

# Shadows Across the Desert: Proxy Wars in West Asia

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## Abstract

In the evolving world of geopolitics, proxy war is a strategic tool that great powers and states employ readily to pursue their objective indirectly by avoiding direct confrontation, at the same time inflicting damage on their rivals. This strategy enables the players the opportunity to widen their strategic reach without dipping their feet in the turbulent waters of direct conflict. While looking into the contemporary state of affairs in West Asian geopolitics, this strategic instrument has become handy in the interstate rivalries that are transforming the domestic upheavals into regionalized conflicts backed by ideological and geopolitical contestation with external sponsorship. This led to the intensification of problems in a region already torn by political instabilities and sectarian disputes. This work will look into the long standing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two major powers in the region, that has transformed the security landscape. Especially since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the feud between these countries became regionalized through proxy wars in Iraq, Yemen, Syria and beyond, spilling the seeds of conflict throughout the region. The centuries-old friction between the Sunni and Shia sects in Islam became clearly reflected in the dynamics between these two states, with the 1979 revolution that led to the establishment of a Shia state in Iran posing ideological and political challenges to Sunni monarchy in Saudi Arabia. These events, exacerbated with the security concerns and ambition for regional domination, turned the neighbouring countries into a battlefield. The study tries to synthesise and understand the proxy dynamics and the factors driving it along with discussing the implication of this on regional stability.

*Keywords: Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry, Proxy warfare, Non-state actors, West Asia regional security, Regionalization*

A region that once held the mysteries of human existence has now turned into a scene of bloodbath for power and domination. West Asia for many years has been going through a swirl of instability and upheavals. The region being a mosaic of identities, has always remained entangled in a series of conflicts, where the

sectarian tension is being capitalized by the regional powers to assert their regional hegemony. These conflict transcends conventional warfare to become what is known as proxy warfare. This work will look into the long standing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two major powers in the region, that has transformed

the security landscape.

### **Beyond the Battlefield**

Before getting into the intricacies of this dynamic, let us understand what proxy warfare is. In his article named 'Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict', Andrew Mumford has defined proxy wars as "conflicts in which a third party intervenes indirectly in order to influence the strategic outcome in favour of its preferred faction" (Mumford 2013, p.40). From this definition, we can understand that in this dynamic we can see a benefactor who is external to the existing conflict coming into the mix and trying to influence the outcome. Through this mechanism, states can support factions that are aligned to them, politically or ideologically, enabling them to expand their influence without being dragged into the burdens of a conventional war.

### **Tracing the Seeds of Rivalry**

The underlying factor that is considered to have paved the way for the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the ideological tension that exists between them, that is, the Sunni-Shia schism (Tzemprin et al., 2015, p.188). The kingdom of Saudi Arabia shortly after its creation, has constructed a national identity for itself through an alliance between the Al Saud royal family and an 18th century revivalist Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab by reviving Wahhabism, an orthodox Islamic sect (Tzemprin et al., 2015; Nuruzzaman, 2019). Further, being the birthplace of Islam with two holiest sites for Muslims, Mecca and Medina, the Sunni Kingdom began to be seen as the true representative of Islam (Tzemprin et al., 2015, p.189).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Ruling Monarchy led by the Pahlavi Dynasty in Iran had a balanced relationship between them till 1979 as they faced threats from the spread of both communism and Arab Nationalism (Gul, A., Abbasi, R. K., & Haider, S. A. 2021. p.18). Both the countries had a working relationship

though they had their differences (Gaub, 2016, p.2). And this remained unchallenged till the rise of Islamic Republic of Iran after the Iranian revolution of 1979. With Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as the Supreme Leader of the new republic, the Pahlavi Dynasty was replaced with a Shia Authority which questioned the legitimacy of the Saudi Monarchy. Khomeini has expressed staunch criticism against the Saudi monarchy by calling them as "illegitimate puppets who propagate an anti Quranic version of Islam" (Crepy, 2019, p.25). After the revolution, both the states wanted to become the leader of the Muslim world. Though Saudi Arabia had at the outset welcomed the Islamic Republic, the reaction from the latter side was not positive. One of the Iranian parliamentarians even commented that "The Saudi rulers have chosen an evil path, and we will send them to hell and that Mecca is in the hands of a band of heretics" (Gaub, 2016, p.2). This led to increased mistrust leading to a strategic competition between the two states (Sharma, 2016). Gulf monarchies began to see Iran as an "existential threat" in the region (Escobar Stemmann & Arana, 2024, p.4). From this, it became clear to us that, with the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic republic in Iran, the leadership and legitimacy of Saudi Arabia in the Islamic world was questioned and it was not just a change of government but a fundamental change in the regional dynamics. Iran began to portray itself as someone spreading the wave of revolutionary Islam that also supports anti imperialism and anti west policies while, Saudi Kingdom reasserted its role as the defender of Sunni orthodoxy and this became the tool in the hands of the state for mobilizing factions in the sectarian divides across the region for furthering their individual gains and influence. Added to this equation was the desire to establish dominance in the region.

## The Many Fronts of One Rivalry

This raises the question of whether ideological divergence alone explains the rivalry, I would say no, because it just lays the ground, above it comes the regional geopolitical ambitions and interests and the mistrust that aggravates the competition between the two states. The ideological factor had its spill over into the spheres of influence. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran began supporting and providing patronage to Sunni and Shia factions across the region. If we take up the case of Bahrain, having a Shia majority population with a Sunni Al-Khalifa ruling family who hold close relations with Saudi Arabia, and with Iran supporting the Shia factions to rise up against the Bahraini Kingdom especially during the Arab Spring, eventually led to an intervention from Saudi Arabia by sending their troops. According to scholars, “Saudi Arabia’s main fear lying behind the Bahraini crisis is the spillover of sectarian upheaval into its own territory and to the neighbouring countries” (Tzemprin et al., 2015, p.192).

Turning to Iraq, a country with a Shia majority population and a minority Sunni leadership, Saudi Arabia along with the United States, extended their support to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). However, the story changed when the Saddam regime was toppled by the US in 2003. This proved to be beneficial to Iran as they tried to fill up the vacancy with Iraqi Shias. Though the Shia factions were gaining a foothold after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, it was during the post-Saddam era that Iran gained more control over Iraq (Crepay, 2019, p.26; Tzemprin et al., 2015, p.192). Interestingly, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) formed in 1981 is said to have been created to protect Gulf states from Iranian activities (Maria Maddalena & Settembrini, 2019, p.19).

Yemen, a country that is of vital importance to both Saudi Arabia and Iran, has been a ground for their rivalry. Ensuring stability in Yemen is of critical importance to the former as they have to protect their domestic

security and regional interests, while for the latter it is the perfect place to assert its power where Saudi holds most of the influence. The political instability within Yemen has led to prolonged conflict between the Yemeni state backed by Saudi Arabia and various opposing factions like the Houthis who have been supported by Iran. This unrest has urged Saudis to react, which led to an intervention known as the Operation Decisive Storm in 2015. The already existing domestic situation got worsened with the Saudi-Iran rivalry even pushing the country into a humanitarian crisis. Now if we shift our glance to Syria, a country that has gone through one of the bloodiest civil wars in the region. Strategically and politically, Syria is critical for Iran as it provides it with a link to Lebanese Hezbollah and it has been its ally since the 1979 Revolution. In response to the growing Iranian influence in Syria, Saudi Arabia began supporting various oppositional factions and rebel groups. After the Arab Spring, the sectarian divide intensified to a point where Sunni groups and Shia groups have turned towards Saudi and Iran for support, further aggravating the tension (Crepay, 2019, p. 29-32).

Thus, when we analyse the above situations we can see that both the countries are considering the gaining of influence and power in the region as a zero sum game, which means if one country gains the other loses. Saudi Arabia always had this fear that Iran might export its revolutionary ideology that might hurt its interest in the region and therefore Saudi tries to hinder Iranian advances in the region (Boucek & Sadjadpour, 2011, p. 6). In addition, after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action by Iran and UNSC+1, a nuclear deal that lifted the sanctions, the Gulf countries considered it a further imperative that would strengthen Iran (Escobar Stemmann & Arana, 2024). Though the sectarian divide in the region provides States with a mobilizing narrative, it is the security dilemma that leads to the spiralling of mistrust and competitive interventions throughout the region. All these elements push

the region into the pitfall of a self-perpetuating cycle of instability leading to protracted struggles.

### Conclusion

In a region torn by instabilities and institutional weakness, the use of proxy warfare has become a convenient tool in the hands of powers who wish to protect their interest and influence. Iran and Saudi Arabia capitalised and appealed to various factions in the already existing sectarian tension in the region to reap the benefits. With the indirect external interventions, the domestic conflicts turned into more intractable struggles leading to grave humanitarian crises. Regional stability thus requires more than mere photo ops and diplomatic gestures as the problem runs deep and instead States should focus on addressing the security dilemma that causes this competition and rivalry. With mutual threat perception, and competing regional visions, though the intensity of this dynamic may ease up, there might not be a complete end in sight.

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