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The Quest for Middle Eastern Supremacy



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INTRODUCTION

The Middle East is widely referred to as the Cradle of Civilization. Some of the world's first civilizations i.e. Mesopotamia, Egypt and Kish all originated in the Nile Valley or the Fertile Crescent region. Even though the region was first officially unified during the Neo-Assyrian Empire, it only ever united spiritually when the Islamic caliphates of the middle ages invaded in the 7th century as part of their Islamic conquest, thereby establishing a wholly Islamic identity for the region. During the early 20th century, the modern Middle East was formed as the Ottoman Empire collapsed at the hands of the British. This seemingly independent status was barred as the Middle East became a chessboard of the superpowers during the long and paranoid Cold War. The Middle East has famously always been a very profitable region, not the least due to its incredible wealth of energy resources, especially oil. According to Transparency International (2019) based on BP data regionally the largest share of proved oil reserves is in the Middle East (754 billion barrels, constituting 51 % of global reserves including oil sands and 57 per cent excluding them)¹. Middle Eastern countries also possess about 41% of natural gas reserves. The Arab region includes approximately 60% of the world's oil reserves and 30 % of the world's gas reserves. Now the region finds itself amidst incredible change. A decade old cold war is in the resurgence as various revolutionary protests have taken place, providing varying results and threatening to change the Middle East as we know it.

IRAN IN ARAB SPRING

The inciting incident that constitutes the identity of Modern Iranian politics and society has undoubtedly been the Iranian Revolution of 1979. It can be argued that this revolutionary ideal is a primordial instinct for Iranians but the Iranian Revolution is the literate embodiment of what ideas were to come in the 41 years since. To sum up many years of history, during the Islamic conquest, Iran or erstwhile Persia was invaded. The first dynasty to rule Persia was the Safavids who were responsible for the forced conversion of the region into Shia Islam.

1. Bp 2019, *Oil; Energy and Economics* , accessed 9 December, 2020 ,
<<https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/energy-economics/statistical-review-of-world-energy/oil.html>>

Till the 20th century the short lived Pahlavi dynasty ruled over the region. Reza Shah was supported by the British and he enforced a very western way of life which he coined “The White Revolution”. After a coup in 1953, the Shah became increasingly authoritarian leading Iran into several controversial alliances with Western states. Even though the White Revolution was advertised as a crucial step towards modernization, it was not hard to spot the Shah’s ulterior motives. Many people saw it as a move to legitimize the Pahlavi claim over the region.² All these reforms seemed progressive however the introduction of a modern i.e. Western lifestyle irked people who considered this plan to be unsavoury for Iranian culture and heritage. What particularly vexed Islamic cleric Ruhollah Khomeini was the extension of the right to vote for women. He thought of such a reform to be Un-Islamic. Though the White Revolution contributed towards the economic and technological advancement of Iran, the failures of some of the land reform programs and the partial lack of democratic reforms, as well as severe antagonism towards the White Revolution from the clergy and landed elites, would ultimately contribute to the Shah's downfall and the Iranian Revolution in 1979. While the White Revolution ensued, the Shah installed his private police force, SAVAK, who crushed dissent with authoritarian force. Protests and Demonstration against the Shah commenced on October 1977 both of secular and religious nature. The protests rapidly intensified in 1978 as the Islamic clergy, led by the vociferous Ruhollah Khomeini began to capture hearts with their nationalistic Shiite sentiment. The Shah was taken completely by surprise by the protests and, to make matters worse, he often became indecisive during times of crisis; virtually every major decision he would make backfired on his government and further inflamed the revolutionaries. Iran's security forces had neither received any riot-control training nor any equipment since 1963. As a result, police forces were unable to control demonstrations, thus the army was frequently deployed. On 19 August 1978 at the Cinema Rex in Abadan, Iran, hundreds of people were watching *The Deer* when, four men locked the doors from

2 . Darioush Bayandor , *The Shah, the Islamic Revolution and The United States*, (Cham, Switzerland : Springer), 27-29

outside and set it ablaze.³ The fire started outside three entrance doors to the main hall. This was seen as the immediate cause of the revolution. The Pahlavis blamed the incident on Islamic Marxists and Islamic militants while anti-Pahlavi protesters blamed SAVAK, for setting the theatre ablaze. It is still considered to be one of the largest terrorist attacks in history. The Shah did not understand the protests and believed that bringing the people prosperity would help his cause. However the people did not err and kept protesting to the extent to which Mohammed Reza Shah had to finally flee the countries and find residence in US, an event which has soured US Iran relations ever since. When news of the Shah's departure was announced, there were spontaneous scenes of joy throughout the country. Millions poured onto the streets, and virtually every remaining sign of the monarchy was torn down by the crowds. The SAVAK was dissolved and freed all remaining political prisoners. The army was ordered to allow mass demonstrations, promised free elections and invited the revolutionaries into a government of "national unity".

From early 1979 to either 1982 or 1983 Iran was in a state of chaos. With the monarchy overthrown, the economy and security of the country was severely threatened. Yet, by 1982 Khomeini and his supporters had crushed the rival factions, defeated local rebellions and consolidated power. Ever since then Iran has been a theocratic democracy, run by a Supreme leader, where elections are held although heavily influenced by Islamic Supreme Leader.

To classify the Iranian Revolution as an Islamic Revolution would be incorrect as at its core it started out as a group of people discontent with an authoritarian government. The core of the revolutions could be described as radical leftists, happy with their modernized way of life, rebelling against the oppression of Pahlavi rule.⁴ Only later when Khomeini came into power was the rhetoric of it being a nationalistic and Shiite revolution enforced. The clergy would take a similar stance years later while dealing with Arab Spring. As only 15% percent of Muslims are

3 . William Branigan, The Washington Post 1978, *Terrorists Kill 377 by Burning Theater in Iran*, accessed on 7 December 2020, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/08/21/terrorists-kill-377-by-burning-theater-in-iran/2eb80ec8-123b-4d73-b351-870bc2a41f3f/>>

4 . Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*, (Great Britain : Vintage), Part 1

Shia, there develops an identity among them of being the oppressed. A country with a revolutionary spark and of an ambitious nature. Thus the Iranian Government spreads the word of Middle Eastern Supremacy. The quest to be the leader of the Islamic world. A quest to put a death knell to the old order.

SAUDI ARABIA IN ARAB SPRING

Just as Iran represents the revolutionary Shias, Saudi Arabia represents the old world Sunni monarch structure. However their goals and foreign policy is much harder to pin down than just an effect of being a different sect of Muslims than the Iranians. Their objective seems to be more about survival as a Middle Eastern superpower rather than practicing sectarianism or preaching their 'gospel'. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as it is called today was at one point of time a number of scattered kingdoms in a vast desert landscape (thus, this politics is known as oasis politics). They were unified in when Mohammed Saud, the chieftain of the Oasis town of Diriyah formed a pact with Islamic fundamentalist Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, who was seeking refuge in Diriyah. Saud would be emir and Wahhab would be imam and together they would spread Wahhabism, a puritanical sect of Islam, throughout the region. The region was under Ottoman rule. However that would end in 1811 in the Wahhabi War. Saud would capture the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and establish his own state where Wahhabism would thrive. However he was murdered by the Ottoman Empire. His grandson, Bin Abdullah bin Mohammed escaped the Ottoman surge of Diriyah and establish the Islamic State of Nejd now with the city of Riyadh as its capital. However he was overthrown by the Rashidi Tribe. His son, Abdul Rahman would try twice to defeat the Rashidis but would be defeated. Demoralized, he would focus more on propagating Wahhabism to the Southern Bedouins in whose lair he had taken refuge. His son, Abdulaziz would mobilize the now Wahhabi Bedouins and together they would defeat the Ottoman Turks and the Rashidis, along the lines also making allies with the British. He would then reclaim Mecca and Medina which were for the first time in 70 years, then ruled by the Heshemites. In 1932 Abdulaziz would unify the kingdoms of Nejd and Hejaz to form what we now call the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In 1938, the Arabian American Oil Company Aramco would discover five huge oil reserves containing more oil than that of North and South America combined.

Abdulaziz saw this as a perfect opportunity to capitalize and bring prosperity. After the war ended he talked directly to both Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. His talks with Roosevelt went on for three days, thereby cementing Saudi US relations for years to come. Since then Saudi Arabia has prospered, having the 2nd best GDP in the entire region, second only to Turkey. There has been a smooth, although rash, running of the government solidified by a harmonious working relationship with the Al Saud and the Islamic clergy. Booming their economic and regional importance is the fact that they are the holders of two of Islam's holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. Every Muslim is told to at least once in their life visit the holy city of Mecca. Studies show that most people paying patronage to the holy city are non-Saudi citizens. The Saudi economy also benefits a lot from the sale of other hydro carbonic resources.⁵ The crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, who administrates Saudi affairs now has started introducing more progressive reforms such as giving driving rights to women. The nation has been economically flourishing.

To understand Saudi policy is a very difficult thing to do. It can't be looked at from a similar perspective through which other countries of the region are looked at. The Saudi policy changed from that of an oasis policy to that of representational policy. Saudi unification did not happen until 1930 and so for a good chunk of the 20th century, the oasis politics was followed. Only later was representational policy used. Saudi Arabia enjoyed a position of power few did in the Middle East. That is why their actions were more reactive than proactive. During the first decade of the 21st century, they sat back, to the dismay of many Middle Eastern political critics. It was only in the 2nd decade that Saudi Arabia's position was threatened. It was then that they started to take a more active role in the workings of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia saw Arab Spring as a threat to its existence. And thus began a proxy war which has been terrorizing the Arab world ever since.

ARAB SPRING

For Iran, Arab Spring was an opportunity to extend its influence in the Middle East. Supreme Leader Khamenei claimed that the Arab Spring was a natural extension of the Iranian revolution of

5 . Thomas Richter, "Saudi Arabia: A Conservative Player on the Retreat?", in Henner Furtig (ed.) , *The Modern Muslim World* , 180

1979. He said that the Arab Spring was proof that an Iranian model could still work. The advocate of Arab Spring was not much out of sympathy but rather as “the manifestation of a firm determination to exclusively define the revolutions as an Islamic awakening and thus force them into a trajectory that began with the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Khamenei and other leaders tried to create an understanding that the Iranian model was obviously still attractive enough to serve as a role model for others in spite of its setbacks and in spite of it being condemned by Western and regional opponents.”⁶ It was an extension of an idea that the Ayatollah Khomeini himself has first propagated. He said; “We shall export our revolution to the entire world because it is an Islamic revolution . . . As long as people on this earth are being oppressed, our struggle shall continue”. However Khamenei claim of the Arab Spring being a spiritual successor to the 1979 revolutions did not remain uncontested in Iran. The Green Movement ; the opposition party, declared that the Arab Spring was more in line to the 2009 protests that had taken place against the Iranian government, with regards to the establishment of human rights. In 2005, Supreme Leader Khamenei also declared the policy paper “20-Year Vision Plan” as the binding foreign policy guideline according to which Iran would assume the leading economic, scientific, and technological position in the region by 2025. Achieving this goal would not only see the Islamic Republic of Iran become a development model for the Islamic world but it would also constitute the realization of the model society project that had been cultivated since Khomeini’s death. Additionally, Iran would become a role model due to its pioneering role in the “anti-imperialist” struggle, which was in keeping with the slogan “justice among the peoples and the States.” Thus, the mission could not simply be reduced to a task for Shiites or Muslims in general. In order to consolidate the image of a pioneer, Iran constantly reminds the rest of the Islamic world of its merits in the struggle against “imperialism” and “Zionism.” Thus Iran began spreading their propaganda everywhere they could. They started with Egypt where a revolution of biblical proportions was occurring. President Hosni Mubarak was being overthrown by a totally 21st century revolution. Egypt was the only Arab country in which Iran did not have an embassy. There was still contention between the two nations which had only been accentuated through decades of

6. Henner Furtig , “Iran: Winner or Loser of the “Arab Spring”?” , in Henner Furtig (ed.), *The Modern Muslim World*, 24

tension. It seemed as though the air was clearing after Mubarak resigned and Mohammed Mursi came into power. He took part in 16th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) hosted by Tehran. Although this was not an official state visit, Mursi was in fact the first Egyptian president to visit Iran since President Sadat in 1978. Shortly before leaving Cairo, he declared that Egypt welcomes “a good relationship with Iran”. Hoping to maximize this situation, Mursi was invited to speak with the Supreme Leader. However when Mursi arrived he openly criticized Bashar Al Assad regime over Syria, an ally of Iran. He also left on the same day. The message was clear; Egypt did plan to have a good relationship in Iran but that did not mean they would sacrifice relationships with other Arab states especially the States in the Gulf. Those nations had boycotted the summit, skeptical of Iran’s intentions. Back at Egypt, Mursi had problems dealing with the Salaffis who were the opposition party in the government. They advocated anti Shiite sentiments and thus were unhappy with Mursi’s alliance with them. However this dispute was ended abruptly when in 2013, Mursi was deposed. Thus ended a really fruitful partnership for Iran. Things intensified in Bahrain as Saudi troops were sent to stop dissent and the popular uprising against the Al Khalifa royal family. Iran saw this as a move by Saudi Arabia and other gulf states to keep the monarchical structure intact. Especially in Iranian media, this power move was heavily criticized. The Saudis were especially concerned about Bahrain as they had a Shiite majority. So they put extra force and managed to quell the revolution. Iran was furious and broadcasted it around the Arab World that Saudi Arabia was afraid of losing its old world order. However these qualms were left unheard because of what happened in Syria. Syria was, and still is, in the midst of a civil war. Protests against President Bashar Al Assad and Al Assad’s violence against it had turned Syria into a warzone. Al Assad was a helpful Iranian ally and so Iran sent military enforcements to help his cause. People from Syria and all around the Middle East were quick to realize where Al Assad’s forces were coming from. This led to heavy criticism towards the Iranian cause. People began to realize that Iran’s protection of the people’s will propaganda was just that as it was just working for its self-interest. This was a severe blow to Iran.

In short, Iran did not benefit from Arab Spring as they would have hoped, partly because of the Saudis and partly because of themselves. Arab Spring left them in a very precarious position as far

as their war with the Saudis were concerned. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand was extremely wary of the Arab Spring. After taking what had been an extremely passive role in the first decade of the 21st century, Saudi Arabia started extending its hand everywhere in the region. One advantage that Saudi Arabia had was the existence of the GCC. When the revolution arrived in the Gulf countries, they were able to quell the protests and keep the Sunni monarchy in power. However, their rhetoric was just as religious as Iran's was. They became increasingly paranoid about their status and fought very hard to protect it. Saudi Arabia's journey into the depths of Arab Spring can be traced similarly to that of Iran. After the Muslim Brotherhood took charge of Egypt in the summer of 2012, Saudi Arabia was cautious. The Egyptian brotherhood's objective was to establish itself as the leading Sunni Power in the Middle East, a title Saudi Arabia held dear to itself. The possibility of the Egypt-Iranian alliance also loomed in the horizon. Such an alignment would not only target Saudi Arabia but also Israel and the Western powers. This would bring them in favour to a lot of Arabs, especially Saudi citizens. This possibility was hugely reduced when Mohammed Mursi was elected president of Egypt. Mursi held Egypt's alliance with the Saudis as top priority.

Furthermore, the worsening of relations between Iran and the Hamas meant that no such Egypt-Iranian alliance could take place in the near future. The deposition of Mursi by the Egyptian army could also be seen a favourable incident to the Saudis. This proved that the army was the most stable institution in the country. Riyadh believed that the army was the only national institution that could be able to bring political stability to Egypt. What pleased Riyadh was the fact that the army was one of the biggest opponents to the concept of an Egypt-Iran alliance. For a long time, the establishment of the GCC was Saudi Arabia's most important contribution to the region. It paid off during the Arab Spring as Saudi Arabia was able to extend its influence. When protests in Bahrain began, with Iranian support, Saudi was able to offer enough support to quell the dissent. Saudi Arabia's policy in Yemen is what caused the most damage. Yemen is the source of three internal and strategic threats to Saudi Arabia. The first is that the political vacuum in Yemen continues to weaken Saudi counterterrorism endeavors. Although Saudi counter terrorism efforts have proved successful in the Kingdom itself, a few members of the Saudi branch of al-Qaida quickly found a safe haven in Yemen. From their Yemeni bases al-Qaida continue to plan attacks

on Saudi soil and interests, such as the failed assassination attempt against a senior Saudi official in August 2009. The second of these sources is the inability of the Yemeni government to maintain territorial integrity. 'Its lack of penetrative capability has allowed some groups to build their own autonomous domains that have dismembered territorial integrity and challenged its sovereignty.'

The third of these sources is the challenge originating from the issue of the restoration of the now defunct South Yemen Republic. The Southern separatist movement, whose ideology is based on past political identity and rising economic demands, presents a latent strategic and often neglected challenge to Saudi Arabia.⁷ This has led to a very bloody war where Saudi Arabia has constantly bombed the Yemeni streets, often harming many civilians. This has drawn a lot of ire from not only the Middle East, but from around the world. Thus Arab Spring did not affect Saudi that much as from before Arab Spring dissent against the Saudis was brewing, not only in Saudi Arabia but also in the whole geopolitical sphere of Arabia.

HYPOTHESIS

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have been gearing up in fear of a violent war. The prospect of such a confrontational war seems ripe for the future. However tides are turning internally as we speak. While outside Iran has gained an unfortunate image as a theocratic fundamentalist terrorist state, inside could hardly be different. After the Iran-US deal was signed, more on that later, the foreign minister, Mohammed Javad Zarif was celebrated in the streets. In a poll, it was shown that 68% of Iranian preferred a US alliance. Some of that goodwill was destroyed when Donald Trump cancelled the deal. However enough damage had been done Khomeini's nationalist rhetoric. Add to that, the Green Movement had also made Supreme Leader Khamenei an unpopular figure in progressive circles. Iran's handling of the Arab Spring has worsened situations, lowering its status in the Arab World. Khamenei's regency struggles to impose itself in the Arab world.

7 . Saud Mousaed Al Tamamy, " Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring: Opportunities and Challenges of Security" in Henner Furtig(ed.), *The Modern Muslim World*, 202

As for Saudi Arabia, things are middling. It has begun to shed its old world image in favour of a more progressive look. The crown prince, 32 years old Mohammed bin Salman has reduced many strict law against women. This aspect of Saudi legislature has always been much contested. Mohammed Bin Salman has also made very good nuclear deals with the US. However not everything about his policies have been very progressive. He has participated in a large corruption crackdown which involves imprisonment of many clergymen and government officials in a Ritz Carlton in Riyadh. The harsh treatment of clergymen has also soured the relationship with the religious leaders. The cooperation of the Al Sauds and the clergy was the foundation on which the country had prospered. His actions have drawn ire in the religious community in Saudi Arabia.

Iran seeks to expand its power in the Gulf, which is a key area of competition between the two states. Saudi Arabia and to varying extents other Gulf Arab states often seek to contain Iran's quest for dominance. In the struggle for Gulf influence, Saudi Arabia has consistently maintained a vastly higher level of political clout with local states than Iran. Iran currently cannot hope to overshadow Saudi regional influence in the Gulf, but it does seek to influence Gulf Arab states and is especially interested in pressuring them to minimize or eliminate their military links to the West. In recent years, Sunni-Shi'ite tension in the Gulf seems to have been rising for a number of reasons.

Just as Iran's failed foreign policies have made their nuclear strength weak, Saudi Arabia has also been gravely handicapped in many ways. For a long time Saudi Arabia was comfortably sitting as one of the biggest powers in the region but now as it reacts to different situations, it is important to analyse what the roadblocks are that can prevent Saudi Arabia from being the biggest regional power. For one, Saudi Arabia lacks the military strength it requires to be the biggest regional power. Despite Riyadh's obvious willingness to massively improve its military capacities and possibly also to acquire a nuclear deterrence capability, there remain major doubts concerning the efficiency and effectiveness of the majority of Saudi military forces. The latest event of Saudi militaries fighting under combat conditions relates back to an armed confrontation with Houthi rebels at the Saudi-Yemeni border in December 2009 and January 2010.

Oil constitutes as almost all of Saudi Arabia's revenue. The demand for oil has never been more although since 2014 the prices have dropped drastically. To compensate for this Mohammed bin Salman has decided to end the nation's "oil obsession" and started a project called vision 2030 focusing more on technology. This has drastic effects for Saudi society. Many Saudis, due to the kingdom's consistent flow of oil revenue, have reaped benefits such as free healthcare and proper housing. However, with the undertaking of such a bargain, the instability of the economy is inevitable. This could further the unpopularity of the regency. Another thing Mohammed Bin Salman has done is vehemently oppose Iran. It has found an ally in the US who is even more antagonistic towards the Persians after the fallout of the Iran deal. Another stumbling block in the acceptance of Riyadh as the regional leader is the puritanical nature of Wahhabism. Throughout the region, Saudi remains one of the only countries to still propagate that part of Islam

Looking at the wider Middle East region, however, the normative reference to a puritanical and exclusionary version of Islam bears a number of inherent discrepancies. While domestically grown transactional Islamic terrorism is only part of the problem—the resilient hostility among parts of the Wahhabi establishment toward the strategic alliance of the Al Saud with the United States and other Western forces was for instance one of the reasons that groups like Al-Qaida found so much resonance among the Saudi society, even though, most senior Wahhabi scholars have always been willing to legitimize major foreign policy decisions by the Al Saud family—the major challenge for the potential of Saudi leadership, however, relates to the acceptance of an extremely exclusionary religiously legitimized claim used to explain, understand, and legitimize political action by other, non-Wahhabi regional political and social actors.

REGIONAL POWER

While speaking about regional power it is essential to examine Detlef Nolte's definition of it. Nolte outlines three main factors to achieving regional power. They are: it has to articulate the aspiration to being in a leading regional position; it has to display that it has the material and ideological resources for regional power projection; and, it has to exercise a genuine influence in regional affairs. To achieve this there must be a good synthesis between hard and soft power. Hard

power refers to the material strength that a nation has. Geographical size, population size, economic and military strength fall under the purview of hard power. Soft power is harder to define. Many interpretations have been thrown around over the years. It can be broadly defined as the ability of a state to influence a foreign matter through means of attraction rather than coercion or financial backing.⁸ With respect to the factors it is important to examine Iran and Saudi Arabia's right to claim.

Iran is blessed with hard power resources. It possesses 1.7 million square kilometers of land mass, with 75 million inhabitants a large population, with a GDP of USD 496 billion a relatively strong economy with 18 billion tons of proven capacity it possesses the third-largest oil reserves in the world. However it can be observed that since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iran has increasingly used soft power to accomplish its foreign policy objective. Iran's rhetoric of reforming Islam has been often used by its government as a means to an end. Thus it can be said that Iran's hard power capacity is designed to primarily serve as an enabler and defender of its main objective – expansion of soft power. Yet, the core hard power capacities of Iran have eroded over time. International sanctions as well as internal mismanagement have harmed the country's economy tremendously, and Iran's military capabilities have also turned out to be rather limited: while still impressive in size, its army is insufficiently led and poorly equipped. Iran's air force's fighter planes are outdated and its air defense capabilities limited. Iran possesses limited power projection capabilities. With an allocated budget of about USD 9 billion Iran still spends less than 3 percent of its GDP on defense, while Saudi Arabia with its much smaller population, for example, spends over USD 40 billion thereon—about 9 percent of its GDP. There is an obvious discrepancy between Iran's self-perception as a representative pan-Islamic actor and the inherent Iranian/Shiite identity associated with that concept, something that has continued to deny the Islamic Republic its sought-after role as the avant-garde of an Islamic movement. Even the Arab Spring did not come close to meeting Iranian expectations. On the contrary, the longer the crisis in Syria lasts the greater the alienation becomes between Iran and its former allies on the one side and the Arab

8. Henner Furtig, "Prospect for New Regional Powers in The Middle East", in Henner Furtig (ed.) *The Modern Muslim World*, 211

street on the other. In the meantime, more and more of the “oppressed masses” are coming to see Iran as an ally of a brutally repressive regime and thus as being on the wrong side of history.

Saudi Arabia’s hard power is instantly recognizable. It is large and has the world’s biggest oil reserves. However its hard power ends there. Despite having such a vast landmass, Saudi Arabia has a population of 25 million, out of which only 15 million are registered Saudi citizens. Saudi Arabia’s army can also be defined as deficient with only 230,000 soldiers in its command. Notwithstanding huge imports of weaponry over the years, the misuse of arms spending as a result of corruption and nepotism meant that the country could not ease these military weaknesses. A deeply rooted conviction about its military inferiority has caused a specific behavior to take hold in Saudi foreign policy: the pursuit of a reactive, defensive stance. The soft power that Saudi Arabia possesses is also instantly recognizable. It is the custodian of the two holy cities Mecca and Medina. It also hosts the hajj which as said before is the holy pilgrimage. Yet, the type of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia limits the effectiveness of these activities and the claim of being the symbolic center of the Islamic world tremendously. Saudi Wahhabism, an ultraconservative variant of Hanbali Sunnism, may appear to some believers to be the most authentic and pure type of Islam, but among the vast majority of Sunni adherents it is extremely unpopular—not to speak of Shiism, its antipode. Consequently, the impact of this theoretically striking soft power factor has remained limited.

It is a very tense situation out in the Middle East. So far Saudi Arabia and Iran have fought through proxies, but a direct war seems to be looming. Major Houthi attacks have taken place in Riyadh in the last year. This has added a new front of confrontation to the parties. For a long time US and Western powers have considered free navigation throughout the Middle East essential to their foreign policy. Thus US intervention seems ripe for the future. With Saudi Arabia and Iran being coastal neighbours it is only a matter of time before a direct war starts.

CONCLUSION

While learning about such a conflict, it is essential to recognize what the motives are for each party. The superficial motive is religious. Saudi Arabia considers Iran to be an existential threat.

Not only does the Sunni-Shia conflict play a part but also the quest for supremacy. However there is one simple motive both parties can be boiled down to. That is the naked ambition of survival. Saudi Arabia wants to survive as the religious old world monarchy while Iran wants to save itself from utter obscurity. All external reasons are superficial with respect to the naked ambition of survival.

All of this has led to an incredible war with many unfortunate consequences and it does not seem to be running out of steam any time soon. The concept of rich, influential people sitting up on the hill and fighting their own wars through the common people has been touched upon a lot, yet it fails to not be prevalent in this circumstance. The crises in Yemen and Syria can attest to this. Therefore it becomes very hard to describe the motives of each country as the motives are not psychohistorical but rather very concentrated. Therefore the practice or use of words such as Tehran or Riyadh to describe the actions of Khamenei or bin Salman could be called into question. This leads to another intriguing discussion about collective responsibility as a form of national identity. We can identify various different inciting points of history which have helped define the countries in question. The revolutionary instinct of Iran, divided by the leftists and the fundamentalists or the rich, conservative Saudi Arabia where only a handful can be described as such. Important concepts such as national guilt and national pride are placed at the centre of international political disputes. The concept of national identity is as fluid in nature as human identity. Isaac Asimov wrote in his foundation series, the principles of psychohistory, a science based on the belief that a larger a group of people the more predictable they are. The principles of psychohistory can be called into question in our modern world where most of the time we criticize the leaders we ourselves armed. And no two countries are as prime examples as Iran and Saudi Arabia.

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