



Saudi Arabia's and Iran's Regional Rivalry over Syria

Zuhour Aziz Abdel Hamid Aljabary

Abstract

Many media channels and writers have argued that the ongoing Syrian civil war since 2011 is purely sectarian oriented nature and that Sunni-Shi'a divisions are the main driver behind it. Nevertheless, global power and vital regional players have abused the instability, insecurity, and the vacuum of power for their involvement in Syria. The objective of their strategic involvement centered on securing their national interests. On the regional scale, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been highly involved in the regional rivalry in Syria and have deceived the international arena for their real motivations. The study will examine through realist lens how both Saudi Arabia and Iran are competing over Syria for their interests under sectarian excuses. The study suggests that their goal is to preserve their regional position, to secure their political regimes, and to enhance their political sphere of influence.

Introduction:

Since 2011, the Arab uprising waves and the mass protest movement swept from North Africa to the Middle East. The whole region has witnessed different political transformations due to the fall of the authoritarian regimes and the new internal political transformation. However,

the political transformations and the desired outcomes have ranged differently along the region. Some states like Tunisia have managed to approach the political transformations in less dramatic and more democratic resolutions while the others like Syria has entered an endless cycle of civil war and internal conflicts (Heydemann, 2013). The Syrian civil war has left its strong, undeniable effects on the surrounding states and the region as well due to foreigner involvement and Gulf financial supports for the opposition parties. The regional military and financial funds to different groups have empowered sectarianism divisions in Syria; the radical Islamic rebellions have strengthened their power while Syrian civilians have witnessed death, displacement, and immigration. (Friedman, 2007) . However, the regional competition over Syria has abused the vacuum of centralized power within its territory, and the U.S gradual declined the role in Syria for serving their interests and achieving their desired political goals (Kamrava,2012). The leading most prominent regional players have been Iran and Saudi Arabia (Reisininezhad, 2019).

Before the rise of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia enjoyed its regional leadership through ultimate authority and legitimacy. Moreover, it served as coordinator player between the regional states due to its regional supremacy and religious status. Nevertheless, with the critical outcomes of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia realized that it should act as a forceful actor since it is losing its regional supremacy, and Iran's political sphere of influence is growing in the region. (Blanga,2017).In other words, Iran's strong position threatens Saudi Arabia's security and regional role. Moreover, its regional political influence is gradually diminishing in Iran's favor (Marcus, 2019).

The Syrian civil war and the vacuum of power have helped these two major regional powers Iran and Saudi Arabia to exploit this opportunity to rebalance against each other, to preserve their national interest, to ensure their regional domination and to enforce their political power under sectarian ideology in the region (Malmvig,2014). The outcomes and the future

prediction of the Syrian war cannot be evaluated without analyzing the bigger context and the role of regional key players (Ayoob,2012). The external involvement Of Iran and Saudi Arabia in Syria aims at shaping the regional political outcomes (Martini, & Young, 2013). However, the critical outcomes of Syria and Bashar's regime can reshape the regional order that would negatively affect one of the significant regional players.

Research Questions:

1. Why Iran and Saudi Arabia are in continuous rivalry over Syria, and what are their real motivations beyond sectarianism?

Research Objectives:

The researcher will investigate the geopolitical interest of both sides by evaluating and studying the political value, geographical location, and economic perspectives of Syria and how it can serve the interests of both Sides.

Thesis Statement:

1. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are pursuing regional supremacy, domination, and regime preservation through fueling Syria's sectarianism.

Data Collection:

The research will be based on a qualitative approach. Archival searches will be the primary tool for collecting data. Secondary data will be the leading sources for this work. Internet-based searches will be used to access peer-reviewed articles and academic blogs and some newspaper article.

Theoretical Framework:

Structural -Defensive realism will be adopted through this study to investigate Iran's and Saudi Arabia's real motivations behind the rivalry over Syria's case. Realism argues that the international system is anarchic, and there is no central power or international authority to control the political dynamics between the states. Each state practices its ultimate authority in the international system for achieving its goals (Walt,1979). Due to the absence of central authority and the anarchic nature of the system, States will most likely go into wars against each other to preserve their national interests and to secure their future goals and survival (Waltz, 2001).

The anarchic nature of the international system force states to preserve their power and global political position by forming a global and regional alliance that would serve them to balance against the opposed threat (Walt,1998). Adding to the survival in the anarchic system is the states' primary goal or priority. For securing their survival, states practice self-reliance mechanism since the environment of the international system is a self-help system. In other words, it is the responsibility of each state to ensure its survival and to maintain its position in the anarchic international system. (Walt,1998).

The balance of power theory will be used as well through this work. Balancing the opposed threat serves as an essential technique for preserving the state's survival in the future. The balancing technique could be achieved through different tools. Firstly, states tend to form an alliance with global or regional power with whom they share mutual interests against the opposed threat (Waltz,2010). Secondly, hard power (military), or soft power like economic growth and diplomatic ties, can secure a state's survival and preserve its security along with alliances strategy (Waltz,2010).

Moreover, according to Mearsheimer (2001), states always seek regional or global hegemony by acquiring the highest means of military power and security. Achieving regional

hegemony will help the states in eliminating the chances of other opposed regional threats or competitors.

Literature Review:

The study will investigate the geopolitical motivations of Iran's 'and Saudi Arabia's involvement in Syria. It will study how the sectarian divisions of both players are used to achieve their own regional goals. For the purpose of the study, the literature review will be divided into three sections: The first part will review the general idea behind their regional rivalry, then moving to Iran's interests in Syria. Lastly, the researcher will investigate Saudi Arabia's motivations and interests in Syria

Iran's -Saudi Arabia's Regional Rivalry:

Tzemprin, Jozić, and Lambare (2015) argue that the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia plays a significant role in shaping the regional geopolitical landscape through the ongoing proxy wars. However, their geopolitical interests are much deeper drivers than ideological elements for explaining their rivalry and their balance of power through the proxy war strategy. Moreover, their involvement in post Arab spring states politics has increased the sectarian violence and the regional polarization due to religious fragmentation. Notably, the regional supremacy in the Persian Gulf is the main key factor behind their rivalry and fueling regional sectarianism involvement in weaker unstable states. As Iran's foreign policy expanded its ties with Russia and Saudi Arabia's neighbors, Riyadh became under threat since it is losing its regional strength and entering an isolation stage. Iran is aiming to switch the regional order of power into its box. Iran's new diplomatic relations in the region and the internal domestic challenges that Saudi Arabia faces explaining their rivalry and the game of proxy war. For supporting the above, Malmvig (2014) focuses on the concept of sectarianism as an

instrumentalist approach for gaining power and national interests. He explains that the leading regional actors like Iran and Saudi Arabia utilize and abuse the sectarian division for achieving their own interests and elevating their regional power. Iran and Hezbollah tried to utilize the Arab spring by arming and strengthening their ideological supporters. Their massive support is explained by their desire to change the regional order and to eliminate the Sunni's and West influence in the region. Moreover, Iran is attempting to spread to its political ideology and its Islamic identity to become the ultimate representative of the region.

In Parallel, Zweiri (2016) believes that Iran lacks the advanced capabilities and resources for supporting and creating the non- state actors within the instable regional states. However, the main objective and concern of Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East after the Arab Spring is to create new alliances that share similar ideologies and future regional objectives. Having alliances that share Anti-Israel, Anti-Americans views empowers the political position of Iran, as well as, it strengthens its Islamic Shia's political position. On the other hand, Iran's strong position threatens Saudi Arabia and the regional status quo. In order to encounter this, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Saudi Arabia are trying to oppose Iran's political influence by attacking their supports like Houthis in Yemen. The ongoing regional confrontations bring more instability and insecurity that help in causing the vacuum of power. The political vacuum is abused by both sides for gaining different ideological groups by their side. Having big supporters by their sides will help them in reaching the regional hegemony and preserving their political regimes.

To strengthen Zweiri's (2016) findings, Mabon (2013) founds that Saudi Arabia's political role and its interventions in the Gulf area, like Bahrain's case, is to rebalance against Iran's rising power in the Persian Gulf and the increasing power of Shia in the Gulf area. Saudi Arabia is concerned with preserving the monarchy regimes of the Gulf states to secure and control its internal stability and security, as well as to secure its political regime.

Nevertheless, Iran's foreign policy strategies are advanced and well developed. Iran's foreign policy that is served by Iran's behavior can shift the regional order. Its policy orientation is driven by changing and manipulating the relations between the political regimes and their society. Iran's foreign policy orientation is driven by its behavior, which advances its position regionally since the U.S lacks those capabilities that can stabilize and control the regional order (Mansour,2008).

Iran's involvement in Syria' civil war:

From a realist lens, Iran's involvement in Syria is based on geopolitical interests rather than ideological support since the Syrian regime is secular. Iran's primary interest is preserving and securing its land corridor to Lebanon-Hezbollah and protecting the military supply for them. Iran wants to protect the Iran-Hamas-Hezbollah alliance, which serves as "resistance power" against U.S and Israel interests in the region. By preserving the regime in Syria, Iran will be able to balance against Saudi Arabia and impose its regional political influence. Furthermore, losing Assad's regime can impose Iran under risk since Saudi Arabia will be able to take down the new Iraqi government that is Iranian allied (Kinninmont, 2014). Adding to, Yolcu (2016) studies Iran's involvement in Syria by pointing towards Iran's policy toward Syria. Iran is utilizing the sectarian division and Shia's ideology supporters for its interests. He argues that Iran will keep supporting Bashar's regime and supporting the armed fighters because armed conflicts in Syria will serve it at the end. Having Russia by its side in Syria's case, Iran, through the politics of fear and security politics, will be able to strengthen its regional political position and increase its sphere of influence regionally. Moreover, having an aggressive influential role will help Iran in maximizing its capabilities over the social impact.

Another argument has been highlighted by Wastnidge (2017), he argues that Iran's main interest in supporting Bashar's regime is to secure Iraq since its geographical location is critical

for Iran's security. Syria's geographical location will help Iran in preserving its strong relation with Hezbollah in Lebanon. In return, Hezbollah is a crucial key player For Iran's security. Hezbollah's location is an essential element for acting against Israel. As a result, maintaining this relationship will serve as a deterrent barrier for Iran against Israel's attacks or strikes and will help in increasing deterrent measures along Israel borders. Shortly, religion divisions or Shiitism is used as a strong justification for their involvement in Syria for achieving other purposes. The importance of Hezbollah as a critical player in the Levant area was also emphasized and highlighted by Hokayem (2014). He finds that Iran is concerned about the security of Syrian Urban centers and the protection of supply routes into Lebanon. The preservation of Syrian territories is a vital factor for their relations with Hezbollah.

Saudi Arabia's interests in Syria:

The Arab uprising has created some vacuum of power. This has created an opportunity for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to practice their regional influence and to empower their global profile by their involvement in regional conflicts and wars. Saudi Arabia is adopting pragmatic policies as well as, is sponsoring the opposition part to gain it by itself. By following this strategy, Saudi Arabia is buying its regional influence to ensure its future dominance and regional hegemony (Kamrava,2012). However, Berti and Guzansky (2012) say that Saudi Arabia's involvement is driven by sectarian, political, and domestic interests. Saudi Sunni's regime always found Baathist secular regime unfavorable. Moreover, supporting Assad's opposition helps Saudi Arabia in weakening Iran's regional influence. Therefore, Saudi Arabia will eliminate the influence and the power of its regional competitor. As a result, it will achieve the regional leadership and supremacy by weakening central Iran's ally.

In addition, Tehran's close relation with Syria and its regional role in Palestine- Israel conflicts and its role in Lebanon's politics worry Saudi Arabia. By supporting the opposition of

Assad's regime, Saudi Arabia is indirectly helping in destroying and causing the fall of this regime. Weakening Assad's regime will serve as a considerable opportunity for Saudi Arabia to switch the regional leadership role toward itself. Through regional leadership status. Saudi Arabia will compensate for its loss in Iraq, as well as, will reduce Iran's influence in the Levant and will try to eliminate it (Hokayem,2012).

Lastly, Saudi Arabia's position as the leader of the Sunni world in the Middle East shaped its politics toward the Syrian civil war. The growing power in the region is threatening the regional order. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's objective is to weaken the Syria-Iran alliance and to preserve its regional status of quo and regional stability. Adding to this, Saudi Arabia wants to preserve its monarchic political regime by reducing the Shiite's power and the protests movement in the Gulf states since it can affect the regional security and put Saudi Arabia under risk (Balanga,2017).

Finding and Analysis:

For understanding the regional rivalry over Syria, the researcher will analyze how the regional empowerment of Iran through the Iraq war in 2003 and its relationship with non-state actors in the Levant affect Saudi Arabia's regional position. Furthermore, the study will examine how their intervention in the Syrian conflict can change the regional political dynamics and switch the balance of power toward one of them while eliminating the political influence of the other.

Before 2003, Iraq acted as an opposing power or deterrent wall for Iran's political and influential expansion in the Persian Gulf, especially after the Islamic revolution in 1979. The geographical proximity, the religious and ethnic diversity, and the internal political developments in Iraq have always been one of Iran's security concerns since they can impose a threat for the political position of Iran (Taremi,2005). However, the U.S invasion of Iraq in 2003

had unintentionally served Iran's regional interest. The outcomes of the war caused a shift in the regional balance of power and changed the regional Arab order. Iraq that once was a strong regional competitor for Iran, turned into a weak state (Fawcett,2013). As a result, the regional balance of power switched into Iran's favor, mainly when Iran played a role in imposing its political influence in forming the new friendly Iraqi government in 2005. The close ties with the Iraqi government and Iran's success in spreading the Shiite ideology in Iraq empowered Iran's regional position for two reasons. First of all, it guaranteed easy access to Syria, which is a staunch ally of Iran, and secondly, it strengthened its security in the region as a non-Arab state since it gave Iran direct access to Saudi Arabia and the chances to strengthen the security of its borders. The empowered bonds between Iran and the Shiite government symbolizes a victory for Iran's regional domination and empowerment (Taremi,2005) and a strategic tool for redefining Iran's position in the region (Barzegar,2005).

On the other hand, Iran's success in Iraq imposed a threat for Saudi Arabia, especially after its failure in strengthening its position in Iraq(Fawcett,2013). Saudi Arabia started to lose its regional legitimacy and its geographical position as a leader of Sunni axis regimes (Salloukh,2013), while regional leadership started to switch from the Sunni axis to the axis of resistance (Fawcett,2013). Shortly, Losing Iraq that served as a stabilizer between Saudi Arabia and Iran, imposed a threat to Saudi's regional influence, regime preservation and security since the Shiite ideology is being empowered and the role of Iran's influence in the region is increasing.

When it comes to non-states actors in the Levant, we can say that Hezbollah represents an extension of Iran's political agenda in the region that serves its national interests. First, the winning position of Hezbollah in the region reflects the success of Iran's domination and influence. Second, the importance of Hezbollah is characterized in its opposing stand on Israel and U.S domination in the Middle East, which are the core of Iran's Islamic Revolution agenda.

Thirdly, Hezbollah acts as a protection shield for Iran against Israeli attacks which in return preserve its national security among the Arab states in the region. Also, Hezbollah's success against Israel war in 2006 has empowered Iran's position and turned it into a regional player in the Levant region since its victory reflected the success of Iranian Islamic politics (Hokayem,2010). Moreover, 87% of Lebanese population has favored Hezbollah in the internal political sphere during the war. At last, the victory of Hezbollah and the positive Lebanese view of it has empowered Iran's regional role in Israeli -Arab resistance agenda and elevated its regional role in the Israeli Palestinian conflict (El Hussein, 2010). Having a leading role in the Israeli Palestinian conflict which is considered the most critical debate among Arabs empowered the regional political status of Iran, deepened its Islamic ideology and expanded its sphere of influence (Taremi, 2005). Besides, in 2008 Hezbollah achieved Another victory against Israel and America. The Hezbollah has managed to seize Beirut and strengthen its political role in Lebanese government. The Lebanese politics has shifted the power into favor of Hezbollah and its allies against the backed-up government by Saudi Arabia and U.S (Worth& Bakri, 2008). Again, Saudi Arabia proved another failure in its geopolitical confrontation with Iran in Lebanon (Salloukh,2013) . Nevertheless, having Hezbollah as an official governmental representor reflects another success of Iran's domination and empowerment in the region. Consequently, Iran's political position as a dominant actor has empowered in the Levant, and the power switched into its playground while Saudi Arabia perceived it as a threat to its security and its regional leadership.

Ultimately, Hezbollah's victory over Israel indicates Iran's robust stance on regional issues like Israeli -Palestinian conflict.Iran proved its victory over Saudi Arabia's again after Iraq's case in 2003. Adding to this, Hezbollah's legal victory in Lebanese politics represents Iran's influential achievement and success in the Levant. After all, these two factors switched the regional power in favor of Iran and its domination. All in all, Saudi Arabia's political influence

weakened in the Levant, and it witnessed a loss of another chance for imposing its influence in Lebanon.

Another non-state player that empowered the regional stance of Iran is Hamas. Iran is in a winning position in the Gaza strip and in the West Bank. As well as it managed to establish a beneficial tie with Hamas, which in return strengthened its position in the Levant and emphasized its leading role in the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. Plus, its relations with Hamas serves as a deterrent barrier against the possible U.S or Israeli attacks against its nuclear facilities. Having a deterrence actor in Palestine plays a vital role in Iran's security preservation and elevating its regional power. Moreover, the geopolitical rivalry in the Gaza strip between Iran and Saudi Arabia did not end with fruitful outcomes for Saudi Arabia. Although Saudi Arabia tried to encounter Iran's influence and rebalance its power by funding and supporting the Abbas movement and attempting to lead some negotiations aside with the U.S between Hamas and Abbas government, the election ended with Hamas's victory, and the negotiation did not actually help in empowering Saudi Arabia role. Saudi Arabia again proved its weak position in having a leading regional role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its unsuccessful attempt to eliminate Iran's influence in the Levant area (Salloukh,2013).

Bringing up the rear, Saudi Arabia lost the post-Saddam Iraq to a friendly government that favors Iran and its political position in the regional affairs like Israeli Palestinian conflict is also weakened. On the contrary, Iran is expanding its regional influence in the Persian Gulf and the Levant. It achieved a leading regional role in Palestinian – Israeli conflict and has proved its political success in Lebanon. Iran's strong political position and growing role in the region threat Saudi Arabia's leadership and security. After failing in containing or rebalancing Iran's in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, Saudi Arabia strategy switched into aggressive involvement in Syria. Saudi Arabia sees Syria as a final hope or a golden key for restoring its political position,

containing and rebalancing Iran's influence. Besides, it is a crucial factor for regime preservation of the Sunni Gulf axis before they fell into Iran's sphere of influence.

Meanwhile, Syria's Civil war turned into a regional playground between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both countries see Syria as a chance to shape the future political dynamics of the region and switching the balance of power toward one of them.

For Iran, Syria plays a significant role in preserving its recent strong position in the region and for expanding its regional influence in the future. As a non-Arab actor in the region, Syria helps Iran in decreasing Iran's isolation in the Middle East by preserving the power of the resistance axis. Moreover, Hezbollah plays a critical role in securing Iran's regional influence and domination (Martini, Young, 2013). Therefore, Syria's importance is characterized in its geographical location. Through Syria, Iran will be able to secure its corridor with Hezbollah and to keep the flow of military supplies that serves the preservation of Iran's security against Israel. Securing Assad's regime and winning Syria represents the continuation of Iran's alliance with the resistance power. As a result, Iran will keep its strong regional position and will empower itself for future regional domination and influential regional leadership. Shortly, Winning Syria symbolizes winning over Iraq and securing the resistance axis influence in the region against Saudi Arabia and the Sunni pro-Western axis (Martini, Young, 2013). Another national Interest of Iran is preserving its national security. Securing Syria means having stable Iraq. In other words, the geographical proximity of Iraq plays a significant role in securing Iran's border (Wastnidge, 2017). If Bashar's regime will fall and the future government will fall under the influence Sunni axis, the chance of having more open access to Iraq will become more prominent. As a result, Iran will face security threats on its border.

Another highlighted national Interest is the preservation of South Pars Gas pipelines. The South Pars gas field is one of the largest gas fields on a global scale, and it accounts for 40% of

Iran's gas profit (Bahmannia,2006). One of the South Pars project objectives is transferring gas from Iran to Europe. However, the pipeline routes pass via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The project will increase Iran's energy security and will help in establishing more prominent petrochemical sectors (Developing South Pars: a look at Iran's mega gas field,2017). By way of explanation, preserving the land through which the pipelines pass through will help Iran in securing its economy and Gas export and transportation routes. The Gas revenue will empower and secure Iran's regional position since reflects the strength of its soft power and the economic prosperity. Acquiring adequate soft power capabilities will help Iran to become stronger in the rebalancing mechanism of the regional power.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia sees Syria as a preservation strategy for its regional leadership and balance of power (Martini & Young,2011). Through Syria, Saudi Arabia will be able to contain Iran's influential expansion and domination and to compensate for its past lost in containing Iran. If Saudi Arabia achieves success in destroying Assad's regime, then it will be able to weaken Iran's regional power by cutting its relationship with Hezbollah and Hamas (Salloukh, 2013). Simply, Syria serves as a winning key in the intra-Islamic cold war. The final outcomes of the Syrian civil war will determine the nature of the future leading regimes. Winning Syria by weakening the Baathist regime will act as a winning position of Sunni camp that is led by Saudi Arabia over the Shiite camp led by Iran (Blanga, 2017). In Return, Saudi Arabia's security will be empowered since it will act as a patron for the Arab states in the region. The leadership role will help Saudi Arabia in securing its internal affairs and having a strong legitimacy over its territory (Aras,2015). Other than the internal security, regional stability is also one of the main concerns of Saudi Arabia, especially in the neighbors' Gulf monarchies. Most of the Gulf populations are Shiite, while the ruling government is Saudi's Sunni allies. Having Iran as an influential player in the region can help Iran in creating close bonds with the Shiite population and manipulate them to rise against the government. The consequences of the Sunni

regimes fall in the region can impose a threat to Saudi Arabia. Naturally, it will lose its allies in the Gulf area, which, in return, will weaken its regional position (Blanga,2017). Therefore, weakening Iran and eliminating its influence in the Persian Gulf is one of the leading Saudi's objectives to preserve its regional domination. Lastly, the fall of Bashar's regime can help in establishing a friendly Sunni regime since most of the Syrian are Sunni Muslims. The Sunni regime will help Saudi Arabia in establishing a new ally in the Levant region that will serve its interests. Through the new Sunni government, Saudi Arabia will be able to return its Levant starting with Syria, moving to Lebanon, and then maybe to have a hand over Iraq (Hassan,2013).

Conclusion:

Since the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003 and the dynamics of the regional political are switching between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, the Iraq war has empowered the regional stance of Iran and helped it to expand its political agenda in the region. Iran managed to strengthen its relationship with Hezbollah and Hamas, which empowered its regional role in the Levant. Combining its winning position in the post-Iraq war and its active role in the Israeli Palestinian conflict, Iran gained the power to push its sphere of influence and empowering its leadership role in the region. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia realized that it is losing its regional position, and Iran gradually takes its political role in the region. Saudi Arabia tried to contain Iran's growing role in the region before, but its attempt in Palestine and Lebanon did not produce fruitful outcomes. As a result, Syrian uprising and the internal chaos of the civil war helped both players to use the Syrian ground for regional competition and deciding the faith of their balance of power. Through Syria, Iran is trying to preserve its gained influence and power by securing its resistance alliances while Saudi Arabia is supporting the opposition to weaken Bashar's regime that will gradually collapse, and Iran's influence will be weakened. Moreover, Saudi Arabia wants to preserve the power of its Sunni Axis and to secure its internal affairs. To put it shorty, Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are seeking regional domination, regime preservation, and expanding

their sphere of influence. Syria's ground is the most effective arena for reshaping the regional order and empowering of the players while containing the influence of the other.

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