
Iranian-Saudi Strategic Competition in the Middle East: An Analysis of the Arab Spring

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Abstract

The major regional players in Mideast, including Iran and Saudi Arabia always intervened in politics of neighbouring countries with different political strategies. This study explores factors that played key role in changing their strategies towards the regional politics. The research is helpful to know dynamics of Iranian and Saudi relations keeping in view the US factor. The research is helpful in assessing certain political objectives of both countries. The paper tries to examine recent gulf between the status of both countries in relation with the hindrances and possibilities that lies between them. The foreign policies and political situation of both countries is leading towards a greater change in Mideast region. The growing relations and foreign policies of these countries have certain objectives and due to globalisation, no country can live in isolation. This research provides a clear picture of recent gulf political situation which is leading toward a great change in scenario. Having different ideologies, the two important countries of Middle East have completely different priorities and objectives for the regional peace and stability. Therefore, this qualitative study is helpful in determining the objectives of both states towards resolving the political unrest and security issues in the Middle East.

Keywords: Saudi-Iran Rivalry, Iran-Iraq Relations, Syrian Crisis, Gulf States, Persian Gulf.

1. Introduction

The states in the Middle East are playing a significant role in World Politics. The two significant states of this locale are Iran and Saudi Arab. Persian Gulf locale – considered under a dormant Sectarian separation – was enlivened by a show of Iraq-Iran contention; each power adjusted the other. The defeat of Saddam Hussein, by the US attack of Iraq, presented another part in the provincial issues – Saudi Arabia and Iran as the twin mainstays of the territorial power – setup. Regardless of various endeavours by each party to work on reciprocal relations and extend collaboration, Iran-Saudi relations have been laden with irregular logical conflicts (Heydarian, 2011). In 2011, Arab world witnessed a wave of public protest against their respective governments. Demand of democracy in Middle East is not new but during Arab uprising it turned into countrywide movement which changed the socio-political scenario of Mideast. At this time when a positive and unanimous reaction was needed, both regional

powers had different views. Saudis were not looking happy with this revolution, on the other hand, Iran welcomed it in some states. The basic research problem is that what are the competing interpretations of Middle East crises by the Iran and Saudi Arabia, and how to find out the active factors behind the political crisis of the Middle East, and to investigate the future prospects of Middle East?

The needs and targets of the two nations, Iran and Saudi Arabia are not the same in the region. While the two countries are gaining ground toward regional prevalence, Iranian dependence on Saudi Arabia for money-related reasons and Saudi Arabia's fear of Iranian nuclear potential may strike an average influence structure in the locale, as each get-together exhibits hesitant to confront the following directions. The delayed consequence of their relations will significantly influence the security of the Gulf region. The Saudi-Iran dispute is a central segment in the Middle Eastern security scene that wanders into both the Gulf and the Arab Israeli theatre. It is not an easy task to strengthen the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia because of the geo-strategic goals and sectarianism. In fact, their mutual relations are not spoiled due to differences in their geostrategic interests or sectarianism but due to their responses to the regional events. Moreover, Middle Eastern territorial governmental issues do not comprise of unbending alliances that can be seen as a smaller than normal war (Fatima, Zehraa, & Malik, 2017). The paper investigates how and why the Arab uprising in the Middle East is deciphered distinctively by the two significant players, i.e., Saudi Arab and Iran in the area? Both consider each other responsible for the involvement of US scrutiny into their internal affairs.

2. Literature Review

In 2011, Arab world witnessed a wave of public protest against their respective governments. Demand of democracy in Middle East is not new but during Arab uprising it turned into countrywide movement which changed the socio-political scenario of Mideast. At this time of reaction both the regional players had different view. Saudis were not looking happy with this white revolution of people, on the other hand, Iran welcomed the revolution in some states. Especially in Bahrain and Syria, officials from the Gulf States, mainly from Saudi Arab, accused Iran of interference in the affairs of Gulf States to topple their neighbouring rulers. The basic research problem is what are the competing interpretations of Middle East crises by the Iran and Saudi Arabia. How we could find out the active factors behind the political crisis of the Middle East, and to investigate the prospects of Middle East? Although, the sectarianism is not the root cause of the Saudi Iranian split it is an outcome of their policies for regional hegemony. Scholars consider four key events that increased enmity between two states which includes the fall of Ottoman Empire, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the 2003 US led Iraq invasion, and the Arab uprisings.

Middle East is known as the cradle of civilization. It has two river systems, the Nile, and the Tigris-Euphrates. These were the world's earliest civilizations. The Middle East has three distinct cultures; Arabs, Turkish and Iranian which were the great Islamic empires with a glorious history in Islamic civilisation. In 7th century, the Arabs created a great empire in Middle East. However, after the WWI, the great Muslim dynasty collapsed, and different Nation-states came into being. According to Calvocoressi (2001), after losing the power in Middle East, Arabs were seriously thinking of recovering their independence and to revive vision of a renewed unity. But they were divided on the racial, linguistic and the most prominently on political basis. They were divided into two major poles, i.e., Iran as a Shi'a state and Saudi Arabia as Sunni state. Looking into the history, it can be said that the rivalry

between both states is not new, but it is traditional. The Persian Gulf district, considered under an inactive partisan separation was energized by a show of Iraq-Iran contention; each power adjusted the other. The defeat of Saddam Hussein, by the US intrusion of Iraq, presented another section in the local issues, Saudi Arabia, and Iran as the twin mainstays of the local power arrangement. Notwithstanding endeavours by each party to work on reciprocal relations and extend participation, Iran-Saudi relations have been loaded with discontinuous logical conflicts (Heydarian, 2011).

There are many researchers who have discuss this subject and recently many scholars are keenly interested to explore the reasons and factors behind the recent political unrest in Middle East. The relations between Saudi Arab and Iran are the determinant of the politics of Middle East. Their relations became intensified after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Both states have never confronted militarily but they divided the whole region based on political ideology. Many scholars call this rivalry a “Cold War.” Both states always tried to compete in global energy market and for the political influence in the Persian Gulf and Levant (Shadid, 2009; Grumet, 2015). The religious and ideological rift along with other factors such as sectarianism, nationalism, revolutionary ideology, competition over regional hegemony, oil prices towards US and military presence in the gulf encircle a competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran which influences their foreign policies as well as their bilateral relations.

Henner Furtig explained the traditional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in his book *Iran Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*. Furtig concludes that the Iranian behaviour in future will depend on the actions of western states. Iran-US is the main factor which will determine the future policies of Iran (Furtig, 2006). Peter Calvocoressi explained the historical events of Gulf in ‘World politics 1945-2000’ and pointed out the involvement of superpowers like US-USSR in this region. He said that when Nasser died in 1970 the policies of the Middle East (Iran excluded) were dominated by a bipolar pattern (Doran, 2011). The Arab oil exporters gave a starting demonstration of the efficiency of economic sanctions. Therefore, the US factor cannot be ignored in the politics of Middle East which is always considered as the central place of world’s politics (Calvocoressi, 2001).

The Saudi Arab and Iran rivalry is complex in nature. The conduct of each state in the locale is established considering both the global circumstance and its own status as a state. Saudi Arabia is upset to keep up with the state of affairs while Iran is subject to the local associations. As an enemy of business-as-usual power for a really long time, Iran utilized even-minded means to construct an effective reach all through the locale. The competition has components that can be clarified through primary authenticity, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism. Various methodologies offer important knowledge into the dynamic rather than excusing them as altogether inconsistent components of each approach ought to be utilized. One can’t just classifications the competition exclusively as an overall influence situation with just one approach.

3. Research Methodology

This research encompasses in-depth qualitative analysis of the issue of regional rivalry in the Middle Eastern context. In this way, it consists of content analysis which includes both recently published materials as well as historical data that gives a background to the issue. Keeping in view the fact that the Arab Spring and subsequent events, the online and print media is great asset in exploring the inter-relationship between the Saudi Arabia and Iran. Secondary data

such as books, journal articles and newspapers were used to understand the issue and highlight the key findings along with the conclusion. Books, journal articles and newspapers are helpful in understanding the latest controversial issues and future dynamics. Data from reports and policy document is used to build a clear analysis of proposed issues.

4. Discussion and Findings

This research paper aims to explore the problem of Saudi-Iran relations and their impact on Middle East in post Arab Spring era. The detailed discussion, assessments and analysis has been discussed in the subsequent portions.

4.1. Arab Uprising and Saudi-Iran Associations

In 2011, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was rocked by a wave of uprisings which at the time were understood as the most dramatic geo-political events since the cold war, eclipsing the importance of 9/11 and 2008 economic recession (Kaye & Wehrey, 2011). The uprising began with the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor named Mohammad Bouazizi against the corrupt and incompetent government. Consequent street protests then revolutionary movements emerged throughout Tunisia then swept through Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria (Alhassen, 2012). Tunisian revolution against corruption, inequality, and lack of economic rights in the region caused to overthrow one of the most powerful regimes of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Eighteen days of mass protest deposed Hosni Mubarak, while eight hundred people were killed during uprising. Morsi was elected as the president in June 2012 but after one year he was replaced by the military and General Sisi got the power in Egypt.

Libya's uprising against Muhammad Gaddafi erupted in February 2011 when government security forces opened fire on anti-regime rally held in capitol Benghazi. Soon the protests and clashes turned into armed conflict. Finally, the people of Libya succeeded to topple the forty-two years long hegemony of Gaddafi in Libya. Yemen President Ali Abdul Saleh was the fourth Arab leader who lost his power in the result of Arab spring. For the end of Ali Abdul Saleh rule protest and rallies started in the first week of January 2011. Clashes between security forces and protesters killed nearly 2,000 people. After a series of protest President Saleh signed a pact and his 33 years old presidency ended. Nonetheless, Jordan was one of the first countries which took the effect of Arab spring. Protests and demonstrations started in Jordan in 2010. These anti-government protests were staged by the teachers and labour organisations. There was a public criticism of the government by retired officers, and most importantly boycott of opposition against the elections. As the rulers were toppled in both Tunisia and Egypt, the government in Jordan seemed to be next in line (Ryan, 2014).

In the wake of civilian war in neighbouring Syria left a clear impact on Jordan's policies. Jordan policy towards Syria was ambiguous which though, appeared as a smart choice. However, pressures of Syrian war remained with a deep impact. The turning point in Jordan's Arab Spring was that The Arab Spring's signature slogan, "al-shaab yurid isqat al-nizam" (the people want regime overthrow), remained largely absent from Jordan's protests. The protesters in Jordan focused on economic and particularly political reforms. Political pressure did not escalate as it was the case in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain (Jones, 2013). On March 24, Jordanian protesters tried to follow Egypt's Tahrir square, using the "#march24" hashtag, but they were dispersed by pro-government groups.

The Jordan's spring was nevertheless followed by political and economic concessions. A new cabinet was formed, and some political reforms also took place. Given the country's growing internal debt, and weak macroeconomic condition, Saudi Arabia was happy to be of assistance. Another reason of failure in Jordan spring was that demonstrations were organised by the prominent religious party the Muslim Brotherhood. This opposition could mobilise the people without any challenge to their respective government. Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan played the role of 'loyal opposition.' These were the reason that Jordan's regime proved to be more resilient than that of most Arab states. The challenge Jordan has been facing is still enormous. Yemen and Tunisia are important for Iran as well as their recent events provided an ideal ground for cultivation of 1979 revolution's ideology. In both state, Iran is supporting public uprising and having close relationship with oppositions.

Syria, Jordan, and Iran's policies are same as its real goal is to pursue its national interest and bilateral relations. Syria and Jordan are important countries having a crucial role in regional politics, towards Hamas and Hezbollah and Israel-Arab peace talks (Presse, 2010). Although, Iran is favouring Arab spring and public uprising against their respective states but upheavals in Syria is a tremendous concern of Iran. Due to Jordan strategic role in regional security and its importance in Arab world's politics Iran views the uprising very carefully in Jordan. Therefore, Iran's priority is to maintain its bilateral relations with Jordan. For example, regardless of existing home-grown resistance and calls to drop a generally stretched out greeting to King Abdullah to visit Iran, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad communicated that this visit is as yet on the public authority's plan (Amiri et al, 2011). Syria is a closest ally of Iran which is connecting it to Levant strategically. Therefore, Iran has a different stance towards Syria, and it continuously reacted to stress the role of foreign powers i.e., Saudi Arabia, US, and Israel. The wave of Arab uprising affected Syria later but demonstrations against President Basharul Assad turned into a brutal and sectarian conflict. An estimated 250,000 people have been killed due to the turmoil in Syria and more than 11 million have been forced to displace since 2011 (Muir, 2003).

Iran and Syria have good relations over three decades, especially since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. After Iranian Revolution, and Iran Iraq war, Syria was one of only two Arab states that provided diplomatic support to Iran, the other was Libya (Seele, 1988: 351-54). Syrian state system differs clearly from Islamic Republic of Iran, but both are enjoying good relations for long time. There are many reasons for these strong ties. One important and noticeable factor was Iran's willingness to provide support for Syria in any future confrontation with Israel while another reason is their confrontation with US. During the George W. Bush era, Iran and Syria were pushed closer towards each other. US even declared Iran an axis of Evil. However, Syrian feared that if resistance in Iraq could be quickly pacified and turned over to a pro-Western government, US may attack Syria (The Daily Star, 2011). Though, the Syrian concern about US was not based on concrete reasons but it revealed the relationship between US and Syria. During Obama regime, US-Syrian relations improved slightly but they remained poor due to Syrian non stopping support to Hamas and Hezbollah (BBC News, 2010). These "improving relations" once again soured because of US sympathy for the rebels who were engaged in the armed struggle against Basharul Assad's regime.

The Syrians and Iranians along with Hamas and Hezbollah have called themselves, the axis of resistance. This refers to the shared objective of these countries to confront Israel. The Iranians believe themselves to be the major and natural leaders of this coalition, while Syria also wants to be a major partner in this coalition. For Syria it has been difficult to achieve because Iran is

a major contributor to Syrian military. Tehran has also assured Syria to help in future Israeli attacks against Syria. At a press conference in Damascus, Iranian Vice President Mohammad Irda Rahimi stated that Iran would be an ally of Syria if Israel attacked Syria (Presse, 2010). Damascus, by contrast, has less to offer to Tehran in return. However, Iran logistic support to Syria is the important reason which allows Iran to support Hezbollah in Lebanon (Hodeib, & Lakiss, 2011). Israel, on the other hand, appears divided in their analysis of the consequences of Syrian unrest for Israel. Syria set up good relations with Turkey prior to the Arab Spring, but these ties collapsed as Turkey became increasingly critical of escalating Syrian repression in 2011 (Torchia, 2011). Syrian-Iran relations are interesting in the sense that there are some instances where Syria sided with Saudi Arabia as opposed to Iran. For example, as mentioned earlier, Saudi Arabia and Iran maintained deeply opposing policies on Yemen's Houthi rebellion, but Syria has sided with Saudi Arabia. The Syrians further supported the Saudi military intervention in Bahrain in March 2011 especially opposed to Iran's view of intervening in Bahrain by Saudi Arabia (Morgan, 2011).

4.2. Saudi Iranian Rivalry and Unrest in Iraq

Iraq is the centre of attention for both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both are sensitive about the emergence of a new unreceptive government in Iraq. It is pertinent to mention that after the Saddam regime, this problem has emerged as more challenging for Saudi Arabia than Iran. Iran has, in post Saddam scenario, a natural advantage to improve relation with Baghdad because of post-Saddam Shi'ite dominated governments. The same situation is not very favourable for Saudi Arabia as it has strained relations with many Iraqi leaders which include Prime Minister Haider-al-Ebadi (Wehrey, Karasik, Nader, Ghez, & Hansell, 2009). Iraq is also in an effort to invite and work with international oil companies in order to rebuild its oil facilities in a way that may allow it to be a leading oil exporter (Hill, 2011). This might have the potential to weaken Saudi Arabia's position as a regional and international player of the world's oil market. Moreover, the Saudis have concern that any Shi'ite establishment in Iraq could create a conducive environment against Saudi Arabia's interests which can result diplomatic propaganda. Even a temporary alliance of Iran and Iraq could potentially harm Saudi interests in the Middle East.

Iran is also aware that a pro Saudi Arab government in Iraq can do more damage to Iran than a pro Iran government in Iraq can do to Saudi Arabia. The history of the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted for eight years, is a sad and hurting incident. As a result, thousands of people were killed on both sides and many people were disabled, and for the Iranian society, the war is difficult to forget (Muir, 2013). As the history narrates, when the war entered its final phases and Iran saw that offensive operation was no longer possible then Iran agreed to a cease-fire. At the end of the war, Iraq was able to control disputed territory, and the map of the border with Iran had gone into Iraq's interests (Freedman & Karsh, 1993: 96). Therefore, the overall war ended by giving more favour to Iraq than Iran.

When Iraq was defeated in Desert Storm Operation conducted by US, Iran monitored the situation in Iraq very closely. While Iran took Saddam defeat with delight, at the same time, it was troubling to see US forces slicing through Iraqi military forces. These were the same forces that Iranians were unable to defeat in their fight. In this condition, with aging and outdated weapons and war equipment, the Iranians would not wish to be at war with an Iraq whose military is now equipped with Western technology (Tilghman, 2011). Iran has no doubt spent huge sums on its missile forces and nuclear enrichment program; it has neglected its

conventional forces, and therefore, is obsolete by Western standards (Cordesman & Kleiber, 2007). Even if Iran decides to modernise its conventional equipment, this would be difficult because of sanctions imposed by the UN and western governments (Riedel, 2010: 372). The only country that is helping Iran and thus violating this embargo is North Korea. But North Korea itself is facing sanctions so it cannot be of much help to Iran as a major military option for modernising conventional arms (Washington Post, 2011). Tehran is still significant character to gain influence in Iraq, due to rapid rise of US military power and influence on borders of Afghanistan and Iraq. These efforts consist of diplomacy savings, secret action, and promoting Iranian clients within the Iraqi political system which also includes the leadership of armed militias. This approach has been successful to an extent and Iran has been able to become a major power in Iraqi politics.

5. Conclusion

The post of Arab uprisings effects will be felt throughout the Middle East, irrespective of the nature of government, may it be a monarchy or countries who have already undergone political change like Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. Iran saw the upheavals in Arab states as an opportunity to cultivate its revolutionary ideology in Arab but uprising in Syrian has been one of the great concerns for Iran. Iran wants to save Bashar-ul-Assad regime, because, if it falls, Iran would be almost friendless throughout the Middle East. On the other hand, Iran wants to achieve its goals and interests in Persian Gulf. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) blamed Iran several times for meddling in the affairs of its member states which Iran denied. Therefore, Iran who wants to spread its influence throughout the Middle East needs a comprehensive and defined policy to save its bilateral relation with neighbouring states especially in Persian Gulf. US as foreign actor played a significant role in the perception of mutual threat among Iran and Saudi Arabia. In case of Sunni-Shiite conflict, US involvement in Iraq has developed competition among them. Both consider each other as responsible for the involvement of the US scrutiny into their internal affairs.

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