Saudi Arabia and Iran:
Islam and Foreign Policy in the Middle East

In early January 2016, Saudi Arabia executed 47 people including the Shi'a cleric Nimr Al Nimr for his involvement in protests in the Eastern Province of the Kingdom. The executions were condoned by the Council of Senior Clerics, whose head, the Saudi Mufti 'Abd Al'Aziz bin Abdallah Aal Al-Sheik, stressed that the sentences were in accordance "to the sharia'a, and there is no doubt for these are the punishments set out in the Koran and they apply to everyone".[i] The executions were framed as essential for national security, amidst allegations that Nimr was an Iranian agent. In neighbouring Iran, there was widespread condemnation. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khameni stressed that the move was "a political error on the part of the Saudi regime. God will not relinquish [avenging] the blood of the innocent. The blood spilled unjustly will rapidly deliver a blow to the politicians and officials of this [Saudi] regime."[ii] Khamenei later predicted that Saudi Arabia would experience "divine vengeance" as a consequence. Shortly after, the Saudi embassy in Tehran was set fire to and the Saudi consulate in Mashhad was looted. As a consequence, diplomatic relations between the two states were severed, the latest low point in an increasingly fractious relationship.

Historical rivals, the 1979 revolution in Iran added a religious dimension, which became vitriolic given the existential importance of Islam to Riyadh and Tehran. As such, religion began to feature prominently within the political, security and foreign policies of both states. The construction of the regional security environment provides opportunities for external involvement in the domestic affairs of regional actors and with the increasing tensions between regime and society after the uprisings. Within this, political life became increasingly contested, as many struggled to meet their basic needs within the context of deteriorating and increasingly complex political and security situations. Such conditions provided scope for Riyadh and Tehran to increase their standing across the region by providing support for groups within contested spaces. To this end, the chapter seeks to understand and engage with how the fragmentation of political life – and sovereignty broadly – has provided scope for the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran to intensify and with it, further escalate tensions across the region.

In recent years, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has become increasingly important in shaping the nature of Middle Eastern politics. Building upon the spread of religious and ethnic identities and pre-existing schisms between regime and society that deepened with the Arab Uprisings, Riyadh and Tehran capitalised upon a fragmenting region in an attempt to shape the Middle East in their image. To understand this – and indeed the importance of religion broadly – we must consider the importance of religion within the fabric of each state, which goes some way in explaining the prominence of religion within foreign policy.

Amidst this competition, the nature of regional security calculations would be determined by this rivalry, the consequences of which have spread out into the wider Middle East. The severity of the situation was stressed by President Barak Obama, who noted that

> The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians — which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen — requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace.[iii]

The US had long been seen as a guarantor of regional security for Saudi Arabia – although the presence of external forces in the Gulf was a source of concern for Iran – and as such, Obama's condemnation was met with a great deal of hostility in Riyadh. In response, Turki al Faisal, a Saudi prince publicly stressed that

> the Kingdom's 80 years of constant friendship with America to an Iranian leadership that continues to describe America as the biggest enemy, that continues to arm, fund and support sectarian militias in the Arab and Muslim world, that continues to harbor and host Al-Qaeda leaders, that continues to prevent the election of a Lebanese president through Hezbollah, which is identified by your government as a terrorist organization, that continues to kill the Syrian Arab people in league with Bashar Assad?[iv]

Of course, the sensitivity of Middle Eastern politics in the midst of the Arab Uprisings played a prominent role in such security concerns, with the struggle between the two states taking on increasing importance in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings. Following the protests, the fragmentation of regime-society relations across a number of Middle Eastern states resulted in a wide range of socio-economic and political challenges, all impacting upon human security and the ability to meet basic needs. In these cases, people turned elsewhere to ensure their survival. Such existential issues provided scope for the external penetration of a state, particularly with the existence of shared religious or ethnic bonds that create strong ties between different actors. The severity of the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran meant that such penetration was seen in zero-sum terms through the prism of regional security.

To the layperson, at the heart of this rivalry is a religious dimension that pits the most powerful Sunni state against the most powerful Shi'a state to shape the nature of regional politics. In spite of the prominence of religion, one must be careful not to fall back entirely upon religion as the main driving force of the rivalry; indeed, sectarian difference need not necessarily be violent or result in animosity. It can do, however, when it becomes increasingly politicised and framed in such a way that the other poses an 'existential threat' to the survival of the state. We see that Islam plays a prominent role within the fabric of both Saudi Arabia and Iran and, as a consequence, also within foreign policy, yet in both cases, religion is used instrumentally as a means of securing legitimacy for domestic and external audiences. By the very nature of the *umma* – the worldwide community of Muslims

– states that have a prominent Islamic identity have the capacity to speak to people across state borders. Such capacity serves as a means of transcending state borders, the *dawla,* and speaking to people of the same faith or doctrine in different communities, which is regularly used instrumentally. Of course, there also exists the perception that religion is used as a means of mobilising particular communities, which is a prominent feature of regional politics. Perceptions are shaped not only by shared religious ties but also by historical experience, which also requires consideration.

Efforts to understand the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran have produced a body of literature that can be separated into three camps. The first suggests that the rivalry is best understood through a balance of power in the Gulf.[v] This position suggests that states compete for regional hegemony in a range of different arenas and when state sovereignty fragments, the opportunity to increase power emerges. The second camp[vi] suggests that religion plays a prominent role in shaping the nature of the rivalry and that proxy conflicts have been drawn along sectarian lines. It boils the rivalry down to an existential struggle about religious difference, neglecting the complexity of identity construction – and change – or the political ramifications of identity politics. The third camp suggests that a more nuanced approach is needed, drawing upon concerns about regime power and legitimacy – externally and internally – with the instrumentalised use of religious difference.[vii]

This chapter offers a genealogical approach to understanding the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, considering the importance of religion within the context of each state's foreign policy agenda.[viii] In doing this, the chapter is broken down into 5 sections: the first, considering the nature of relations between the two prior to the revolution; the second looking at the first decade of the Islamic republic; the third, considering the scope for rapprochement after Khomeini's death; the fourth, looking at the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq; and the fifth, considering the Middle East after the Arab Uprisings. Within each of these sections is a reflection upon the nature of the rivalry, along with the exploration of the role of Islam in shaping actions. Such a breakdown allows for the identification of different periods within the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran, which allows us to acknowledge the importance of a range of different factors in shaping the nature of regional security.

Domestic Factors

In search of an understanding of the nature of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, one must also consider the role of religion within both states. The preamble to the Iranian constitution of 1979 notes that

> The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran advances the cultural, social, political, and economic institutions of Iranian society based on Islamic principles and norms, which represent an honest aspiration of the Islamic Ummah. This aspiration was exemplified by the nature of the great Islamic Revolution of Iran, and by the course of the Muslim people's struggle, from its beginning until victory, as reflected in the decisive and forceful calls raised by all segments of the populations. Now, at

> the threshold of this great victory, our nation, with all its beings, seeks its fulfillment.[ix]

Similarly, Article 1 of the Saudi constitution declares that

> The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion; God's Book and the Sunnah of His Prophet, God's prayers and peace be upon him, are its constitution.[x]

It is hard to ignore the symbolic importance of Islam, reflected in the green on both flags, along with the Shahada on the flag of Saudi Arabia, which stresses the oneness of God and Mohammad's role as his messenger. It is clear that Islam is built into the fabric of both states and such prominence positions religion as a prominent characteristic of regional politics.

If one considers state building processes in Saudi Arabia and Iran, the role of religion is paramount. For the Al Saud, the centuries old alliance with the Wahhabist *ulemma* provides an integral source of legitimacy, allowing a fringe tribe to claim rule over large swathes of the Arabian Peninsula. It is a state run in accordance with the Shari'a, which served as a source of the country's laws, and although a large number of people may not identify as Wahhabi, the importance of clerics should not be understated.[xi] Within Saudi Arabia are the two holiest sites in the Muslim world, the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. As a consequence, the Al Saud have derived legitimacy from being the custodians of the two holy places and in doing so, offering protection to all of those who make *hajj*.

In Iran, whilst religion played a more private role prior to the revolution, in the months after the revolution faith was positioned front and centre within the Islamic Republic. Khomeini's vision of *veleyat-e faqih* (The Regency of the Jurist) suggested that *in lieu* of the 12th Imam, only jurists of a certain status were qualified to rule. This position is a serious diversion from traditional Shi'a thought, which suggests that there should be a clear separation between religion and politics and, as a consequence, deep divisions emerged between clerics following Khomeini in Iran and clerics in Najaf under the tutelage of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. In the Islamic Republic, a system of checks and balances was implemented to ensure that politics was run in accordance with the Shari'a and that Khomeini's political vision was maintained.

Shi'a history played a prominent role within Iran, particularly their construction of a foreign policy agenda. Of particular relevance was the Battle of Karbala, at which Hussein – the grandson of the prophet – was killed. Hussein spoke out against the impropriety of the caliphate at this time, which had accrued vast wealth and behaved in a way that was perceived to be un-Islamic. Hussein's martyrdom, which some suggest was his desired outcome, located ideas of martyrdom, guilt and sacrifice within the Shi'a experience and Iranian foreign policy.[xii] It is with these domestic factors in mind that we turn to competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran and their respective foreign policies.

Rivalry Before Revolution

To understand the characteristics of the contemporary rivalry, let us begin our exploration with a consideration of the rivalry prior to the revolution. In 1929, the Saudi-Iranian Friendship Treaty was signed, following dialogue which included Iranian officials visiting Mecca to witness Wahhabi governance first hand. In the following decades, both states were predominantly concerned with the development with domestic infrastructure projects, paying scant attention to broader regional trends. Whilst there was a legacy of suspicion directed at the 'other' across the Gulf, stemming from a long history of Arab-Persian tensions, relations were largely positive. The first serious point of tension emerged from Iranian recognition of the state of Israel, in doing so, positioning Iran on the opposite side of the pan-Arab support for the Palestinian cause.

Despite this point of tension, Richard Nixon, at this point President of the US, attempted to resolve security concerns in the Persian Gulf by establishing a 2 pillar approach, drawing support from both Saudi Arabia and Iran to maintain stability in an increasingly important part of the world.[xiii] Such security calculations were driven by a mutual suspicion – and indeed fear – of the military capabilities and intentions of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq. Moreover, both were concerned by the legacy of Pan Arab thought, which shaped regional politics during the 1950s and 1960s.

Territorial tensions would be a source of friction, particularly over the offshore boundaries in the Gulf. Respective coastlines varied between 95 to 135 miles away from one another at the northern part of the Gulf, which required an International Court of Justice negotiated accord in 1968.[xiv] Such concerns were bound up in concerns about regional security mechanisms in light of the British withdrawal from the Gulf. During this time, Iranian influence across the Middle East had increased as a consequence of Tehran's membership of a number of international institutions, along with maintaining a position of influence as an ally of the US.

At this time, Gulf security was shaped by the presence of Western actors, particularly the British. With the decision to withdraw 'East of Suez', a number of questions emerged, particularly with regard to the nature of regional security. The smaller Gulf states would also be affected, with many gaining independence at this time. In Bahrain, independence would raise questions about identity, amidst long-standing suggestions that Bahrain was the "14th province of Iran". A UN organised plebiscite across the island returned the motion that Bahrainis wished to be independent, yet Iranian claims to Bahrain continued.[xv]

The Impact of Revolution

Unsurprisingly, revolutionary action in Iran dramatically altered regional security calculations across the Persian Gulf and Middle East. The events of 1978 and 1979, which forced the Shah to abdicate resulted in the establishment of *veleyat-e faqih*, the Regency of the Jurist under Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini's vision was anti-monarchical and anti colonial, immediately pitting Iran

against a number of states across the region.[xvi] The revolution brought Islamic considerations to the forefront of the rivalry, raising existential questions about regime security and influence across both the Middle East and wider *umma.*

In the formative stages of the Islamic Republic, the importance of Islam was abundantly clear to the new regime Tehran, yet also to Riyadh, where the Al Saud was reliant upon its long-standing alliance with Wahhabi clerics to provide legitimacy. Given this, a spiral of rhetoric emerged that sought to demonstrate the Islamic credentials of each state. Things began positively, with King Khalid welcoming the establishment of an Islamic Republic:

> It gives me great pleasure that the new republic is based on Islamic principles which are a powerful bulwark for Islam and Muslim peoples who aspire to prosperity, dignity, and well-being. I pray the Almighty to guide you to the forefront of those who strive for the upholding of Islam and Muslims, and I wish the Iranian people progress, prosperity, and stability.[xvii]

In turn, Khomeini also sought to stress cohesion across the Muslim world, transcending language and sectarian allegiance:

> There is no difference between Muslims who speak different languages, for instance the Arabs and the Persians. It is very probable that such problems have been created by those who do not wish the Muslim countries to be united [. . .] They create the issues of nationalism, of pan-Iranianism, pan-Turkism, and such isms, which are contrary to Islamic doctrines. Their plan is to destroy Islam and Islamic philosophy.[xviii]

Of course, when relations soured, this rhetoric became increasingly vitriolic and divisive. Khomeini's vision was explicitly stated:

> We will export our experiences to the whole world and present the outcome of our struggles against tyrants to those who are struggling along the path of God, without expecting the slightest reward. The result of this exportation will certainly result in the blooming of the buds of victory and independence and in the implementation of Islamic teachings among the enslaved Nations.[xix]

Saudi Arabia was not immune to this criticism; after all, Khomeini's vision was explicitly anti-monarchical. Given this, coupled with Saudi Arabia's position of leadership within the Muslim world, it would be hardly surprising to see Khomeini attacking the Al Saud.

> If we wanted to prove to the world that the Saudi Government, these vile and ungodly Saudis, are like daggers that have always pierced the heart of the Moslems from the back, we would not have been able to do it as well as has been demonstrated by these inept and spineless leaders of the Saudi Government.[xx]

King Fahd, having succeeded King Khalid, referred to the new regime in Iran as "hypocrites and pretenders who are using Islam to undermine and destabilise other countries".[xxi] Whilst sovereign borders were transgressed, the argument put forward suggested that sovereignty was found in God and, as such, both states were dealing with the *umma*, the global community of Muslims, rather than the Westphalian notion of a nation-state. This point of tension would be a prominent feature across the international relations of Middle Eastern states, particularly amongst those who derived a great deal of legitimacy from Islam.

The revolution brought a religious dimension to the rivalry that had previously been shaped by geopolitical considerations about the nature of regional security. Religious rituals would also take on a political dimension. The *hajj* of 1987 would be one such site of political contestation, when Shi'a Muslims on *hajj* clashed with Saudi security forces, resulting in the deaths of at least 400 pilgrims, 200 of whom were Iranian. It was later argued that Iranian agents were involved in creating discontent with political motivations. A year later, Iran boycotted the *hajj*.

A year later, the onset of the Iran-Iraq war resulted in a large-scale loss of life, which also drew in regional and international actors, largely on the side of Iraq, who were concerned at the potential for Khomeini's Islamic vision to spread. While neither side was fully prepared for war, it was expected by many in Iran that the Shi'a of Iraq – long marginalized by the Ba'ath regimes – would join their sectarian kin from Iran, yet this view was misguided and underestimated the importance of Iraqi and Arab nationalism.

In 1981, the Gulf Co-Operation Council was established, predominantly in response to security concerns emanating from the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. During the war, a number of incidents threatened to escalate tensions between Riyadh and Tehran, notably an Iranian attack of a Saudi oil tanker and a Saudi attack of an Iranian jet.[xxii] Although threatening to escalate and draw in other Gulf states, the conflict remained between Iran and Iraq, ending in 1988.

One of the main reasons for the onset of conflict was Khomeini's desire to spread his ideological vision across the Middle East, particularly to those with a Shi'a minority such as Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states, and Lebanon, and those with a disenfranchised Shi'a majority such as Bahrain and Iraq. Of those states, two are of paramount importance to our discussion of the immediate aftermath of the revolution, as a consequence of direct Iranian involvement in the domestic affairs of other states.

In Lebanon, members of the newly formed Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps – the elite wing of the Iranian military, answerable only to the Supreme Leader – provided logistical and financial support to the Shi'a of Lebanon, working with them towards the establishment of Hizballah, the Party of God.[xxiii] The establishment of Hizballah provided Iran with a powerful actor on Mediterranean and sharing a border with Israel. The ideology of *veleyat-e faqih* found traction amongst the downtrodden of Lebanon, where Shi'a communities were marginalized politically, economically and

socially.[xxiv] In the midst of a 15 year long civil war, Hizballah provided support to the marginalized Shi'a communities and, over time, the group's resistance ideology would derive a great deal of popular support. Alongside Hizballah, Iran would strengthen relations with neighbouring Syria, which also played a prominent role in Lebanon, supporting the Party of God. This alliance, between Iran, Syria and Hizballah would become known as the Axis of Resistance,[xxv] challenging the regional order.

In Bahrain, viewed by many to be the epicentre of sectarian conflict as a consequence of its location in the Gulf between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Kingdom's demographic constitution left it rife for unrest. Decades of marginalization of Shi'a communities provided fertile ground for unrest[xxvi] and once again, with the support of the IRGC, a Shi'a group – the *Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain* (IFLB) – attempted to overthrow the Al Khalifa regime.[xxvii] Although the coup was thwarted before it could begin, the legacy of Iranian involvement in Bahraini politics, created suspicion that Iran was behind any regional unrest. Saudi fears were mitigated by the construction of the King Fahd causeway, although ostensibly designed to improve economic links between the two Gulf kingdoms, the causeway served as a means to provide rapid military assistance to the Al Khalifa regime if required.[xxviii]

These two sets of events meant that whenever there was unrest amongst Shi'a groups, the belief that Iran was behind the unrest was paramount. Such claims, although understandable, were not always accurate. Indeed, the legacy of the revolution can also be felt in a number of different ways, serving to *inspire* Shi'a groups across the region, without necessarily having causal links, as was the case in unrest in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. Regardless, the perception that Iran was behind unrest only served to fuel tensions between the Sunni Arab states and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

A Burgeoning Rapprochement?

At the end of the devastating Iran-Iraq war, a generation of Iranians lost their lives and the societal and economic consequences were severe, with both economies hit dramatically. Such consequences fed into Iranian strategic calculations at this time. Recognising the need to develop more favourable relations with neighbours and the international community, and also with a lingering fear at Iraqi aspirations, Iran sided with Kuwait and tacitly supported the international community's efforts to liberate Kuwait. The amelioration of relations across the Gulf would be a key part of the presidencies of Rafsanjani and Khatami over the coming decade.

In 1990, a large earthquake hit Iran, killing 30,000 people, and in response, Saudi Arabia sent aid to help.[xxix] Diplomatic ties between the two were later restored as a consequence of this act. In 1997, then Crown Prince Abdullah attended the Organization of Islamic Co-Operation meeting in Tehran, in doing so becoming the most senior Saudi official to visit since the revolution. Two years later, President Khatami visited Abdullah in Saudi Arabia, in the first visit by an Iranian leader since

the revolution.

With Khomeini's death in 1989, space for rapprochement between the two state opened up. The presidency of Hoshemi Rafsanjani was one such opportunity, as the transition to Ali Khamenei as Supreme Leader – and Khamenei's legitimacy deficit compared to Khomeini – left space for Rafsanjani to take a greater role in the day-to-day politics of Iran. Under Rafsanjani, the two were able to restore diplomatic relations, thawing a frosty relationship in part, by visits of prominent state officials to both countries.^{xxx}

In 1999, President Khatami visited Riyadh, becoming the first Iranian President to do so since the revolution. The same year, Abdullah attended a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in Tehran, becoming the first high-ranking Saudi official to visit Iran since the revolution. A series of bilateral deals between Riyadh and Tehran were signed, whilst increasing security co-operation across the Gulf aided the amelioration process. This led to a period of rapprochement within Saudi-Iranian relations, although the two states were still characterised by religious difference. One reason for this, aside from the trust that had been built in the aftermath of the earthquake, was the continued presence of Iraq as a prominent player within regional security calculations, where Tehran and Riyadh shared fear of a belligerent Iraqi foreign policy under Saddam Hussein.

Despite this, a key historical dimension of the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran has been over contrasting views of the role of external actors in maintaining regional security. Iran saw itself as uniquely qualified to ensure regional security, given its demographics and long history. In contrast, Saudi Arabia has been reliant upon the United States since the Gulf War. This issue would feature prominently in the years to come, particularly with an increased US presence in the Gulf in the next decade.

The 'War on Terror'

In the early part of the 21st century, relations between Riyadh and Tehran appeared cordial. The political rapprochement of the previous decade was suppored by security co-operation, which resulted in the establishment of a security pact on terrorism and drug trafficking. Yet the 9/11 attacks would dramatically alter the construction of regional security across the Middle East. As previously noted, regional security in the Gulf had long been shaped by the interaction of three major powers: Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Any change to the ability of one state to shape regional security would have a serious impact upon the ability of the other two states. Thus, in 2003, the toppling of Saddam Hussein would have a serious impact upon Gulf security, creating a bi-polar system that would have ramifications across the Middle East.

The 2003 war was a prominent part of George W. Bush's 'War on Terror', the ideological response to the 9/11 attacks, which saw the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the toppling of the Ba'athist regime 18 months later. In the early stages of the War on Terror there was a largely positive relationship between Washington and

Tehran, with the latter permitting US planes to use Iranian airspace on missions to Afghanistan. The 2002 State of the Union speech would end any burgeoning rapprochement, however, as Iran was posited as being a member of an 'Axis of Evil',[xxxi] comprising North Korea and Iraq. From this point, relations between Washington and Tehran became increasingly fraught, along with relations between Riyadh and Tehran.

The US led invasion of Iraq under the banner of *Operation Iraqi Freedom* was hugely unpopular within the international community but within the Muslim world in particular. Despite this, few were sad to see Saddam removed from power. This action created space within the Persian Gulf regional security complex for Iran and Saudi Arabia to compete for influence.

The Iraqi rear guard action was short lived, resulting in the establishment of the Coalition Provisional Authority and, ultimately, the transition to Iraq's first free elections. Under the CPA, the decision was taken to eviscerate the Ba'ath party infrastructure in an attempt to prevent the party from regaining control of Iraq and all party members across the state were fired from jobs in the police, army and bureaucratic institutions.[xxxii] Little did the CPA realise the impact that such a move would have, resulting in hundreds of thousands of people being made redundant and struggling to provide for their families. Iranian involvement in Iraq's internal politics was multifarious, stemming in part from shared religious ties, a number of Iraqi dissidents who had sought safe haven in Iran returning to frontline politics, and the presence of a number of powerful militias who received support from Tehran.[xxxiii]

Rising sectarian violence, in part as a consequence of the presence and competing agendas of Al Qaeda members, Shi'a militias and coalition forces, was rife yet the regime in Baghdad appeared either unable or unwilling to prevent it. Coupled with concerns about ensuring that basic needs were met, these would be key factors in explaining why a number of Sunni tribes, particularly from the Anbar province, would turn to groups like Da'ish.[xxxiv] Such conditions, coupled with the presence of American forces within the region, in Iraq, Bahrain, and Afghanistan, along with a number of other bases, would pose serious issues to a number of actors across the region, particularly those of the belief that regional security should be ensured by those states within the region.

Although Iranian foreign policy became more progressive under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, particularly as Khatami sought to reach out to global powers, this would not last. The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the bombastic former mayor of Tehran, as president of Iran in 2005, however, would be a turning point in the construction of regional relations. Ahmadinejad fused a Shi'a outlook with a strong sense of Persian nationalism, which became an aggressive part of his foreign policy. Despite this bombastic outlook, Ahmadinejad travelled to Saudi Arabia in 2007, when GCC states were reaching out to Iran, building on increasingly positive relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Indeed, Ahmadinejad became both the first Iranian president to attend a meeting of the GCC and also to make *hajj* whilst serving as president.

Despite this burgeoning rapprochement, a number of factors would prevent a permanent thawing in relations, predominantly coalescing around security, albeit defined broadly. Such calculations revolve around national interest and maintaining territorial integrity, with a nod towards the Westphalian notion of non-interference within the domestic affairs of other states. Yet it also involves an understanding of security that sees Islamic legitimacy – and its erosion – as an existential threat to regime survival.[xxxv]

Saudi efforts to securitize the Iranian threat date back to the revolution in Iran, yet the invasion of Iraq in 2003 would cause consternation amongst many in Riyadh. On a number of occasions, Saudi officials spoke to their US counterparts, documenting the threat posed by Iran. In 2006, Prince Nayif bin Abdul Aziz called for the US not to "leave Iraq until its sovereignty has been resorted, otherwise it will be vulnerable to the Iranians'".[xxxvi] Two years later, in conversation between the Charge and Adel Al Jubeir, the Saudi Ambassador to the US, Al Jubeir vocalized the severity with which key Saudi officials were viewing the Iranian threat. Al Jubeir recalled

> the King's frequent exhortations to the US to attack Iran and so put an end to its nuclear weapons program. "He told you to cut off the head of the snake," he recalled to the Charge', adding that working with the US to roll back Iranian influence in Iraq is a strategic priority for the King and his government.[xxxvii]

In 2009, John Brennan, the White House Counter Terrorism advisor met King Abdullah, who expressed his concerns about the Prime Minister of Iraq, Nouri al Maliki.

> The King said he had "no confidence whatsoever in (Iraqi PM) Maliki, and the Ambassador (Fraker) is well aware of my views". […] For this reason, the King said, Maliki had no credibility. "I don't trust this man," the King stated, He's an Iranian agent." […] Maliki has "opened the door for Iranian influence in Iraq" since taking power, the King said.[xxxviii]

Perception at Iranian involvement in the manipulation of domestic affairs can be seen across the region, which facilitated this securitization process. In Lebanon, with the establishment of Hizballah, in Gaza through its support for Hamas, in Iraq with support for Supreme Council of the Islamic Republic in Iraq, in Bahrain with support for the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, in Syria with support for Assad, in Yemen with support for the Houthis, and in other states with Shi'a unrest. After the revolution in Iran, rhetoric from Khomeini, coupled with article 3.16 of the Iranian constitution, set out an explicitly proselytizing agenda, grounded in Shi'a thought. In the following years, the fragmentation of regime-society relations across the Middle East and marginalization of Shi'a communities across the region would provide fertile ground for Iran to exploit, and also for perceptions of Iranian involvement to develop.

In the years following the invasion of Iraq, the Axis of Resistance[xxxix] would gain power and influence across the Middle East, stemming, in part, from the rising popularity of a number of key players, namely Ahmadinejad and Hassan Nasrallah (the leader of Hizballah, the Lebanese Party of God). The rising influence of Hizballah in particular would pose a serious problem for Saudi Arabia in light of the 2006 war between the Israeli Defence Force and the Party of God.[xl] Despite being an explicitly Shi'a actor in its *raison d'etre*, the Al Saud provided financial support for the rebuilding of Dahiya, the southern part of Beirut destroyed by the IDF. Iran provided financial assistance in the region of $120 million whilst Saudi Arabia provided $1.2 billion for the rebuilding efforts.[xli]

At this point, it becomes apparent that despite religious difference, the quest for legitimacy and desire to be seen to *do the right thing* meant that Riyadh had to circumvent the concerns of Wahhabi clerics in Saudi Arabia to ensure that an external position of power and influence was maintained, much to the chagrin of the Wahhabi clerics.

The Arab Uprisings and the Fragmentation of Regional Order

In late 2010, protests spread across the Middle East emanating from serious schisms between regimes and societies. These tensions resulted in the fragmentation of state sovereignty in a number of states, which provided new arenas for proxy competition between Riyadh and Tehran. Stemming from increased concerns about the nature of political organisation and stagnating economies that prevented people from achieving their goals, a growing dissatisfaction resulted in people taking to the streets to demonstrate their frustration. The self-immolation of Mohammad Bouazzizi would be the catalyst for demonstrations across the region, leading to the toppling of political elites in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen, whilst regimes in Bahrain and Syria were challenged, to varying degrees.[xlii] The failure of political structures, both formal and informal, left people increasingly marginalized, which required people to turn elsewhere to meet their basic needs.

Within this context, both Riyadh and Tehran sought to exploit opportunity structures to strengthen the self and weaken the other, amidst a zero-sum game for the heart of the Middle East. Ultimately, the fracturing of political organisation and the nature of state-society relations after the uprisings provided scope for the two to become involved in a number of proxy conflicts, increasingly along sectarian lines. In Syria, Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen, the two supported opposing sides in conflicts, adding to a long-standing competition in Lebanon. This behaviour – and the rivalry broadly – should not be viewed purely as a sectarian conflict; rather, as we have seen, sectarian dynamics have been used as a fig leaf for national interest.

As previously noted, Article 3.16 of the Iranian Constitution articulates that "the organization of the nation's foreign policy based on Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unrestrained support for the impoverished people of the world." Within the context of the fragmentation of states and the failure of political elites to ensure the protection of people across the Middle East, the Iranian

constitution explicitly called upon the state to protect those marginalized. Of course, Iranian foreign policy in the years following the revolution created the perception that Tehran was behind unrest across the region, particularly amongst those states with Shi'a minorities. The narrative that Iran was behind unrest in Bahrain and Yemen was compelling to many and, with the religious construction of the Middle East, the spread of Shi'a groups would leave a number of states open to (the perception of) external penetration.

For Ayatollah Khamenei, the uprisings were framed as an extension of the Islamic revolution of 1979,[xliii] where once again, Iran attempted to position itself at the vanguard of regional change. Whilst regimes sought to ensure their survival by stressing that the events were a consequence of sectarian schisms that were manipulated by external powers, this denies the agency of protest groups, along with rejecting the socio-economic grievances that led into people taking to the streets.

The protests resulted in regimes referring to a range of strategies to ensure their survival, including the creation of sectarian master narratives as a mechanism of control. Such efforts largely distorted legitimate grievances and divided protest groups along sectarian grounds and with it, creating a climate of fear and suspicion which often turned to violence. Of course, sectarian difference need not necessarily be violent, but the existence of sectarian networks, albeit with different types of links between actors in the network, provides an easy opportunity through which one can spread messages and mobilise. The fear of the mobilisation of a Shi'a network led to King Abdullah of Jordan referring to a 'Shi'a Crescent', mapping an arc of areas with Shi'a Muslims from Iran through the Middle East to Lebanon. Despite failing to engage with differences within Shi'a thought, particularly over the role of clerics within politics, such concerns have shaped the perceptions of many Sunni states, particularly Saudi Arabia.

With the onset of the Arab Uprisings, many regimes sought to frame the protest movements as a consequence of Iranian manipulation and interference, drawing upon the Islamic Republic's history and foreign policy behaviour. This strategy involved framing unrest amongst Shi'a populations as a consequence of Tehran's "propensity for mischief",[xliv] creating divisions within domestic populations, whilst also securing regional support from powerful Sunni statesIn the climate of uncertainty and instability, the securitization of protest movements would solidify a Saudi-led conservative bloc, who were vehemently anti-Iranian and, as time went on, anti Islamist.

The competition would spill into a range of institutional arenas, including the OIC, which became the site for posturing – and contesting – legitimacy. The OIC would take on an increasingly political dimension, when in 2016 the organisation denounced "Iran's interference in the internal affairs of the States of the region and other Member States (including Bahrain, Yemen and Syria and Somalia) and its continued support for terrorism". [xlv] The need to maintain leadership over the Islamic world would be of paramount importance in times of chaos,

Independent of the uprisings were negotiations designed to end Iran's nuclear programme and prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons across the Middle East. Much to the chagrin of Israel and Saudi Arabia, the successful agreement between P5+1 and Iran would result in the lifting of economic sanctions that had decimated the Iranian economy. Around this time, the price of oil dropped from $110 to $30 in 2015 stemming, in part, from Riyadh increasing supply to maintain the low price. While the Saudi economy was also hit hard, the thinking was that their economy could withstand such pressures, whereas the Iranian economy could not. Driving this action was the concern that an empowered Iran would increase its sponsorship of its violent proxy groups in particular, Hizballah in Lebanon, and the various militias in Iraq. Such increased sponsorship would have the capacity to empower these groups and to destabilise their local environments. Moreover, as regional security was increasingly seen in zero-sum terms, increasingly influential Iranian proxies would coincide with the reduction in Saudi influence.

Such sentiment – and indeed manifest suspicion – about Iranian aspirations would be reflective of geopolitical shifts across the region. Within the context of what appeared to be an existential struggle for the Middle East, lines between a Saudi led alliance of Sunni states (and Israel) and what was termed 'the Resistance Bloc', comprised of Iran, Syria, Hizballah and Hamas were drawn. Across a fragmenting region, such support to the 'marginalized' would be appealing.

As sectarian networks were mobilised, the importance of religion became increasingly apparent and the failure to adhere to one's responsibilities to the Muslim world would be seriously damaging to claims to legitimacy. In 2015, the *hajj* was the site of thousands of deaths when a crane fell on pilgrims. The failure to prevent such events from happening was an opportunity to criticise the Al Saud for failing in their duty to protect Muslims making *hajj*, whilst also attempting to erode the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia. In a meeting with the families of the victims, Ayatollah Khamenei stated how

> The incompetence of the Saudis and the insecurity imposed by them against the Hajj pilgrims to the House of God indeed demonstrated that this government is not qualified to manage the Two Holy Mosques and this reality must be spread in the Muslim world and be understood.[xlvi]

Whilst a number of Iranians died on *hajj*, the event was used for political – and indeed geopolitical – ends, much like in 1987, to once again demonstrate Iran's position at the vanguard of the Islamic world.

Such concerns about hegemony and legitimacy within the Muslim world continue to play an important role in defining the nature of Saudi-Iranian relations. In attempting to facilitate this, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have provided financial support to clerics from across the world, hosting them for training and providing economic assistance in support of their vision of Islam.

Of course, efforts to demonstrate vitality and legitimacy are also coupled with desires to depict the weaknesses of the religious establishment in the other. Take for instance the following remarks from Iranian officials speaking about the spread of Wahhabist ideology

> Wahhabism is a tool for the enemies, and Muslims should stay away from the heretical Wahhabism… The disagreements and conflicts among Muslims have today risen to an unprecedented level. In Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, and Bahrain… the heretical Wahhabism is the chief cause of conflict. For hundreds of years, Shi'ites, Sunnis, Alawites, and Christians lived together in Syria, but when they [i.e. Wahhabi elements] entered [the arena] – look at the wars and bloodshed that began. Several Arab countries have become tools for the U.S. and Israel.[xlvii]

Additionally, others presented the view that "The greatest danger threatening Islam today is the existence of takfiris, since with their fatwas they proclaim Shi'ites to be inferior to [even] the Jews and Christians, and strive for Muslim infighting."[xlviii]

In return, Saudi officials referred to

> the statements of the Iranian regime expose its true [character], as expressed by [its] support for terror, and continue the policy of undermining the security and stability of the region's countries… By defending the actions of terrorists and justifying them, the Iranian regime becomes a partner to their crimes, and it bears full responsibility for its policy of incitement and escalation."[xlix]

Such comments would also be presented in Western news outlets, as Adel Al Jubeir presented Iran as responsible for widespread regional unrest, with Tehran attempting to "obscure its dangerous sectarian and expansionist policies, as well as its support for terrorism, by leveling unsubstantiated charges against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia".[l] Jubeir also suggested that Iran was "the single-most-belligerent-actor in the region, and its actions display both a commitment to regional hegemony and a deeply held view that conciliatory gestures signal weakness either on Iran's part or on the part of its adversaries".[li] Once again, after the veneer of sectarianism is removed, we see how political and security considerations feature prominently within the calculations of both states.

Conclusions

The role of Islam as a means of deepening divisions between Saudi Arabia and Iran has become increasingly apparent in recent years. Prior to the revolution, despite religious differences, the two were able to work together on a range of issues affecting them. Even after the revolution, it is possible to identify periods of rapprochement where relations between the two appear far more favourable than at other times. Yet when sectarian differences become utilised for political ends and, perhaps more importantly, when this sectarian difference is securitized for

geopolitical ends, the divisions between the two become entrenched. When such positions emerge, it is important to look beyond what appears to be the driving force of violent difference, to consider structural factors both internally and externally, which provide scope for the possibility of action.

Such action occurs in a range of different guises, ranging from direct military action to support for proxy actors, to competition attempting to ensure legitimacy and primacy within the Islamic world. It is undeniable that religion has a role to play, but structural factors are equally important. The possibility of improving a position within the Persian Gulf or wider Middle East, or an opportunity to solidify the regime's domestic position is perhaps a more important factor, seemingly whatever the cost.

What remains clear is that to understand the nature of the rivalry – and ultimately for there to be de-escalation – we must recognise the complexity of the issues and their regional ramifications. By acknowledging the importance of myriad factors, local, regional and international, we are better placed to understand how such factors interact across policy decisions and religious beliefs. By accepting this complexity, and with it the idea that Islam plays a significant yet not sole role in the foreign policy of behaviour, we are better placed to understand the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

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[iv] Turki Al-Faisal, "Mr. Obama, we are not 'free riders'" March 14, 2016 http://www.arabnews.com/columns/news/894826 accessed 15.03.16
[v] Such as: Furtig, Henner, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia Between the Gulf Wars* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2006); Chubin Shahram, and Charles Tripp, *Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order* (London: OUP for IISS, 1996), Keynoush, Banafsheh, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?* (London: Palgrave, 2016) and Mason, Robert, *Foreign Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia: Economics and Diplomacy in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014)
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