

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The complex issue of regional stability in the Middle East and how vague the lines of political and sectarianism within, to understand the continuous instability in the region is to be aware of the on-going rivalry between the two major players in the Middle East, The Iran, and Saudi Arabia rivalry competing for regional dominance.¹ Their relations are complicated and shared long history since the US and USSR cold war where both states cooperate against Soviet advancements under the “Twin Pillars” policy by the Nixon doctrine.² However, the fall of Shah of Iran in the event known as the 1979 Islamic Revolution turned these two states relations into a bitter rivalry. Iran’s revolutionary ideology filled with anti-monarchy, universalist, and anti-imperial.³ Therefore, Iran becomes a new threat to the ruling elites of the Arab peninsula especially to Saudi Arabia as the 1979 Revolution come to be with Ahmadinejad control (Shiite group) has declared them as the revolution of the entire Islamic world.⁴ The following events such as the fall of Saddam Hussein which lead to US invasion in Iraq resulted in

¹ Max Fisher, "How the Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East," The New York Times, November 19, 2016, accessed September 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-proxy-war.html>.

² Ray Takeyh, and Steven Simon. *The Pragmatic Superpower Winning the Cold War in the Middle East*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2016.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ "Great Powers as Client States in a Middle East Cold War." Middle East Policy Council. <https://www.mepc.org/great-powers-client-states-middle-east-cold-war>. accessed February 26, 2019

the Shia's Iraq establishment, the Arab Spring in 2010 and the aftermath of Arab Spring's



conflicts such as Syrian civil war and Yemen's uprisings have inflamed tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁵ Both states have not confronted each other militarily, their confrontation through an armed third party that divided the region of the Middle East through political and religious ideology in seeking strategic regional allies as both states exploiting the region's instability which lead to states vulnerability into series of proxy wars from Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.⁶

Iran and Saudi Arabia's political struggle gives difficult challenges in the Middle East, not only it is a strategic and geopolitical rivalry, but the Iranian-Saudi rivalry also invites a religious and ideological competition as both states compete for Islamic leadership. Between Saudi Arabia representing Sunni Islam and Wahhabi interpretation while, Iran representing Shia Islam within the 1979 Islamic Revolution doctrines which revolve on the rhetoric of 'justice', 'resistance', and the cultivation of Shia networks into their foreign policy.⁷ Iranian leaders including Ayatollah Khomeini and President Bani-Sadr announced to be fully committed to aiding other Islamic revolutionaries. Expressing their commitment to liberate the oppressed people in the Muslim world which is the Shia Muslims and aspirations to be the "true Islamic state".⁸ In response to Iran's ideology ambitions, Saudi also

⁵ *Great Powers as Client States in a Middle East Cold War.* Middle East Policy Council.. <https://www.mepec.org/great-powers-client-states-middle-east-cold-war>.; accessed February 26, 2019

⁶ Gause, F. Gregory. *"Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War."* Brookings. Brookings, February 2, 2017.

⁷ <https://www.sepad.org.uk/report/religion-and-geopolitics-in-iranian-foreign-policy>

⁸ *"Iran: Exporting the Revolution."* 2016. Central Intelligence Agency. Central Intelligence Agency. December 20. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp81b00401r000500100001-8>.; accessed February 26, 2019

exploiting sectarianism to bolster their religious legitimacy.⁹ Such measures including tightened religious sectors at home and boast the spreading of Wahhabi ideology abroad.¹⁰ This rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia which dwells within Sunni-Shia identity and ideology, influencing foreign policies and bilateral relations that eventually define Middle East geopolitics.

Asides from the sectarian element within the rivalry, Iran and Saudi Arabia also have different perspectives into the region of Middle East struggles, especially in issues of Western intervention within the Middle East conflicts and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the aftermath of Islamic Revolution, the “Twin Tower” policy dissolves and Iran’s ideology evolves on anti-Israel and anti-American rhetoric and activism, Saudi Arabia stands alone as a Western ally, leading other Arab states within the Middle East against Iran through various coalitions and organization such as GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) to isolate Iran’s influence.¹¹ As a Western ally, Saudi Arabia also developed a somewhat moderate stance in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Although the Saudi regime took proudly as leading supporters of the Palestinians, especially on humanitarian aid

⁹ Theodore Karasik, "Case Study: The Arabian Peninsula." In *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks*, by Cragin Kim, Rabasa Angel, Boraz Steven, Chalk Peter, Karasik Theodore W., Moroney Jennifer D. P., O'Brien Kevin A., and Peters John E., 77-110. RAND Corporation, 2007. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg561af.15>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Frederic Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy Ghez, Lydia Hansell, Robert A. Guffey, and Smith Richardson Foundation. "Sectarianism and Ideology in the Saudi-Iranian Relationship." In *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, 11-44. Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation, 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg840srf.8>

and development, it provided financial support with a total worth of \$6 billion since 2000.¹² While



¹² "Saudi Arabia Provided \$6bn in Aid to Palestinians since 2000." Saudi gazette. May 28, 2018. [http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/535741/World/Mena/Saudi-Arabia-provided-\\$6bn-in-aid-to-Palestinians-since-2000](http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/535741/World/Mena/Saudi-Arabia-provided-$6bn-in-aid-to-Palestinians-since-2000). accessed September 2, 2019

Riyadh trying to preserve their traditional stances as pro-Palestinian, in the same time the Kingdom also takes pragmatic and reformist vision within the Arab-Israeli peace process such as in 2002, Beirut summit conference which Saudi proposed a peace plan that would recognize the state of Israel in exchange of territories which taken in the 1967 war.¹³ In April 2018, the Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) stated Israel has the right to own the land as well as Palestinians. Whereas, Iran in the aftermath of Islamic Revolution lead by Khomeini made his ambitions beyond Iran to become the leader of Islam, has committed to Palestinian cause into extreme measures such as opposing to any peace negotiations between Arabs and Israelis that includes Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) Oslo Accords of 1993.¹⁴ Iran even actively involved within the creation of the Lebanese Hezbollah, guerilla militants against Israel advancement in the Middle East, that actively played in their role to aid the Syrian government, the Assad regime during the civil war and other numerous proxy conflicts.¹⁵ Not only that, but Iran also backed Sunni Islamist Palestinian groups, despite different ideologies such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas, the main opposing groups to Israelis.¹⁶ Iran's extreme efforts to aid the Palestinians made them their number one enemy in Israelis perspective. Not only to Israel but

¹³ "The Arab Peace Initiative, 2002," Al-Bab, 2002, <http://www.albab.com/arab/docs/league/peace02.htm>. accessed September 2, 2019

¹⁴ Natan Sachs. "Iran's Revolution, 40 Years on: Israel's Reverse Periphery Doctrine." Brookings. Brookings, January 24, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/24/irans-revolution-40-years-on-israels-reverse-periphery-doctrine/>. accessed September 2, 2019

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

also Saudi Arabia as its issue has an ideological element and it also questions the
Saudi's commitment to the Muslim world.



Moreover, Iran's ambitions on nuclear effort raised tensions within the Middle East since the Iran-Iraq war. The current Prime Minister of Israel directly condemned Iran's nuclear ambitions that resolved in a deal with the West (P5), called the JCOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) as a "historic mistake" which will allow Iran to further support the global terrorism while building a nuclear bomb.¹⁷ The Prime Minister expressed concern about Iran's nuclear deal that also includes the total removal of Iran's sanction from any entity as money will flow into Iran which enables them to continue their aggression and terror within the Middle East.¹⁸ Whereas Saudi Arabia, a long-time ally to United States, does formally support the initiatives for Iran's nuclear energy but the deal still paranoid the Saudis and shared similar concerns as Israel. In the end, Riyadh still believes to the Americans that they will protect under their nuclear umbrella, however, the deal was described by one of Saudis diplomat as "extremely dangerous". Due to the fact, the deal also offers to lift all international sanctions that will give them more income to fund their other ambitions which is regional hegemony.¹⁹

The deal proven does not reduce tensions in the Middle East, rather encourage it, especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2010 which Iran has heavily involved and invested to aid their allies in the uprisings. Though, Arab

¹⁷ William Booth, and Ruth Eglash. "Israeli Leaders Condemn Iran Deal, 'One of the Darkest Days in World History'." The Washington Post. WP Company, July 14, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-blasts-iran-deal-as-dark-day-in-history/2015/07/14/feba23ae-0018-403f-82f3-3cd54e87a23b_story.html.; accessed September 2, 2019

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Bruce Riedel. "What the Iran Deal Has Meant for Saudi Arabia and Regional Tensions." Brookings, May 1, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/07/13/what-the-iran-deal-has-meant-for-saudi-arabia-and-regional-tensions/>. accessed September 2, 2019

Spring is a domestic issue that revolves on serious demonstrations due to people's dissatisfaction with their government performance such as lack of political freedom, corruption, and slow economic growth.²⁰ It quickly becomes an international intervention due to instability of the regime that leads power vacuum within their regime, especially to Iran's interest to export their influence across the Middle East, while Saudi Arabia sees Tehran advancements, they responded by sending aid to their allies to hold their power against Iran's ally factions and in the same time, supported some insurgencies against their regime that has close relations with Iran.²¹

The Arab Spring was hoped for democracy, transparency, and freedom to the Middle East—its citizens called out a reformation for better government. However, this only resulted in series of war and violence across the region leading to rising of state vacuums (failed state) in the Middle East and non-state actors such as terrorist organizations, militias, and insurgents. Three major conflicts highly involve both Iran and Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the Arab Spring such as in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen that is still ongoing until today, turning domestic instability into proxy wars. As the two major regional powers compete for power in the new regional order in the wake of the Arab Spring through third parties. It further prolongs and complicates the current conflict but also deepens the regional discord and the existing sectarian conflicts and so forth.

²⁰ "Dealing with Iran Will Not Be Enough to Restore Regional Stability." Foreign Policy Research Institute.. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/06/dealing-with-iran-will-not-be-enough-to-restore-regional-stability/>. Accessed September 2, 2019

²¹ *Ibid.*

The phenomena are above known as the Middle East Cold War between Iran and Saudi Arabia that resort to influence neighboring states that are weak in their political struggles and local player to seeks regional allies against their domestic opposition, as it happened in the aftermath of Arab Spring.²² Therefore, this research is purposely to study the dynamic of hostility between Iran and Saudi effecting the region stability such as its pattern of hostility n the aftermath of the Arab Spring that resorts to proxy wars. In addition to analyzes, the conflicts and further identify Iran and Saudi Arabia's proxies and how they manage their proxy wars.

1.2 Research Question

Based on the explanation above, the following research question is:

1. How are the dynamics of hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia after the Arab Spring?
2. What types of proxy wars have been produced out of this hostility and how do both countries manage their proxy wars?

1.3 Research Objectives

There are two objectives of the research, first is to understand Iran and Saudi Arabia relations from their dynamics of hostility and its implication to the region of Middle East, mainly in the aftermath of Arab Spring and the second

²² Gause, F. Gregory. "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War." *Brookings*. Brookings, February 2, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-sectarianism-the-new-middle-east-cold-war/>.; accessed September 2, 2019

objective is to identify the Middle East conflicts that heavily correlated with Iran
and Saudi



Arabia rivalry (proxy wars), where the region left vulnerable and there's a power void that can be an opportunistic chance for major countries like Iran and Saudi to exploit. The research will also be focused on its hard and soft power dimension (regional power competition), which influences another regime to dominate the region such as the proxy conflict in both Yemen and Syria that highly involves in Saudi Arabia and Iran intervention.

1.4 Research Contribution

The result from this research will provide insight into power struggle particularly on the realism perspective on Iran and Saudi Arabia's rivalry to achieved regional dominance. As explained above, the Middle East Cold War between Iran and Saudi cause turmoil in the region, including extremist groups to wage their war. This research hopes to further understand Iran-Saudi political rivalry concerning security issues in the region that strictly on the theme of power struggle and the effect of the rivalry which is the proxy conflicts and how they operated in waging war for their patron (Iran and Saudi Arabia). Therefore, it also helps decision-makers especially from powerful countries that also involve within the region politics such as United States, on balancing power within the Middle East in hopes of better future and peace in the region.

1.5 Thesis Organization

The first chapter of the thesis provides the introduction which gives information related to the topic of the thesis. It also includes the background of the

thesis to explain the context of the topic of the thesis, this chapter will also include the



research questions that guided the writing of the thesis and the justification of why the thesis research arise. While chapter two explains the theoretical framework of the thesis, includes literature review and concepts which used in this thesis and as a tool to understand Iran and Saudi Arabia's dynamic of hostility and how their relation in the aftermath of Arab Spring and the use of proxy wars for regional power and hegemon.

The third chapter explains the research methodology of the thesis as well as the methods of data collection to complete this thesis which uses the framework of qualitative—a combination of historical-comparative and descriptive methods. It will explain how this thesis answers the research questions from chapter one. The fourth chapter is the highlight of this thesis brought up the analysis from all the data and information collected from various sources as well using related theory and concepts that needed to answer the research questions. To explain Iran and Saudi Arabia's dynamic of hostility and its use of proxy wars in their quest for regional power balance. It also uses the systematic methods of the research from chapter three.

Finally, the fifth chapter gives a conclusion from the research conducted in this thesis. The conclusion answers all the research questions of this thesis as well brings the main points from chapter four.