

The New Middle East Cold War and Ethnoreligious Conflicts in Oil-rich Regions: Iran-Saudi Arabia Rivalry

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Some scholars describe the ongoing regional stiff rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East as a cold war that resembles the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. This rivalry shapes real political, military, and economic dynamics in the region. Although in the post-Iraq invasion in 2003 there are ample discussions on different dimensions of rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, one aspect that has received little attention is how this rivalry affects ethnoreligious conflicts at the domestic level within the two countries. This study uses the study of the Arabic-speaking minority in Iran's Khuzestan province and the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia's Al Sharqia province to illustrate how the rivalry creates a new force that impacts the internal dynamism of mobilization among these minorities. This is despite the fact that these regions produce most of the oil in the Middle East and may suffer the consequences of the resource curse. Therefore, the main question is: How does this rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia affect the ethno-religious cleavages in the oil-rich region of the two countries? I argue that the approach of the governments of Saudi Arabia and Iran to their regional rival has internal consequences for religious and ethnic minorities in these two countries that pave the way for extremist's groups to lead the mobilization in these regions. As a result, the two regions have a high potential for the formation of crisis centers and can foster extremism.

Key words: Rivalry, Resources Curse, Middle East, Shiism, Wahhabism, Ethnoreligious Conflicts.

1. Introduction

The US invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein to some extent altered the balance of power in the Middle East in Iran's favor, away from Saudi Arabia and its allies. The invasion has had extensive regional implications in terms of the rise of sectarian and ethnic conflicts. From Lebanon to Iraq and Yemen, the rise

of Shiism has been the main driver of identity conflict in the region. However, the rise of identity politics has also had consequences for both Iran and Saudi Arabia at the domestic level. How does the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia affect ethnoreligious conflict in the oil-rich regions in the Middle East? Some scholars describe the stiff ongoing regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East as a cold war that resembles that between the United States and the Soviet Union (Grumet, 2015). Following the Iraq invasion in 2003, this rivalry has continued to shape the political, military, and economic dynamics in the region.

Although there are ample dimensions to the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, one aspect that has received little attention is how this rivalry affects ethnoreligious conflicts at the domestic level within these two countries and in Iraq and Yemen. In this study, I will investigate the impact of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia on ethnic mobilization among the Shiite Arab minority in Iran's Khuzestan Province and the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia's Al Sharqia Province. The main question I will try to answer is the following: How does this rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia affect the ethnoreligious cleavages in the oil-rich regions of these two countries? The assumption is that the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has domestic consequences for religious and ethnic minorities in these two countries (Shias in Saudi Arabia and Iranian Arabs in Khuzestan) that pave the way for extremist groups to lead the mobilization in these regions. As a result, both states increase repressions against ethnoreligious minorities at the domestic level.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are two major oil countries whose economies are heavily influenced by oil revenues. The point should be underscored that Shiite Arabs live and reside in the oil-rich areas of both countries. In other words, the Shiite Arab population is concentrated in areas that are critically and economically important for both states, which puts this population, a minority in both countries, in a specific position. As a result, both states have considered the Shiite Arab region in their territory a restive province.

The Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia have had different policies toward their Shiite Arab populations. In Iran, the post-revolutionary state, since its inception 40 years ago, has been advocating policies to mobilize and support Shiite Arabs from Lebanon to Iraq and Yemen. Thus, the Islamic Republic has not pursued political discrimination against Shiite Arabs in Khuzestan. The most important evidence of this is the presence of Arab citizens in senior positions in the regime, such as Ali Shamkhani in the Supreme National Security Council and Ayatollah Kaabi in the presiding board of the Iran Assembly of Experts. There are no such cases for other religious minorities such as Sunni Kurds or Sunni Baloch (Boroujerdi, M., & Rahimkhani, K., 2018). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia organizes its political mobilization inside its country behind "anti-Shiite" slogans, to the extent that it defines it in opposition to Iran (Al-Rasheed, 2011). However, the Shiites Arabs in Iran suffer from societal cleavages of the

center and periphery such that the general population in the periphery suffers from a lack of access to power and resources. Meanwhile, the Shiite Arabs in Saudi Arabia suffer from a sectarian cleavage in which the majority Sunni in power discriminate against the Shiite minority.

Although many scholars (Wehrey, F., Karasik, T. W., Nader, A., Ghez, J. J., & Hansell, L., 2009) (Terrill, 2011) (Downs, 2012) (Mabon, 2012) (Chubin, S., & Tripp, C., 2014) have focused on the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, they have overlooked the impacts of this rivalry on ethnoreligious minorities in both countries and in the region. By focusing on the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, I will investigate how this rivalry affects the nonviolent and violent mobilization of ethnic and religious minorities in both countries and in the region.

According to the question and theory that was considered, the process of this article will be as follows, which will first determine the methodology and theoretical framework of the research. Then, the relevant data will be examined, such as demographic and geographic features and the history of relations between the two countries and the concept of the Cold War, considering the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In the next part, they will be analyzed according to the data, and in the end, conclusions will be drawn from the mentioned topics.

2. Methodology and theoretical framework

To achieve the goal of this research, a qualitative method has been used based on a combination of rivalry theory, and resources curse theory. In general, it has been tried to ensure that data collection is based on fresh and relevant sources. The long history of conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia has led to a traditional multilateral rival between the two countries that cover a wide range of dimensions and some observers suppose it as a new Cold War in the Middle East (Gause III, 2014) (Salisbury, 2015) (Grumet, 2015). When ethnic-religious identity is politically active, political elites try to use it for political mobilization. Despite the class conflict that we see in Third World countries such as Latin America that social heterogeneity, like developed Western countries, appear as class conflict, in the Middle East we have a linguistic and religious heterogeneity in the classifications. It expresses its ethnicity, and political mobilization is formed along with these ethnic conflicts (Fearon, 2006). As a result, ethnic conflicts can have a strong potential for crisis, and rivalries countries can use it against each other.

From the perspective of different versions of new realism (e.g., defensive realism and offensive realism), due to the absence of a central authority above the states, the international system is anarchic (Schmidt, 2012). According to this strand of scholarship, sovereign states, as the important actors in the international system, understand themselves to be the highest authority and therefore construct their domestic politics as to how they see fit. Along this line of argument, states

persistently pursue opportunities to gain more power than other states. Mearsheimer (2001, p. 33) argues that these states “understand that the best way to ensure their survival is to be the most powerful” in the system. Thus, based on this perspective, states as power maximizers engage in rivalry and competition to ensure their survival.

The rivalry between powers in a system can take different shapes, from competition for the military to economic capabilities or recruitment of new allies to expand her territorial influences. In the post-Saddam Middle East and post-Arab uprising in 2011, ethnic and religious minorities have become means and proxies for Shiite Iran and Sunni Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia. Identity conflicts are not a new phenomenon in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), but after the US invasion of Iraq and the fall of Arab nationalism, identity politics has become the driving force of most civil wars and unrest in the MENA region, from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon.

To understand how ethnic and religious identities become a base for the mobilization of marginalized minorities, I will use social identity theory and the institutional approach to identity politics. Employing such a theoretical approach will help develop a clearer vision of the temporal relationship between ethnoreligious exclusion, external influence, and violent and nonviolent mobilizations. Another relevant aspect of ethnic and sectarian mobilization relates to natural resources in this region. The topic that has been considered in the literature on the resource curse. For example, one strand of scholarship underscores how the combination of oil wealth and deprivation increases the likelihood of ethnic conflicts in oil-rich countries (Ross, 2012) (Asal, V., Findley, M., Piazza, J. A., & Walsh, J. I., 2016). Between middle- and low-income countries, there is almost twice as much chance of civil war in oil producers countries as in non-oil producers countries. He pointed to two types of conflict: “separatist wars waged by disenfranchised minorities in oil-producing regions, and conflicts led by rebels who fund themselves by extorting money from the oil industry” (Ross, 2012). Citizens in the oil-producing region With the motive that would now be better off if they separated and established an independent state because it would provide every resident with a bigger share of the oil wealth than they currently receive (ibid). Michael Ross also by analysed 50 years of data from separatist conflicts in the oil regions found that this natural resource wealth is much more hazardous when combined with ethnoreligious grievances (ibid). For example in Indonesia has hundreds of ethnic and religious minorities that they were under the economic crisis, the military dictatorship, and Suharto’s fall; however, it was the oil-rich region of Aceh where a large and violent separatist movement emerged (Ross, 2005).

As mentioned above, it can be said that the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, despite this ethnically active gap, which has been strengthened by the existence

of the oil in a dialectical manner, can be a place for playing a role in these areas for two countries.

3. Historical backgrounds of the new Cold War in the Middle East

3.1. The history of relationship between Iran-Saudi Arabia

Since 1924 the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been dominated by a domino of events, one after the other, which causes aggravation conflict between the two countries. The climax in this relationship between the two power blocs in the Middle East dates back to 1979, the time of the Iranian Revolution. Since then, the two countries have consistently sought to form regional and trans-regional coalitions against each other.

The different periods of Iran-Saudi Arabia relations can be divided into 4 times. The first time, from 1924 to 1979, may saw the start of a tough rivalry in it, but it was clearly a time of low tension between the two countries. During this period, despite the economic, political, cultural, and religious challenges of the two countries, according to the common interests resulting from the greater responsibilities of their regions, they inevitably ignored the differences and asserts the importance of overcoming these challenges by emphasizing the friendships and mutual interests. To establish security and stability in the Persian Gulf region (Ahmadi, 2008). Reza Shah saw Saudi Arabia both as a regional rival in the Middle east and as a threat to her expansionist interests in the Persian Gulf (Al Toraiifi, 2012). The first important relationship dates back to 1927 when Reza Shah sent a delegation to Saudi Arabia to declare his readiness to establish diplomatic relations. Between 1925 and 1930, the two regional kingdoms rival for their hegemony to each other. In April 1925 one of the first tensions between the two modern Middle Eastern countries has been occurred, when Reza Khan overthrew Sheikh Khazal in Khuzestan, and it worried King Abdul Aziz. In contrast, Saudi Arabia signed a bilateral agreement with Britain in 1927 to establish other buffer states in the Persian Gulf and to recognize the states of Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman. Reza Shah supposed it as a severe challenge to Iran's sovereignty because he believed that these agreements were to weaken Iran's position on the Persian Gulf and especially on Bahrain (ibid). During the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, the most important conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia regards Bahrain, but with the takeover of Shah Faisal in 1964, a new phase had begun. In 1965, Saudi Arabia and Iran reached a new agreement through which they were able to resolve their conflicts in the Persian Gulf. Britain exited from 1971 to 1979, Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia culminated under the policy of the Nixon Doctrine (twin pillars).

The second phase of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is from 1979 to 2003. With the start of the 1979 revolution in Iran, tensions between the two

countries began to rise. The growth of revolutionaryism in Iran had frightened most countries in the region, and Saudi Arabia was no exception in this matter. The Shia ideology's opposition to Wahhabism became the most important challenge between the two countries. Although Saudi Arabia's support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war set the two countries acutely against each other, the 1987 Hajj may be the most important tense event between Iran and Saudi Arabia during the period. As much as Ayatollah Khomeini said in a famous speech that year: "Even if it were possible to forgive Saddam Hussein, it would never be possible to forgive Saudi Arabia". In the following years, during the presidency of Rafsanjani and Khatami in Iran, efforts were made to improve relations, and to some extent it was successful, but with the beginning of the third term of relations between the two countries in 2003, these relations again strained.

The third term of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is from 2003 to 2011, which began with the fall of Saddam in 2003. With the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the shaping of Shia Iraq and the efforts of the two countries to fill the power gap, a form of open rivalry took place, and the two countries openly confronted to each other, that continues today. Iran's nuclearization makes it one of the most powerful countries in the world, and for Saudi Arabia, a nuclear Iran is a very serious threat. During this period, we saw the beginning of the two countries' unprecedented rivalries in third countries, which later became known as proxy wars. Both countries tried to confront allied forces in Yemen, Palestine and Lebanon, thereby increasing their regional influence.

The fourth term of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which began with the Arab Spring in 2011 that continues today, is the beginning of the most tense period of rivalry between the two countries. The next chapter will explain how the multilaterally rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia at different levels has led the two countries to a cold war. Briefly, the disputed matters between the two countries can be described as follows:

Proxy wars: in Syria and Yemen, arms race: heavy arms purchase by Saudi Arabia - Iran's missile program, oil rivalry: Saudi Arabia increase production - sanctions on Iranian oil (role of major powers), regional coalitions: Iran, Qatar, and Turkey, In contrast, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, and JCPOA.

3.2. Why use the concept of the cold war to rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia?

The Cold War term was first applied by George Orwell. The fierce rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union after the end of World War II and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century included a comprehensive rivalry that did not only lead to direct conflict. Therefore, it is called the Cold War. The dimensions of the rivalry included seven areas, such as

political maneuvers, military alliances, spying, propaganda, arms manufacturing, economic aid, and proxy wars between the other nations. Many Middle East analysts have compared the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia to the Cold War. The seven features that were contested in the Cold War literature can also be seen in the intensity and weakness of rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. These seven features or dimensions are ideology, diplomacy, allies, economic, arms race, proxy wars or indirect conflicts, and direct interventions (Grumet, 2015).

By considering these common features, it can be explained that the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is at a high level. Many Middle East experts look at the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia as a reminder of the Cold War and refer to it as the New Cold War. Except that identity concepts are different in the Middle East (ibid). Governments' policies on identity concepts are the focus of this study, where Saudi Arabia seeks Wahhabi identity to pursue political mobilization in its country to maintain the authority of its government and pursues a kind of sectarianism inside and outside its borders. And Iran is pursuing a policy of Shia outside its borders in the Middle East.

4-oil geography and the presence of ethnic and religious minorities

4.1. Al Sharqia Province, Saudi Arabia, and the Shias minority

Saudi Arabia's Al Sharqia province is located in eastern Saudi Arabia and on the southern shore of the Persian Gulf. It is the largest province in Saudi Arabia in terms of size and it fits most of Saudi Arabia's oil. According to the US Energy Information Administration, Saudi Arabia is the second-largest oil producer in the world by producing 11.82 million barrels of oil per day.¹ According to the statistics, Saudi Arabia's population is 34 million; about 15 percent of Shias live mainly in the eastern province.² In Figure 1, you can see a map of Saudi Arabia by province, and Figure 2 shows the distribution of oil fields concentrated in this Shiite province.

¹ Source: International Energy Statistics, Total oil (petroleum and other liquids) consumption, July 26, 2021.

² The total population - General Authority for Statistics". stats.gov.sa. Retrieved 31 October 2019. <https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/indicators/1>



Figure 1: Map of Saudi Arabia - Al-Sharqiya province is distinguished by its red colour

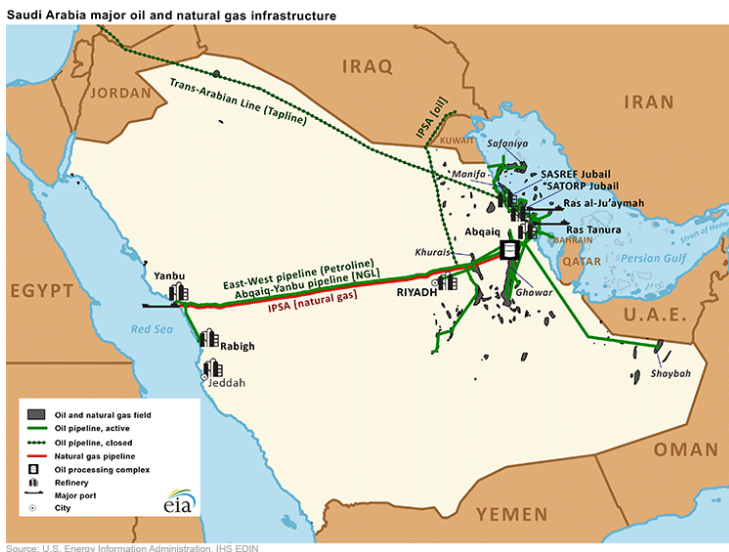


Figure 2: Distribution of oil fields in Saudi Arabia. Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)

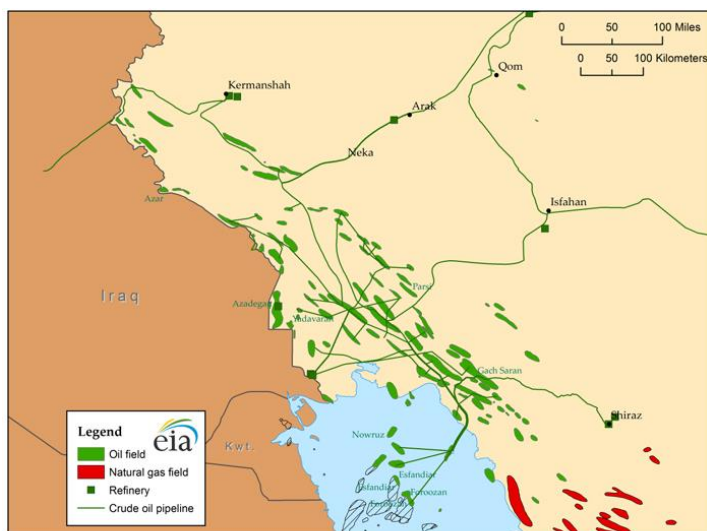
4.2. Khuzestan Province of Iran and the Arabic-speaking minority

Khuzestan Province is located in south western Iran and the north of the Persian Gulf. 33.6% of its population is 1.6 million Arabs. Iran is the ninth major oil country with a daily production capacity of 3 million barrels of oil,³ most of which is produced in Khuzestan province. In Figure 3, you can see a map of Iran by province, and in Figure 4, you can see the distribution of oil fields located in the Arab province of Khuzestan.



Figure 3: Map of Iran - Khuzestan province is distinguished by red colour

³ Source: International Energy Statistics, Total oil (petroleum and other liquids) consumption, July 26, 2021.



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, IHS Markit Midstream Database (via IHSM EDIN).

Figure 4: Distribution of oil fields in Iran. Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)

5. Discussion

With the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 at the hands of US forces and the subsequent shift in the balance of power in the region in favor of Iran, Sunni Saudi Arabia has witnessed Iran's growing influence through the rise of Shiite Arabs in the region. As a result, this trend has affected how Saudi Arabia comprehends the change in the balance of power in the region and its position in the Islamic world. The Saudis not only view the growing power of Iran and Shiites in the region but also have kept an eye on the Shiite Arab population at home. The rise of Shiites in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen has given the Shiites in Saudi Arabia a feeling of empowerment. The rise of Shiites to power in the region has given courage to their brethren in Saudi Arabia, the courage to express their long-repressed grievances related to the Wahhabi ruling elites in Saudi Arabia mobilizing the general population over fears of the rise of Shiism in the country.

Saudi Arabia in dealing with riots in Arab Spring had three strategies: 1) control 2) acceptance of the revolution and 3) Counter-Revolution (Al-Rasheed, 2011). As is evident, the Saudi government has chosen the third way and standing in front of the Arabic Spring by fomenting the sectarian debates by using the sectarian power of extremely conservative Saudi society. Though old famous exiled Sunni Islamists such as the new Islamist party, the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia, and Shia activists called for a protest on 11 March, but the

Saudi regime identified such calls as a Shia under plot and insurgency backed by Iran (ibid).

Through this, two things were done: 1) easier cracked down of the Shias, 2) mobilization of the Sunnis under the discourse that Iran seeks to strengthen the Shias against the Sunnis and to scare the people that any protest will divide Saudi Arabia and It becomes torn (ibid).

In two ways, the Saudi regime gathers the main religious persons behind it and strengthens its propaganda apparatus. 1) Issued a fatwa (religious opinion) against the protests through Wahhabi scholars (supreme council of scholars, religious highest official). 2) Saudi official religious scholars see the protests as a conspiracy by Iranian-Safavid-Shia and introduce Shiism as heresy in Islam (ibid.). Mazawi al-Rasheed (2011) said: "In a country where there is weak nationalism and strong Islamism and sectarian tension, state strategy to depict protests as a Shia conspiracy was successful in pushing the Sunnis to renew their allegiance to the regime [...] The real threat to Saudi authoritarianism is the development of a national opposition composed of both Sunnis and Shia, and Islamists and secularists".

In the theoretical part, it was pointed out that there is more hazardous in oil-rich areas that have ethnoreligious grievances. Therefore, this is an important issue that the Shia of Saudi Arabia and the Arabs of Khuzestan are present in the oil-rich areas. This means that there is a double possibility of instability in the new Cold War in the Middle East. On the other hand, the US oil sanction as the most important supporter of Saudi Arabia on Iran and the accusation of Iran's attack on oil tankers and Aramco oil facilities by Saudi Arabia and Iran's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz have taken the conflict to a critical level. A fierce clash in Mahshahr, Khuzestan, as following the November 2019 protests in Iran, which was called revenge by Saudi officials over the attack on Aramco, shows some of the conflicts in these oil-rich areas. Also, the water crisis in Khuzestan in the summer of 2021, which caused widespread dissatisfaction among Arabic-speaking citizens, is another aspect of the sensitivity of these areas. Such sensitivity leads the two countries to adopt more security policies in their oil-rich areas. These policies and sensitivities by the government lead to dissatisfaction among the people of these areas, which, due to the background of ethnoreligious conflicts in these areas, causes more and more crises.

Conclusion

It was observed that how Saudi Arabia and Iran have a multilateral rivalry with each other. This multilateral rivalry can be reminding the features of Soviet-American rivalry in the Cold War. The issue of minorities in Middle Eastern countries has always been a major problem for states. The ideological opposition between Iran and Saudi Arabia at the level of identity is widespread. Within these

countries, social crises and the accumulation of demands have posed a serious challenge in two countries. The Arab Spring wave, as the fourth wave of democracy, has sparked insurgents' demands in these countries. The internal response of both countries to their crises has been different, with Saudi Arabia inevitably moving towards Wahhabism and Iran toward nationalism and expanding regional influence. This has created unhappy groups in the two countries that are a serious challenge for their states. Since the two countries have an oil economy and these dissatisfied groups are present in the oil-sensitive areas of the two countries, the situation has become even more difficult for them in these areas.

This article showed how ethnic and religious minorities are located in the oil-rich regions of the two countries. And each of these minorities has identity ties to a rival country. Because identity variables in the Middle East are organized on the basis of religion and ethnicity, as well as past studies showing the possibility of separatist insurgency in oil-rich areas, the two countries have potential leverage to confront their rivals. In other words, the combination of ethnic and religious divisions, the potential for conflict in oil-rich regions, and Rivalry have identified the two provinces of Khuzestan in Iran and Sharqiya in Saudi Arabia as two potential hotbeds of crisis. Therefore, this article can provide a clear perspective for further studies that want to explore the centers of crisis in the Middle East and oil-rich regions.

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