

## SAUDI-IRAN RIVALRY: A SECTARIAN DIVIDE OR SECURITY DILEMMA?

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### Abstract

*This paper examines two major drivers of conflictual relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran: sectarian schism and power politics. The protracted enmity and rivalry has been analyzed in light of uncertainty and security dilemma through the prism of constructivism. The application of the theoretical lens provides clarity and supersedes the reductionist analysis of this squabble. The inception of the Shia-Sunni schism and Saudi-Iran rivalry has been investigated in greater length. Within this context, the deterioration of relations due to Saddam Hussein's demise, the Arab Spring, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr's execution, and the impact of Trump's administration in the US have also been examined. Conclusively, this paper argues that security dilemma and uncertainty of each other's actions is the driving force and primary cause of Saudi-Iran rivalry rather than sectarian divide.*

**Keywords:** Saudi-Iran Rivalry, Sectarian Schism, Security Dilemma, Constructivism

### Introduction

A detailed comprehension of the Saudi-Iran rivalry is a prerequisite for a deeper analysis of the security and political factors of the Middle Eastern region in general and of states in this region specifically. The belligerence between Saudi Arabia and Iran is categorized as a cold war, as to date, direct war has not taken place between them.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, due to the prevailing security dilemma between the two sides, a continuous struggle for power or a tug of war is prevailing between them. Proxy wars in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, and Lebanon are

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<sup>1</sup> Tali Rachel Grumet, "New Middle East Cold War: Saudi Arabia and Iran Rivalry," (Master's Thesis, Joseph Korbel School of International Studies University of Denver, 2015): 3.

the outcome of this cold war.<sup>2</sup> The most daunting query related to this rivalry is linked with its root cause: whether this enmity is an outcome of sectarian divide, which is deeply rooted in history, or is it due to the temptation of both states to attain more power? This paper investigates these perplexing queries in greater detail while stressing the role that uncertainty and security dilemma play under the umbrella of constructivism in international politics.

Before investigating the driver of enmity, this study elucidates the concepts of uncertainty and security dilemma as vital conceptual frameworks in global politics. It examines the origins of the Shia-Sunni rift as well as the cause and evolution of Saudi-Iran antagonism. This study also explores recent regional happenings, such as the US invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring, Sheikh-al Nimr's death, and the election of Trump and then the Biden administration to the White House.

## Security Dilemma

John Herz proposed the security dilemma concept in his book *Political Realism and Political Idealism*. Robert Jervis and Herbert Butterfield further elaborated this concept.<sup>3</sup> Anarchic international system<sup>4</sup> creates a security dilemma due to the anarchical system. When state A attempts to secure itself, state B interprets the actions of A as threatening and starts feeling insecure. Hence, B, as a result, enhances its security which ultimately reduces the security of A, and the continuation of this procedure creates an uncontrollable security or power cycle.<sup>5</sup> This notion is quite significant in the arena of international relations as this idea elucidates the fundamental logic behind conflicts and wars between states.

John Herz accentuated, in his work, on the influence of "fear" existing in the mind of an individual regarding the action of other players or the element of fear present between two states, parties, or groups in the creation of a security dilemma,<sup>6</sup> Iran and Saudi Arabia are experiencing the same element of fear against each other. It can be taken out from the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1-6.

<sup>3</sup> Mohamed B. Huwaidin, "The Security Dilemma in Saudi-Iranian Relations," *Review of History and Political Science* 3, no. 2 (December 2015): 69, doi:10.15640/; Paul Roe, "The Intrastate Security Dilemma: Ethnic Conflict as a 'Tragedy'?" *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 2 (March 1999): 183.

<sup>4</sup> Constructivists elucidate the ontology of anarchy differently as compared to the realists and this paper will utilize the ontology and definition proposed by constructivists to explain security dilemma and anarchy.

<sup>5</sup> Mohamed B. Huwaidin, "The Security Dilemma in Saudi-Iranian Relations," 70.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Roe, "The Intrastate Security Dilemma: Ethnic Conflict as a 'Tragedy'?" *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 2 (March 1999): 183.

works of Jervis, Herz, and Butterfield that “anarchy” creates “uncertainty”; furthermore, uncertainty comes into play and produces “fear,” and fear eventually creates “dilemma” or “power competition” and this dilemma or power competition resultantly creates “security dilemma.”<sup>7</sup> Robert Jervis has expounded security dilemma in his phenomenal work “Cooperation under the security dilemma,” that one state, in an attempt to enhance its security, deliberately or unintentionally, reduces the other state’s security.<sup>8</sup>

This study argues that the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia is no different. As one of them tries to enhance its security by assisting its friendly groups or regimes in the states – Yemen, Lebanon, Bahrain– in the region or by arms buildup, it reduces the security of other states and resultantly, a security dilemma lingers between their relations.

This research emphasizes a few significant features present in the work of Jervis, Butterfield, and Herz to further elaborate on the security dilemma concept. For Herz, anarchy is predominantly responsible for the production of the security dilemma, and for Butterfield, fear is mainly responsible; nonetheless, for Jervis, the structure of the international system is ultimately responsible for producing the security dilemma.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Herz and Butterfield contend that the emergence of security dilemmas is caused by uncertainty about one another’s intentions. Nevertheless, Jervis emphasizes that this uncertainty is not confined to the existing intentions; instead, future intentions also come under the ambit of uncertainty.<sup>10</sup> For Butterfield, the origin of the security dilemma is unintentional; however, it can be intensified by psychological features and its consequences are catastrophic (including destruction or war) in nature.<sup>11</sup> According to Herz and Jervis, states have to rely on no one but their selves to secure themselves due to the presence of anarchy. Resultantly states try to attain the power to overcome the security dilemma and to secure them. Nonetheless, this attainment act indulges the states in a security dilemma, consequently entangled in an untended power struggle.<sup>12</sup>

For Butterfield, the security dilemma is the source of all human conflicts or wars. However, for Jervis and Herz, security dilemma can be held responsible for human conflicts and wars but not for all the conflicts and wars.<sup>13</sup> After a thorough examination of the works of Herz, Butterfield,

<sup>7</sup> Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 168.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>9</sup> Shiping Tang, “The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis,” *Security Studies* 18, no. 3 (October 2009): 587.

<sup>10</sup> Tang, “The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis,” 588.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

and Jervis, it can be concluded that uncertainty of intentions of others, fear, and anarchy are the predominant reasons for security dilemma. To further comprehend security dilemma concept this research examines the concept of uncertainty as elucidated by Nicholas J. Wheeler and Ken Booth. This research also explores the concept of anarchy of realists in general and constructivists in specific.

## Uncertainty

As propounded by Butterfield and Herz, the creation of a security dilemma between groups, individuals, states, and parties is essentially due to the element of uncertainty. Therefore, this research examines the concept of uncertainty to comprehend why a security dilemma persists between Iran and Saudi Arabia. One of the illustrations of uncertainty is that generally, states enhance their security by acquiring weapons, but the foremost point here is that the same weapons that the states have manufactured or acquired mainly to secure themselves (for defensive purposes) can also be utilized for hostility (offensive purpose) against the rival or any state.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, Uncertainty of states' actions is not restricted to accumulation of weapons only; rather all other physical or psychological actions of a state can be unreliable for the other states. Similarly, in the case of Saudi and Iran, both are uncertain of each other's actions, which is one of the significant reasons to produce a spiral of security or power between them.

Uncertainty, as per Wheeler and Booth, is an inescapable feature existing among humans and is ubiquitous in nature; existential nature of uncertainty means that it is not something which is merely occasional in fact uncertainty is something which is part and parcel of daily human life and groups.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, uncertainty is not constant rather it can be less or more in intensity existing between two or more states, groups, and individuals, though uncertainty is irregular in nature but eventually it is inevitable.<sup>16</sup> In international relations' perspective "existential uncertainty" can be explained that governments or states can never foresee or comprehend the intentions of other states completely and this uncertainty is one of the primary causes for generating security dilemma among states<sup>17</sup> and same is the case between Iran and Saudi Arabia where

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<sup>14</sup> Roe, "The Interstate Security," 184.

<sup>15</sup> Ken Booth and John A. Wheeler, "Uncertainty," in *Security Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Paul D. Williams (London: Routledge, 2013), 133.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 134.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

this uncertainty is further exacerbated due to statements and rhetoric being put forward by both players.<sup>18</sup>

Wheeler and Booth used the term "Other Minds Problem" while elucidating the concept of uncertainty, this "Other Minds Problem" is the reason which renders government or decision-makers of one state (for example Iran) incapable to decipher the motives or understand the mind of other state (for example Saudi Arabia).<sup>19</sup> Besides uncertainty, another feature which is quite significant to explore the concept of security dilemma is fear on which Jervis, Butterfield, and Herz grounded their notion of security dilemma.<sup>20</sup> An interesting factor about the notion of fear is that it is not merely confined to existing intents, rather it is similarly linked to the future intents as well and due to this linkage with future intents, the notion of "future uncertainty" is derived, and a state/government feels itself insecure from the future actions of other state due to "future uncertainty," at present time.<sup>21</sup> Wheeler and Booth also emphasized on the notion of anarchy which has a fundamental role in creating uncertainty hence this paper will highlight the variation between the description of anarchy propounded by constructivism and realism, and will examine the notion of anarchy in detail.

## Security Dilemma and Constructivism

Several academics, including Nicholas Wheeler and Ken Booth, Jack Snyder, Allan Collins, Paul Roe, and Alexander Wendt, have explained the idea of the security dilemma.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, this research emphasizes the elucidation of security dilemma presented by Alexander Wendt, who explicated the notion of "security dilemma" under the lens of constructivism. Thus, firstly it is imperative to elucidate constructivism concisely and then the notion of security dilemma under constructivism.

According to constructivists and realists, security dilemma endures among states due to the anarchical feature of the international arena.<sup>23</sup> For realists, anarchy is out there, which mean that anarchy is existential ; nevertheless, for constructivists, anarchy is something that is being constructed by states by their own.<sup>24</sup> Constructivists emphasize that,

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<sup>18</sup> Umut Can Adisönmez, Recep Onursal and Laçin İdil Öztüğ, "Quest for Regional Hegemony: The Politics of Ontological Insecurity in the Saudi-Iran Rivalry," *Alternatives* 48(1) (November 2022): 91-107.

<sup>19</sup> Booth & Wheeler, "Uncertainty," 135.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>22</sup> Huwaidin, "The Security Dilemma," 70.

<sup>23</sup> Roe, "The Intrstate Security," 184; Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 392.

<sup>24</sup> Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It," 392.

besides constructed anarchy, state's identity plays a crucial part in creating animosities and amities, and this hostility, which is created due to state identity generates security dilemma among states.<sup>25</sup>

Alexander Wendt put forward the example of the US, Canada, and Cuba to explain constructivism; why the US interprets the actions and activities of Cuba as intimidating while interpreting the actions and activities of Canada as being non-threatening under the same international anarchic system.<sup>26</sup> Hence, in the anarchic international system constructed state identity is the prominent feature which dictates the behavior of the states rather than the anarchy. For example, Saudi Arabia interprets the actions of Iran, regardless of the intent of Iran, either offensive or defensive, as being threatening or intimidating; nonetheless, under the same anarchic international system, Saudi Arabia, most of the time, does not interpret most of the actions and activities of Pakistan and most of the gulf states as being threatening or intimidating.

Though constructivists do not refute the existence of anarchy in the international system. However, they emphasize that anarchy has been constructed by the same states and not given in nature as propounded by realists.<sup>27</sup> According to the constructivists, present and past relations among states dictate the behaviour of the states.<sup>28</sup>

## Inception of Shia-Sunni Rift

Antagonism between Iran and Saudi Arabia mainly can be characterized by two foremost aspects, that is, the fact that both Iran and Saudi Arabia claim to be the true torchbearers of two contrasting branches of Islam and a constant tug of war between them to control the region.<sup>29</sup> Presently the dominant narrative is that the vendetta between Iran and Saudi Arabia is due to the sectarian schism; subsequently, it is imperative to grasp the inception and factors of Shia-Sunni schism. The split which separated the nascent Muslim nation into two main camps, Sunni and Shia, is roughly as old as the religion of Islam and can be traced back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> According to Robin Wright, the ultimate division between Shiites and Sunnis was not based on the differences over theological or

<sup>25</sup> Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *International Security* 23, no. 1 (Summer 1998): 172, accessed February 26, 2021.; Matt McDonald, "Constructivism," in *Security Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Paul D. Williams (London: Routledge, 2008), 85.

<sup>26</sup> Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It," 397.

<sup>27</sup> Matt McDonald, "Constructivism," 86.

<sup>28</sup> Roe, "The Interstate Security," 184.

<sup>29</sup> John Hall, "Sunni and Shia Muslims: Islam's 1400-year-old Divide Explained," *Independent*, January 4, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/>

<sup>30</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 24.

religious doctrines, but rather an outcome of differences over leadership, most suitable to lead the burgeoning Muslim Ummah.<sup>31</sup> Soon after the demise of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the disagreement between Sunni and Shia Muslims exploded regarding the most deserving heir of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to lead the Muslim Ummah.<sup>32</sup>

Consequently, the Muslims separated into two camps; according to the Shiites, Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) successor should be Hazrat Ali (RA) and that leader of Muslims should be from Prophet's family.<sup>33</sup> Alternatively according to the other camp, present day Sunnis, the leader of Muslims should be selected through consensus of the noble followers and companions of Prophet (PBUH).<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the opinion of Sunnis succeeded and they selected Hazrat Abu Bakar (RA) as the first, Hazrat Umer (RA) as the second, and Hazrat Uthman (RA) as the third Caliph of Muslims, and finally, Hazrat Ali ibn Abi Taleb (RA) became the 4<sup>th</sup> caliph.<sup>35</sup> Two caliphs, Hazrat Umer and Hazrat Uthman were martyred before Hazrat Ali became the caliph, moreover, war erupted when Ali (RA) became Caliph and ultimately Ali (RA) was also martyred.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, one of the sons of Ali (RA), Hazrat Hussein (RA), along with his family members and a small number of followers, was also martyred in the battle of Karbala in 680 by second Umayyad Caliph Yazid.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the initial and foremost reasoning which laid stimulus for the formation of Shia or "Shi'at Ali" was that Ali (RA) is the Prophet Muhammad's rightful successor, and the second reason proved to be the martyrdom of Hussein (RA) in Karbala which further deepened the notion of "Shi'at Ali". Shiites emphasize that Hussein (RA) stood firm against the tyrant caliph Yazid and till the date this conception of standing firm against the tyrant ruler remains intact in Shia Islam, that is, Islamic revolution in 1979 in Iran against the Shah of Iran is a prominent manifestation of this long enduring conception.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Chuck, "What Are the Differences Between Sunni and Shiite Muslims?" *NBC News*, January 5, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/what-are-differences-between-sunni-shiite-muslims-n489951>.

<sup>32</sup> Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*, (Washington, D.C: Brookings, 2013), <https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2016/06/sunni-shia-abdo.pdf>; Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Mike Shuster, "The Origins of the Shiite-Sunni Split," *NPR*, February 12, 2007, accessed February 23, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/>

<sup>35</sup> Amir M. Haji-Yousefi, "Whose Agenda is Served by the Idea of a Shia Crescent?" *Alternatives Turkish Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 114, <https://www.ciaonet.org/attachments/14357/uploads>.

<sup>36</sup> Shuster, "The Origins of."

<sup>37</sup> Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, 28.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 30.

Approximately, there are around 1.5 billion Muslims presently in the world, Shiites are the one who are in minority and Sunnis are in significant majority.<sup>39</sup> Almost 85-90 percent of, around, 1.5 billion Muslims are Sunnis and roughly around 15-20 percent of them which is approximately 154 to 200 million are Shiites, nonetheless, precise percentage of both these sects is missing.<sup>40</sup> In Syria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt, Sunni population is in majority, while in Iran, Bahrain, Iraq, and Azerbaijan Shiites are present in majority, albeit, substantial percentage of Shiites is also residing in Qatar, Yemen, Lebanon, and Kuwait.<sup>41</sup> The foremost fact to emphasize here is that, in Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia mostly Shiites are present dominantly in the places that are rich in oil resources.<sup>42</sup> As Shiites are in minority in the Muslim population, so it can be easily considered that the enmity between Sunnis and Shias is not merely political, ideological, and theological, relatively, this contention is also produced due to the instilled hate against the majority (oppressor) in the hearts and minds of minority (oppressed). Hence, it can be deduced that the presence of fear and uncertainty about each other's intentions and actions and the security dilemma between Sunnis and Shiites can be traced back in history.<sup>43</sup>

### **Inception of Saudi-Iran Hostility**

The bases of Shia-Sunni schism are present, overwhelmingly, down in the Islamic history and that the genesis of this split was, to a greater extent, political instead of theological or religious in nature. Nonetheless, the available evidence suggests that in the animosity between Saudi-Iran, this schism has largely played an insignificant role.<sup>44</sup> Hence, this research directs that rivalry between Saudi-Iran is mainly a competition of power in the everlasting existence of security dilemma and uncertainty and both the states, Saudi Arabia and Iran, are consuming religion (sect) as a tool rather than an end/objective. Moreover, enmity between Iran and Saudi Arabia can be dissected into four main fragments: Iranian revolution in 1979, departure of Saddam Hussein, Arab spring, and latest execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr.

<sup>39</sup> "Sunnis and Shia: Islam's Ancient Schism," *BBC News*, January 4, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16047709>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Hall, "Sunni and Shia Muslims."

<sup>42</sup> Shuster, "The Origins of the Shiite-Sunni Split."

<sup>43</sup> Adisönmez, Onursal and Öztığ, "Quest for Regional Hegemony."

<sup>44</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, "Sunni-Shiite Conflict Reflects Modern Power Struggle, Not Theological Schism," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 14, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/>.



Present day Saudi Arabia, established around early 1930s, is a relatively new state, and is being ruled by Al-Saud's.<sup>45</sup> Saudi Arabia follows the version of Islam projected by Al-Wahhab, which is a conservative Sunni-Wahhabi state. According to the teachings of Al-Wahhab, Shiites are infidels and heretics, and he also justified the killing of Shiites.<sup>46</sup> Iran and Saudi Arabia's relations have gone through several stages; before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, they had a strategic alliance; today, they are embroiled in an unofficial, never-ending cold war.<sup>47</sup> When Shah was in power in Iran, during 1960's and 1970's, Saudi Arabia and Iran upheld a strategic coalition, that is, political, security, and military interaction.<sup>48</sup> During the Cold War between the US and the USSR, the West in general and the US in particular used both of them against the USSR in order to curb the USSR's growing influence in the Middle East.<sup>49</sup>

However the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, when the country's people ousted the Shah from office through demonstrations, changed the nature of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>50</sup> The denunciation of the Saudi monarchy as being conflicting with the true teachings of Islam by Ayatollah Khomeini and his aim to spread the Islamic revolution in Iran to Saudi Arabia and other monarchies in the gulf region proved to be the foundation stone of rivalry of Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, instead of the sectarian split it was this very denunciation of Khomeini that generated a security dilemma and eventually an everlasting enmity between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Hence, the relations between Riyadh and Tehran indulged in a new period of suspicion and aggression.<sup>52</sup>

After the Iranian revolution the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia started to deteriorate and due to uncertainty and fear of each other's actions both of them tried to attain more power in the region. Saudi power elite was and someday till date is more anxious about the perseverance of the regime, instead of sustaining or expanding Saudi

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<sup>45</sup> David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006)

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Khosrow Soltani, "Iran-Saudi Arabia: a Troubled Affair," *Aljazeera*, November 20, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/>

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. ; Ariel Jahner, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: the Struggle for Power and Influence in the Gulf," *International Affairs Review* 20, no. 3 (May 2012): 35.

<sup>49</sup> Soltani, "Iran-Saudi Arabia."

<sup>50</sup> Thom Poole, "Iran and Saudi Arabia's Great Rivalry Explained," *BBC*, January 4, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35221569>.

<sup>51</sup> Tali R. Grumet, "New Middle East Cold War: Saudi Arabia and Iran's Rivalry," (master's thesis, University of Denver, 2015), <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/cgi/>

<sup>52</sup> Soltani, "Iran-Saudi Arabia."

Arabia's regional influence.<sup>53</sup> This is one of the foremost motives due to which Saudi Arabia tries to counter Iran's influence in the region. Saudi power elite is in fact facing two façades; internal differences and revolts inside the country, and threats from external front emanating from Iran mostly.<sup>54</sup> A number of events after Iranian revolution in 1979 further intensified the Saudi-Iran relations; including the support of Iraq by Saudi Arabia in Iran-Iraq war to contain the Iranian influence in the region, clashes between 402 pilgrims and police in 1987, 275 pilgrims were Iranian out of 402, this episode further intensified Saudi-Iran relations.<sup>55</sup>

During the Iran-Iraq war, Saudi Arabia also exploited its control over oil to hurt the economy of Iran.<sup>56</sup> During the period of President Muhammad Khatami, Saudi Arabia and Iran also enjoyed the ease in tensions; nevertheless, after the US invasion of Iraq strains in their relations again intensified.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, it was the statement of Ayatollah Khomeini, where he denounced the gulf monarchies, which transformed both states' identities, formed a security dilemma, and proved to be a turning point in their relations. Consequently, it can be deduced that rhetoric and statements have played a significant role in even inception of the Saudi-Iran rivalry.

### **Saddam Hussein's Demise**

After the US incursion in Iraq and Saddam Hussein's demise in Iraq, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia was exacerbated further, as the demise of Saddam Hussein generated a power vacuum not merely in Iraq rather in the region and produced a sufficient space for both the players to augment their regional influence.<sup>58</sup> As per Aarts and Duijne, a triangular kind of power structure was sustaining in which three opposing forces, namely, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq, were vying with each other to attain dominance in the Persian Gulf region.<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, it is beyond the ambit of this research to comprehensively elaborate this complex triangular power pattern, still a concise explanation has been inculcated to shed some light on this complex triangular power pattern to emphasize on

<sup>53</sup> Jennifer Williams, "Why Saudi Leaders Keep Making Bad Decisions: they're Scared," *Vox*, January 7, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/1/7/10725896/saudi-insecurity-iran>.

<sup>54</sup> Ariel Jahner, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: the Struggle for Power and Influence in the Gulf," *International Affairs Review* 20, no. 3 (May 2016): 36.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 36.; "Factbox: Troubled History of Saudi-Iran Relations," *Reuters*, January 4, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/>.

<sup>56</sup> Grumet, "New Middle East Cold War," 37.

<sup>57</sup> "Factbox: Troubled history of Saudi-Iran Relations," *Reuters*.

<sup>58</sup> Saleh Heba, "Sunni and Shia: Explaining the Divide," *Financial Times*, January 6, 2016, <https://next.ft.com/content/>

<sup>59</sup> Paul Aarts and Joris Van Duijne, "Saudi Arabia after U.S.-Iranian Détente: Left in the Lurch?" *Middle East Policy* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 65, doi:10.1111/.

the significance of a powerful Iraq under Saddam Hussein in the region, whose departure further deepened the aspect of uncertainty between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Like zero-sum game, this triangular power pattern has diverse situations in which each power counters the other. For instance, Iran and Saudi Arabia went into a coalition when the Bath party attained power in Iraq in 1968. Likewise, Iraq and Saudi Arabia came closer during the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, and then again during the Iraq-Kuwait war.<sup>60</sup> Rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran was confined to a specific limit due to this triangular power pattern; nevertheless, presently, this animosity is at peak due to the elimination of an influential Iraq from the region.<sup>61</sup>

US invaded Iraq and Afghanistan under War on Terror drive after September 11, 2001 attacks and it altered the dimensions of politics of the world and specifically of Middle Eastern region.<sup>62</sup> The triangular pattern ceased to exist in 2003 after the US incursion in Iraq and Saddam Hussein's demise from power and a power void was infused in the region and in Iraq.<sup>63</sup> Both the states Iran and Saudi Arabia scrambled to cover this vacuum to enhance their influence in Iraq as well as in the region, nonetheless, eventually Iran attained more influence due to this vacuum.<sup>64</sup> As Shias were present in majority in Iraq nonetheless was ruled by Saddam Hussein, a Sunni elite, so, after the withdrawal of US from Iraq the sectarian card was being played by Iran in Iraq and this sectarian ploy ascertained to be quite favorable for Iran.<sup>65</sup> Though, Iran and Saudi both players extracted benefits out of Iraq, nonetheless, ultimately Iran created plenty of difficulties for Saudi Arabia, as Iran managed to create a compliant Shiite government in Iraq after the departure of US from Iraq.<sup>66</sup> As per Aarts and Duijne, Nouri-al-Maliki's government in Iraq was considered to be a puppet of Iran in the region by Saudi Arabia and disliked it.<sup>67</sup>

With the growing Iranian influence and power in the region, the notion of Shia-Crescent was propounded by the Sunni elites: Iran, Iraq,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>61</sup> Dr. Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "The Iranian-Saudi Hegemonic Rivalry," DGAP (German Council on Foreign Relations, October 26, 2017), <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/iranian-saudi-hegemonic-rivalry>.

<sup>62</sup> Jahner, "Saudi Arabia and Iran," 36.

<sup>63</sup> Max Fisher, "The Cold War between Saudi Arabia and Iran that's Tearing Apart the Middle East, Explained," *Vox*, January 4, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/1/4/10708682/sunni-shia-iran-saudi-arabia-war>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Aarts and Van Duijne, "Saudi Arabia after U.s-Iran Détente," 68.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

Lebanon, and Syria mutually create a crescent of Shiites and this crescent is responsible for the creation of problems in the region for the Sunni states.<sup>68</sup> This imaginary notion presented by Sunni elites, was essentially the reaction of elites of Sunnis of losing their firm grip in Iraq, and a response of the advent of a friendly government, after January 2005 elections, of Iran in Iraq.<sup>69</sup> As aforementioned, after Saddam's demise in Iraq, Iran played the sectarian card to enhance its power in the region but this episode further intensified the sectarian loathing and this is one of major reasons due to which presently the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia ostensibly appears to be sectarian, due to Shia-Sunni split, in nature. Though, primarily centered on fear and uncertainty this enmity is more of a power competition.

### **Arab Awakening, Killing of Sheikh Nimr-al-Nimr, and Escalation in Tensions**

After Saddam Hussein's demise, as the rift between Iran and Saudi Arabia started to ease, a plethora of new episodes smashed the Middle East, and a majority of dictators and authoritative regimes were toppled in 2011 by public upsurge.<sup>70</sup> Long-lasting authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt ousted by public revolts in so-called Arab Awakening or Arab Spring which eventually left behind a greater power vacuum, as compared to the one that was left behind by the demise of Saddam Hussein, in their respective countries as well as in the Middle Eastern region as a whole.<sup>71</sup> This mammoth power vacuum further exacerbated uncertainty and security dilemma between Saudi Arabia and Iran. These revolts had a significant impact on the minds of Al-Saud rulers because they were scared that a similar rebellion could also hit their country, unlike the demise of Saddam, which was planned by an outside force.<sup>72</sup> This instilled anxiety in the minds of Al-Saud and is the main reason why Saudi Arabia and Iran are currently in a tense state of cold war and a security dilemma.

Iran to enhance its power in the region and some other aspects, and Saudi Arabia to overcome its fear and some other aspects, both tried to cover the power vacuum left behind after the so called Arab

<sup>68</sup> Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, 172.

<sup>69</sup> Bogdan Szajkowski, "The Shia Crescent," *The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies* 3, no. 1 (May 2013): 23.

<sup>70</sup> Frederic Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy Ghez, Lydia Hansell, and Robert A. Guffey, *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG840.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Jahner, "Saudi Arabia and Iran," 36; Grumet, "New Middle East Cold War,".

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 37.

Awakening.<sup>73</sup> Nonetheless, during this phase Saudi Arabia and Iran had to fill in a greater power vacuum and had to face greater challenges, resultantly, this time they entangled in a quite furious power struggle paradox and spree of proxies including Houthis, Hezbollah, Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al Haq, Zaynabiyoun Brigade, and Saraya al Ashtar etc ranging from Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Lebanon, to Iraq.<sup>74</sup> Both the players also utilized the Shia-Sunni card to garner further support, in the name of religion, in their particular domain of influence, so it becomes quite clear that both the states used religion (sect) as a tool or mean.<sup>75</sup> Iran and Saudi Arabia back conflicting parties in Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain, Syria, and Lebanon, they also back violent groups and resort to violence to formulate friendly regimes in the respective states to counter each other and increase their influence in the region, which further intensified uncertainty and security dilemma between them.

A new episode that happened after the Arab Awakening had not yet fully subsided—the Saudi Arabian killing of Shia preacher Sheikh Nimr al Nimr—led to a resurgence of hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>76</sup> Sheikh Nimr was a Shia cleric, noticeably outspoken, who eloquently highlighted the oppression of Shiites in Saudi Arabia.<sup>77</sup> In the wake of so-called Arab Awakening, Sheikh Nimr al Nimr was apprehended in 2012 and was accused of functioning as an agent for Iran, treason, and disobedience to the ruler was given death penalty which was executed on the starting months of 2016.<sup>78</sup>

Most experts agree that Sheikh Nimr's murder was motivated more by internal than external considerations, i.e., Saudi Arabia's own political dynamics.<sup>79</sup> Yet, Iran vehemently condemned this execution; Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini claimed that it would get divine retribution while a stern statement was given by the then Iranian President Hassan Rouhani against Saudi Arabia in which he emphasized that Saudi Arabia cannot hide its crimes.<sup>80</sup> Besides, a Saudi embassy in Tehran was attacked

<sup>73</sup> Fisher, "The Cold War between Saudi Arabia and Iran."

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.; Ashley Lane, "Iran's Islamist Proxies in the Middle East," *Wilson Center*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/>

<sup>75</sup> "Saudi Arabia and Iran's Rivalry: The Sectarian Dimension," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 23, 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/>

<sup>76</sup> Greg Botelho and Ed Payne, "Iran's Rouhani: Saudi Arabia can't cover up its 'great crime' of executing cleric," *CNN*, January 6, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/>

<sup>77</sup> "Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr: Figurehead Shia cleric," *BBC News*, January 2, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35214413>.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> "A gulf between them: Understanding the Saudi-Iran dispute," *BBC News*, January 10, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east->

by few Iranian protestors and rift between Iran and Saudi Arabia touched a new hike.<sup>81</sup> As aforementioned, internal factors were predominantly liable for this execution, then the query arises that why a stern stance was taken by Iran in this episode. The straightforward answer is that the “fear” and “uncertainty” of each other’s actions eventually created a security dilemma that inculcated fear in Iran due to this incident. Moreover, Elevation of Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS) as de-jure crown prince and de-facto king ensued in further denting the relation between Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, this rivalry further exacerbated due to arrival of Trump’s administration in US<sup>83</sup> as the Trump’s administration was quite critical of Iran. The impact of Joe Biden’s administration is yet to be seen, nevertheless, the future is not much brighter. Recent spree of GCC states of normalizing relationship with Israel and Saudi Arabia’s keen interest in it<sup>84</sup> along with the Biden administrations attempts at restoring or renegotiating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran at the cost of Saudi objections<sup>85</sup> – whatever the reasons for this developments may be – will further exacerbate the uncertainty and security dilemma between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

### **Rivalry of Saudi Arabia and Iran under the Prism of Security Dilemma**

It is easy to see from events like the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Arab Awakening incidents, the most recent murder of Sheikh Nimr, the revolt in Yemen, and declarations and rhetoric aimed at one another that the root of this war was not sectarian but rather stemmed from uncertainty, power competition, fear due to one another's activities, and security dilemma. Realists contend that because anarchy exists in the international system, states struggle for control in order to preserve their survival; however, constructivists contend that anarchy is what states make of it, that is, that it is the states who create anarchy.<sup>86</sup> Constructivists never deny the existence of “anarchy” in the international arena, instead

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35251833; Ken Bredemeier, “Iran Calls Saudi Execution of Cleric a ‘Crime’,” *VOA News*, January 05, 2016, <https://www.voanews.com/>

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammad Bin Salman* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2020) : 83, 96.

<sup>83</sup> Daniel L. Byman, “Trump’s reckless Middle East policy has brought the USA to the brink of war,” *Brookings*, January 6, 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Omar Rahman, “What’s behind the relationship between Israel and Arab Gulf states?” *Brookings*, January 28, 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Steven A. Cook, “A New Iran Deal Means Old Chaos,” *Foreign Policy*, February 17, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>

<sup>86</sup> Huwaidin, “The Security Dilemma,” 70.

they emphasize that the very states have constructed it. They further claim that as states are the one who construct anarchy then states can surely deconstruct it as well.

While the anarchic nature of the international arena and sectarian split between Iran and Saudi Arabia endured, nevertheless, their relations fluctuated from collaboration, hatred to hostility in the nearby history.<sup>87</sup> Evidently, it is not merely the sectarian schism or structure of the International system which instilled power struggle or animosity between Iran and Saudi Arabia. For instance, Saudi Arabia and Iran maintained a strategic alliance and cordial relations prior to the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. Moreover, Iran's support for the Palestinian cause and for Armenia in the most recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (a Shiite majority state) undermines the reductionist assertion that sect is the primary factor driving Saudi-Iran antagonism. A state's identity explains why it perceives one state's behaviour as intimidating while not viewing the identical action by another state as threatening.<sup>88</sup> For instance, Saudi Arabia, in the attendance of anarchic international system, does not interpret most of the actions of UAE as being intimidating but finds the same actions of Iran as being threatening. As explained comprehensively in the abovementioned sections that "anarchy" yields "uncertainty", "uncertainty" creates "fear" and "fear" resultantly creates "power competition or dilemma" and this "power competition or dilemma" as a result yields "security dilemma".<sup>89</sup> Same is the case with Iran and Saudi Arabia; after Iranian revolution in 1979, identity of both states altered to a greater extent for each other and consequently a struggle for power and security dilemma thrived in their relation.

One of the reasons of all the proxies that are being managed by Iran and Saudi Arabia, from Bahrain to Yemen and from Lebanon to Syria, is the existence of security dilemma between them. Every act of Iran, whether defensive or offensive, is being identified as a threat for its security by Saudi Arabia, and Iran observes the same, subsequently, an unending and everlasting power struggle and security dilemma are prevailing between them.

## Conclusion

While understanding the rationale for the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is paramount for a deeper appreciation of the complex Middle Eastern politics. The Iranian Revolution and the social construction of the enmity required due to the principles of uncertainty and security dilemma are

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<sup>87</sup> Uri Friedman, "What's the Saudi-Iran Feud Really About?" *The Atlantic*, January 7, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.

<sup>88</sup> Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

<sup>89</sup> Huwaidin, "The Security Dilemma," 76.

where the roots of this animosity between the two start, which is more recent than the historical Sunni-Shia schism after the death of the Prophet (PBUH). This leads both sides to a power-maximization strategy in the ensuing power struggle within the region and beyond. These phenomena have been observed throughout the contemporary occurrences of Saddam Hussain's demise, the advent of the Arab awakening, political volatility in Lebanon, public revolts in Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain, the execution of Sheikh-al Nimr and the arrival of Trump and latest Biden at the White House.



