

Threat Perceptions and Security Dilemma in the Middle East¹

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Abstract

There has been an almost unprecedented degree of hostility and hostile rhetorical exchanges during the last few years among major regional actors in the Middle East. Many observers are concerned about the formation of an escalating security dilemma in the region with unintended and/or unpredictable consequences. This article seeks to explain the current security dilemma in the region on the basis of the threat perceptions of three major regional actors, i.e., Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey², and the way in which their attempts for constituting a balance against each other may either lead to more problems in the region or less tensions. It will demonstrate how any act by the actors out of defensive concerns might be interpreted by others as an offensive approach. Yet it is suggested that through dialogue and confidence building measures much of the distrust and uncertainties can be overcome.

Keywords: *Middle East conflicts, regional balance of power, security dilemma, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey*

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2. Of course one cannot deny the similar historical significance of Egypt. Yet during the last decade, it has not been as assertive and active in the region as it used to be. Saouli does not consider Turkey as a middle power in the Middle East and mentions other countries such as Iraq (Saouli 2020: 1); but as recent developments show the three countries examined here have been more powerful and active in regional politics in recent years.

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Introduction

The Middle East has often been the focus of international attention and its instability causes concern all around the world. The region has historically faced periods of tension, turmoil, conflict, and war due to external pressures and/or regional and domestic dynamics. Yet there has been an almost unprecedented degree of hostility and hostile rhetorical exchanges during the last few years. What has been going on in Syria and Yemen together with occasional references by leaders of the countries in the region against each other lead one to conclude that we are in a dangerous period when important actors' moves in the region may have unintended hazardous consequences.

Although many actors (intra-regional and extra-regional) are somehow involved in and effecting the regional developments, main regional powers can be seen to have more stake and, at least potentially, more influence in regional developments. This article seeks to explain the current security dilemma in the region on the basis of the threat perceptions of three major regional actors, i.e., Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey¹, and the way in which their attempts for constituting a balance against each other may either lead to more problems in the region or less tensions. It is reasonable to assume that an appropriate regional arrangement involving the three major regional powers may constrain the impacts of extra-regional forces and would lead to more regional

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stability.

These countries have some similarities and differences. During the last decade or so, they have been very active and assertive in their regional policies. They are the most powerful states in the region in terms of territory and economy.¹ In all of them domestic politics has its more or less determining effect on foreign policy. All of them see a role for themselves as an example of Islamism (Saudis have always emphasized their role as center of the Islamic world, Iran has seen its revolutionary version of Islam as an example for Muslims for the last four decades, and the ruling party in Turkey, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, sees its Modern version of Islamism as a source of inspiration for others). Iran and Turkey are non-Arabs with a multi-regional identity and geographically are more peripheral to the Middle East while Saudi Arabia sees itself as the leader of the Arab countries. Although Iran and Turkey are more suspicious of their external environment, all of them see the regional environment as sources of both threats and opportunities. Turkey and Saudi Arabia see the international system more in terms of opportunities and Iran more as a source of threat.

Although, in general, the existing literature on the Middle East “has failed to examine” what Saouli (2020, 1) calls “middle powerhood”, foreign policy and regional concerns of the three countries have been subject of some studies. The general features of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy (Nonneman 2005, Al-Faisal 2013), its strategic/security concerns and regional policy (Safran 1988; Peterson 2002; Russell 2005, Van den Berg 2017), and in particular its policies during recent developments in the Arab world (Leverett 2011; Steinberg 2014; Ennis and Momani 2013) besides other aspects of its foreign relations have been examined. As far as Iran is concerned, the general determinants and features of its foreign policy (Ramazani 1992; Moshirzadeh 2010, Bayar

1. Even in terms of population; yet Saudi Arabia is not as populated as the other two. In economic terms, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have higher GDPs than Iran.

2018) as well as its regional policy and security concerns (Jones 1998; Barzegar 2005, 2008, 2010; Taremi 2005; Juneau 2014; Saikal 2020), have been studied from various perspectives. The determinants of Turkish foreign policy (Mufti 1998; Aydin 1999; Robins 2003; Kirisci 2004) and its regional policy especially after the introduction of the notion of “strategic depth” (Martin 2004; Murinson 2006; Aras 2009; Ennis and Momani 2013) have been scrutinized. Furthermore, studies on Saudi’s relations with Iran and their rivalries (Russell 2004; Mosallanezhad 1395 [2016]; Yahiaev 2007; Friedman 2016; Forouzan and Alishahi 2018) and Turkey-Iran relations and competitions (Aras and Polat 2008, Kooshki and Kiani 1394 [2015]; Athari, Hajimineh, and Enayati Shabkolaei 1392 [2013]; Azimzadeh Ardabili, Masoudnia, and Emamjomezadeh 1396 [2017]) clarify some aspects of the relations of the three regional powers in the Middle East. Yet the security dilemma resulting from their perceptions of threat, specifically during the last decade, has less been focused on.

The questions I address here are 1) how the perception of these countries of their security and their understanding of threats against it have been shaped and 2) how these may lead to security dilemma in the region. I will argue that these countries’ understating of their own vulnerabilities and their role conceptions lead to their definition of their regional environment and constitute their perceptions of threats. Yet these perceptions have been shaped in a way that balancing behaviors based on them may lead others to see them as threats against their security. In other words, while the three countries see themselves as defensive, others might perceive them as more or less offensive entities. In order to support my argument, I make use of historical empirical data as well as analytical description of these data.

The first part of this article sets the conceptual framework for the study. In the second part, it will shown how Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia can be or are actually perceived by others as threat. The third part of the article deals with their own perceptions of threat and the roots of these perceptions in order to show how

these perceptions lead to foreign policy behaviors that may be taken by others as threatening. The concluding part will emphasize that mutual understanding of others' concerns and attempts for reducing them through confidence building measures can contribute to less costly policies for each country and more stability in the region

I. Conceptual Framework

States require security and in their attempts to acquire it face a condition in which their security might be more in jeopardy since "competitive systems of interaction are prone to security 'dilemmas'" (Wendt 1992: 407). It makes states, even the status quo states, to prepare for the worst (Hacke and Puglierin 2007: 372). Thus security dilemma emerges when two states,

Believe that power is a means toward security [and] both seek to accumulate more and more power. Because even primarily defensive capability will inevitably contain some offensive capability, many of the measures adopted by one side for its own security can often threaten, or be perceived as threatening, the security of the other side even if both sides merely want to defend their security.

The important point is that the states involved in security dilemma do not necessarily have malign intentions and at the same time attempt to increase their power (Tang 2009: 594-555).¹

John Hertz (1950), who introduced the concept, sees security dilemma not just as a structural condition (Hacke and Puglierin 2007: 372), but also as a social constellation (Sylvest 2008: 448; Stirk 2005: 298). His conceptualization of security dilemma as a socially constructed situation directs attention to context, interactions, perceptions, and interpretations (Sylvest 2008: 448-449).²

1. It is worth mentioning that Mohammad Ayoob (2001) adds another aspect to security dilemma. He argues that third world state see security dilemma more as a domestic condition.

2. There are differences among major theorists of security dilemma in their

It is actors' perceptions that gives meaning to international life (see Stirk 2005: 302). According to Herz, "social actions, based on world-views and the perceptions of previous actions, have an impact on other actors and their actions, giving rise to a cumulative historical process" (Sylvest 2008: 449).¹ Thus, foreign policies of states as social actions are based on perceptions and in particular their perceptions of threat. The importance of perceptions is underlined by many IR scholars and foreign policy analysts, including Robert Jervis (1976), Stephen Walt (1996), Neoclassical Realists (see Rose 1998: 157-159), and constructivists (for example, Wendt 1999).

For balance of threat theorists, state behavior is a response to perceived threats (Wivel 2008: 296). A "threat is defined as a situation in which one agent or group has either the capability or intention to inflict a negative consequence on another agent or group". Threats against states can be military, economic, or cultural (Rousseau 2007: 745). From this point of view, in addition to "power possession, military capabilities, geographical proximity, and other states' perceptions on how one intends to use this power are important. States whose intentions are viewed as aggressive will be perceived as more threatening than states whose intentions are viewed as benign" (Wivel 2008: 297). In other words, states balance against those states they perceive to be offensive. Yet this perception may lead to a "spiral of suspicion" that would lead to war (Walt 1996: 33).

Thus the images of the other side as "hostile" would not easily change even if evidence is to the contrary. It is because "people's belief structures tend toward consistency or balance" (Jervis 1976: 117). In a balanced structure, relations among good elements are positive and relations among bad elements are negative This

conceptualization. See Tang 2009.

1. This is contrary to Kenneth Waltz's structuralist account. He believes "to incorporate threat or the various motivations of states would infuse theories of international politics with unit-level factors" (Waltz 1996: 56).

makes the foundation for interpreting others' behaviors. In the words of Jervis (1976: 145), "in the interpretation of other states' behavior... expectations create predispositions that lead actors to notice certain things and to neglect others, to immediately and often unconsciously draw certain inferences from what is noticed, and to find it difficult to consider alternatives".

Constructivists show how identities affect actors' perception of threat. As Wendt argues, "States act differently toward enemies than they do toward friends because enemies are threatening and friends are not" (Wendt 1992: 397). The way in which a state defines itself and others is the effect of historical narratives, discourses, role conceptions, and interactions. It is through uncovering these than one may reach the reason for perceptions being the way they are.

Yet perceiving others as threat and hence security dilemmas are neither universal nor unchangeable. Threats are socially constructed not natural (Wendt 1992: 405). Therefore, changes in identity, roles, and interactions may remove specific perceptions of threat. Many states do not suffer from security dilemmas in their relations (Hopf 1998: 188). If states follow a minimum of reason and the will to survive, security dilemma could be mitigated, for example, through the development of collective security systems (Hacke and Puglierin 2007: 372-375). Security dilemmas are the result of practices of states and intersubjective understandings created in and through their interactions (see Wendt 1992: 407). The problem is, however, that "for almost any role identity, practices and information that challenge it are likely to create cognitive dissonance and even perceptions of threat, and these may cause resistance to transformations of the self and thus to social change" (Wendt 1992: 411). Perhaps it is only through awareness of this that the dilemma can be avoided.

II. Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey as Regional Powers

During the last decade or so, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have been pursuing most active foreign policies in the region. All of

them can be more or less taken as regional powers seeking more influence in the region. Before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, all three were part of the Western alliance. Iran was the main ally of the US in the Persian Gulf; Saudi Arabia was the second regional partner of the US; and Turkey was a member of NATO. The 1979 revolution changed Iran's role in the region. The idea of exporting the revolution could be seen as being threatening to many ruling elites in the region. Despite its being invaded by Iraq in 1980, Iran was active in regional affairs mainly through its support for Palestinians and its opposition to Israel as well as its support for revolutionary movements. Saudi Arabia and to a lesser degree Turkey had their concerns about the revolutionary Iran and Saudis in particular tried to contain Iran's influence in the region through regional mechanisms such as the GCC in the Persian Gulf region and support for Iraq in its war against Iran.

The end of the Cold War and in particular the rise of popular movements in Arab countries led to changes at the global and regional level that made Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia more active in the region. Each of the three countries became involved in regional affairs more than before and this became a source of concern for the other two. The following section will focus on how this was realized.

Iran's pragmatic foreign policy that was shaped during the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and followed by President Khatami (1997-2005) changed to a more ideological-revolutionary one with the presidency of Ahmadinezhad (2005-2013). His anti-status quo discourse, based on anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric with his emphasis on peoples instead of states in foreign policy, had already generated concerns among countries in the region. Furthermore, Iran's nuclear program, which was announced repeatedly to be peaceful, generated concerns about its possible military intentions. Even the possibility for a nuclear Iran seemed to be acceptable to a large part of the elite in the Middle East because they thought it could balance Muslim countries' position *vis-à-vis* Israel (see Russell 2004). This, however, changed

later.¹ Iran's active policy towards Iraq and its support for the *Arab Spring*, or as it is called in Iran, the *Islamic Awakening*, was taken as intervention in other countries' domestic affairs, especially in cases where a Shiite minority was involved, as in Bahrain. Later, when the movement in Syria reached a point where the intervention of other countries could lead to a fundamental change in Syria, the main Arab ally of Iran in the axis of resistance against Israel, Iran increased its support for Bashar Assad. This was again taken as a part of the expansion of Iranian influence in the region or over-extension. When Shiite Houthis in Yemen were under pressure and Iran supported them, it was taken as interfering in the "back-yard" of Saudi Arabia. These all articulated with the concept of *Shiite Crescent* to make an offensive image of Iran specifically in many Arab countries (see, for various interpretations, Forouzan and Alshahi 2018; Mosallanezhad 1395 [2016]).

Saudi Arabia had been seen as a status quo power in the region for a long time. Yet it has had a record of high military expenditure in the region for decades. It has sought to arm itself to the latest military technologies available. During the 2000s it was reported to have sought nuclear weapons. The missiles capable of being armed with nuclear warheads had been bought from China and there had been negotiations with Pakistan that were taken to be for acquiring nuclear weapons (see Russell 2005).² Saudis have for many years continued to be one of the largest spenders on military equipment and this could have negative consequences due to their role in the formation of others' perception of threat. It

1. The reasons for this change does not seem to have been explored. Yet one may think of factors such as developments in the Middle East together with changes in Iran's policies during the presidency of Ahmadinezhad to efforts by Americans and Israelis to change this image of Iran's nuclearization.

2. Of course Turki al-Faisal, Saudi former head of intelligence agency, underlines Saudis seek a nuclear-free zone in the region and the Kingdom pursues nuclear energy as an alternative source of energy (see Dan Drollett 2016).

is worth mentioning that in 2017 Saudi Arabia was the world's third largest military spender with highest military burden at 10 percent of GDP. It is worth mentioning that in 2017 Iran's military expenditure was \$14.5 billion and that of Turkey was \$18.2 billion compared to Saudi Arabia's \$69.4 billion (SIPRI 2018: 2). This has been taken as a matter of concern by others.

The support for radical fundamentalist Sunni groups such as Taliban as well as the alleged ties besides doctrinal similarities between al-Qaida and dominant version of Islam in Saudi Arabia were taken as signs of increasing influence throughout the region through non-state radical actors acting as proxies. Interventions in Libya, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, etc. all could be taken as signs of a new offensive approach to the region. Post-King Salman developments with increasing anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite rhetoric together with unprecedented cooperation with and closeness to Israel and a seemingly unconditional support by the US, massive bombardments in Yemen, hostility towards Qatar, more involvement in Syria and Iraq were among factors that led to the formation of an expansionist image of Saudis (see, for example, al-Alam 2018; Mousavian [2018]). Thus, there has been much doubt about "balancing behavior" of Saudi Arabia in the last few years as it seems the country may seek hegemony in the region.

Turkey for a long time showed little interest in the Middle East. Yet, after the end of the Cold War and with changes in geopolitical considerations besides domestic political changes due to the rise of moderate Islamists to power, this gradually changed. Turkey began to redefine its relations with the Middle East on the basis of what was called "neo-Ottomanism" and the new strategic doctrine of "Strategic Depth" (see Mourinson 2006; Martin 2004). Davutoğlu (2008) saw Turkey as a "central country with such an optimal geographic location [that] cannot define itself in a defensive manner." This could have been read as announcing an offensive strategy, even if he also emphasized Turkey's role as "providing security and stability not only for itself, but also for its

neighboring regions” (Aras 2009: 4). Many analysts saw the new doctrine as the sign of the beginning of a new era of expanding the sphere of influence of Turkey as the “territorial limits to Turkish involvement in neighboring countries has disappeared in this new mindset” (Aras 2009: 4). A change in its Middle East policy objective from a regional power to a central power could be interpreted as such. As a result, Turkey’s support for uprisings during the Arab Spring and its operations in Syria were taken by some as being expansionist activities.

Thus, there *can* be an expansionist or offensive image of these countries. Yet it is not necessarily so. In what follows I try to show that if we look at major general threat perceptions of the three countries and the way in which they define themselves and see their environment, we may find that they try to be secure in a more or less defensive way under conditions of uncertainty.

III. Middle East Regional Powers and Their Threat Perceptions

Iran’s Perception of Threats: The main key to understanding Iran’s threat perception as well as its foreign policy is the concept of “strategic loneliness” (see Juneau 2014). The country is geopolitically located between the Middle East, Caucasus, Central Asia, and South Asia, which have been more or less unstable regions in the world (Jones 1998: 43). At the same time, it is different from other states in these regions: it is not Arab, it is not Sunni, it is not Turk, although parts of its population are. This loneliness which is “primarily the result of structural factors inherent in its place in the regional and international systems” (Juneau 2014: 92) has been even exacerbated after the 1979 revolution.

Historically Iran finds itself as having been victimized by foreign powers and neighboring countries and has rarely been supported by others in these cases. It was partitioned twice between Britain and Russia (1907 and 1915), it was invaded by allied forces during the World War I and World War II despite its

declaration of neutrality (1914-15, 1941), and its democratic government was overthrown by the US coup (1953). Its experience in the eight-year war with Iraq has been taken as another major example of its victimization and loneliness (see Barzegar 2010: 174-175). These experiences have intensified its suspicion of others. A sense of being the target of others' plans and conspiracies has become a part of its culture, both at elite and popular levels. There is an ever-present concern about others' attempts for penetration into the country and influencing its policies, jeopardizing its territorial integrity, and undermining its stability.

This sense of being historically victimized by others and being lonely is one of the main sources of its preoccupation with independence and justice. A "maximalist" understanding of independence that I have elsewhere called "*hyper-independence*" was shaped after the 1979 Revolution and the idea of *justice* that had its roots in historical nationalist narratives and religious discourses became dominant in foreign policy discourse (see Moshirzadeh 2007: 528-535). Shiite/Islamic norms besides revolutionary ideals influenced by leftist and Third-Worldist discourses with their anti-Western/anti-American connotations laid the foundation for principles such as the unity of the Muslim world: supporting the oppressed; the survival of the Islamic Republic of Iran; and exporting the revolution to become ideational pillars of Iran's foreign policy (see Moshirzadeh 2010). Within this discourse the US, as the most recent "imperialist power", and Israel as the most oppressive against Muslims became the evil others. Four decades of interactions with the US and Israel fixed their image as enemies and they have been considered as the main sources of threat to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Territorial disintegration is taken as another threat against Iran's security. Iranian sense of nationalism makes the integrity of the country as one of the main pillars of Iran's national interest. The fact that most of Iranian ethnic and religious minorities reside along borderlines makes the central government more sensitive to

external and domestic forces that may affect stability in these areas and/or support separatist forces. Radical Sunni fundamentalism as a threat is framed to an extent within this general perception.

Iran has hardly ever had perceived direct major threat by its neighbors such as Pakistan and Turkey during the last decades. Although there have been disputes over the three islands in the Persian Gulf, the United Arab Emirates has been perceived to be too weak to cause any serious threat against Iran. Afghanistan in the Taliban era was for a period a source of threat but not anymore. Even Saudi Arabia was seen not so close and much weaker than Iran to pose any serious threat despite all political and ideological differences and disputes. Of course one may say that recently Saudi Arabia has become an important threat due to threatening rhetoric and behavior as well as its ultra-pro-Israeli position in the last few years that have led to a re-evaluation of its role in the region. Yet if any of these countries are perceived to have a role in threatening the integration of Iran, they have been immediately seen as a source of threat.

Among all neighbors, Iraq has been the one to be perceived as a threat and the eight-year war could not but reproduce this perception. Even it may be argued that Iraqi invasion and its territorial claims over parts of Iran, have had a strong impact on Iran's strategic view. Although now Iraq is too weak to be taken as a concern by itself, its containment is one of the goals of Iran's foreign policy (see Ramazani 1992: 394) and in general, the developments therein are very important to Iran.

Thus, a combination of ideological and geopolitical considerations together with historical experiences have contributed to the formation of a constellation of threats as far as Iran is concerned: US and Israel as well as any form of disintegration are the major perceived threats by Iran. Terrorism too in the last few years has become another source of threat. Although Iran has been more or less in control within its territory (except for a few instances of terrorist attacks), it sees terrorist

activities or any sort of domestic instability in its surrounding countries as threatening. And if any of the neighboring countries are perceived to be involved in movements against stability and territorial integration of Iran, they may be taken as threats.

If take these perceived sources of threat are taken as the major drive behind Iran's strategic calculus and foreign policy behavior, Iran's regional engagements might be understood as attempts to control and minimize these threats. Its engagement in Iraq can be primarily seen as an attempt to contain Iraq and "prevent it from re-emerging as a strategic threat."¹ The second reason for Iran to be involved in Iraq is to reduce US presence and influence. The closer the Americans are to Iran, the more they are seen as threatening (see Bongers 2012, Barzegar 2005). The third reason is to stabilize Iraq because instability in Iraq means opportunity for separatism to grow and that is what Iran is very sensitive to (Barzegar 2010: 177-178; see also Taremi 2005). This could be best seen in its reaction to referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran's reaction to the rise of ISIS in Iraq can be interpreted in this light: it was seen as a threat because it was perceived to lead to the emergence of a hostile government in Iraq, could in the long run directly or indirectly jeopardize the unity of Iran, and even some believed it to be created or utilized by Americans and Israelis against Iran. Thus, the rhetoric about Iran's policy in Iraq as a part of "Shi'a axis" (Yahiav 2007) or "Shiite Crescent"² and an attempt for expansion is far from what Iranians understand from their role in Iraq (see Barzegar 2008).

1. Ali Younesi, the former Minister of Intelligence, once said, "For us, Iraq is the most important country in the world." (Quoted in Taremi 2005)

2. It is important to remember that Iranian leaders have always emphasized the unity of Muslims and wish to avoid sectarianism. Of course Iran as a Shiite-majority country has always been concerned with Shiites around the world but not to see the unity of Shiites as a viable reasonable strategic goal particularly due to doctrinal differences among various Shi'ite sects and even incompatibilities in the national interests of Shiite countries.

Iran's friendly relations with Syria and Lebanese Hezbollah is related directly to its relation with US and Israel. In the words of Barzegar (2010: 173), "Iran tried to deter the U.S. or Israeli military threat in the short term and to prevent the institutionalization of a U.S. role in its backyard in the long term." Iran became involved in the Syrian crisis because, with the intervention of the US and Israel, it could lead to the emergence of a pro-US/pro-Israeli government. Furthermore, as in the case of Iraq, the maintenance of Syrian integration has been important to Iran. Another threat that Iranians saw in the crisis was the increasing strength of Radical groups such as the ISIS again with the same concerns mentioned in the case of Iraq.

We may thus see that Iran's perception of threats from other countries are most often indirectly linked to their relations with its arch enemies as well as the direct or indirect impact of their policies on regional stability and/or its domestic stability and territorial integrity.

Turkey's Threat Perception: Turkey, like Iran, is a multi-regional state -- from the Balkans to the Middle East and Central Asia and Caucasus -- that makes it a geopolitically important and unique country. Within the Davutoğlu doctrine of Turkish "Strategic Depth", Turkey, as "a central country with multiple regional identities" (Davutoğlu 2008:78), would occupy an important geopolitical position in these regions. Turkish involvement in regional affairs would be deepened, especially in former Ottoman territories (Aras 2009: 2-7) but it does not seem to have changed the basics of Turkey's perception of threat.

Again, not unlike Iran, Turkey is historically suspicious of its environment and other powers leading to the belief that the Turks can "rest on nothing but their own strength" (Aydin 1999: 152, 162). Furthermore, historical memory has led Turkish leaders to be suspicious of "Western design to fragment Turkey" and weaken it (the so-called "Sèvres Syndrome" or *Sevr Sendromu*), of Arabs in general whose revolt against Ottoman Empire was a "stab in the back" that led to its collapse, and of their neighbors in

general (Robins 2003: 109, 135; Lenore 2004: 159). Thus, caution besides daring are two competing values that shape debates about its foreign policy (Mufti 1998: 33).

To Turkey, external and internal threats are the main preoccupations in strategic planning and foreign policy behavior (see Martin 2004: 164). During the Cold War years, one of Turkey's main security concerns was the Soviet Union. Having a common existential threat perception with the West and in particular the US led to its becoming a part of Western security alliance. Yet after the demise of the Soviet Union, "Turkey and the United States no longer share an existential threat perception" (Taşpinar 2011: 11). Greece and Syria as main external sources of threat due to territorial disputes over Cyprus and Hatay province became Turkey's immediate concerns (Mufti 1998: 34-35). This has made it sensitive to developments in the two countries as well as their relations with other countries, including great powers and neighbors.

The legitimacy and stability of the Republic of Turkey as well as its territorial integration have been the most important priorities any threat against which can be taken as existential. After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Turkey, as a secular republic, could not welcome the export of the Islamic Revolution and hence, Islamists were regarded as the "other" in domestic politics and "Iran was perceived as posing an existential threat to the organizing ideology (secularism) of the Turkish state and as attempting to undermine the domestic legitimacy of the secular government" (Aras and Polat 2008: 505, 506). Yet this changed in the course of time and in a process of de-securitization,¹ Iran was no longer seen as a source of existential threat to Turkey from this point of view.

With the rise of AKP to power in Turkey, a rather different identity for Turkey was envisaged. It could represent a new

1. Although it has been suggested that this desecuritization has been the result of Turkish attempt to EU, one may add other factors such as changes within Iran and Turkey with foreign policy implications.

version of modern reformist Islam (see Tezcur 2010) to be followed as an example in the Muslim world. Hence a new role as its leader emerged that can indirectly affect its perception of threat as well as its perception of opportunities in the region.

Kurdish separatism is another source of threat to the identity and unity of Turkey (Kirisci 2004: 273) exposing it to a “persistent problem” (Lenore 2004: 165). Thus, thwarting “Kurdish regional ambitions” has become a foreign policy priority (Coats 2018). Turkey has seen other countries such as Syria, Iraq, Iran, and even recently, the US, as threatening its security whenever they have been seen as being involved in a sort of relation with the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kudistanê*) or other Kurdish militant groups in Turkey.¹

In recent years, the Syrian crisis as well as developments in Iraqi Kurdistan have led to the intensification of “Kurdish question”. With the empowerment of Iraqi and Syrian Kurds and their wish for a Kurdish state, the threat has been seen as more acute. As far as Iraqi Kurdistan is concerned, Turkish position was similar to other states in the region (and in particular Iran) that saw the referendum in Kurdistan negatively (see Reuters 2017).

In Syria, Turkey has been sensitive to Kurdish question for a long time. When Hafiz al-Assad let Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, stay in Syria, this sensitivity was intensified and when in 1990 he was expelled, the relations between the two countries warmed (for the de-securitization of Syria, see Aras and Polat 2008). With the emergence of public demonstrations against Bashar al-Assad, however, Turkey condemned the suppression of the opponents and began its support for anti-Assad forces. It later became more involved in the crisis when Kurdish forces became stronger in the course of conflict. It thus declared a direct military intervention and carried out air strikes against Kurdish forces in order to contain their territorial gains. However, it seems that

1. Since Iran has had the same concern, it has always saw this as a misperception as far as it is concerned.

Turkish involvement was seen as having more implications beyond deterring a Kurdish state to be formed. Besides concerns about refugee problem and unrest in Kurdish areas in Turkey, some related the operations to a more ambitious strategic vision. Yet in the course of time, Turkey did not show much of such an approach anymore.

Terrorism is another source of threat to Turkey. Although there have been analyses that charged the Turkish government with supporting or at least having a kind of compromise with radical fundamentalist groups such as ISIS in Syria (see Reuters 2015), Turkey participated in operations against ISIS during the Syrian crisis. It also became the victim of its attacks several times. Furthermore, ISIS and similar groups may become a source of threat for Turkish government from an identity point of view. Therefore, such groups can be perceived as sources of threat against Turkey not only in material terms but also from an ideational point of view.

In sum, as far as recent developments in the Middle East are concerned, Turkey's major threat perceptions are rooted in Kurdish problem and to a lesser degree terrorism. These have led it become involved in military operations beyond its borders that may have caused security concerns for other actors in the region.

Saudi Arabia's Threat Perception: Saudi Arabia, unlike Iran and Turkey, is not a historically "natural" country; it was actually "created". Yet unlike other countries in the region, its creation was the result of internal dynamics and not decisions by foreign countries (Leverett and Leverett 2011). It is a large and wealthy country armed well with military equipment and by virtue of "its size, history, resources, and geostrategic position, Saudi Arabia considers itself to be a pivotal player in Middle Eastern politics and even beyond" (Kamrava 2013: 19). At the same time, it is vulnerable due to its "huge territory, long coastlines, porous borders, and exposed oil facilities" and potential threats are more or less located on all sides in its immediate neighborhood (Nonneman 2005: 327; Safran 1988: 1-3).

Providing domestic and external security are the two main aims pursued by Saudi leaders. Even it is believed that the way in which external security is pursued is to a large degree determined by domestic security concerns. The centrality of both regime and national security is the foundation of its foreign relations (Safran 1988: 1). As Nonneman (2005) argues, domestic security ideally roots in legitimacy and the legitimacy of al-Saud rests on: “(1) personal charisma; (2) tradition and maintenance of values; (3) patronage and delivering quality of life; (4) effective dealing with the outside world; [and] (5) performance as the protector of the Holy Places and of Islam” (Nonneman 2005: 18-19). The outside world and in particular the regional environment can affect most of these and thus create perceptions of threat from outside against internal security.

“Tradition and maintenance of values” mostly refers to Wahhabi reading of Islam whose main guardians are the *ulema*. Wahhabi Sunni identity of the Kingdom has more precautions than one might first imagine. It traditionally lies in special relations between al Saud and Wahhabi *ulema* dating back to the pact between Mohammad al-Saud and Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab signed in 1744 through which the “Saudi Amir was acknowledged as the political leader and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab got the control over religious interpretation” (see Rasheed 2002: 17-18). Wahhabism is threatened if a rival set of values or another reading of Islam presents itself as a viable alternative. In a similar vein, Saudi’s role as the protector/leader of the Islamic world can be challenged by rival claimants. Thus, one should not forget the role identities the Saudis identify themselves with: a Wahhabi Sunni country, the leader of Islamic World as “*khadim al haramain al sharifayn*,” (serving the holy shrines in Mecca and Medina) and also the leader of the Arab world. These all affect its interests and concerns.

The quality of life, which is usually taken to be in socio-economic well-being, can be threatened if the revenues of the state (particularly from the oil sector) are interrupted. Failure in foreign

policy can also affect the legitimacy of the system and outside powers taken responsible for that may be perceived as sources of threat.

Saudis have traditionally sought to realize their security through external protection (mainly by the US), collective security through regional cooperation with like-minded countries (the [P]GCC in particular), and heavy purchases of arms. Mabon (2020) sees the regional influence of Saudi Arabia as dependent on its allies. Although balancing has been suggested as the fourth factor (Nonneman 2005: 331), it can be better seen as the result of the three other factors. Since the 1920s and 1930s, the Kingdom has turned to the US as its principal external security partner and “the ultimate guarantee of their security and survival” (Leverett and Leverett 2011). Although during the Obama administration, the Kingdom was not satisfied with US postures, it has found a sort of more or less unconditional support from Americans during the presidency of Donald Trump. The [P]GCC, although has more or less followed Saudi line in the course of time, has suffered from internal disputes, and its internal cohesion has been sustained through a common perception of an external threat. Heavy military purchases have for a long time been a feature of the Kingdom and in the course of time has led to a large set of sophisticated equipment. It is believed that the equipment can to a large degree compensate for the limited quantitative and qualitative human resources.

One may say that even external sources of threat are highly intertwined with domestic security concerns. It seems that Saudis’ main perceived threat is Iran. Although Iran, specifically due to its territory, population, and large economy, has been seen as the more powerful actor in the region, its power *per se* was less considered as a source of threat. Iran has been more seen as a revolutionary and/or Shiite threat. The construction of Shi’ism as the major “other” in Wahhabism has historically led to confrontations within Arab territories and also against individual Shi’as (see Doran 2004; Al-Rasheed 2002: 22; Asriran 1396). In

recent decades, Shiism has increasingly been considered as a source of threat to the legitimacy and unity of the kingdom. On the one hand, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, was seen in itself as presenting a rival revolutionary reading of Islam. On the other hand, the Saudis have always been concerned about the Shiite minority in Eastern Province with their grievances due to a long time of discrimination. This problem could successfully be externalized. Tensions in the Eastern Province that rose with the Iranian Revolution in 1979 led Saudis to perceive Iran as a threat against the stability, legitimacy, and even unity of the Kingdom. Hence, according to WikiLeaks, an “obsession with Iran” has emerged (van den Berg 2017: 8, 2).

Thus Iran’s influence in Iraq after the collapse of Saddam’s regime, has been one of the main concerns of Saudis. They often interpret this as an expansion of Shiite role in the region (Inbar 2006:12).

With the *Arab spring*, the Saudis felt that the influence of the Islamic Republic and its supporters rise even more dramatically (Leverett and Leverett 2011). They see Houthis in Yemen and Bashar al Assad Syria as portions of the so-called “Shiite Crescent” without considering the doctrinal divide between various versions of Shiism. And in Bahrain, without considering the roots of the uprisings, just saw Iran’s hand in the event. In all three cases they intervened militarily: In Bahrain it dispatched military forces to repress popular protests; in Syria it became an active supporter of the armed opposition; and in Yemen it engaged in air strikes leading to human catastrophe (see Tansey *et al.* 2017: 1241, Leverett and Leverett 2011). That is why some believe that Mohammad bin Salman seems to be “buttressing his domestic power by appealing to Sunni sectarian nationalism” (Cockburn 2016).

Another source of threat to Wahhabi identity is from other Sunni readings of Islam with a popular appeal. This includes both more democratic versions – from the Muslim Brotherhood in Arab countries to Islamism in Turkey- and radical violent organizations

such as al-Qaida and ISIS (van den Berg 2017: 3-4). When a synthesis between Salafism and Muslim Brotherhood's ideas led to a new version of Salafism, an internal threat was felt (see Steinberg 2014: 8-9). This is perhaps a more significant threat but it is less reflected in the speeches and positions of Saudi officials. Yet, some observers believe that was why the events leading to Arab Spring were taken as a threat against political legitimacy in Saudi Arabia and led to "unprecedented types of interventions" (Lynch 2016) which made some observers to see the Kingdom as the leader of "the counter-revolution" (Steinberg 2014). In Egypt this led to first supporting for the incumbent regime (Tansey *et al.* 2017: 1241) and later to supporting the Egyptian military coup against the Ikhwan President Muhammad Mursi in July 2013 and placing the Muslim Brotherhood on the list of terrorist organizations (see Steinberg 2014: 7). Even a great part of the severe relations with Qatar is rooted in latter's support for the organization. Turkey too may be seen as a threat due to the fact that it represents a Sunni modern more or less democratic system of governance and some affiliation with Ikhwan and it is also a successful example in economic terms. There are Islamists in Saudi Arabia who wish to follow the Turkish example (see Fararu). Furthermore, some Saudi analysts have suggested that President Erduağan seeks to make himself the leader of Islamic world (Tabnak 1393) and this too can be a perceived as a threat against the role conception of Saudi Arabia.

Thus, it seems that the most immediate threat perceived by al Saud is domestic and relates to internal stability and legitimacy.

Conclusion

Security, both material and ontological, is the main concern and the prior interest of all states. Whatever threatens security is taken seriously. But threats are not necessarily out there but they are perceived. In other words, it is the actors' interpretation of events and other actors' actions that manifests itself in the form of threat. These perceptions usually have their roots in historical narratives,

images of others, ideologies, etc. Yet they can explain a great part of strategic planning and foreign policy. They also have significant implications for their environment and the way in which others perceive them.

As far as the three major regional powers in the Middle East, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, are concerned, one can follow the events in the region to understand how their perceptions of threat have had their consequences. As far as Iran-Turkey relations are concerned, one may see more cooperation than conflict. Although there have been ups and downs in the relations and some degree of deterioration of relations in the course of Syrian crisis and some other cases, they have always managed their conflict of interests and reached some sort of agreement through negotiations at various levels. Turkey and Saudi Arabia, despite differences in their threat perceptions, have not experienced severe relations even if there have been rivalries and concerns. Yet, Iran-Saudi relations and in particular the way in which Saudis have portrayed the image of Iran, have led to much tension and the formation of two opposing coalitions in the region led by the two. The rhetoric exchanges between the two sides have in cases reached open animosity. This can be particularly seen on the part of Saudi officials during the last three years.

Nevertheless, as perceptions are the result of interactions and constructed identities, they may change in the course of time. An awareness of the crucial consequences of animosities as well as recognition of sensitivities and threat perceptions of each other can help the parties to decrease the levels of hostilities. The ups and downs in their relations during the last four decades show the possibilities for change.

Dialogue is the key to solving security issues in the Middle East. The low degree of mutual trust which has historical roots does not mean that confidence building is impossible. Perception of threat are constructed and new types of interactions can lead to their being transformed. If major countries in the region become involved in dialogue, they can reach common fundamental

assumptions on the basis of which they can understand the concerns of others and respect their vital interest. This can in the course of time lead to comprehensive regional security arrangements.

A couple of years ago in a conference in India, the retired Iranian diplomat Seyyed Hossein Mousavian and Albadi from King Faisal Center for Research Islamic Studies reached the conclusion that although Iran and Saudi Arabia have different understandings from Middle East developments, they can look for and agree upon solution which is negotiation and dialogue (see Tabnak 1397 [2018]). There have also been some more recent signs exchanged that may pave the way for a less conflictual approach. If track-two diplomacy is taken seriously and the same example be followed at the official level, one may hope for a more stable and prosperous Middle East in the future.

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