

The Security Dilemma in Saudi-Iranian Relations

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Introduction

The concept of security dilemma emerged as early as the 1950s with the writings of John Herz, Herbert Butterfield, and Robert Jervis. It is one of the very important concepts in the field of international relations because it can explain conflict and war. Herz's article "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma" is the first major work in the concept of security dilemma. Herz defines the concept of security dilemma as "politically active groups and individuals are concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, or annihilated by other groups and individuals. Because they strive to attain security from such attack, and yet can never feel entirely secure in a world of competing units, they are driven toward acquiring more and more power for themselves, in order to escape the impact of the superior power of others".² Butterfield explains the security dilemma in his book *History and Human Relations* by outlining that "the greatest war in history can be produced without the intervention of any great criminals who might be out to do deliberate harm in the world. It could be produced between two powers, both of which were desperately anxious to avoid a conflict of any sort".³ Jervis contributed to this concept in his important article "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma". Jervis argues that the security dilemma exists when "many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others".⁴

Herz, Butterfield, and Jervis have laid the groundwork for scholars to employ this concept to many of the most important questions of international relations including major events such as World War I and World War II. This paper seeks to be part of such literatures. It attempts to use the concept of security dilemma to explain the current Saudi-Iranian relations. It argues that the relationship between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran has been driven by the existence of a security dilemma. A security dilemma exists in the two states relations as both of them are seeking policies of increasing their relative gains in order to make them secure; but this, in reality, is making a situation in which both states are less secure. The escalating tensions and rivalry between the two regional powers are threatening the balance of power and raising the chance of war between the two states. The paper uses the constructivist interpretation as the source of tension between the two states that leads to the situation of a security dilemma.

Understanding Security Dilemma

In an international system characterized by the absence of a higher authority to provide protection and guarantee order, each state has no choice but to work to enhance its own power.

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² John Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma" in *World Politics*, 2(2) (1950): 157-180.

³ Herbert Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins, 1951), 19-22.

⁴ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma" in *World Politics*, 30(2) (1978): 169.

This kind of international environment will, according to the concept of security dilemma, ignite suspicion, competition, arms races, and eventually war. According to Herz and Jervis, the ultimate source of security dilemma is the anarchical international system; while to Butterfield the source of the dilemma is derived from the "universal sin of humanity".⁵ The three major writers of the security dilemma agree that the security dilemma is about states' fear of each other's intentions; and it is a fundamental cause of conflicts among states. By accumulating more power (including unnecessary offensive and defensive capabilities) to match the perceived power of others, states do not escape from the security dilemma; instead they unintentionally move toward facing each others, producing tragic results - that is, war. Generally, the security dilemma is a situation in an anarchical international system in which "the search for security on the part of state A leads to insecurity for state B which therefore takes steps to increase its security leading in its turn to increase insecurity for state A".⁶In short, anarchy creates uncertainty; uncertainty develops fears; fears lead to power competition; power competition produces a security dilemma; and the activated security dilemma causes conflicts and wars.⁷Therefore, there is a strong correlation between anarchism and states conflicts.

The security dilemma has been expounded by number of authors. They have presented variety of different interpretations to the concept of security dilemma. Jack Snyder introduced structural security dilemma, perceptual security dilemma, and imperialist security dilemma.⁸Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler talked about deliberated security dilemma and inadvertent security dilemma;⁹ Paul Roe outlined tight security dilemma, regular security dilemma, and loose security dilemma;¹⁰ and Allan Collins presented system-induced security dilemma and state-induced security dilemma.¹¹

Even though many of the literatures on the concept emphasize the importance of lack of intention on behalf of each state to cause harm to one another, security dilemma may not necessary be triggered unintentionally. Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler distinguish between the intentionally and unintentionally types of security dilemma. They identified that the security dilemma could be caused by inadvertent actions and deliberate action.¹² In the latter states act aggressively in order to change the status quo, so they hold intention to harm other. It is an offensive type of security dilemma, in which it encourages states to embark upon expansionist policy to take neighboring territory in order to make them safe, as what Adolf Hitler and imperial Japan did before World War II, and to challenge the current order and revise it.

Although the term security dilemma emerges as part of the realist approach of the study of international relations, it is not limited to it. Alexander Wendt has used it in his constructivist writings. To him anarchy is not the core cause of the security dilemma. He writes "we do not begin our relationship with the aliens in a security dilemma; security dilemmas are not given by anarchy or nature". Anarchy, according to Wendt, is constructed by states.¹³ Instead, it is the perceptions that states gain from their interactions that will determine if the security dilemma occurs.¹⁴ Constructivism emphasizes the role of shared ideas and norms in shaping states behaviors.¹⁵ The beliefs that states hold about each other determine their relationship, whether they opt for balancing, cooperation, or war.¹⁶

⁵ Shiping Tang, "The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis" in *Security Studies*, 18(3) (2009).

⁶ John Baylis and N. J. Rengger, "Introduction" in John Baylis and N. J. Rengger (Ed.), *Dilemmas of World Politics: International Issues in a Changing World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 9.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jack Snyder, "Perceptions of the Security Dilemma in 1914" in Jack Snyder, Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebo, Janice Stein, and Patrick M. Morgan (Ed), *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 153-179.

⁹ Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, "The Security Dilemmas" in John Baylis and N.J. Rengger(Ed.), *Dilemmas of World Politics: International Issues in a ChangingWorld*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 29-60.

¹⁰ Paul Roe, "Actors' Responsibility in "Tight", "Regular" or "Loose" Security Dilemma" in *Security Dialogue*, 32(1) (2001): 103-116.

¹¹ Allan Collins, "State-induced Security Dilemma: Maintaining the Tragedy" in *Cooperation and Conflict*, 39(1) (2004): 27-44.

¹² Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, "The Security Dilemmas", p. 31.

¹³ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of it: the Social Construction of Power Politics" in *International Organization*, 46(2) (1992):407.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Christine Agius, "Social Constructivism" in Allan Collins (Ed), *Contemporary Security Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 88.

¹⁶ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

To constructivism, security is a social construction. It means preserving group's core values.¹⁷ States designate each other as friend or enemy on the basis of conception of identity - the perception of who they are.¹⁸ Human relations, according to constructivism, are social and we create the world we live in and it influences us as well.¹⁹ Thus, constructivism differs from realism on the nature of security dilemma; to them security dilemma is a product of states perceptions of their own identities than a given situation marked by the anarchical international system as neorealism would argue.

The Constructivist Explanation of Saudi-Iranian Security Dilemma

Neorealists would argue that the anarchical nature of the international system makes state to reach security dilemma, Constructivists would say that states' identity leads to the situation of security dilemma. In defining the state, Jens Bartelson argues that state identity is conditioned by the absence of authority and community in the international sphere.²⁰ It means that the absence of international values is important to the existence of states identity. If there were to be a set of universal values that all states recognized, then states identity would be of no significance between states. This gives importance to the existence of identities among states. However, it creates different identities, which in turn brings tensions between the rival identities, which signals the emergence of security dilemma.

In the case of the security dilemma between Saudi Arabia and Iran constructivist argument about the rise of the dilemma is very important. It is not only the lack of an ordering principle that brings the security dilemma in Saudi-Iranian relations into existence, but also the ideas and identity that are held by both states matter in explaining their case. Identity tells you and others who you are, and tells you who others are. Thus, the identity of a state implies its preferences and consequent actions.²¹ Different approaches of international relations can explain the nature of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but in our opinion constructivism offers greater insight and flexibility in analyzing this relationship. Therefore, constructivist approach is used as the basis for our argument in this paper. The existence of norms between states of the same identity is important to constructivism. Norms is the shared expectations about appropriate behavior by states with a particular identity.²² It exemplify why state like Saudi Arabia is not afraid of Pakistan nuclear military capability, but feels worry toward Iran acquiring nuclear capability. This is because Saudi Arabia considers Iran as a hostile state with different identity, but Pakistan is a state in which it shares identity with it.

State identity is the shared values, believes, and cultures held in common by people in certain state or states; and, according to constructivism, it dictates states behavior.²³ State identity also refers the state's perception of what role it should play and what status it should enjoy in international relations.²⁴ Identity has been the predominant factor in determining both Saudi Arabia and Iran view of each other since the early 1980s. The most important element of both Saudi and Iran identities is religion. Religion is the source of legitimacy for both the ruling family in Saudi Arabia and the Ayatollahs regime in Iran. Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, and to its holy city of Mecca where billion faithful turn five times a day for their prayers. Wahhabism has been the official form of Islam in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism has its origin in the teaching of Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a religious leader born in 1702 and died in 1791. His teaching calls for the strict interpretation of the *Quran* and the *Hadith* (the collected sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) and hold tightly to the ideal of *Tawhid*, the oneness of God. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab sought partnership with Muhammad ibn Saud, the emir of Dariya in Saudi Arabia. The partnership was of a mutual gain, linking religion with power, and was the basis for the first (1744-1818), the second (1824-1891), and the third (1932-) Saudi state.²⁵

¹⁷ Matt McDonald, "Constructivism" in Paul William (Ed), *Security Studies an Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), 65.

¹⁸ Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory" in *International Security*, 23(1) (1998).

¹⁹ Christine Agius, "Social Constructivism", 88.

²⁰ Jens Bartelson, *The Critique of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 12.

²¹ Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory", 175.

²² Matt McDonald, "Constructivism", 65.

²³ Christine Agius, "Social Constructivism", 91-93.

²⁴ Masahiro Matsumura, *The Japanese State Identity As A Grand Strategic Imperative* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2008), 3.

²⁵ Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Wahhabism is so active in Saudi Arabia; and particularly after the assault on the Grand Mosque in 1979 by Juhayman al Otaibi, a religious activist who protested against the Saudi monarchy, the relationship between the house of Saud and the Wahhabism has been enhanced, sending direct message to everyone that the house of Saud is still dedicated to the ideals of Wahhabism. With that the Ulama (Wahhabi religious scholars) began a crackdown on anything deemed antithetical to Wahhabi belief including its view of Shia Muslims of Saudi Arabia.

For Iran, Shia branch of Islam is the official religion; however this form of Islam has been also influenced by the thought of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution. Khomeini has not only succeeded in changing Iran from absolute monarchy to Islamic republic, but also in weaving his revolutionary religious message into Iran's national identity.²⁶ Khomeini redefined Iranian state identity from being dominated by elements of Iranian national identity to a new identity that is dominated by the vision of Iran Shia belief. Thus, the sense of unity among the Iranians is no longer identified only by the share of common historical experience, ethnic backgrounds, cultural heritages, and languages, but also by the sense of the special Shia identity of Iran. Some argued that the continuing emphasis of Iran on its Shia identity is meant to distinguish itself from the rest of the Islamic world and retain its particular identity and institutions in Islam.²⁷ This is evident in Iran refusal to adopt Arabic language and culture as the guidance to its Islamic belief since its conversion to Islam in the Seventh century.²⁸

Saudi Arabia's View of Iran

The Islamic revolution in Iran has changed the Saudi view of Iran dramatically. After perceiving Iran as a partner sharing mutual security concerns in keeping regional status quo in face of the rise of pan-Arab platform and Soviet design on the region, Saudi Arabia began to regard Iran as ideological and geopolitical revisionist rival.²⁹ Every Saudi ruler has pushed a policy of making Wahhabi line of Islam central to his reign.³⁰ Wahhabi establishment has for long time seen the Shia sect as its enemy. It considers Shia as infidels.³¹ It even demanded, at certain stage, the ruler of the kingdom to ensure the conversion of all Shias in Saudi Arabia to Wahhabism.³² Therefore, the emergence of Shia Islam as the political force in a central state in the region like Iran is considered as threat to Saudi Arabia. The kingdom felt the danger by Khomeini's intention to export Iran model of Islam to the neighboring states, and rhetoric to protect the rights of Shia minorities in the region including in Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi leadership recognizes how important Wahhabism in keeping the kingdom intact. So, it cannot challenge the Wahhabi establishment in favor of the Shia in the country. At the same time, the Saudi leadership fears that an empowerment of the Shia in the kingdom Eastern Province could encourage them to try to secede with the help of Iran, and therefore, deprive the country of its oil wealth.³³ The Islamic revolution in Iran is also viewed as a contest to Saudi Arabia's right to speak in the name of Islam and represent the Muslim world.³⁴ Therefore, Saudi Arabia began adopting policies aimed at challenging the Iranian efforts to achieve its goal of exporting its ideology. Externally, it has involved in a proxy wars in different parts of the region by sponsoring a number of different warring factions and conflicting parties. Internally, it has worked to enhance its control of its eastern region, preventing its Shias from conducting their religious activities freely or protesting against the state. Saudi school textbooks teach Wahhabi doctrines and omit reference to Shia religious belief or events.³⁵ They refer to them as *Rafida* (rejectionists), and blame them for introducing new beliefs (*Bida*) into Islam that did not exist during the Prophet's time.³⁶

²⁶ Ray Takey, *Guardians of the Revolution, Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12.

²⁷ Academic Press, *Encyclopedia of Nationalism*, Volume 2 (San Diego: Academic Press, 2001), 239.

²⁸ Vali Nasr, "Iran" in Jeffrey Kopstein and Mark Lichbach (Ed.), *Comparative Politics: Interests, Identities, and Institutions in a Changing Global Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 399.

²⁹ Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran, Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 3.

³⁰ Joseph Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia" in *Middle Eastern Studies*, 34(3)(1998): 39.

³¹ David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 170.

³² Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 8.

³³ *Ibid.*, 10. The Eastern Province is the largest province in Saudi Arabia and the home of most of Saudi Arabia's oil production. It also controls the Saudi entire Gulf coast.

³⁴ Bahgat Korany, "Defending the Faith amid Change: The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia" in Bahgat Korany and Ali Dessouki (Ed.) *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Change of Change*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 313.

³⁵ David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, 169.

³⁶ Michaela Prokop, "The War of Ideas: Education in Saudi Arabia" in Gred Nonneman and Paul Aarts (Ed.), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 68.

The Saudis even started to associate the Shias of the region with Iran, and linked every Shia move to demand more rights as a conspiracy inspired by Iran against the Sunni regimes.

Iran's view of Saudi Arabia

The Islamic revolution has profoundly transformed Iran state identity, including its foreign relations. Iran is no longer sees itself as a status quo state, but a force to bring revolutionary changes to the world that it lives in, particularly in its region. Iran's view of its neighbors has historically been shaped by its presumption of a sense of superiority.³⁷ Islam Shia identity came to add a new dimension to that superiority by distinguishing itself from the main stream Islam. The revolutionary thinking of the Islamic Republic of Iran divides the world into two blocs, the oppressors and the oppressed, and Iran is the vanguard state leading the oppressed toward freedom and justice.³⁸ The United States and the Soviet Union were the leaders of the oppressor bloc. Iran's foreign policy would be an extension of this revolutionary vision. The Iraqi attack on Iran in September 1980 was considered by this view as the oppressor response to Iran and its new role. The Saudi support to Iraq was viewed as part of this stance; and the Saudis were described as "lackeys" and "puppets" for the US imperialist power.³⁹

This did not prevent Iran from applying its worldview. Therefore, Khomeini called on peoples to rise up in revolutionary movements by following the Iranian example, and overthrow their regimes, including the Shia people in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁰ He employed religion to justify Iran expansionist effort in order to be the epicenter to a new Islamic order,⁴¹ challenging, thus, Saudi Arabia. This message appeared to have given the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia coverage to challenge the Saudi Monarchy and make demands for changes including a fairer distribution of wealth and reduce ties with the United States.⁴² It also used the annual pilgrimage to Mecca as a means of spreading the revolution.⁴³ Khomeini regarded Al Saud as "traitor" and "corrupted and unworthy to be the guardian of Mecca and Medina".⁴⁴ This made Iran speed up its efforts to export its vision of Islam throughout the Muslim World, challenging therefore the Saudi vision of Islam.

Tension and Rivalry in Saudi-Iranian Relations

Saudi Arabia and Iran's aspirations for leadership over the Islamic world have led to the emergence of competition between the two states on ideological base. The bilateral tension between the two states has caused Sunni-Shia divide in the Middle East. Both countries try to export its religious values to the outside in order to contain the other scope of gains. This stems from the belief that the zero-sum game is the basis for each state's view of the other. Each state sees the expansion of regional influence by the other as a net loss for itself. As a result, both adopted asymmetric policy strategies in dealing with each other. Iran backs Shia minorities, militant non-state actors, and hostile regimes to Saudi Arabia; while Saudi Arabia uses its wealth and its relations the United States to contain Iranian efforts throughout the Middle East. Tension and rivalry have been disseminating throughout the region as both states wanted to solidify their positions within the region. Saudi Arabia and Iran have sponsored a number of different warring factions and conflicting parties in order to consolidate or expand their zones of influence in the Middle East. The following are some of the flashpoints of such tension and rivalry between the two states.

Iraq

The US led invasion of Iraq in 2003 that toppled Saddam Hussein regime created a tremendous shift in the power balance in the Middle East.

³⁷ Ray Takey, *Guardians of the Revolution, Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs*, 2.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Richard Cottam, "U.S. Policy in the Middle East" in Hooshang Amirahmadi (Ed.), *The United States and the Middle East, A Search for New Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 49.

⁴⁰ Maryam Panah, *The Islamic Republic and the World, Global Dimensions of the Iranian Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 69.

⁴¹ Ray Takey, *Guardians of the Revolution, Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs*, 18.

⁴² Maryam Panah, *The Islamic Republic and the World, Global Dimensions of the Iranian Revolution*, 83.

⁴³ Stephen Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 260.

⁴⁴ Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran, Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, 175-177.

It shifted the traditional balance of power away from the domination by Arab states to a new environment dominated by non-Arab states.⁴⁵ Iran has been not only one of the major beneficiaries of such shift in the region, but also the main beneficiary of the change in Iraq. Iran enhanced its role in Iraq where most of the Shia political factions had long standing ties with it before the war. It also felt relieved by the dismissal of Saddam regime, which waged aggressive eight-year war against Iran. With the Iraq buffer removed, Iran become able to maneuver in the Middle East beyond supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon. The American invasion of Iraq and the subsequent result led to the end of a decade of détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia, during the presidencies of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami.⁴⁶ Riyadh was willing to accept Shia controlled government in Iraq but free of Iran influence. This however did not happen as Iran strengthened its influence there. Saudi Arabia considered that the United States is handing Iraq to Iran on a silver platter. The former Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal said that his country and the United States fought a war together “to keep Iran out of Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait,” but “now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason”.⁴⁷ This Saudi frustration with Iran meddling in Iraq affairs made Riyadh uneasy in its relations with Iraqi governments particularly the government of former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. Al-Maliki accused Riyadh of being unfriendly and seeking to destabilize Iraq by supporting insurgent groups and providing them with financial support.⁴⁸ This includes the unfounded claim that Riyadh is financing the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) inside Iraq. It can be said that the rise of Sunnis of Iraq is welcomed by Saudi Arabia, which believes that Iraqi Sunnis are marginalized and their rise can be an opposing force against Iran presence in Iraq, but the Saudi leadership considers ISIS a threat to the kingdom.⁴⁹

Bahrain

Bahrain has long been a very important spot in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The nature of this rivalry was changed as a result of the change in Iranian politics. Power politics was the main dominant determinant in this rivalry during the Shah's time, and ideology became the main factor affecting the modern political landscape of the relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia. To both states Bahrain is essential in their rivalry. Bahrain's importance to Saudi Arabia stems from the island geographical location and large Shia population. It is only less than twenty kilometers away from Saudi' Shia dominated Eastern Province. Thus, Riyadh concerns that political empowerment of Shia in Bahrain will: 1) likewise be demanded by Saudi Shia community, and 2) increase Iranian involvement in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.⁵⁰ To Tehran, Bahrain suits very well its ideological call to support the oppressed people. With Shia Muslims is the majority in Bahrain Iran could take advantage of their hard feelings towards their Sunni ruling regime, and support regime change along the lines of its revolution. Despite Iran recognition of Bahrain as a sovereign state, some voices in Iran still refer to Bahrain as the fourteenth province of Iran, a reference to the Safavid Persian Empire's conquest of the island in early seventeenth century.⁵¹

Saudi Arabia's fear of Iran revolutionary involvement in Bahrain makes it works to strengthen ties with the ruling regime of Al Khalifa. The stability of the Bahraini ruling family has become essential to Riyadh in order to contain Iran. Not only political and economic supports are used to achieve this goal but also military support. Saudi forces along with assistance from some other Gulf state militaries entered Bahrain on March 14, 2011. The goal was to support Al Khalifa regime from the consequences of the so-called Arab Spring, which led to the toppling of some of the strongest Arab regimes including Zin El Abidine Bin Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. A two-month uprising in Bahrain threatens the Al Khalifa two-hundred-year old dynasty.

⁴⁵ Frederic Wehrey, Dalia Kaye, Jessica Watkins, Jeffrey Martini and Robert Guffey, *The Iraq Effect: The Middle East After The Iraq War* (Santa Monica: Rand, 2010), 19.

⁴⁶ Paul Aarts and Joris Van Duijne, “Saudi Arabia After the U.S.-Iranian Détente: Left in the Lurch?” in *Middle East Policy*, 26(3) (2009): 67-78.

⁴⁷ Stratford Global Intelligence, “Saudi Arabia: Feeling the Iranian Pinch in Iraq”, (September 2005), <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/saudi-arabia-feeling-iranian-pinch-iraq>.

⁴⁸ BBC, “PM Maliki Says Saudi Arabia and Qatar ‘destabilize’ Iraq”, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26501610> (accessed: March 8, 2014).

⁴⁹ Fahad Nazer, “Saudi Arabia Threatened by ISIS Advance in Iraq” in *Al Monitor*, 2014. www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/saudi-arabia-sunni-isis-threat-iraq-shiite-maliki-setbacks.html#.

⁵⁰ Simon Mabon, “The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry” in *Middle East Policy*, 19(2) (2012): 84-97.

⁵¹ Kevin Down, “A Theoretical Analysis of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain” in *Journal of Politics & International Studies*, 8(winter) (2012-2013).

The Saudi message was clear: Bahrain is a red line. Saudi Monarch King Abdulla bin Abdulaziz reaffirmed its support to Al Khalifa by telling U.S. President Barack Obama following the Saudi military intervention that Saudi Arabia would never allow Shia rule Bahrain.⁵²

Syria

A proxy war has already emerged in Syria between Iran and Saudi Arabia right after the eruption of popular protests against Bashar al-Assad regime. Syria has been Iran most important Arab ally for over thirty-five years. Both countries formed a strong alliance right after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Despite their different ideologies, they succeeded in forming a strategic interest based alliance, or as described by Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch an "anti-imperialist front".⁵³ Their main goal was to neutralize Iraqi, Israeli, and American offensive capabilities in the region.⁵⁴ The two states cooperated closely in many occasions including during the Iraq-Iran war, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the American occupation of Iraq.

Saudi Arabia and Syria experienced troubled relations as they vied for influence in the Arab world. They seem to differ in almost every major policy issue in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is an ally to the United States, while Syria is an ally to the Soviet Union and today Russia. Saudi Arabia is an Islamic State ruled by Sunnis, while Syria is a secular, socialist, Arab nationalist state governed by Alawis. But no other reason more important to Saudi Arabia than Syrian alliance with Iran. It is the main source of friction between the two countries. Saudi Arabia is seeking to establish a united Arab front against Iran, while Syria is engaging in alliance with the Islamic regime in Iran.⁵⁵ Riyadh attempted to downgrade the Syrian-Iranian alliance and to break up the so-called "Axis of Resistance";⁵⁶ but its efforts were not successful.⁵⁷

Iran and Syria's cooperation reaches its zenith after the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring. The event caught Tehran off guard and puts it in an awkward position. Tehran had to choose between supporting Bashar al-Assad regime or the protesters. Bearing in mind that Iran regarded that the eruption of the Arab Spring would be in favor of Iran vision of establishing a new regional order without the domination of the West.⁵⁸ Un-reluctantly, Iran chose to throw its support fully behind its ally, the Assad regime, and provided it with all kinds of help, including military supports of advising, training, intelligence, and weapons.⁵⁹ As a result, Iran relations with Saudi Arabia have deteriorated further since the latter had declared its support for the Syrian rebels. Iran and Saudi Arabia view the situation in Syria as a zero-sum-game. Iran felt compelled to stand by the Assad regime in order to ensure the continuity of its influence and presence in the Levant, particularly to keep access to Iranian proxies; while Saudi Arabia worked to exert pressure to remove Assad regime in order to cause a major setback for Iran.

Lebanon

The Lebanon issue is very much related to the Syrian issue. In Lebanon both Saudi Arabia and Iran are the main external players influencing its politics. Despite that Lebanon is not a traditional sphere of influence of either state, it has become part of the rivalry and the proxy war between the two countries. Lebanon is divided into pro-Saudi and pro-Iranian factions.

⁵² Helene Cooper and Mark Landler, "Interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran Collide with the U.S. in the Middle" in *New York Times*, (March 17, 2011), <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/18/world/18diplomacy.html>.

⁵³ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London: Routledge, 1997), 90.

⁵⁴ Jubin Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment" in *Ortadoğu Etutleri*, 4(2) (2013): 35.

⁵⁵ Sonoko Sunayama, *Syria and Saudi Arabia: Collaboration and Conflicts in the Oil Era* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 61-66.

⁵⁶ It is an anti-Israel and anti-western alliance between Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas; and it is led by Iran.

⁵⁷ Benedetta Berti and Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Toward a New Chapter?" in *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 8(3) (2014): 25-34.

⁵⁸ Ali Parchami, "The Arab Spring: The View from Tehran" in *Contemporary Politics*, 18(1) (2012): 36.

⁵⁹ Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer, "Iranian Strategy in Syria", Institute for the study of war, 2013, www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria.pdf.

Saudi Arabia supports Sunnis group led by Saad al-Hariri, while Iran supports Shia group led by Hezbollah.⁶⁰Iran's main interest in Lebanon is to export the idea of its Islamic revolution. Lebanon is an ideal place for Iran to achieve this goal because of its Shia population that can be mobilized by Tehran. Iran founded and supported Hezbollah in Lebanon as a radical militant organization in order to deter Israel from operating against Iran, and to keep itself involved in the internal politics of the country.⁶¹

Saudi Arabia provides support to Lebanon Sunni group and to Lebanon military establishment mainly to counter Hezbollah.⁶² The success of the Hezbollah story in Lebanon troubles the Saudis. They fear that it might encourage creating other similar non-state Shia entities elsewhere in the Middle East. Iran and Saudi Arabia proxy war in Syria eye the situation in Lebanon. Iran wants to make sure that Syria remains its crucial access in allowing Iranian weapons to reach Hezbollah, while Saudi Arabia wants to cut off the line of support to Hezbollah from Iran through Syria.

Yemen

Yemen has always been within the Saudi sphere of influence. Riyadh considers Yemen as a vital interest. No one dares to challenge this and get away with it easily. Riyadh wants Yemen to remain a benign neighbor, which it should not become a threat. Throughout its relations with Yemen, Riyadh enforced different policies to achieve this goal. Houthis recent takeover of large portions of Yemen's territory challenged Riyadh main interest there. Saudi Arabia's fear stems from the Houthis religious affiliation. Houthis are belong to a branch of Shia Islam; therefore, they are viewed as Iranian proxy by the Saudis. The Saudis believe that Houthis ascent in Yemen is a step for Iran's regional agenda. Thus, Riyadh led a military coalition against the Houthi forces in order to prevent them from controlling the country. The military attack was aimed at Iranian possible influence and presence in Yemen once Houthis control the country. Yemen is an important state as it controls the Red Sea chokepoint of Bab-el-Mandeb. Whoever control it will enhance its regional power to control oil and other passage to and from the region. Yemen is also a neighboring country to Saudi Arabia, sharing 1,800-kilometer borderline. Thus, whoever controls Yemen could easily threaten Saudi Arabia directly. This is why Yemen is so important in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The Nature of Saudi-Iranian Security Dilemma

The ideological tensions and rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in many places in the Middle East are creating a situation of a security dilemma in the two country relations. The anarchical nature of the international system is making uncertainty in the Middle East; uncertainty is developing fears among the states of the region; fear is leading to power competition and rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two main ideological powerhouses of the region; power competition is leading to a situation of a security dilemma in the relations between the two states. Each state thinks that by increasing its relative power it will be more secure. But the fact is that this action compels the other state to take countermeasures to enhance its own security. This situation of search for security is actually making the two states less secure. As Iran's capabilities and power continue to grow, Saudi Arabia will be nervous about what this portends for both regional security and its own primacy in the Muslim world. And as long as Saudi Arabia remains hostile to Iranian line of Islam Iran will become increasingly anxious about how much Saudi Arabia will invest in containing Iran. Robert Jervis' features of a security dilemma can explain the situation in Saudi-Iranian relation. Jervis indicated that state leaders' intensions are not stable, as they would seek intervention in other states' domestic affairs in order to protect their own territory; they will work to enhance their country military capabilities; the more the range of interests perceived as requiring protection, the more likely they clash with the interest of others.⁶³This is exactly what is happening in Saudi-Iranian relations. While Saudi Arabia considers itself a leader of the Sunni, Iran thinks of itself as the protector of Shia. This irreconcilable ideological difference creates lack of trust in each state leadership, and makes both view each other less benign and more threatening.

⁶⁰ Mohamad Bazzi, "Lebanon and the Start of Iran and Saudi Arabia's Proxy War" in *The New Yorker*, (May 26, 2015), <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/lebanon-and-the-start-of-iran-and-saudi-arabias-proxy-war>.

⁶¹ Eyal Zisser, "Iranian Involvement in Lebanon" in *Military and Strategic Affairs*, 3(1) (2011): 8-9.

⁶² Awad Mustafa, "Saudi Arabia's aid to Lebanon presents challenge for Iran" in *Defense News*, (December 31, 2013), <http://archive.defensenews.com/article/20131231/DEFREG04/312310006/Saudi-Arabia-s-Aid-Lebanon-Presents-Challenge-Iran>.

⁶³ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma" in *World Politics*, 30(2) (1978):168-170.

Each state, fearing attack, ramps up defense capabilities and supports a regional proxy and interfere in other states internal affairs (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Bahrain, and Yemen) in order to guard against the perceived threat from the other. The other sees that as threatening and feels compelled to respond in kind. This is because the two states view regional politics in an ideological zero-sum term. The more powerful Islamic Republic of Iran is, the more vulnerable the Saudi's Wahhabism feel, and vice versa. Both states actions end up increasing the chances of conflicts between the two states. Wherever there is an Iranian presence there will be a Saudi involvement, and vice versa. This situation of competition between the two countries is in an escalating path. In the 1980s and 1990s, the rivalry between the two states was limited to the Arabian Gulf states and the Levant. Nowadays, it has expanded to involve new states like Iraq, Yemen, Egypt, Sudan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to go along with the Arabian states and the Levant. This indicates that the rivalry is escalating and could get even worse in the coming years with Iran's efforts to increase its military capability by acquiring nuclear capacity. The spectre of war hangs over the region. As Iran has begun thickening its involvement and intervention in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has become more assertive to protect its status in the region. Both policies have not only created a strong sectarian rift among the peoples of the region, but also increased the chance that incidents escalate or spiral out of control.

The other defining features of the Saudi-Iranian tensions that do not help to prevent the security dilemma from existing are the low level of economic interdependence and their client pressures. It has been argued by some that the economic interdependence of two powers could prevent them from the trap of direct confrontation.⁶⁴ This could be true because trade flows can raise the opportunity cost of going to war, since war leads to a severing of valuable commerce. By looking at the Saudi-Iranian economic relations we can argue that there is no interdependence exists between the two states. Trade volume between the two sides is too low; it stood at about US\$200 million in 2013, according to the World Bank. For Saudi Arabia, Iran's share of Saudi total trade was about 0.1 percent. For Iran, the share of Saudi trade was about 0.12 percent of the total Iranian trade volume.⁶⁵ This, therefore, does not help to create harmony between the two states. As a matter of fact, Saudi Arabia and Iran are economic rivals. Both export oil and chemicals, and Riyadh uses its oil production to cause harm to Iran, which depends heavily on high oil price to meet its budget commitments. This was evident in Riyadh's refusal to cut oil production when oil prices continued to drop down in 2014.⁶⁶ Part of the Saudi intention was to punish Iran for meddling in the Middle East affairs. In addition to that, client actors of states and non-state actors of both Saudi Arabia and Iran are not helping the two states to conform to each other; instead they are pulling their patrons into confrontation with one another. Hezbollah, Bashar regime, Houthis, and Iraqi loyal are pushing Iran into conflict with Saudi Arabia; while some Gulf states, anti-Bashar rebels, Sunnis in Iraq and Iran, and anti-Houthis elements are pushing Saudi Arabia to stand up to Iran's aggressive actions in the Middle East. Such situations are inflaming the security dilemma between the two states. The best hope for avoiding Saudi-Iranian confrontation, intentionally or not, and moving beyond security dilemmas is to look beyond the quest for superiority to fashion more inclusive and effective power sharing arrangement. Yet, neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran is working to achieve peaceful environment in their relationship, and this can be explained mainly by the strong ideological differences between the two powers. With such relations, the two states are trapped in a vicious security dilemma. Therefore, the question is not whether, but when, war would occur.

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⁶⁴ Liberalism and Neo-liberalism emphasize the importance of economic interdependence in order to bring peace among states.

⁶⁵ Numbers for Iranian trade volume is based on 2011 numbers and according to the World Bank, available at: www.its.worldbank.org (accessed: July 23, 2015).

⁶⁶ Michael Stephens, "Why is Saudi Arabia using oil as a weapon?" (December 3, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30289546>.

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