

Saudi-Iranian Entanglements in the Persian Gulf: Is Rapprochement Possible?

Fatma Aslı Kelkitli*

Abstract

The Persian Gulf retains the characteristics of a distinctive and critical region in the Middle East owing to a variety of economic, strategic, political and security reasons. This article will examine the troubled relationship between the two important powers of the Persian Gulf, Iran and Saudi Arabia, through the utilization of regional security complex theory developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever. The study, while focusing on competition between the two states in three main dimensions namely ideology, regional primacy and security will also explore the likelihood of a rapprochement between them which is deemed crucial for the establishment of enduring peace, order and stability in the Middle East.

Keywords

Persian Gulf, Iran, Saudi Arabia, regional security complex, rivalry.

Introduction

The Persian Gulf is one of the most important regions of the world due to a variety of economic, geostrategic, political and security reasons. Nearly half of the proven global crude oil reserves¹ and almost 40 percent of the world's

*Assistant Professor, Istanbul Arel University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Political Science and Public Administration. The author could be reached at aslikelkitli@arel.edu.tr or kelkitlikongur@yahoo.com. (orcid.org/0000-0002-0164-8736)

¹ Crude oil reserves in the Persian Gulf constituted 49 percent of the total crude oil reserves in the world in 2014. See Crude Oil Proved Reserves (Billion Barrels), *International Energy Statistics*, U.S. Energy Information Administration, <<http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/iedindex3.cfm?tid=5&pid=57&aid=6&cid=r5,&csyid=2011&eyid=2015&unit=BB>> and

proven natural gas reserves² are located in the Gulf. The Persian Gulf countries realized 29 percent of the global oil production and 29 percent of the global natural gas production in 2014³ and in 2013⁴ respectively. 17 million barrels of oil flowed through the Strait of Hormuz on a daily basis in 2013 which corresponded to the 30 percent of the world's oil trade by sea.⁵ Significant amount of Liquefied Natural Gas trade is carried out through this chokepoint as well especially by Qatar and Kuwait.⁶

The Persian Gulf is also notorious with its destructive wars, revolutions, failed revolutionary attempts and political upheavals. The region witnessed the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, The Gulf War of 1990-1991 and the Iraq War of 2003 all of which while inflicting severe human and economic losses on the belligerents, impaired substantially the intraregional ties and also exposed the region to the designs and encroachments of the extraterritorial actors. The replacement of the monarchical regime in Iran with an Islamic republic in 1979 sent shockwaves to the authoritarian leaders of the Gulf states who did not leave much room for political opposition and dissident voices in their rentier governments. The uprising in Bahrain and the protests directed against the ruling families in Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia, triggered off by the overthrow of the twenty-four-year-long reign of the President Ben Ali in Tunisia in 2011 in the face of massive riots, raised the hackles of all the Gulf

<<http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/iedindex3.cfm?tid=5&pid=57&aid=6&cid=ww,&syid=2011&eyid=2015&unit=BB>>, (access date: 29 October 2015).

² The Persian Gulf natural gas reserves formed 39 percent of world's total natural gas reserves in 2014. See Proved Reserves of Natural Gas (Trillion Cubic Feet), *International Energy Statistics*, U.S. Energy Information Administration, <<http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/iedindex3.cfm?tid=3&pid=3&aid=6&cid=r5,&syid=2011&eyid=2015&unit=TCF>> and <<http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/iedindex3.cfm?tid=3&pid=3&aid=6&cid=ww,&syid=2011&eyid=2015&unit=TCF>>, (access date: 29 October 2015).

³ Total Petroleum and Other Liquids Production 2014, *International Energy Statistics*, <<http://www.eia.gov/beta/international/rankings/#?cy=2014>>, (access date: 29 October 2015), U.S. Energy Information Administration, *Short-Term Energy and Winter Fuels Outlook*, October 2015, p. 34, "Oman Oil Output Up in 2014, Exports Down", *the Oil and Gas Year*, 9 February 2015, and "Bahrain Crude Oil Production 1994-2015", *Trading Economics*, <<http://www.tradingeconomics.com/bahrain/crude-oil-production>>, (access date: 29 October 2015).

⁴ Gross Natural Gas Production (Billion Cubic Feet), *International Energy Statistics*, U.S. Energy Information Administration, <<http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/iedindex3.cfm?tid=3&pid=3&aid=1&cid=regions,&syid=2010&eyid=2014&unit=BCF>> and <<http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/iedindex3.cfm?tid=3&pid=3&aid=1&cid=ww,&syid=2010&eyid=2014&unit=BCF>>, (access date: 29 October 2015).

⁵ U.S. Energy Information Administration, *World Oil Transit Chokepoints*, 10 November 2014, <http://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis_includes/special_topics/World_Oil_Transit_Chokepoints/wotc.pdf>, (access date: 29 October 2015).

⁶ U.S. Energy Information Administration, *World Oil Transit Chokepoints*.

monarchies and led them to extend some political and economic concessions to the discontented and estranged populations under their rule.

The security of the Persian Gulf region is of utmost importance to the industrialized nations of the world as the smooth functioning of their economies' is very much dependent on the Gulf energy resources. Therefore, the leading industrialized state of the world, the USA, has taken on the responsibility to guarantee unimpeded flow of Gulf oil to the world markets since the mid-1970s even if this encompasses the utilization of military means when needed. Accordingly, Washington consolidated military ties and expedited security cooperation with the Gulf monarchies in the wake of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and the disclosure of Iran's nuclear program in 2002. Iran, on the other hand, tries very hard to keep up with the military buildup of Washington's allies. This situation brought out a salient boost in the military spending across the Gulf in the post-Gulf War period. The military expenditures in the region increased from 59 billion USD in 1990⁷ to 144 billion USD in 2014⁸, placing Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iran on top of the military spenders' list.

Remarkable attention paid by the Persian Gulf states to each other's moves in the military field along with the allocation of considerable portion of their annual budget to purchase weapons and military equipment to thwart a possible military assault that might come from their Gulf neighbours led Barry Buzan and Ole Waever to categorize the Persian Gulf region as a sub-complex within the larger Middle East regional security complex in their seminal study. Buzan and Waever stated that the Persian Gulf region is composed of states among which there exists high level of security interdependence that is their national securities cannot be considered apart from each other.⁹ The sub-complex comprises of countries that have coastline on the Persian Gulf such as Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It is based on a tripolar power structure where Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia play major roles,¹⁰ and the nature of the relationship among themselves has been one of enmity since the early 1980s.

⁷ Stockholm International Peace Institute Military Expenditure Database 2015, <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database/milex_database>, (access date: 29 October 2015) and Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iraq and the War of Sanctions: Conventional Threats and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers, 1999, p. 38. The military spending of the UAE is missing from this figure.

⁸ Stockholm International Peace Institute Military Expenditure Database 2015 and Trita Parsi and Tyler Cullis, "The Myth of the Iranian Military Giant", *Foreign Policy*, 10 July 2015. The military spending of Qatar is missing from this figure.

⁹ Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 44.

¹⁰ Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, p. 191.

The American attack on Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent toppling of the Baathist regime engendered an internal transformation in the Persian Gulf sub-complex and brought about a major change both in the polarity and the dynamics of amity/enmity in the region. Iraq lost its place as one of the poles in the triangular rivalry. Post-invasion Iraq demonstrates the characteristics of a weak state where the degree of socio-political cohesion is low, internal political violence is high¹¹ and the sub-state actors such as the Kurds and the Shiites compete for the augmentation of their stakes in the state institutions to the benefit of their own constituencies. Moreover, Iraq lags far behind Saudi Arabia and Iran according to economic and military indicators. Riyadh and Tehran perform better than Baghdad in terms of GDP and GDP per capita.¹² The military capacity of Iraq weakened to a great extent after the dissolution of the Iraqi Republican Army in May 2003. Whereas the Iraqi army had been the world's fourth-largest army in 1990 with a mechanized infantry and a powerful air force¹³, today it is equipped with 250,000 troops¹⁴, the majority of which are light infantry units, and with a less sophisticated air force which failed to resist the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)'s capture of large swathes of Iraqi territory in 2014.

The regime change in Iraq and the ouster of Saddam Hussein from power, who had initiated an eight-year-long bitter war with Iran, and the replacement of his administration with that of an entirely new political structure, which included political actors that opted for better political and economic relations with Tehran, shifted the patterns of amity/enmity substantially in the Persian Gulf regional security sub-complex. The current nature of Iraqi-Iranian relations features amicable characteristics. Iran became one of the major trading partners of Iraq and backed up many reconstruction and development projects in the country.¹⁵ Iraq defended Iran's right to develop nuclear technology in international platforms¹⁶ which would be unthinkable during Saddam Hussein's rule.

¹¹ Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, p. 22.

¹² Saudi Arabia's GDP reached to 1.6 trillion USD in 2014 while Iran's GDP came at 1.3 trillion USD in the same year. Iraq recorded GDP of 523 billion USD in 2014, much lower than the figures of Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Saudi Arabia ranks first in terms of GDP per capita as well. Its GDP per capita rose to 52,200 USD in 2014 whereas Iran registered GDP per capita of 17,100 USD in 2014. Iraq's GDP per capita came at 14,600 USD in 2014, again lower than its competitors. See Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>>, (access date: 30 October 2015).

¹³ Eric V. Thompson, "The Iraqi Military Re-Enters the Gulf Security Dynamic", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Fall 2009), pp. 28-29.

¹⁴ Peter Beaumont, "How Effective Is Isis Compared with the Iraqi Army and Kurdish Peshmerga?", *the Guardian*, 12 June 2014.

¹⁵ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "International and External Security in the Arab Gulf States", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 2, (Summer 2009), p. 43.

¹⁶ "Iraqi Minister Defends Iranian Nuclear Program", *CNN International*, 26 May 2006.

The distribution of power in the Persian Gulf in the post-Iraq War era rests on a bipolar system where Saudi Arabia and Iran vie for influence both in the sub-complex and in the Middle East in general. This article will examine the basic contours of this rivalry in three dimensions such as ideology, regional leadership and security and will explore the possibility of a rapprochement between the two competing poles in the region.

Ideological Confrontation

The not so intimate but workable relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia as the main pillars of the protection of the Western, specifically the American interests in the Gulf region throughout the 1970s, suffered a major blow in the spring of 1979 with the abolition of the Pahlavi monarchy subsequent to a popular revolution and the declaration of a Islamic republic in Iran. From then on Iran would be ruled by a constitution which foresaw the spread of the Islamic revolution abroad¹⁷ under the guidance of Ruhollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader who denigrated monarchy as “one of the most shameful and disgraceful reactionary manifestations of political life”.¹⁸ Moreover, Khomeini also spoke harsh words about the House of Saud, dubbing it as “decadent and out of touch with its own people”.¹⁹ Iran translated rhetoric into deeds shortly after the consolidation of the regime. The Liberation Movements Bureau was founded to provide ideological, military and financial wherewithal to foreign Islamic revolutionary movements²⁰ as well as another agency to coordinate and supervise Iran’s religious activities in other countries²¹. With revolutionary fervour and passion at zenith, Tehran called on the peoples of the neighbouring countries’ to overthrow their ruling regimes and establish a similar system with Iran.

The unease, anxiety and suspicion felt by the Saudi regime about the new government in Iran evolved into a security concern following the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca on November 20, 1979, and the outbreak of Shi’a

¹⁷ The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989, <<http://en.parliran.ir/index.aspx?siteid=84&pageid=320>>, (access date: 15 November 2015).

¹⁸ *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. Hamid Algar, Berkeley, CA, Mizan Press, 1981, p. 202. Cited by Ruhollah K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East*, Baltimore, MD, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, p. 29.

¹⁹ Richard Falk, “Ayatollah Khomeini: A Rare Encounter with a True Revolutionary”, *Al Jazeera*, 3 February 2014.

²⁰ Mirjam Künkler, “The Special Court of the Clergy (Dadgah-e Vizheh-ye Ruhaniyat) and the Repression of Dissident Clergy in Iran”, *The Rule of Law, Islam, and Constitutional Politics in Egypt and Iran*, eds. Said Amir Arjomand and Nathan J. Brown, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2013, p. 63.

²¹ John Calabrese, *Revolutionary Horizons: Regional Foreign Policy in Post-Khomeini Iran*, New York, NY, St. Martin’s Press, 1994, p. 144.

uprisings in the Eastern Province in the final days of November 1979 and the early February 1980. The capture of the Grand Mosque was carried out by a group of young Salafi Islamists led by Juhayman al-Utaybi and Mohammed Abdullah al-Qahtani who claimed that the Al-Saud dynasty lost the legitimacy to rule the lands of Arabia due to its corrupt governing style, Westernization attempts and close alliance with the USA.²² Their degenerate rule should be replaced with that of a new administration which would act in strict obedience to the principles of the early Islamic period. The Saudi security forces suppressed the rebellion with difficulty and with foreign help, especially from the French and Pakistanis, two weeks later. The Saudi state weathered this serious crisis to its regime security by paying more attention to the views and criticisms of the ulama, increasing the outreach of religion in the daily life of the Saudi citizens and extending gender segregation in the country.²³

Barely one week after the siege of Mecca, many Shi'a took to the streets in the cities of Qatif, al-Hasa, Abqaiq, al-Khobar, Dammam and Dahrhan²⁴ to celebrate ashura, the mourning of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in defiance of the government ban which had forbidden the public reminiscence of this event since 1913. What was more troubling for the Saudi authorities was the fact that the commemorators were carrying the pictures of Khomeini in addition to placards that denounced the House of Saud and the USA and demanded cessation of oil supplies to Washington.²⁵ A few months later, in February 1980 another wave of demonstrations took place again in Qatif, this time to celebrate the first anniversary of Khomeini's return to Iran.²⁶ The rallies ended only after the dispatch of the Saudi National Guard to the Eastern Province.

In February 1980, during the Shi'a parades in Qatif, Iranian radio stations had called openly for a revolt to topple the Saudi regime. In April 1980 Iranian pilgrims held demonstrations in Mecca and Medina for the same purpose.²⁷ Moreover, the organization which took notice of the political, economic and

²² Adel Altorafi, "Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making: The Rise and Demise of Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement (1997-2009)", Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012, p. 125.

²³ Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia*, New York, NY, Viking Penguin, 2009, pp. 48-52.

²⁴ Toby Craig Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization and the Shi'a Uprising of 1979", *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 38, (2006), p. 216.

²⁵ Henner Fürtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, Reading, UK, Ithaca Press, 2002, p. 37.

²⁶ Madawi Al-Rasheed, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Cultural Authenticity", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1998), p. 122.

²⁷ F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Gulf*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 48-49.

social plight of the Shiite community in the Eastern Province was watching the foundation of an Islamic republic in Iran closely. The Shi'a Reform Movement which was established in 1975 by Hassan al-Saffar changed its name to Organization for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula in the course of the uprisings. The Organization had been greatly influenced by the teachings of Ayatollah Muhammad al-Husayni al-Shirazi who had returned back to Iran in the wake of the fall of the Shah after long years of exile spent in Kuwait.²⁸ With al-Shirazi's support, the dissident Shi'a movement began to broadcast from Iranian radio stations and opened information offices in Tehran and Qom.²⁹ All these developments startled the Saudi ruling elite taking into consideration the significance of the Eastern Province for the wealth and economic well-being of the Saudi state. The vast majority of the oil and natural gas fields of Saudi Arabia were located in the region along with Saudi Aramco, the national oil company, which employed many workers of Shi'a origin.³⁰

Saudi Arabia utilized various instruments to contend with these perceived fifth column activities of Iran. First of all, the government came up with an economic development plan that focused on the improvement of infrastructure, healthcare, education and housing services of the local population in the Eastern Province.³¹ King Khaled made a visit to the province in November 1980 during which he met with the prominent figures of the Shi'a community and listened to their grievances. A general amnesty was announced to grant pardon for those who had been imprisoned during the November 1979 and February 1980 riots.³² The Ashura celebrations were permitted in Qatif where the Shi'a composed nearly 95 percent of the total population. However, the Shi'a did not experience any amelioration in their political rights. Municipal or governmental positions were still closed to the members of their community even if they met requisite qualifications for the stints.³³

Secondly, Saudi Arabia made use of international Islamic organizations and institutions such as the Muslim World League, World Assembly of Muslim Youth and the Islamic Development Bank to fight against the revolutionary

²⁸ Toby Craig Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization and the Shi'a Uprising of 1979", p. 215.

²⁹ Madawi Al-Rasheed, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Cultural Authenticity", p. 122.

³⁰ 60-70 percent of the workforce in Saudi Aramco were composed of Shiite employees. See Joe Barnes and Amy Myers Jaffe, "The Persian Gulf and the Geopolitics of Oil", *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Spring 2006), p. 150.

³¹ Jacob Goldberg, "The Shi'i Minority in Saudi Arabia", *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, eds. Juan Cole and Nikki Keddie, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1986, p. 244.

³² Hennan Fürtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, p. 38.

³³ Toby Craig Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization and the Shi'a Uprising of 1979", p. 227.

Islam of Iran and to disseminate the philosophy of Wahhabism, the predominant Islamic sect in Saudi Arabia. The Muslim World League, established as an international Islamic non-governmental organization in 1962 has been funded by the Saudi government since its foundation. Riyadh's contribution to the League had grown nearly to 13 million USD by 1980.³⁴ The main goal of the organization was to propagate Islam and explicate its principles and tenets. In order to realize this objective the organization coordinated the activities of Islamic activists in the world, organized seminars and courses, published Islamic books and pamphlets, contributed to the construction and maintenance of mosques and extended relief to the people affected by war and natural disasters via the International Islamic Relief Organization established in 1978.³⁵

Set up and headquartered in Riyadh in 1972, the World Assembly of Muslim Youth concentrated on promoting Islamic solidarity among young Muslims through sports tournaments, youth camps and educational exchanges.³⁶ The organization also provided opportunities for foreign students to receive Islamic education in religious institutions and universities in Saudi Arabia thus offered an important alternative to seminaries and universities in the Iranian city of Qom. Saudi Arabia also capitalized on the development and investment projects carried out by the Islamic Development Bank, the financial arm of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in the Muslim countries as it became the largest shareholder in the bank.³⁷

Lastly, Saudi Arabia, along with its fellow Gulf monarchies such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE, formed a regional political and economic organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in May 1981 excluding the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Baathist Iraq which had been engaged in an exhaustive war since September 1980.³⁸ Notwithstanding the aim of coping with the spill-over effect of the instability, the GCC anticipated

³⁴ "Muslim World League and World Assembly of Muslim Youth", *Pew Research Center*, 15 September 2010.

³⁵ Muslim World League, Introduction, < <http://www.themwl.org/Profile/default.aspx?l=EN>>, (access date: 22 November 2015).

³⁶ "Muslim World League and World Assembly of Muslim Youth", *Pew Research Center*, 15 September 2010.

³⁷ Islamic Development Bank in Brief, May 2013, p. 4, <<http://www.isdb.org/irj/go/km/docs/documents/IDBDevelopments/Internet/English/IDB/CM/Publications/IDBGroupBrief2013.pdf>>, (access date: 22 November 2015).

³⁸ Saudi Arabia lent its political, financial and logistical support to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. See F. Gregory Gause III, "Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf", *Security Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Winter 2003/2004), p. 296. From the viewpoint of the Saudi rulers, Saddam Hussein was regarded as a lesser evil despite his aspirations for regional leadership in the Middle East. He was at least did not take steps to bring down their regime.

achieving cooperation among the member states in various economic fields which would also create benefits for the disaffected minorities, in particular the Shiite communities and the Iranian Shia emigrants, and would increase their loyalty to the Gulf dynasties.³⁹

Iran, to the chagrin of Saudi Arabia, did not easily back away from its motto of exporting the Islamic revolution. Tehran decided to benefit from the Hajj, annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, to acquaint the Muslims from all over the world with the precepts of the Iranian brand of Islam, to spread the ideals of the Islamic revolution and to denounce the activities of the USA and Israel. The Hajj event became a major point of discord between Saudi Arabia and Iran throughout the 1980s as the former tried hard to impede its politicization. Small skirmishes between the Iranian pilgrims and the Saudi security forces escalated over the years came to a head in 1987 when 402 people; 275 Iranians, 85 Saudi citizens and security personnel and 42 pilgrims from other Muslim countries lost their lives following clashes between the Iranian pilgrims and the Saudi police.⁴⁰ After the 1987 incident Iran repeated its proposal of joint control of the holy shrines in Mecca and Medina by all the Muslim nations which the Saudis took as an insult owing to the fact that King Fahd had formally assumed the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in 1986.⁴¹

Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations with Iran in April 1988 and introduced a quota system on the annual pilgrimage in order to limit the number of pilgrims coming from Iran which resulted in Iran's boycotting of Hajj for three years. Although Riyadh increased the Iranian quota in the succeeding years after the resumption of diplomatic ties with Tehran, the Hajj event remained to be a bone of contention in the bilateral interaction. The main axis of dispute evolved from Saudi complaints about the militant attitude of the Iranian pilgrims into Iranian accusations directed against the Saudi authorities for organizational incompetence and inefficiency after the occasional death of pilgrims in stampedes and fires.⁴²

³⁹ David Priess, "Balance-of-threat Theory and the Genesis of the Gulf Cooperation Council: An Interpretative Case Study", *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (June 1996), pp. 143-171.

⁴⁰ John Kifner, "400 Die as Iranian Marchers Battle Saudi Police in Mecca; Embassies Smashed in Teheran", *the New York Times*, 2 August 1987.

⁴¹ Adel Altorai, "Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making: The Rise and Demise of Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement (1997-2009)", p. 140.

⁴² Iran issued a statement after the loss of 144 people during the 2015 Hajj in a stampede which again offered the joint planning and organization of the Hajj occurrence by a coalition of Muslim nations. Furthermore, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, called on Saudi Arabia "to accept the responsibility and apologize to the world's Muslims and the bereaved families". See "Saudi-Iran Relations Heat Up following Mina Tragedy", *Today in Pakistan*, 27 September 2015.

Saudi Arabia had to grapple with another Shiite opposition movement, Hizbullah al-Hijaz, shortly after the 1987 Hajj incident which aimed to overthrow the Saudi regime and to establish an Islamic republic based on the Iranian model. Enjoying close ties with its Lebanese equivalent, Hizbullah al-Hijaz did not eschew from resorting to violence in order to attain its goals. Several bombs were exploded at the Ra's Tanura refinery in August 1987, one month after the Hajj incident and attacks were orchestrated against the Sadaf petrochemical plant in Jubayl in March 1988.⁴³ The organization was also blamed for the Khobar bombings of June 1996 which killed 19 US soldiers and injured many.⁴⁴ Saudi Arabia managed to curtail the activities of Hizbullah al-Hijaz only after an intense crackdown on the organization and commencement of reconciliation process with Iran.

The rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran that was initiated in the course of the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani to end Iran's regional isolation continued unabated during his successor Mohammad Khatami's presidency. Things started to change after the eradication of the Iraqi pole from the Gulf regional security sub-complex in the wake of American invasion in 2003. This new situation precipitated the emergence of Saudi-Iranian rivalry over the country and strained the relations. Furthermore, the ideological competition between the two countries assumed regional characteristics in the face of massive protest movements gained steam to bring down authoritative and repressive governments in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen. The next part of the study will dwell on the reverberations of this regional rivalry on the Saudi-Iranian relationship by comparing and discussing the views and policies of Riyadh and Tehran regarding Iraq, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen.

Regional Tug of War

Iraq

The post Saddam Hussein Iraq presented a myriad of opportunities for Iran. The Iraqi Shiites who had been historically on good terms with Tehran began to be represented in the new Iraqi parliament commensurate to their population following the 2005 elections.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the new Iraqi government headed by Nouri al-Maliki demonstrated explicit eagerness to rebuild friendly relations with its eastern neighbour. High-level exchanges

⁴³ Toby Matthiesen, "Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of the Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Spring 2010), pp. 185-186.

⁴⁴ Toby Matthiesen, "Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of the Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group", p. 191.

⁴⁵ The Shiites make up of approximately 60-65 percent of the Iraqi population. See Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>>, (access date: 13 December 2015).

brought forth the signing of more than 100 cooperation agreements between the two countries.⁴⁶ Iraq became one of Iran's major five trading partners and the bilateral trade between Baghdad and Tehran reached to 12 billion USD at the end of 2013.⁴⁷ Iran extended financial aid for realization of infrastructural projects such as the construction of schools, hospitals and mosques especially in southern Iraq where the majority of the population was composed of Shiites. Tehran also spent considerable amount of money on renovation of the holy shrines in Iraqi cities of Najaf and Karbala which were visited every year by thousands of Iranian pilgrims.⁴⁸

The growing power of Shiite groups in Iraq along with increasing Iranian influence in the country did not bode well for Saudi Arabia which was anxious that such a Shiite revival might be exemplary for its own disenchanting Shiite population. The rising anxiety of the Kingdom was bluntly expressed by Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal in 2005 in strong words, "We fought a war together to keep Iran from occupying Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait. Now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason".⁴⁹ In order to counterbalance the impact of pro-Iranian groups in Iraq, Riyadh commenced to support the Sunni Awakening movements and funded the 2010 election campaign of the secular Shiite leader Ayad Allawi⁵⁰ who seemed to be more receptive to the demands of the Iraqi Sunnis compared to al-Maliki. However, the election victory of al-Maliki and the further marginalization of the Sunni minority in Iraq exacerbated the bilateral ties. The Saudi leadership refused to meet al-Maliki and to reopen its embassy in Baghdad which had been closed in 1990, following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.⁵¹

The decline of power and authority of Iraq's central government in the face of ISIL's offensive as of the summer of 2014 caused the Saudi-Iranian disagreement over Iraq to resurface. Saudi Arabia blamed the emergence of ISIL on al-Maliki's sectarian and exclusionary policies against the Iraqi Sunnis⁵² and evaluated ISIL's expansion in Iraq as an opportunity to curb Iranian

⁴⁶ Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS Policy", *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (2015), p. 4.

⁴⁷ Bijan Khajepour, "Rouhani Deepens Iran's Ties with Iraq", *Al-Monitor*, 4 March 2014.

⁴⁸ Babak Rahimi, "Iran's Declining Influence in Iraq", *the Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 1, (Winter 2012), p. 76.

⁴⁹ Afshin Molavi, "Iran and the Gulf States", *the Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, <<http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-gulf-states>>, (access date: 20 December 2015).

⁵⁰ Tali Rachel Grumet, "New Middle East Cold War: Saudi Arabia and Iran's Rivalry", Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Denver, 2015, pp. 87-88.

⁵¹ Saudi Arabia reopened its Baghdad embassy in December 2015, one year after the replacement of al-Maliki with Haider al-Abadi. See "Saudi Reopens Baghdad Embassy After 25 Years", *AFP*, 16 December 2015.

⁵² "Saudis Give Apparent Warning to Iran: Don't Meddle in Iraq", *Reuters*, 18 June 2014.

influence. This even led Riyadh to provide funds to the ISIL.⁵³ Iran, on the other hand, gave its full backing to the Iraqi central government via political, economic and military means to retain its clout in the country. The likely result of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Iraq may be dismemberment of the country into three parts based on ethnic and sectarian lines.

Bahrain

The mass demonstrations held in Tunisia and Egypt which resulted in the subversion of long-lasting authoritarian governments in these countries in the early months of 2011 triggered the outbreak of similar rallies in Bahrain in February-March 2011. The opposition movement in the country was overwhelmingly spearheaded by the Shi'a that made up of approximately 70-75 percent of the population⁵⁴ and had serious political, economic and social grievances.⁵⁵ Their demands centred on the abolition of the 2002 constitution which granted power and authority to the Consultative Council appointed by the King rather than the Council of Deputies elected by popular vote⁵⁶, election of a constitutional assembly to draft a new constitution and the removal of Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, the King's uncle and leading opponent of political liberalization in the country.⁵⁷ There were even calls for the ending of monarchy and the establishment of a republican system.⁵⁸

Iran evaluated the uprising in Bahrain as a sign of Islamic awareness, similar to the ones in Tunisia and Egypt, which was inspired by the 1979

⁵³ Amin Saikal, "A Zone of Frenemies: Untangling Middle East Relations", *ABC.net*, 15 April 2015.

⁵⁴ Simon Mabon, "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Summer 2012), p. 84.

⁵⁵ The Shi'a were underrepresented in government and public positions. The Bahraini regime abstained from hiring Shiite recruits in state security apparatus such as the Defence Force, National Guard, police force, and the National Security Agency. Naturalized immigrants from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria and Yemen got ahead of the Shiite population in terms of public sector employment and housing opportunities. Furthermore, the government hesitated to give permission to the building of Shiite mosques in the country. See Laurence Louër, "Sectarianism and Coup-Proofing Strategies in Bahrain", *the Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2013), p. 246, Lars Erslev Andersen, "The Regional Security Complex of the Persian Gulf: Bahrain in a New Global Power Balance after the Arab Spring", *ATINER Conference Paper Series*, Athens, Greece, 2012, p. 11 and Mohammed Nuruzzaman, "Politics, Economics and Saudi Military Intervention in Bahrain", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2013), p. 370.

⁵⁶ Omar Ocampo, "Regime (Not) Changed: Bahrain, the Arab Spring and Energy Security", 28 May 2014, <<http://schools.aucegypt.edu/huss/pols/khamasin/Pages/article.aspx?eid=7>>, (access date: 30 December 2015).

⁵⁷ Brandon Friedman, "Battle for Bahrain: What One Uprising Meant for the Gulf States and Iran", *World Affairs*, March/April 2012, p. 77.

⁵⁸ Brandon Friedman, "Battle for Bahrain: What One Uprising Meant for the Gulf States and Iran", pp. 77-78.

Islamic revolution.⁵⁹ In return the Bahraini authorities accused Tehran of orchestrating disruptive protests⁶⁰ in order to dethrone their regime and set up an Islamic republic similar to its model. It was not the first time that Iran was accused of instigating political disorder in Bahrain. On December 13, 1981, the Bahraini Ministry of Internal Affairs had announced the revelation of a terror cell composed of 73 people that planned to overthrow the ruling regime and replace it with an Iranian-style republic. Claiming that the convicts were trained in Iran, the government had expelled Iranian diplomats including Hassan Shushtari Zadeh, the highest-ranking Iranian diplomat in Bahrain.⁶¹ The demonstrations of 1994-1999 which came to the fore with demands of effective fight against economic deprivation and restoration of the constitution and the national assembly were again appraised as a plot of Iranian origin which aimed to undermine the reputation and credibility of the royal family.⁶²

The Saudi response to the popular movements in Tunisia and Egypt was explicitly different from the Iranian position. Riyadh hosted the ousted Tunisian President Ben Ali in Jeddah and kept the new Tunisian government led by the Islamist Ennahda Movement at arm's length.⁶³ The stepping down of Mubarak and the ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt were not received well either as the Crown Prince Nayef stated that the Iranians were behind the uprisings in the country that led to the fall of Mubarak.⁶⁴ The situation in Bahrain however received the utmost attention by the Saudi leadership and was considered a national security issue. The transition to a genuine constitutional monarchy in the country or the establishment of an Islamic republic based on popular sovereignty might be inspiring for the Shiite population in the Eastern Province that enjoyed ethnic, familial and trade links with the Bahraini Shiites. Furthermore, a possible change of power might transform Bahrain from a friendly and meek neighbour to a state which preferred running a more independent course in foreign policy or worse to a competitor which allied with Iran. In order to avert such things from occurring, Riyadh sent 1,000 troops to Bahrain in March 2011 under the auspices of the GCC's Peninsula Shield to beef up the ailing al-Khalifa rule.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ "Khamenei Hails 'Islamic' Uprisings", *Al Jazeera*, 4 February 2011.

⁶⁰ Mary Ann Tétreault, "The Winter of the Arab Spring in the Gulf Monarchies", *Globalizations*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (2011), p. 632.

⁶¹ Hasan Tariq Alhasan, "The Role of Iran in the Failed Coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Autumn 2011), p. 607.

⁶² Joe Stork, "Bahrain's Crisis Worsens", *Middle East Report*, No. 204 (July-September 1997), pp. 33-35.

⁶³ Md. Muddassir Quamar, "Managing the Arab Spring: The Saudi Way", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2014), p. 150.

⁶⁴ Simon Mabon, "Kingdom in Crisis? The Arab Spring and Instability in Saudi Arabia", *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (December 2012), p. 546.

⁶⁵ W. Andrew Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security*, Carlisle, PA, Strategic Studies Institute, December 2011, p. 22.

The political atmosphere in Bahrain remains tense with sporadic protests organized by the opposition which occasionally spark off clashes with the security forces.⁶⁶ Tehran and Riyadh continue to squabble over the fate of the country. While the former attributes the unwillingness of the al-Khalifa regime to engage in a reconciliation process with the opposition to the Saudi backing⁶⁷, the latter accuses Iran of jeopardizing the national security of the Gulf states by supporting terrorist groups and subversive forces within these countries.⁶⁸

Syria

The protest movements in Syria started against the authoritarian administration of the President Bashar al-Assad in March 2011 evolved into a full scale civil war after a while during which more than 220,000 people lost their lives,⁶⁹ and more than four million Syrians⁷⁰ had to flee the country to find sanctuary mostly in the neighbouring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. The war in Syria became a litmus test for grasping the extent of regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The nature and characteristics of the parties to whom Tehran and Riyadh lent their support and assistance were diametrically opposed to each other which brought forth a long and destructive conflict that claimed many lives and ruined the infrastructure of Syria.

Iran, unlike the Tunisian, Egyptian and Bahrain cases, threw its weight behind the ruling regime in Syria unwaveringly and did everything in its power to keep al-Assad in power. Close ties between the two administrations dated back to the period of Iran-Iraq War when Syria stood by Iran albeit mostly out of a joint enmity towards Saddam Hussein. The two countries closed ranks in the post-Cold War years as well in the face of disagreements with the USA and Israel. Iran regarded Syria as a gateway to the wider Arab world and the Levant and used the Syrian territory to transfer financial and military aid to Hizbullah, its chief ally in Lebanon. Therefore, possible unseating of al-Assad and his replacement with a new pro-Western and/or Sunni-led government was considered a strategic loss and existential threat for Iran which should be impeded at all costs.

⁶⁶ "Bomb Blast Kills Three Bahrain Policemen", *BBC News*, 3 March 2014.

⁶⁷ Michelle Moghtader, "Saudi Arabia and Iran Swap Accusations as Tensions Persist", *Reuters*, 14 October 2014.

⁶⁸ Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "Iranian Aid to Fighters in the Gulf Peninsula", *the Washington Institute Policy Analysis*, 24 March 2014.

⁶⁹ Sophia Jones and Akbar Shahid Ahmed, "These Activists Are Spending 40 Days Tweeting the Names of 100,000 Killed Syrians", *Huffington Post*, 3 November 2015.

⁷⁰ Syria Regional Refugee Response, 17 December 2015, <<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>>, (access date: 2 January 2016).

Iran provided continuous backing to the Syrian government on diplomatic, economic and military fronts. Through official declarations and extensive media coverage Tehran portrayed its countenance of the Assad regime as a necessary move to strengthen the axis of resistance against the USA and Israel.⁷¹ Iran is estimated to allocate 6-15 billion USD of its annual budget to prop up Assad financially.⁷² Iran extended credit and other payment facilities to Syria and convinced the Iraqi government to facilitate Syrian trade and finance through Iraqi banks.⁷³ On top of all these assistances, Tehran's major contribution to the Assad government came at the battlefield. Iran sent weaponry and ammunition to the regime forces along with Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force, Iran's elite military division responsible for foreign operations. Soleimani reorganized and trained the National Defence Forces, a coalition of regime militias and brought in many foreign militias from Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan to fight among the ranks of the Syrian army.⁷⁴ Iran's military support proved to be crucial for the Assad regime to hold its sway in the western parts of the country.

Saudi Arabia changed tack on its policy of keeping away from the revolutionary movements which it had adopted throughout the Tunisian, Egyptian and Bahraini uprisings and embraced the cause of anti-regime forces in Syria wholeheartedly after a brief period of hesitation. It became alluring for Riyadh to have a friendly Sunni government in Damascus which would not take sides with Tehran in Lebanon or would come closer to the Saudi line with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In accordance with this new outlook, Saudi Arabia took the lead in withdrawing its ambassador to Syria in August 2011⁷⁵ and supported the suspension of Syria's membership to the Arab League in November 2011⁷⁶ and to the OIC in August 2012⁷⁷. Furthermore, in

⁷¹ Senior Advisor of the Iranian Supreme Leader for International Affairs Ali Akbar Velayati stated that Syria was the golden ring of the chain of resistance against the Zionist regime. Recalling that Syria helped Palestine, Lebanon and Gaza in the past, he urged Islamic states to demonstrate solidarity with the Assad regime that was under the triple pressure of the USA, Israel and their Arab allies. See "Velayati Sees Syria as 'Golden Ring' in Chain of Resistance against Israel", *Sabar TV*, 5 September 2012, <<http://english.sahartv.ir/news/velayati-sees-syria-as-golden-ring-in-chain-of-resistance-against-israel-1030>>, (access date: 2 January 2016).

⁷² Michael Wahid Hanna and Dalia Dassa Kaye, "The Limits of Iranian Power", *Survival*, Vol. 57, No. 5 (October-November 2015), p. 180.

⁷³ Emile Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War", *Survival*, Vol. 56, No. 6 (December 2014-January 2015), p. 73.

⁷⁴ Emile Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War", p.74.

⁷⁵ Silvia Colombo, "The GCC and the Arab Spring: A Tale of Double Standards", *the International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (December 2012), p. 119.

⁷⁶ David Batty and Jack Shenker, "Syria Suspended from Arab League", *the Guardian*, 12 November 2011.

⁷⁷ Asma Alsharif, "Organization of Islamic Cooperation Suspends Syria", *Reuters*, 16 August 2012.

February 2012, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal announced support for arming the groups fighting against the Assad regime⁷⁸ and declared in April 2012 taking along Qatar and the UAE, a 100 million USD fund to meet the expenses of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the insurgent army founded by the defected officers and soldiers of the Syrian Armed Forces.⁷⁹

Saudi Arabia also appealed to the long-standing tribal links with Syria which had been strengthened over the years through intermarriages, business ventures and religious networks. When the FSA failed to give the final blow to the regime forces and the Western powers especially the USA, refrained from intervening in Syria to make a decisive change in the course of the war in favour of the opposition groups, Riyadh decided to draw more on these tribal affiliations mostly of Salafi nature and backed up the establishment of the Islamic Front in November 2013.⁸⁰ However, support of these Salafist groups had some kind of a boomerang effect on Saudi Arabia as they became a fertile breeding ground for the emergence of radical Islamist organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL that did not hesitate to resort to terrorist methods and viewed the Gulf monarchies as illegitimate.⁸¹

It is for sure that regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia evolved into a proxy war in Syria. The contradictory and irreconcilable interests and calculations of Tehran and Riyadh and their propping up of opposite sides of the conflict prolonged the civil war and took a heavy toll on Syrian people. Although the USA and Russia seem to take the lead in the Syria peace talks held in Vienna, any arrangement that fails to compromise the Saudi and Iranian views will have a slim chance of bringing an enduring peace to the war-torn country.

Yemen

The Republic of Yemen, the youngest and the poorest state of the Arabian Peninsula barely had a moment's peace ever since its foundation.⁸² The country was plunged into a civil war in May 1994 because of the demand for secession

⁷⁸ Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia: Local and Regional Challenges", *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2013), p. 36.

⁷⁹ Emile Hokayem, "The Regional Struggle over Syria", *Adelphi Series*, Vol. 53, No. 438 (2013), p. 122.

⁸⁰ F. Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War", *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, No. 11 (July 2014), pp. 6-7.

⁸¹ Benedetta Berti and Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Toward a New Chapter?", *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2014), p. 29.

⁸² The Republic of Yemen came into existence on 22 May 1990 following the unification of the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen).

by South Yemen. The order was reinstated only after the southern army was defeated by the forces of the central government two months later. Yemen, especially the southern province of Abyan, had become an operation base for al-Qaeda since the late 1990s.⁸³ In 2004, the country got again embroiled in a spiral of internal violence which would continue until 2010 when the Houthis, the Zaydi Shi'ites lived in northern parts of the country and made up of approximately 35 to 45 percent of the population⁸⁴, took up arms against the government on the grounds of political, religious and social discrimination. Furthermore, from late 2006 onwards the separatist movement in the south has revived under the name of al-Hirak.⁸⁵

Amidst all these turmoil, the ripples from the Arab Spring dropped in Yemen in January 2011 as the Yemenis pervaded the Tahrir Square in the capital Sana'a to overthrow the long-standing nepotist and corrupt regime of the President Ali Abdullah Saleh. They became successful in November 2011, when Saleh upon the initiation of Saudi Arabia and the intervention of the GCC, agreed to step down from his post in favor of his aide, Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in exchange of immunity for himself and his relatives.⁸⁶ However, the transitional government headed by Hadi failed to reach a political compromise that would bring together various contentious and disenchanted groups under the umbrella of a new constitution and the reconciliation process came to a halt when the Houthis with the covert support of Saleh, rebelled against the government in September 2014 and captured Sana'a along with large swathes of territory in northern and central Yemen.⁸⁷

Yemen had always been a soft belly for Saudi Arabia owing to the fact that the two countries shared a porous 1,800-kilometer border along which arms, drug smugglers, human traffickers and migrants roamed in high numbers especially in times of crisis. Secondly, Riyadh was annoyed to see the shift of power to a Shi'ite group in Yemen as it considered this development an indirect extension of Iranian influence at its backdoor. Finally, the success of Zaydi Shiites in Yemen might stir up separatist feelings among Saudi Arabia's small Zaydi minority who lived in southern parts of Saudi Arabia, pretty close to the Houthi areas.⁸⁸ Because of all these reasons Saudi Arabia watched the unfolding

⁸³ Md. Muddassir Quamar, "Managing the Arab Spring: The Saudi Way", p. 152.

⁸⁴ Roland Popp, "War in Yemen: Revolution and Saudi Intervention", *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 175 (June 2015), p. 2.

⁸⁵ Noel Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis: Genesis of the 2015 Crisis", *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2015), p. 237.

⁸⁶ Vincent Durac, "Yemen's Arab Spring: Democratic Opening or Regime Maintenance?", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (July 2012), p. 167.

⁸⁷ Roland Popp, "War in Yemen: Revolution and Saudi Intervention", p. 1.

⁸⁸ Gidon Windecker and Peter Sendrowicz, "Cooperation among Antagonists: The Complex Relationship between the Gulf States and Iran", *KAS International Reports*, No. 5 (June 2015), p.

of the Yemeni crisis since its very beginning with great concern and decided to take action at the end of March 2015 upon the Houthi advance towards the south.⁸⁹ Forging a nine-nation coalition that encompassed all the members of the GCC except Oman as well as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Sudan, Riyadh started out a massive bombing campaign on the Houthi targets which also killed many civilians and devastated Yemen's already decrepit infrastructure further.

Iran had been occasionally accused by the Saudi⁹⁰, Yemeni⁹¹ and Western⁹² officials of providing political, financial, military and training support to the anti-regime groups in Yemen. Although it was not possible to trace the extent of Iranian help to the centrifugal forces in Yemen, Tehran made no secret of its contention when the Houthis captured Sana'a in February 2015. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian lauded the Ansarullah movement (the political wing of the Houthis) on the grounds that it not only took major steps to establish domestic peace and stability by fighting against corruption and terrorism but also tried to complete the political process in the country.⁹³ Furthermore, only a day after the seizure of Sana'a by the Houthis, Iran signed an aviation agreement with the rebel government⁹⁴ and agreed to provide financial aid and to invest in Hodeida port and some power stations.⁹⁵ A friendly and sensitive regime to Iranian interests

⁹³, <http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_41542-1522-2-30.pdf?150608111055>, (access date: 9 January 2016).

⁸⁹ Massimo Calabresi, "Caught in the Cross Fire", *Time*, 13 April 2015.

⁹⁰ Saudi Arabia claimed that Ansar al-Sharia, the Yemen-based militant group which assumed responsibility for bombing attacks in the country obtained covert financial aid from Iran. See Aylin Ünver Noi, "A Clash of Islamic Models", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 15, (June 2013), p. 104.

⁹¹ Hadi designated the Houthis as the puppets of the Iranian government and claimed that they were emboldened by the Iranian regime obsessed with regional domination. See Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, "Yemen's President: The Houthis Must Be Stopped", *the New York Times*, 12 April 2015.

⁹² A senior American official stated that Iranian smugglers backed by the Quds Force were using small boats to ship AK-47s, pocket-propelled grenades and other arms to the anti-government groups in Yemen. See Eric Schmitt and Robert F. Worth, "With Arms for Yemen Rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role", *the New York Times*, 15 March 2012. The Western and Yemeni officials also alleged that both Iran and Hizbullah funded and trained the Houthis and al-Hirak members. See Maria Abi-Habib, "Fears Grow Over Yemenis' Ties to Iran", *the Wall Street Journal*, 20 June 2013.

⁹³ "Iranian Deputy FM Hails Security Situation in Yemen", *Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, News, No. 328658, 22 February 2015, <<http://www.mfa.gov.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=3&pageid=2023&newsview=328658>>, (access date: 9 January 2016).

⁹⁴ David Roberts, "Viewpoint: How Far Is Saudi-Iranian Rivalry Fuelling Yemen War?", *BBC*, 7 May 2015.

⁹⁵ Noel Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis: Genesis of the 2015 Crisis", p. 248.

in Yemen deemed an important bargaining chip for Tehran in its regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia. It was not therefore surprising that Iran criticized the Saudi-led attacks against the Houthis fiercely. The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated that an irrational and ignorant group-think within the Saudis was in charge of decision-making about the issues of Yemen⁹⁶ whereas the Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Marziyeh Afkham said that the air attacks would expand terrorism and stir up unrest in the whole region.⁹⁷

Iran and Saudi Arabia backed up different parties in the conflicts that occurred in Iraq, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen. This situation had deteriorating effects on the already troubled bilateral relationship as both Tehran and Riyadh frequently put the blame on each other for the ailing state of affairs in these countries. Furthermore, equipping their allies with political, economic and military wherewithal they brought on protraction of the friction and warfare which drifted the Middle East region into more uncertainty, disorder and instability.

The last part of the article will focus on the last aspect of the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the means of maintaining security in the Persian Gulf. For Iran the responsibility for ensuring the security of the Gulf lies exclusively on the shoulders of the regional states whereas Saudi Arabia draws on the power and support of the extra-regional actors, specifically the USA to achieve this goal.

Security Rivalry in the Persian Gulf

Iran has the longest coastline in the Persian Gulf. It has a navy of 18,000 personnel undergirded by submarines, frigates and corvettes.⁹⁸ Most importantly, Tehran retains a sophisticated ballistic missile system which has the capacity to carry out attacks against the critical targets in the Gulf such as Ra's Tanura refinery, desalination plants and populous cities of Jeddah and Riyadh in Saudi Arabia.⁹⁹ In recent years Iran has also ramped up efforts towards strengthening of its naval capacity through acquisition and

⁹⁶ "Supreme Leader: Saudi's Crime in Yemen Will Backfire on Them", *Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, News, No. 340907, 14 May 2015, <<http://en.mfa.ir/index.aspx?fkkeyid=&siteid=3&pageid=2012&newsview=340907>>, (access date: 9 January 2016).

⁹⁷ "Iran: Saudi Arabia's Attack on Yemen Sparks Unrest in Whole Region", *Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, News, No. 333325, 26 March 2015, <<http://en.mfa.ir/index.aspx?fkkeyid=&siteid=3&pageid=2021&newsview=333325>>, (access date: 9 January 2016).

⁹⁸ Vladimir Efimov, "A New Role of Iran in the Persian Gulf", *Iran.ru*, 19 March 2014.

⁹⁹ Ben Rich, "Gulf War 4.0: Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Complexification of the Persian Gulf Equation", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (October 2012), p. 478.

development of new military systems such as anti-ship ballistic missiles, satellite navigation-guided Fateh-110 missiles and combat and flying boats.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, a coastal defence missile system was installed along the country's 1,500 mile coastline.¹⁰¹

Iran's sole reliance on its naval forces to ensure its security in the Persian Gulf and its ability to block the Strait of Hormuz led Tehran to call on the Gulf neighbours starting from the Rafsanjani period to establish a security regime in the Persian Gulf which would incorporate all the littoral states but exclude the extra-regional actors especially the USA.¹⁰² Accordingly, Iran put forth many security proposals for the foundation of such a security system in the Gulf and carried out regular consultations with the GCC governments in order to acclimatize them to this idea.¹⁰³ However, the Gulf Arab states demonstrated unwillingness towards this prospective security scheme which would isolate Washington that supplied most of their military arsenal and weapon systems.

Iran's growing military buildup and military exercises in the Persian Gulf bothered Saudi Arabia at the most among the GCC states as this development would help Iran to exert more influence in the region. Riyadh was also discomfited about Iran's ballistic missiles as articulated by the words of a Saudi official in 2006 who stated that they could take preventive measures against terrorism but not against Iran's missiles.¹⁰⁴ In order to balance the perceived Iranian threat in the Gulf, the GCC countries led by Saudi Arabia initiated the Gulf Security Dialogue with the USA in 2006 which aimed to foster cooperation between the parties on matters of defence, regional security, counter-proliferation, counter-terrorism and critical infrastructure protection.¹⁰⁵ Additionally Saudi Arabia, with the approval of the US administration, purchased Chinese-made DF-21 ballistic missiles in 2007 in order to have retaliation capability in the event of a possible Iranian attack aimed at its infrastructure and major cities.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iran's Rocket and Missile Forces and Strategic Options", *CSIS*, 7 October 2014, p. 44.

¹⁰¹ Alexander Wilner, "US and Iranian Strategic Competition: Iranian Views of How Iran's Asymmetric Warfare Developments Affect Competition with the US and the Gulf, Sept. 2010-Feb. 2011", *CSIS*, 28 March 2011, p. 5.

¹⁰² Özden Zeynep Oktav, "The Gulf States and Iran: A Turkish Perspective", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer 2011), p. 137.

¹⁰³ Kamran Taremi, "Iranian Perspectives on Security in the Persian Gulf", *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (September 2003), p. 390.

¹⁰⁴ Brandon Friedman, "Battle for Bahrain: What One Uprising Meant for the Gulf States and Iran", p. 82.

¹⁰⁵ Christopher M. Blanchard and Richard F. Grimmett, "The Gulf Security Dialogue and Related Arms Sale Proposals", *CRS Report for Congress*, 8 October 2008, p. 3, <<https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL34322.pdf>>, (access date: 10 January 2016).

¹⁰⁶ Jeffrey Lewis, "Why Did Saudi Arabia Buy Chinese Missiles?", *Foreign Policy*, 30 January 2014.

The progress Iran made in its nuclear program sent chills down the spine of Saudi Arabia as nuclear-clad Iran would be a very difficult rival to overpower in the Persian Gulf. Riyadh pursued a two-pronged strategy to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue. Firstly, the Kingdom decided to take steps for the utilization of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes as declared at the annual summit of the GCC in December 2006.¹⁰⁷ In line with this decision, GCC Secretary-General Abdul Rahman bin Hamad Al Attiyah made a visit to Vienna in early February 2007 to study how the International Atomic Energy Agency could help the GCC states to make use of nuclear energy to counterbalance the depletion of oil and gas reserves.¹⁰⁸ Afterwards, Saudi Arabia announced plans to build 16 reactors over the next several decades which would hopefully provide 15 percent of the country's electricity by 2032.¹⁰⁹

Secondly, Saudi Arabia pursued an active diplomacy to prevent Iran from acquiring the nuclear bomb even if this might require the employment of military force against the country. The leaked US diplomatic data released on the website WikiLeaks revealed that the late Saudi King of Abdullah lobbied for the launch of military strikes by the USA to destroy Iranian nuclear program.¹¹⁰ Moreover, Riyadh reached out to the top trading partners of Tehran such as Russia, China and India and offered to buy weaponry from these states and to increase trade with them if they distanced themselves from Iran.¹¹¹ As might be expected Saudi Arabia did not receive enthusiastically the April 2015 nuclear deal framework with Iran and the USA had to announce a new US-GCC strategic partnership in May 2015 which would enhance security cooperation with Washington and the GCC states via development of a GCC-wide ballistic missile early warning system, organization of joint training programs and military exercises, facilitation of arms transfers and collaboration on maritime security and counter-terrorism¹¹² to convince Riyadh about America's unending commitment to its security.

¹⁰⁷ Yoel Guzansky, "The Saudi Nuclear Genie is Out", *the Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Spring 2015), p. 93.

¹⁰⁸ Joseph A. Kechichian, "Can Conservative Arab Gulf Monarchies Endure a Fourth War in the Persian Gulf?", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Spring 2007), p. 303.

¹⁰⁹ Brooke Anderson, "Saudis Make Push for Nuclear Energy", *the Wall Street Journal*, 15 September 2015.

¹¹⁰ Ross Colvin, "'Cut off Head of Snake' Saudis Told U.S. on Iran", *Reuters*, 29 November 2010.

¹¹¹ Adel Altorai, "Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making: The Rise and Demise of Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement (1997-2009)", p. 245.

¹¹² The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Annex to U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement", 14 May 2015, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/annex-us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>>, (access date: 10 January 2016).

Iran and Saudi Arabia continue to have different security perceptions pertaining to the Persian Gulf. While Tehran regards the USA-led GCC security scheme as an intrusion of a foreign power, Saudi Arabia welcomes the American presence in the region as it helps to alleviate the fear and threat it perceives from Iran.

Conclusion

The weakening and unravelling of the Iraqi state following the two destructive Gulf wars transformed the Persian Gulf sub-complex from a tripolar power configuration into a bipolar structure at the beginning of the 2000s in which Iran and Saudi Arabia were positioned as the dominant powers. This situation rekindled simmering tensions between the two countries dating back to the early years of the Islamic revolution when Iran irritated Saudi Arabia substantially because of its untiring zeal and endless struggle for the spread of Islamic democracy as well as a revolutionary version of Islam.

The invasion of Iraq by a US-led coalition in 2003 and the rapid fading of the Baathist regime created a power vacuum which was deftly exploited by Tehran to enhance its sphere of influence in the country. Iran's gaining ground in a fellow Arab state came as a huge blow to Saudi Arabia and frustrated the reconciliation attempts between Riyadh and Tehran that had been threaded with care and caution since the Rafsanjani period. The wave of mass protests and demonstrations staged against the perennial autocratic regimes of the Middle East and Africa starting from the end of 2010 and which escalated into bloody and devastating civil wars in some of these countries further derailed the Saudi-Iranian bilateral relationship as the two countries backed up opposite sides of the conflicts in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen.

The clashing views and divergent opinions of Iran and Saudi Arabia regarding the security situation in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East make the realization of a lasting rapprochement between the two states a difficult goal to attain. The severing of diplomatic ties between Tehran and Riyadh in early January 2016 in the wake of attacks against the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the consulate in Mashhad in protest of the execution of the prominent and respected Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr al Nimr in Saudi Arabia further attest to the fact that smouldering tensions between Tehran and Riyadh have the potential to erupt at any time and sink the region more deeply into further chaos, pain and tribulation.