Research Paper

Survival of Two Regional Powers at the Expense of the Security of the Middle East

Shokrollah KamariMajin
The Institute of International Relations, University of WarsawŻurawia 4, 4th floor
WarsawPoland

ABSTRACT: *Many have called the current relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia a cold war. In an article in "The National Interest", Mohammed Ayoob refers to the competition between the two as "a new cold war" [Ayoob, 2013].*
The relationship betweenIran and Saudi Arabia for the last three and a half decades has been tumultuous at best, so talk of conflict between these two countries isn't anything new. The conflict is occasionally given more visibility to the rest of the world by media attention and political analysis, but it's typically overshadowed by other newsworthy events elsewhere.
However, now it looks like their infighting has expanded to full out aggression. The upsizing in military might have major and long-lasting consequences for many of the people that live in the Middle East.
Current events related to the conflict between the two countries risk creating a new border system to emerge. The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are fully responsible for the birth, development, and shaping of the coming borders.
The purpose of this paper is to focus on the background of the conflictbetween Iran and SaudiArabia; a conflict with a Middle Eastern instability and danger of secessions in the region as part of the consequences. It is intended to provide a highlighting of the twocountries' hugeinternalchallenges and thus the need to externalenemies in the form of intensifying the historicalShia-Sunniconflict.
***Keywords:**cold war, competitive relationship, conflict; Islamic Republic of Iran, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,Middle East, the region's security*

I. INTRODUCTION

Theconflictual relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia has attracted the attention of political analysts. Kenneth Pollack, director of Middle East policy at the Brookings Institution believes that wherever in the Middle East, onecaneither find a group, who the Iraniansarebehind or a groupwho, the Saudis support [npr.org, 11 October 2011]. Analysts generally seem to have differing thoughts as to the reason for the war. Some try to explain it via the "balance of power"theory [Waltz, 1979]; others believe it to be an ideological war [Imonti, 2012] while some others believe that they bare their fangs in fear of one another. One analyst by the name off Ariel Jahner believes that it is a "competition for regional predominance" [Jahner, 2012].

In order to get a good grasp of the reason for the conflict, one must look at the most common foreign policy positions of the two states.

There is an important factor that may contribute to the possibility of the two states cooperating with one another. Both the Iranian and Saudi states claim to be Muslim, so they may be able to find common ground on this basis.

This commonality between the two states can be regarded as the strongest reason for a potential lasting alliance. However, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the main reason for the feud is actual that they share similar behavior.

If one views the Middle Eastern conflict as a focal point for looking at Iran and Saudi Arabia's positions, it can actually be inferred that the two states often play roles in direct opposition to each other. Iran tends to get involved in the support of groups that is in some way opposing Saudi Arabia, and vice versa. Both groups also tend to deny support to groups that support the other side.

The Iranians are supporting Hamas while Saudi Arabia supports Fatah; Iranians are behind the Lebanese Hezbollah, fighting against Israel while Saudi Arabia is allied with Hariri faction. There are also

substantiated rumors about Hezbollah's role in Hariri's death; including a report backed by the UN that found Hezbollah responsible for Hariri's murder [Macdonald, 2010].

These two states compete with one another by intervening in conflicts between other rival groups and organizations. Both states may be trying to curry favor and influence in other Middle Eastern Countries.

These attempts of influence can have serious consequences for the entire region. Already now there are several violent conflicts in various areas of the Middle East, which political analysts see the two states' roles as the underlying hands.

More instability in an already tense world region, as well as the danger of secessions in gradually more countries in this region, may be the cause for more violence and serious concerns.

The Iranian and the Saudi state regardless of the consequences of their "cold war" to the region, intend to overcome their internal challenges. In this direction, an old religious conflict more and more is expanded and deepened. This religious dispute is used as a tool in a political exploitation.

II.   EXPANSIONISM AS A COMPETITION TOOL

Radical Islam can be considered as the means by which both states promote their goals [Price, 1999]. The reason is that both states base their legitimacies on the religion of Islam so that Islam is used as a political tool in order to could maintain power. Therefore, the two states use the religion also as tools in their attempt for their power expansion throughout the region.

Uprisings in some Arab countries under the name "Arab Spring" have given both states good opportunities to gain a foothold in those countries.

The two countries have expanded their confrontations and rivalries to various other countries in the region. Ersoy from Bilkent University sees the Iran-Saudi relationship everywhere in the Middle East. In an article in the Journal Turkish Weekly Ersoy states that practically several countries including Yemen, Syria, Iraq, ... are the battlefields for competition between the two states [Ersoy, 2012].

Egypt is one such country where both states have used radical Islam to gain influence within its political sphere. In Egypt, the Iranians have lost ground in favor of the Saudis. The Islamic Republic invested in the Muslim Brotherhood while the Kingdom stood behind the Egyptian military.

Sudan is also one another country where Iran and Saudi Arabia have had conflict.In recent years, Sudan has also been a country close to the anti-West axis, which contains countries such as Iran, Syria and North Korea. The anti-west axis is a political sphere backed by Russia and China in retaliation to the western world.In recent years, Saudi Arabia has sought to convince Sudan to steer its foreign policies away from Iran. Saudi Arabia and Sudan lie on either side of the Red Sea, which is an important geopolitical area.

Iraq has been a real battlefield for the two states as well. Iran seems to have a larger foothold in Iraq than Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has attempted to tamper with Iraqi politics in order to undermine the Iranian supremacy. It can be said,"The future of Iraq is a central concern for both Iran and Saudi Arabia" [ISN ETH Zurich. 2013, April 3].

Bahrain is another country that is subjected to the Saudi-Iran rivalry. Bahrain is in a situation opposite to Iraq. The Saudis on the one side and organizations opposing the Saudis, funded by Iran on the other dominate it. The Saudis obviously find this support intolerable as Al-Jazeera referred to it as "Safavid Iran's plans for the destruction of the Gulf States" [Al-Jasir, 2011]. The situation is so dire that "Bahrain's government is dependent on Saudi Arabia for Stability" [Downs, 2012/2013].

Roughly eighteen months ago, the Saudi and Bahraini governments reported that an Iranian drone fell somewhere in the waters between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, tensions between Iran on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and Bahrain on the other increased. Almost simultaneously, Saudi Arabia reported on the arrest of a group accused of espionage actions in favor of Iran.

As their rivalry grows, more countries such as Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and some areas of Palestine are becoming embroiled in the Saudi-Iran conflict.

III.   THE CAUSE OF THE CONFLICT

All this conflict begs the question; from where does all the enmity arise? Currently, there are several theories. However, there are a few clear facts that can be taken for granted.

They are prone to religious discrimination, economic corruption, and high unemployment and corrupt politics. They also sorely lack accountability for their massive economic and financial institutions, and unjust laws hold down courts that may be able to fix some of these problems. What's worse is that the people who are educated enough to fix this are either emigrating in droves or being held down by the government. Repression of dissident groups and individuals is severely applied, so even if someone were able to speak out through all of that, they would have to contend with the law afterward.

Both the Iranian[Fürtig, 2002] and the Saudi state[Lacey, 2009]have so many complicated problems that change is nearly impossible. If a person attempts to make even a small change in the society, they are met with quick and severe repercussions.

1. The Iranian rulers are the worst politically. Their ruling body has been in turmoil since the 1979-revolution. However, Saudi Arabia's royal family isn't in a much better position. This was directly confronted by Sheikh Salman al-Awdah's speech. Al-Awdah has said, "He has up to 2.4 million followers - which he warned the royal family of injustice and corruption adopted by it" [Henderson, 2013]. Both countries may be attempting to distract from their political issues by focusing on the cold war with one another.

2. The states are both claiming that their primary mission is God's satisfaction, and their primary goal is protecting and promoting "God's religion". However, their interpretations of Islam are quite different.

In light of the two previous issues, it is easy to reach the conclusion that both states have to use their ideologies to ensure their survival. These two states' internal conflicts and crises are so pervasive in their societies that solving them would take momentous effort. It's much safer for them to manufacture external threats than to be torn apart from the inside.

IV. THE SECURITY ISSUE

"Security" is a matter in which no country can take frivolously. Therefore, the "security" issue can in situations, in itself, be a factor that can be used by states for their stability, strength, and an overcoming of their rivals.

"Securitization" [Buzan, 1998], as defined by the Copenhagen school, is a means by which a particular subject or ruling body will label something as a threat to security as an excuse to use extraordinary means or force to further its political agenda. It examines special interest groups that often use this tactic to achieve lofty political goals that they wouldn't be able to achieve if they were forthright about their intentions.

When studying securitization it is important that we identify their actors, what they should be protecting, and finally, the relationship between actors and audience (the Mass).

The main drivers behind the scene of securitization in a theocratic political system like those in Iran or Saudi Arabia are religious leaders and clerics.

Regimes will sometimes intentionally create problems in a country to inspire conflicts with foreign bodies. This accomplishes two goals; one is that enmity with a foreign enemy can create an internal unity. The other is that the dominant rulers are able to use the external enemy as an opportunity to suppress their internal enemies. Creating an enemy can be an effective way for the regime to inspire public support for itself, as all internal problems will be dwarfed by the shadow of the external enemy.

Mozaffari associates the process of creating enemies with totalitarian regimes. He believes that these political regimes have difficulty surviving in the normal, peaceful framework. Mozaffaribelieves that such "regimes must create crises or maintain existing crises. Normality, appeasement and tranquility are the worst enemies of such regimes" [Mozaffari, 2013].

The regime repeatedly reminds the nation of "the threats" in order to retain the perception that "the threats" are still present. With this, the regime is able "justify their actions and decisions by the state of emergency" [Ibid.].

In addition, the presence of "irreducible enemies" is a necessary precondition for a totalitarian regime's survival. These regimes need an enemy whose conspiracies can be connected to everything. Under such regimes "the situation is never normal; a state of emergency is the rule" [Ibid.].

Since 1979, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have had many instances of internal difficulties, instability, economic hardships, and social crises. In these situations, they chose to adopt unrealistic and non-strategic foreign policies with destructive consequences for both the region and their own countries. Iran and Saudi Arabia, in particular, have used each other as "external enemies" with the goal of overcoming their inside-threats. They have both exaggerated each other's threat levels in order to shift focus from their internal problems. Because of this, since the Iran-Iraq war, both countries have heightened their military spending and fought for a stronger military and security position relative to each other.

In order to legitimize the "securitization" and consolidate power expansionism, it is especially in the Middle Eastern society - because of the role of religion in the society - inevitably that a state ensures itself with the religion's ensure support when the state feels threatened.

In such dire circumstances, "faith" can serve as an indispensable tool to achieve goals and curry favor with the people. The common approach relies on the claim the mission of the state is not political but religious.

Therefore, the state claims to operate on several tenets;
1. Preservation of the Islamic values (each with its own interpretation of Islam) is the state's primary priority.
2. If a state decides that it must defend these values, it will do so immediately. Fulfillment of this duty is not limited to a particular territory because it is based on a national, regional, and global mission.
3. Anywhere an "Islamic state" feels that "the religious brothers" are endangered or threatened, it has "Sharia duty" (Islamic legal duty) to act in order to help them.
4. Wherever "the enemy" intends to harm "our ideological interests", "we" are obliged to battle against it.

All of the evidence points towards the fact that both the Iranian and the Saudi states are forced to participate in external crises to escape the deep internal challenges they face.

This external crisis has a great degree of depth. These can be divided into layers;
1. In the first, most obvious layer, the two states justify their regional competition and expansion by claiming that it's in the name of the "Protection of the God's religion".
2. The second layer is more intangible, as the fundaments of this "justification" are loose.

Here is where doubts arise about whether the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia has an ideological cause. If their mission were purely based on ideology then the two states would probably share a common front against the "enemies of God" despite their different versions of Islam. It's safe to assume that the hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia isn't fueled by religion. If theywere, they would have no reason to be enemies.

"Ideology" is surely an important factor in Iran's war against the kingdom, "but it is neither determining, in short in itself insufficient to explain Iranian behavior nor is it that often necessary for explaining the actions of Tehran" [Parsi, 2013]. Saudi Arabia is also well aware that Iran isn't combating a threat to them based on ideological or "security" grounds.

It is clear that "ideology" is just a tool used to disguise the true goal of regional expansion. In this layer "the ideological responsibility" gradually gives way to "security concerns".

Each of the two states supports military and civilian groups that don't share a common ideology or are so far removed that they can't possibly have an effect on national security.

For example, the Kingdom supports groups in Syria who aren't Sunnites such the Shiites in Khuzestan. Iran is guilty of this as well, as it supports the Sunni organization Hamas.
3. At the deepest level is the third layer. It is obvious that the expansion of regional influence is conducive to internal political stability. This layer is hidden from the general population and probably isn't known by anyone except those active in politics.

It can be concluded that each of the two states is using the war to overcome their legitimacy challenges. To ensure their stability and survival they are contributing to the instability of smaller countries. This instability makes these smaller countries makes it easier for one of the two states to control them.

So, the source of this "cold war" seems to be internal problems in both Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, they each claim that the other is planning conspiracies against their security.

The "cold war" isn't based on preserving the balance of power or protecting an ideology. The war is because both states have found a mock war to be a viable means of temporarily quelling the vast internal problems that were previously ripping them apart.

V.   THE END OF THE COLD WAR BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

It is also noteworthy that during "the Cold War" between the US and the Soviet Union, they had a more active role in other countries compared with this role in the Post-Cold War Era.

After the East camp collapsed it spent nearly twenty years convalescing. During the collapse of the East Block, the world's political scene dramatically changed. Many alliances gave way to hostility and vice versa. At the end of the Cold War, states were suddenly faced with uncertainty. In Fukuyama's 1989 essay "The End of History?"he asks the question "in what direction are world affairs headed?" [Fukuyama, 1989].

Philippe Le Prestre drew attention to a "redefinition of states' roles in the international system" in his book Role Quests in the Post-Cold War Era [Le Prestre, 1997: 3]. The roles Le Prestre talks about are specific to

the large powers, but when the large powers have to learn their new roles; one can imagine how drastic the changes will be for the smaller powers caught in between.Holm & Sorensen believe that the end of the Cold War changed the picture we had of the state. It turns out that the sharp distinction between "domestic" and "international politics" was irrelevant [Holm &Sørensen, 1994].

There was an emergence of stability among many so-called Third World countries as a consequence of the Cold War ending. Jose Cintra believes that the Cold War between East and West did not allow the emergence of "many potential third world conflicts" [Cintra, 1989]. This may be because it is easier to create uncertainty calculations in a bipolar world. [Waltz, 1979:176]. More specifically, it is Mearsheimer's argument, which claims that in a bipolar system there are limited decision-making points to exclaim war while a multi-polar system is much more fluid and has many such dyads [Mearsheimer, 1993], whereby war is more easily declared. This begs the question; is a bipolar international system better than a multi-polar system? The obvious answer is no, as it is neither ideal nor fair that the entire international relations would be guided by or influenced by the relationship between two superpowers. However, one can also say that a political system characterized by chaos, conflict and instability isn't preferable to a bi-polar one.

One of the consequences of the end of the Cold War was the disappearance of regional balances of power in many regions of the world and the emergence of a "new regional constellation" [Rahigh-Aghsan, 2000: 2. The Middle East was one of the areas most affected by this shift.

In addition, the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq led to vast changes in the balance of power between the Middle Eastern major countries, especially in the Persian Gulf region. After the power vacuum caused by Saddam Hussein's fall, the Islamic Republic (Iran) attempted to fill the void by "engaging in geopolitical competition with Saudi Arabia for control over the Gulf region" [Mabon, 2013: 101]. The West's success in toppling Saddam's regime resulted in the strengthening of radical religious views and organizations. This ended with sectarian confrontations between Shia and Sunni.

VI.   CONCLUSION

The conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran increases the risk that countries like Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon will fracture due to territorial disputes. This conflict will end up causing mass infighting and political turmoil, which will affect the Middle East for decades.

When there are only two major powers in a region that are at war:
1 – They cannot compromise with each other. Their hostility and tension are to such an extent that negotiations are pointless.
2 – They cannot defeat each other without a long, costly, high casualty war.
3 – They end up sharing the smaller powers between them in a cyclical fashion. If they expand their scope of authority and influence in one area, it comes at the cost of losing theother area due to decreased presence.

If this trend continues, we may witness to a two-part region in the near future. This separation will bear nothing more than war, hatred, genocide, conflict and instability. The war between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia must be stopped, or the people of the Middle East will pay the price.

REFERENCES

[1].   Al-Jasir, J. (2011).Safavid Iran's plans for the destruction of the Gulf States. Al-Jazirah. 2011, between 12 -17th March.
[2].   Ayoob M. (2013). The New Cold War in the Middle East.The National Interest. 2013, January 16.
[3].   Buzan B., Wæver O., de Wilde J. (1998). Security: A New Framework for Analysis. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
[4].   Cintra J. T. (1989). Regional Conflicts: Trends in a Period of Transition. In: The Changing Strategic Landscape, Adelphi Paper no. 237. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies; 1989.
[5].   Downs K. (2012).A Theoretical Analysis of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain.Journal of Politics & International Studies. Winter 2012/13, Vol. 8.
[6].   Ersoy E. (2012). The Rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East.Journal of Turkish Weekly. 2012, December 27.
[7].   Fukuyama F. (1989).The End of History and the Last Man.The National Interest. Summer 1989.
[8].   Fürtig H. (2002). Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia Between the Gulf Wars. Garner Publishing Limited.
[9].   Henderson S. (2013).A perfect of internal challenges in Saudi Arabia. Islam Times, 2013, April 4.
[10]. Holm H. & Sørensen G. (1994). International politik. Politica. 1994, Bind 26– 2.
[11]. Imonti F. (2012). Oilprice.com. The No.1 Source for Oil and Energy News, 2012, 22 August.
[12]. Jahner A. (2012). Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle for Power and Influence in the Gulf. International Affairs Review. Spring 2012, volume XX, number 3, p. 47.

[13]. Lacey R. (2009).Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia. Viking.

[14]. Le Prestre P. G. (1997). Role Quests in the Post-Cold War Era – Foreign Policies in Transition.McGill-Queen's University Press.

[15]. Mabon S. (2013). Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East. I.B. Tauris& Co Ltd., p. 101.

[16]. Macdonald N. (2010). CBC Investigation: WhokilledLebanon'sRafik Hariri? CBC News. 2010, November 21.

[17]. Mearsheimer J. (1993). Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War. in Crosscurrents: International Relations in the Post-Cold War Era, ed. Mark Charlton and Elizabeth Ridell-Dixon. Toronto: Nelson Canada.

[18]. Mozaffari M. (2013). The Role of Ideology in Iranian Foreign Policy. In: Chehabi H. E, KhosrokhavarFarhad, Therme Clément. Iran and the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century. Costa Mesa, California; Mazda Publishers, p. 195.

[19]. Parsi R. (2013).Exploring Iran & Saudi Arabia's Interests in Afghanistan & Pakistan: Stakeholders or Spoilers – A Zero Sum Game? CIDOB, April 2013, Part 2: Iran.

[20]. Price D. E. (1999). Islamic Political Culture, Democracy, and Human Rights: A Comparative Study. Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data.1999, p. 182.

[21]. Rahigh-Aghsan A. (2000).The dynamics and inertia of the Northern Tier cooperation.KøbenhavnsUniversitet, Institut for Statskundskab, p. 2.

[22]. Terril W. A. (2011). The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security. Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), U.S. Army War College.

[23]. Waltz K. N. (1979). Theory of International Politics. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.