

## Middle East Dominance Scenario between Iran and Saudi Arabia

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### ABSTRACT

“ ‘Sunni vs Shia’ makes for a simple headline, but does not do justice to the complexities of the new Middle East cold war” is a true statement according to F. Gregory Gause. The oil-rich region of the Middle East has always been in a fragile condition with an abundance of conflicts. Especially after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the relationship of two regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, has been intensified. Shia and Sunni divide has been emphasized loud and clear. Most people think Shia-Sunni divide it is, the cause of their hostility. Yet this research aims to study the real motives of their hostility throughout the wars, which took place from 1979; Iran and Iraq War, Iraqi Invasion in Kuwait, U.S.-led Invasion in Iraq and proxy wars played out in weak states of Syria and Yemen. Regarding the findings, beneath the sectarian division, the underlying cause is the quest of regional influence of the two states in the Muslim World. The formation of more alliances in Iraq, Syria and Yemen is the balance of power game to dominate the region. The prediction of their future relationship will still remain in doubt.

**Keywords:** Relationship of Iran and Saudi Arabia, Quest for Regional Influence, Sectarianism

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## Introduction

The Middle East is a fragile-conditioned region which has been flooded with conflicts and violence for a long time. Dating back to identity issues of Arabs and Persians more than one thousand years ago. The Persian Empire was regarded the very first and greatest empire of all the empires led by Cyrus the Great until Arab armies defeated them in Mesopotamia in 637 according to Dr. Simon Mabon.<sup>1</sup> Although, the Middle Eastern countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, were invaded mostly by the superpower such as the United States in 1990s as the United States had no equal competitor<sup>2</sup> in the region, states in Middle East themselves do not at all times share good relations. Iran, whose population does not belong to Sunnism like majority of other countries in the Middle East but Shiism, faces several problems and discrimination against many countries in the region. Among its enmity, Iran enjoys its relationship with Syria (Bashar Al-Assad Government) and Hezbollah (Shi'a Islamist militant group). Saudi Arabia has enjoyed its natural leadership in the region as well as the international level because of high production of oil. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is home for two sacred places of Muslim World, which are in Mecca and Medina. Above all, influential states in the Middle East namely Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia tend to encounter difficulties in maintaining good relationship. Egypt was one of the historical leaders of the Middle East until the regime of Hosni Mubarak came to an end.<sup>3</sup> By the Sunni side, Saudi Arabia views Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt as a terrorist organization because Muslim Brotherhood can be a leading strategic threat in educating the idea of revolution to North African countries.<sup>4</sup>

## Objectives of the study

This research is to mainly study Iran and Saudi Arabia rivalry in the concept of their dominance scenario and understand their power dynamics, which they do not confront militarily but many Middle East experts described this rivalry as "New Middle East Cold War." Their rivalry between them will be analyzed by their behavior in each conflict they confronted in the past. Time periods will be after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Iran and Iraq War, Iraqi Invasion in Kuwait, 2003 U.S.-led invasion in Iraq and phenomenon after Arab Spring. The current conflicts between two states are playing out through proxy arenas of weak states, for instance, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. Certainly, this proxy wars embolden and deepen sectarian war in the Middle East, however, beyond sectarianism, what are the motives behind their rivalry? The motives should be studied in the later parts.

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Mabon, "FPC Briefing: The Middle Eastern 'Great Game'," *The Foreign Policy Centre*., <http://fpc.org.uk/articles/615> accessed on 20 February 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Steven A.Cook, Jacob Stokes and Alexander J. Brock, "The Contest for Regional Leadership in the New Middle East," *Middle East Security Series*, (2014): 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>4</sup> Guido Steinberg, "The Gulf states and the Muslim Brotherhood," *Visions of Gulf Security* 25. (2014): 20.

## Methodology

This research is meant to bring understanding of the dominance scenario between Iran and Saudi Arabia to the readers. In order to analyze how they (Iran and Saudi Arabia) behave or how they try to dominate the region, the research is to carry back to how their belief was constructed namely Sunni Wahhabism and Shia Khomeinism. It will explore the time periods of Iran and Saudi Arabia fluctuated relations after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, Iran and Iraq War in 1980-1988, Iraqi Invasion in Kuwait in 1990, 2003 U.S. led-invasion in Iraq, 2010 Arab Spring to address their goals. During the time, the quest for regional power and influence will be researched on.

This thesis will be conducted mainly on qualitative methodology using a comparative study between Iran and Saudi Arabia dominance scenario for the cases of Iraq, Yemen, and Syria in details. Primary and secondary sources will be used to collect and evaluate the data. Primary sources comprise government documents, reports, speeches, journal articles, scholarly books, as well as elite interviewing of The Former Thai Ambassador to Iran, and other professors and scholars who have expert knowledge in the Middle Eastern field. In addition, newspapers articles, Arab newspaper in English.

## Results

### Iran and Saudi Arabia Relations after 1979

The name of the Iranian Revolution was changed to Islamic Revolution for Iran wanted Muslim World to accept their authority. The revolution did not only create fear to the West, but also the monarchic ruling countries in the Middle East, directly to Iran's formidable foe, Saudi Arabia. At first, the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia remained friendly. King Khalid of Saudi Arabia recognized Ayatollah Khomeini by sending him a letter in order to congratulate to the new regime, King Khalid emphasized that "Islamic solidarity" is very significant to keep their good relations.<sup>5</sup> Later on in 1979, Khomeini sent Shi'ite individuals to protest during the annual Hajj in Mecca in order to spread the words about the revolution and the new republic in Iran to Muslims around the world who participated in annual Hajj.<sup>6</sup> In the following year (1980), Shi'a groups in Saudi Arabia ran a huge demonstration and attacks in Qatif to celebrate one-year anniversary since Khomeini returned back to Iran.<sup>7</sup> This event displayed Shia discontent in Eastern Province over their status as second-class citizens in Saudi Arabia, at the end the demonstration was subdued by Saudi authorities, leading to a big amount of casualties.<sup>8</sup> To diminish the tension between Saudi Arabia and Shia minority in Eastern Province, Saudi authorities more often visited the area and promised they will improve people's quality of life by providing education, social services, healthcare and economic infrastructure.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tali Rachel Grumet, "New Middle East Cold War: Saudi Arabia and Iran's Rivalry" (Master's Thesis, University of Denver, 2015), 55.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 56

<sup>7</sup> Madawi al-Rasheed, "The Shia of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Cultural Authenticity," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No.1 (May, 1998), 122.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 123.

### Iran and Iraq War

*"After all this, Khomeini comes and calls on the Iraqi people...to go out on the rooftops and protest against their government. He said the Shah had gone and someone else had come. It turned out that it was another Shah, but this time wearing a turban": Saddam Hussein, Nineveh, 15 April 1980"*

The message above from Saddam Hussein depicted his perspective towards export of the Iranian Revolution. After the Iranian Revolution, Iraq regarded Iran as an unarmful state, yet with time passed, Khomeini urged Shia majority in Iraq to protest against the government. Iraq then no longer perceived Iran as a friend but a threat to their state. Besides, Sunni and Shia Islam carried weight to the conflict, there are more underlying causes to the conflict. For example, Territorial Issue over Shatt al-Arab Waterway that in the past Iraq lost territory to Iran and made Iraq almost a landlocked country. They regarded Shatt al-Arab Waterway as the connection with the outside world and its access to the Persian Gulf, therefore, Saddam Hussein would like to claim it back. Other underlying causes consisted of the hatred between two leaders, when the Shah ruled Iran and Khomeini was in exile in Iraq, Saddam cooperated with the Shah to expel Khomeini out of Iraq, thus, when Khomeini came into power, he also wanted to overthrow Saddam's government.

Saudi Arabia during this war supported Iraq financially and militarily because they could have someone fight for themselves and also to show the Arab Unity against Shia. Damages the Iran-Iraq war caused did not affect only militarily but also economically. The longer the war lasts, the greater will be the damages and more difficult would be the task of economic recovery.<sup>10</sup> According to Mehrunnisa Ali, to recover both countries' economy after the war, they both would need \$5 billion as in budget as well as take four years for the recovery.

### Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait in 1990

After Iran-Iraq War, Iraq saw itself as a powerful regional power as they were supported in many ways by international community, for example, the United States, Western Europe, and Arab states provided Iraq with arms and military service as well as financial assistance. From this capacity, Iraq gained confidence and became more powerful reckoning it is easier for them to invade in another country. Secondly, after the long war with Iran, Iraqi government has spent a lot of money on waging war with Iran, it thus led to political insecurity of their own government. Therefore, Iraq had to depend their expenditure from oil, Iraq used the OPEC cartel to push up price of oil by limiting its supply. This was agreed by some of OPEC members since it benefited them as well, except for Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. They kept surpassing their quotas, meaning that price of oil failed to rise.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Mehrunnisa Ali, "The Impact of the Iran-Iraq War," *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Fourth Quarter, 1980), 27.

<sup>11</sup> "Economic Causes of the Gulf War," *Worldsocialism*. The Socialist Party of Great Britain May 1, 2004,

<http://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialism-or-your-money-back/modern-era/economic-causes-gulf-war>. (July 3, 2016).

Iraq regarded Kuwait as an obstacle for them to recover from the war as well as the prevention from their trade route to the sea. Hence, Iraq waged war on Kuwait.

During this period, Iran and Saudi Arabia renewed good relations due to Iran's neutrality stance. As Iraq was impoverished after the war with Iran, Kuwait was the first country they invaded, thus in this case, Saudi Arabia was predicted to be another rich country that might as well be invaded from Iraq. With the friendly Iranian's outlook, Saudi Arabia, hence, considered Iran as the buffer from Iraqi invasion. According to this, balance of power shifted and favored Iran in several ways. King Fahd made an excuse that, during the Iran and Iraq war, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia financially supported Iraq owing to their own defense without any harm to Iran.<sup>12</sup> Many speeches were made from Saudi side to justify themselves about the past and also to attract Iran's attention. From this point of Hashemi's stance, it led to powerful decision for Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states in trusting again and seeing that Iran was there to merely help solve the problems and bring about the regional peace. In turn, Iran received their trust among the Persian Gulf states because of their ties with Saudi Arabia, the natural leader among them and also in managing their oil policy as Saudi Arabia has a significant say in OPEC. In summary, Markus Kaim pointed out that Iraqi invasion in Kuwait assert detente period between Iran and Saudi Arabia with the slogan "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."<sup>13</sup>

### U.S. led-invasion in Iraq in 2003

After the Fall of Saddam, Saudi Arabia was fearful as the Sunni government was toppled down and her formidable Shi'a Iran would rise in Iraq by their oppressed and marginalized Shi'a groups under Saddam Hussein. The United States overthrew Saddam's government as their continuous efforts to fight against terrorism, but it turned out that this invasion favored Iran and Shi'a movements in Iraq who were for so long looked down on and regarded as heretics. Saudi Arabia was concerned on the power transitions that could shift from Sunni influence to Shia power, then the story would turn to the other way around. Sunni Muslims are 20% of Iraqi population and Shi'a Muslims consists of 60% population. The situation would be worse for Sunni minority as they no longer had Saddam Hussein to take sides with, coinciding with hatred from Shia groups that were suppressed in the past. Ethno-sectarian civil war was not far from taking place. Briefly, Iran believed Saudi Arabia is a local proxy for American as well as a buffer against Iran, while Saudi Arabia no longer trusts Iran since Islamic Revolution in 1979, which targeted at destroying monarchical order in Riyadh.<sup>14</sup> The vacuum of power occurred after Saddam's departure, Nouri al Maliki then came to power, he used "*de-ba'athification*" laws to keep formers Saddam's followers out of the government.<sup>15</sup> He was

<sup>12</sup> Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael, *The Gulf War and the New World Order*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), p.306.

<sup>13</sup> Markus Kaim, *Great Powers and Regional Orders: The United States and the Persian Gulf*, (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), p.127.

<sup>14</sup> Frederic Wehrey et al, "Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam. Rivalry, Cooperation and Implications for U.S. Policy," (2009): 2.

<sup>15</sup> Tali Rachel Grumet, "New Middle East Cold War: Saudi Arabia and Iran's Rivalry" (Master's Thesis, University of Denver, 2015), 82.

supported by Shi'a allies, however, he did not win election votes to solely rule the country without any coalition partners. Saudi Arabia took a strong standpoint towards new Prime Minister of Iraq, later King Abdullah described Maliki as a person who embodied sectarian division.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Riyadh did not keep diplomatic ties with Iraq in opening their embassy, this displays their secret opposition towards the Shi'a government. What frightened Saudi Arabia after Saddam's fall was that they were losing regional influence, instead, Iran would gain preeminence at this power transition.

### Arab Spring

After the relationships between Iran and Saudi Arabia since 1979 mentioned above between each conflict, we can see their behavior, which tried to balance each other's power in the Middle East. Furthermore, there is another phenomenon playing in the world nowadays called Arab Spring which began in Tunisia in 2010 and followed by Egypt. Afterwards, Arab Spring spread from North Africa to the Middle East to Syria and Yemen. Arab Spring is the phenomenon in which a huge amount of people participated in overthrowing the fraudulent and/or authoritarian regimes. Arab Spring, hence, is newborn and inspiring for citizens who have lived in such impoverished society and who must have faced economic downturn. Arab Spring could be sprung from many reasons. In Tunisia, economic and political situation came first and foremost. In Egypt, the reason was almost similar as under Hosni Mubarak's governance, people lived in poverty and encountered economic recession.<sup>17</sup> His government was taken down by the junta. After the successful uprising of the people, the democratic election then arose. Mohammad Morsi from Muslim Brotherhood was elected. Yet, after a year of his ruling, Abdul Fatah al-Sisi overthrew Morsi's government and Morsi's opposition group claimed that they could no longer tolerate Muslim Brotherhood's governance. Then again, Egypt was in the vacuum of governance system. This uprising in Egypt was in doubt of its own chaos.

Arab Spring was expanding very quickly like domino effect because of the main factor: the so-called social media encouraging people to receive news and any updates in a split second. It is easier for them to show their opposite expressions or even walk the street with their counterparts.

To understand Arab Spring, causes are originated from human's grievance towards their own authoritarian regime as well as the economic and political situation in the country, which led to the political phenomenon from the citizen, which could no longer tolerate the system. As the speech goes, uprisings in the Arab countries are not only Israeli and Palestinian conflict, but it has rather been about "bread and liberty."<sup>18</sup>

Each country that has encountered Arab Spring changed towards different degrees of successes and failures. But the countries that are in danger are Syria and Yemen because sectarianism became an important and deepened cause

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>17</sup> Jaran Maluleem, Ph.D., *Arab Spring: The uprising to transform the Arab World (Arab Spring การลุกฮือที่เปลี่ยนโฉมหน้าของโลกอาหรับ)* (Bangkok: Siam Porithat Publishing, 2012), 16.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Jones, "The Arab Spring: Opportunities and implications," *International Journal* Vol. 67, No. 2 (Spring 2012): 456.

of these proxy wars. Iran and Saudi Arabia are two countries that support this sectarian division and make the war harder to end.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Iran and Saudi Arabia rivalry, some say, tends to arise from sectarianism, and some others say, sectarianism is one of the factors of their rivalry but there are more underlying causes in their rivalry, for example, their quest in the regional influence and domination, struggle for more regional alliances, power projection, disagreements over the Hajj, oil prices, revolutionary ideology, different foreign policy and so forth.

### Regional Influence and Domination

Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a balance of power game in which each country plays a role that balances out the power of the other, in order to be superior. As the only two giants of the Middle East after the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 and the internal affairs of Egypt after the insignificance of Muslim Brotherhood, they tried to fill up vacuums to counter on another<sup>19</sup> in order to dominate the region which we can see the proxy ways playing out in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

### Sectarianism Still Matters

Sectarianism is simply understood by majority of the population in the world that it is the main factor of any wars in the Middle Eastern arenas without doubting whether it is true or not. Sectarianism is good for the headline on the newspaper but many authors argue that there are far more underlying causes between the rivalry of Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, in my opinion, sectarianism still matters in order to explain their rivalry because if not, why would they ever label themselves differently at all for Sunni and Shia.

U.S.-led invasion in Iraq created a certain level of sectarian and ethnic tensions.<sup>20</sup> Iraq is not a proxy for Iran and for sure it has not been closely tied with Arab states, Iraq was always a threat for both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Today Iraq is a very difficult country to manage as there are more growing conflicts between Sunni and Shia groups as well as Kurdish ethnicity.

Geneive Abdo and other experts portrayed an idea that Islam's schism has existed for fourteen centuries and two countries are competing for the leadership in Muslim World.<sup>21</sup> Sectarianism is unavoidably important which Iran and Saudi Arabia further their usage of this to fulfill other ambitions in the region.

In addition, both countries claim that they represent true interpretation of Islam, hence, one will refer to the other as heretic or apostate. Or each will refer to the other as radical and extremist. Graham E. Fuller mentioned about the

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<sup>19</sup> Max Fisher, "The cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran that's tearing apart the Middle East, explained," *VOX*. January 4, 2016, <http://www.vox.com/2016/1/4/10708682/sunni-shia-iran-saudi-arabia-war>. (accessed September 17, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, "Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the "Clash within a Civilization"," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. February 3, 2014, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/saudi-arabia-iran-and-clash-within-civilization>. (accessed June 13, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Geneive Abdo et al., "The Sunni-Shia Divide," *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)*. February 2016, [http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#!/?cid=otr-marketing\\_url-sunni\\_shia\\_infoguide](http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#!/?cid=otr-marketing_url-sunni_shia_infoguide). (accessed February 21, 2016).

clash of the fundamentalists between Iran and Saudi Arabia that the radical expansionist Islam did not come to the Gulf with Ayatollah Khomeini but it came out of Arabian Peninsula from the first Arab Bedouin tribesmen and importantly nearly 200 years ago with the powerful fundamentalist Wahhabi Movement of Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Iran has only started and remained high after Iran's revolution since 1979.<sup>22</sup>

In this case, it is not needed to focus solely on the clash between fundamentalism and sectarianism, but it cannot be ignored that Iran and Saudi Arabia further utilize the distinctive sectarian ideas to achieve in politics and to apply into their power projections in the Middle East. The conflicts in the Middle Eastern countries as well as the ongoing Arab Spring certainly derive from sectarian factions that are being carried out to succeed in other objectives.

### Political Regime

Two states of Iran and Saudi Arabia, as we all know, represent different models of government.<sup>23</sup> Although both states are strict Muslim practitioners, they do not share the same model politically. Iran's system preserves their role of religion strictly and insert it into politics as well as people's life. However, Iran still gives partial participation to their citizens through election. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia never once in the history holds a democratic election meaning that people can never participate in politics. Moreover, Saud family, who are the ruling leaders of the country, efficiently removes the political characters out of clerics.<sup>24</sup>

Iran and Saudi Arabia are indirectly fighting each other at the moment because of their ambition for regional hegemon as well as a quest for the leadership in the Muslim World. The factor that has reinforced their difference is sectarianism that plays out importantly in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Sectarian Division emerged significantly after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and again after the fall of Saddam Hussein in which two influential countries are trying to fill up the vacuum of the leadership in the Middle East. They do not wage war directly because they know it would destroy both of them. After the execution of al-Nimr, a Shia cleric in Saudi Arabia, at the beginning of 2016, their diplomatic ties were cut after the past decades. This can be political implications for future trends of two countries. However, Iran after sanction lifting at early 2016, seems to be a powerful competitor towards Saudi Arabia, the natural leader of Muslim World, as their assets are lifted and economic developments will improve. The United States also plays an important roles to both countries and now the U.S. tend to be more friendly with Iran after nuclear deal, that causes suspicion to Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>22</sup> Graham E. Fuller, *The Center of the Universe: The Geopolitics of Iran* (Boulder & London: Westview Press, 1991), 104.

<sup>23</sup> Frederic M. Wehrey, "The roots and future of sectarianism in the Gulf" *The Project on Middle East Political Science*, (2014): 28.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 28.



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