

Role of External Factors in Iran-Saudi Relations

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Abstract

Saudi Arabia and Iran have long been two major powers in the Middle East competing for domination in the region. The extra-regional factors in the Iran-Saudi relationship have played an important role in the understanding of the conflict. Prior to inception of the Islamic republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iran had enjoyed a cordial relationship with each other. They had been signatories to the Baghdad Pact and various other memorandums of understandings until 1979. Initially, Russia and the United States played an important role in shaping their relationship. Until 1979, both Saudi Arabia and Iran were a part of the anti-Soviet camp. Both had their own respective grievances regarding the expansion of Soviet Union.

Keywords: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Conflict, Factor, Relations

Introduction

The decades-old Iranian-Saudi rivalry has once again been brought into attention with political and social upheaval spreading in both countries and the wider region. The role of extra-regional factors that have transformed the Iranian-Saudi relationship to its current level have had far-reaching impact in shaping the present West Asian region. Saudi Arabia and Iran could be headed toward a major war. Recent power struggles in Riyadh, the shooting down of a Yemeni missile over the Saudi capital, and rising Saudi alarm over Iran's strengthening position in the Middle East have created a potentially deadly brew of instability. The Iranian-Saudi rivalry is taking place in a variety of countries of interest to the United States (US), Russia and other countries.

Intervening Factors in Iran-Saudi Relations

The Russian factor

Saudi Arabia and Iran could be headed toward a major war. Recent power struggles in Riyadh, the shooting down of a Yemeni missile over the Saudi capital, and rising Saudi alarm over Iran's strengthening position in the Middle East have created a potentially deadly brew of instability (Nader, 2017).

The Iranian-Saudi relationship, functional but not always normal, suffered a major jolt particularly after the Syrian Arab Spring. The US invasion of Iraq, in which Saudi sided with

the US, destabilized the region. Iran, on the other hand, had declared itself neutral. Although Iran raised its concern over the offensive, the criticism did not go beyond verbal condemnation. Nevertheless, the role played by the extra-regional factors such as Russia and the US, to name the strongest among the other players in the relationship of conflict, have only exacerbated the tensions.

Iran's policy in the region has been more influential than that of Saudi Arabia. Iran has been able to exploit the strategies of the extra-regional factors, such as those of the US, to further its own agenda in the region. According to Ali Reza Nadir "Iran has demonstrated an uncanny ability to exploit U.S. strategy in the Middle East to further its own interests" (Nader, 2017). On the other hand, Iran has managed a cordial relationship with some other extra-regional factors, such as Russia. Russia and Iran have been coordinating with each other in Syria to the dismay of Saudi Arabia, who had tried to bring Russia into its fold. Prior to their armed adventure in Syria together, Iran and Russia had managed a cordial relationship in the field of trade and economics. In particular, there had been an expanding cooperation between Iran and Russia in gas fields (Ladane & Walters, 2008).

Saudi Arabia and Russia, on the other hand, have had a turbulent relationship. During the cold-war, Saudi Arabia had sided with the US. Whereas Russia tried to extend its influence in the region, Saudi Arabia was opposed to its extension in the region, keeping in line with the US policies. The Saudi monarchy had become more influential in world politics after the oil-boom during the 1970's and "with its wealth, vulnerability to external aggression, opposition to atheistic communism, and ties to...US..., the Saudi monarchy was a valuable ally during this global conflict" (Bowen, 2015). Via diplomatic and commercial connections, Saudi Arabia was covertly trying to counter the Soviet Union and its allies which were at that time "hammer (ing) blows against Soviet interests" (Bowen, 2015).

Historically, the Soviet Union was among the first countries to recognize the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia giving it "economic and moral support", however the "Soviet Union unilaterally took the decision to end its diplomatic relation in Riyadh after it realized that its relations with the kingdom were not achieving its objectives" (al-Alkim, 2012). In the later phases of the cold-war, "Saudi Arabia took up hostile positions against Soviet interests in the region and against its policies towards the Third World, especially the Arab World, and justified its positions in all these cases with ideological pretexts" (al-Alkim, 2012). Saudi-Soviet tensions reached their highest level during the defining phase of the cold-war. In December 1979, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan on the pre-text of stabilizing the political instability.

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was followed by armed rebellion in which various Afghan factions emerged to challenge the occupiers in defensive armed struggles. During the course of war, Saudi Arabia provided billions of dollars to flush out the Soviets from Afghanistan. The Soviet-Afghan war was the first instance which brought a regional and extra-regional power head-to-head. Saudi involvement in Afghanistan was purely based on religious inclination. On the other hand, the United States was opposed to the Soviet Union on political grounds and the US sided with its biggest ally in the Middle East and supported the Afghans to curb the Soviet expansion. "Thus, over the course of the 1980's, the Soviet Union poured billions of (US) dollars into the war in Afghanistan, and at its peak, more than 100,000

Soviet soldiers were fighting in the country. However, the Afghan resistance (the mujahideen) was heavily supported by a wide variety of international factors, including the US and Saudi Arabia. In the end, the mujahideen prevailed and the Soviet Army was forced to withdraw from Afghanistan in February 1989, having lost tens of thousands killed and wounded. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow continued to supply and arm the communist regime of Dr. Najibullah, but this was not enough, and Kabul fell to the mujahideen in 1992” (Afghanistan, 2010).

For Iranians, the Soviets were no less satanic than the Americans. As they saw it, Americans did have a God to worship but the Soviets were a godless people. While delivering a sermon, Khomeini proclaimed that, even if the Soviets “killed all the mullahs and destroyed all the believers, what are we frightened of? ... The person who believes in God...cannot loose...” (Hussain, 1985). The new regime in the Islamic republic had voiced utter disgust against the Soviets, so much so that even their allies were not tolerated which were becoming vivid in their actions (Hunter, 2010). Though there was stark similarity between the Russian revolution and the Islamic revolution in Iran, such as the proclamation of new forms of “universalist utopian modernity’s, superior to that of the West. The institutional arrangements, ideological dynamics and ultimate historical goals of these politics share much in common whilst also differing from each other in fundamental ways” (Shakibi, 2010). However, the fundamental difference remained that Iran was driven by a religious ideology while the USSR was based on so-called “Godless communism”.

Nevertheless, Iran and Saudi Arabia, if on the same platform against the Soviets on the one hand, were separated by their different ideologies on the other. While Saudi Arabia was continuing its relationship with the US, Iran had broken off with it after the revolution. The animosity further intensified when a Saudi-US alliance supported Iraq during its war with Iran.

The US factor

The US foreign policy towards the Middle East has been difficult to understand for policy makers and analysts. According to Weidenfeld & Nicolson:

“US policy-making on the Middle East is not easy to analyze complex and multi-centered, at times chaotic, it takes place in a society in which, for all the partisan noise, most people know little and care less about the region. In the words of a US senator while speaking about Qatar, ‘the American people don’t know the difference between Hamas and Hummus’. The proper analytic response is to apply the insights of Foreign Policy Analysis: the application of a set of basic, often heuristically and analytically penetrating, categories designed to take the study of a state’s foreign policy - above all, that of the United States on which most of the literature is based - out of the instinctive and the immediate” (Halliday, 2009).

Nevertheless, it is not a hidden fact that the US has any hidden agenda in the West Asia. “For nearly 50 years the United States’ policy in the Middle East has been directed towards two main goals: securing oil supplies for US industry and establishing Israel as a Jewish homeland” (Watkins, 1997). The US enjoys a position whereby it can encourage demilitarization;

however, “rather than encourage demilitarization, the United States has been responsible for the transfers of hundreds of billions of dollars of highly sophisticated armaments into the region during the past twenty years, totaling 80% of all U.S. arms exports to the Third World” (Zunes, 1993).

Nevertheless, if one is to take a quick glance at the realities of the current-day Middle East, many things have witnessed transition, yet many things remain the same. To highlight a few issues “intra-regional (Arab-Israeli wars and the Iran-Iraq War) as well as inter-regional (the U.S. led war against Iraq and the U.S. led war against the Taliban in Afghanistan). Other dramatic events that have shaped the region’s political landscape include foreign invasions (the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980, Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990), civil war in Lebanon and the subsequent stationing of U.S. marines there in the early 1980s, Iran’s Islamic revolution, uprisings in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, growing Islamic radicalism and associated terrorism, and a U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf” (Monshipouri, 20002).

According to Monshipouri: “Today the Middle East is home to repressive regimes, an oppressive Israeli occupation, human-rights abuses, economic disparities, unelected governments and corrupt political systems. The Arab defeat in the wars with Israel and the failure of parliamentary democracy to make ruling elites and the military electorally accountable have precipitated a deepening sense of disillusionment and crisis in many Muslim societies, culminating in the resurgence of political Islam by the late 1970s. This resurgence has come to be seen as a potent backlash against the failure of secular states and ideologies such as liberal nationalism and Arab socialism, and against secular processes and institutions” (Monshipouri, 20002).

On the other hand, the US factor, in particular in the Iran-Saudi relationship has played a dual role. Rather than conciliating or mediating between the two rivals, the US have been involved in exploiting the tumultuous relationship between the countries. For instance, according to Fathollah-Nejad, “The presence of Western powers such as the...United States in and around the Persian Gulf has not led to a stable security order in the area. In fact, in past and present, their presence has been a source of conflict, aggression, and regional turmoil. A viable security order in the Persian Gulf region cannot be imposed from the outside and certainly not through perpetually feeding an arms race. It will only come about organically from within, established as a mutually beneficial pact by the littoral states and other immediate stakeholders” (Fathollah-Nejad, 2017).

The Iran-Saudi rivalry has always been in the interests of the United States, however, its major ally, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia had been expressing its reservations as “U.S. interests often overlap with those of Saudi Arabia...Saudi Arabia and the United States often work well together in seeking to contain Iranian influence, but Saudi Arabia also is an absolute monarchy opposed to Arab democracy or any democratic reform of the existing monarchical systems” (Terrill, 2011). On the other hand, “Iran views the United States as its most dangerous enemy. Perhaps the most important difference between the two nations is that Saudi Arabia is a conservative Sunni Muslim Arab state, while Iran is a Shi’ite state with senior politicians who often view their country as the defender and natural leader of Shi’ites throughout the region. The rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran has been reflected in the politics of a number

of regional states where these two powers exercise influence” (Terrill, 2011), according to Terrill.

Nevertheless, unlike Saudi Arabia, “Tehran's top priority is the survival of the Islamic Republic as it exists now. Tehran views the United States as an existential threat and to counter it has devised a strategy that rests on both deterrence and competition in the Middle East. To deter any possible military actions by the United States and its allies, Iran is improving its retaliatory capabilities by developing the means to pursue asymmetric, low-intensity warfare, both inside and outside the country; modernizing its weapons; building indigenous missile and anti-missile systems; and developing a nuclear program while cultivating doubts about its exact capability” (Milani, 2009).

The French factor

Signatories to the Baghdad Pact in 1955, France, Saudi Arabia and Iran, were at common terms with each other. The pact was signed under the supervision of the US and the parties to it had a common understanding between them. The major concern of the pact was to tackle the Soviet threat or influence in the West Asian region. Nevertheless, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the former ruler of Iran, had introduced some progressive reforms in the country which had incensed the clergy. Protests were organized against the reforms and to resist the authoritarian approach of the Shah. The Iranians began to rally around one leader, Ayatollah Rookhullah Khomeini. Khomeini rose to prominence as he began the protests in the name of Islam and challenged the Shah's authority. Consequently, he was exiled to Iraq and later to France where he sought refuge.

He led a fierce campaign against the Shah from France via audio cassettes and print. The campaign against the Shah eventually turned out to be successful which led to his overthrow in November 1978. Three months later, Khomeini returned to Iran in February 1979. All the treaties signed previously were rendered invalid. Khomeini took an anti-western stance and denounced them vehemently. He was of the view that the westerners had been pushing an imperialist agenda in the region and the signatories to the Baghdad Pact, including the previous regime of the Iranian Shah, were a party to this nefarious design of the westerners.

Nevertheless, anti-western rhetoric led to the isolation of Iran at the international level and a war of words ensued between the newly born Islamic republic of Iran and its critics. Eventually, the events took an ugly turn and war of words turned into a real war in which the West sided with Iraq and Iran was caught in isolation. The eight-year-long war between Iraq and Iran took hundreds of thousands of lives and ended in a stalemate. During the years, the French policy towards Iran has varied from time to time. Although, Iran had accused it of maintaining double standards, particularly after the fall of Shah and during the 1990's given the closeness of the French with the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, however, relations between the two countries began to see a positive transition under President Jacques Chirac. During his presidency, France maintained mild diplomacy towards Iran. They stood against any anti-Iranian stance initiated by the international community. For example, in 2006, on Saudi Arabia's behest, as was speculated, the international community was firm on slapping harsh sanctions against Iran but Chirac heavily “came out against sanctioning Iran” (Mason, 2105).

Role of United Nations in Iranian-Saudi relations

On October 24, 1945, “The United Nations officially came into existence” when the charter was “ratified by China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, the United States and by a majority of other signatories. United Nations Day is celebrated on 24 October each year” (History of the United Nations, 1990). Prior to that a “charter was signed on 26 June 1945 by the representatives of the 50 countries. Poland, which was not represented at the conference, [and] signed it later [to] become one of the original 51 Member States” (United Nations). Both Saudi Arabia and Iran became member states of the UN on October 24, 1945.

Iran and Saudi Arabia had enjoyed a more or less cordial relationship at the United Nations prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Both had been in the anti-Soviet camp and signatories to the Baghdad Pact of 1955. However, after the Islamic revolution, Iran and Saudi Arabia found themselves at loggerheads with each other at the United Nations over the Iran-Iraq war. They were accusing each other of destabilizing the other and the accusations continue to this date. Though there was some sort of consensus on reviving the relationship, after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the United Nations became one of the battle grounds where Saudi Arabia and Iran would try to slug it out with each other. In 2016, the United Nations “Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon...phoned the Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia and Iran to urge both countries to avoid actions that could further exacerbate tensions” (UN News, 2018).

Nevertheless, according to many authors, both Iran and Saudi Arabia should be blamed for the troubles engulfing the West Asian region. Saudi Arabia acts like a primitive kingdom which is obsessed with religion and trampling human rights. Iran, on the other hand, also acts like a medieval theocratic state continuously trampling human rights. The Shia regime in Iran has been persecuting “Sunni Baluchis” situated in the neighborhood of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Over the past several years the Iranian regime has persecuted Kurds as well. Iran’s involvement in supporting certain Shia groups in numerous places such as Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain and Pakistan is not an unknown fact. In Pakistan, it supports the Shia Tehrani Nifas i Fiqah i Jafria (TNFJ) that has criticized the Sunni interpretation of Islam. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has supported the extremist Sunni entities fighting the Shia organizations thought to be extremists. The proxy war has been going on for decades now (Suhail, 2016).

There are signals that Saudi Arabia is facing an increased anxiety over instability. The monarchy in “Saudi Arabia faced challenges from several directions, including the economy. The Kingdom faced a high deficit of \$98 billion in 2015 and also a drop in foreign exchange reserves from \$728 billion to \$640 billion. Saudi Arabia’s regional assertiveness had also presented a threat to the country’s future. Spending on defense and security, had grown from 7% of GDP in 2012 to 10% in 2015, and was set to rise again in 2016” (Suhail, 2016).

Saudi Arabia’s search for a new partner has proved costly. The Saudis promised \$8 billion to Egypt. It had waged a full-scale war in Yemen, which went on longer than was expected. Saudi Arabia had also been financing a war against the Assad regime in Syria. “Yet, some people wanted to see Saudi Arabia stand up powerfully for Sunnis against Shia Iran which was considered an element of the solution to the jihadists’ evil ideology. The Saudi actions of late don’t seem to be moved by ideology and are born of compulsion. Iran has to come out from its isolation now. The US recognizes many countries in the world with which it has serious

differences. The aim is to gain some leverage to influence Iran. The Iran nuclear deal was an important first step in the direction” (Suhail, 2016).

The United Nations does not seem to need much time to safeguard peace efforts between Saudi Arabia and Iran whenever the need arises or whenever there has been a problem in relations with these countries. There were many times in which the breakup of the relationship has been termed as worrying and disappointing. For instance, “Saudi Arabia cut off diplomatic ties with Iran after angry protesters ransacked and set fire to the Saudi Embassy in Tehran over the execution of Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon spoke by phone with the Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers to urge them to ‘avoid any actions that could further exacerbate the situation’. The Iranians, even before the break of diplomatic relations, have not been very supportive, not very positive in these peace efforts” (Times, 2016). Another example of the UN’s reaction to tensions between the two countries was when the UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura went to Riyadh for talks and later to Tehran to seek assurances that hard-won gains in the Syria peace process were not in danger.

Conclusions

The extra-regional factors in the Iranian-Saudi relationship have played an important role in the understanding of the conflict. Prior to inception of the Islamic republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iran had enjoyed a cordial relationship with each other. They had been signatories to the Baghdad Pact and various other memorandums of understandings until 1979. Russia and the US had played an important role in shaping their relationship initially and until 1979, both Saudi Arabia and Iran were a part of the anti-Soviet camp. Both had their own respective grievances regarding the expansion of the Soviet Union.

However, after the abdication of the throne by the Shah of Iran, followed by the Iraq-Iran war and the anti-Saudi and the counter anti-Iran rhetoric, the relationship began to deteriorate. Britain, France and the European Union more or less came out in open support of Saudi Arabia. However, after the JOPAC deal signed in July 2015, the relationship between the West and Iran, and in particular France and Iran, saw some revival.

The United Nations, on the other hand, had always played a conciliatory role since the inception of the crisis between the two countries. It tried to bring Saudi Arabia and Iran to the negotiating table whenever a crisis erupted and took an ugly shape. During the Iraq-Iran war Saudi Arabia and Iran were requested by the UN to mend their fences and reconcile with each other. In one of the instances the Secretary-General of the UN intervened himself to solve the crisis. The United Nations is usually quick to safeguard peace efforts between Saudi Arabia and Iran whenever the need arises or whenever there is a breakup in relations with each other.

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