

The Impact of The Syria's Crisis on The Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in The Region: Iran's Point of View.

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Introduction

Iran and Saudi Arabia have been viewed as rivals who have historically been seeking the upper-hand position in the Middle East. Particularly, after the 1979 Islamic revolution of Iran, they competed to gain more regional power both politically and economically through the OPEC meetings. Among all the regional developments which impacted the relationship between Iran and Saudi since 1979, the downfall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 and the outbreak of Syria's conflict in 2011 have been the two major events that caused tension and the rivalry between the two states.

Many scholars such as Berti (2014:25) have also argued that Iran-Saudi cooperation became more intensified after Syria crisis started. However, the close analysis of what happened after the downfall of Saddam's Iraq shows a couple of significant changes in Iran's and Saudi Arabia's relationship to Iraq. It has been said that Iran's influence in the Middle East has expanded after the fall of Saddam Hussein as a result of the Shiite government under Maliki's leadership being supported by Iran.

It has been also maintained that Saudi Arabia expanded its support for the al-Qaida group in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein to the establishment of Maliki's government (Alisa, 2014). Moreover, Saudi Arabia generally has supported Sunni groups since 2005, and in particular provided financial aid to radical groups which later emerged as "Islamic State" (Clemons, 2014). By so doing, Saudi Arabia intended to curtail Iran's influence in Iraq since Iran gained more power by successfully establishing the Shiite government there (Dreazen, 2014).

In the case of Syria, Saudi Arabia also financially supported Salafist/Jihadist

groups from 2011 to 2013 (Daou,2012). Until the capture of Mosul by IS in July 2014, Saudi Arabia supported Salafists/Jihadist, a part of which later became IS in 2006 in Iraq. By so doing, according to Barrett (2014:11), Saudi Arabia aimed at facilitating the downfall of the Assad regime. On the other hand, Iran has supported the Assad regime. Despite the early prediction of the Western media, the Assad regime did not fall (The Guardian,2013,January 7).

Much literature has existed about the prospect of the Middle East power politics among Iranian scholars. Sariolghalam¹ stated that “Turkey and Saudi Arabia are the benefitters of regional developments and in the end the Saudis will gain political power while the Turks gain economic and diplomatic power.” (2012, interview with Shargh) Daheshiar, professor of political science in Tehran also maintained that “recent regional developments will strengthen the Saudis. Damages inflicted by the Saudi’s potential defeat will be compensated by oil money and the United States support and consequently Saudi Arabia will not be the true victim [of the Syria’s crisis].” (2015, interview with Khabaronline) Therefore, many researchers agreed that the Saudis would expand their power and that Iran would have no significant place among the emerging political powers of the Middle East.

In light of these developments, this article aims to examine the impact of the Syria’s crisis and emerging ISIS on the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. More specifically, it analyzes how the powers of both countries in the region changed in the last four and half years since the outbreak of the Syria’ s crisis. Which of these regional rivals gained more power of influence in the Middle East and under what circumstance and process it happened? While many Western scholars such as Algoul(2015) and Dreazen(2014) discussed the impact of the Syria’s crisis and identified the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia as a sectarian conflict, this article attempts to present Iran’s policymakers’ viewpoint by answering the above-mentioned question by using English and Persian sources as well as by the author’s interviews with several government authorities in Iran that was conducted in March, September and October, 2014.

There are three sections in this article. Section one assesses the Iran and Saudi relationship during the Iran-Iraq war, and in the post-war period until

1. Adviser to Iranian president Rouhani’s international affairs.

2011. Section two examines Saudi Arabia's policy towards Syria after the 2011 internal conflict, and the Saudi's relationship with the Salafist/Jihadist groups. Section three tries to clarify Iran's reaction to the Syrian crisis and to evaluate the consequences.

I . Iran-Saudi Arabia Relationship Before Syria's Crisis

I.1. Antagonism and Temporary Rapprochement(1979-2003)

Iran and Saudi Arabia are the two big powers in the Persian Gulf and in the Middle East region, and geopolitical and strategic characteristics of these states have also caused a rivalry between them. During the Cold War in general and until Iran's Revolution of 1979, due to the strong ties of both Iran and Saudi Arabia with the West, Iran- Saudi ties were based on peaceful mutual cooperation despite differences and rivalry. The United States also supported both states and exercised its political and economic power over them.

Yet the rift between the two states happened right after the Shiite government of Iran gained power after the Revolution in 1979. Saudi Arabia feared that its monarchical rule would be lost if a wave of revolution reached the state, since the Pahlavi's monarchy ended with the revolution. For 8 years the Iran-Iraq War (1981-1989) happened and resulted in the highest level of conflicts between Iran and the Saudis. It was during the same period when the Saudis established the Persian Gulf Cooperation Organization (GCC) in 1981 to oppose the influence of Iran's Shiite revolution and to prevent Iran from exporting revolution to the Arab states. The Saudi decision to support Iraq was based on the Saudi fear that Iran and its propaganda against the kingdom itself endangered the Saudi regime and its authority.(Jahner, 2012:40)

A certain level of economic competition also prevailed in the mid 1980's. In 1985-86, Saudi Arabia flooded its oil into the international market, which caused the rapid decline in the oil prices. Iran was economically hurt by this as it caused a big decline of national revenue. According to Okruhilk (2003:114), this happened in the context of the U.S pressuring Iran: it wanted to exert pressure on Iran to end the war with Iraq. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were also temporarily discontinued when 275 Iranian pilgrims were killed in Saudi Arabia while carrying out anti-American demonstrations on June 31, 1987.

But after the Iran-Iraq war Iran's political atmosphere changed upon the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and the consequent replacement of Ayatollah Khamenei that coincided with the period of Rafsanjani's presidency. Moderate foreign policies employed by the Rafsanjani's administration replaced revolutionary and ideological policies. Rafsanjani and Prince-Abdolah's warm meeting in Pakistan in 1991 was a turning point to break the ice of relations. This led to a more favorable environment in which Saudi Arabia and Iran reached a period of rapprochement during Rafsanjani's presidency, for instance, initiating negotiations of Rafsanjani on oil prices in 1999 at the Vienna meeting both countries agreed to increase price up to 25\$ /barrel from 13\$.(Okruhilk:116)

Peaceful relations continued and reached their peak when Khatami came to power in 1997. In the meantime, there was a sharp rise in trade between the two countries to the level of 248.5 million USD in 2001 from 95 million USD in 1999 (Okruhik 2003:119). When Iran's defence minister's visit to Saudi Arabia in 1999 and Saudi's counterpart's visit to Iran in 2000, Iran and Saudi Arabia marked a point of mutual cooperation: they signed a security agreement (Hadian, 64). Also after September 11, 2011 the two states signed counterterrorism cooperation agreement in 2002 (Koshki, 2013:736). Thus, the Iran-Saudi relationship saw some signs of rapprochement during Khatami's administration.

Yet, as Hadian argues, it is true that the period between 1988 and 2003 saw a limited interaction and the area of cooperation was only seen in the increasing the number of pilgrims, mutual meetings of the leaders, friendly participating in international meetings like OIC and OPEC. But both states did not reach the level of the cooperation and of the mutual understanding about sensitive regional issues like Persian Gulf security, energy security, and the implementation of a counterterrorism agreement. Moreover, they could not reach any deep and sustainable agreement in OPEC, to say nothing of in the security of Iraq. This implies that the two states did not reach to common will and mutual confidence-building (Hadian,112).

1.2. After The Downfall of Saddam in Iraq (2003-2011)

After a period of optimistic relations, Iran-Saudi ties entered a new stage since the 2003 United States attack on Iraq which resulted in the fall of Saddam Hussein. In an interview held by the author on September 10, 2014, Farazmand, director general of the Persian Gulf stated: "we have entered a specific stage

since 2003 in which we have not yet exited. Saudi Arabia did not accept the new Iraq that was formed in 2003 and which favored Iran therefore it plans on disrupting the new order, consequently forming hardline terrorist groups.”

According to Hadian, Iraq generally plays a very important role in Iran-Saudi relations. On the one hand, Iraq's alliance with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia can, as Hadian maintains, limit Iran's sphere of influence in the Persian Gulf. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has always concerned about increasing power of the Shiite in Iraq, whereas Iran was deeply concerned about the empowerment of the pro-Saudi Sunnies with anti-Irani and anti-Shiite policies after 2003.

Within this context, the most important event that affected Iran-Saudi regional relation was the 2005 election in Iraq, which led to the establishment of the Shiite government that made a close relationship with Iran's Shiite regime. There is no doubt that losing Iraq and giving it to the rival was not tolerable and acceptable by Saudi Arabia. Iran had not expected Saddam Hussein's downfall as fast and easy as it happened. In the other words, Iran faced the Shiite friend government without any trouble to collapse its enemy and as a result, gained more regional power in competition with Saudi Arabia.

However, Iranian officials intended to maintain and develop their relations with Saudi. According to some Iranian political analysts such as Hamid Ahmadi, since 2005 Ahmadinejad sought the restoration of Iran's relationship with Saudi Arabia more than previous presidents. However, it is true that he did not have the required power and influence to implement it. Moreover, it is said that regional and international conditions did not favor Iran” (interview by the author, Oct 9, 2014). For instance, Ahmadinejad made five official trips to Saudi Arabia in December 2005, March, November and December 2007 and June 2012 and claimed in an Interview with the author in March 5, 2014 that: “In all trips, I was warmly welcomed by Saudi officials and there were not any tensions or any misunderstanding among us, but the third factor, namely, the US and its policies did not let us [Iran and Saudi, the two main factors] improve our relations.”

Regardless of the third American factor which Ahmadinejad mentioned, there have been various factors that shaped Iran-Saudi relationship, such as Iran's nuclear issue, Iran's influence on Syria, Lebanon and Hamas and the Iraqi Shiite government that the last one has caused a deep effect. Thus, any substantial improvement did not happen from 2005 until 2011.

In this regard, Yusefi, an expert on Saudi affairs in the foreign affairs ministry, stated in an interview with the author on October 6, 2014 that:

“following Saddam’s fall which resulted in Iran’s influence in Iraq and friendly relations with Iraq’s new Shiite government, the northern section of the Arab world consisting of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon are under Iran’s influence. Saoud Al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia’s minister of foreign affairs addressed the United States in saying that you have presented Iraq to Iran on a golden plate. It is obvious that the Saudis have and will do anything in their power to stop Iran from easily influencing Iraq and the region.”

But, in contrast to Saudi’s policy and in a more pronounced shift, the United States agreed to bilateral meetings with Iran, in Baghdad, on the Iraq issue in 2007 and 2008 (Katzman, June 4, 2009).

It is certain that regional developments favored Iran after the fall of Saddam and the Baathist enemy who forced Iran into an 8 year war turned into a Shiite ally, it should be noted that Iran’s increased influence in Iraq alongside its strong strategic relations with Syria and Lebanon (called the axis of resistance) has increased Iran’s regional influence and such occurrences have not favored Iran’s old rivals, the Saudis.

Obviously, Saudi Arabia’s interests in Iraq manifested strong motivation and challenged Iran in Iraq to stop Iran’s political actions and to change back the regional balance of power toward its favor. Saudi’s policy was to make critical situation for both Iran and Maliki’s government by creating and supporting the Salafist/Jihadist groups who will be assessed in the next section. Saudi Arabia was implementing its anti-Shiite government and anti-Iran policies in Iraq when the Syria’s crisis happened and gave an unanticipated turn to Saudi to develop its policy against Iran to exit both Syria and Iraq from Iran’s influence. The next section will assess Saudi’s strategy to face with Iran after the crisis in Syria in 2011.

II. Saudi Arabia and the Syria Crisis

2.1. Saudi Arabia's Strategy Toward the Syria's Crisis

Saudi Arabia's involvement in Syria can be regarded as efforts to maintain its regional security that were endangered by the way Iran's regional position changed since 2003. Saudi's strategy took ideological and non-ideological forms. Supporting militant Salafist/Jihadist groups was in line with supporting Wahhabism as its main ideology, and preserved its national interest both domestically and regionally. Regarding its non-ideological strategy, Saudi Arabia has constantly utilized some different means to inhibit Iran's influence.

For instance, Saudi Arabia has been the main sponsor of conferences called "Friends of Syria" aimed at supporting the Syrian opposition groups. The first Friends of Syria conference was held in Tunisia on February 25, 2011 with the participation of 70 countries including Saudi Arabia. The second conference was held on March 3, 2012 in Istanbul with the participation of 83 states and international organizations, the third on 6 July 2012 in Paris, the fourth on 11 December 2012 in Marrakesh, Morocco as well as some others in 2013 and 2014 in which Saudi Arabia played an important role and Iran was intentionally excluded as a participant (Adami, 2012: 163). Moreover, Saudi Arabia beside Kuwait and UAE pledged \$900 million for Syrian at Donor conference in January 2013 (Al-Arabia news, 2013, January 30).

Financial support by Saudi Arabia for weapon acquisition and smuggling into Syria as described above was not the only means that Saudi Arabia used. Presenting advice to prominent people among protesters and linking them with international media to create media pressure upon Iran through news channels such as the al-Arabiya T.V. network, al-Hayat and al-Sharh-ol-Awsat are also among other attempts made by Saudis against Syria (Adami:2013).

It is also true that the Assad government that Iran supported has killed many secularists and civilians including Arabs and Kurds, as the Washington Post stated that "for every Syrian that ISIS kills, Assad forces kill seven more" (The Washington Post, 2015, September 5). Thus, it goes without saying that Iran is also responsible for prolonging Syria's crisis. But from Iran's viewpoint, Saudi's ideological tool has been more destructive. Over more than two decades, Saudi Arabia has lavished around \$100 billion or more on the worldwide promotion of the Wahhabist sect of Islam that the ruling royal family espouses.

In 2003, a United States Senate committee on terrorism heard testimony that in the previous 20 years Saudi Arabia had spent \$87 billion on promoting Wahhabism worldwide (Manthorpe,2013, May). It is generally considered that the roots of Salafist groups' beliefs go back to Wahhabism that emerged in the 17th century. However there are many Salafist groups in the region who even sometimes are against each other, but it is believed the origins of their mindset is same.

Among all Salafist/Jihadist groups, ISIS is now the most important of them who is affiliated to 'Abu-Mosab Zarghawi' and initially expanded as 'Al-Qaida in Iraq' but was suppressed in 2007 by Iraq's central government. However, during this same period, ISIS became a means by Saudi to oppose Iraq's Shiite government by secretly providing financial and military aid. Dr. Ahmadi, a University of Tehran lecturer stated in an interview by the author that "Saudi Arabia attempted to establish militant groups to preserve their interests in the region in particular in Iraq just as Iran was supported by the Hezbollah, but this resulted in the formation of an extremist violent group called ISIS."(October 15, 2014)

The emergence of ISIS goes back to Oct. 15, 2006, when what is known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was established. With the financial and military support of the Saudis in particular Bandar Bin Sultan, head of Saudi intelligence, ISIS managed to strengthen its power (Ostadi, 2015). Prince Bandar bin Sultan, reportedly told Secretary of State John Kerry when Kerry pressed him about Saudi financing of extremist groups in 2014 that "Saudi Arabia has retaken a leadership role in past months guiding help to the Syrian armed rebels."(Rogin, 2014) ISIS, in fact, may have been a major part of Bandar's covert-ops strategy in Syria(Clemons,2014).

On the other hand, the Saudi citizens are believed to be one of the most charitable people and have funneled hundreds of millions of dollars to Syria and Iraq in recent years, including to ISIS. In 2006, it was reported that millions of Saudi Riyals, often collected in the form of Zakat (compulsory charity), were smuggled to Iraq to pay for missiles and other weapons (Ehrenfeld,2013).

Obviously, Iran's official response to the policy of Saudi has not been positive, for instance Javad Zarif Iran's foreign minister in an interview with Frankfurter Allgemeine on February 1, 2013 emphasized that "I believe Saudi Arabia is pursuing the policies in Syria and Iraq which hurt itself and all the region's

interests.”

Despite Iran's official opposition, Saudi and ISIS's relationship continued in both Iraq and Syria against the States' official governments. On the other side, Iran also strongly pursued its supportive policies to protect Iraq and Syria's current regimes. But the important event which changed the regional situation was to sharp increase of ISIS's power and facilities since June 2014 and its overt confrontation with Saudi. Iranian officials like Mohtadi, Senior researcher of the Middle East Strategic Studies Center in Tehran, consider it as the wrong investment of Saudi on an unreliable group. (interview by the author, 2014, October 17). The next part examines more about Saudi and ISIS's instable relation.

2.2. Saudi's Relation with ISIS

As it is generally conceived, ISIS is one of the Salafist/Jihadist groups rooted in Wahhabism. The group supported Saudi policies in line with destabilizing Iraq and challenging its Shiite government. From Iran's viewpoint the objective of these activities has been to endanger Iran's new influence and the overthrowing of the Assad regime. Foreign minister Zarif stated that: “ISIS is the product of two things. First is the US invasion of Iraq, and the foreign presence that creates a dynamic of resistance. Second is the feeling of disequilibrium, which has prevailed in some countries in the region since the fall of Saddam. They are trying to change the status quo.” (Tabatabaie, 2014)

Iranian officials occasionally publish documents which indicate Saudi's direct aid to ISIS, for example the Islamic revolution's news in Iran claimed by the pictures in December 2014 that Iraqi security forces discovered plenty of food aid in Takrit and published their pictures which had been sent by Saudi to IS group with the slogan of “Saudi Arabia, country of humanity” on the packages.²⁴

Financial sponsors such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar allowed ISIS to gain more control in the region as have been reported by the 'Al-rabt-al-yamani' news portal. This news portal also pointed out the weight of the Saudi sponsorship. More precisely, 28 Saudi and 12 Iraqi political and religious figures are said to be the top of ISIS's financial sponsors list (Fars News 2014). But regardless of Saudi's support, the group's main financial source is oil which has made ISIS the richest terrorist group in world.

On the other hand, it is noticeable that according to Cockburn (2014), Saudi

Arabia has adopted two policies regarding the Salafists/Jihadist. Firstly, they encouraged them as a useful tool of Saudi's anti-Shiite influence abroad, and secondly they suppressed them at home as a threat to the domestic status quo, the ruling of the Saudi royal family in Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi royal family fears domestic terrorist groups. A part of ISIS members, most of AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) members are also the Saudi nationals whose aim is to topple the royal family. The March 2011 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report on Saudi Arabia details the Kingdom's progress on its domestic al-Qaeda terrorists cells. However, the GAO (the Government Accountability Office) report noted that there was hardly any efforts to prevent "funding for terrorism and violent extremism outside of Saudi Arabia."(Ehrenfeld,2013)

But as ISIS strengthened its own power of influence, and time went by, Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the top leader of ISIS, claimed the Islamic caliphate on June 28, 2014 and stated that Malik Abdullah, former Saudi's king, is not the caliph. This declaration was made as soon as ISIS found a good opportunity for increasing its revenue and political power by the capture of Mosul, the second important city of Iraq. It is reported that the financial gain by capturing Mosul was not only Mosul's huge amount oil and tax, but also the fact that the group reportedly scored \$430 million in July 2014 when they looted the main bank in Mosul. It is clear that ISIS decided not to be dependent on the Saudis anymore.

With the above-mentioned development considered, one of the most significant repercussions of the threat of ISIS's has been a serious security threat to Saudi Arabia. It reached a point in March 2014 that Saudi Arabia's interior Ministry officially designated ISIS as a terrorist entity after some serious threats and attacks on Saudi territories started by ISIS (Mashreghnews, 2015)43. In June 13,2014 , U.S. Treasury Department officials also stated that Saudi Arabia sees "eye to eye" with the United States on the importance of halting activities by the ISIS. It is after this statement that the US launched the formation of the Coalition of Willing against ISIS in which Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey became members.

However, until 2014 and even after that, many Saudi citizens joined ISIS. Frank Gardner BBC security correspondent reported on December 18, 2014 that more than 2000 Saudis have been estimated to have joined ISIS and have brought extremist ideology into Saudi Arabia . He continued to say that the

Saudis do not agree with the government's attack on ISIS, which was reflected in an incident that one of Saudi's pilot who participated in the operation against ISIS and was threatened with death inside Saudi Arabia. Thus, it is obvious that Saudi officials not only can not easily prevent its citizens from proving financial aids to ISIS, but also according to the claim of Conservative factions in the parliament of Iran " some Wahhabi clergies suggested the Saudi king to dedicate some parts of the Hajj income to IS fighters and its families, they also noticed financial support to ISIS means participation in the fighters' oblation." (2015)¹¹

According to the Al-Arabia news in July 2014, a Saudi leading commentator stated "what did we do wrong? With 3000 - 4000 Saudi fighters in the Islamic Sate today, we have to admit our political mistake." By so saying, he inferred that ISIS has transformed itself to a radical terrorist group that led to a new crisis not only for the Saudis but for the Middle East as well as the global world. In this context, the United States started its military campaign in June 2014.

Then, a question should be raised here: what was Saudi's overall intention by intervening in Syria? From Iran's perspectives, Saudi Arabia has benefited from creating conflicts in order to weaken Iran's influence (the author's interview with Dr. Jabbari, October 13, 2014). However, what Saudi Arabia did not expected was an emerging reality in which ISIS created a crisis both for the west and the Arab world in which Saudi Arabia holds a dominant regional power.

Saudi Arabia attempted to place the Syrian crisis under its control in which ISIS became a strong military power, and turned out to be a well- organized force. But, as analyzed above, an unexpected development happened: ISIS turned to Saudi Arabia for its attack after it captured its independent financial basis. ISIS is currently using its ideological slogan that originated from Wahhabism but in fact is seeking to change the Middle East's geopolitics.

Historically, Saudi Arabia's investments in terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida and ISIS have been demonstrably detrimental to their long-term causes. For example, after Al-Qaida's September 11 attacks on New York, fingers were pointed towards the Saudis for nurturing such radical beliefs and the international community blamed the Saudis for these attacks. Eventually, the United States attacks on Afghanistan and the Taliban's defeat wiped out Iran's

dangerous and close enemy thus the Saudis policies concerning Al-Qaida turned out to be Iran's favor and to the Saudi's detriment.

Regarding ISIS, the situation is more complex as this terrorist group has surpassed Al-Qaida in terms of violence and extremely radical ideology. On 2nd February 2014, Al-Qaida's leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri officially denied any affiliation with ISIS (Zelin,2014,February).

The author believes that on the one hand, ISIS's long-term threat became a big concern for Saudi Arabia rather than Iran because ISIS's origin of existence is Saudi Arabia. This means that the Saudis, being responsible for the expansion of Wahhabism in the Arab world, enabled the growth of ISIS and nurtured such a religious extremism. Therefore, ISIS's recruitment within Saudi Arabia's borders and among the Salafist groups was predictable. The explosion of a Shiite mosque in the Qatif area in Saudi Arabia on 22nd May 2015, which was claimed by ISIS, was a warning sign for its perceived rival, the Saudi regime. Saudi Arabia said in April 2015 it has arrested 93 people who had ties with ISIS in Iraq and Syria (The Guardian,2015,April 28). Such religious radical tendencies are not visible in Iran, with the majority of Shiite who never had good impressions of the extreme orientation of Wahhabism.

To sum up, although Saudi's relation with ISIS did not continue officially, the number of its citizens and Wahhabi clergies still believe in supporting Salafist/Jihadist groups in particular ISIS and ideologically, it is not easy to convince them not to support IS any longer. On the other hand, Iran has been attempting to respond to the IS developments towards its regional interests which will be assessed in the next section.

III. Iran and Syria Crisis

3.1. Iran's Official Response to The Civil War

After the Islamic revolution in 1979 and the change in Iran's regime from a western dependent monarchy to an Islamic regime that was symbolized in the expression of Khomeini,supreme leader, "neither East nor West," Iran and Syria formed one of the most problematic yet strategic partnership in the past few decades. Iran and Syria do not have a common language, culture and ethnicity with distinct differences in the political regime (Islamic republic versus a secular socialistic republic). Moreover, there is a religious difference,

namely, Iran being Shiite and Syria being Sunni. However, these countries have formed one of the strongest and most important alliances in the Middle East.

A major reason was that since 1979 one of Iran and also Syria's main security concerns in the Middle East was the lack of strategic allies within the region and beyond. In such a situation, Syria and Iran played a vital role in the security policies of each other as the strategic alliances. The Middle East's chaotic environment lacks a security consensus among states. The absence of a security structure has paved a way for different and often conflicting agreements. Among them are the Arab league, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Collective Security Treaty Organization, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Guam Treaty, Organization of Democratic Elections, NATO Treaty and its subsidiary agreements in the region. In addition, bilateral agreements among the regional and trans-regional countries have created a complex situation under which Iran and Syria are hardly included. Thus, the Middle East's current and future security environment is likely to entail various threats to the both states (Simber, 2014:150).

Before the fall of Saddam in 2003, Iran and Syria signed their first military and economic agreements in 1982. This alliance continued despite changes after the Cold War due to Syria's economic problems, loss of Soviet aid and increased dependency on Iran which resulted in Iran being one of the few foreign investing countries in Syria (Piotlowski, 2011, p 596).

The cooperation between Iran and Syria has been reflected in various agreements among which were bilateral agreements after 2003: the 'strategic cooperation agreement' in 2004 and the 'mutual defense treaty' in 2006 which resulted in the expansion of naval cooperation in the Mediterranean Sea (Lauren, 2009:29). A contract was signed in 2008 where Iran was to participate in building a power plant in Syria to maintain this country's electricity. In 2010, Iran handed over an advanced radar system to Syria to detect Israeli missiles. Exchange rates between Syria and Iran were estimated at approximately 5 billion dollars in 2010 (Koshki,2013).

But following extensive developments regarding regional countries such as Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt, the scope of these developments called the 'Arab Spring' reached Syria and president Assad's opposition started to hold protests. Consequently, Iran's position was to continue its complete support of its only regional strategic ally as it did before 2011. Syria has a crucial role in Iran'

s security policy in the region which provided much efforts in aiding financial, military and moral support to the preservation of the Assad's regime.

Since 2011, Iran has deployed a few hundred of its al-Qods Forces (a special unit of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guards established after the Revolution) including 150 officers and members of Hezbollah to Syria. Recently, one of Iran's Revolutionary Guards' commanders has publicly announced that some of its senior officers have been sent to Syria for non-military consultations (Nerquizan,2013:4).

It is noticeable that Iran forced to deal with the opposition groups in particular ISIS in both Syria and Iraq at the same time due to ISIS has occupied some parts of the both states territory. It was reported that following the arrival of 100 Quds Force members to Syria, Iran planned to create a volunteer militia similar to the National Defence Force in Syria, to fight against ISIS alongside the weak and demoralized Iraqi army.

One Iraqi intelligence official noted that these deliveries included rockets, heavy machine guns and multiple rocket launchers in early July, Tehran reportedly delivered Su-25 aircraft (former Iraqi planes kept by Iran following the Iran-Iraq War) to Iraq. On 12 August 2014, ISIS captured Jalawla, a town just 20 miles from the Iranian border. In response, Tehran reportedly assisted the Kurdish counter-offensive by sending in Iranian army units. According to a peshmerga commander, Iran offered military assistance, training and advice (Tabatabaie, 2014).

In addition and in parallel, on February 2012 U.S. Department of Treasury designated the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) to providing "substantial technical assistance to the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate for the purpose of assisting the Syrian regime in its violent crackdown on protesters. In March 2012 an unnamed U.S. official stated that Iran had "shared techniques on Internet surveillance and disruption" with the Assad regime and provided "unarmed drones that Damascus is using along with its own technology to monitor opposition forces," as well as "monitoring tools to help the regime suppress the opposition.

In September 2012 IRGC, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Commander Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari explained at a news conference that "there is no need for external support in order to preserve the security in Syria, since 50,000 popular forces called Jaysh al-Sha'bi are fighting alongside the Syrian

military.”(Fulton and Holliday,2013,p:15)

On the other hand, financially, Iran's trade value with Syria increased from approximately 200 million dollars in 2010 to one billion dollars in 2013. Both countries have agreed to create a direct shipping line to increase their trade to two billion dollars by the end of 2015 (Kermani, 2015). At the time when Syria's exchange reserves were decreasing and the European Union and Turkey's sanctions inflicted various damages, Iran provided Syria with financial support and in March 2011 promised an aid of five billion dollars (Niakuie,2014:134). Also, in March 2014 when Damascus was under pressure to neutralize its business losses relevant to a one way suspension of a free trade agreement by Turkey, Iran signed a free trade agreement with Syria (Nerquizan, 2013:11). Based on a strategic decision, Iran's government has completely supported the Assad regime by providing arms, oil and financial support (Goodarzi, 2013:21).

Although it seems Iran's political support of Syria is justified to maintain its own economic interests, two key issues should not be forgotten. Firstly, the relative advantage that Iranian companies have is due to the lack of foreign investments and it is the least Syria can do in exchange for the 5.6 billion dollars it has received from Iran since the crisis. Secondly, Syria's future is uncertain therefore there is no guarantee that Syria will be a reliable place for Iranian companies to compete with foreign companies or if Iranian companies will keep their relative advantage in the Syrian market.

To sum up, despite its strategically unfavorable situation in which Iran was placed, Iran's investment in Syria is an indication of Syria's strategic priority for Iran. This is not only limited to economic activities since Iranian authorities have maintained clear political stances in prioritizing Syria and do not attempt to hide this policy. In a meeting with Iraq's former oil minister in September 2013, Rafsanjani explicitly and publicly declared that “Alawite regimes in Syria are more beneficial for Iran and Iraq. If the Iran-Lebanon chain is broken (via Syria), detrimental events can be expected”(interview,2013)

3.2. Intense Competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia

Iran has overt wars with terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq to preserve its alliances, Iran claims that its actions since 2003 are completely legal based on international law.³³ Iran is a supporter of Assad's government. It is important to note that Ali Velayati, senior advisor to the supreme leader in Iran stated in an

interview with Khabaronline on August 30, 2015 as follows:

“In Syria a legitimate government still exists because it has a representative in the UN. If a country that is a member of the UN requests aid from another country, this request is legal. We are in Syria based on their request but those who are joining illegal Salafist and terrorist groups in Syria are convicted of breaking the law.”

This statement approves Iran's support of the Assad regime whilst not allowing Saudi Arabia to achieve its goals in Syria. Velayati acknowledges that "Assad's government has been fighting terrorism on behalf of regional countries in the form of 4-5 years of resistance and as years have gone by, this country has not weakened and has gained more strength." (Ibid)

Hossein Yousefi another Iranian politician also in the interview with the author on October 6, 2014 emphasized that Saudi Arabia expected the fall of the Syrian regime in one or maximum two years after breaking the civil war, and as above-mentioned by supporting the opposition groups achieving the goal did not seem to be far-fetched. But the emerging confrontation among many oppositional groups against the Assad regime made the Syrian situation more complicated: between al-Jabat-al-Nosrat and ISIS, and on the one hand, ISIS and Saudi Arabia. The new conflicting situation was unpredictable for Saudi Arabia as much as for Iran (Alghoul,2015).

It is true that Iran supported Syria militarily and financially, but in the begging of crisis in 2011, it was not easy to predict emerging conflict between Saudi and some Salafist/Jihadist groups, in particular ISIS. ISIS was expected by Saudi to be a serious threat to Iran and a political tool for Saudi Arabia to challenge Iran's regional power. However, everything went wrong for Saudi. Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi's declaration of the capture of Mosul in 2014 was interpreted a declaration of war not only to the Shiite including Iran, but also to Saudi Arabia.

The above-mentioned situation is a new threat of ISIS that has been more dangerous to Saudi than Iran. ISIS has been seen as an unexpected success and opportunity by the Iranian government in competition with its rival, Saudi Arabia. Since ISIS was identified as an international security problem, Iran attempted to gain reputation and legitimacy by fighting this group and

criticizing Saudi's Wahhabism ideology which developed such extreme groups in the region.

In the light of the progress made by ISIS fighters close to Iranian borders, Tehran changed its approach to the conflict, further increasing its involvement in Iraq in the effort to pre-empt a potential spillover across its borders (Tabatabaie,2014, p:2). In fact, in contrast to Saudi's policy to reduce Iran's presence in Iraq and Syria, not only ISIS could not reverse Iran from Iraq and Syria but also gave an acceptable excuse to Iran to continuously stay in Iraq and Syria. In practice, Iran modified ISIS threat to an opportunity to develop its presence and influence in both the Iraqi and Syrian states to defeat the terrorist groups who occupied territory of the Iran's alliances. In the other world, growing the terrorist groups who were identified as an international security problem let Iran justify its interfere and also criticize Saudi Arabia as the Salafist/Jihadist groups main funder.

For Iran, it can be an important achievement that after more than four years civil war, Assad's oppositions include Saudi Arabia have not achieved their objectives which seemed to be the collapse of the Assad regime, and despite losing some cities like Aleppo, Palmyra and Deirez-Zor by the Syrian army, this regime has remained in power and has maintained its main territory like Damascus, Hama, Tartus and Homs. With Assad appearing on BBC on 10 February 2015 with an obvious self-confident means, powerful TV broadcasts that are dependent on their government, still recognize Assad as Syrian legitimate governor. Assad stated in the interview "Syria is not failed state at all, as long as the government and the state institutions are fulfilling their duty toward the Syrian people, [we] cannot talk about failed states."⁷

Finally, it should also be noticed that Saudi's effort to convince the US to attack Syria failed in 2013 (According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Saudi Arabian intelligence presented the US with proof in February 2013 that the Syrian regime had already resorted to chemical weapons) , but on the other hand, the US-led decision to bomb ISIS militant positions in 2015 and even more military cooperation with Iran to defeat ISIS considered (by Iran) in favor of the Syrian regime and also Iran. Federica Mogherini, the current High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs, stated on her visit to Tehran on July 28, 2015 that "the valuable cooperation process with Iran (after the nuclear deal) can be started with Syria."

Thus, Iran considers that strengthening its relationship with Saudi Arabia is crucial. This position of Iran's is also evident from other Iranian officials' remarks. For example, in an interview with Lebanon's Al-Mayadin in June 2015, Zarif requested that the Saudis "refrain from the delusion of eliminating Iran's role within the region. As owners of the region, we must have good relations. Today, cooperation is required to establish security and Iran is prepared to solve the region's problems." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, 2015)

Apparently, new circumstances (ISIS-Saudi conflict) have been evaluated positively by the regime in Iran. Not only have maintaining the Assad regime in power after more than four years and Saudi Arabia's failure (so far) to undermine Iran's regional power come to be considered as a valuable success by Iran, but also some other political events such as the new moderate government in Iran since 2013 and its effective interactions with the international community, the nuclear deal in July 2015 and also cooperation with the US-coalition against ISIS have all caused that Iran considers itself in upper hand and legitimate position in the region in comparison to Saudi.

Conclusion

It is certain that the developments such as downfall of Saddam and Syria crisis sparked new disputes in addition to the already existing differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Rafsanjani stated in a meeting with Hoshiar Zibari, the Iraqi foreign minister that "currently we are witnessing the darkest relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia where extremism on both sides is certainly one of the most important reason."³⁶

For Iran, the crisis in Syria that is one of its most important strategic allies, and the unstable Iraq, its western neighbour and another strategic ally, are not acceptable. In contrast, for Saudi Arabia, the interfering of Iran in the Arab world that should be Saudi Arabia's sphere of influence is intolerable. As above-mentioned, Iran has blamed Saudi Arabia for intensifying the critical situation in the Middle East by supporting the extreme groups to deal with Iran's ambitions the regional dominance. According to the Persian and western documents, Saudi Arabia considered ISIS as the best means to develop its anti-Iran policies.

ISIS had been expected to be an obstacle for Iran and an obedient group for

Saudi and its other supporters in Iraq and Syria, and it seemed ISIS who has undeniable ideological and political contradiction with Iran would undermine Iran's regional power. But just after capturing Mosul, the group became a problematic issue not only for Saudi but also for the all region. In other words, before the ISIS threat emerged, the Syrian free army and regional states including Saudi had concentrated on overthrowing Syria's regime, but after June 2014 all the mentioned groups involved in a two-front war with both Assad and ISIS that changed the civil war to a war of attrition for all sides.

For Iran, the new situation had both advantages and disadvantages, but regardless of disadvantages such as the Syria's regime's likely collapse, increasing ISIS's power in Iraq in areas very close to Iran's borders and expanding the regional insecurity, Iran decided to take advantage of the ISIS threat to challenge Saudi Arabia by reminding the public the roots and ideology of IS is from Wahhabism on the one hand, and also overt fight with the Islamic state as a global threat to gain more legitimacy for itself on the other hand.

It should be noticed that along with Iran's new developments, such as the 2013 presidential election in Iran and resolving the nuclear issue, rapprochement with the west which strengthened the regime's international reputation, helped maintain its alliance in power in Syria, and altogether enabled Iran to claim having the upper hand in Syria and also the region.

The Saudis, on the other hand, are faced with frequent regional crisis. From Iran's point of view, Saudi Arabia is now faced with a serious security crisis. Regarding Syria, whether the Assad regime stays in power or will be overthrown is still unknown. Yet, both scenarios will be threatening for the Saudis. The Assad regime's preservation will entail Iran's influence to continue and a defeat for the Saudis, while the prospect of Assad's fall will also not be in the Saudis favor and its national security due to the number of threatening groups such as ISIS and Al-Nosrat Front, especially since they are defying the Saudis. The emergence of any serious tensions within Saudi Arabia has given a rise to extremist pro-ISIS groups.

To sum up, Syria's crisis has not turned out as a suitable opportunity for Saudi Arabia to strengthen its regional power. ISIS has also not turned out as a crippling menace for Iran. After ISIS leader Baghdadi's declaration of capturing Mosul, as noted previously in this article, ISIS was also targeting Saudi. In contrast, Iran considered ISIS a favorable circumstance to justify its

policy towards Iraq and Syria, and have continued its involvement by provided military equipment, and supporting financially some specific groups, and sending troops to both Syrian and Iraq. How the restoration of the relationship between Iran and the IS will happen in the next few years would also shape further the regional power politics between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is to be noted continuously.

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Abstract

The Impact of The Syria's Crisis on The Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in The Region: Iran's Point of View.

Atefeh BAGHISHADBAD

It is clear that the Iran and Saudi's response to the Arab spring was determined by the need to expend their regional power and more favorable direction. From Iran's perspective Saudi Arabia's post-Saddam and post-Syria crisis policies have clearly been to weaken Iran's regional power due to the expansion of Iran's influence in the region since 2003. In the meantime, Syria as one of the three pillars of Axis of resistance against Israel has always had a specific place in foreign policy of Iran. Saudi Arabia attempted to abuse its power by involving in Syria's conflict and supporting the Salafist groups in particular ISIS to challenge Iran's regional power.

This article aims to examine the impact of Syrian crisis and emerging ISIS on the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. More specifically, it analyzes how the powers of both countries in the region changed in the last four and half years since the outbreak of the Syria's crisis. Which of these regional rivals gained more power of influence in the Middle East? The analysis will be made based on the author's interviews with Iran's foreign policy officials and other Persian and english sources. Based on the fact that Saudi Arabia is the country which has become much confrontational against Iran since fall of Saddam in Iraq in 2003.

This study is significant in the sense that it pays attention to Iran's perception of Saudi Arabia's the years between 2003 and 2015. By so doing, this article will shed light on the reasons Iran and Saudi Arabia have become so conflictual at the time and how despite Saudis efforts, Iran's regional power has been increasing. The article argues that Saudi Arabia exploited the Salafist radical groups in Iraq in the post-Saddam era and in Syria since 2011 to enjoy much opportunity to challenge Iran's expansion of power in the region. But

the author discusses how to military and financial progress of ISIS in Syria has gradually become a threat and challenge to Saudi Arabia despite the fact that the ISIS originally supported Saudi Arabia, furthermore how Iran modified the threat of ISIS to an opportunity to gain more regional power and legitimacy.

Key words; Saudi Arabia, Iran, ISIS, Syria, Iraq, The regional power