The Ideational Nature of Iranian - Saudi Interactions

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Abstract

The intense rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is more complicated than disagreement over certain interests. The article tries to conceptualize the causes of tensions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East. The main question of the article is 'what are the root causes of the tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East?' The research hypothesis is 'the root causes for the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East are more on ideational interests than material ones. In fact, different types of ideational resources are the basis for the competing interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the very strategic region. Thus, to understand the root causes of confrontational policy between Iran and Saudi Arabia, one should try to understand the key ideational elements of the two countries which affect their foreign policy orientations in the region.

Keywords: Constructivism, Identity, Normative, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Middle East

Introduction

Iran and Saudi Arabia, as the two key actors in the Middle East, are employing different ideational principles to extend their influence over the region. On the one hand, after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and when the Shia factions of the country came to power, Iranian political influence in Iraq was expanded. On the other hand, The Islamic Awakening provided an opportunity for the Islamic Republic of Iran to extend its influence over the other Shi'ite communities, especially in Bahrain and Yemen. Today, the Saudi regime finds itself strategically in an ever more "deteriorating regional environment" (Russell, 2006: 123-24) in the Middle East. That is why, Saudi Arabia intended to implement an aggressive policy to deter Iranian growing influence in the region. After the Saudi aggression against Yemen (26 March 2015), the confrontational political sphere between the two countries was intensified, and the Saudi media tried to "demonize" Iran and portray the Islamic Republic as an idealized picture of an enemy.

In fact, the identity-oriented policy shapes both states' "threat perceptions"[1] of each other and such perceptions are manifested in their respective security policies towards each other. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia contend that the best policy for preserving and extending security and political interests is expansion of ideational principle all over the region. In this regard, "one of the main reasons for deteriorating relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is their ideational perception of 'mutual threat' caused by closeness to the United States" (Barzegar, 2013). While Iran has defined its political

identity based on anti-Westernism (especially against the United States) Saudi Arabia has based its political identity on pro-Westernism. This demonstrates two opposing agendas on security and stability of the Persian Gulf. Thus, the two countries are pursuing divergent normative orders in the region. The Soft power rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia (in countries such as Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and especially Iraq) produced two different discourses on the proper normative order that the region should follow: Preserving the status quo which is sought by Saudi Arabia or Changing the status quo (basis on resistance) which is supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran[1] (Altoraifi, 2012: 146).

Generally, identity is the most important factor in explanation of Iran-Saudi relations in the Middle East. The article argues that Iran and Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour in the region, to a great extent, are driven by a type of identity that each country ascribed to itself. The research tries to apply Constructivism as an identity-oriented approach, to investigate the confrontational relationship between two countries especially in the post-Islamic Awakening era. The theory of Constructivism with its emphasis on states' identities is the most appropriate approach for describing the role of identity in shaping the foreign policies of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

I. Identity and State Behaviour

State identity plays a causal and a constitutive role in shaping state's foreign policy. The basic argument of the approach is that state identity can be treated as a variable and states can represent different ideational values at different times. Based on the Constructivist approach, there is a direct relationship between states' identity and their foreign policies. The theory tries to conceptualize the relationship between identity and foreign policy and answer the question that how cultural norms and ideational values affect states' foreign policy behavior?

State identity consists of "the set of beliefs about the nature and

purpose of the state expressed in public articulations of state actions and ideals" (Lynch, 1999: 349). Identities define the "role" [1] of states adopted in international relations. The role can be thought of as a `road map' that foreign policy-makers rely on to simplify and facilitate an understanding of a complex political reality" (Aggestam, 1999: 2). The role constructed within restrictions is imposed by factors such as ideas, norms, public opinion, military power at the domestic level and the nature of international environment (peaceful or aggressive) as well as power distribution at the international level.

The term "state identity" refers "to the state's perception of what role it should play and what status it should enjoy among other states (Altoraifi, 2012:44-45). State identity plays a crucial role in defining relationships between states. State identity is most easily understood as a role that the "*self*" assumes in relation to the "*other*". In fact, self-Other relationships and their perceptions can determine friends, enemies, rivals in world politics (Wendt, 1999). Thus, state identity defines the meaning attributed to other actors. It also determines state's rights, obligations, and responsibilities in international relations and sets boundaries between self and others. The question that raises here is who are you relative to others? (Altoraifi, 2012: 44) Barnett believes that 'identity is linked to the construction of the threat and represents a potential source of alliance formation" (Barnett, 1996: 410). Unlike the general view that identity changes in long term periods of time, state identity is flexible and could also change in short terms. (Altoraifi, 2012: 23). The Iranian revolution of 1979 is a good example of the rapid change in a state identity (from a pro-Western to an anti -Western identity).

An identity may define state interests and construct state preferences by "legitimating some courses of action while making others unimaginable" (Saideman, 2002: 179). Moreover, identity may serve as a prop or justification for state behavior. In this regard, decision-makers may appeal to social norms and values and refer to particular identities to justify their policies, even if more objective

interests have all the same roots in state behavior. Although this relationship comes close to an instrumentalist notion of identity, it does not mean that identity is reduced to a mere disposable tool in the hands of a self-interested actor. Another causal relationship between identity and foreign policy can be seen in the role of identity in imposing "costs" on certain behavior. These costs can be either in form of material or ideational "legitimacy costs" as a result of "identity violations" (Saidemanm, 2002: 180).

Constructivism as an identity-oriented approach has effectively opened up the "black box" of identity formation by explaining the social environment as the basis for states' behavior. The theory has also paved the way for a grand debate between utilitarian-rationalist and normative-reflectivist thinking in social sciences. In constructivist terms, state behavior is the result of malleable identities and interests which are thought to be constructed and re-shaped through social interaction. From the constructivist point of view, behavioral norms and principles originate from, identity, culture and a state's role- and self-conception. While culture remains a rather "fuzzy" concept, national role and self-conceptions may give more detail information about "appropriate" behavior. (Boekle et al., 2001: 107) Norms, "specify standards of behavior" and give "immediate orientation to behavior". In a constructivist understanding, norms do not only have a regulative effect in terms of regulating state behavior (by increasing or reducing the cost of a certain action), but also have a constitutive effect in terms of constituting and legitimizing state goals (Boekle et al., 2001: 107).

Constructivists emphasize the constitutive effects of ideas and norms and explain how ideas and discourses influence states' perceptions and priorities in foreign policy. According to constructivist perspective, states attach meanings to the material objects and behave "on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them" (Wendt, 1992: 397). In contrast with the rationalist approach that stresses on the logic of consequentialism, constructivist

approach emphasizes the "the logic of appropriateness" as a basis for state behavior and interests. 'The logic of appropriateness implies rule-guided behavior in which states try to "do the right thing" rather than maximizing or optimizing their given preferences. (Risse, 2000: 4-5).

Identity has the most important role in shaping Iran and Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviors. Applying theories like constructivism with its emphasis on norms and identities, can contribute to a better understanding of Iran and Saudi Arabia disputes in the Middle East. Iran is using the Islamic-revolutionary ideology, as main normative resource of its anti-Western (especially anti US) Identity to boost its status in the international community. In fact, National interests and the religious-historical identity of the Iranian society are basically intertwined.

II. Saudi Ideational Sources

For understanding the nature of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, it is necessary to identify the ideational sources that shape its foreign policy. These ideational sources have always played an important role in shaping foreign policy of Saudi Arabia especially after the Islamic Awakening. In other words, without having a right perception of Saudi Arabia's ideational resources, one cannot give an appropriate explanation of Saudi's foreign policy behavior in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia's sources of national and state identity can be perceived in to both sub-state and supra-state levels. Meanwhile, the most important points of reference to national and state identity of the Saudi's are Arabism and Islam. In the Middle East region and Persian Gulf *Arabic States Systems*, the Arab-Islamic identity has proved to be more emotionally compelling and enjoys greater popular credibility over alternative identity constructs (Hinnebusch, 2003: 57).

1. Arabism: Arabism is one of the key elements in understanding contemporary Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. Arabism in terms of a feeling of belonging to a distinct Arab World has been

wide-spread within the Arab state system. The Saudi Arabia state encompasses the homeland of the Arabs and constitutes one of the oldest fully independent Arab states. Its ethnic Arab identity has therefore never been a matter of contest or self-questioning. Yet, the official state identity has always been more religious than national in a sense that Islam forms the over-arching core collective identity of the Saudi state. Arab identity which is defined by the commonality of language is thereby "intimately linked" to Islam insofar as Islam has "made sacred" the Arabic tongue (Partrick, 2009: 6-7).

2. Wahhabism: Wahhabism is another source of Saudi's identity. Wahhabism is a reform movement that began 200 years ago to rid Islamic societies of cultural practices and interpretations that had been acquired over the centuries. The followers of Abdul Wahab (1703-1792) began a movement to cleanse the Arab bedouin from the influence of Sufism. Wahhabis are the followers of Ibn 'Abd ul-Wahhab, who instituted a great reform in the religion of Islam in Arabia in the 18th century. He studied literature and jurisprudence of the Hanifite School. In the 1990s, Saudi leadership did not emphasize its identity as inheritor of the Wahhabi legacy as such, nor did the descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab, the Al ash Shaykh, who continue to hold the highest posts in the religious bureaucracy. Wahhabi influence in Saudi Arabia, however, remained tangible in the physical conformity in dress, in public deportment, and in public prayer. Most significantly, the Wahhabi legacy was manifest in the social ethos that presumed government's responsibility for the collective moral ordering of society, including the behavior of individuals, institutions, businesses, and the government itself.

The Islamic identity of the Saudi state has been decisively shaped by the historical political compact of the ruling family of al-Saud with the *ulama* (religious jurists). This political compact gave the *ulama* a de facto partnership role in governance" and in turn religiously legitimized and sanctioned the Saudi leadership. On account of this compact, the official state religion has been based on

the religious interpretation of the Sunni Hanbali School of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and on the puritan doctrine of the Wahhabiyya in particular. As a result of the "symbiotic relationship" (Steinberg, 2005: 12) between the ruling House of Saud and Wahhabi scholars, Wahhabi Islam has become more "statist" whereas the state was able to prevent an autonomous religious domain. Since the 1930s, Saudi *ulama* have no longer been able to autonomously implement strict Wahhabi doctrine or to shape important policy decisions, but have instead interpreted Islamic traditions in the interest of the rulers (Zeino-Mahmalat, 2012: 90).

The situation of *Ka'aba*, as the most sacred place for Muslims in the world, boosts Saudi Arabia's position among the Islamic countries. Therefore, the Saudi regime is trying to present itself as the Umm al-Qura of Islamic countries. The Saudi king wants to identify himself as the supreme leader of the Islamic world for the privilege of having the most sacred place in Saudi Arabia.

3. Kingdom System: Some constructivists believe that one of the other indicators of state identity relates to the nature of the political regime. In fact, power structure and sovereignty inside any country has a deep nexus to foreign behavior of state. One of aspects of this nexus is imply on political elites and decision makers and another aspect shed light on power and sovereignty sources that determine tools of states in international relations. Monarchy system of government, therefore, is another source of identity in Saudi Arabia. The analysis of Saudi political regime shows that the power structure of this country is based on some institutions that work both officially and unofficially. There are some unofficial structures of power in Saudi Arabia that traditionally impact decision-making process.

The Saudi's state identity generates foreign policy roles and norms that contour what is considered "appropriate" in foreign policy and that impacts Saudi's conduct in foreign policy. The main sources of Saudi Arabia's foreign-policy role-conceptions are the Saudi state's

(Wahhabi)-Islamic identity and a 'statized' form of Arab identity attached and subordinated to Islam. The Arab-Islamic self-conception of the Saudi state may for one thing, in the form (positive) policy suggestions, give an idea about what is considered 'possible' or 'desirable' within the realm of foreign policy. For another thing, it may determine in terms of (negative) policy rejections what is regarded to be 'un-imaginable'. (Zeino-Mahmalat, 2012: 90)

4. Oil Sources: Having huge sources of crude oil is another ideational concept of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is a one of the richest countries in the world in terms of natural oil reserves. In 2013, Saudi Arabia's total proved oil resources were 265 billion barrel, i.e., 9 percent of the total oil reserves in the world (BP, 2013). Additionally, Saudi Arabia is one of the biggest global producers of crude oil, producing 10 Million barrels per day, i.e., almost 12 percent of the total oil production in the world (BP, 2013). However, the production potential in Saudi Arabia far exceeds this amount.

III. Iranian Ideational Sources

The study of the Iranian ideational and normative structures and their effects on construction of the country's national identity is necessary for understanding the country's foreign policy towards the regional and international system. In other word, without having an accurate perception of Iranian ideational resources, one cannot give an appropriate explanation for Iranian foreign behavior in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf regions. As Michael Smith argues, foreign policy is a phenomenon which derives from the identity theories (Smith, 2004: 1-16).

Telhami and Barnet believe that, "a careful assessment of the interplay between Iranian identity and foreign policy since 1979 demonstrates the complexity of the dynamics between the two" (Telhami and Barnet, 2002: 90). Iran's foreign policy orientation especially toward the Middle East, to a great extent, is based on normative and ideational sources of the Islamic revolution.

The first and the most important elements of Iranian national identity are domestic and self-referential; however, it may be affected by the external environment and international transformations (Rezaei, 2008:33). Generally, Iranian ideational structures mainly originate from the historical experience, political Islam, Islamic revolution, Shiite religion, and political viewpoint of Imam Khomeini and the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Systemic factors have a secondary effect on shaping the country's foreign policy priorities. It can be said that Islamic Republic's interest and identity are more exogenous to the international system than endogenous one (Mohammad Nia, 2010: 154). On this basis, the research gives more importance to the domestic element of Iranian identity and the constructive role of normative structures in shaping Iran's foreign policy priorities.

Iranian identity has been subjected to different definitions and interpretation by scholars of Iran's contemporary history. Maloney believes that Iranian state identity in the post-revolutionary era is based on three elements: "Great Power nationalism, Islamism, and anti-imperialism". Each of these dimensions has played an important role in shaping Iran's foreign policy in the Persian Gulf region and throughout the world. (Maloney, 2002: 94) Some authors also define Persian identity vs. Islamic identity.

This paper attempts to analyze three most constructive elements of Iranian identity.

1. Political Islam: Islamic culture and principles have played a constructive role in defining Iranian foreign policy objectives. But the interpretation of Islamic principles Islam as a basis for foreign policy differs. (Rezaei, 2008: 31). After the Revolution, the shift toward an Islamic definition of the state and applying a religious rationale in building institution became Islamic Republic's approach to regional and trans-regional states. Accordingly it became the basis for state's interpretation of threats and opportunities in world politics. (Telhami and Barnet, 2002: 90) That is why since the Islamic revolution, we

have witnessed different approaches in Iranian foreign policy. In this regard, Shia ideology, as a main part of Islamic culture is another source of Iranian identity which has a strong impact on the country's foreign policy direction. The Pahlavi regime tried to change the origins of Iranian identity by accentuating the Persian and modern parts of the state identity which eventually led to an identity crisis and created a new imbalance between current normative environment and the public demands (Zahed, 2004: 16).

The integration of ancient Persian Empire with Shiite Islam in the formation of Iranian identity made Iran's state identity both historical and religious (Dehshiri/Majidi 2008/2009: 102-103). In fact, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 has added a prominent religious dimension based on the Shia religion to the "territorial nationalism" of the state, so that, the majority of the Iranian people are sensitive to both Islamism and nationalism arguments and consider both nationalist and Islamic identity at the same time. (Zahed, 2004: 13). Shiite values and traditions were regarded as compatible with the Iranian ones. Accordingly Shiism's central characteristics are religiosity, justice seeking and support for the oppressed all over the world (Zahed, 2004: 13).

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Saudi Arabia has been concerned about emergence of an Iranian-backed regional 'Shia awakening' in the region. That is why, after the beginning of "Islamic Awakening" in late 2010, the Saudis has accused Iran of backing Shiite movement in Bahrain and in the eastern parts of the country. Apart from the Shia political movement in the region, Saudi Arabia also fears the spillover of all kinds of ideas that might undermine legitimacy of the Saudi regime. These could be possibly democratic, pluralist or revolutionary-Islamist ideas from Islamic Republic of Iran. In this respect, Iranian anti-Western rhetoric and its appeal to the Muslim-Arab public in the region could also undermine the legitimization of the pro-U.S. policy of the Arabian state in the Persian Gulf in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. Historically,

Saudi Arabia and the other Arab states of the Persian Gulf, have been concerned about the Islamic Republic's political mobilization of Shiite forces against their regimes.

2. Persian Nationalism: Persian nationalism refers to Iran's pride and historical self-conception as a great civilization. Persian Nationalism refers to Iranian great historical civilization which is considered for many Iranians as a main source of pride. Iranian revisionist foreign policy in the regional and international areas and its challenges to the status quo can be explained based on its civilizational context. Iran has a strong sense of identity and enjoys a superior culture and civilization from which it takes inspiration.

Iranian nationalism is one of the key elements in understanding its contemporary foreign policy. Accordingly, a sense of historical pride and identification with glory of the Persian Empire, culture and civilization is widespread in today's Iranians. Many Iranians remember the Persian Empire as a regional hegemon of its time, ruling lands from Anatolia, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and Mesopotamia. This gives Iranians a sense of "superiority" in the region (Isbilen, 2015: 8). According to Gregory F. Giles "The culmination of these historical, cultural, religious, and geographic influences is considered to constitute Iran's 'strategic personality' or 'culture'" (Giles, 2003: 145). He contends that Iranian strategic culture is rooted in a about 3000-year history of Persian civilization. Hence, a strong sense of pride and self-esteem is among elements of Iranian political culture with both positive and negative consequences and sometime exceed the normal extent that has turned to ultra-nationalism and hostility and humiliating foreigners especially those who has invaded Iranian the past (Sadeghi, 2008:26).

Persian civilization is distinguished from other declined ancient civilizations such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, "Most of the other conquered peoples in Iraq, in Syria, in Egypt, also had higher civilizations than that brought by the nomadic invaders from the Arabian Desert. Yet they were absorbed, as the Persians were not"

(Lewis, 2004: 45). Unlike these civilizations, Persian civilization is considered as the main source of pride for Iranian people and government. In this regard, as Bernard Lewis believes the "sense of ancient glory, of pride in identity, comes out very clearly in Persian writings of the Islamic period" such as "emergence of a kind of national epic poetry, which has no parallel in Iraq or Syria or Egypt or any of these other places" (Lewis, 2004:45). Even more, in the choosing names for their children, in addition to Islamic names, Iranians choose distinctively Persian names such as Khusraw, Shapour**,** Daryoush and other names reminds Persian glory of the past. Whereas, one cannot find ancient names like Nebuchadnezzar or Sennacherib in Iraq, nor Tutankhamen or Amenhotep in Egypt. These civilizations are indeed dead and forgotten. (Lewis, 2004: 46). Recent polls show that 92 percent of Iranians assert that they are 'very proud' of their nationality compared with 72 percent of Americans who say so. (Ramazani, 2010: 12) Hence, Halliday considers 'nationalism' as the driving force in Iran's foreign in the regional and international levels. (Halliday, 2005: 32)

Actually, a great part of Iranian identity is routed in its historical context. The concepts such as Persian nationalism, anti-imperialism and enemy originate from Iran's historical context of pride and dignity on the one hand, and its historical experience of foreign invasion on the other hand. The Persian nationalism had already affected Iranian approach to the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Since the days of the Shah, Iranian officials have argued that Iran's territorial size, its historical significance and professed cultural superiority gives it a privilege stance among the states in the region (Mohammad Nia, 2012: 48). For this reason, both before and after the revolution, Iran has tried to expand its influence and gain a meritorious role on the regional and international stages.

Many of the Shah's policies were aimed at reviving the ancient Iranian Empire. Thus, the Pahlavi regime glamorized the sense of nationalism led by the ancient kings and raised anti-Arab sentiments.

On one hand, Iran sees itself as an ancient great civilization and one among the few "natural states" (Ehteshami 2002: 286) in the Middle East that enjoys a remarkable legacy of territorial integrity. Iran's memorization of a glorious past as a leading civilization, being a great power for several millennia since pre-Islamic times (Moshirzadeh 2007: 529) and its geographical centrality, have reinforced the country's self-perception of being a "natural" leader in the region. (Reissner 2008: 7-9) On the other hand, "Saudi Arabia views Iran's involvement in regional issues, especially in Arab politics, in the context of an ideological and security threat combined with hegemonic and nationalistic aspirations". Generally, the two elements of Persian nationalism and Islamism are complemented and intertwined by the element of revolutionary anti-imperialism as the third major component of Iran's state identity (Maloney 2002: 94).

Persian nationalism is one of the main driving forces in geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Considering Iranian glory, the Persian Empire, Saudi Arabia assumes Iran as a country which desires to be the hegemonic power in the region. Thus, Saudi Arabia sees danger in a resurgent Iran. This danger is originated from the Persian nationalism and Iran's historical position which imply its natural leadership of the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia is uncomfortable with Iran's hegemonic role in the Persian Gulf just as it was exercised under the Shah`s regime. That is why, Saudi Arabia, "ignored Iranian demands to be included in regional policy and security talks and to throw out American forces" from the regional security equation. For this reason, there is a consensus among the Persian Gulf's states especially Saudi Arabia that Iran is and will always be a strategic concern. To deter Iranian hegemony in the region, Saudi Arabia accepted U.S. protection and is hidden under the US Security umbrella (Yaphe and Lutes, 2005: 21).

Another dispute between the two countries is over name of the Persian Gulf. Iranian nationalism often conflated with the historical naming of the sea as "the Persian Gulf" (Moghaddam, 2006: 36). In

spite of incontestable document that implies the name of the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia tries to change the historical name of the sea and replaced that with a fabricated name. Saudi Arabia sees it as a way to reduce Iranian influence in the region. Based on the historical usage and documented evidences, the UN and other international organizations and the United States, officially recognize "Persian Gulf" as the established name of the sea.

3. Anti-Hegemonism: The Middle East has always been the center of attention for great powers. In addiction to oil reserves, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, added more impetus to the security issues in the Middle East. The US security strategies of preemptive war and the global war on terror, placed the Persian Gulf region at the heart of his post-9/11 strategic vision (Houchang, 2008: 44). Iranian Anti-hegemonic policy is a direct consequence of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Since the Islamic Revolution, the state has been seeking a Revisionist policy and is trying to establish a new order in the Middle East region based on its Anti-hegemonic policy. Yet, the repercussion of the Islamic Revolution continues, so that not only it deeply affected its immediate neighborhood, but also affects the greater Middle East and the rest of the world. Ideational effects of the Iranian Revolution has divided the region not only into two notion of pro-Western or anti-Western alignments, but also into two distinct normative views of regional order: one which advocates resistance and challenges the existing status quo and the other which is interested in reactionary approaches and aimed at preserving the status quo (Altoraifi, 2012: 257).

The main challenge of the Persian Gulf security refers to the two competing viewpoints from Iran and PGCC regarding the Persian Gulf security regime. Due to Iranian domestic identity-in terms of "Counter-Hegemonic and "anti-American foreign policy"- the country's viewpoint toward the Persian Gulf security system is 180 degrees the opposite to the PGCC viewpoints. While Saudi Arabia has preferred the status quo in the strategic and political

power, Iran is dissatisfied with the existing security order in the Persian Gulf which necessities US. Military presence in the region. Iran believes that the regional states by virtue of their capabilities – military, economic, technological, and societal -- are able to make a regional security system. Hence, there is no need for participation of external powers like the United States in the Persian Gulf security arrangement. The country feels that its rightful position as major power in the region has been denied.

The Islamic Republic is aware of the potential threats to its national security and territorial integrity; thus, it increasingly views the US as the most immediate threat to the interests and security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran believes that the United States is the major element of insecurity and the massive US military presence in the Persian Gulf was not intended to guarantee the free flow of oil from the region. Rather, it is regarded as clear manifestation of US hostility towards the Islamic Republic Iran (Al Toriafi, 2012: 149).

In the view of Iran's supreme leader, ensuring the security of the Persian Gulf region is to the advantage of all countries surrounding it…What business does America have in the region which gives it the right it to express its opinion about the issues of the Persian Gulf and to gather allies. They are not after security, rather they are after their own interests" (Ayatollah Khamenei, 16/05/2015). It can be said that Iranian revolutionary and anti-imperialist policy, is rooted in the Iranian sense of vulnerability, victimization and exclusion. A long history of injustices and traumatic events (Reissner 2008: 10-11) caused by external interferences, imperialist encounters and Iran's semi-colonialization1situation in the modern era shaped a "foreign-suspicious collective memory" (Moshirzadeh 2007: 529).

Iranian policy toward the West, is a reflection of the collective self which is understood as "non-submissive" and "resistant" (Moshirzadeh 2007: 536-537). Even, Iran's nuclear activities cannot be understood without reference to Iran's ideological formation of "anti-imperialist" rhetoric. Generally, what makes strategic advantages

of other states dangerous to the Saudi Arabia is prevalence of revisionist ambitions in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region. Saudi's regime is indirectly threatened by state actors with revisionist or hegemonic intentions and expansionist or territorial ambitions (Zeino-Mahmalat, 2012: 55). Apart from the political empowerment of Shiites in the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia fears the issuance of all kinds of ideas such as democratic, pluralist or revolutionary ideas from Iran and re-built Iraq that might undermine the Saudi's legitimacy. Also Iran's anti-Western rhetoric is appealing to the Muslim-Arab public in the wider region which could undermine the legitimization of the pro-U.S. policy of the Saudi government (El-Hokayem/Legrenzi 2006).

4. Justice-Seeking Policy: Historically, the concept of justice is believed to be a very important characteristic of the Iranian kings. Ibn-e Khaldoon, a 14th century Arab sociologist, believes that Iranian kings were among the most just rulers in the history. Acting against injustice and taking care of the oppressed people was a feature of reputable Iranian political and social activists. A content analysis of Iranian myths, specially Shahnameh by Ferdousi (Early 11th century Iranian poet), confirms this view. 'Justice seeking' and 'support for the oppressed' in different times is the most significant dimension that is an integral part of Iranian identity from ancient periods (Zahed, 2004: 13). The justice-seeking policy in foreign policy was pursued (with more or less enthusiasm) by all presidents of the Islamic Republic in post-revolutionary era.

As Moshirzadeh believes, the justice-based-discourse, "allows us to understand Iran's continuous reference to double standards in the international system and its demand for an international recognition of its right to nuclear technology" (Moshirzadeh, 2007: 538). Iranian officials claim that the Western countries ignore Israel's nuclear arsenal, while putting severe pressure on Iran to prevent it from having nuclear technology for the peaceful objectives (Mohammad Nia, 2012:52).

Accordingly, in the recent nuclear negotiations with the Western countries, the Islamic Republic of Iran, did not give up its rights to indigenous nuclear program. In the recent nuclear agreement - the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) –with the P5+1 group (on Jul 14, 2015), Iran has kept its right to "enrich uranium" (based on NPT) and has maintained its nuclear cycle which is recognized by the P5+1 states and the UN Security Council.

IV. Different Casses of Ideational Confrontation

1. Yemen: Saudi aggression on Yemen (March 2015) is an obvious example of Saudi's ideational confrontation with Iran which led to deaths of more than 4500 Yemenis, over 24000 injuries and 1.8 million children at risk of malnutrition since the war began (ECHO, 10 September 2015). The western and Arab media representation of the Yemen war often frame Iran as the aggressor, parroting arguments that Saudi Arabia's aggression against Yemen was forced due to Iranian meddling in its backyard (Mousavian, May 8, 2015). For better understanding of the origins of the war, it is necessary to understand the historical context of Houthi movement in Yemen. The Houthis have taken its name from Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi (killed by Yemeni army forces September 2004), who launched an insurgency in 2004 and managed anti-Israeli and anti-American demonstrations that year. The Houthis who make up about 40% of Yemen's population, represent the Zaidi branch of Shiite Islam from the far north of Yemen, near the border with Saudi Arabia. The Zaydis, as a minority in the majority-Sunni population, are majority in the northern Yemen along the Saudi border as a predominantly Sunni northern neighbor.

After the unification of north and south Yemen in 1990, Saudi-backed king, Ali Abdullah Saleh, ruled over the country For 33 years. His presidency was marked by the persecution of the Zaydi minority. After 34 years, and during the Islamic Awakening- in which the Houthi movement played a key role in the popular uprising- Saleh

was forced to hand over power to his deputy Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi in 2012. This change was based on the agreement brokered by the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council in which the Houthi group was marginalized (Mousavian, May 8, 2015). The Houthis have long been under socio-economic and political oppression forced by Saleh government. Regardless of sect, they reflect, in large part, the genuine grievances of many the Yemenis people. That is why, the Houthis' armed insurgencies against Saleh government initiated in 2004. The Yemeni army during Saleh government has fought six wars against the Houthis since 2004.

With the presidency of Mansur Hadi, Houthis continued to protest against him when he decided to cut fuel subsidies. In September 2014, in a battle, Houthi fighters gained control of Sana'a, the Yemeni capital and forced Hadi to negotiate an agreement to end the violence (Al Arabiya, 21 September 2014). Following the rejection of a proposal to divide Yemen into six federal regions, Houthi fighters seized control of the presidential palace and Hadi's residence in Sana'a that led to resignation of Mansur Hadi and his ministers. Subsequently Houthis constituted a Revolutionary Committee to govern the Yemen on 6 February 2015 (Reuters, 06/02/2015).

For a better understanding of conflict in Yemen, one needs to understand the key role of internal players and historical transformation of the country. Thus, it is an exaggeration to attribute Houthi gains to Iranian support, rather it is an ingenuous movement given the reality of the conflict inside Yemen. Saudi Arabia views Iran as a Shia entity which tries to utilize Houthis and its Shia identity as a tool to expand its soft power and ideational objectives into Saudi Arabia's southern and Eastern borders. In fact, "Saudis see Houthi gains in Yemen as advance for Iran" (Al-Buluwi, July 22, 2014). In this respect, some studies draw a linkage between development of DAESH (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) In Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen. These observers are "interpreting the Houthis' sudden advance toward the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, as a message from

Iran that it will not tolerate a Sunni Islamist advance on Baghdad". They are "theorizing that if Baghdad or part of it falls into the hands of Sunni groups, Sanaa might well fall to Shiite groups" (Al-Buluwi, July 22, 2014).

In reality, Saudi Arabia's allegations that the Houthis are controlled by Iran and they are just a tool of Tehran's expansion policy, may be attributed to the motivation for using Iran as a scapegoat to justify its aggression against the country. Similarly, Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of making trouble in its Shia-dominated eastern province. Apparently, the Iran has supplied only very moderate assistance and had even tried to dissuade the Houthis from making a bid for power. It can be said that The Houthi advancement in the country is purely Yemeni and as F. Gregory Gause believes, "They're more homegrown". (CFR, March 9, 2015).

Currently, Houthis are strongly opposed to al-Qaida and any Sunni-Salafist movements. Actually, one of the key factors in the emergence of the Houthi movement is Saudi Arabia's support for Salafist teachings, financing and arming the extremist groups especially in Sa'ada. Therefore, Saudi's aggression against Yemen has created a power vacuum that can give an opportunity for Al Qaida and Salafist groups to reinforce their position in the country.

2. Bahrain: The Bahrain's Shia population launched a new wave of peaceful protests against Al Khalifa Family's regime after Islamic Awakening. After inability to control the protests, the government supplicated security assistance from PGCC countries especially Saudi Arabia. The presence of foreign security forces in Bahrain enhanced clashes between two sides and due to deepening of disparities in the country and this conflict is still going on.

Shiites make about 70 percent of 1.3 million population of Bahrain. The majority of Shia population in the country believe that they are under the systemic pressure of Al Khalifa's ruling Family. Nowadays, Shia population are not employed in the security and intelligence services and even, the ruling Family make pressure on

private foundations to replace Shia workers with Sunnis, so that, some political analysts believe that the regime has created an "apartheid system" against the Shia majority. (Rowden, 2013: 2)

These protests increased ideational confrontations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In offering support to the Al Khalifa regime against the Shia in Bahrain, Riyadh is seeking to prevent the political empowerment of this community, fearful that "any political gains by Bahrain's Shiites will likewise be demanded by Saudi Shiites. Moreover, the pressure placed on the Al Khalifa to resist calls for democratic reform can be traced back to Riyadh, again, fearful of the consequences for its own Shia population. However, it is possible that the Saudi-led PGCC intervention has done more to incite Shia populations in both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, in turn pushing these populations closer to Iran. In addition to concern at the rising empowerment of the Shia, Riyadh has also been motivated to act by the power of the Wahhabi Ulama and their proximity to hardline members of the Al Saud, namely Crown Prince Nayef. Simon Mabon believes that: "In seeking to retain the support of the Wahhabi Ulama, thus maintaining their legitimacy both internally and externally, the Al Saud are required to respond to the sectarian nature of the ideological challenge posed by Iran. Furthermore, given increasing Shia gains across the Middle East, notably in Iraq, Saudi Arabia is reluctant to allow the Shia in another neighboring country to make prominent gains, let alone in such close proximity to Saudi Arabia". (Mabon, 2012: 1)

Bahrain plays a significant and strategic role in the Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. The two countries relations depend mostly on both tribal ties between two countries and also on common economic interests in exporting oil. In addition, Bahrain is considered as a valve for social pressures that come from Wahhabi extremist ideology. Bahrain is regarded by Saudi Arabia as a sample of responding Shia movements under the spiritual influence of Iranian Islamic Revolution in the region.

However, there is a strong relation between Bahraini Shias, as predominant religion in Bahrain, with Iranian people. Iran, as the most important Shia nation in the world, has the specific relationship to Shia people in other parts of the Middle East. Moreover, many of the Bahrainis have an Iranian origin with a kind of affection toward Iranian territory. Many of their progenitors had emigrated from Iran to Bahrain in two recent centuries.

This ideational difference in Bahrain is one of the most important reasons for escalation of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf region. Although this tension is visible in Bahrain now, we should consider it in the framework of an ideational confrontation in the region.

Conclusion

The article has tried to discuss the confrontational relationships between Iran and Saudi Arabia based on an identity-oriented approach. Hence, in the present research, the ideational sources of Iranian and Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, which led to soft power rivalry between the two countries in the Middle East, have been investigated. Identity plays a crucial role in understanding Iran and Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour in the Middle East region. Based on the identity-oriented approach, Iran and Saudi Arabia behave on the basis of "logic of appropriateness" and try to do the "right thing" rather than maximizing their materialistic interests. Moreover, Iran's identity of resistance, nationalism and Shiism, and Saudi's identity of Arabism, Wahhabism and Kingdom system have created two competing identities with confrontational policies in the regional and international levels.

The ideational rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East has been intensified by the the Islamic Awakening, so that the two countries launched vitriolic criticism against each other and continued mutual accusation of supporting identity groups in the highly divided countries of the region such as Lebanon, Iraq, Syria

and more recently in Bahrain and Yemen. It has led to Saudi military intervention in Bahrain and its aggression against Yemen.

Based on the ideational sources of Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is concluded that the foreign policy behavior of the two countries are driven mostly by the ideational and normative elements which determine their ideational preferences and the role that each country should play in the regional and world politics.

It can be argued that the identity-based foreign policy of Iran and Saudi Arabia is the root cause of enduring tension between the two rival countries and affected alliance in the regional and international areas. Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, especially after the Islamic Awakening, Iran and Saudi Arabia have struggled to influence the identity groups and strengthened their attempts to extend their soft power all over the region. Iran's supports for Shia Muslims populations (especially in Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen) and Saudi Arabia's supports of Sunni Salafi-extremist groups (versus Shia groups) are obvious samples of the ideational confrontations between the two countries in the Middle East region that has complicated the future perspective of bilateral relationships between them.

On the one side, Saudi Arabia strongly tries to securitize and delegitimize the Islamic Republic by portraying the country and Shia religion as a major threats to the regional peace and security. On the other side, Iran tries to appeal the Muslim world and the Shia populations of the region (especially Bahrain and Saudi Arabia) to lose the legitimacy of pro-U.S. policy of the Saudi regime and other Arab states of the Middle East.

Notes

1. According to Walt, perceptions of state intent play a crucial role in alliance choice and state behavior. States with (perceived) aggressive intentions pose a higher threat to others than those with assumed benign intentions but greater power capability (Walt 1987: 25-26).

2. Iran's opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process and to US presence in the region solidified its image as a revisionist state challenging Western intervention and pushing for armed liberation

3. The concept of role is defined as a "set of norms expressing expected foreign policy behaviour and action orientation (Aggestam, 1999:2).

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