformed into a disciplined and organized militia. The Houthis movement kept gaining popularity across Northern Yemen, reworking their rhetoric to support the revolution and the youths that are staging a protest in Sana'a instead of relying on Islamic revolutionary principles which it has upheld since its formation. The Houthis continued to increase in number and in January 2015, they mounted pressure on the acting president of the country Abd Rabbu Mansour to step down. With their increased number, they were able to take control of Yemen's capital (Roberts 2014). At this level, the Houthis-led political instability in the country was considered capable of pushing the country into civil war. Although the Houthis were gaining support from many Yemenis, they were continuously facing resistance Sunni tribes in the Marib oil region, from former President Saleh, and from various political and tribal movements. The instability in the country also raised the tempo of the Saudi-Iranian conflict.

With the increase in the activities of the Houthis, Iran has fingered as the arms sponsor of the movement. For instance, the March 2012 edition of The New York Times cited officials of the U.S. military and intelligence, stating that Quds forces were supplying rocket grenades, AK-47 rifles, and other arms to the Houthi rebels. Furthermore, a shipment with Iranian markings was confiscated in January 2013 just off the Yemeni coast with weapons such as C-4 explosives and air missiles (Roberts 2014). With this development, Saudi Arabia started the aerial bombardment of the Houthi camps in March 2015, and as expected, Iran condemned the offensive targeted at the Houthis. In a direct challenge to the US for the blocking Yemen's ports, Iran sent aid ships to Yemen in April and May 2015. Although the first attempt to send the aid did not succeed, however, Iran resorted to its navy to secure the ship with a promise of retaliation should the ship be prevented from its mission. The ship conveyed 2,500 tons of aid to the port controlled by the Shi'ite Houthis. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have an interest in the Yemeni conflict. By virtue of its bothering with Saudi Arabia, Yemen present to be a national security matter to Saudi Arabia. Despite the insistence of the Iranian government on not support any form of foreign intervention in the Yemeni conflict, most of its actions present Yemen as the latest quest by Iran for regional influence against Saudi Arabia. With the persistent destruction of Yemen by the war, its future remains uncertain (Clarke 2017).

Syria War

Some teenagers in the southern Syrian city of Deraa scrawled anti-government painting in March 2011 and unknowingly, set Syria on fire. As they were arrested and tortured, protestors took to the streets of Deraa and staged similar demonstrations that have swept the entire Arab world. The violent intervention of the government forces and the killing of some of the protesters facilitated the spreading of the protest across the country, especially to the poorer areas where the demand for the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to stand down took the center stage. As the president refused to step down, he claimed that the movement is made up of opposition Islamists, foreign agents, and criminals and as such, ordered a brutal crackdown. With time, some of the opposition groups resorted to arms in a bid to match the government forces, thereby, setting the stage for a civil war (Phillips 2015).

Irrespective of the simple origin of the Syrian conflict, it is anything but, a peaceful protest movement that only aimed to challenge an autocratic regime metamorphosed into a

multi-layered complex war. Domestically, although the opposition fighters captured territories earlier from the Government, the division among the fighters allowed Assad to reclaim most of the lost territories. With time, new groups began to emerge in a bid to complicate the contest between the opposition fighters and the Government. The Kurds in Syria raised a militia and got involved in the fight; so is the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Both groups waged a war against both the government and the opposition in a bid to gain territories (Hawramy et al. 2014).

On the international scene, the involvement of foreign powers has increased gradually and having a gat influence in the conflict. The Syrian government has the support of Russia and Iran from the beginning of the conflict as they have continued to offer economic, military, and diplomatic support. They have recently begun to deploy troops, air, and naval power to the country. On the other hand, the opposition is supported by countries like Turkey, the Gulf states, and Saudi Arabia. The US and other heavy powers are providing economic and political support to the opposition, together with some training and weapons although their involvement in the conflict is less pronounced compared to that of Russia and Iran. The Kurdish forces were also supported by the US in their fight against ISIS by providing them with air support. This air support to the Kurdish fighters by the US is to the anger of the opposition who were refused air support by the US in their conflict with the Government and Turkey who believed that the Kurds are terrorists (Abdo 2017).

This conflict has been narrated by several western media outfits in its simplified form; some of the outfits even reduced it to a Sunni Muslims (backing the opposition)-Shia Muslims (backing the government)-conflict. Some even considered it as a proxy war between global rivals (US and Russia) or between regional enemies (Iran and Saudi Arabia). However, the real situation is more complicated and often more by the different accounts presented by the different sides, as well as the passions raised. The IWM London's new display, Syria: Story of a Conflict doesn't shy away from the conflict's complexities, but seeks to explain them. Using the stories of real Syrians and objects from the conflict, it aims to provide a better introduction to the conflict to the public by disclosing its origins, the major players, and the consequences. About 500,000 Syrians have been killed since the graffiti first appeared in Deraa six years ago; cities have been destroyed, and more than half of the initial 21 million people in Syria have fled their homes. The conflict seems set to drag for years and its consequences might even last longer (Phillips 2015).

An examination of the consequences of the Arab Spring presents the Syrian civil war as the heart of Saudi-Iran rivalry regarding the Middle East. The Arab uprisings got the attention of the Syrian people in March 2011. Syrians have for years been subjected to severe economic and political grievances, massive corruption in the government, as well as human rights abuses under the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The Syrians originally fight for political freedom, dignity, and social justice through non-violent demonstration movements as many will flood the streets in the cities of Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo. However, the situation changed in April of 2011, making the president to launch a massive campaign of removing perceived anti-government forces. He enforced a vicious onslaught against the protesting Syrians using the widely feared police and militia troops; the move resulted in the wounding and death of several Syrians. By July 2011, some of the defected military personnel formed a rebel group (the Free Syrian Army) in a bid to have a military opposition group that can match the Assad regime. By 2015, more than 6.5 million people have been displaced in Syria, while more than 160,000 deaths have been recorded as the conflict has turned into a divisive and bloody sectarian civil war (Sakhawy 2015). The division among the key actors in the war furthermore facilitated the emergence of ISIS in the country. These obstinate circumstances have made it look like the real reason for the uprising has been forgotten, which is primarily

to oust the Assad regime and institute a free, sovereign, independent, and democratic Syria (Grumet 2015).

CONCLUSION

The intensification of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as their quest for regional dominance keeps challenging the power balance in the Middle East. Their pursuit for influence has found root in the domestic politics of the region as a result of the crash of peaceful and popular protests. Both countries have engaged in proxy wars by supporting opposing groups within the conflict. This has extended from the Levant to the Gulf and both countries have committed huge resources in terms of funds, public support, arms, training, and personnel to ensure improved relations with transitioning governments. Following the Arab Spring, both countries intensified their sectarian rhetoric politicization in a bid to legitimate their stance on Islamic leadership, as well as their influence in the local politics of the states. Iran and Saudi Arabia have been clearly engaged in proxy conflicts in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq and these proxy wars have provided an avenue for the emergence of terrorist groups like ISIS who if unchallenged, changed the political landscape in the Middle East. all of these issues had affected and worsen the national security of the Middle East to down level in the Middle Eastern regions.

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