

8. How does Saudi-Iranian rivalry shape developments in the Middle East and South Asia?

The Saudi-Iranian geopolitical rivalry demonstrates an increasingly array of problems for the Middle East and South Asia. This geopolitical rivalry is further complicated by religious and ideological competition that is embedded within the domestic and regional landscape of the both the Middle East and South Asia. The rivalry has hindered peaceful developments within the regions as both rivals have attempted to out manoeuvre each other through proxy conflict. This can be exemplified by their interferences in Iraq, Lebanon and to a smaller extent in Pakistan. The implications of their rivalry has also exacerbated conflicts within Syria and Yemen by hindering any prospects of a conflict resolution, and further contributing to the widespread catastrophes. The religious dimensions of the rivalry have also prevented discriminated Shi'a populations in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan from gaining political and civil rights. Sunnis within Iran and Iraq also face a similar dilemma. Furthermore, Iran's expansion has forced Saudi Arabia to seek common ground with Israel.

Prior to 1979, the competition between the two nations were largely characterised by concerns involving regional order with some pre-existing Arab-Persian tensions.¹ The United States acted as a moderating influence on the rivalry.² Both Saudis and Iranians maintained good relations with the US and was part of Nixon's attempted 'Twin Pillar' policy, which aimed in creating a bulwark against Soviet influence in the region.³ However, the Iranian revolution of 1979

¹ S. Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran – Power and Rivalry in the Middle East*, London, I.B. Taurus, 2016, p. 44.

² Z. Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 93.

³ Ibid.

catapulted the two nations into hostility. Both competed for Islamic leadership with Iran representing Shi'a Islam through its Revolutionary doctrines and Saudi Arabia representing Sunni Islam and its Wahhabi interpretations.⁴ This rivalry was worsened by Iran's attempts to delegitimise the existence of the Gulf monarchies and by expanding Iranian influence through supporting Shi'a minorities across the region⁵. Early signs of the rivalry were evident by Saudi Arabia's support of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War and by Iran's support of the Shi'a uprisings in Saudi Arabia⁶.

The influence of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has continued to exacerbate sectarian conflict within the region. Both nations attempt to expand and counter each other's influence by supporting proxy groups within the domestic politics of weakened institutional structures.⁷ The fall of the Taliban in 2001 and the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003 created a significant shift in the power balance within the region.⁸ It presented Iran an opportunity to fill the postwar vacuum, in terms of both soft and hard power.⁹ Its religious ties with the Shia majority in Iraq allowed it to influence Baghdad's domestic politics.¹⁰ This alarmed Riyadh which feared Iraq becoming

⁴ R. Munteanu, "Saudi Arabia vs. Iran: from Proxy to Hybrid Warfare", *The Market for Ideas*, 2016, <http://www.themarketforideas.com/saudi-arabia-vs-iran-from-proxy-to-hybrid-warfare-a115/>, (date accessed: 20/03/2017).

⁵ T. Grumet, "New Middle East Cold War: Saudi Arabia and Iran's rivalry", PhD Thesis, University of Denver, 2015, p. 23.

⁶ Mabon, op. cit. p. 5.

⁷ M. Fisher, "How the Saudi-Iranian proxy struggle tore the Middle East apart", *New York Times*, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-proxy-war.html?_r=1, (date accessed: 20/03/2017).

⁸ C. Fair, "Who's Killing Pakistani's Shia and Why?", *War on the Rocks*, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/05/whos-killing-pakistans-shia-and-why/>, (date accessed: 19/03/2017).

⁹ Mabon, op. cit. p. 56.

¹⁰ Ibid.

part of the wider Iranian-Syrian-Hezbollah axis.¹¹ As a result, Riyadh began supporting Sunni insurgents within Iraq in order to counter Iran's supremacy.¹² The marginalisation of Iraq's Sunni population by Bagdad has further allowed Saudi Arabia to take advantage of the situation.¹³ This was exemplified by the former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki that routinely accused Saudis of supporting insurgents that were "tearing the country apart".¹⁴

The proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is not only limited to Iraq. Lebanon's frail democracy and sectarian organised government provided an opportunity for both states to expand their influence in the country.¹⁵ This opportunity became ripe after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005.¹⁶ The death of Hariri created a vacuum that stirred long-dormant tensions between the two competing coalitions and respective associates of Iran and Saudi Arabia.¹⁷ Lebanese politics was split between two factions: the March 8th Alliance which was supported by Hezbollah, Syria and Iran; and the March 14th Alliance which comprised of a pro-Hariri and Sunni coalition supported by Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ The intrusion of Saudi-Iranian influence helped sharply divide Lebanon's political landscape by making

¹¹ F. Smyth, "How Iran is building its Syrian Hezbollah", *The Washington Institute*, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-iran-is-building-its-syrian-hezbollah>, (date accessed 20/03/2017).

¹² A. al-Buluwi, "Saudi Arabia sees allies among Iraq's Sunni tribes", *Al-Monitor*, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/saudi-arabia-iraq-long-history-suspicion.html>, (date accessed: 20/03/2017).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ M. Huwaidin, "The Security Dilemma in Saudi-Iranian relations", *American Research Institute for Policy Development*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2015, p. 74.

¹⁵ Fisher, loc. cit.

¹⁶ W. Frederic, *Saudi-Iranian relations since the fall of Saddam*, Los Angeles, RAND Corporation, 2009, p. 105.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mabon, op. cit. p. 66.

concessions between the two political factions more difficult to achieve.¹⁹ Thus further polarising Lebanon's political landscape. On the other hand, the nature of the rivalry did assist Lebanon's economy, especially in the aftermath of the 2006 war with Israel.²⁰ The Saudis were alarmed by the conflict between the Iranian-backed Hezbollah and Israel because it saw Iran as the mastermind behind the war. Disturbed by strong Iranian influence in the Levant, Saudi Arabia made significant efforts to counter Iranian gains.²¹ For example, it provided \$1.5 billion for post-war reconstruction and \$1 billion dollars towards the Lebanese Central Bank for domestic economic support.²² Whilst this financial assistance did benefit Lebanon's damaged economy, the underlying principle was to prevent Iran's Hezbollah from further consolidating the country.²³

In South Asia, the rise of radical Sunni groups can be explained partly due to Saudi Arabia's efforts to undermine Iranian influence in the region.²⁴ The fall of the anti-Iranian Taliban allowed Iran to make further gains in South Asia through its support of Shia and Persian-speaking population in the region.²⁵ Initially, Saudi Arabia financed the Deobandi madrassas in the 1980s to create jihadist opposing the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.²⁶ Continued Saudi

¹⁹ Fisher, loc. cit.

²⁰ R. Ginty, "Reconstructing post-war Lebanon: A challenge to the liberal peace?", *Taylor and Francis: Conflict, Security and Development*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2007, p. 458.

²¹ Ibid.

²² "Saudi King offers Lebanon \$1.5 billion", *BBC News*, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5214354.stm, (date accessed: 20/03/2017).

²³ Frederic, op. cit. p. 113.

²⁴ Fair, loc. cit.

²⁵ A. Nader and A. Scotten, "Iran's influence in Afghanistan", *RAND Corporation*, 2014, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR616/RAND_RR616.pdf, (date accessed: 20/03/2017).

²⁶ Hussain, op. cit. p. 93.

funding of Deobandi madrassas in both Afghanistan and Pakistan has been seen as a way to counter Iranian influence in the region given the strong anti-Shi'a rhetoric in Deobandi teachings.²⁷ As a result, it has contributed in sectarian violence in both countries where Shi'as as well as other minorities have been routinely targeted by radical Deobandi groups.²⁸ According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, in 2013 alone more than seven hundred Shi'a were killed and more than 1,000 were injured in Pakistan alone.²⁹ Similarly, attacks in Afghanistan routinely target Shi'a populations throughout the country.

By competing amongst religious lines, the two rivals have not only helped sectarian violence aggravate across both regions, it has also helped drive state(s) into frequent collapse as seen in Lebanon and Iraq, as parties are relying themselves on Saudi-Iranian backers who want to oppose one another more than building a functioning state³⁰.

The implications of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry have made conflict resolution significantly difficult to achieve and helped foster the ongoing catastrophes in both Syria and Yemen. The civil war in Syria has pitted both Iranian and Saudi interests directly against each other.³¹ The crisis in Syria has provided Riyadh the opportunity to eliminate the threatening Hezbollah-Syrian-Iranian "axis

²⁷ D. Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission in Saudi Arabia*, London, I.B Taurus, 2006, p. 198.

²⁸ Fair, loc. cit.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Fisher, loc. cit.

³¹ "World should be 'worried about Iran-Saudi conflict'", *Al Jazeera*, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/world-worried-iran-saudi-conflict-160115055436274.html>, (date accessed: 19/03/2017).

of resistance”.³² As a result, Saudi Arabia along with the Gulf States have supported many rebel and Islamist militant groups combating the Assad regime.³³ For Iran, the survival of the Assad regime is essential for its own standing within the Middle East, as Syria provides a gateway for its influence in Lebanon and Palestine.³⁴ As a result, the Iranian government has provided extensive military and economic support to the Syrian regime.³⁵ Since both states view the struggle for Syria as a zero-sum game; any hope for a peaceful political resolution seems highly unlikely.³⁶ For Syria, the war has turned into a stalemate that has created a large refugee crisis that threatens to destabilise neighbouring nations, it has killed more than 250,000 people and has facilitated in the growth of extremist militant groups such as the Islamic State.³⁷

Furthermore, the conflict has attracted in many foreign fighters across the region. For example, approximately five thousand Shia foreign fighters participated in the takeover of East Aleppo in late 2016.³⁸ Most of these Shia fighters were from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Lebanon.³⁹ Whilst it was also noted that a sizeable number of rebel forces were of Lebanese, Libyan and Gulf nationality. Similarly, the conflict in Yemen can also be seen within the context of the Saudi-Iranian conflict.⁴⁰ Saudi Arabia’s bombardment of Yemen revolves around the fear

³² S. Ward, “Axis of Resistance: The Hezbollah-Iran-Syria opposition”, *The Cipher Brief*, 2016, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/axis-resistance-hezbollah-iran-syria-relationship-1089>, (date accessed: 19/03/2017).

³³ Mabon, op. cit. p. 69.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ O. Shariff, “Is peace in the region a zero-sum game?”, *Gulf News*, 2015, <http://gulfnews.com/news/mena/iran/is-peace-in-the-region-a-zero-sum-game-1.1586861>, (date accessed: 20/03/2017).

³⁷ Mabon, op. cit. p. 52.

³⁸ M. Chulov and K. Shaheen, “Sectarian fighters mass for battle to capture East Aleppo”, *The Guardian*, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/29/aleppo-attack-foreign-syrian-fighters-plan-shia-islamic>, (date accessed: 21/03/2017).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

of an Iranian-led Houthi government in Yemen.⁴¹ Although the extent of Iran's relationship with the Shia Houthis is unclear, the minor presence of Iranian influence in Yemen has been enough to prompt Saudi-led airstrikes against the country.⁴² This has resulted in large civilian casualties, with the blockade putting one-third of the population at the brink of starvation.⁴³ Thus the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in both Syria and Yemen has exacerbated the human catastrophes and regional security of the region.

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has had detrimental ramifications for discriminated Muslim minorities in their quest of achieving improved rights. For both Saudi Arabia and Iran; any gains by local Shi'a or Sunnis in the political and economic sphere would be equally seen as gains made by their Iranian and Saudi counterparts.⁴⁴ This example can be exemplified in the context of the 2011 Bahrain protests. The Bahraini protests were largely led by its majority Shia inhabitants whom demanded greater political representation and an elimination of the institutionalised discrimination.⁴⁵ The Saudis and the Bahrain's Sunni rulers viewed these developments as an Iranian attempt to expand its hand in the Gulf.⁴⁶ This led to a Saudi-led Gulf force that crushed the demonstrations within the kingdom and helped preserve the ruling Al Khalifa family of

⁴¹ M. Reardon, "Saudi Arabia, Iran and the 'Great Game' in Yemen", *Al Jazeera*, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/09/saudi-arabia-iran-great-game-ye-201492984846324440.html>, (date accessed: 18/03/2017).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ S. McNeill, "Yemen on 'brink of famine' as more than one-third of population faces starvation, UN warns", *ABC News*, 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-24/yemen-on-brink-of-famine-mass-starvation-un-warns/8299776>, (date accessed: 20/03/2017).

⁴⁴ Mabon, op. cit. p. 91.

⁴⁵ S. Mabon, "The Battle for Bahrain: Saudi-Iranian Rivalry", *Centre for Middle East Policy*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2012, p. 86.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Bahrain.⁴⁷ Although the extent of Iranian involvement in Bahrain was uncertain, the strategic importance of Bahrain for Saudi Arabia as a buffer against its own Shia population, coupled with a history of Iranian interference in the region forced the Saudis to act under the assumption that its claims were correct⁴⁸. Riyadh believes that political empowerment of Shi'as in Bahrain will not only increase Iranian power in the region but also give inspire Saudi Shi'as to follow suit.⁴⁹ This belief has also echoed across other nations as well. For example, the Shi'a political figures in Afghanistan are widely seen as puppets of Iran.⁵⁰ Similarly, Iran also excludes its Arab populations from positions of power and institutional discrimination against Sunnis is widespread. Even though the majority of Iran's oil producing areas lie within the Arab populated region of Khuzestan; the region is largely under-developed compared to the Persian-speaking region due to Tehran's discriminatory policies.⁵¹ Furthermore, Iran has also routinely accused Saudi Arabia of supporting Arab and Sunni Baluch separatists.⁵² In other words, the rivalry has further solidified discrimination for both respective Sunni and Shi'a populations across the region because any gain by local Shi'as is perceived be seen as a gain for Iran and vice-versa. This has put a strain in the regions' efforts of having a fairer and egalitarian society.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 71.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 84.

⁴⁹ Frederic, op. cit. p. 56.

⁵⁰ E. Karagiannis, "The rise of Iran as a regional power: Shia empowerment and its limits", *NATO Review*, 2016, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/Also-in-2016/iran-tehran-islamic/EN/index.htm>, (date accessed: 20/03/2017).

⁵¹ D. Graham, "Iran's Beleaguered Sunnis", *The Atlantic*, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/01/iran-sunnis-saudi/422877/>, (date accessed: 20/03/2017).

⁵² F. Aman, "Iran's Uneasy Relationship with its Sunni minority", *Middle East Institute*, 2016, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/iran%E2%80%99s-uneasy-relationship-its-sunni-minorities>, (date accessed: 20/03/2017).

The rivalry between the two regional powers has changed the dynamics of the political landscape in a number of ways. The initial competition between the two nations, fostered many Sunni Arab states into a common bloc against Iran's allies. It has also forced Iran's foe Israel and Saudi Arabia to seek closer ties.⁵³ Despite the two nations not having official diplomatic relations, it is widely believed that both Saudi and Israeli share intelligence on matters concerning Iran.⁵⁴ Both Israel and Saudi Arabia oppose the Iranian-backed Assad regime in Syria and Israel has been noted for covertly assisting rebel fighters.⁵⁵ Both nations had also presented a common stance against the Obama administration's deal with Iran's nuclear program and Hezbollah's presence in Lebanon.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Iran's nuclear ambitions could also potentially force the Saudi's to pursue its own nuclear program, thus increasing the nuclear proliferation of the region. Despite Saudi Arabia sharing no official ties, the increasing Iranian influence in the region has prompted both Israel and Saudi Arabia to develop stronger covert ties in order to combat Iran.⁵⁷ With some analysts believing that the increasing Saudi and Iranian rivalry could potentially create better Gulf relations with Israel in the near future⁵⁸.

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has played a significant role in hindering positive developments in

⁵³ Frederic, op. cit. p. 114.

⁵⁴ J. Hogi, "Is Israel-Saudi Peace a Realistic Proposition?", *The Jerusalem Post*, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Analysis-Is-Israeli-Saudi-peace-a-realistic-proposition-482706>, (date accessed: 20/03/2017).

⁵⁵ R. Ahren, "Israel acknowledges it is helping Syrian rebel fighters", *Times of Israel*, 2015, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/yaalon-syrian-rebels-keeping-druze-safe-in-exchange-for-israeli-aid/>, (date accessed: 21/03/2017).

⁵⁶ Hogi, loc. cit.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

South Asia and the Middle East. The rivalry has deteriorated Sunni-Shia relations by increasing sectarian rivalry which in turn has damaged the capacity of many states to govern itself. This can be exemplified in Iraq, Lebanon and Pakistan. The zero-sum game between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the Syrian and Yemeni conflict has exacerbated hopes of a peaceful settlement, it has contributed to the humanitarian crises and rise of militancy in the region. The sectarian nature of the rivalry creates the belief that any gains made by local Shi'as is a gain for Iran and gains made by Sunnis is a gain for Saudi Arabia. Thus, it has put more strain in the plight of disadvantaged Shi'a and Sunni communities from gaining more political and economic rights. Furthermore, Iran's increasing influence in the region has the potential to change the dynamics of Gulf-Israeli relations by bringing Saudi Arabia to seek more solid ties with Israel.

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