

Saudi-Iranian Relations; The Proxy Conflicts and Implications for Balochistan

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Abstract

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran are two Muslim states. They practice the different religious sects of Sunni and Shia Islam. Their geological location in the region and natural resources have increased their significance in the Middle East and Gulf region. Saudi Iranian relations have been tense since 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution. The Iranian revolution changed the political environment of the Middle East. These political changes have changed the power structure of the region. The study begins with an overview and exploration of the historical background of the Saudi Iran relations. The study discusses the Saudi Iranian relations in post revolution era which consists the period of normalization and rivalry. The paper underscores three notable factors that have had impacts on the Saudi Iran relations. The analysis of the study demonstrates that, the Saudi Iranian relations are tense, and contradictory interests will result will bring about a persisted rivalry between these two countries.

Key Words: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Gulf, Revolution, Middle East, Relationship, Iraq war, USA, Sunni, Shi'ites OPEC, GCC.

Introduction

The study is an attempt to explore the historical background of the Saudi-Iranian relations. The study also highlights the latest events and developments in Saudi-Iranian relations. Saudi Arabia and Iran two major Islamic countries. They are important countries in terms of their geological significance in the region and natural resources, particularly in Oil reservoirs. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the largest oil producer in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), while Iran is the second largest in the Organization. They enjoy their leverage in the Middle East, particularly in the

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Gulf region. Before the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979, Saudi was considered the only representative of the Muslims in Middle East. Saudi control over the Holy places (Makah and Madina) have privileged it a unique position in the world, especially in the region. But, after the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979, Iran emerged as a contender to the Saudi hegemonic position, and resulted into Iran's dominant and influencing status.

The study overviews and probe the historical ties between Saudi and Iran in the pre and post Iranian revolution period. The paper highpoints and discuss the success and challenges of the past to understand the Saudi Iran rivalry. In the perspective of historical analysis, this paper highlights that have had impacts on the Saudi-Iranian relations, these causes are 1 sectarian division 2 Economic factors, oil and the organization of petroleum exporting countries (OPEC). 3 Competition for hegemony in the region of Gulf and Middle East. The analysis of the study demonstrates that, the Saudi Iranian- relations have been tense, the conflicting interests will result in a persistent competition. (Cardinali, 2015)

Relations In Pre -Revolution Era

The relations between Saudi and Iran date backs to Al-Saudi dynasty, which was established in 1928. However, till the mid-sixties, official visits did not taken place between the leaders of the both countries. The impulse for the expanded political discussions subsequent from the overthrown of king Faysal in Iraq in 1958. The king's dethronement by the Nationalist forces raised issues regarding the prospect of an extramainstream uprisings against Monarchical reigns in the region. Consequently, Shah Muhammad Raza Pahlavi and the Saudi King Saud , and King Faysal in particular , when he seized power in 1964, started an era of consistent talks to coordinate in their foreign policy , which had bound the ties between the two ruling leadership, and their states. (Furtig, 2007)

The cooperation between the leaders become effectively a result of a communal interest in the upkeep of their particular governments, in addition to shared economic desires and worries. Moreover, the friendly relations in this era was indeed, due to the equal governmental structure in the both countries. Foreign policies of the both countries were equally complimentary and they had shared national interests. Sectarianism was not an issue of the period and they had a frim bilateral ties. According to David long "before Iranian Islamic revolutions, the main political divergence in the region of Gulf was neither Sunni-Shiite nor Arab -Persian, but traditional-radical". (Okruhlik, 2003)

From Revolution To The End Of Iran-Iraq War

The early ties between Saudi and Iran were cordial and cooperative. But in 1979, the overthrow of shah of Iran led the new dynamics in the Iran's foreign policy, which threatened Al-Saud family by challenging the status quo of monarchical rule in the region. In 1970s, the people of Iran were getting disgruntled by the policies of authoritarian Shah. The Iranian society is historically traditional, but when the shah of Iran when the shah of Iran tried to westernize and modernize Iran the Iranian Shiite clergy was severely marginalized. The 1977 economic crisis created political catastrophe. People lost trust in shah and Political repression expanded through the population. Consequently these economic crisis and political repression led to the revolutionary movement led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini. Ultimately a stable Muslim government of Muhammad Raza Shah Pahlavi was overthrown.

The overthrown of Shah of Iran caused hatred in the Saudi-Iranian relations. After the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979, the relations between the Saudi-Iranian relations started getting tense. The relations continued to crumble and eventually led to end in diplomatic ties in 1988. Saudi feared the Iranian revolution to expand it towards other Gulf States. (Kechichian, 1999)

In contrast, Iran declared Saudi Arabia not able to guard Holy places of Islam. At the same time Iran's Khomeinist ideology was extremely against Monarchy. in the same way the clash of rules and ideologies the Saudi Iranian relations have been tense after the 1979 Mecca Grand Mosque takeover, regardless the fact, no evidence was found for the Iranian involvement. The coreeffect of Iranian Islamic revolution over the Saudi-Iranian relation has been the loss of mutual trust that bring an end to their cordial and cooperative diplomatic relations and a competitions for hegemonic power was started from the both ends in the region. (Kechichian, 1999)

The Iran-Iraq war which was happened soon after the creation of Islamic Republic of Iran. Saudi Arabia took the side of Iraq which led to the further weakening in the Saudi-Iranian relations. Saudi Supported Iraq because, Saudi feared that the Iran's propaganda against its Kingdom was a threat for Saudi regime. These were the factors of the Saudi support of Iraq in the war against Iran. Iraq was supported economically and politically by Saudi Arabia.. This decision of Iraqi support in the war against Iran also caused ansignificantchange. (Furtig, 2007)

After the Iran-Iraq war, Saudi used monetary policy to pressurize Iran. The Saudi monetary policy was not like that of Western powers sanctions on Iran these days. The Saudi oil policy broke the Iranian economic system. The

Saudi's potential to influence International Oil costs could kept Iran pressurized. Saudi-Iranian relations got tenser in 1987 after the incident of Mecca. After the incident the Iranian pilgrims staged demonstrations and protests which caused clashes with the Saudi security forces, the violent crashes lead to the killing of 275 Iranian pilgrims and wounded 303 others. Iran was blamed by Saudi Arabia for this incident on the ground that Iran was engaged in creating conspiracies against the Kingdom. (Okruhlik, 2003)

The Saudi-Iran Rapprochement In The Nineties

The breakup in Saudi Iranian relations continued, after the end of the Iran-Iraq war. In 1990, The Iraqi forces Invaded Kuwait and the triangular power relations in the Gulf shifted in all the region. The Gulf war led to the normalization of tense relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia and Iran get integrated against the common enemy Iraq. The consequences of the war triggered a detente between the two states. Though politicalties were not reinstated till March 19, 1991. The happenings of the earlier decade would have left an enduring mark on the Saudi-Iranian relations. Lack of trust remained a complicating factor in bilateral relationship. However notwithstanding the tensions of 80s, both countries had earlier to 1979, a concentration on joint political and economic goals helped to cool down the hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The Iraqi bellicosity took the two countries close togetherpolitically, as Iran was sturdily anti-Iraq after Iran-Iraq war and Saudi Arabia regarded Iraq as more hazard to its security, than Iran. The economic factor also brought Saudi and Iran united, as Iran regarded its relations with Saudi Arabia very important, due to Saudi's Oil reservoirs, which would play an important role in its development. The nine year war between Saudi and Iraq, left Iran with enormous socio-economic problems. Stabilization of relations with the Persian Gulf countries was the Iran's foreign policy main program that time. Restoring the Saudi-Iranian relations was, in particular, helpful for the improvement of fragile economy after the war.(Reza Amiri, 2011)

Consequently, Iran regarded its relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia more essential owing to its hegemony in the region and its influences over OPEC. And economic concerns were taken into reason. (Kechichian, 1999)As the decade of ninety advanced,the member countries of the GCC also realized that past notions of the Iranian threat may have been over embroidered. The period of nineties is considered a period of normalization and rapprochement between Saudi and Iran.(Okruhlik, 2003)

The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry In Iraq

After the fall of Saddam government, Shiite take control of the following Iraqi government. This was a noticeable change in Iraq for both Saudi and Iran. Both countries looked the civil war in terms of their interests. Saudi and Iran have had equal objectives in the Iraqi civil war. Islam has been used by these two rivals as instrument to enhance their political power and, ultimately hegemon in the Middle East. The fall of Saddam government and the following Iraqi war have changed the security paradigm of the region and have engaged the two regional rivals in a struggle for power in the region. Iraq, which was once a common enemy of Saudi Arabia and Iran, is now a focusing point of their enmity. Neither of these two states is ready to content with the rise of a new hostile regime in Iraq. Iran considered Iraq a highly important place for them not because of the Majority Shiite population, but also due to Askari shrine and Najaf and Karbala, the two holy cities in Islamic world.

Since the fall of Saddam government, the Sunni political prominence has been facing challenges. This has been a serious worrying issue for Saudi Arabia. Saudi have fear of losing her hegemony in the region. The fall of the Saddam government has been a challenge to the Saudi hegemony in the region. Iran has established strong ties with the following Saddam government. Saudi fears of these firm relations between Iran and Shiite dominated-Iraqi government. Saudi fear is that, this will led to an alliance, which would organize them diplomatically and ultimately will create challenges to the Saudi's interests in the region.

The USA led invasion of Iraq has created serious concerns for Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia did not fear of the USA expansion in the region, but their actual concern was the Shiite hegemony in the region. Saudi had three main interests were 1 security of his state, which was threatened by the instability and conflict in Iraq 2 safeguards of the rights and security of the Iraqi Sunni population. 3 to restrict the Iran's leverage in the region, especially in Iraq.(Matthiesen, 2013)

For Saudi Arabia and Iran, Iraq has been a ground of their proxies. The USA Iraq's invasion led to fall of Sunni dominated Saddam government and the empowerment of the past oppressed Shiites. The change in the governments from Sunni dominated to the Shiite's dominated government shifted the hegemonic control from Riyadh to Tehran. Iraq has utilized the opportunity to expand its leverage in the region. The Saudi Iran rivalry continues causing further instability in the region.(Gibbons, 2005)

The Saudi Iranian Rivalry In The Context Of Arab Spring

The Arab world was shook after a chain of pouring activities in winter 2011. The political disorder that had upturned the status quo, a known as Arab uprisings. The Saudi Arabia and Iran rivalry started again and expanded in the region. The rivalry for hegemony and power between Saudi and Iran, these Political and ideological contestants, utilized conflicts in the region. They are backing opposite political parties, providing fund to rival armies and waging military actions against the other proxies. Saudi-Iranian relations have been exacerbated further since the events of 2011. (LGelvin, 2015)

A new political variables have been introduced by the Arab Spring that have to be considered by both Saudi Arabia and Iran. When the Arab Uprising were moved to Egypt from Tunisia, both Saudi and Iran took interest in the result of the struggle. Interestingly, after the Arab Uprising, Saudi appealed for Status quo to be maintained. On the other hand Iran was interested to expand its revolutionary ideology.

Saudi and Iran have been trying to sustain their compasses of hegemony in the Gulf and Levant. The rivals have always taken advantage of Anarchy in weak states to promote their interests in the region. Saudi Arabia and Iran have been involved in the proxies against each other., however in the perspective of Arab Uprising, the Saudi-Iranian enmity has led to direct military intrusions in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and Iraq. (Shkolnik, 2012)

The Syrian Crisis And The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry

The Syrian civil war has been a midpoint of Saudi-Iranian rivalry. In March 2011, the Arab spring inspired the people of Syria, who have been distress from political and economic deprivations. Thousands of people took to the street, which as a non-violent way to fight for their rights. But in March 2011 the state of affairs had worsened and Assad commenced a huge operation to eliminate the opposing-government forces.

Syria has been Iran's close ally. Syria have been the main Center of Iran's power plan in Levant. Syria has been used by Iran as a doorway to train, arm, and fund and to offer logical support to Hezbollah and Hamas. The Iranian led alliance consists of Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah and the recent inclusion of Shiite militant groups has been named the Alliance of Resistance, as they have constituted the Shiite anti-Western and anti-Israeli ideology. For Iran, removal of Assad government is catastrophic as this will threat the Iran's access to Hezbollah and for spreading of its revolutionary Islamic beliefs, thus it has a monopoly in the Levant. As Geneve has rightly said. "Without his (Assad) loyalty, the defense of Hezbollah and Hamas might collapse. In April

2011, Iran began to provide aid, training and personnel were sent from Iran. The Iranian government is providing Assad technology to observe social media and cellular phones.

Saudi Arabia, the pivot of the Sunni motive have been playing a shaping role in the Syrian civil war. The Saudi-Syrian relations have been tense, since the Nineteen Seventies. There is a serious lack of trust between the Saudi-Syrian relations. Saudi Arabia have distrust and suspicion with the Syrian government. When the uprising of 2011 took place, Saudi Arabia used hard-hitting approach against the Assad government. Saudi Arabia in the beginning presented itself in elusive way. King Abdullah, the Saudi King demanded for an end to the bloodshed of the Syrian population. In a statement, Nawaf Obaid clear the Saudi Stance regarding the Syrian civil war, he said, that "Saudi Arabia would linger to resist Iranian involvement in the Syrian civil war. Saudi Arabia will be there to stop them if Iran is there in the Arab countries." He stated Saudi Arabia expanded support towards Syrian rebels. Saudi spend millions of dollars to train and to provide arm and trained thousands of Syrian fighters. The Saudi soft power leverage through the Wahhabi doctrine has been a power to expand Saudi legitimacy to the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia has been engage in strengthening and building Sunni force, to support the future government of Syria. Saudi Arabia have been a close friend of all other Sunni states to ensure its objectives. (Abdo, 2011)

The Saudi Iran rivalry in Syria have propelled the country the ground of Proxy. According to a report, released in 2014, there are between 6000 to 7000 Sunni foreign fighters fighting in Syria, and between 7000 and 8000 Shiite foreign fighters, fighting on the behalf of Assad against the Sunni forces.

The Sunni-Shiite Proxies And Implications For Balochistan

Baluchistan, being largest province Pakistan, shares an about 900km long porous border with Iran. After the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979, Saudi Arabia remained watchful. Saudi feared of the Iranian revolution extension into the neighboring countries including Pakistan. According to analysts the Saudi-Iran proxy war started in Baluchistan in 1979. After the Iranian Islamic revolution, Iran wanted to spread it into Pakistan particularly in Baluchistan. On the other side, Saudi Arabia strongly resisted to counter it. Consequently, the sectarian violence broke out in Baluchistan in the mid of 1980s. (Nation, 2015) Recently, Iran warned of attack on militant bases in Baluchistan. The Saudi-sponsored militants groups including Sipah-e-Sahaba an anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite organization and Jaishe Adl one of the Sipah's offshoot have been engaged in anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite activities. The Iranian attacks on anti-Iranian groups in Baluchistan would be precarious for the already troubled

province. (James M . Dorsey, 2017) The Saudi-Iranian proxy war in Baluchistan have negative implications and consequences for the peace, stability and prosperity of the province.

Conclusion

The status of the Saudi and Iran is still not determine, as the two countries wait for the consequences of the political revolutions in the Middle East. The evidence from the history of Saudi-Iranian relations highlights the vacillating nature of the relations. Both Nations have to overlook the past differences to cooperate for the achievement of shared objectives. Issues of conviction in the past and desires for hegemony will lead to the tense relations in the future too. They compete for regional domination. The Iran's compulsions of economic dependency and the Saudi fear of Iran nuclear potentialities may led to a balance of power again in the region. As both states ascertain unwillingness to antagonize each other directly.

The present Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the Middle East will trigger friction between the two countries in the future too. But their regional interests and compulsions may not led to a serious quarrel. Their friendly ties will have gigantic positive impacts on the peace and stability of the region, due to the importance of these two countries. The Saudi-Iranian relation will remain attention-grabbing for the world, to wait and see the directions and implications of the Saudi –Iranian rivalry , especially in the light of present tense relations between Iran and Saudi and continual Saudi threat to isolate Iran in the world politics , especially in the region. (Okruhlik, 2003)

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