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CHALLENGES TO MEDIATION IN THE PERSIAN GULF

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Saudi Arabia and Iran have been on the opposite sides of the geo-political divide since the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and their rivalry has become more acrimonious with the passage of time because of its sectarian dimension and domestic politics of the two countries. Both are now facing off each other in a number of conflicts across the region — namely in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Bahrain — and there is a growing fear of a direct military conflict between them, which, if it happens, could have serious consequences for regional peace and security.

At the turn of the twenty first century, the bilateral relations between Riyadh and Tehran were not so hostile as they are currently¹ and both states pursued normal diplomacy back then. There is, therefore, a dire need to understand reasons for their conflictual relationship. Since the Islamic revolution in Iran, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have emerged as two clearly distinct opposite poles of Islamic politics, Saudi Arabia as a conservative monarchy, while Iran as a revolutionary republic. Both states have since then claimed to have championed the cause of the Islamic World.

Saudi Arabia, a country brimming with followers of Wahhabism with their anti-Shiite discourse, has dramatically exacerbated Sunni-Shiite ideological conflict.² The

¹ *Iran says it will destroy any aggressor as tensions build in Gulf.* (2019, September 22). Retrieved October 11, 2019, from The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/22/iran-says-it-will-destroy-any-aggressor-as-tensions-build-in-gulf>.

² Mouline, N. (2018, July 03). *Can the Saudis Break Up With Wahhabism?* Retrieved October 10, 2019, from The New York Times:

sectarian conflict is not the sole cause of Saudi-Iran rivalry; rather it is the geo-political competition in the Gulf³ that is fueling the animosity between them.

Each state desires to maintain its hegemony on the oil trade by sidelining the other. The US sanctions on Iran and supply of military hardware to Saudi Arabia have, irrefutably, exacerbated the confrontation.⁴ It would not be an overstatement to equate the struggle between both states with cold war in the Middle East.

They have left no stone unturned to make forays into Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine, and Bahrain in addition to other parts of the world, to strengthen their sphere of influence. Soon after the Islamic revolution in Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini publicly denounced monarchy as an un-Islamic act. This gave birth to Saudi animosity towards Iran. Iranian attempts at promoting the ideals of Islamic revolution further scared the Gulf monarchies. This was one of the major reasons behind Saudi Arabia's extravagant support for Iraq in its war against Iran.⁵

The relations between both states, at one stage, worsened to a point where a brief military confrontation in 1984 took place leaving two Iranian planes shot down by Saudi fighter jets. The relations were further

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/03/opinion/saudi-arabia-monarchy-wahhabism.html>.

³ Riad, Mohamed. "Geopolitics and politics in the Arab Gulf States (GCC)." *GeoJournal* 13, no. 3 (1986): 201-210.

⁴ Rasmussen, S. E. (2019, July 04). *Squeezed by U.S. Sanctions, Iran Shifts From Patience to Confrontation.* Retrieved October 09, 2019, from The Wall Street Journal: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/squeezed-by-u-s-sanctions-iran-shifts-from-patience-to-confrontation-11562270731>.

⁵ Hooglund, Eric, and William Royce. "The Shi'i clergy of Iran and the conception of an Islamic state." *State, Culture, and Society* 1, no. 3 (1985): 102-117.

strained when in 1987 Saudi security clashed with Iranian pilgrims in where around 400 people perished.

After the passing away of Imam Khomeini, there was a thaw in the relations of both adversaries and the two subsequent presidents of Iran, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, showed no public animosity towards the Kingdom and their focus remained on normalization of the bilateral relationship. It is clearly an indicator that animosity between the two adversaries is not an inevitable phenomenon.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia which unconditionally supported Iraq against Iran in 1980s went against Iraq in the 1990s when the Iraqi army under President Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. The development provided an opportunity to both states to come together without nursing any obvious hostility towards each other.⁶

Even during the tenure of hardline Iranian President Ahmadinejad both states played a cooperative role in sorting out political issues in Lebanon in 2007. He was also invited by Riyadh in the same year. These are open evidences that rapprochement between both Iran and Saudi Arabia is not a pipe dream but can be an achievable reality.

The current president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, at the time of assumption of office called the Kingdom “a friend and a brother”. It helped keep his government’s focus on national economic development rather than the political developments in the Middle East. This gave a sense of comfort to Saudi Arabia, which had always taken Iranian role in the

region as a threat to its interests.⁷

Fast-forward to 2011, Arab Spring rekindled Iran – Saudi Arabia contest as Riyadh not only feared losing regional influence, but also saw a threat to the monarchy. Uprising in Bahrain was then the flashpoint. However, it was the Syrian crisis which massively inflamed the tensions between the two sides. Iran’s support for Syrian president Bashar Hafez al-Assad and Saudi assistance for the rebels, who were fighting against Syrian army and Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia resistant group, were instances where both states were at variance with each other. Another point which hardened the troubled ties between both states was the transition in the Saudi leadership. Due to absence of democratic process in Saudi Arabia, and non-transparency in affairs of Saudi monarchy, where succession to the throne is non-uniform, brought about a decisive change in policies those were being pursued by the predecessors. By 2015 the focus of this power play had shifted to Yemen, on whom the Saudis imposed war after the Houthis ousted Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.

US withdrawal from JCPOA and imposition of restrictions on Iranian oil exports has been the reason behind the latest escalation in the Persian Gulf. Number of security incidents have happened in the Gulf since Iran warned that it would reciprocate any action against movement of its oil tankers. However, Tehran denied its role in those incidents. Lately, the attack on Aramco oil field and processing plant by the Houthis,

⁶ Wehrey, Frederic, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy J. Ghez, and Lydia Hansell. *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for US Policy*. Rand Corporation, 2009

⁷ Wolgelenter, M. (2019, October 01). *Brother of Iran's President Is Sentenced to Prison for Corruption*. Retrieved October 07, 2019, from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/01/world/middleeast/iran-hosseini-fereydoun-corruption.html>

and the border incident in Najran forced a rethink in Riyadh. The tepid American response to the Aramco attack caused a realization in Saudi Arabia about the limits of US power and influence. This convinced the Kingdom to initiate a quite rapprochement with Iran. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman asked Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran to play his role as he (MBS) intended to avoid war with Iran. Iranian President Rouhani too had in his speech on the occasion of Iran-Iraq war anniversary spoke about a regional peace plan.

There are also domestic reasons, which may make the two adversaries to seek peace. Iran, under the current government of Hassan Rouhani, has pledged to ameliorate the economic plights of its nation. For this reason, Iran has initiated 20-Year National Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran with political, social and economic ambitions. Saudi Arabia similarly has embarked on a socioeconomic plan to diversify the kingdom's economy by weaning itself off oil and depending more on other sources. Its Vision 2030 is a mega project to uplift the lives of its citizens. Such development projects can be successful only through an all-embracing regional cooperation. There is, therefore, hope that economy-oriented policies of both states will keep them away from pursuing the path of confrontation.⁸ There is no denying that these visions can only be materialized if peace prevails in the Middle East.

Despite its strong desire for mediating peace between the Gulf rivals, Pakistan, some experts believe, would not be able to play a significant role because:

- First, there is lack of consensus among Pakistani political parties on different foreign policy issues.
- Second, owing to its weak economy, Pakistan's has been heavily depending on Saudi Arabia, which not only raises questions about its neutrality as a mediator, but also limits its influence on the Kingdom. It should be recalled that Pakistan in 2016 undertook a similar effort, but it ended in vain because Saudis rejected it. Other regional states, notably China, have considerably enhanced their influence due to their burgeoning economy. Unless Pakistan becomes stable and strengthens its dwindling economy and fast depleting reserves, there are little chances that it can play any significant role.
- Third, Iran maybe suspicious of Pakistani mediation as Pakistan has a defence pact with Saudi Arabia and has in the past made statements declaring an attack on Saudi Arabia as an attack on Pakistan, and that Saudi Arabia's territorial defence is Pakistan's defence.
- Fourth, Prime Minister Imran Khan has embarked upon a noble cause to mediate between two regional rivalries, but his success is directly linked to the stability at home. Rising political challenges, especially impending Azadi March by JamiatUlema-e Islam Fazal (JUI-F), can undermined his efforts for mediating in the Gulf.
- Fifth, there is an unfounded fear in the Arab world, which has roots in the history, that Iran may overwhelm the region. This concern is not new, it even existed during the era of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, when both Iran

⁸ Wolgelenter, M. (2019, October 01). *Brother of Iran's President Is Sentenced to Prison for Corruption*. Retrieved October 07, 2019, from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/01/world/middleeast/iran-hosseini-fereydoun-corruption.html>.

and Saudi Arabia were staunch allies of the US, although it compounded after Iranian revolution in 1979 as Iran afterwards started championing Muslim causes across the world. This concern and the US and Western backing of the Kingdom would therefore inhibit any effort at rapprochement.

- But, there are compelling reasons for Pakistan to seek a mediation role and reduce the threat of a catastrophic war in the region:
 - Being one of the bedrocks of Pakistan's policy, the principle of Islamic solidarity permeates all aspects of its foreign relations-bilateral as well as multilateral. The policy, as envisaged by the founding fathers as well as the framers of the Constitution, has benefitted Pakistan immensely including in multilateral context where association with a bloc is considered a source of strength.
 - Pakistan has legitimate political, economic and strategic interests in the region. A stable, friendly and relatively prosperous Gulf region is in Pakistan's interest. The Gulf region is a preferred destination of Pakistan's labour force. Currently, around 4 million Pakistanis are employed in various sectors in the Gulf region. In 2018-19, they sent over 60.79% (nearly US\$13.1 billion) of total (US\$ 21.8 billion) remittances to Pakistan. Gulf countries are a major source of Pakistan's oil imports.
 - Religion is another important factor. A large number of Pakistanis visit Saudi Arabia and perform Hajj and Umrah every year. A comparable number of Shia Muslims also visit Iran for pilgrimage or transit through it for pilgrimage in Iraq and Syria.
 - More, significantly Pakistan, in the eventuality of war, would be the first to suffer the spillover effect of the conflict because of its deep sectarian fault lines.
 - Pakistan government while mediating in the Gulf dispute must develop a strategy based on its compulsions, limitations, and the apparently achievable targets. Importantly the reasons for failure of the past initiatives should be kept in mind. Pakistan's mediation strategy may include:
 - Exhibiting greater neutrality and avoiding steps that could cast a doubt on its role as an honest broker.
 - Changing the narrative that Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict is a sectarian conflict, by underscoring that it is just another geo-political contestation.
 - Sensitizing the leadership of both countries about the gravity of the situation and the consequences of a war between them. The Arab leadership should be made to realize that cooperation with Iran is a prerequisite for the regional peace and prosperity.
 - Initiating a phased process for confidence building between the two Persian Gulf arch rivals. Arab world's fear of Iran dominating the region needs to be addressed.
 - Encouraging the two sides to sign a non-aggression pact and guarantee uninterrupted oil traffic.
 - Introducing a 'Yemen Formula' which ensures regular elections and power division in Yemen that could help end hostilities in Yemen.
- Creating a coalition of like-minded regional states which enjoy cordial relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. This group can be comprised of Kuwait, Oman, Iraq and Pakistan. This will enhance leverage and political weight of

Pakistani efforts aimed at mediating efforts.

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