

## **Tug of War Between Saudi and Iran and its Implications for Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

*Iran and the Arab world represent two distinct cultures with different historical backgrounds and ideologies. The Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 created new bitterness among the two as Iranian leadership vowed to export revolution to the Arab countries. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the revolutionary zeal cooled down and Iranian policy makers adopted a degree of pragmatism and opted to normalize its relations with its Arab neighbors. However, geo-strategic compulsions are forcing the two to reduce tension and come forward with cooperative approach by respecting the sovereignty of each other. This paper aims to dispassionately and impartially analyze the Arab and Iranian viewpoints, the concerns of other countries, regional implications and finally the policy options for Pakistan. In addition, guidelines are forwarded to policy makers to re-evaluate policy options to ensure that national interests are safeguarded and worsening diplomatic situation in the Middle East is diffused.*

**Keywords:** Conflict, Middle East, Foreign Policy, Implications, Pakistan

### **1. Introduction**

Amidst the upheaval of the Arab Uprisings, the Saudi-Iranian competition has been greatly intensified (Terrill, 2011). Their struggle for regional dominance continues to challenge the power dynamics of the Middle East and Muslim World. In their quest for influence, Saudi Arabia and Iran became involved in the domestic politics of other states (Salloukh, 2013). Supporting opposing factions within the conflict, Saudi Arabia and Iran engaged in proxy wars, contributing vast resources, including funds, arms, training, public support, and even personnel in order to improve relations with what they hope will become the transitioning leadership (Berti

and Guzansky, 2014). In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, both Saudi Arabia and Iran increased their politicization of sectarian rhetoric in order to legitimize their claims to Islamic leadership and their role in the domestic politics of other states.

The interaction between politics and religion in the Middle East has driven the region into a period of intense crisis and confrontation. Both competing powers within the region continue to redress and reverse the strategic imbalance and direction of the regional politics. Their ongoing dispute and Sunni-Shiite proxy wars will continue to have important implications as both are key players in the region and Muslim World (Cardinali, 2013). In their quest to control different parts of the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran, being divided by longstanding structural tensions, have divided the Muslim World into two armed camps on the basis of politico- sectarian ideology in seeking regional allies (Grumet, 2015). Each has aspirations for Islamic leadership, and each possesses different visions of regional order.

It is beneficial to view the conflict in terms of the aims and goals of Iran and Saudi Arabia, in addition to how these two regimes continue to use Islam as an instrument to further their political power to become the ultimate hegemon (Ayubi, 1999). Though the competition between these two states is enduring, paying attention to the rivalry is now principally crucial. This rivalry is defining the strategic landscape of the Region, threatening Pakistan's National Security interests and endlessly challenging its foreign policy in the region.

## **2. Literature Review**

Two most powerful countries in the Middle East are Saudi Arabia and Iran. The two countries played the most important role in historical developments of the Middle East. Iran being proud of, as being part of great ancient Persian Empire, as no western powers made Iran its colony (Sadjadpour, 2011: 34). Likewise, king Saud, established his kingdom in 1928 and reflect her kingdom as guardians of blessed metropolises of Makkah and Medina, which the billions of Muslims come for prayers. Iraq separates these two nations of Saudi Arabia and Iran from western side and Persian Gulf from eastern side. The Diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran were established in 1932, but remain inactive till 1960s (Wrampelmeier, 1999). Nevertheless, these diplomatic relations have seen many ups and downs, especially after 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. The Iranian and Saudi hegemonic designs, their own interpretation of Islam, conflict of interest on oil policies in OPEC and Saudi endorsement on the presence of US

in Middle East has added fuel in agitation in the region (Muasher & Sadjadpour, 2011). The relationship between both the countries worsened after the World War II and touched its lowest level after the 1979 Iranian revolution (Chubin, 2012). The estimated Shia followers in the world is 200 million out of 1.6 billion of total Muslim population, that constitute 12 – 15% of total Muslim populations. Keeping in view the population figures Iran never tried to fix her regional objective in the sectarian framework. Iran not only waved Shia banner but a Pan-Islamic banner (Muasher& Sadjadpour, 2011). According to Valliley (2014), “the rift between the two great Islamic denominations runs like a tectonic fault-line” (cited in Muzaffar, Khan, and Yaseen, 2017: 120).

The most dominant element of both Saudi and Iran identities is religion. In both the regimes of ruling family in Saudi Arabia and Khomeini, religion is the source of legitimacy. The official form of Islam in Saudi Arabia has been Wahhabism . Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab has laid foundation of Wahhabism (Al-Rasheed, 2010). House of Saud declared the formal establishment of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 despite that they had gained power of maximum of Arabian Peninsula earlier (Bowen, 2014). The main driving force behind the rise of Saudis was the Wahabbi reformation movement which allowed them to garner the support of tribes and raise big army (Commins, 2005). In fact it was a political settlement between Saud and Wahab, according to which the former will receive legitimacy and backing by the later and in exchange Saudis would ensure strict adherence to Wahabi Islam throughout the Kingdom. The house of Saud continues to run the Kingdom this way to date. At the same time, they have developed the Kingdom on modern lines and managed to commence a great economic activity in it. While getting legitimacy inland from religious ideology, Saudis secured their external security through their alignment with USA, particularly against rise of Russian communism.

Iran remained a secular state during Pahlavi regime which was not considered as threat by Saudi kingdom. There were conservative monarchies in both the countries which were the ruling body. The status quo of both the countries were extended primarily to power politics and did not enter to ideological struggle (Aarts and Van Duijne 2009). Reza Shah became the king of Iran in 1925 and established the Pahlavi dynasty after a coup. Despite Shiite majority of the region, Reza Shah propagated Iranian nationalism distinct from Islam. He had a view that religion and religious practices are regressive in nature and cannot ensure development on modern lines (Farhat-Holzman, 2000). Being accused of inclining towards Nazi Germany, Allied

Forces invaded and overthrew him in 1941. Later his son, Muhammad Raza Pehlvi was installed who continued to rule till 1979 revolution. Muhammad Raza Pehlvi also continued the same liberal modernization of Iran and served as a close ally of USA during Cold War era (Mashayekhi, 2016). His strict rule, disregard for religious practices and handling of Shiites with force resulted into a massive uprising bringing Khomeini in power in 1979. In Iran, Islam Shia branch is official religion and it is mostly influenced by the thought of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. He infused his religious thoughts in Iranian masses and changed Iran from absolute monarchy to Islamic republic (Takeyh, 2009).

The Khomeini redraw definition of Iranian state identity being dominated by fundamentals of Iranian Shia belief. In Iranian national identity besides share of common historical experience, ethnic backgrounds, cultural heritages, and languages, sense of the special Shia identity was important factor. The continuous emphasis on Shia identity was the major factor which was taking away Iran from rest of the Islamic world.

The overthrow of the Shah in early 1979 was a turning point in Saudi-Iranian relations. Khomeini ideology was essentially based on Shiite Islam. He graded revolt and martyrdom against tyranny and unjust rule as a must (Wright, 2000). But the most important aspect of the new revolution was the concept of "Wilayat - Fiqah", the "guardianship," in the form of rule or supervision by the leading Islamic jurist (Dabashi, 1993). Khomeini argued that Islam and hereditary kingship were in-compatible (Quandt, 2010), an idea which brought him in direct confrontation with the house of Ibn-e- Saud.

Saudi Arabia viewed Iran as a threat in the region due to its "repeated attempts to export its revolution" to other Gulf States (Kechichian, 1999). In addition, the new revolution saw West with skepticism while the Saudis greatly relied on USA. Any confrontation of Iran with the Western powers was surely to bring Iran and Saudi Arabia on the opposite sides. The hostage crisis of November 1979 furthered the fears of Saudi regime against new Iran (Katzman, 2010).

The new Iran and Saudi Arabia had at that moment (1980s) entered into a conflict of "State and religious identity"(Ersoy, 2013). On every matter the two countries were now on opposite poles. Iranian political ideology, which called for revolution and illegitimacy of kingship, was a direct threat to house of Saud and other gulf monarchies (Gause, 2007). Their idea of protection of Shiite community and support for their aggression was seen as 'existential threat' by Arab monarchs (Marcus, 2017). On the other hand, Wahhabi ideology viewed Shiite

theology as a clear departure from true Islamic teachings (Linge, 2016). On the foreign policy level, Iran propagated anti-Western sentiment and in total contrast, Saudi Arabia banked on USA and western powers for its security and economic needs, particularly oil. In regional security matrix, Iranian control of Strait of Hormuz, territorial dispute with Iraq and their claim and control of number of Islands in Persian Gulf were key conflicts with Arab monarchs. All these marked clear dividing lines between the two States (Allison and Cordesman, 2010). The division between Saudi and Iranian and its influences over the region can be seen in the figure below.

### **3. Strategic Mosaic of ME**

In the scenario of rapidly changing political situation, any endeavor to construe the Middle Eastern history, involves peril of irrelevance. Pattern of events relevant at one point of time is rendered irrelevant after a new and unexpected happening. In this context, the US persistent overlook at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while mustering the support of monocratic regimes in the campaign against terrorism, managed to add to the bitterness-and misunderstanding (Deedat, 1999). Hence the efforts at the end of 2007, to resuscitate the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians did not prove effective at all.

The regional matrix of gulf is quite complex There have been conflict and commonality of interests since long between various nations. This complexity is primarily based on three things, the need to maintain status quo, politico-economic interests and sectarian divide. The rider clause has been the international interest in the region owing to its oil production. Given all four factors, the whole scenario emerges out to be a complex situation in which there is a constant tug of war between nations and even groups.

#### ***3.1. The Rise of Iran in Middle East***

Iran importance increased in issues and geo politics of region which became the key concerns of the regional players, especially Saudi Arabia. The geopolitical position of Iran played an important part in war against Al Qaeda in two ways since 2001, first by hindering Al Qaeda infiltration routes, secondly adding the US in toppling the Taliban government (Barzegar, 2009). They not only supported Northern Alliance but also provided intelligence of valuable information to USA against Taliban (Zarif, 2007). Iran also helped in formation of interim government in Afghanistan, which contributed in an increased cooperation between Iran and international community. Secondly overthrow of Fouad Siniora government by Hezbollah

through Shia group in 2008 further consolidated its position in the region and now Iran was challenging USA directly (Norton, 2007).

### **3.2. *Yemen and Bahrain Crises***

Yemen is one of the bone of contention among Iran and Saudi Arabia among other issues. The Yemen borders Saudi Arabia and occupies considerable portion of Arabian Peninsula in the south. The rise of Houthis since 2011 is the important development in Yemen. The Houthis movement by 2015 became so strong that they were in controlled of Sana the capital of Yemen and forced Yemen president, Mansour Hadi to resign (Laub, 2016). Perceptibly, Saudi Arabia seeks to establish its dominant position, over its important neighbor- Yemen, which it believes falls in its sphere of influence. On the contrary, Iran has always backed and supported Shiite minorities especially those which are oppressed (Wright, 2015). The whole situation is thus in a mess in which every nation supports one side or the other in order to further their own interests.

Bahrain remained focus for the neighboring state since times. Majority of the Bahrain's population is Shiite approximately 75 percent while the government of Bahrain is Sunni, supported by Saudi Arabia to counteract Iranian Shia influence (Mabon, 2012). Due complex nature of the Saudi-Iranian competition, Bahrain has been caught in the middle of the both countries, power struggle. For its stability Bahrain is reliant on Saudi Arabia and GCC.

### **3.3. *Iraq***

Iraq is demographically divided into Shiites (60%), Arab Sunnis (20%) and Kurds (18%) (Katzman & Humud, 2015). Saddam's rule was a Sunni dominated regime with pan-Arab ideology. Iranian revolution brought with it a major change in the region. Khomeini's resolve to support Shiites and spread the revolution outside Iran was corroborated by his support to Iraqi Shiites and Kurds against Saddam Hussein (Karsh and Rautsi, 2002). The gulf monarchs see the whole situation in Iraq as a threat. Growing Iranian influence and possibility of a "Shiite crescent are sources of serious concern for gulf monarchies. On the other hand, Iran continues to grow its role and influence in Iraq and already has a strong base in Lebanon. This forces gulf monarchies to support any group that opposes Shiites in Iraq and Syria (Hinnebusch, 2007).

### **3.4. *Syria***

Despite that Syria is Sunni majority country, ruling Asad being Alawi has been closely aligned with Irani Shiite ideology. The relationship of Saudi Arabia with Syria, however, has

been turbulent. The main concern of Saudis which finally led to worsening of relations with Syria was Hezbollah, to which Syria and Iran, both provided active support.

### **3.5. Current Saudi and Iranian Position in the Region**

Recent developments in the Middle East have finally shaped the Saudi-Iran relations into two rivals. A careful analysis is being made in the ensuing paragraphs in order to identify where each country stands on various geo-political developments in the regions.

The regime change in Iraq had created a power vacuum. Iran's interest lies in filling this vacuum by supporting majority Shiites so that it can enhance its influence in the region. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia cannot afford to have expanding Iranian influence over Iraq because Iranian ideology is strongly against status-quo and would encourage local Saudi Shiites and other groups to rise against Saudi's regime.

In Syria, Bashar's regime has been working very closely with Iran and Russia. This is a major source of concern for Saudi Arabia which already has a tussle with Iran as well as close ties with USA and Western powers. Thus, while, Iran and Russia actively support Assad's regime against insurgency in Syria, Saudi Arabia has been providing military and economic support to insurgents including ISIS. Despite this support, however, Assad remain in power and USA's reluctance to intervene militarily and peace deal with Russia (NBC news, 2016) has further alienated Saudi Arabia (Matthiesen, 2014).

In economic terms, the Saudi Arab finds itself in turmoil due to falling oil prices and cost of war in Yemen. To add to their fury was Iran-US deal, which quite contrary, has opened doors of prosperity and economic growth for Iran. Saudi Arabia has been able to control Arab spring owing to its massive spending and subsidization programs through which it enables its population to maintain a comfortable living standards. Nevertheless, an economic demise is likely to increase frustration amongst masses and given the recent Arab spring, other insurgencies in the region and increased influence of Irani revolutionary ideology, the house of Sauds may find themselves in trouble.

## **4. Effects of Saudi-Iran Rivalry on Pakistan**

### **4.1. Domestic Implications**

The Iran-Saudi power struggle had repercussions in Pakistan, where Shi'as represent about 20% of population (Muzaffar et al, 2017). In early 80s, while Iran was increasing its support for Shiites throughout the region, Saudis, in a bid to contain Iran and save Pakistan from

Iranian revolutionary ideology funded and supported Sunni Wahabi thinking along with spreading of hatred for Shiite. This caused extreme polarization and rise of some most ugly terrorist groups which continue to spread sectarian violence inside Pakistan to date.

#### **4.2. *Economic Implications***

Pakistan is an economically weak country which has always faced a threat from east i.e. India. In this milieu, Pakistan faces a dilemma of balancing the need to meet its defense requirements through external support as well as securing its west against aggressive east. While Saudi Arabia has been a major contributor and supporter of Pakistan in furthering its military might, Pakistan traditionally endeavored to influence Afghanistan for securing its west while remaining cautious of its relations with Iran due to Saudi factor. Had Iran been as economically strong as Saudi Arabia is, and ready to support Pakistan economically, the way Saudis do, the situation might have been different. Saudi Arabia is well aware of this Achilles heel of Pakistan, and has always been rendering desired support to Pakistan. Recent developments in the region, especially Iran-US pact has however changed the dynamics. Pakistan cannot ignore Iranian factor now. But at the same time it can also not abandon Saudi Arabia. This complex equation has put pressure on Pakistan to adopt a very cautious approach and will continue to do so in near future.

#### **4.3. *Afghanistan***

At present, both Iran and Saudi Arabia appears to be supportive of political process in Afghanistan, despite that Saudis have been focal in bringing Taliban to power. Iran intends to continue to maintain an influence in Afghanistan but has welcomed an all-encompassing approach. Saudi Arabia too has been making efforts to broker some understanding between US government and Taliban, which it had supported in the past. Peace process in Afghanistan is very important for Pakistan given its ambitious CPEC pact with China and need to ensure peace after unprecedented wave of terrorism in Pakistan. For the time being it appears that Iran-Saudi rivalry will not negatively impact this process; however, it is not a farfetched idea that if Saudis feel abandoned by USA against Iran (De Luce, 2016) a feeling which is growing day by day, they might take some radical steps like supporting ISIS in Afghanistan against Iran. Such a situation, thus, may seriously change balance of power in war torn country and effect Pakistan, which cannot afford to face rise of another globally linked terrorist organization in Afghanistan.



#### **4.4. *Nuclearization of Iran***

A nuclear Iran, despite being a Muslim country, is a threat to all GCC countries in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. Saudi Arabia, which has a history of supporting Pakistan, has a solid ground to approach Pakistan for provision of nuclear technology, should Iran acquire it. This would put Pakistan under extreme pressure since it has already been blamed for nuclear proliferation and while India has been able to gain concessions from NSG after its deal with USA, Pakistan has been left isolated. But again, for the time being, the issue is not likely to destabilize the situation owing to recent Iran nuclear deal with the west.

#### **4.5. *Energy***

If Saudi-Iran rivalry has actually impacted Pakistan in any sphere the most, it is the energy sector. Pakistan has its national interest in pursuing long term agreements and development of infrastructure to obtain energy mix from Iran. This will not only enable two countries to come close but also make them interdependent. This proposition, however, is not acceptable to Saudi Arabia. As recent as 2015, Saudi Arabia and USA forced Pakistan to sign a deal with Qatar and roll back its IPI project. TAPI is yet another alternative to IPI which alienates Iran in the region. All these contribute to spoiling of Pakistan-Iran relations, which Pakistan cannot afford at the moment.

#### **5. *Conclusion***

Saudia-Iran relations have remained incessantly inconsistent. In race to gain regional influence and thus finding partners / playing through proxies have remained the similar tools of both sides. Pakistan with mixed demography and a state with religious blend of Sunni, Wahhabi and Shiites as major sects in the country foist on to craft a very cautious policy towards these partners. Retrospect of Saudi-Iran intervention in Pakistan, growing sectarianism and already fragile security milieu makes it all the more important to thwart the destabilizing factors through sound policy. This would entail firm steps to address internal fault lines and a prudent maneuver through a comprehensive foreign policy. The emerging scenarios of ME strategic mosaic, rising interests of global powers in ME, SE Asia and conflicting interests in emerging political scenario are all the factors which cannot be unheeded in formulating in any such internal / external policy framework. The changing interests are needed to be anticipated, forethought and comprehensively responded. The current continuum of Saudi- Iran conflict of interest is to be

dealt with neutrality with unceasing efforts to stay relevant to the developing interests of both the belligerents so as should be the evolving policy.

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