

Power Politics in Bilateral Disputes: Case Study of Iran-Saudi Rivalry

Syed Qandil Abbas¹ Syeda Hudaisa Kazmi²

1. School of Politics and International Relation, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan
2. MPhil Scholar, School of Politics and IR, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad, Pakistan

Abstract

The hostile relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are that of power politics and contestation. The dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia is often related to their religious and ideological differences. However, this is not the only conclusive factor. The rift did not begin after the Iranian Revolution when it was declared as an Islamic Shiite state; rather it goes back to centuries even before the arrival of Islam in Iran. The difference of Arab and Ajam is deeply rooted since those times and has continued till date. However, these ideological, religious and nationalistic factors are instrumental to the actual goals of Iran and Saudi Arabia and this is quest for regional hegemony. This study emphasizes that “power politics” and not religion, ideology or nationalism is the dominant factor in Iran-Saudi rivalry. Despite recent Saudi Arabia’s ‘change of tone’ towards Iran, both the countries are still extending their sphere of influence in the Middle East through proxies, partners and alliances. This study is trying to highlight that how power politics is playing its role in Iran-Saudi bilateral disputes? And how these two nations have been contesting each other to gain regional dominance?

Key Words: Iran, Middle East, Power Politics, Religion, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Power politics has been the most dominant factor in bilateral and multilateral disputes. Similar is the case of conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, where power politics is largely at play. Power politics contends that cause of war or conflict is the unequal distribution of resources and capabilities. States try to achieve relative gains over the other powers to enhance their resources and capabilities, whether in a bilateral dispute or a multilateral. This quest for relative gains entails the use of all instruments, resources and capabilities. Economics, ideology, religion, diplomacy, institutions and public opinion are all the tools that states engage for the sole purpose of power politics. In regional context, two or more powers struggle for regional hegemony. For this, the states open “Cold War” fronts throughout the region for “Power Struggle”.

On 27 April 2021 Saudi Arabia’s crown prince surprisingly highlighted an appeasing tone towards the kingdom’s archrival Iran, saying he sought “good” relations, after sources said the rivals held secret talks in Baghdad (Dawn 2021). Although Tehran welcomed this Saudi change of tone but rivalry and competition in the region is still going on. Though Iran and Saudi Arabia are not fighting directly but are indirectly engaged in different regional countries like Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Lebanon and Qatar. They play religious, sectarian, ideological, nationalist and economic card wherever feasible, but the end goal is regional hegemony and relative gains, a concept of power politics. The Islamic Revolution or religious difference is not the exclusive or conclusive factor in conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The rift does not even start only after the Islamic Revolution (1979). It has historical roots and history shows that how power politics is playing its role in Iran-Saudi bilateral disputes? And how these two nations have been contesting each other to gain regional dominance?

Iran-Saudi Relations: Historical Background

Pre-Islamic Era

Before the advent of Islam, Persia and Arabia were related in the context of Sasanian- Byzantium wars. Sasanian was empire of Persia and Byzantium was eastern extension of Great Roman Empire. Both Sasanians and Byzantium formed alliances in the Arabian Desert in order to trump any aggression there. Christian-Arab mercenaries were sponsored by both Sasanians and Byzantiums against each other but soon disagreements and differences developed between these mercenaries and their patron empires (Egger, 2018). Eventually wars between Sassanids and Byzantium Empire began to reduce, because both empires were exhausted due to years of wars and a deadly plague known as Justinian Plague. By the end of 628, on the one hand Sassanid and Byzantium empires were declining while on the other hand, Arabia was uniting under the politico-religious leadership of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) after he (PBUH) began receiving revelations in 610 CE. During the period of prophet (PBUH), Muslims sent message of Islam to Persian and Roman Empire but in some cases their violent response resulted to wars between Muslims and these non-Muslim empires. Muslims of Arabs began to launch attacks against both empires and this marked the beginning of rise of Arabians. Eventually after years of struggle Muslims of Arabia dominated empires of both regions. Sassanid Empire fell in the hands of Arabs in 651. Arab-Byzantium wars began in 629 and remained till 1050's during Umayyad and Abbasside caliphates (Kaegi, 1992). So, Arabs rose as another power which challenged the domination of Sassanids and Byzantines. The constant war between Byzantium and Sassanid Empire gave Arabs space to grow as a power. Another reason that led to Arabia's conquer of Persia was demographics. Arabia being a desert faced lack of resources and over-population. Therefore, it was probable to migrate out of Arabia and conquer Persia. The Muslim conquest and defeat of Persian Sassanid Empire led to the decline of prevalent religion that was Zoroastrian. With the passage of time, Iranians began to convert to Islam. But the Persian civilization was not casted-off and remained parallel to Islam.

Post-Islamic Era

It can be said that Persia was only Islamized, and not Arabized. Wherever, Arabian empires and caliphates spread, they would spread their culture, knowledge and civilization. This determined the center-periphery relations. Arab being the center had cultural and religious outreach to its conquered periphery regions. But that was not the case in Persia since it had its own deep civilization. There were two opposing ideas regarding the conquest of Persia. Some considered it a positive development because according to Arabs, light was spread to this region through Islam as they degraded Persians as "Majoosi (worshippers of Sun). These sentiments continued even after majority of Iranians embraced Islam. However, if seen through the lens of Persian nationalism at that time, this conquest was an embarrassing moment and thus the people embraced Islam but not the Arab culture which for them was backward. Persians considered Arabs as nomads with no civilization. Persian maintained their pre-Islamic traditions along with new Islamic ideals, which shaped their Iranian Islamic identity. Due to these historic differences Iran and Arab world could never maintain mutually peaceful relations.

Arabia continued to increase its influence on Persians and met constant resistance until the advent of Samanid dynasty in 819–999 CE, which claimed to be descendants of Sassanids. It was the first native dynasty to rule Iran since the Arab conquest. It revived the pre-Islamic culture and traditions including language (Foltz, 2019). After the establishment of Safavid Empire (1501-1722) in Iran, Twelver Shiite Islam was declared as the state religion and majority of Iranians adopted it (Moghaddam, 2017). During this period the relations between Persians and Arabs could only be understood in context of interactions between Ottomans and Persian empires such as Safavid and Qajar dynasty. When Safavids declared Shiite Islam as state religion, Ottomans who were predominantly Sunni, became insecure and it led to tensions. With the formation of Qajar dynasty in Iran in 1789 the legacy of competition continued. Most of the Arab region was under Ottoman's control including Holy cities of Makah and Medina, present day Saudi Arabia. They contested for domination in Arabian desert and for instance among a series of war, one war known as Battle of Chaldiran was fought in 1514 for the control over Iraq (Lapidus, 2014). This rivalry continued until the fall of Ottomans in 1923 and that of Qajars in 1925. The empires declined but the rivalry continued. Fall of Ottomans marked the rise of modern Saudi state in 1932 as a result of nexus between House of Saud and House of Wahab. Rise of Saudi state began to shape new form of interaction between Persians and Arabs.

Pre-Islamic Revolution Era

In 1929, a treaty of friendship was signed between Iran and Kingdom of Najd-Hejaz, which was then ruled by Ibn-e-Saud and later in 1932 it was consolidated into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. But formal relations did not begin until 1960 because of differences like Iran's diplomatic ties and recognition of Israel. In 1966, King Faisal paid a visit to Iran. Only this period of time between 1966 till 1979 can be regarded as era of limited friendliness between the two states (Badeeb, 1993). The two countries did not have fully cordial relationship because Saudi Arabia was concerned about the modernization of Iranian army under Shah. At that time Iran was trying to establish a security architect in the region which was resisted by Saudi Arabia. To counter Iranian ambitions, King Khalid built security relations with neighboring Persian Gulf countries. Moreover, there was argument on the increasing OPEC prices which were more than Iran had wanted (Gause, 2009). Until Iranian Islamic revolution (1979), there was no open hostility between Riyadh and Tehran.

Post-Islamic Revolution Era

Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia gradually became sour after the Islamic Revolution. The revolutionary leader's proclamation of spreading the revolutionary ideology led to insecurity for Saudi Arabia which considered itself as the leader of Muslim World. Soon after the Islamic Revolution, Iraq under Saddam's rule declared war on Iran. Saudi Arabia supported Saddam by giving financial aid of \$25 billion and also encouraged other Arab countries like Qatar, Kuwait and UAE to follow the suit (Bowen, 2014). The relations were further aggravated after the 1987 Hajj incident when almost 400 people were killed as a result of clash between Shiite pilgrims and Saudi security forces. Out of 400 pilgrims killed, two thirds were Iranian nationals. People in Tehran protested in front of Saudi embassy which led to death of one Saudi official from injuries. This resulted to the ending of diplomatic relations between Iran

and Saudi Arabia. Saudi state put a ban on Iranian citizen from acquiring visa to perform Hajj obligation. Since then relations between two became tense especially in 2000's when both countries confronted each other in different battlegrounds throughout Middle East.

Major Disputes between Iran and Saudi Arabia

Iran and Saudi government accuse each other for internal unrests. Both countries face security issues due to the presence of minority religious groups. Iran's Khuzestan province is situated along the borders with Iraq and inhibits majority of Arabs. It is interesting to note that Arabs living in Iran are predominantly Shiite; however, they prefer to maintain their distinct national identity as Arabs (Minahan, 2002). There are some separatist elements as well such as *Al-Ahvaziya* group which the Iranian claims to be supported by Saudis and Western allies (Aljazeera, 2018). Moreover Iranian state is of the view that militant separatist Baloch group known as *Jundullah* and *Jaish-ul-Adl* are also supported and funded by Saudi Arabia as there is a close affinity between the ideologies of both being pre-dominantly *Wahabi*. Therefore, Iranian state believes that the internal conflict within the country is spurred due to the interference of Saudi Arabia and its allies (France24, 2019).

Saudi Arabia claims that Iran discriminates Sunni population living in Iran. Similarly, Iran claims that Shiite population living in Eastern region of Saudi Arabia, Qatif and other areas is mistreated by Saudi officials. Saudi government is of the view that this Shiite population is backed by Iran in order to create chaos within the country; hence since 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Shiites living in Qatif and other cities of Saudi Arabia have faced even more hardships. Consequently, civil unrest erupted in Qatif and other areas and ultimately resulted to persecution of Shiite activists by Saudi security forces. The Arab Spring protests of 2011 also exacerbated the situation in Saudi Arabia as well. However the most controversial and open event of discrimination against the Shiite population was arrest of Shiite leader Nimr al-Nimr who had encouraged his group called "Hezbollah Al-Hejaz" for a non-violent protest in 2011 against Shiite discrimination. Later on Jan 2, 2016 Al Nimr was executed by Saudi government (Matthiesen, 2016). This led to protestors' attack on Saudi embassy in Tehran and once again diplomatic relations between the two countries were cut off. Another episode of Qatif Unrest began in 2017 and is still going on between the Saudi government and Shiite groups such as Hezbollah Al-Hejaz in Saudi Arabia. So, Iran accuses Saudi government of mistreating its Shiite population. This evidently shows that Iran and Saudi Arabia play a blame-game even for internal unrests. Both impose sanctions on members of opposing sect but there are some external factors such as Al-Qaida who take advantage of the situation. It means that it is not necessary that both are responsible for each other's internal disturbances rather terrorists groups also conduct such attacks against both countries.

On external level, there are numerous theatres where Iran-Saudi clash can be found. Especially, both the countries are contesting each other throughout Middle Eastern countries. Iran has considerable influence in countries such as Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Bahrain (Abbas & Jahangaiz, 2020). Saudi Arabia tries to counter the Iranian influence through different means. Their conflict in Middle East is sometimes referred to "Cold War in Middle East" because both countries do not

confront each other directly rather through proxies and partners. Iran along with Russia and some non-state partners like Hezbollah Lebanon supports Bashar al Assad, while Saudi Arabia along with US supports Syrian rebel groups. In Yemen, Houthis came into power by ousting pro-Saudi government. Resultantly the Saudi monarch imposed war on Yemen and accused Houthis as Iranian Proxy. On 14th September 2019, Houthis attacked the Saudi Aramco oil refinery (Aljazeera, 2020). Saudi government placed the blame on Iran; however, Iran refused allegations. Houthis officially took responsibility of these attacks as a response to the continuation of the Saudi intervention in Yemen (Hidir 2020).

In post Saddam Iraq, Iran has expanded its influence tremendously, which has taken as serious threat for Saudi Arabia because Iraq is a buffer state between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran has attacked the US bases after the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani. This shows that Iran has the capacity to attack Saudi region in case of escalation since it already has access and capability to attack Iraq. Moreover, both try to bring Iraq under their political influence. Similar is the situation in Bahrain where both countries support the opposing sides. Saudis support Bahrain government which has adopted hardline policies against opposition groups such as Wifaq party. These opposition groups in Bahrain are mostly Shiite. The dilemma in Bahrain is that majority of the population is Shiite but the government is dominated by Sunnis. Therefore, government adopts harsh policies towards the population which is predominantly Shiite. Almost 85% of population in Bahrain is Shiite and are alleged to be supported by Iran. In short, it can be rightly said that Iran and Saudi Arabia are always on the opposing sides. Wherever Iran goes, Saudi comes to oppose it and vice versa. This is the nature of conflict between the two countries whether it is internal unrest or external engagements.

Power Politics: A dominant Factor in Bilateral Disputes

Larger portion of literature on Iran and Saudi Arabia dispute is themed on religious and ideological differences. However, it is not the most prevailing cause of dispute rather it is power struggle and quest for regional hegemony that derives the relationships between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the power struggle did not start in the Post-Islamic revolution period (1979) rather it dates back to centuries. Since the coming of Islam to Persia, there is a sense of competition between Iranians and Arabs on the basis of nationalism. The Nationalistic differences and historical prejudices are characterized by old age *Arab-Ajam* notion where both consider each other less superior. The struggle took a turn after the Islamic revolution, when Iran also appeared as the leader of Muslim World. Traditionally, Saudi Arabia has been considered as the leader of Muslim World due to consideration of *Hejaz* as the center of Muslim World as well as glory of Arabic language and the significance of Holy places of Makah and Medina. The Saudi Kings have been given the royal title of “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques”. But after the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran, the standing of Saudi Arabia as leader of Muslim world was challenged. Iran emerged as an Islamic Republic with the ambition of spreading the revolution beyond the borders through the spread of anti-imperialist and anti-monarchist ideas. Iran raised the slogans such as “Neither East Nor West” rejecting any alignment with either United States or Soviet Union, the two big powers of Bipolar World. In this way Revolutionary Iran clashed with the big powers. It called for the support of oppressors anywhere in the world. The notion of

exporting the revolution cautioned Saudi kingdom which saw it as a challenge to their de facto leadership of Muslim World.

Iran on the other hand also started to glorify itself on religio-political bases. Just like Saudi Arabia which calls itself “the center of Islam”, Iran has used the term of “Umm al-Qura (mother of all settlements)” (Mohsin & Amir, 2015). According to this philosophy, revolutionary Iran considers itself as the true center of Islam. Iran presented itself as the leader of the Muslim world and anticipated all the Muslims should accept the leadership of *Wali-e-Faqih (Guardianship of Jurist as a Religio-Political philosophy of leadership)*. In this way the concept of *Umma* (Muslim community) was introduced under the guardianship of Ayatollah Khomeini by Islamic Revolution (Aarabi, 2020). Iran aspired to expand the revolution and this notion eventually challenged the supremacy of Saudi Arabia over the Muslim world. Increasing popularity of Iranian revolutionary ideology particularly in the Middle East resulted to serious confrontation between Tehran and Riyadh. However, this confrontation is still indirect and through proxies and partners in countries like Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain, etc.

Power Politics in Syria

The Syrian crisis started in 2011 led to the involvement of Iran and Saudi Arabia which are considered as the major powers of the Middle East. Traditionally Iran has been backing the government of Hafiz al-Asad and then Bashar al-Assad who were mainly supported by Syrian Alawite population while Saudi Arabia supports the anti-government Sunni-Wahabi rebel groups. The role of both countries in Syria can be understood in the light of national, ideological and political conflicts. The main prominence of Syria for Iran is its role as a bridge to provide logistic support to Hezbollah Lebanon which is Iran’s strategic asset to counter threats coming from Zionist regime of Israel. Iran and Saudi Arabia have formed alliances on the basis of their political interests. Iran is backed by Russia and Saudis by US. Involvement of US and Russia is also political and strategic in nature. Their support is crucial for Saudi Arabia and Iran who are competing to claim the leadership of Muslim world and to emerge as the regional hegemon.

Alawite population in Syria constitutes 15% of the total, while rest of the population is predominantly Sunni (CIA, 2020). It is generally perceived that Iran supports Bashar because he is an Alawi and there is some sort of religious affiliation. However, this argument is largely misleading. Alawits are considered as an offshoot of Shiite Islam but their beliefs are rejected by Twelver Shiite Islam (followed by Iranian state). Alawi school of thought is also known as *Nusayri* practicing some beliefs which are not considered legitimate by the Twelver Shiites (Lewis, 2011). Moreover, they have become largely secular which is opposite to the Iran’s revolutionary ideology. Iran is an Islamic Republic and there is a strong influence of religion over politics. The only religion based interest of Iran in Syria is for the defense of the Holy Shrines based in Syria which are often threatened to be demolished by Wahhabi rebels. For example in 2013, the body of Holy Prophet’s (PBUH) companion Hujr bin Adi was disinterred by Al-Nusra Front, a group associated with Al-Qaeda. It threatened to do the same with the Shrine of Hazrat Zainab, granddaughter of Prophet (PBUH) (Aljazeera, 2018). This is only one factor and Bashar has no emotional affiliation to it. Iran’s support to Bashar

is political in nature but mainly based on countering the power of Tehran's enemies like Saudi Arabia and Israel. Saudi presence in Syria is justified since it has always been found in the opposition to Iran. Saudi Arabia along with the support of its Western allies is countering Iranian power and influence in Syria by supporting its proxies like anti-Syrian government rebels.

Power Politics in Yemen

Yemen is one of the poorest countries of Middle East. Historically, Yemen faced deterioration in relations between state and society due to corruption, tribalism and social inequalities. Like other states of Middle East, Yemen also could not shield itself from the spreading impacts of Arab Spring. In 2011, agitation inside Yemen started due to public grievances regarding illiteracy, unemployment and malnutrition. Within five months, on the pressure of Saudi Arabia the then president Ali Abdullah Saleh was replaced by vice president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi in February 2012 (Cerioli, 2018). The situation however could not be improved and civil unrest continued. Iran was sympathetic towards the protestors and called the entire situation as "Islamic awakening". The major anti-government group was Houthis. Saudi Arabia began to support the government against the Houthi opposition and also tried to blame Iran in causing the unrest. Saudi Arabia has three major causes for interfering in Yemen: security of Arab Peninsula, threat of Iranian interference and hostile Yemen being neighboring country is a major security threat for Saudi Arab. Iran never showed direct association with the Houthi movement. Its support was merely rhetoric in the light of principles of Iranian Revolution and anti-imperialist movement which it used to show Iranian position in Yemen crisis. Saudi Arabia also tried to give it sectarian tone by making a relation between Zaydis of Yemen and Iranian Shiite Islam. This notion is widely known but it is largely misunderstood. Houthi are predominantly Zaydis and their beliefs are quite different from that of Iranians who follow Twelver Ja'afari Shiite Islam as state religion (Nasr, 2006). This false sectarian similarity is used by Saudis to justify their interference in Yemen on religious basis. Neither Iran's rhetoric support nor Saudi intervention has anything to do with the safeguard of any particular sectarian group. As Ayatollah Khamenei the supreme leader of Iran gave a statement in 2015, "the war in Yemen is a political war, not a religious one. They falsely claim that the issue is about Shiite and Sunni while this is not the case." (Khamenei.ir, 2017).

Power Politics in Iraq

An amazing transition has taken place in Iran-Iraq-Saudi triangle. Iraq is a Shiite majority country with almost 64-69% Shiite Muslims and 30% Sunni Muslims (CIA, 2020). Iraq has a fragmented society because in past despite being a Shiite majority country, it was dominated by Sunnis. It was plunged into internal conflict for a long time (Abbas & Naqvi, 2020). Soon after Iranian revolution, Saddam backed by Arab countries and US led Western alliance, imposed war on Iran which lasted for eight years (1980-9188). In post Saddam period the whole scenario changed in Iran's favor and Iran established considerable influence in Iraq. But now Saudi Arabia is also making its way to enhance its relations with Iraq. Both countries resumed their diplomatic relations in 2016 which were cut off since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Saudi Arabia has kept aside its policy of sectarian prejudice in case of Iraq and focused

on economic relations. Iraq has also welcomed Saudi offer of economic cooperation which is evident from the visit of Iraq's influential Shiite cleric Muqtada Al Sadr to Saudi Arabia (Al Arabiya, 30 July 2017). This rapprochement is another evidence of Saudi power politics against Iran despite of its traditional anti-Shiite approach.

Moreover, Iran's influence in Iraq is not only limited to Shiite groups but it has formed an anti-ISIS alliance with Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) or *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*. This alliance had become part of Iraq's government program, after 2014 fatwa by influential Iraqi Shiite cleric Sistani and is considered as a branch of security forces under prime minister's office. This paramilitary force is funded, provided weapons and given state legitimacy to fight against ISIS by Iraqi government. Fighters included in PMU are not only Shiite but a large number comprises of Sunni and Kurds volunteers. These facts show that Iranian influence in Iraq is not merely on sectarian basis. Rather, Iran also enjoys influence among the non-Shiite population in Iraq (Haddad, 2020). Therefore, Iran-Saudi competition in Iraq is not only on the basis of faith or sect rather characterized by power politics.

Power Politics in Bahrain

Bahrain comprises of a Shiite majority population while a Sunni monarchy rules over it. The larger population feels underprivileged and this has led to sectarian rift. Just like the case in Yemen, agitation started between the population and government especially in the wake of Arab Spring in 2011. The government's response was violent. It sought to imprison, kill and torture the Shiites opposition. The monarchs put the blame on Iran for supporting the Shiite population and called them Iran's fifth Column (Mabon, 2012).

Since the situation could not be brought under control therefore, Bahrain government called on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for intervention. Bahrain convinced the GCC members that Iran was responsible for it but Iran denied any involvement. As in the words of Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei, "The revolts of the people of Bahrain are primarily the same as those from the people of Egypt, Tunisia or Libya. They want free elections, is that asking for too much?" (Cerioli, 2018). But ultimately for the first time in GCC's history the military branch of the organization was activated and the demonstrations were put down forcefully by Saudi-led GCC troops against Shiite population in Bahrain.

Saudi Arab framed Shiite population as the source of instability in Bahrain. For some scholars, the manipulation of sectarian issue has become a constant policy of Saudi Arabia to justify its involvement in Middle Eastern countries including Bahrain (Rubin & Majidyar, 2014). Saudi began to support Sunni population in the name of curbing Shiite uprising but in reality just like Iran; Saudi Arabia is doing nothing but smoothing ground for political interference. When the uprisings began in Bahrain, Iran showed support in the name of Pan-Islamic ideology. The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei stated, "Iran supports any popular movement under the slogan of Islam and freedom and we do not distinguish between Gaza, Palestine, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt or Bahrain". He also stated that he does not distinguish between Sunni and Shiite for their protest against despotic rule. He also declared that those that try to interpret the Bahraini people's uprisings against despotism as the conflict between Shiite and

Sunni are in fact doing the greatest service to the United States' (Çakmak & Özçelik, 2019). Iran as always has used its ideological grounds to pave the way for its regional influence to counter enemies of Islamic revolution. So when Iran enters an arena, Saudi leadership feels bound to be present in order to safeguard its own hegemonic status against Iran.

Power Politics in Palestine

Before Revolution in Iran, there were diplomatic ties between Shah of Iran and Israel due to which Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was averse towards Iran. PLO had supported revolutionary groups against Shah. After the revolution, Iran cut-off its ties with Israel and adopted an anti-Semitic foreign policy. Just after few days of Revolution, PLO chief Yasser Arafat headed a Palestinian delegation to Iran. The keys of Israeli embassy were handed over to PLO and in its place a Palestinian embassy was established (Brandenburg, 2010). It is worthy to note that Yasser Arafat or PLO, as a whole, did not have any sort of religious tendencies in forming relations with Iran. However, after the PLO's engagement with Zionist regime in the name of peace process, Iran parted its way. Iran over the period of time has been supporting the Palestinian cause by supporting resistance groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Iran is known to support Hezbollah Lebanon an organization fighting against Israeli occupation. Hezbollah is Shiite group and its affiliations with Iran are made on religious basis. However, there is another group in Palestine fighting against Israel known as Hamas. Hamas is a Sunni nationalist group and has an open support of Iran. Similarly, Islamic Jihad is another group fighting along Hamas and it is also a Sunni organization. Islamic Jihad is also supported by Iran and Hezbollah (Levin, 2018). Therefore, religion and sect is not the conclusive factor defining Iran's involvement in Middle East, specifically Palestine. Regardless of religious ideology, Iran supports all the anti-Israeli groups which is part of its power politics and increases its influence in Palestine. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia in alliance with US has stopped supporting Palestinian resistance groups and even overtly and covertly it is trying to pave the way for recognition of Israel. This endeavor has formed new regional alignment in Middle East. Iran is leading anti-Israel factions while Saudi Arabia and some other Muslim governments are seeking support of Israel against Iran.

Power Politics in Qatar

Saudi Arab along with other Arab countries like Bahrain, Egypt and UAE severed their diplomatic relations with Qatar on June 5, 2017 (Bouoiyour & Selmi, 2019). Qatar was accused of supporting terrorism and a blockade was imposed on Qatar by Saudi-led alliance. One factor that is important to note here is that; Qatar is a Wahhabi dominating country. If Saudi Arabia is so concerned about the Sunni and Wahhabi population of Middle East then why such extreme measures were taken by Saudi Arabia and its allies against Qatar. This blockade did not prove beneficial for Saudi Arabia since due to imposition of blockade it brought its rivals closer. Qatar has moved closer to Iran and Turkey. The reason for imposition of such policies was Saudi's own interests, because Qatar does not submit to Saudi hegemony in Persian Gulf region. Qatar hosts one the most important US bases known as *Al Udeid* Air Base which gives it a sense of power and security and thus tries to have independent policies (CRS, 2020). For further maximization of its power, Qatar has established good

relations with Iran and Turkey. Iran also welcomed the move. Once again it must be noted that Iran is a Shiite country while Qatar is predominantly Wahhabi, two opposing Muslim sects. This was the most alarming factor for Saudi Arabia. Therefore, after blockade Saudi Arabia made a number of demands which on top required Qatar to sever relations with Iran, cease military cooperation with Turkey and shut down Al-Jazeera. However, it yielded little benefits since Qatar refused to decline relations with Iran, rather moved much closer. The case of Qatar also shows the nature of power politics by Iran and Saudi Arab in this country as well.

Conclusion

Power politics is mostly the dominant factor in bilateral disputes. The bilateral conflict involves claiming hegemony over the sphere of influence. Economy, ideology, religion and nationalism are also important factors but these are mere instruments in the hands of states which are used for political purposes. The same sort of characteristics is observed in Iran-Saudi conflict since 1979. In post 1979 era, the two states became direct hostiles but it is also true that this has historical roots. Since the time of Arab invasion of Persia, a clear distinction between *Arab and Ajam* was made and it has continued till date. Religious differences are also present. However, all these factors have proved instrumental for Iran and Saudi Arabia, in order to pursue their regional power play. Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Qatar, Palestine and Bahrain have become battle grounds for Iran and Saudi to fight for regional hegemony. Recent unexpected change in tone of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman towards Iran (Apr. 27, 2021) is indeed an optimistic development in an uncertain regional environment but at the same time he blames Tehran for its “negative behavior”. On the other hand while Iran welcomed what it called a change of tone from Saudi Arabia and said it hoped they could work together to secure peace” but certainly Tehran has its own conditions to ease tensions between the regional rivals. Facts show that Tehran and Riyadh don’t face each other directly, rather through different proxies and partners. Even in the internal affairs, both interfere by supporting the opposition groups. Saudi Arab accuses Iran of mistreating its Sunni population while Iran blames Saudi for exploiting Shiite population. This regional dispute has now becoming an international conflict where big powers have also taken sides and thus giving more hype to the dispute. Consequently, because of struggle for power, Middle East will remain a turbulent region and will face more socio-political and economic problems.

References

- Aarabi, K. (2020). Beyond Borders: The Expansionist Ideology of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, 1-68.
- Abbas, S.Q., Jahangaiz, M. (2020). Iran's Foreign Policy towards Lebanon: Success Story of Synergy between Hard and Soft Power. *Journal of Research in Social Sciences (JRSS)*, 8(20), 116-134.
- Abbas, S.Q., Naqvi, S.F.H., (2020). US Hegemonic Interests and the Strategic Dilemma in Iraq, *Quarterly Noor-e-Marfat*, 11(2), 150-168.
- Al Arabiya. (2017, July 30). *Muqtada al-Sadr visits Saudi Arabia for the first time in 11 years*. <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2017/07/30/Muqtada-al-Sadr-in-Saudi-Arabia-for-the-first-time-in-11-years-#:~:text=Influential%20Iraqi%20cleri%20Muqtada%20al,visit%20in%20nearly%2011%20years>
- Aljazeera. (2018, September 23). *Iran blames US and Gulf allies for Ahvaz parade attack*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/9/23/iran-blames-us-and-gulf-allies-for-ahvaz-parade-attack>
- Aljazeera. (2020). *Yemen's Houthis hit Saudi Aramco site in Jeddah*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/23/yemens-houthis-say-they-fired-missile-at-saudi-aramco-site>
- Badeeb, S. M. (1993). *Saudi-Iranian Relations 1932-1982*. Centre for Arab and Iranian Studies and Echoes.
- Bouoiyour, J. Selmi, R. (2019). Arab Geopolitics in Turmoil: Implications of Qatar-Gulf Crisis for Business. *International Economics*.
- Bowen, W.H. (Ed.). (2014). *The History of Saudi Arabia*. Greenwood.
- Brandenburg, Rachel. (2010, October 13). *Iran and the Palestinians*. United States Institute of Peace. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-palestinians>
- Çakmak, C., Özçelik, A.O. (2019). *The World Community and the Arab Spring*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Central Intelligence Agency. (2020, November). *The World Factbook: Syria*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>
- Central Intelligence Agency. (2020, November). *The World Factbook: Iraq*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>
- Cerioli, L.G. (2018). Roles and International Behaviour: Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain's and Yemen's Arab Spring. *Contexto Internacional*, 40(2), 295-317. <https://doi.org/10.1590/s0102-8529.2018400200010>

- Congressional Research Service (CRS). (2020, August). *Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44533.pdf>
- Dawn (2021). Softened Saudi tone, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1621351>
- Egger, V. (2018). *A History of the Muslim World to 1750: the Making of a Civilization*. Routledge.
- France24. (2019, February 14). *Jaish al-Adl: shadowy Sunni extremists on Iran-Pakistan border*. <https://www.france24.com/en/20190214-jaish-al-adl-shadowy-sunni-extremists-iran-pakistan-border>
- Foltz, R. (2019). *A History of the Tajiks: Iranians of the East*. I.B. Tauris.
- Gause, F. G. (2009). *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*. Cambridge University Press.
- Haddad, F. (2020). Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units: A Hybrid Actor in a Hybrid State. *Centre for Policy Research*, 31-65.
- Hidir, Aladin. (2020, November 23). *Yemen: Houthi rebel group attacks Saudi Aramco facility*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/yemen-houthi-rebel-group-attacks-saudi-aramco-facility/2052648>
- Aljazeera. *ISIL claims deadly blasts near Sayeda Zeinab shrine*. (2016, June 12). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/6/12/isil-claims-deadly-blasts-near-sayeda-zeinab-shrine>
- Kaegi, W. (1992). *Byzantium and the early Islamic conquests*. Cambridge University Press.
- Khamenei.ir. (2017, January 1). *Saudi Arabia is Committing a Genocide in Yemen: Ayatollah Khamenei*. <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/4505/Saudi-Arabia-is-committing-a-genocide-in-Yemen-Ayatollah-Khamenei>
- Lapidus, I. M. (2014). *A History of Islamic Societies*. Cambridge University.
- Levin, Daniel. (2018, July 9). *Iran, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad*. Wilson Centre. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/iran-hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad>
- Lewis, M.W. (2011, March 29). *Confusion About Syria's Alawites*. GeoCurrents. <https://www.geocurrents.info/geopolitics/confusion-about-syrias-alawites>
- Mabon, S. (2012). The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry, Middle East Policy, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2012.00537.x>
- Matthiesen, T. (January 8, 2016). *The World's Most Misunderstood Martyr*. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/08/the-worlds-most-misunderstood-martyr/>

- Minahan, J. (2002). *Encyclopedia of the Stateless Nations*, Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Moghaddam, A. A. (2017). *Psycho-nationalism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mohsen, K. Amir, A.K. (2015). Conceptual Comparison of the Three Doctrines of the Islamic Republic Of Iran's Foreign Policy. *Political and International Scientific and Research Quarterly*, 6(21), 183-218.
- Nasr, V. (2006). *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. W.W. Norton.
- Rubin, M., Majidyar, A.K., (2014). *The Shi'ites of the Middle East: An Iranian fifth column?* American Enterprise Institute.