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Issue Brief

Tensions in Iran-Saudi Relations and Future Prospects

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As entities with sound state structure and strong governments, both Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) hold a significant place in the turbulent region of Middle East. The strain between their relations is neither recent nor unprecedented. However, their conflict is often shrouded in a mist of religious ideologies and sectarianism. But it is a rift much deeper than that. Earlier this year, a famous Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr was executed by the Saudi government along with 47 others on claims of terrorism. This triggered outrage in Iran and the over-all Shia community around the world. The Saudi Embassy in Iran was stormed by angry protestors and thus tensions escalated between the two countries which resulted in straining the relations between these two states. The *Hajj* stampede of 2015 was yet another bump in the road.

Flaring statements were delivered, unfortunately by people that hold responsible ranks and offices. But diplomatic stand-offs between Iran and KSA are an oft-repeated phenomenon. Their relationship is generally described in terms of theological differences. In order to understand their conflict objectively, it is imperative to explore its strategic and political connotations.

Pre-1979 era of the Iran-Saudi relations was a time of celebrated partnership of these two countries in the Middle East. But after the Islamic revolution transformed the socio-political norms of the Iranian society, the relationship fell to dust. The conventional assumption is that the mutual relations soured due to the major ideological and religious shift in the Iran's governmental policies after the revolution. While this premise remains significant, it is important to understand that it is not the only factor to be considered. Monarchical regimes, no matter how sturdy, are precariously perched on top of suppressed masses which have the power to dethrone them. Such existential apprehensions were also a factor behind the Saudi Arabian policy of cold-shouldering the post 1979 regime in Iran. The Iranian leadership was accused by other countries of attempting to 'export' its revolution across country borders.¹

After analysing the pre-1979 policies of both Iran and KSA, it becomes evident how their regional outlook was symmetrical, as both states had powerful dynasties ruling them. Another factor was the petrodollar pact implementation and US becoming the guarantor of Saudi Arabia which created a rift with Iran as it was already eyeing the US as an external 'imposition' to this region. The fall of the Saddam regime in 2003 which led to the formation of like-minded regime alliance between Iran and Iraq, was also considered an affront by the Saudi Arabian regime. As the perpetrators of 'balance of power'

¹ Rizwan Naseer, Liu Debin, Musarat Amin, "Balance of Power and Order in International Relations", *Berkeley Journal of Social Sciences*, 2:4, 2012.

suggest, powerful regional rivals can maintain a status quo of consistent conflict which compels them to acquire formidable strengths to counter each other's threat.² That is exactly how it has happened with Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East.

Bahrain, Yemen and Syria are bleeding examples of this reflected rivalry which has resulted in loss of countless innocent lives. The recent spat was initiated between the two states when the *Hajj* dates for 2016 loomed up and there was an outright disagreement between the two governments over the arrangement and management of the pilgrims. The disagreement spiralled out of proportions when religious leaders started issuing controversial statements which finally resulted in Iranian government's decision to refrain its citizens from going for *Hajj*. The Ka'aba is a sacred site for pilgrimage that holds a special place in the hearts of millions of Muslims living all over the world. Politicising this issue can have severe implications that will spread globally, affecting millions of Muslims around the world who hold both these states in high esteem. As both states are considered to be the 'vanguards' of the Islamic doctrine, they must attempt to reconcile their differences, bilaterally or through third-party arbitration.

This is where Pakistan has a constructive role to play. Pakistan is the only Muslim nuclear state with close strategic ties with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran, as a neighbour, and Saudi Arabia, as a close ally, are significant partners to Pakistan in the global scenario. Pakistan can offer a neutral platform to both its Muslim brethren. In order to handle this delicate situation, Pakistan needs to be diplomatically balanced in its approach towards both countries as it did before many a time.

The future of the entire Middle Eastern region will be in jeopardy if these two states initiate a conflict which would be simulated on both the regional and the global level. As Iran and Saudi Arabia flex muscles at each other, the region is becoming more and more chaotic. Russia and USA have also picked sides in the Syrian conflict as per their traditional rivalry. However, these alliances might not float for long as the strategic dynamics of Middle East are changing with each passing day. Iran after years of sanctions, is finally stepping out to reap the economic rewards that the world has to offer.

The future of Iran-Saudi relations, in all probability, will look the same with a few fluctuations here and there in the intensity of their proxy conflicts. However, complete rapprochement between the two is highly unlikely at this point in time when even the religious sentiments are running high. Their enmity will not transform into a full-fledge war as the saturated tension will be released through

² Ariel Jahner, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle for Power and Influence in the Gulf", *International Affairs Review*, 20:3, 2012.

indirect means and waging war of words with each other. But the role of external powers in affecting their relations cannot be ignored either. The role of bigger powers and their favouritism has always been a deciding factor in the state-state relations in the Middle East. It is about time that the regional countries decide to take the fate of their own region into their hands. The external influence by global powers have left the region a haphazard mess of toppling regimes and 'forced democracies'. Iran and Saudi Arabia need to play an effective role in joining hands with regional countries to find a solution to the fateful predicament of their conflict ridden region. The sectarian divide is only an effective threat because it has been perceived and planted among these societies by external agents who only sow chaos and anarchy. If these heinous elements not entertained, their potency will fade away with time, thus leaving behind nothing but peace and harmony in the region.