

The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry: A Foreign Policy Analysis Approach

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Abstract: *For decades, scholars and policy makers have debated whether the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is primarily motivated by realist concerns for power, security, and relative gains or constructivist concerns surrounding issues of identity and ideology. This article utilizes the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) approach, an agency-based approach in which concerns regarding relative power and ideology are weighted with attention given to domestic decision-making factors to argue that the rivalry is motivated by issues of power and identity as well as domestic concerns. The author first examines regional history with a focus on the Sunni-Shia Schism and the Iranian Revolution to illustrate the origins of Iran's anti-elitist identity. Next, the FPA approach is employed to discuss diplomacy with a focus on Saudi and Iranian relations with Israel and the Iran Nuclear Deal to show how Saudi Arabia is consistently motivated by power and relative gains while Iran is consistently motivated by power, identity, and domestic concerns. Finally, FPA is used to explore the proxy conflict in Iraq to show how Saudi Arabia's motivations for power and Iran's motivations for power and its anti-elitist identity are exhibited in neighboring states. With FPA, scholars and policy makers will gain a better understanding of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and will thus be better positioned to manage it to work towards a more secure and stable Middle East.*

Introduction

The Middle East is in disarray. The two major powers in the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran, fan the flames of regional conflict. Their nearly forty years long rivalry shows no sign of abating. In the face of increasing numbers of civil wars, failed states, and numerous terrorist groups plaguing the region, the solution for bringing about regional stability remains unclear. Should the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran escalate, it may provoke increased great power involvement potentially sparking a global conflict.

After almost four decades of unrest, it is surprising and unfortunate that policy makers and scholars cannot arrive at a consensus regarding the best way to manage the region's troubles, and they have long debated whether the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a result of geopolitics or ideas. In the vernacular of international relations (IR) theory, the debate is whether the rivalry is primarily motivated by realist concerns for power, security, and relative gains or constructivist concerns surrounding identity and ideology.¹

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¹ Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2014), 41.

However, the region of the Middle East and the relationships within it are too complicated to be addressed through the prism of only one theory. The traditional ‘either-or’ approach employed by the bulk of policy makers and scholars inhibits appreciation of the nuanced motivations behind Saudi and Iranian policies. Although power and identity offer insights into the conflict, they provide an incomplete understanding of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Equally problematic, these traditional approaches fail to factor in domestic political concerns on the part of both states. Thus, an unconventional perspective, the foreign policy analysis (FPA) approach is required to analyze the rivalry.

This article employs FPA to examine the Saudi-Iranian relationship in order to prove that the rivalry is motivated by issues of power, identity, and domestic politics. First, an examination of the regional history illustrates that the origins of Iran’s anti-elitist identity stem from the Sunni-Shia schism and the Iranian Revolution. Next, the article analyzes Saudi and Iranian relations with Israel and the Iran Nuclear Deal using the FPA approach to show how Saudi Arabia is consistently motivated by power and relative gains while Iran is consistently motivated by power, identity, and domestic concerns. Finally, the proxy conflict in Iraq exemplifies how Saudi Arabia’s motivations for power and Iran’s motivations for power as well as its anti-elitist identity impact neighboring states.

Terminology

Before analyzing relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is necessary to establish first the theoretical underpinnings of this essay and define the central concepts that will be employed to explain the observed behavior of these states. In particular, a concise overview of realism, constructivism, and foreign policy analysis shall be provided, with only enough detail provided in each summary to guide the reader through the subsequent analysis.

Realism

As the oldest of the theories being applied in this article, realism offers a natural starting point. Its assumptions are best encapsulated by John J. Mearsheimer. According to Mearsheimer, classical realists believe that human beings are genetically disposed to grasping for power. Since states are populated with people of these same atavistic appetites, it follows that leader and subject individually or en masse fall prey to these predatory instincts.²

Necessity is another core concept of realism. The relationships between states are structured by anarchy. States cannot be reliably recognized as friend or foe on sight, and tragically, reveal themselves as foes only when it is too late to defend against them. Neighboring states cannot know any other state’s intentions, and so each raises arms and walls against the other, just in case. With unknowable intentions, but known shows of force and strength, each state falls into a race for power.³ If a state loses a contest, it is destroyed. Anarchy demands prudence. This insight frees the theorist from having to consider peculiarities of individual states. Culture and government do not influence their behaviors. Inner workings and complications are immaterial. Every state remains surrounded by other states, and no matter their character, they must compete. They are “black-boxes,” impenetrable and irreducible, but uniform in output.⁴

² John J. Mearsheimer, “Structural Realism,” in Timothy Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith. *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 77-94, 78.

³ Ibid. p. 78

⁴ Ibid.

Structural realism works on five assumptions: firstly, as stated before, states are the actors in an anarchic system. Great powers are the specific focus as actors. Secondly, every state worthy of consideration can do some injury to its competitors. States are dangerous. Thirdly, states have no guarantees of the competitors' behavior. Diplomats lie, regimes change. A state that seeks to shift the balance of power in secret is indistinguishable from the state that legitimately seeks to maintain the balance. These states are respectively referred to as revisionist and status quo. Fourthly, there is no goal that interferes with a state's primary goal, which is survival. Survival is the preservation of borders and the maintenance of self-rule. States naturally pursue other projects, but they cannot reach completion after the expiration of the state. Lastly, states are rational actors. They can make mistakes, and incremental rational acts can still lead to catastrophe, but altogether the actions taken are secondary to the overarching pursuit of power.⁵

This combination of certainties and uncertainties makes for a stew of fear. Without order, armed states are free to plunder wherever and whenever they are able and expect no less of their competitors. The system pressures states to seek revisionist strategies whenever possible.⁶ This compulsory perpetual cycle leads to security dilemma. It rests upon two other patterns of seemingly irrational behavior illustrated by the prisoner's dilemma and the Red Queen effect. An environment of mutual distrust demands that actors forgo the possible benefits of collaboration because the risks of betrayal are too great (utter destruction). The only move is to keep the opponent from power. But these moves demand countermoves by the opponent and countermoves go back and forth because every gain in power must be matched.⁷

Constructivism

Constructivists undertake their explanation of state behavior from a radically different perspective. According to constructivists, while all events occur within the current political structure that exists, it is not only the structure but also ideas that urge these events to happen in the first place. While power is a tool, it is ideas that determine how those tools are used.⁸ Constructivists emphasize the role of social constructs and identities in shaping great power politics by establishing the perspective and goals of states that guide their decision-making. These identities can be characterized by norms and rules that specify what behavior is appropriate.⁹ In contrast to structuralists like Mearsheimer, who posit that states always act rationally to maximize their own power, constructivists argue that decisions are not made in a vacuum and the unpredictability of politics necessitates principles to help states understand what the rational course of action is.¹⁰ States are not alike, as realists argue. Indeed they differ in fundamental ways, with their own ideas and histories that influence how they respond to various situations.

Constructivists do not contest that nations pursue their national interests; however, they conceptualize national interests much differently than realists. For constructivists, the identities of states are inherent to how they define their interests. Constructivism revives the elements of circumstance, interpretation, and social relationships in understanding this pursuit (and definition) of self-interest. Material interests are tied to the identity of the state, which cannot be

⁵ Ibid. p. 79-80

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. p. 80-81

⁸ Jeffrey W. Legro, *Rethinking the World*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 3

⁹ K. M. Fierke. "Constructivism," In *International Relations Theories*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, Steve Smith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p 181.

¹⁰ Legro, *Rethinking the World*, p. 25.

detached from interactions with the world.¹¹ Norms, culture, and identity construct the reality that gives meaning to human interactions and experiences, constituting the perspective in which actions are interpreted and consequently how they are responded to. To simplify the distinction between constructivism and realism, in conclusion, we can note that the former locates the primary explanation of state behavior in that particular state's identity, whereas for realists, all states are similarly motivated by the pursuit of power and security.

Foreign Policy Analysis

Although examination of power and identity offer insights into state behavior, they do not provide a nuanced explanation for the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran needed to address regional stability. Equally problematic, these traditional approaches fail to factor in domestic political concerns on the part of both states. Thus, an unconventional perspective, the foreign policy analysis (FPA) approach, is required to analyze the rivalry.

FPA is an agency-based theory in which concerns regarding relative power and ideology are weighted, but with attention given to domestic decision-making factors as well.¹² FPA provides an avenue in which to analyze state behavior without the potentially distorting constraints of realism and constructivism. At its core, FPA offers an “actor-specific focus based upon the argument that all that occurs between nations and across nations is grounded in human decision-makers acting singly or in groups”.¹³ Along with external factors, it considers domestic political concerns and changes in the broader political climate as significant factors in decision making.

This article employs FPA, in addition to realism and constructivism, to examine the Saudi-Iranian relationship in order to demonstrate that the rivalry is motivated by variables described in each of the theories: power, identity, and domestic politics. Of the three theories, FPA will be accorded predominant explanatory significance, because through FPA, policy-makers can understand this relationship more holistically.

History

The Sunni-Shia Schism

Although conflict between the Sunni and Shia began over 1,000 years before the modern states of Saudi Arabia or Iran came into existence, the Sunni-Shia Schism is critical to understanding the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The Schism is significant because it begets the narrative used by Iran to oppose what it considers elitist Western, and subsequent Saudi influence, and thus champion the rights of oppressed Muslims. Iran will go on to utilize this narrative to amass political legitimacy. The Schism's ideological importance lies in the narrative and not the theological doctrine that stems from the event. Sunni-Shia doctrinal differences prove largely insignificant in the rivalry, given Iran's stringent support for Sunni groups such as Hamas and Shia offshoots such as the Alawites, which share little doctrinally with the Twelver branch followed by the Iranians. The narrative that surrounds the Schism lays the groundwork for the Iranian Revolution over a thousand years later and must be understood to fully comprehend Iran's self-view and identity.

¹¹ Fierke, “Constructivism,” p. 182.

¹² Juliet Kaarbo. "A Foreign Policy Analysis Perspective on the Domestic Politics Turn in IR Theory," *International Studies Review* 17, no. 2: 189-216. 2015. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed February 5, 2017).

¹³ *Ibid.*

Following the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 A.D., two main groups debated as to who should lead the Islamic faith and Empire. Those who wanted Abu-Bakr, the prophet's father-in-law, to lead became known as Sunni. Those who wanted Ali, the prophet's cousin and son-in-law, to lead became known as Shia. Supporters of Abu-Bakr were victorious as he became the first leader, or Caliph, in 632 A.D.¹⁴ In the minds of the Shia, Abu Bakr's ascendance to the Caliphate over Ali was the first instance of Sunnis disrespecting the Prophet — as they believed political succession should have occurred based on bloodline, which would have made Ali first in line to succeed the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁵

The Schism between Sunni and Shia grew more intense when Ali's son Husayn, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, led a rebellion against the Caliphate in 680 A.D. The Caliph at the time was Yazid, who had only ascended to the Caliphate because of his father, the previous Caliph and rival of Ali, Muawiyah, designating control to him. Yazid's rise to the Caliphate, in the mind of Husayn was improper and illegitimate, as the previous Caliphs had been chosen by elite members of the Muslim community.¹⁶ The uprising ended in failure at the Battle of Karbala with Husayn, along with his family and supporters, being killed.¹⁷ Shia Muslims look at this battle as the "moment when the sanctity of the prophet was violated" — thus making Husayn a martyr.¹⁸ For Shia Muslims and Iranians, the Battle of Karbala is an informing example of elitist powers, in this case the Sunnis, disrespecting and oppressing weaker factions.

Today, the narrative from the Schism and the Battle of Karbala remain key aspects of the Iranian identity. Furthermore, the narrative justifies Iran's support for Hezbollah, informs caricatures of Saudi Arabia as an elitist Western puppet, and catalyzes Iranian involvement in the region's many proxy wars as Iran plays the role of the less powerful actor standing up to a more powerful entity. Yet, socially constructed ideas, such as identity, are not enough to completely explain the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia or the behaviors through which the rivalry is played out.

The Iranian Revolution

Issues of power and identity are both invaluable when discussing Saudi-Iranian relations. However, when utilized in isolation each provides an incomplete understanding of the conflict. Saudi Arabia and Iran are not *both* motivated by concerns for power nor are they *both* motivated by ideas. If concerns for power and relative gains drove both states, Iran would be more cooperative with the West to usurp Saudi Arabia's place as the West's premier regional power broker. If Iran were to be more cooperative, Saudi Arabia could be more isolated from its primary patron, the U.S., providing Iran with an advantage politically and militarily vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia. Although the Nuclear Deal was a rapprochement with the West, Iran still largely pursues an agenda that directly collides with the objectives of the U.S. at the cost of Iran's relative power in the region. Iran's rebirth following the 1979 Revolution spawned a narrative which emphasized that it must oppose Western influence in the region and function as the champion of the Muslim world. This narrative became a central part of the Iranian identity.

¹⁴ "Abu Bakr," Encyclopædia Britannica Online. June 8, 2016, Accessed September 10, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abu-Bakr>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "The Caliph - Part 2: Division - Featured Documentary." Al Jazeera English, July 27, 2016, Accessed September 10, 2016, <http://video.aljazeera.com/channels/eng/videos/the-caliph---part-2:-division---featured-documentary/5044660173001;jsessionid=62AF7E4105BE67B9F566972C7D708AF9>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Similarly, if concerns surrounding issues of identity and ideology drove both states, Saudi Arabia would be a more stringent supporter of Sunni militias which are opposed to Israel and would maintain a more hostile relationship with the U.S. Doing so would provide legitimacy to Saudi Arabia's claim as the leader of the Muslim world, given America's unpopularity in parts of the Islamic world. However, this is not the case. Saudi Arabia takes a more security-focused approach regarding its relationship with the West and Israel. Saudi Arabia's concern for security in the face of Iranian aggression leads it to maintain a secretive, but well-known, relationship with Israel. This relationship detracts from Saudi Arabia's narrative of Islamic legitimacy as many everyday Arabs, the so-called *Arab Street*, view pro-Israeli policy as detrimental towards the cause of Muslims.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia feels that the benefits of allying with Israel to oppose Iran outweigh the costs; a behavior best explained from a security-focused perspective. The development and importance of these behaviors of Iran and Saudi Arabia can be illustrated through an examination of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 proved a watershed incident not only for Saudi-Iranian relations, but also for how the modern Middle East functions. The 1979 Iranian Revolution led to Iran undergoing a rebirth and becoming the prime geopolitical and religious rival of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East. Iran's narrative to oppose Western influence in the region and fight for the rights of oppressed Muslims stems in large part from the 1953 coup conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.), as it left a deep scar in the minds of Iranians. Iran wishes to determine the destiny of its own state as well as the Gulf region without interference from the West or Saudi Arabia. FPA's perspective is required to understand the Revolution as issues of power, identity, and domestic politics each played a role in the uprising's materialization.

Prior to 1979, Saudi-Iranian relations were generally cordial. As no opportunity existed for hostility, the C.I.A. organized a coup in 1953 to overthrow Mohammad Mosaddeq, the Iranian Prime Minister who wished to nationalize the British petroleum interests in the country, and installed a Pro-Western ruler, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, in his place.²⁰ The coup prevented any rivalry with Saudi Arabia from forming given that Iran's government was both secular and in check by America.

Enter Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a religious Shia scholar who was an outspoken critic of the Shah's secular reforms. Khomeini was the leading figure in crafting the narrative used by Iranian leaders today, which stresses opposing the West and standing up for the rights of Muslims. Khomeini was exiled in 1964 due to his critical opinions of the U.S.-installed Shah. Nevertheless, he continued to gain popularity as his supporters spread his anti-Western, pro-Islamic message across Iran.²¹ Along with calling for an end to Iran's secularization, Khomeini also criticized the Iranian government for its ties to America and Israel, two states which heavily meddled in the region's affairs in the view of many Iranians. In addition, he called for an end to the concessions granted to the U.S., which gave American military personnel diplomatic immunity.²² The anti-elitist message by Khomeini, which criticized the Shah's policies for only benefitting the Iranian elite and Americans, was reminiscent to the reformist message by Ali and Shia leaders in Islam's early years.

¹⁹ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*.

²⁰ "Mohammad Mosaddeq," Encyclopedia Britannica Online. May 31, 2013, Accessed September 13, 2016. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mohammad-Mosaddeq>

²¹ Ibid.

²² "Imam Khomeini's Biography," Khamenei.ir, Accessed November 09, 2016, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/2116/Imam-Khomeini-s-Biography>.

Domestic factors were vital in the Revolution's success as Khomeini's populist rhetoric resonated with large numbers of poor and unemployed Iranians who were disillusioned with the Shah's secular and failed economic policies. In January 1979, the Shah was overthrown. Following the Shah's removal, Khomeini returned from exile on February 1st to crowds of rejoicing supporters and by April declared himself as the leader of Iran.²³ Khomeini's capacity to play on regional power and ideological concerns by using the narrative outlined above coupled with his drawing attention to domestic troubles in Iran once more indicates the utility provided by FPA in understanding not only the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, but Iran's rebirth following the Revolution which allowed the rivalry to materialize.

After the formation of Iran as an Islamic Republic, Iran's exhibition of its anti-elitist identity and its motivation for power are most immediately seen with its conflict with Saudi Arabia to be leader of the Muslim world and its conflict with Iraq for geopolitical supremacy. Iran's claim to leadership through Islamic legitimacy led to an inherent clash with Saudi Arabia; previously the only state in the region which declared legitimacy through Islam, as it is home to Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina.²⁴ Iran pushed its narrative as the champion of the Muslim world by rhetorically attacking and discrediting the Islamic legitimacy of Saudi Arabia by citing its close ties with elitist Western powers.²⁵

This attempt to undermine Saudi Arabia's legitimacy and to speak directly to the Muslim world sought to shift the balance of power in the region in Iran's favor by driving a wedge between Arabs and Riyadh.²⁶ Iranian leaders wished to cause massive domestic unrest to vex and disrupt the ruling regime of Saudi Arabia to leave Iran as the unopposed hegemon of the Middle East and leader of Islam. This was most clearly seen when Iran utilized the grievances of the minority Shia population in Saudi Arabia, which was heavily discriminated against, to encourage further unrest among the oppressed population. As a result, there were widespread riots in the Kingdom's Eastern province, an area containing large numbers of Shia, in the 1970s and 1980s. Saudi officials responded forcefully, and in 1979 used 20,000 members of the National Guard to end the public Ashura celebration, one that had not taken place since 1913, to quell support for the Iranian revolution.²⁷

Hezbollah's founding in Lebanon in the 1980s also demonstrated Iran's desire to gain influence in the region following the Revolution.²⁸ Regarding geopolitics, Hezbollah provides an avenue for Iran to project its power across the region to the Levant to pursue its strategic interests in Syria by supporting the Assad regime, and in Lebanon by opposing Israel. Regarding Iranian identity, Hezbollah's military wing's vexation of Israel and the West provide Iran legitimacy in its ideological narrative of opposing Israeli and Western influence and championing the rights of Muslims. The organization's manifesto reads, "our primary assumption in our fight against Israel states that the Zionist entity is aggressive from its inception, and built on lands wrested from their owners, at the expense of the rights of the Muslim people".²⁹ In addition, Hezbollah's active social service wing further reinforces Iran's

²³ "Mohammad Mosaddeq." Accessed September 13, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mohammad-Mosaddeq>

²⁴ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 51.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁹ Jonathan Masters, "Hezbollah," Council on Foreign Relations, January 3, 2014, Accessed November 07, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/lebanon/hezbollah-k-hizbollah-hizbullah/p9155>.

motivation to stand up for the oppressed, as the Shia group provides a great deal of services to Muslims in Lebanon. For example, "Hezbollah operates three hospitals, 12 health centers, 20 infirmaries, 20 dental clinics [and].... provides low-income students with scholarships, financial assistance and books, buying in bulk and selling at reduced prices; it also operates lending libraries for students."³⁰

Saudi Arabia's top concern remains security following the Iranian Revolution. Saudi Arabian officials began strengthening geopolitical ties with the U.S. in the early 1980s to balance against Iran, a trend that has continued in recent decades, detracting from Saudi Arabia's claim of functioning as the champion of the Muslim world. Due to its increasing ties with the U.S., Saudi Arabia became more secure and its relationship with Iran became more aggravated, given Iranian opposition to Western intervention and influence in the Middle East.

Diplomacy

Relations with Israel

An examination of Saudi Arabia and Iran's respective relationships with Israel provide significant insight as to how both states act in regard to their respective motivations. FPA is the ideal theoretical perspective to use when discussing Saudi and Iranian relations with Israel because both the issues of power and identity are at play. As previously stated, Saudi Arabia's concerns for security and relative gains lead it to maintain a covert partnership with Israel to balance against a rising Iran. Iran, in contrast, maintains a hostile relationship with Israel for reasons of power and identity given its goal for regional superiority, and its self-view as the liberator of the Muslim world.

While Saudi Arabia maintains no formal diplomatic ties with Israel because it does not recognize Israel's legitimacy, a closer examination reveals that Saudi Arabia and Israel are closer than they publicly appear. Saudi Arabia's decision to covertly cooperate with Israel reveals its acknowledgement that overt cooperation would damage its reputation as the leader of Islam given Israel's unfavorable reputation in the Muslim world. The Saudi-Israeli covert partnership began developing when concerns over a nuclear Iran emerged. In 2009, "Saudi Arabia allegedly tested its air defenses to evaluate Israel's ability to use Saudi territory for a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. During a June 2015 Council of Foreign Relations event in Washington, representatives of Israel and Saudi Arabia revealed covert diplomatic meetings between the two countries over Iran's nuclear ambitions."³¹ Moreover, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a regional security organization involving Saudi Arabia and various other Gulf states, and Israel also share intelligence, which suggests deeper ties than both sides publicly acknowledge.³²

Iran has maintained its hostile relationship with Israel since 1979, remaining consistent with its ideological stance against imperialist influence in the Middle East. Iran views Israel's existence as illegitimate as it disrespects the rights of the Palestinian people and is a Western satellite. Iran frequently paints itself as the liberator of the Palestinians against the oppressive Israeli government. For example, Supreme Leader Khamenei in 2014 said, "This barbaric,

³⁰ Shawn Teresa Flanigan and Mounah Abdel-Samad, "Hezbollah's Social Jihad: Nonprofits as Resistance Organizations," Middle East Policy Council, June 11, 2009, Accessed April 27, 2017. <http://www.mepc.org/journal/hezbollahs-social-jihad-nonprofits-resistance-organizations>.

³¹ Samuel Ramani. "Israel Is Strengthening Its Ties With The Gulf Monarchies." The Huffington Post. December 9, 2016. Accessed November 23, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/samuel-ramani/why-israel-is-strengthening_b_11946660.html.

³² Ibid.

wolflike & infanticidal regime of Israel which spares no crime has no cure but to be annihilated.”³³ Hossein Salami, the deputy head of the Revolutionary Guard said, "We will chase you [Israelis] house to house and will take revenge for every drop of blood of our martyrs in Palestine, and this is the beginning point of Islamic nations awakening for your defeat.”³⁴

Iran attempts to weaken Saudi Arabia’s claim as the region’s leader by implying Saudi complicity in Western intervention in the region’s affairs and the oppression of Muslims. For example, following a joint statement by Saudi Arabia and Israel condemning Iran for regional instability, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman said, “It’s unfortunate that this occupying regime [of Israel] is counting on the coordination and collaboration of an Islamic country [Saudi Arabia] to further its perpetual anti-Iranian policies.”³⁵ This Iranian official is implying that Saudi Arabia’s cooperation with Israel indicates Saudi Arabia’s passivity in the illegitimate Israeli domination of Palestine. Hence, Iran is communicating that Saudi Arabia is not committed to advocating for the Muslim world.

Iran’s support for Sunni militant groups opposed to Israel illustrate that Iran is more motivated by its identity as the liberator of the Muslim world than its identity as a Shia state. For example, Iran has been a prime supporter for Sunni Palestinian militant groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which have frequently combatted Israel. In 2007, the Jewish Policy Center reported that Iran pledged over \$250 million in aid to Hamas.³⁶ Religious doctrinal differences within Islam are largely insignificant for Iran in its aim to combat Israel. This is evidenced by a statement made by Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, assistant to the Chairman of the Iranian parliament, in February 2017 when he remarked “‘The Palestinian issue can be a common denominator for efforts by the Arab and Islamic world to assemble a unified strategy against the Zionist entity and against terror [or Israel].’”³⁷ The phrase “common denominator” is telling as it implies that non-common denominators exist in the Islamic world, namely sectarianism. By focusing on advocating for Palestine, an issue of agreement, Iran upholds its values as the liberator of the Islamic world, even if it means cooperating with Sunni groups.

The Iran Nuclear Deal

The Iran Nuclear Deal, signed in July 2015 between Iran and the P5+1, the five members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany, has fueled the flames of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, despite being hailed as an international achievement.³⁸ The agreement vowed to stop production of a nuclear bomb in exchange for the removal of Western-imposed economic sanctions which were put in place to force Iran to halt its uranium enrichment program. Iran has benefitted diplomatically, militarily, and economically from the deal, and has improved relations with the U.S. Saudi Arabia views the lifting of Iranian sanctions and Iran’s closer relations with the U.S.

³³ Jeffrey Goldberg. "The Iranian Regime on Israel's Right to Exist." *The Atlantic*. March 09, 2015. Accessed April 15, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/Iranian-View-of-Israel/387085/>.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ Judah Ari Gross. "Iran says Saudi Arabia, Israel working to damage country." *The Times of Israel*. February 20, 2017. Accessed April 23, 2017. <http://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-says-saudi-arabia-israel-working-to-damage-country/>.

³⁶ Wurmser, Meyrav . "The Iran-Hamas Alliance – Jewish Policy Center." *Jewish Policy Center*. January 22, 2016. Accessed April 15, 2017. <https://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2007/08/31/the-iran-hamas-alliance/>.

³⁷ Jack Houry. "Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei: Support for Palestine resistance forces is vital." *Haaretz.com*. February 21, 2017. Accessed April 15, 2017. <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran/1.772985>.

³⁸ "Iran Nuclear Deal: Key Details," January 16, 2016, *BBC News*, Accessed October 17, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33521655>.

to its detriment. Saudi officials feel that a more economically prosperous Iran will lead to better funded, Iran-backed, Shia militias, and a less secure Saudi Arabia. Saudi officials are also highly skeptical of Iran's commitment to the Deal and its promise to cease development of a nuclear weapon. Thus, it has chosen to escalate the rivalry in hopes of baiting Iranian officials into acting aggressively so that Iran may once again be isolated from the international community.

The Deal is best explained using FPA. Iran's decision to engage with the West, its longtime enemy, was motivated by issues of security, identity, and domestic politics. The Deal secured a non-nuclear Saudi Arabia, which ensures Tehran's security and geopolitical positioning vis-a-vis Riyadh. Although Iran will not have a nuclear weapon for the foreseeable future, the West will keep Saudi Arabia from obtaining one as well to maintain regional stability. Should the Saudis develop a nuclear weapon, Iran may once more be put on the path of developing its own nuclear weapon to balance against its rival. The guarantee of a non-nuclear Saudi Arabia is vital to both Iranian and regional security.

In addition, Iran secured funding for its non-state armed groups battling throughout the Middle East from the lifting of sanctions, which also reinforces its geopolitical stature and reach. Funding Hezbollah in the Levant and its Shia militias in Iraq allow for Iran to more easily exert its influence and fill power vacuums in the region. Increased access to funding allows Iran to pursue its objective of increased geopolitical influence in the Middle East, and its objective to use said influence to combat Western and Saudi interference in the region to champion the rights of Muslims.

Domestically, the Iranian economy will recover allowing it to become a competitive oil producer. For example, "Iran is expected to boost production by 400,000 [barrels per day] to reach 4.15 million [barrels per day] production in 2022."³⁹ Iran's economy, given its new freedom, is looking to capitalize and maximize exports. The rehabilitated Iranian economy will ensure domestic stability by easing the financial strain on the Iranian people which existed under sanctions. Iranian unemployment was over 10 percent in late 2015 when the deal was signed.⁴⁰ The lifting of the sanctions will allow Iran to access \$100 billion worth of overseas assets.⁴¹ While the Iranian economy is still suffering with an inflation rate of 10.6 percent and an Iranian youth employment rate of 30 percent, Iran will most likely continue to abide by the agreements set forth in the deal to facilitate the lifting of sanctions and rehabilitate its economy.⁴²

Contrarily, Saudi Arabia was motivated primarily by security concerns. Saudi officials viewed U.S. engagement with Iran as naïve, as they were highly skeptical of Iran's promise to cease development of a nuclear weapon. In response to fear of a nuclear-powered Iran, Saudi Arabia forged a covert relationship with Israel in the name of security, as stated above. Both states share intelligence and have conducted joint military exercises with the goal of striking

³⁹ Rakesh Upadhyay, "Iran And Iraq To Ramp Up Oil Production Despite OPEC Cuts," OilPrice.com, March 09, 2017, Accessed April 23, 2017, <http://oilprice.com/Energy/Crude-Oil/Iran-And-Iraq-To-Ramp-Up-Oil-Production-Despite-OPEC-Cuts.html>.

⁴⁰ "Iran Unemployment Rate 2001-2017 | Data | Chart | Calendar | Forecast," Trading Economics, Accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/iran/unemployment-rate>.

⁴¹ "Iran Nuclear Deal: Key Details," January 16, 2016, BBC News, Accessed October 17, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33521655>.

⁴² Ibid.

Iranian nuclear facilities.⁴³ Consequently, Saudi Arabia's image as the champion of the Muslim world was harmed by its choice to engage in a strategic, security-focused partnership with Israel. The U.S.'s decision to engage with Iran, despite Saudi distrust of the Deal, signaled to Saudi officials that America is willing to distance itself from Saudi Arabia in certain circumstances. Such a move is uncharacteristic of the U.S., as it has consistently supported Saudi Arabia since the 1930s, when Saudi officials encouraged U.S. firms to develop the country's oil. Saudi Arabia derives much of its power, especially regarding security, from its alliance with the U.S.

With the reform-minded President Hassan Rouhani at the helm of Iranian politics, and his acceptance of the Deal, U.S. tensions with Iran have declined, which worries Saudi Arabia. Saudi officials are deeply skeptical regarding Iran's promises to abide by the deal and fear for their security if Iran covertly develops a nuclear weapon.⁴⁴ To quell Saudi Arabia's paranoia regarding a rising Iran and reaffirm America's commitment to its Sunni allies, the Obama administration administered a weapons sale worth \$115 billion to Saudi Arabia in September 2016.⁴⁵ The deal signaled to Saudi Arabia and to the globe that the U.S. would not tilt towards Iran following the Deal.

Following the Deal, Saudi Arabia has attempted to bait Iran into operating from its habitual, anti-Western, standpoint, so that Iran may once more be isolated from the West. Saudi Arabia has acted in an aggressive, sectarian fashion, effectively taking on the role of the combative ideologue, a role traditionally held by Iran. For example, the execution of the Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr in early 2016, and the escalation of the war in Yemen, while being branded to suppress internal dissent and combat Iranian influence respectively, should also be viewed as a means to tempt Iran to once again to respond in a hostile manner to paint it as the aggressor.⁴⁶ Despite the specific degree of Iranian support for the Houthis, a Zaydi Shia movement in Yemen, being debated, Saudi Arabia feels strongly that Iran is providing significant weaponry to the Houthi insurgents. In response, Iran, for the large part, has refused to be baited into escalating tensions further and has abided by the agreements set forth in the Deal. Iran has also unsuccessfully attempted to paint Saudi Arabia as a reckless, ideological actor, to drive a wedge between Riyadh and Washington.

This attempt to delineate the differences between the more 'rational' Iran and more 'fanatic' Saudi Arabia was most clearly evidenced in a *New York Times* article penned by Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, titled "Saudi Arabia's Reckless Extremism".⁴⁷ Zarif cites what he views as provocative and unjust actions perpetrated by Saudi Arabia, including the targeting of Iranian diplomats, to create further unrest in the Middle East. He writes "Iran has no desire to escalate tension in the region."⁴⁸ Iran is attempting to build rapport with

⁴³ Samuel Ramani, "Israel Is Strengthening Its Ties With The Gulf Monarchies," The Huffington Post, December 9, 2016, Accessed November 23, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/samuel-ramani/why-israel-is-strengthening_b_11946660.html.

⁴⁴ Ashley Fantz, "Saudi Foreign Minister Deeply Skeptical of Iran Deal," CNN, January 19, 2016, Accessed December 04, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/19/politics/situation-room-saudi-arabia-foreign-minister/>.

⁴⁵ Yara Bayoumy, "Obama administration arms sales offers to Saudi top \$115 billion: report," Reuters, September 07, 2016, Accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-security-idUSKCN11D2JQ>.

⁴⁶ Mohammed Ayoob, "Iran Nuclear Deal Fuels Tension With Saudi Arabia Inflaming New Conflicts," January 19, 2016, Accessed October 18, 2016, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/iran-nuclear-deal-fuels-tension-saudi-arabia-inflaming-new-conflicts>.

⁴⁷ Mohammad Javad Zarif, "Opinion | Mohammad Javad Zarif: Saudi Arabia's Reckless Extremism," The New York Times, January 10, 2016, Accessed April 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/11/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-saudi-arabias-reckless-extremism.html?emc=eta1>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

the West to maintain the economic and subsequent military gains made from the Deal in its quest for regional domination. In the same vein, those gains will be utilized to further its narrative as the champion of the Muslim world, which is central to Iranian identity.

The Iraqi Proxy Conflict

Iraq has played a key role in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry since the Iranian Revolution. The country has a 65% Shia majority and a 35% Sunni minority.⁴⁹ From 1979-2003, the country was under the strict control of Sunni Saddam Hussein. With Iraq directly bordering the new Islamic Republic of Iran in the late 1970s, Hussein worried that the Ayatollah Khomeini would spark Shia uprisings in his country like those seen in Saudi Arabia. In 1980, less than a year after the Iranian Revolution, Iraq's desire for the oil-rich Iranian border region of Khūzestān and its calculation that the new Iranian regime would put up little resistance led both states to war.⁵⁰

Iraq is a critical battleground for both Saudi Arabia and Iran given its extended border with both countries and the ever-present power vacuum following the 2003 Iraq War. FPA is the ideal theoretical perspective to utilize when discussing the proxy conflict in Iraq because issues of security and identity are both significant for Iran while the singular issue of security is most significant for Saudi Arabia.

Regarding issues of security for Iran, Iraq functions as a key factor in Iran's ability to project its political and military power across the Levant and buttress Iranian security. Iraq provides a path into Syria which then allows Iran to send weaponry and supplies into Lebanon, thus making Iraq an important actor regarding Iran's ability to provide support for Hezbollah and the Assad regime in Syria. In addition, Iran currently supports roughly 100,000 Shia fighters in Iraq known collectively as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), which are fighting ISIS. The PMUs are made up of roughly 40 militias. Iran wishes to entrench these fighters in Iraq to ensure that it maintains a favorable balance of power in the region following the expulsion of ISIS as well as ensure that Iraq does not pose a threat as it did under Saddam Hussein. These fighters will most likely serve as a detriment to U.S. objectives in a post ISIS-Iraq given Iran's influence over the PMUs. Any policy crafted by the U.S. will need to take these militias into account.

The presence of these militias in Iraq may allow Iran to buttress its security and greatly increase its political influence in Iraq should the PMUs establish a political infrastructure. The rise of the PMUs mimic that of Hezbollah in Lebanon in the 1980s, and leaders are hinting at their desire to transition the PMUs' military structure into a political party in Iraq. The PMUs are also looked at as noble forces fighting against ISIS similar to how Hezbollah is looked at in its fight against Israel. One Iraqi commander remarked that the PMUs experience "huge popularity" in Iraq.⁵¹ The Iranian-backed fighters have reportedly "contributed to most of the fighting to secure the area around Fallujah."⁵²

Regarding issues of identity for Iran, it employs its anti-Western narrative to combat future American and Saudi influence in Iraq by buttressing the presence of the PMUs. The

⁴⁹ "The Sunni-Shia Divide," Council on Foreign Relations.

⁵⁰ "Iran-Iraq War," Encyclopedia Britannica. September 22, 2008, Accessed May 02, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Iran-Iraq-War>.

⁵¹ Ali Mamouri. "Has the US found a new friend in Iraq's Shiite militias?" Al-Monitor. April 06, 2016. Accessed May 04, 2017. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2016/03/iraq-us-position-support-popular-mobilization-units.html>.

⁵² Paul Shinkman. "The Iranian Fingerprints on Iraq's Fallujah Plan." USNews.com. June 2, 2016. Accessed October 1, 2016. <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-06-02/the-iranian-fingerprints-on-iraqs-fallujah-plan>.

preservation of Iranian influence in Iraq allows Iranian officials to support the Assad regime and Hezbollah, both of which operate in opposition to Western objectives. In addition, Iran acts upon its self-view as the champion of the Muslim world by backing the PMUs, which skillfully utilize propaganda to further their image as liberators for all Muslims by releasing photos and videos showing PMU fighters rescuing Sunnis, Shia, and even Christians from ISIS.

Saudi Arabia is motivated by security concerns, as it recognizes the advantages Iran enjoys from its military influence in Iraq and thus wishes to contain Iranian influence for its security. Moreover, Saudi Arabia, as stated previously, is opposed to the Assad regime and Hezbollah as they support Iran's geopolitical prowess. Saudi Arabia is also concerned that the large presence of PMUs in Iraq will function as a detriment to Saudi security and regional stability in the future.

Saudi Arabia's concerns for security and relative gains are illustrated with the creation of the GCC, a regional institution involving Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE, created following the start of the Iran-Iraq War in 1981. The purpose of the GCC was to ensure economic and defensive cooperation against aggressive non-members, which underlies Saudi Arabia's concern for its security. The organization maintains a security clause similar to that of NATO's article 5, which states that an attack against one member is attack against all and thus will elicit a unified military response.⁵³ Today, the GCC functions as a key security organization for Saudi Arabia to balance against Iran.

Saudi Arabia's primary concern for its security can also be seen with its decision to strengthen ties with the U.S. following Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait, a GCC member and Saudi ally, in the 1990s. Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the U.S. intervened after being given permission by Saudi Arabia by expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The Americans then established bases in Saudi Arabia to more effectively protect its allies against future Iraqi aggression.⁵⁴ Thus, the balance of power shifted in Saudi Arabia's favor and its rivalry with Iran became more strained given Iranian opposition to Western interference in the region. The increased U.S. presence served as fodder for Iran to paint Saudi Arabia as a puppet of the West.

The reactions by Saudi Arabia and Iran to increased U.S. influence in the region illustrate each states' theoretical motivations and concerns. Saudi Arabia's reluctant acceptance of U.S. troops indicate that concerns for security were its top priority regardless of the U.S.'s negative image. Iran's opposition to U.S. forces illustrates its own concerns for its geopolitical posture and security as well as its adherence to the anti-elitist narrative set forth in 1979 which opposes Western influence in the region.

The 2003 Iraq War led to an intensification of the rivalry regarding both security and sectarianism. Prior to Hussein's toppling by the U.S. in 2003, Iraq and Iran were the region's two main powers. With the U.S. occupying Iraq, political space was created for the now much more powerful, U.S.-backed Saudi Arabia to fill and challenge Iran. The 2003 war galvanized sectarian tensions in Iraq by causing a breakdown of the previously existing social structures of coexistence between Sunnis and Shia and creating a power vacuum for sectarian factions to fill. Al-Qaeda's targeting of Shia places of worship and Shia political parties' encouragement of ethnic cleansing and revenge against Sunni populations escalated sectarian strife to create

⁵³ John Pike, "Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC]," GlobalSecurity.Org, Accessed September 17, 2016, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/gcc.htm>.

⁵⁴ Max Fisher, "How the Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East," The New York Times, November 19, 2016, Accessed November 23, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-proxy-war.html>.

massive instability resulting in a Sunni vs. Shia civil war which polarized the Iraqi population. Saudi Arabia and Iran sent funds and foreign fighters into Iraq to assist members of their respective ideologies with the goal of ensuring their victory and exerting influence in Iraq.⁵⁵ Both states wished to fill the newly created power vacuum with a political entity which would further their interests and ensure that the other did not gain a new satellite government in Iraq. Iran proved to be more successful given Iraq's majority Shia population and its close ties to Shia groups in Iraq.

In 2011, U.S. troops began to withdraw, leaving the Iran-supported Iraqi President Nouri al-Maliki, a Shia Muslim, in charge. Maliki quickly became paranoid, attempted to centralize power, and began targeting his Sunni political rivals.⁵⁶ His discriminatory and violent policies undermined the inclusive government that had been crafted by the U.S. Maliki's government held no legitimacy for Iraqi-Sunnis, as it consistently violated their rights.⁵⁷ As a result, the disillusioned Iraqi population did not resist ISIS's takeover of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city.⁵⁸ ISIS's entry into the country led to the current disarray which exists in Iraq and the ensuing competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia to once more exert influence within the unstable state. As the ISIS presence draws down in Iraq with American support, the PMUs' long-term impact in the country remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Human decision making ultimately drives a state's actions. Because human motivations are not mono-causal, a variety of factors must be explored to discover the reasoning behind state behavior. Given FPA's multi-faceted approach, it is the best method to analyze the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. A single theoretical approach when applied to a conflict does not give appropriate attention to an individual state's history or system of government and thus assumes common motivations on the part of all involved actors. Realism stresses relative gains and the desire for security, which leads to an under examination of ideology and identity. Constructivism stresses socially constructed ideas, which leads to an under examination of rational state behavior in the name of security, power, and relative gains. Neither approach gives appropriate attention to domestic concerns of a state which are especially significant in states' decision-making. Simply put, a single theory approach applied to an entire conflict hinders policy makers in their aim to produce policy which is conducive to peace, because all involved actors may not be motivated by the same factors or have the same constraints. The result is an ineffective policy which addresses one state's concern but not the other's.

FPA compliments conventional political science theory as it allows policy makers to examine the conflict and involved actors from a nuanced perspective. This approach provides significant utility when examining the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as both states have different motivations. Saudi Arabia is consistently most concerned with security and relative gains. Saudi Arabia's closer ties with the West illustrates its aim to preserve and benefit from its geopolitical position vis-à-vis Iran, to the detriment of its claim of Islamic legitimacy. Conversely, Iran

⁵⁵ Ned Parker, "Iraq Insurgency Said to Include Many Saudis," Los Angeles Times, July 15, 2007, Accessed October 26, 2016, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jul/15/world/fg-saudi15>.

⁵⁶ Priyanka Boghani, "In Their Own Words: Sunnis on Their Treatment in Malik's Iraq," Frontline, November 11, 2016, Accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/in-their-own-words-sunnis-on-their-treatment-in-malikis-iraq/>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

operates from a varied approach being motivated by relative gains and security when necessary but also operating in accordance with its identity to oppose the West and stand for the rights of Muslims while considering domestic political factors.

The West's acknowledgment of varied Iranian behavior allowed for the success of the Iran Nuclear Deal. To address Iranian domestic concerns, the West lifted its sanctions. To address Saudi security concerns following the Deal, the Obama administration signed a weapons deal worth over \$100 billion with Saudi Arabia, thus satiating both parties.⁵⁹

FPA is a method of looking at each aspect of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in isolation or in concert to determine what motivates both states and why. Only after understanding the context of different aspects of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry can policy makers begin to cool or at least manage tensions in the region. The Middle East has experienced instability for decades. Policy makers have a moral obligation to reduce the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Terror groups, recognizing the power vacuums caused by instability, have taken advantage of the situation to expand their gains. Massive unrest in the Middle East must be better managed as its impacts have been and will continue to be felt globally. No "one perfect" solution exists to calm the region; however, by utilizing the FPA approach, policy makers can begin to formulate nuanced solutions which will address the multiple, shifting, dynamics in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

⁵⁹ Bayoumy, "Obama administration arms sales."

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