

## Hybrid Warfare; Iran-Saudi Rivalry and Its Implications on Pakistan's Internal Affairs

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### Introduction/Importance

*The research paper circulates the Iran-Saudi Rivalry which has deep historical roots and can have drastic implications on Pakistan's internal affairs. Scholars have argued that both these Islamic giants adhere to different approaches to leadership and dominance in the Middle East. The author uses qualitative methodology to formulate this paper with the help of research papers and documentaries. Similarly, as long as the bone of contention escalates, so do the implications and instability rise in Pakistan as the latter is composed of Sunni majority and Shia minority population resulting in vast sectarianism. In support of the argument, the theory of Realism is implied which discusses how both states prioritize their national interests. Case studies of Shia violence in Pakistan have also been discussed in this paper about the rivalry. The DIME model has been used for better understanding. Lastly, the paper converses on the China-led rapprochement between Saudi-Iran rivalries.*

**Keywords:** *Saudi-Iran Rivalry, Sectarianism, National Interests, Middle East, Realism, Sunni-Shia, rapprochement, Pakistan.*

### Introduction

Saudi-Iran Rivalry famously known as the 'Cold War in the Middle East' has produced eminent historical factors that have contributed to the contention and its implications on the domestic politics of Pakistan. Being Islamic countries, both these major states undergo differences in religious beliefs and approaches in the international arena. Iran is a Shia majority country and Saudi Arabia is a Sunni majority country, both aim at leading the Muslim world and acquire dominancy in the Middle East.

This conflict has led to the aforementioned states using hybrid warfare tools to confront the other by indirect means including proxy wars, diplomacy, cyber-attacks, Special Forces (IRGC, Houthi Rebels, Hezbollah, and TTP), and economic warfare. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 led by Ayatollah Khomeini was the foundation of Iran-Saudi rivalry since the former criticized the House of Saud due to its monarchy. Since, the Saudis, invested in Pakistan heavily, around 120 million dollars in the construction of the Shah Faisal Masjid in 1986 (Afzal 2019).

Moreover, the Saudis have also invested \$100 billion worldwide to promote the Wahabi doctrine. In Pakistan alone, there were 244 madrassas in the 1960s but in 2020 reportedly there were more than 24,000. It is quite clear that Saudi's money buys it the influence.

Pakistan being an Islamic state itself consists of both Sunnis and Shias with the former being in majority while the latter being in a minority number. However, as much as the tensions rose between the two major Middle Eastern powers, it had an indirect impact on Pakistan's internal affairs in the form of sectarianism, radicalization, and discrimination. There is heightened fear in citizens within the borders over their religious beliefs which question the national security of Pakistan and whether the state can ensure their rights and providing a peaceful coexistence atmosphere.

The relationship between Iran and Saudi deteriorated to its worst after the execution of prominent Shia cleric Nimr al Nimr in 2016 by the Saudis (Bukhari 2022). In retaliation, the Saudi embassy in Tehran was set ablaze and their diplomatic ties took a back-foot. Iran has an upper hand when it comes to the military since it supports non-state actors in the Middle East such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Iran does not have a big military which is why the country chose this approach. Iranian officials

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showed extreme condemnation of the assassination of Qassem Soleimani (Iranian General), who developed the country's Guerrilla-styled operations abroad. He was assassinated by the Americans in 2020.

There is discussion around the contemporary changing dynamics and reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia with the help of Chinese intervention and its effects on Pakistan's internal affairs. Various policy recommendations or agreements are to be drafted so that they can lead to improved bilateral relations with each separately in their domains.

Historically, Pakistan has played an important role as a mediator in Sino-US rapprochement along with offering mediation between Iran and Saudi (Bukhari 2022). Pakistan has a constructive role in the peace negotiations. The country is expected to achieve this strategy and maintain efforts of peace missions to ensure positivity while pursuing practical diplomacy.

## Research Objective

The research aims to understand the historical conflict between major regional powers of the Middle East, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. To examine the hybrid warfare tactics that have been implied by both for their national interests causing implications on Pakistan's domestic affairs concerning increased political instability, sectarianism, and radicalization. This will help to comprehensively understand the rivalry with a holistic lens concerning Pakistan's national security. To analyze what measures Pakistan can acquire for its national interest as Iran is a Shia-majority country that is rich in gas and Saudi Arabia is a Sunni-majority country that is rich in oil.

Lastly, to narrow down foreign policies that Pakistan can adopt to balance the bilateral relationship with both states amidst contemporary reconciliation initiated by China in April of 2023 to ensure security and peace within its borders

## Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is to understand how hybrid warfare tactics can exacerbate existing sectarian tensions and fuel instability. The purpose is to highlight the vulnerability of Pakistan's critical infrastructure and regional division. Moreover, to comprehend, the influence of the Iran-Saudi rivalry on Pakistan's internal matters.

## Hypothesis

*“The Saudi-Iran rivalry and hybrid warfare tactics inculcated are indirectly affecting Pakistan's domestic affairs which lead to an increase in sectarianism, radicalization, political instability and security foreboding across the country.”*

## Research Questions

Question 01: What are the historical factors that led to Saudi-Iran cold war in the Middle East and what hybrid warfare tactics were used by both?

Question 02: To what extent sectarianism, has played a key role in exerting influence on Pakistan's domestic politics and social cohesion incited by Saudi-Iran rivalry?

Question 03: What policies can Pakistan draft to balance its bilateral relationship with Iran and Saudi amidst contemporary development of reconciliation?

## Research Methodology

Reference to secondary data has been referred to within the research paper. This includes different newspapers, documentaries, political magazines, and articles on the history of Iran-Saudi rivalry, as well as research papers taken from Google search engines. The method of qualitative analysis has been stressed in the paper. Local news articles were consulted in order to understand Pakistan's unstable domestic affairs as

per the rise of radicalization and sectarianism. Discussions were also held with the minority Shia population and the majority Sunni population to grasp the experiences of Pakistani citizens and their national security due to this increasing havoc between major Islamic states.

## Literature Review

### *Middle East Region*

Iran and Saudi Arabia have been conflicted for the past 45 years since the Iranian Revolution by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 (FrontLine PBS, Youtube 2020). The Saudis saw this revolution as a threat to their monarchy and aimed at containing its expansion to other parts of the surrounding countries. Saudis view Iran as a hostile and aggressive state in the Middle East whereas Iran views Saudis as initiators of sectarianism and funders of Tehreek e Taliban Party (TTP) and Al-Qaeda. There is a significant amount of reflection on US interest in the Middle East as well which supports the Saudis and Saddam Hussein in order to contain Iran, especially in the case of the Iran-Iraq war of 8 years; 1980-1988. Iraq or the Saddam Hussain government acquired the support of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Khomeini at the time agreed to a ceasefire in 1988 as both countries were devastated by the war. In addition, the attack was led with the help of chemical weapons used by Iraq on Iran and was a crime against humanity. Iran was later isolated internationally which resulted in a hatred of Iran towards the US for support of Iraq.

The Saddam Sunni Arab Regime suppressed the Shia opposition through threats, expulsions, and brutality. However, due to the 9/11 event, the US attacked Iraq and toppled Saddam's regime which resulted in a miscalculation by the US of the depth of antagonism between Shia-Sunni. Consequentially, this led to a direct fight between the Sunni with the Shia counterpart. In the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Iran sought this as an opportunity to bring the Shias into power in Iraq while the Saudis felt dumbfounded by the US invasion, and this led to the government falling into the hands of Iranian allies. In 2005, Abu Musab Al Zarqawi reportedly stated that Osama Bin Laden aimed to begin the sectarian war which led to the 2006 bombs led by Al Qaeda and destroyed the Al-Askari Shrine in the city of Samarra, Iraq. In retaliation, the Shias led grenade attacks, attacked mosques of Sunnis, and killed the Sunni Imams. The rivalry between Saudi and Iran then escalated due to the rising tensions.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) also known as 'Artesh' supported allies without direct fighting and using hybrid warfare tactics. The Saudis used proxy wars to counter Iran such as preaching networks, charity networks, and volunteer networks. It was funded by the government to the Sunnis in Iraq to pull up arms against the government, the use of secret intelligence channels, businessmen, and Iraq furthered the sectarian agenda by rushing into executing Saddam Hussain.

The use of proxy wars by both these states as means of hybrid warfare has resulted in massive casualties and damage to infrastructure especially in Syria and Yemen where rebel groups have created instability within the countries. Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is Iran's guerilla-styled operational force actively in abroad missions such as Yemen and Syria. However, both states are seen to be accused of multiple war crimes and hybrid warfare means to escalate the proxy wars.

(Abbas 2021) highlights that Saudi Arabia is vital to Pakistan because of its religious affiliation and economic grants to Pakistan. Saudi Arabia generously helped Pakistan's economic means by giving \$1.5 billion in grants in 2014. (Mumtaz 2016) claims that the provocation of Saudi Arabia could result in disastrous effects on Pakistan's internal politics.

The fault lines between Iran and Saudi Arabia may concur towards overlapping according to national interests and mostly both have been hostile towards each other. The influence of Iran and Saudi Arabia has been largely believed to be the root cause of immense sectarian violence in Pakistan in the 1980s (Mumtaz 2016).

Amid Contemporary times, on October 7th, 2023, Hamas launched an attack on Israel which has created heightened tensions in the Middle Eastern region. However, Iran and Saudi seem to engage diplomatically concerning the issue at large. In accordance, on October 10th, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and

Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) engaged in a telephonic conversation since the rapprochement with the help of Beijing. Moreover, both countries participated in the Joint Arab-League Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held in Riyadh on October 11th, Gaza Summit (Tahir 2023). The participation of Iran signaled a message of unity and solidarity with Gaza.

### *Pakistan*

Pakistan is a Sunni majority country which however encompasses various ethnicities as well such as Shia in a minority. The country has fallen victim to the immense amount of sectarian violence and hatred among its citizens. The Shia's feel extremely unsafe to declare and tend to look forward to hiding their identities. In this discussion, various cities experience violence against the Shia minorities such as the incident of bombing in a Peshawar Mosque in 2022 which killed 60 Shias. Hazara Community which belongs to the Shia ethnicity in Quetta is largely targeted by the TTP such as the 2013 twin suicide bombing resulting in 200 dead (Watch 2014). According to political scientist Ayesha Siddiq, from the years of 2001-2018 almost 4840 Shias have been killed (Standard 2022). In contemporary times, in May 2023, 7 schoolteachers have been killed in Kurram district for being Shias. There is still rising violence against the ethnicity which requires media attention and reforms.

(Mumtaz 2016) argues that Pakistan should focus on a candid dialogue with Iran and Saudi Arabia to make them understand the consequences and huge price that comes with it to Pakistan's internal matters. Pakistan should work on ensuring that no foreign interventions can lead to extremism and sectarianism within the borders. Moreover, the country is vulnerable in matters of security, which may arise if sectarianism is exacerbated. Saudi Arabia has supported Pakistan with petrodollars since the West imposed economic sanctions for acquiring nuclear power status (Zahra Ibrahim 2022).

Pakistan's foreign policy is expected to be neutral as aforementioned the country is pressurized by both Shia and Sunni communities. Foreign external threats and agendas can result in a severe uprising within the society which could result in domestic instability. Concurrently, Pakistan's balancing approach is the key indicator towards peace and neutrality since Iran and Pakistan's volatile border needs cooperative measures for security and for eliminating hybrid warfare tactics of non-state actors. A shift/tilt towards any of the states could not give favorable outcomes.

### Rivalry through the Lens of Hybrid Warfare in context of Realism:

For the understanding, in-depth analysis, and discussion, the theory of Realism is stressed with the help of hybrid warfare tactics. Iran and Saudi are countering each other based on power and dominance in the Middle East also considered as the power struggle or balance of power. Recently, in an interview with FOX News, Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS) stated that if Iran acquires a nuclear power, then we 'have' to get it (Fox News 2023).

The stress on this after reconciliation is mere proof of how they still look up to their national interests and position in the region. Both states are focusing on exerting influence on each other with the use of hybrid warfare tactics such as proxy wars, and the security dilemma of gaining power which may be threatening to the counterpart.

The Iran-Saudi rivalry transforms into a zero-sum game when, where one's loss is the other's gain. In the case of Pakistan, it is sandwiched between the whirlpools and must work on maintaining balance with both powers to ensure its own security and stability. The primary concern for Pakistan is its territorial integrity and political instability which can be disturbed by the proxy and disinformation wars within its boundaries.

### **Hybrid Warfare Tools used by Iran and Saudi Arabia**

The Hybrid Warfare tools used by both the countries are as below:

#### **Support of Proxy Wars**

Iran and Saudi use tactics of proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Saudis claim to have given weapons to Syria to defend against the Iranians. Moreover, the Salafi Groups share a sectarian identity with the Saudis and counter the IRGC. On the other hand, the Fatmiah Group is an Afghan Shia group trained by the IRGC. Among the most prevalent is the Shia militant group Hezbollah of Lebanon which focuses on Iranian influence in the Middle East.

*Implications on Pakistan:* Iran supports Shia military groups in Pakistan such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi along with cyber-attacks on Pakistani government websites and infrastructure. Saudi offers support for Pakistani leaders that align with Saudi interests. The Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP) Sunni extremist group with close ties to Saudi Arabia has been accused of attacks targeting Shias and Christians in the country. In addition, this leads to instability within the borders of Pakistan.

### **Economic Warfare**

The countries use means of economic tools to spread their narratives. It includes funding, imposition of sanctions, and funding for arms, drones, precision missiles, and weapons.

*Implications on Pakistan:* As aforementioned, Saudi Arabia funded Pakistan to build more Wahabi mosques such as the Faisal Mosque in Islamabad funded by King Shah Faisal of KSA.

Iran offers financial aid and trade deals to Pakistan in exchange for political support and threatens to reduce trade or cancel economic projects if Pakistan aims at being unfriendly towards Iran.

### **Cyber-attacks**

The countries actively use the means of propaganda and disinformation against one another. In 2023, Saudi Arabia barred an Iranian regime propagandist Ali-Akbar Raefipour from leaving the country when he tried to return to Iran from Hajj pilgrimage. In late 2022, the IRGC-affiliated media activist used social media after he threatened anti-government protesters on the social media platform.

Moreover, Iran allegedly targeted critical infrastructure of Saudi Arabia in the past including oil and gas facilities with cyber-attacks. They hacked into government websites and social media accounts to promote pro-Iranian agendas. On the contrary, the Saudis invested in developing its cyber capabilities against offensive and defensive purposes. Furthermore, the Saudis partnered with Israel and other Western states to improve its cyber security measures.

*Implications on Pakistan:* Pakistan as a state under turmoil needs to invest in its own cyber defenses and build international partnerships to counter cyber security threats and maintain stability within its borders.

### **Political Interference and Destabilization**

The countries both support opposition groups and manipulate political processes which can weaken the rival governments. This can also bring about an impact on Pakistan's own political stability and democratic process.

### **Opportunities**

The potential opportunity that can arise from countering hybrid warfare tactics in this domain is that it can promote national unity. The tactics of disinformation and sectarian manipulation can be solved with cohesion and resilience. Pakistan's long-standing history of engagements as a mediator and balancer can prove to be an asset in promoting peaceful solutions to regional conflicts. Pakistan can also work on strengthening the intelligence sector to identify potential threats emanating from the rivalry and to address them within time.

### **Challenges**

There is a massive internal security threat due to hybrid warfare tactics like misinformation and cyber-attacks in the internal affairs of Pakistan. The rivalry could end up with sectarian tensions and fuel insurgency in regions like Baluchistan. Pakistan has a critical infrastructure and government networks are at risk of cyber-attacks from non-state actors involved in the Saudi-Iran rivalry. The countries could potentially cause coercion towards Pakistan in ways that the country would align with their respective interests.

### **Levels of Analysis using DIME Model**

Iran and Saudi rivalry along with its implications for Pakistan are explained using the DIME model (Diplomacy, Information, Military, and Economic).

1. Diplomatic: Saudi and Iran should engage more in regional diplomatic initiatives while Pakistan should act as a mediator. Iran and Saudi can interact with other countries that face similar hybrid warfare threats and can share information, intelligence, and best practices.
2. Informational: Under the umbrella of information, Saudi and Iran should establish a dedicated desk that addresses and differentiates between propaganda and real news spread by either countries or non-state actors respectively. There should be support for independent media that highlights facts and combats biased reporting and misinformation.
3. Military: Pakistan should improve its border security to enhance surveillance and patrol the area to avoid any agents or networks that may promote instability in the country. There should be an enhanced investment in protecting infrastructure and government from cyber-attacks along with gathering intelligence to anticipate and prevent hybrid attacks.
4. Economic: Pakistan should work on improving its economy by tackling poverty and massive unemployment which are root causes of exploitation by hybrid warfare actors.

### **Findings**

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia focus on prioritizing their national interests such as acquiring regional hegemony and expansion of their followed beliefs and securitizing against any future threats that may occur. Hybrid warfare is a key component in the contemporary world of warfare since indirect war is more prioritized instead of a direct catastrophic approach. Pakistan is seen as working on a balanced approach between both Iran and Saudi Arabia in order to attain independent foreign policy, along with initiatives as Saudi is an oil-rich country while Iran has strategic interests aligned with Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, Iran and Saudi, being Islamic states should promote peaceful coexistence as it is universally a necessary primary goal of states in the 21st century. Iran and Saudi Arabia should work together to curb these discriminations and formulate policies that may prove to be fruitful. Islam aims at encouraging brotherhood rather than radicalization of one another's beliefs and values. Pakistan, on the other hand, should opt for a neutral foreign policy with both states as it shares a border with Iran and due to the economic crisis cannot lead itself into a Pandora's Box. Pakistan should look forward to oil and gas agreements as both countries acquire richness in these aspects. The country should balance the relationship bilaterally and work together in order to eliminate if not decrease the sectarian influence.

Media houses in Pakistan should also bring into light the anti-Shia violence with true essence and not present as average day conflict. Pakistan should engage and maintain positive relations while ensuring policy in a multilateralism fashion (Bukhari 2022). The country should establish an independent foreign policy to pursue its goals and maintain regional stability. Saudi and Iran may find a common ground of interdependency, but difficulty arises since both cannot let the by-gones be by-gones of regional dominance.

*Gaps in the Research Paper*



The gap of this research paper is that it does not include implications of Saudi-Iran rivalry on other Muslim states. The paper is limited to a case study of Pakistan's internal affairs. Moreover, the paper's foundation is based on the secondary use of data rather than the use of primary sources such as interviews with experts or affected communities. For Pakistan to address hybrid warfare tactics efficiently, the country requires for a multifaceted approach that integrates diplomatic, economic informational military tools.

Scholars view the rapprochement in a skeptical vision since the race for regional hegemony and leading the Muslims to a leadership role is inevitable and deeply integrated within their ideologies.

## Recommendations

After intensive research, the author aims to propose a few recommendations that would likely help in prospects to address the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and its impact on Pakistan.

1. There should be promotion of inter-faith dialogue and tolerance which is the root cause of major instability in Pakistan. The sectarian divide and violence sabotage Pakistan's soft image in the international community.
2. The genuine scholars of both the sects should work together in the promotion of peace and understanding as it is a very sensitive matter. There should be religious awareness among individuals so that false narratives can be shed off.
3. Establishment of dedicated hybrid warfare task forces from relevant agencies (civil, security, media, government, and intelligence) to formulate strategies to counter potential threats.
4. Pakistan should develop closer ties with other regional and international actors for trade investment to lessen dependence on Saudi or Iran.
5. Lastly, to strengthen border control activities in Pakistan. There should be an increase in surveillance and vigilance to counter infiltration routes and networks in Pakistan that promote instability.
6. The government should work together with media and NGOs to promote media literacy, conflict resolution, and peace-building efforts for stability..

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