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Explaining the Iran–Saudi Rivalry through the Lens of Realism

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Saudi-Iran rivalry through the lense of realism, emphasizing that realism provides the most accurate explanation of Middle East crises. The study aims to highlight the ongoing crises in the region, driven by competition for regional hegemony. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are in conflict for gaining the dominance in the Middle East. They have formed alliances with other states, on the grounds of sectarian divide, leading to proxy wars throughout the Middle East. This crisis is fueled by the international actors such as US and Isreal and the Middle Eastern states are making ties with historical and idealogical foe, Isreal to counter Iran. The paper also highlights literary works that reflect struggle for power and superiority. Moreover, literature review methodology is applied to the study applying the theory of realism to the conflict. The finding suggests that the Middle East crisis is likely persist due to the ongoing competition between these rival states for regional supremacy. The paper concludes that the Shiite revolutionary movement will continue to pose a significant threat to the monarchies and kingships in the Middle East.

Keywords: Middle East, Realism, Iran-Saudi Rivalry, Proxy wars, Syria, Yemen, Qatar, Abraham Accord, Palestine, Regional Hegemony, ISIS, Sunni-Shiite, Isreal.

Introduction

Middle East is politically the most volatile region in the world. The region is highly dynamic in nature because making and breaking of alliances and the emergence of new actors in the order of the day. Once, America was the close ally of Iran, today Saudi and America are the closest allies. The feud between Iran and Saudi has its roots in history. The pre-Islamic Persia was the most powerful empire in the region. However, with the advent of Islam, the power faded away and the Arabs conquered Persia. From that day till today, the old Persians and the new Iranians have never accepted the dominance of the Arabs in the region. Another reason of the conflict is the sectarian divide among the rivals. Saudis are Sunni Muslims while the Iranians practice Shiite jurisprudence. To gain regional hegemony, both countries have forged regional and international alliances and both the states are involved in proxy wars in the Middle East. Realism is the only theory in international relations that can perfectly explain the complex nature of relations among the two rival states. Moreover, this theory is able to predict the future events and happenings in the region. This essay would discuss the reasons of the feud between Iran



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and Saudi, it would shed light on literary works which reflect rivalry of Saudi and Iran and that how realism can explain the conflict between the two states.

Assumptions of Realism

Realism is the most powerful theory in international relations because it perfectly explains the relations among the hostile states and the nature of the anarchic world. Moreover, states are becoming conscious about their security and for that reason, some states are in the quest to get more and more weapons while others try to make their own weapons (Fernandes, 1991). Some states rely on the formation of allies' while others on bandwagoning. Realism is the theory that explains the war like situations and conflicts. It has some features which are global in nature and time has proved them correct multiple times. In realism, state is the supreme entity. It is the rational actor and whatever it does, is for the betterment of the citizens of the state. Similarly, states cannot rely on others for their needs.

As stated by Niccolò Machiavelli, state interest is supreme and state should achieve it at any cost. There is no morality in international relations and everything is fair to gain national interest (Calhoun, 1969, pp 205-212). State survival is another feature of realism and states should ensure their survival at any cost. One of the key assumptions of realism is that state is the unitary actor and all policies of the states would be designed by only the state and only for the state. Similarly, state has the authority to use legitimate force and protect her sovereignty. According to realists, non-state actors are important in international system but these are secondary and state is the primary actor. Moreover, national security is of prime importance for the realists because it is the only way to protect and secure the national interest. The balance of power is important to keep equilibrium in relations among the states. If a single state grows more rapidly in terms of economy or military, it can pose a serious threat to the security of other states.

Historical background of the Saudi-Iran rivalry

Before the advent of Islam, Persian Empire was the most powerful and glorious empire in the region. It was an old empire and yet the most powerful. When Islam spread in Arabia, now it was destined that it would go out of the shores of Arabia. Muslim conquerors attacked Persian Empire and subdued her from 634 AD to 654 AD (Hill, 1970). It ended the Sassanid dynasty and Zoroastrian religion in the region. From that day, the then Persians and now Iranians have a sense of revenge for the Arabs (Zargarani, 2014, pp 307-312). Similarly, in the Arab culture, there is a huge discrimination towards the non-Arabs. The non-Arabs are called "aajami" means aliens by the Arabs. Another reason of the feud between Iran and Saudi Arabia is the sectarian divide. Iran is a Shiite dominated state while Saudi Arabia is a Sunni country. The roots of this rivalry are also found in history. Shiites are the followers of Hazrat Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad. Shiites allege that Ali was betrayed and he was not given the leadership of the Muslims after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. This claim is rejected by the Sunnis and Saudi Arabia is a Sunni country. Another reason of rivalry is the revolution of 1979 which took place in Iran. Saudis fear the revolutionist ideology of the Iranians. There are other reasons of the conflict too, for instance, the struggle for regional hegemony and the alliance politics.

Realism perfectly explains the Iran-Saudi reality

Among all theories of International Relations, Realism perfectly explains the relations and the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The following paragraphs would discuss



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every aspect of the conflict through the lens of Realism.

Competition for Regional hegemony

There are many kinds of states in the current world. Some are great powers while others are major powers. Similarly, some states are regional hegemons while another one is global hegemon. Every state in the world wants to be the hegemon. It depends upon the capabilities and the willingness of the state whether it would become regional hegemon or global hegemon. As realism asserts that for becoming global hegemon, it is mandatory to become regional hegemon first. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 was purposely designed because America wanted to be regional hegemon in the region (Jackson, 2016, pp 64-89). Middle East has two major powers that are Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both states want to be regional hegemons. Both states have desire to become sole dictators of the region and other states follow them. The regional hegemony will give them an advantage to shape the policies of the whole region. Also, it would empower her to use the natural resources of the other states and would have influence upon the other states. Therefore, this competition is according to the features of Realism which states that every state in the world wants power and recognition.

Maximization of power and structural realism

According to offensive Realist, John Mearsheimer, every state should maximize her power so that no other state can coerce her or invade her. This is the basic principle of international relations that every state should protect her territory and citizens from foreign intervention (Mearsheimer, 2007, pp 77-94). Saudi Arabia and Iran both are trying to attain maximum power and to assert that power in the region. Saudi Arabia signed a deal worth \$ 350 billion of weapons from the United States of America on May 20, 2017 (Qurat-ul-Ain, et al). Similarly, Iran has been struggling for some time to develop nuclear weapons. The P5+1 deal of the United States with Iran convinced Tehran to give up the work on nuclear weapon. However, President Trump scraped the deal and Iran is once again working on developing nuclear technology and weapon. All this is happening according to the principles of Realism, because realists assert that there is no higher authority in international relations so it is the responsibility of the states to protect her from foreign aggressions and invasions. Therefore, Iran and Saudi Arabia both are in quest to get maximum weapons to assert their power and dominate the region.

The fear of the revolutionist ideas

The 1979 revolution in Iran raised many eyebrows in the region. The Iranian revolution had immense importance in many ways. It was an ideological revolution and the person (King Raza Shah) was a monarch and the family was ruling Iran from early 50's. When the king was ousted, it propagated a sense of fear in the whole region. The Arab monarchs were afraid that similar revolutions can take place in the Arab world too; therefore, the Arab states became hostile to the new theocratic government in Iran (Kedourie, 2013). This is the established principle in international relations and in Realism that anything that challenges the power of a state must be feared and confronted and dealt with Iran hands. Therefore, the Arab states severely criticized the revolution and from that day onward, the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are hostile.

Promoting proxy wars in the region

Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in proxy wars on other avenues. For instance, in



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Syria, Yemen and Qatar, the two rival's states are confronting one another (Gul, et al, 2021, pp 17-29). The brief details of the conflicts in other countries are discussed below.

The Syria theatre and return to great Realist power politics

Syria is located in Middle East. It is strategically an important state. Syria is the ally of Iran in regional politics. It is a Sunni dominated state while it is ruled by the Shiite Asad family. In Syria public revolted against the President Bashar al Asad in 2011. The rebels were mostly Sunni militant groups. They wanted to oust Asad from government. Iran came to his help and to rescue him. Iran joined the attacks on the rebels (Ekşi, 2017, pp 106-129). Later, on Russia came too to rescue Assad's government. On the other hand, Riyadh supported the rebels and later on, they were joined by the America. Both the states wanted regime change in Syria. The alliance formation is the core principle of Realism. In this case, two alliances came into being to support their own parties. Realism believes in power politics and this was visibly seen in the case of Syria. However, the Asad regime survived the revolution because he survived the lethal attacks of the opponents and suppressed them successfully.

The Yemen Theater

Yemen is another theatre where Iran and Saudi Arabia are confronting each other. Yemen is an ethnically diverse state. Similarly, it is also divided on sectarian bases. The Sunni president of Yemen was backed by Saudi Arabia while the rebels were backed by Iran. The rebels belonged to Shiite community (Cote, 2017). Here again, the ideological division came to play the role. It converted into a civil war and both states are supporting their alleys to defeat the rival. Realism talks about the alliance politics which is underway in the Yemen part of Middle East.

The Qatar Episode

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) headed by Saudi Arabia alleged that Qatar is supporting terrorists in the region and the media outlet Aljazeera is negatively reporting about the GCC. The GCC states imposed sanctions on Qatar and sever relations with the latter (Pradhan, 2018, pp 437-442). In Realism, the survival of the state is of vital importance, so Qatar called Iran for help. Iran provided food, energy and other basic needs via sea to Qatar. Here, the sanctions and the alliance politics played the role as predicted by Realism.

Formation of Regional Alliances for security purpose

According to the basic assumptions of Realism, states need security for survival. Similarly, states need other states too, to exert influence on other states. In case of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has aligned Egypt, Bahrain and UAE while Iran has aligned Syria, Oman and Lebanon (Fawcett, 2016, pp 204-208). These alliances are used to exert pressure on the rival states. Moreover, these states are used as battle grounds for proxy wars against one another. Realism would predict that in future more alliances would be forged to assert pressure on rival states.

Formation of international alliances

Realism focuses on alliance formation for security reasons. State needs security from foreign aggressions. For this purpose, states either build their own capacities or rely on the international partners to protect them from foreign aggressions and interventions



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(Fawcett, 2016, pp 204-208). Riyadh is aligned with America while Iran is aligned with Russia. Recently, Iran has signed a deal worth \$400 billion with China. This would have far-reaching implications for the whole region. These alliances are used for arms acquisition and to intimidate one another. Moreover, both are great powers and both have veto power in the Security Council so Riyadh and Tehran both rely on their international partners for diplomatic support.

Beggar thy neighbor policy by Saudi Arabia

This is the most important rule of international relations and realism to weaken the rival state. As far as the rival state is powerful, it is considered a potential threat and a threat to the security of the state. In case of Middle East, Saudi Arabia has done every possible effort to alienate Iran from international community (Freedman, 2013, pp 433-454). Riyadh has played key role in cancelling the p5+1 deal. Similarly, Riyadh is trying at every international forum to portray negative image of Iran. Similarly, Iran is using the Shiite minority in the kingdom to use them against the government. These developments prove the principles of realisms that are playing its role in the politics of Middle East.

The quest to collect maximum weapons

Securing national interest through any means is the end goal of every state in international relations. National interest can be achieved through peaceful and coercive means. Peaceful means leads to cooperation which is the feature of liberalism in international relations. However, when national interest is achieved through coercive means or by using power, it is the main assumption of Realism (Al-Assad, 2009, pp 96-106). In case of Middle East, every state wants security. Iran and Saudi Arabia are in open hostility and it is manifested in Syria and Yemen where both the states are engaged in proxy wars. Therefore, both states need modern weapons for protection and for preventive measures. Hence, Saudi Arabia struck a deal of \$300 billion with USA and Iran is making indigenous weapons and also working on building nuclear weapons. All the conditions are explained by Realism that in power politics, both protection and coercion without modern weapons is impossible.

Conflicting interests over the Palestinian issue

There are many issues in the Middle East that act as stimulus in the relations between Riyadh and Tehran. Among those issues, one is the long standing Palestinian issue. Palestinian territory is occupied by Isreal since 1948 (Forman, et al, 2004, pp 809-830). Five wars have been fought between Isreal and the Arab states. For realists, the protection of territory is the most important function of the state. On Palestinian issue, the Middle Eastern countries have divided. Saudi Arab and UAE have softened their stance on the issue while Iran still has a harsh and rigid stance over the Palestinian question. The difference in opinion is dividing the states and the foreign policies of the states differ from one another.

The Abraham Accord and the new emerging stage

It was called the deal of the century by the US President Donald Trump. In the historical movement, UAE, the Middle Eastern state, recognized Isreal as a state and backed upon all the promises to the Palestinians made in the past. It was done with the green signal of the Saudi Arabia. It is said in international relations that there is no friend or foe while maintaining relations with other states; only interests are kept in view. Same happened in the Middle East. Saudi Arab and UAE took this step to normalize relations with Isreal just because both the parties conceive Iran as foe and potential threat (Rehman). In fact,



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as predicted by realism, these states have forged an alliance against the potential enemy in the Middle East. Similarly, Iran has declared multiple times that Isreal is the potential threat to her. It is a saying in international relations that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. So, the GCC countries normalized relations with Isreal just to offend Iran and get modern weapons and technology to contain Iran in the region. Thus, according to the assumptions of Realism, power politics is being played between Iran and Saudi Arab and realism is perfectly explaining this scenario.

The role of Isreal in the conflict between Saudi and Iran

It is an established practice in international relations and in realist theory that make your enemy weak through any means. Israel is the most technologically advanced democratic state in the neighbor of Middle Eastern states. It is conceived as a potential threat by all the Middle Eastern states. However, Egypt had normalized relations with Isreal decades ago. Now UAE and Bahrain have established diplomatic relations with her (Ramazani, 1978, pp 413-428). And Saudi Arabia is next in line to normalize relations with Isreal. What compels these states to normalize relations with Isreal? The answer is simple: Iran. Iran is perceived as potential threat by both Isreal and Middle Eastern states especially Saudi Arabia and UAE. These states fear the expansionist designs of Iran.

Moreover, Iran is the most advanced military regional power having indigenous weapons too (Ramazani, 1978, pp 413-428). Now, realists would argue that Iran needs weapons for survival in the region while doing so, security dilemma is created and the other Middle Eastern states feel threatened. This compels them to take help from everywhere even from the historical and ideological foe Isreal. Because, in international relations, there is neither permanent friend nor foe, only national interests are supreme. In case of Middle East, the national interest of the states is to secure against any potential enemy i.e. Iran so they would go to any limits to counter Iranian threat. Therefore, they would use the modern technologies of Isreal by establishing diplomatic relations with her.

Sectarian card in the conflict

In the modern hybrid warfare, every sector of life and every resource of the state is utilized to defeat the enemy. For instance, the economy, the political sphere, the social sphere and the environmental factors are used against the enemy to weaken her and to defeat her. Among all these factors, the most lethal and destructive factor is sectarianism which has devastated the region for the last so many centuries (Byman, 2014, pp 79-100). The sectarian card is being played by both the parties to divide public opinion and to secure loyalties. This card is also used for forging new regional alliances. The sectarian divide is visible in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Bahrain. Similarly, this divide is the mostly used tool of power politics. Sunni and Shiite proxy are used which use sectarian slogans and interpret Islam in their own ways. Realism asserts that the rival must be subdued with any means that are available because one does not know, what the rival is thinking to subdue you.

The emergence of ISIS in the Middle East

The emergence of the terrorist organization, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is another factor in the hostile relations between Saudi Arab and Iran. ISIS is a Sunni terrorist organization and it is operating in Iraq and Syria. The prime objective of this organization is to establish caliphate in the world and another objective is to work against the Shiites in the region (Hove,2018). This organization is also called Daesh. It emerged from the remnants of Al Qaida in Iraq and it was formed by Abu Masab Al Zarqawi. It is alleged that this organization is supported by America and Saudi Arab. Iran claims that



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these states have covert relations with Daesh. This is another reason of the hostility between the two states. ISIS has inflicted huge loss to the Shiite interests in Syria and Iraq. Now it has chapters in Afghanistan, Pakistan and even in India. As stated earlier, Realism would put that the rival states use proxies and other hostile elements against one another to achieve their interests and to damage the rival states.

Realism predicts the future relations between Riyadh and Tehran

Realism is the key theory in international relations that predict the future scenarios and the nature of the relations between hostile states. This theory predicts that in future, both states would be in conflict with one another. Because, both rival states are contesting for regional hegemony and this competition would lead to conflict (Steinberg, 2005, pp 487-512). In the same way, the conflict would lead to further alliance formations and party politics. Both rival states would strive to acquire maximum weapons from foreign states and also would make indigenous weapons. Similarly, both states would engage in proxy wars against one another and would use terrorist's organizations against one another. Both states would engage in diplomatic fight and would try to secure the support of veto powers. Realism can also predict that the Shiite revolutionary ideology would be a continuous threat to the monarchs and kings of Middle East.

Realism in Literary Works

Realism, the most dominant theory in international relations, explains and predicts the nature of relations between the states. At its core, realism revolves around the principles of power dynamics, power maximization, dominance, military power, self-interest and the quest of security in an anarchic system (Morgenthau, 1948). The complicated and frequently hostile relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran demonstrates these characteristics.

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran perfectly demonstrates the realist ideas. The goal for regional security and supremacy motivates both countries, which frequently results in a competition for dominance and power. Both the states are in conflict because of sectarian division, inconsistent interests, and a persistent suspicion of one another's motives. The quest for security and power and dominance turns into an aim in and of itself, defending deeds that might otherwise be viewed as immoral. The same principles of realism that are clearly observable in Saudi Iran relationship are portrayed in various literary works such as William Shakespeare's Macbeth, George Orwell's Animal Farm. These literary pieces are brimming with realist ideas of rivalry, power ambition and quest for dominance.

Realism in Macbeth in the light of Saudi Iran relations:

Set in Scotland, the tragedy of Macbeth is a remarkable tragedy written by a celebrated dramatist and poet William Shakespeare. The tragedy of Macbeth reflects political conflict (Al-na'as, 2025) and some scenes of the tragedy are sparking with political ideas (Campbell, 1951). The tragedy explores the themes of ambition, power and desire to control, all of which are closely tied to realist ideas.

Macbeth begins as a noble warrior who becomes consumed by his ambition for power and declines into a bloodthirsty dictator. His lust for power, fueled by ambition to control lead him to commit terrible acts and turns him into a tyrannical ruler, ultimately demonstrating the realist notion of power ambition mirroring Saudi's and Iran's ambition of gaining regional hegemony in the Middle East.

Politics revolves around ambition and desire for power where all kinds of means and



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resources are used to gain it (Kambash, 2023). The play depicts the brutal political struggle for power (Al-na'as, 2025). The depiction of power and its consequence is a potent critique of the realism ideas that power is the core asset of political shows. Macbeth is ambitious of power. His ambition for power and his willingness to do whatever it takes to achieve it reflect the realist notion that individuals and states are driven by self-interest and self-benefits are prioritized over collective good. His transformation from a noble general to a ruthless king reflects the realist idea that individuals (states) will do whatever it takes to maintain power and security.

The play reflects Machiavellian politics, a key aspect of realism, depicting a world where morality is often set aside in pursuit of power, mirroring the realist idea that politics is about power and survival.

In a nutshell, Macbeth's ambition for power mirrors Saudi and Iran's ambition to maintain control in the region.

Realism in Animal Farm in the light of Saudi Iran relations:

Animal farm is a satirical allegory that highlights the themes of power, ideological manipulation, self-interest, fear as a force for domination, social stratification and deployment of propaganda through farm animals (Qamar, 2025). Some of these themes are align with realist principles.

According to Maulani (2020), Animal Farm describes the political conflict of power breakthrough. The pigs in Animal Farm started revolutions against humans but turns into selfish dictators after gaining power. The pigs, led by Napoleon and Snowball, eventually become more controlling and corrupt. The story shows how power can corrupt even well-intentioned people, highlighting the realist idea that power is a force that shapes social and economic structures.

The pigs prioritize their self-interest and change the seven amendments that initially emphasized equality (Khalid, Sherazi & Shaheen, 2023). This flawlessly defines the realist notion of prioritizing self-interest over collective good. The same situation is observed in Saudi-Iran conflict where both the states prioritize their own interest over the collective benefits of the region. Both the states longs for regional hegemony and extending their influence and control in Middle East. Moreover, the same farm after revolution comes under the leadership of two pigs, Napoleon and Snowball. Both tried to rule out the other to have complete control over the farm. Similarly Saudia Arabia and Iran also want complete influence in the region.

The pigs adopted human-like lifestyle against which all animals once rebelled and even made alliances with humans for the sake of extending their power and security. Saudi and Iran are both Muslim countries; however, they have made alliances with different countries like Iran with Russia and Saudi with America at international level and Saudi Arabia alignment with Egypt, Bahrain and UAE while Iran alignment with Syria, Oman and Lebanon at regional level (Fawcett, 2016) for the sake of extending their influence and national security. It shows that in international relations there is no permanent enemy or friend the only thing permanent is self-interest.

Realism often describes the use of various resources and sectors to defeat enemies (Mearsheimer, 2001). Sectarian card among the various sectors and resources is used by both Saudi Arabia and Iran to gain alliances and defeat the enemies. To gain more power the states use information to shape public perception and maintain control. Similarly, the pigs on the farm use different rhetoric and propagandas to manipulate other animals and extend their power and control over other animals (Khalid, Sherazi & Shaheen, 2023). Through this ideological manipulation they try to gain alliances and justify their actions for the quest of influence and power. The pigs (Squealer and Napoleon) maintain



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dominance over other animals through narratives and clever notions (Qamar,2025). This mirrors the way Saudi Arabia and Iran use ideological and sectarian divisions to form alliances and influence others. The pigs' use of ideological manipulation to maintain power over other animals aligns with realism ideas. Both the pigs and the countries use information to shape public opinion and maintain their own power. The rivalry among the pigs in the story is driven by ideological differences, similar to the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Conclusion

It is concluded that Realism is the most dominant theory in international relations which explains and predict relations between the states. There are some assumptions of this theory. Those assumptions include the role of the state, the survival of the state, the importance of the state, the rationality of the state and the protection of national interests at any cost. Middle East is very dynamic region regarding power politics. There are two hostile states in the region. Saudi Arab and Iran are hostile states for the last 15 centuries (Cordesman, 2001). The roots of the hostility lie in history. The Persian Empire was subdued by the Muslims. Similarly, the sectarian divide has devastated this region for several centuries. Realism assumes that both the rival states would ensure security and would protect the territory from the attacks of the other state. For this purpose, states in the Middle East have adopted different policies. First policy according to Realism is the formation of alliances in the region and with international actors. Similarly, both the states are maximizing power by acquiring weapons from different countries. The arms sale agreement between the USA and Saudi Arab is worth mentioning (Abramson, 2018, p 34). In the same way, both states are engaged in proxy wars in the region. These can be seen in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Saudi- Iran rivalry can be paralleled with literary rivalries between characters and groups driven by pride, ideology or power. In both the Saudi-Iran rivalry and the mentioned literary pieces, the realist concepts of power dynamics, self-interest, and the quest of security demonstrated in terrible ways are observed. Realism predicts that this conflict would continue and both states would strive to protect themselves from one another.

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