

# An Iranian Narrative of Tehran-Riyadh Tention Escalation

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## Abstract

The relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia have always been based on tension, political misunderstandings and on some occasions, a kind of limited détente. Presently (early 2019) most researchers employ the term “cold war” to describe the nature of this relationship. This situation has deteriorated after the Syrian crisis (since 2011), and the reign of King Salman and his son, especially with the arrival of Donald Trump at the White House. By using the neoclassical realism theory, the present paper seeks to explain the question of leading causes of Tehran-Riyadh hostility from an Iranian perspective and prospects that can be drawn for it. The findings suggest that the causes of this hostility can be analyzed at the domestic, regional and transnational levels. As long as Riyadh perceives Iran as a threat to its survival, Trump and Mohammed bin Salman remain in power, Riyadh's internal concerns stay in place, and no strategic shift happens from Saudi side (for example, alliance with Russia), the tension in Tehran-Riyadh relations will continue. The method used by the authors in this research is descriptive-analytic, and it is mostly focused on how Tehran interprets the deep reasons for this hostility.

**Keywords:** *Saudi Arabia, Iran, Neoclassical Realism, the United States, Cold War, Foreign Policy*

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## **Introduction**

The Middle East has been moving towards greater instability and insecurity because of the numerous crises, growing tensions, and confrontation among some countries in the region. Political developments along with the strategic rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia have brought about instability in the region. Disagreements between the two countries on many issues such as Iraq, Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen, Iran nuclear deal, oil, and attitude toward Israel have currently intensified the differences. The overriding concern is that the crisis escalation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, may ultimately culminate to an armed conflict. In 2018, *The Council on Foreign Relations* categorized the conflict between Tehran and Riyadh as one of the 8 important world crises and ranked it second after the North Korean dilemma (Brimelow, Dec. 14, 2017). In an article in *Foreign Policy*, Robert Malley put the tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia among the ten international crises in 2019 that may result in war. Of course, Malley ranked it fourth among the international tensions after those in Yemen and Afghanistan and the one between the US and China (Malley, 2018:4).

With the emergence of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Saudi Arabia considered Iran as an existential threat. Therefore, it stood alongside Saddam during the eight-year war (1980-1988) to reduce threats to its national security resulting from the Islamic Revolution. However, after the end of the Iran-Iraq war (1988), a partial *détente* began between the two countries, and the new variables including the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990) which turned Baghdad into a joint

enemy brought them close for a temporary compromise. However, soon tensions cast a shadow over their relations, and the US invasion against Iraq (2003) and Iran's nuclear issue among the factors became base for strained relations between the two states. These tensions reached to a climax with the occurrence of new developments in the region, known as the *Arab Spring*, followed by military intervention in Bahrain by Saudi Arabia as well as the suppression of the Shiites in Bahrain, political-military intervention in Yemen and, most importantly, supporting Assad's opponents in the Syria civil war by Riyadh. The relations between the two countries became so tense that Mohammed bin Salman once stated that it was impossible for Tehran and Riyadh to enter into a dialogue and reach a compromise. He added,

"How can we enter into a dialogue with a regime that has an extremist ideology and believes that the Imam of the Time will appear in Iran and will spread Islam throughout the world, even in the United States .The Middle East is now divided into two groups: one the trilateral axis of evil consisting of Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Sunni terrorist groups and the other the moderate countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, etc." (Goldberg, 2018:5).

Adel al-Jubeir, the anti-Iranian Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, repeatedly has accused Iran of expansionism, sectarianism, a hegemon-seeker, and a country that does not obey international law as well as continuing to be a revolutionary nation rather a normal nation-state. He believed, "Since 1979 (the victory of the Islamic Revolution), Iran has supported terrorism throughout the world and sheltered terrorists and facilitated their movements. It has also established Hezbollah in Lebanon to use it for money laundering and drug trafficking" (B.B.C., 2018:3).

On the other hand, M. J. Zarif, the Iranian Foreign Minister has accused Saudi Arabia of supporting Takfiri terrorism on numerous occasions. In a note on the New York Times, he called Wahhabism, as the official ideology of Saudi Arabia as well as the intellectual source of Takfiri terrorists. He also opined that Saudi

Arabia used enmity with Iran as a tool for promoting its extremist policies:

Virtually every terrorist group abusing the name of Islam — from Al Qaeda and its offshoots in Syria to Boko Haram in Nigeria — has been inspired by this death cult (Wahhabism). So far, the Saudis have succeeded in inducing their allies to go along with their folly, whether in Syria or Yemen, by playing the Iran card (Zarif, 2016:5).

However, in many occasions, the Iranian side has shown more positive signals in breaking the ice which was replied by negative answer repeatedly by the Saudis. It was Saudi Arabia that siezed diplomatic relations with Iran in 2016, despite the Iranian commitment to pay all damages inflicted to its Embassy in Tehran. During the Munich Security Conference in 2018, Zarif put forward his plan for creating a new “Peace Architecture” based on the 1975 Helsinki Treaty for Iran-Saudi Arabia relations that was not welcomed by Riyadh (Deutsche Welle Farsi, 2018). This Treaty with its ten nonbinding principles for “guiding relations” helped the East- and West-Bloc countries to reduce the tensions resulting from the Cold War. Hasan Rouhani suggested that the Islamic Republic of Iran was ready to defend, “the people of Saudi Arabia against terrorism and superpowers with all its power,” and would not even “insult” Saudi Arabia either, lampooning Trump language towards Saudi Arabia. However, this reconciliation gestures from Rouhani and Zarif did not receive any positive response from Riyadh (BBC Persian, 2018:2).

Therefore, this article is concerned with the question of what are the main reasons for the Tehran-Riyadh animosity and what possible future can be envisioned for the relation between the two countries? The basis of the hypothesis at this research is that the Saudis’ concern for their survival and security, the fact that they perceive Iran as the major threat to their survival are the main factors explain their animosity toward Tehran. Moreover, the requirements of the U.S.-Saudi Arabia alliance as well as Washington and Israel’s exploiting of Iranophobia, have

exacerbated the Iran-Saudi Arabia relations. As long as the two players insist on maintaining their positions, scapegoating Tehran by Trump and Mohammed bin Salman function politically well, and no strategic shifts happen in Saudi Arabia's positions (for example, shifting towards Russia), tensions will persist in Tehran-Riyadh relations. Findings of this study indicate that the cold war in the relations between Tehran-Riyadh will continue at least until 2020 (when Trump's first term as president ends). This article presumes Iran is not a major existential threat to Saudi Arabia, but Iran's ploy functions well in Riyadh politics. In other words, Saudi Arabia's perception of security concerns from Iranian side is far from reality which has led to the cold war situation between Tehran-Riyadh.

The topics discussed in this article are organized as follows: the first part of the paper deals with the theoretical framework, i.e., the neoclassical realism and its pertinence to the subject-matter. Part two addresses the brief history of relations between the two countries. The third part investigates the reasons for hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia at the domestic, regional, and trans-regional levels. The final part tackles the outlook for these relations by the end of 2020.

To answer the research questions, the most relevant theory that considers concerns for survival and security as the main driver of states' foreign policies is Realism. However, the reading of the realist theory which also believes that states are not like billiard balls to produce similar foreign policies, and elements like the personality of the ruling elites, perception and misperception of threats, implications of an alliance system, and efficiency and legitimacy of a political system also play role in shaping the foreign policy of a country is the neoclassical realist theory.

Neoclassical realism is, in fact, a title that Gideon Rose gave to a collection of works on international relations that apply major realist insights in explaining foreign policy and international relations as well (Rose, 1998:146). This theory commingles elements and principles taken from classical realism and

neorealism, and believes that stances taken by states in the international system can be evaluated through a series of systemic variables like power distribution capabilities, cognitive variables, perception and misperception of other states' intentions and threats, and by internal parameters such as the nature of the political system, governmental institutions, the elites, intra-governmental players, etc. Those numerous factors influence the power and freedom of foreign policy decision makers (Rose, 1998: 144-145). This theory gradually developed in the works of J. W. Taliaferro, William C. Wohlforth, Randall L Schuler, and others. Its major presumption is that no significant theory can hold true for all times, and no policy can be suitable for all situations in a complex world. The most important task of scholars is to determine which diverse theories under what conditions discover significant causal relationships and can hence provide policy recommendations that will be efficient (Wohlforth, 1996:195). Based on the same belief, neoclassical realism employ variables from other Realist theories in order to explain the events or to reject their importance while still adhering to the realist paradigm. Despite criticisms leveled against the explanatory power of realism, precisely following its incapability to predict the end of the Cold War, neoclassical realism nonetheless considers realism to be solid in explaining international politics (Salimi and Ebrahimi, 2014:38).

According to Taliaferro (1994), the hypotheses of neoclassical realism, with some modifications, are more or less similar to those of classical and structural realism. Survival and security remain the main concerns of states. Sometimes, attempts of a state to increase its security decrease the invulnerability of other states. To make certain of their security, states will constantly seek security and will face the security dilemma. Therefore, they may misunderstand each other's intentions, conflicts can arise between them, or they will likely become enemies toward one another. Scholars like Fareed Zakaria and John Mearsheimer believe that states adopt strategies to expand their power and influence for

overcoming the problem of lack of security in international arena in order to increase their control on their environment (Tang, 2008:455-458). International actions and reactions are influenced by an intervening variable that is called national leaders' imaginations or perceptions. Leaders usually process received information based on historical analogies and on other perceptual shortcuts to make decisions. Moreover, national political developments strongly affect the foreign policies of states. States independence against the civil societies, the internal vulnerability of regimes, types of internal political coalitions, consensus or division among the elites, bureaucratic politics and relations between the civil and military sectors all can influence the ability of leaders to mobilize resources (Lobell, et. al., 2016:140).

Like classical realists, neoclassical realists evaluate the alliance system as a mechanism for power balance and maintenance of security. However, although establishing alliances removes security anxieties of states (and provides weapons for them, if needed), removal of security concerns represents not the only driving force of great powers in forging alliances. The reason for this is that more powerful states do not necessarily achieve security advantages from this type of relations with less powerful state, but rather obtain other advantages like increased freedom of action and even access to military bases as well as desirable trade relations such as extensive sales of military equipment (Sprecher, 2006:234). Although establishing power and threat balance, provide the main incentive in forging alliances; however, David points out that non-democratic leaders first tend to forge an alliance with a foreign power to repel threats from internal enemies and then employ all their power resources to confront the foreign enemy. Since the primary goal of the leaders of non-democratic states is to remain in power, they fortify themselves at the expense of their national interests. In other words, they sacrifice the national interests of their states for their own personal interests (David, 1991:235-237).

## **I. Swing in Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations**

When Pan-Arabism led by Gamal Abdel Nasser diminished in 1967 and Egypt lost its principal status in the Middle East, the regional roles of Saudi Arabia and Iran strengthened. Regional challenges like the emergence of a revolutionary Iraq, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (that established close ties with the former Soviet Union), and the saber-rattling the Dhofar Liberation Front in Oman, threatened the status quo in the region that encouraged both Iran and Saudi Arabia to collaborate. Nevertheless, even after the emergence of these joint threats, rivalry in the oil market and regional leadership remained as the two key factors which overshadowed the relations between the two states before the 1979 revolution (Devine, 2017:3).

The emergence of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 ended both regional cooperation between Tehran-Riyadh, and disrupted strategic partnership between Iran and the United States at the same time. At present (Jan. 2019), the relations between Tehran and Riyadh are hostile in multi-faceted ways. After the the 1979 Islamic Revolution followed by the war between Iran and Iraq, Saudi Arabia and its allies formed the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 as a security-oriented association against revolutionary Iran (Anthony, 2012:78). The tensions in the relations between the two states in the 1980s somewhat subsided with the détente initiatives in the 1990s during administrations of Ali Akabar Hashemi Rafsanjani and his successor Mohammad Khatami as Iranian Presidents (Gasiorowski, 2000:3). Limited cooperation accordingly began in an ambiance of suspicion together with the rivalry. Despite ups and downs in this collaboration, agreements on cooperation in 1998 and on security in 2001 were signed by the two countries (Mojtahedzadeh, 1996: 620). Nevertheless, political, ideological, and identify differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia indicated that these formal diplomatic relations merely hid their deep differences. The September 11 events, halted the process of détente between the two countries, and the US invasion against Iraq in 2003 mark a



turning point in the relations between Riyadh-Tehran. The democratic political system led by the majority Shiites in Iraq meant the further influence of a friendly neighbor i.e., Iran and, at the same time, improvement of relations between Iran and Iraq has increased Saudi Arabia's fears of perceived Iranian influence in the region. Therefore, Saudi Arabia refused to accept the new developments and realities in Iraq and did not establish diplomatic relations with Iraq until 2015 (Fathollah-Nejad, 2017: 3).

During the presidency of George W Bush, when it seemed that Iran and the United States would most likely engage in a war, especially after two states confrontation over Iran's nuclear program, Saudi Arabia aligned itself further with the United States to fight Iran's influence in the region. To the extent that the then Saudi King exhorted the U.S. to "cut off the head of the snake" and proposed an invasion to Iran's nuclear installations and imposition of more sanctions (Colvin, 2010:3). Afterwards, Saudi Arabia together with its allies in the *Gulf Cooperation Council* have undertaken an aggressive policy against Iran (Dazi-Heni, 2014: 4).

The Arab Spring was regarded as shocking and frightening for Saudi Arabia and, and it intensified the enmity between the two countries. As a country with a majority of Shiites, Bahrain was the first scene of the Arab Spring in the Persian Gulf region. Although Iran intended not to get involved directly in the Bahrain's developments, it announced its verbal political support to the demands made by Bahrain's Shiite people. However, Saudi Arabia opted for armed intervention in support of its allies in Bahrain (Friedman, 2016: 4). This intervention and Tehran's negative reaction increased the hostility level between the two states. Saudi Arabia accused Iran of meddling in Bahrain and of inciting Bahraini Shiites to topple the regime. Iran strongly rejected Saudi Arabia's accusations and, in turn, accused it of occupying Bahrain. Nevertheless, the developments in Bahrain demonstrated a vast increase in the tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia. When the Syrian crisis started, Iran and Saudi Arabia stayed at opposing fronts once more. For Riyadh, Syria seemed to remain an

opportunity to curtail the spread of Iranian regional influence. After the United States expressed its hope in August 2011 for the regime change in Syria and started to support the Syrian dissidents, Saudi Arabia closed its embassy in Damascus and asked Bashar Assad, the Syrian President, to leave power (Alrifai, 2017: 2-3). However, Iran expressed concern that regime change in Syria would display vastly dreadful consequences, because it considered the Iran-Syria axis necessary for confronting the American-Israeli order in the Middle East. Iran's strategic goals in Syria, completely against those of Saudi Arabia, can be summarized in three parts: defeat of terrorist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Daesh) and the Al-Nusra Front, survival of Bashar Assad's regime and preservation of the strategic ties between Iran, Syria and Lebanon. Consequently, Iran, seeing its traditional ally endangered, perceived it as a strategic challenge; therefore waging war against Assad by Saudi Arabia affiliated groups ran counter to Iran's interests in Syria (Dobbins et. al., 2015: 6).

The political developments in Yemen represent the last surprising events for Iran. Armed intervention in Yemen through aerial attacks code-named *Operation Decisive Storm* by a Saudi-led coalition started on 25 March 2015 and continued from 22 April 2015 with the code name of *Operation Restoring Hope* (Cordesman, 2015: 1). These operations were carried out in support of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's Administration against the Houthis and former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who controlled Sana'a, Yemen's capital and most regions in northern Yemen since 2015. The US and Riyadh regime accused Iran of supporting and sending arms to Ansar Allah from the beginning of the Yemen crisis, while this part of Yemen has been under severe siege. Iran has repeatedly denied such accusations and has called this military intervention, which has taken place in line with the aggressive approach of Saudi Arabia and the United States, a dangerous invasion which carried out to intensify destabilization of the region (Reuters, 2017: 1-3).

More impressive improvement in the relations of Washington-

Riyadh since Donald Trump has taken the office in the White House. His anti-Iran policies (especially withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or the JCPOA), and the dominant view in Washington and Riyadh that Iran is a common enemy of both states, have deteriorated the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia more significantly. The trend is so grave that several analysts believe that intensified confrontation between the two countries has placed two states at brinkmanship of a likely war. (Feierstein, 2017: 3).

#### The Vicissitudes in Iran-Saudi Relations Over the Past 30 Years

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Massacre of Iranian pilgrims in Mecca</li> <li>-Raiding the Saudi embassy in Tehran by protesters and the death of a Saudi diplomat</li> <li>-Cut-off diplomatic relations in April 1988</li> </ul>	cut-off in diplomatic relations	1987
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-King Fahd Congratulation to Khatami as the new president of Iran in 2001</li> <li>-Khatami's visit to Saudi Arabia in 1999 as the first post-revolutionary Iranian president</li> <li>-Concluding a Security treaty between the two countries in April 2001 in order to establish better relations</li> </ul>	Improving relationships	1999
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The overthrow of Saddam Hussein and subsequently the rise of power of the Shiite majority</li> <li>-Iran's nuclear program and increasing fear of Saudi Arabia</li> <li>-Saudi Arabia's 2007 statement on the relationship between Iran and Iraq and introducing Tehran as a threat to the Persian Gulf</li> </ul>	Regional competition	2003
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Deploying Saudi Arabia forces to Bahrain</li> <li>-Pressing the United States to take tougher positions towards the Iranian nuclear program</li> <li>-The US and Saudi Arabia accused Iran of assassinating attempt of the Saudi ambassador to the United States</li> </ul>	Arab Spring	2011
Saudi Arabia's military invasion in Yemen in March 2015 and accusing Iran of supporting Houthis	Proxy Wars	2015
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The execution of Sheikh Nimr who was against the Saudi government policies and the entry of some protesters inside the Saudi embassy in Tehran and eventually the severance of Saudi diplomatic relations with Iran</li> </ul>	The Cut-off in diplomatic relations	2016
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Trump anti-Iran policy and signing hundred billion arms deal with Riyadh,</li> <li>-The escalation of Saudi hostility towards Iran and the failure of diplomacy in two neighbors relations</li> </ul>	Confrontation	2017 - present

Table by Authors

At present (early 2019), Saudi Arabia rulers, especially under the leadership of King Salman and his son, are intensely hostile toward Iran. The main reason for this hostility is the natural instinct of feeling threat to their survival. However, there are at least six interconnected reasons for this hostility all of which are relevant to understanding of fear by Saudi rulers. These reasons are categorized at domestic, regional, and trans-regional levels. Therefore, at any category, two main reason are elaborated.

## **II. The Domestic Level**

At the domestic level, the inherently unstable political system in Saudi Arabia explains some of tensions in Tehran-Riyadh relations. Since its creation, the modern state of Saudi Arabia has been suffering from one family-ruling monopoly. This is why it insists on its overt and covert hostility with Iran as a country based on semi-democracy or hybrid democracy-authoritarianism system. This is one of the reasons for Saudi Arabia's opposition to Iran. In Saudi Arabia, one family enjoys most of the power, wealth, and prestige, which such a structure is not considered as legitimate and inherently stable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By highlighting the Iranian threat, Saudi Arabia tries to hide the unjust power structure from its people. Moreover, one of the basic dilemmas of the Saudi system is the succession crisis after King Salman and the position of crown prince Mohammed bin Salman especially, after Jamal Khoshoggi fiasco. Madawi al-Rasheed, a professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science, in a note published in the *New York Times* addressed the internal reasons as the main reason for the intensification of tensions between Tehran and Riyadh,

Mohammed bin Salman, often talks about pushing back a dangerous Iranian threat. But the truth is, despite this position, the foreign policy emanating from Riyadh is driven primarily by domestic politics. Prince Mohammed knows that a fearful enemy is a key to his own strength (Al-Rasheed, April 23, 2018).

Therefore, part of roots in making perpetual the conflict with

Iran are hidden in the internal contexts of Saudi Arabia. Bin Salman uses hostility towards Iran as a tool to divert attention from the succession crisis and internal challenges. He has tried to consolidate the power and concentrates it in his hand in order to make his big political ambitions; therefore, deprive other numerous and ambitious princes of the House of Saud. He is personally restless; the reason is that the unprecedented belittling and marginalizing of high-ranking princes in order to repel the likelihood of collusion between them, scares the young crown prince. It is believed that these shaky domestically power base directed him to intense anti-Iranian and populist rhetoric, as well as actions taken to push back Iranian perceptual influence in Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. In this way, he could make the internal dissidence strangled. He holds Iran responsible for clashes by the Saudi Shiites in the eastern region of the country, and accuse the Saudi Shiite citizens of being agents of Iran. The voice of the internal critics towards Crown Prince's policies is silenced by reminding them of the war situation in Yemen and likely war with Iran. The Saudis also consider the so-called rising Iranian influence in the region as the revival of the Iranians' ancient Persian nationalism. The emphasis on the Iranian threat allows bin Salman to magnify his own role as the saviour of Saudi Arabia and of the entire Arab region from Persianization and Shiitization. During the reign of Salman bin Abdulaziz, the Saudis replaced the old ideology of Wahhabism with Saudi populist and militaristic nationalism; this Saudi new nationalism feeds on the Iranian threat and its "Shiite nationalism" (Workman, 2018: 2-3).

The second internal factor for stoking Iranophobia is Saudi Arabia's political economy and its heavy dependence on oil revenues. Among the 12 OPEC members, the top three producers are Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq before the renewal of sanctions in 2018 against Tehran. The most important issue is Iran's vast gas reserves that have not been utilized yet as an economic resource. Environmentally, natural gas is a much cleaner fuel than oil and

its combustion produces considerably less harmful environmentally compared to oil. According to the estimates made by British Petroleum in 2018, Iran with 33 trillion cubic meters, ranked second as having the largest gas reserves in the world (BP, Statistical Review of World Energy: 2018). If Iran's international is normalized by lifting the economic sanctions, it can turn it potentially into an even more powerful global energy player. The European market is of special strategic importance and Iran together with Russia, which is not an OPEC member, will potentially become the top energy suppliers to this market. Wealthy Qatar owes its status to export of vast quantities of natural gas. The Saudis regard this as a certain threat. Saudi Arabia is well endowed regarding oil resources, but has much smaller gas reserves. Therefore, its strategic value as an energy producer may be waning, if Iran is treated normally in international politics (Workman, 2018:4).

According to World's Top Exports, China's most important oil provider after Russia was Saudi Arabia in 2017 that accounted for 6.12% of China's oil imports. During the same year, India imported about 11.5 million barrels of oil from Iraq, 10.3 million from Saudi Arabia, and 6.2 million from Iran (Workman, 2018: World's Top Exports). Consequently, Saudi Arabia was the second largest oil exporter to India. However, Iran took Saudi Arabia's position in the first half of 2018. According to the statistics published by India's Ministry of Energy, this country imported 457 thousand barrels of oil per day from Iran before the United States withdrew from the JCPOA, but Saudi Arabia regained its position in the second half of 2018 after re-imposition of the sanctions on Iran by the United States in 2018 (Workman, 2019:World's Top Exports). Saudi Arabia has extensive plans for expanding its presence in the Indian energy market. It has allocated a large part of the 500 billion dollars as investment funds to India. The regional tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have caused Saudi Arabia to use its investment leverages in India's energy infrastructure as a means of reducing Iran's share

of the Indian energy market. In April 2018, the Saudi Arabian Aramco and a consortium consisting of three Indian state companies signed a \$44 billion agreement to build an oil refinery in Maharashtra Province in western India. Each party will have 50% ownership of the refinery. Amin Al-Nasser the president and chief executive officer of Saudi Aramco believed that the full capacity of the refinery would be 120,000 barrels per day. Aramco is investing in foreign refineries to supply their petroleum needs and increase Saudi share in the world markets. Saudi Arabia wants to increase its oil production in order to replace Iraq as the major supplier of oil to India and to take Iran's share of the Indian oil market after the US withdrawal from the JCPOA (Shokri, 2018).

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia produces 500 million cubic meters of natural gas from the Farzad-A gas field, the Saudi share of which is called the Hasbah gas field, but Iran has not extracted any gas from the Farzad-A or from the Farzad-B gas fields yet. In 2016, Saudi Arabia signed a \$1 billion agreement with Indian and Singaporean companies to raise its production from the current 500 million to 2 billion cubic meters per day. Saudi Arabia hopes Iranian investments in this jointly-owned oil field are postponed for a long time so that it can be the only country utilizing these resources (Trade Arabia, 2016). From the Saudi side, everything possible must be done to prevent Iran from developing its potential energy resources (especially natural gas), so that it cannot replace Saudi Arabia in, or reduce its share of the global energy market. This way, the Saudis guarantee or increase their revenues and further weaken Iran economically and politically. Moreover, the US political and economic superiority is tied to the oil-based economies of Saudi Arabia and other kingdoms in the Persian Gulf region. The U.S. dollar at present largely owes its life to Saudi Arabia and other Sheikhdoms, because the Saudis and the Sheikhdoms main currency to transact goods is in US dollar and provide the U.S. Treasury with the strong dollar; thus strengthen the value of dollar worldwide. Large purchases of US weapons and military equipment worth billions of dollars serve

the same purpose. If Iran was able to completely develop its potential energy power, its trade in oil, and more importantly in natural gas, would very probably be in Euro, Ruble, Yen, and Yuan. This would be a tragic scenario for the US currency.

### **III. Regional level**

All hostilities in Saudi-Iran relations date back to emergence of the Islamic Revolution in 1979; with toppling a client regime of the US in Iran, other autocratic rulers in the region felt threatened. The policies of the Iranian revolutionaries also strengthened this feeling of being threatened. That was why the Saudi rulers immediately reacted to the Iranian Revolution by forming a political-defensive alliance called “the Gulf Cooperation Council” consisting of Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman in the early 1980s. In fact, the Saudi rulers’ hatred of Iran has been intensifying onwards since the Iranian Revolution. The more Iran’s political influence increases in the region, the more the Saudi rulers fear a threat to their existence.

The first reason explaining the hostility at the regional level is geopolitical rivalry. From the time of Nixon-Kissinger doctrine that considered Saudi Arabia and Iran as two pillars providing the security of the region, especially of the Persian Gulf, till now (early 2019), the Saudis have been competing with Iran for expanding regional influence. In the aftermath of the September 11 as well as the US invasions as of 2001, there were five major incidents in the region that have caused major changes in the geopolitical façade of the region. In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq, and by removing Saddam, Baghdad was eliminated as a major power of the Persian Gulf equations. The Arab Spring's outbreak in the West Asia and North Africa region in 2011 led to the collapse of the four Arab dictators; and as a result, Syria and Egypt, as the two powerful Arab countries were diminished in the power equations of the region. The third event was reclaiming power by Bashar Assad which symbolically means victory for Iran in the Syrian civil war. Prolongation of Yemen war (since



2015), convenience coalition between Qatar and Iran (2018) and Jamal Khoshoggi fiasco (2018) were the latest events which deteriorated the Saudi Arabia's position in the Middle East. These events that have led to the elimination of Iraq, Egypt and Syria from the regional rivalry and the emergence of Iran as regional power have brought about significant changes in the power politics of the regional powers. Therefore, the most important reasons for changing relations from rivalry to hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia are the geopolitical developments in Western Asia, which Riyadh perceived it as changing regional balance of power in favor of Iran. In fact, the Saudis consider those developments as expansion of Iran's regional influence tantamount to their being put under siege and a serious threat to their survival. While Iran believes that Tehran is not the main cause of the crises in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon, but rather a set of various factors shaped these crises, and Tehran welcome a fair initiatives to overcome those crises. Zarif in many occasions opined that Iran is no threat to Saudi Arabia, "If Saudi Arabia would be attacked, Iran is the first one rush to support it" (fa.euronews, 2018).

### Iran and Saudi Arabia influence areas



Graphic by Shaeen, Guardian: 2018

The religious identity and its politicization is another factor explaining the tension in Iran-Saudi Arabia relations. Due to historical reasons, Iran is the regional and global centre of Shi'ism. Therefore, one main reason of Saudi Arabia's hostile policy towards Iran is that it considers itself as the heart of Islamic world as Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. While the geopolitical change in the Middle East as delineated has been proceeding at its loss, Riyadh believes that Shiites in the whole region receive various forms of financial and spiritual support from Iran. Iran purposely has been expanding its influence to contain Saudis. As a result, the Shiite minority is turning into parallel power that the Sunnis led by Saudi Arabia enjoy predominantly at present. Saudi officials perceive that Saudi Arabia is Iran's main target in creating the Shi'a-Sunni confrontation. Despite the denial of this claim by Iranian officials at various levels, Saudi Arabia continues to employ a quasi-ideological policy for inciting the majority Sunnis in the region against Iran.

While Tehran believes that the main target is not Riyadh, Tehran was dragged into Iraq, Syria and Yemen developments. Tehran main target is making a geopolitical corridor to make vulnerable Israel, not containing the Saudi regime. However, some conservative figures in Tehran might refer to Saudi's suspicion toward Iran. Alireza Zakani, a former member of the Iranian Parliament who belong to the conservetaive camp, once noted, "There are two opposing views in Iran regarding the Islamic Awakening (Arab Spring)... In the first view, Islamic awakening is considered one of the requirements of (Iranian) revolutionary movement and its enhancement across the region is regarded as a religious duty (to Iran)". He quoted sympathetically Abdullah al-Nafisi: "Prior to the events in Yemen, Iran had taken over Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut, three capital cities of the Arab World, and the file of the old-fashioned people(i.e., Wahhabis or Salafis) would be closed if it could take over Sanaa. This event did take place and the regional conditions have

changed completely” (Farda News, 2015). The Fars News Agency quoted Qasem Soleimani as saying in a gathering in Kerman on 11 February, “Today, we witness signs that the Islamic Revolution has been exported throughout the region from Bahrain and Iraq to Syria and Yemen and North Africa” (Fars News, 2015). These rhetoric have led Riyadh to the conclusion that Iran has an aggressive policy to put Saudi Arabia under siege, to threaten its security and, finally, to disintegrate it. However Iranian top officials reject Iran’s policy of expansionism, and call Iran’s influence as spiritual. Kemal Kharrazi, top advisor to the Supreme leader believes, “Iran is open to dialogue to the regional states..... It is true that we have influence in Arabic and non-Arab countries, because Iran is the source of inspiration for others; and naturally a country that has been able to achieve progress without the support of foreigners is an inspirational model” (Jamaran, 2019).

#### **IV. The Trans-Regional Level**

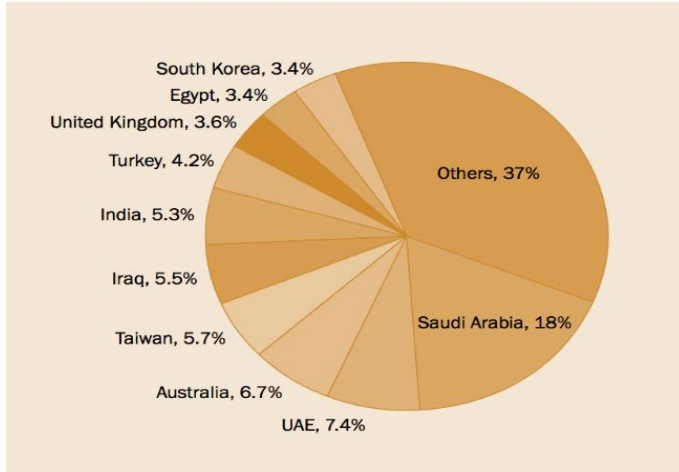
Since the WWII that the United States emerged as a superpower, Saudi Arabia, as an absolute monarchy, has been strongly dependent on the United States for its security. The closed, familial, and traditional government system which lacks any theoretical and legibility foundations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has left the kings in Riyadh no choice but to follow American policies. This is the only way that keeps them safe from the political pressures from inside and outside. The inside threat is raised by potential domestic opponents and the outside threat is levied by those who consider Saudi Arabia as violator of human rights (Behraves, 2017: 3). In other words, by tying its internal and external security to the United States, Saudi Arabia tries to cover up its weak points of lack of popular legitimacy and therefore repel pressures of inside and outside potential critics. Therefore, Saudi Arabia’s hostility towards Iran partly divert its domestic opponents toward the foreign enemy and moreover, the Iranophobia serve both Saudi-US domestic and Middle East

policies in the Middle East (Ayatollahi Tabaar, 2018: 7).

Adopting mainly anti-Iran policy are one of the major reasons of the U.S. support of MBS and his strategic approaches in the region even after the scandal of Jamal Khashoggi assassination. This is quite obvious in Trump's supportive messages after Khoshoggi fiasco, "Our relationship is with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They have been a great ally in our very important fight against Iran. The United States intends to remain a steadfast partner of Saudi Arabia to ensure the interests of our country, Israel and all other partners in the region" (Trump statement on Nov. 20, 2018). Put differently, the trend in domestic and Saudi foreign policy as well as its unshakable alliance with the US prove that the Saudis are sure of American strategic support in any event. In other words, Saudi Arabia, in the position of a strategic ally, has a substantial role in paving the way for the US regional policies and security strategy in the region.

US President Donald Trump in an interview with the press admitted to the fact that previously the former American administrations have always dodged it, "In terms of the order of \$110 billion — think of that, \$110 billion — all they're going to do is give it to other countries and I think that would be very foolish of our country (CNN,2018). Although there is no exact figures of arms deal between the US and Saudis in the past, according to a CNN report out of 110 billion arms deal in 2018, Saudi Arabia has so far followed through on \$14.5 billion in purchases, it is a significant deal which cannot be ignored by statesmen. SIPRI estimated that the Saudi Arabia the third country in the world in military expenses in 2016-2018, and %20 the Saudi deals belong the US in the last couple of years (below figure). Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei characterized the Saudi Arabia clientele attitude as "milk cows for the Americans, when the milk finished, they (Americans) eat their meat"(farsi.khamenei.ir, 2018).

### Share of Saudi Arabia in the US Arms Export in 2013-2017



Source: SIPRI and World Economic Forum

In fact, Washington's macro policy toward the Middle East is mainly focused on containing Iran and preventing Moscow's influence in the region. Consequently, isolating Iran and encouraging the Saudis in confronting Iran in the region, as well as creating serious barriers in the way of Tehran's regional influence constitute the principles of the U.S. strategy in the Middle East especially in Trump era. Therefore, Saudi Arabia, as one of the strategic partners of the US in the Middle East, can highlight its conflicts with Iran both to satisfy Washington's objectives and intentions in the region and help the crown prince in bolstering his leadership internally and externally (Postel & Hashemi, 2018: 62).

### Conclusions

Prediction is a difficult task in the humanities, especially for the Middle East where many factors are involved. As was explained in this article, the following six factors play an important role in shaping future trends: (1) internal politics of Saudi Arabia, (2) Political economy of energy, (3) geopolitical rivalry, (4) the Shiite-Sunni cleavages, (5) Trump anti-Iran strategy, and (6) political economy of arms sale. The future of Iran-Saudi Arabia relations will be influenced by the direction of these factors.

Power, ambition, and anxiety are all that can be seen in Riyadh foreign policy these days. Saudi Arabia, which was once a cautious and passive regional power, has resorted to aggressive policies. Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ambitions have manifested both internally by cracking down on rich princes who are reckoned as his potential rivals, as well as carrying out reforms and suppressing his opponents (like Jamal Kashoggi murder) and externally by Saudi participation in the war in Yemen, supporting the minority Sunni rule in Bahrain, forcible detention of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Qatar blockade, continued support of Bashar Assad's opponents, and the last, not least, pursuing enmity with Iran. Mohammed bin Salman believes that Iran intends to weaken Saudi Arabia and change into the superior and dominant power in the Middle East. This problem has been exacerbated by the undemocratic nature of the Riyadh political system and the one-family oligarchy ruling a vast country. As long as the internal security anxiety exists, Iran will be a suitable scapegoat for the ambitious crown prince. After achieving the mentioned goals and feeling secure in the new position, the Saudi leadership may begin a policy of *détente* in its foreign policy because it will no longer greatly need external threat for internal consumption.

The intensification of anti-Iranian sentiment by MBS before becoming the crown prince and the relative softening in his approach in relation to Iran after being elected crown prince may be attributed to such a process. In the same vein, after bin Salman become the king and is sure of his status and power, he might change Riyadh's foreign policy approach towards Iran and begin implementing a policy of *détente*. However, it is not clear when King Salman will die and, hence, the situation of uncertainty inside Saudi Arabia will continue. Replacing Adel al-Jubeir, who pursued a strictly anti-Iran policy, and appointing Ibrahim Al-Assaf, who is a technocrat, may modify the extreme rhetoric against Tehran. However, it is quite clear that these changes have taken place to decrease the pressures on bin Salman following the

scandal of Jamal Khashoggi murder, not to change attitude towards Tehran. The key to Saudi's foreign policy is in the hands of King Salman and his son Mohammed. Meanwhile, Russia's role is also important; if Riyadh decides to exhibit greater inclination towards Moscow in the wake of international pressures after Jamal Khashoggi murder and reduce its strong security dependence on Washington, this can also play a modifying role in the Tehran-Riyadh relations.

To be sure, restoration of relative stability in Iraq and the moderate foreign policy of this country, the return of ambassadors of a few Arab countries to Syria, renewed recognition of Bashar Assad as the *de facto* leader of the Syria, a peace agreement in Yemen, and the formation of a broad national government in Lebanon can all help reduce Tehran-Riyadh tensions. However, exacerbation of these variables will once again negatively influence Tehran-Riyadh relations. However, Saudi Arabia is a regime must follow the US and Western powers that have provided the basis of its stability. If the Saudis leave the framework of Western policies, it will lose this status and the House of Saud will further become weak. In general, the US of the Trump era does not like to witness the developments in the region which benefit Iran, and stoking Iranophobia is considered to be in line with Washington and Israel's grand politico-economic interests. On this basis, Mohammed bin Salman is a suitable choice for confronting Iran as well as carrying out Washington and Israel's strategy in the Persian Gulf. Riyadh's understanding is that Washington is decisive to confront Iran especially after US withdrawal from the JCPOA and, therefore, Saudi Arabia can utilize Iranophobia along its domestic and regional policies.

Finally, it is not very clear which scenarios will be materialized in the future; however, it can be said that Iran's internal developments may change the circumstances. If Trump's sanctions are so severe that it will become practically impossible for Iran to export its oil, it is very likely that war will break out in

the Persian Gulf and Iran and Saudi Arabia will enter into a military confrontation; although both countries know that this war will only lead to their mutual destruction. All the evidences suggest that the next Iranian president will be a conservative. If a hardline president adopts a more extreme policy towards the US, its repercussions will certainly influence Iran-Saudi Arabia relations leading to an uncertain future for the two countries. All in all, the outlook for future Iran-Saudi Arabia relations is not clear and it is estimated that there will be no thaw in their relations' ice at least before the end of Trump's term in office by 2020.



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