

# Understanding Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran

Saudi Arabia and Iran differ vastly in terms of ethnicity, culture, history, geography, and natural resources. The majority of these two states' populations practice different versions of Islam, and their political systems and ideological principles are quite dissimilar. These overwhelming disparities caused Saudi Arabia and Iran to suffer many years of cold, even hostile relations. During this period, each regime openly and covertly sought the downfall of the other. As a result, the region suffered wars, conspiracies, terror attacks, and unrelenting political tension and instability.

The conflictual perception they have against each other can be observed through various dimensions. There is Saudi's religious attitude towards the Iranians and vice-versa. There is also the national and ethnic dimension of the two states. These dimensions complicate their relationship. Besides the ethnic, religious, historical, and cultural dimensions, the desire for regional hegemony is one factor that most of the time supersedes all other differences, thus acting as a perpetual cause of discord between the two countries. Further, the role of global superpowers like the US and Russia also adds pressure and fuel to the already simmering relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran significantly impact the politics of the Middle East. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran, during the severed periods of relations, have sought the downfall of the other, openly and covertly. The strategic rivalry between the two states has resulted in wars, conspiracies, and implacable political tensions and instabilities in the region. Saudi Arabia and Iran aspire to enforce their hegemonic influence in the Middle East and the Gulf region. The religious sectarianism and nationalism are two important factors which are being employed by the two states against each other to restrain or defeat their rival's role in the region's political and economic settings. Competition over regional power, disputes over land and sea borders and tensions in economic competition also influence the bilateral relations between the two states. Not to mention the US and Russia's own games in gaining their personal interest in the region.

As a bigger country in terms of size and population, and carrying a historical legacy, Iran considers itself a natural regional power. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia also claims to be the leader of the Arab states. The Arab people are known to have much honor and pride for their tribes, represented in their ethnic and national attitude; they consider themselves as the best ethnicity. These claims by the two states added with US military bases in the region, which Iran perceives as a security threat for itself, have increased the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran disproportionately. The disputes over the borders in land and sea, illustrated by the Iranian claims to oil fields in Kuwait and Bahrain, and the occupation of the Tunbs and Abu Musa islands in the Persian Gulf, has also a role in the growing tensions between the two states.

Similarly, the rivalry between the two states over oil prices and control of OPEC creates tension and economic competition between them. Iran has been intending to seek higher oil prices for its development, inconsiderate of its impact on the global energy market. The arms race between Saudi Arabia and Iran has become a game of fear. Their approach in politics and ideology, with everyone's claim to Islamic legitimacy, adds to the dimension of differences between the two. Both states have opposing visions of regional order and stability. Iran considers the monarchical system opposite to the teachings of Islam and believes in the leadership of religion in politics, and has given its people the right to vote in elections. Saudi Arabia on the other hand has a monarchical rule with its people having 'no say' in domestic and foreign politics (Litvak, 2017).

Since the formation of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the relations between the two states have seen many ups and downs, but in recent decades, the relations have broken down and become more and more fractious. The rivalry between the two countries has become one of the important rivalries in global politics and has also shaped the nature of security in the Middle East (Mabon, 2017).

Due to its history, Saudi Arabia has a special status in overall Muslim politics, particularly in the regional politics of the Middle East. Following the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established and unified by Ibn Saud in 1932. With the discovery of oil reservoirs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and later due to the geopolitics of the Cold War, Saudi Arabia's significance expanded beyond the Middle East and the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia is the largest country bordering the Persian Gulf, strategically located in the region, possessing extensive coastlines on both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. This

position provides Saudi Arabia with unlimited facilities for oil export, the mainstay of its economy. Most importantly Saudi Arabia owns a quarter of the proven oil reservoirs of the world, besides being the 5<sup>th</sup> largest gas producer after Russia, Iran, Qatar and the UAE. Saudi Arabia plays an important and leading role in the OPEC and global energy market. The increased global demand for oil in the future only predicts the absolute influence of Saudi Arabia in regional and global politics. Being the custodian of the two holiest Muslim sites located in Saudi Arabia, and the host of non-stop Muslim pilgrims, for hundreds of years now, Saudi Arabia holds a special place in the Muslim world (McLean, 2001).

Today's Iran was born out of the Revolution; and its constitution, which remains in force, based its political, social, and economic relations on the teachings of Islam. Iran's rich oil resources, added with its sheer size and strategic location, make Iran a dominant power in the region. Iran is the most populous and largest state in the region and occupies a pivotal location between the Middle East, the West, and Central Asia. In recent history, Iran's location gave it a strategic role in the geopolitics of the British, Soviets, and Americans during the World Wars and Cold War. Today, Iran's energy resources combined with its key location have made it a prominent actor in regional and global politics. Given this location and energy resources, Iran will continue to play a vital role in future years as well (McLean, 2001).

The political institutions of Saudi Arabia have developed a strategy to cut short the Iranian influence through a soft power strategy. Saudi Arabia has been using its abundant resources and opportunities provided by Mecca and Medina. The Kingdom is a leading nation in providing humanitarian support in many countries. It has been using educational means to support its soft power strategy and a policy to contain Iran effectively on ideological lines. Iran has also established a council for the promotion of its cultural aspects abroad. The Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO) has been established by the Islamic Republic to coordinate cultural activism, spread Shi'ism, and support Shiite associations abroad. The organization has representatives in more than forty countries all over the world (Jones, 2009).

It is a matter of fact that Iran and Saudi Arabia have much in common, yet they have become fierce rivals in the region. This rivalry has been traced to cultural, religious, regional and geopolitical differences between the two countries. The sectarian discord helps fuel the confrontation and conflict. Domestic and regional factors also contribute to this conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The increase in the rivalry between the two states could result in violent tensions and a conflict in the region, with pressure to develop nuclear weaponry and other weapons of mass destruction, which could lead to volatility in the global energy market.

The stakeholders and actors within the Middle East region, combined with the US, Western countries, and other world powers should address the areas of conflict between these two states through different initiatives of regional cooperation in areas like trade, economic development, and other cultural and political areas. These initiatives could bring peace and prosperity in the polity of the Middle East region, and stability to the global energy market.

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