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Cold War in the Middle East: Iran and Saudi Arabia

Atena Panaite

University of Miami, acp79@miami.edu

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

COLD WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST: IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA

By

Atena C. Panaite

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

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COLD WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST: IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA

Atena C. Panaite

Approved:

Costantino Pischedda, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Political Science

Laura Gómez-Mera, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Political
Science

Bradford McGuinn, Ph.D.
Senior Lecturer of Middle Eastern Studies

Guillermo Prado, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

PANAITE, ATENA C.

(M.A., International Studies)

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Cold War in the Middle East: Iran and
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The year 1979 brought forth a radical change in the regional dynamics of the Middle East, setting Iran and Saudi Arabia as protagonists of the Middle East's own version of the Cold War. What explains the lack of interstate war between the two countries? This thesis analyzes four case studies, containing a total of three dyads: the first two cases are examples of when Iran and Saudi Arabia engaged in interstate war with another country - the Iran-Iraq war and the Gulf War of 1991- and last two -the crises of 1987 and 2015-present events between Iran and Saudi Arabia which have been chosen due to the absence of interstate war, despite the serious escalation which they present. I argue that intangible issues/ tangible issues which have acquired intangible aspects will lead to an increased risk for interstate warfare when the countries are contiguous; that civilian domestic audiences will lead to a decreased risk for interstate warfare; and that the negative assessment of their own military capabilities will lead to a decreased risk for interstate warfare.

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

The year 1979 brought forth a radical change in the regional dynamics of the Middle East. The Iranian Revolution set Iran and Saudi Arabia as protagonists of the Middle East's own version of the Cold War. The countries' numerous differences have often set them on a colliding course, pitting them against each other in various proxy wars, and yet somehow the two have managed to avoid war.

What explains the lack of interstate war between the two countries? This is the driving question of this inquiry. Surely the answer cannot be found in the absence of crises between Iran and Saudi Arabia, since their history abounds with periods of turmoil, starting with the illegal religious processions of November 1979 in Saudi Arabia's Shiite Eastern Province and culminating with Saudi Arabia's decision in January 2016 to sever diplomatic ties with Iran.

This question is both interesting and extremely relevant to studies of modern-day state relations. Iran and Saudi Arabia are the two major powers of the Middle East, leading the blocks of Shiite and Sunni states, respectively. Their relationship is crucial for the future of the world's most tormented region, and as of 2017 no comprehensive or satisfactory explanation to this puzzle has been put forward. The topic is even more fascinating considering the turmoil of the region, the numerous wars it has witnessed, and the vast power both countries possess.

The region

The Gulf region has been described as having two distinct political features. First, the region is conflict oriented. The 8 states¹ comprising it have nearly always been in a state of conflict with each other. The large quantities of oil discovered here have made the region even more volatile, making its small states affluent, financially secure, and also “politically and militarily vulnerable and susceptible to all sorts of external envies, involvements, and even invasions”². While the expectation is that their affluence would have made them capable of preparing themselves militarily against such invasions, the invading parties were usually larger, Western neighbors, with incomparably larger militaries (one such recent example would be the 2003 invasion of Iraq). Another factor to be considered is the relative infancy of their governments, at least when compared to other states of the world. Some of these states (Iraq³, Saudi Arabia⁴) were founded 80 years ago, while others (Bahrain⁵, United Arab Emirates⁶) only have 40 years of governmental experience.

The second characteristic of the region is that the Gulf is essentially an “other-directed regional system”⁷. For centuries it has been guided by outward influences –rather than those from within- and scholars have attributed this to either its lack of inner dynamism and direction, or to the fact that its “inner dynamism has been historically suppressed by external necessities”⁸. The Gulf’s geographical position renders it a subsystem of the wider Arab World, which naturally affects much of its politics. But the

¹ Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Yemen

² Abdulla, “Gulf War: The Socio- Political Background”, 2.

³ “Iraq Wins Independence.” History.com.

⁴ Oehsenwald and Philby. “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”

⁵ Crystal and Smith, “Bahrain.”

⁶ Crystal and Peterson. “United Arab Emirates.”

⁷ Abdulla, “Gulf War: The Socio- Political Background”, 2.

⁸ Ibid.

Gulf region is also a region that is “financially and commercially integrated [...] in the world capitalist system”, a system which holds large influence “over the Gulf’s economic choices and developmental strategies”⁹.

Puzzle

This thesis seeks to uncover the reasons behind the absence of interstate war from 1979 onwards between the Middle East’s most powerful rivals, Iran and Saudi Arabia. For the purpose of this thesis I will define interstate warfare as a state of open and declared armed conflict between states or nations, resulting in a total of 1000 or more battle deaths¹⁰.

The puzzle presents readers and scholars with multiple aspects which require analysis: the conflict-oriented, externally-influenced characteristics of the region; the regional power plays in which the countries engage; the domestic and internal considerations affecting decision-making; the issues at stake. Due to the complexity of the topic, I have sought to present a comprehensive analysis based on Realist and Constructivist concepts and ideas, while also delving into relevant domestic and ideological factors.

An extensive analysis of the literature on the factors affecting the presence or absence of interstate war coupled with an analysis of four different events lead me to believe that a combination of three factors affects the decision of whether or not the two countries will engage in war. The factors most likely to affect the possibility for interstate war for Iran and Saudi Arabia are 1. issues and their tangibility; 2. the type of domestic

⁹ Abdulla, “Gulf War: The Socio- Political Background”, 2.

¹⁰ Singer and Small, *The Wages of War*, 381 and “War”, Merriam-Webster.

audience the regime answers to (if any); 3. their assessment of their own military capabilities.

In order to assess the importance of these factors I will be discussing four case-studies: the Iran-Iraq war; Saudi Arabia's involvement in the 1991 Gulf War; the events of 1987; and the events of 2015 and the years that followd. The first two represent instances in which Iran and Saudi Arabia have engaged in interstate war, and the latter represent two crises in the history of these countries which have witnessed escalation but not war. By using these four events I seek to uncover the reasons behind each country's decision to go to war, as well as the mechanisms which have kept escalatory moves from transforming into war.

This thesis proposes three hypotheses which seek to explain the reason behind the absence of interstate war between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

1. Intangible issues/ tangible issues which have acquired intangible aspects will lead to an increased risk for interstate warfare when the countries are contiguous;
2. Civilian domestic audiences will lead to a decreased risk for interstate warfare;
3. The negative assessment of their own military capabilities will lead to a decreased risk for interstate warfare.

Outline

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the relationship between the two countries since 1979, and of the Gulf region and its main characteristics. A brief discussion of the puzzle

tackled in this thesis as well as the proposed hypotheses sought to explain it is also introduced.

Chapter 2 delves deeper into the theoretical underpinnings of my analysis, discussing the main theoretical frameworks used –Realism and Constructivism. The literature review on the important factors which determine the presence or absence of interstate war is found in these pages, followed by a more detailed overview of the hypotheses and methods.

Chapter 3 discusses two of the case studies, the Iran-Iraq War and the First Gulf War. Each section has 3 sub-sections which pertain to the 3 hypotheses presented in Chapter 2, seeking to explain the series of events with an eye out for 3 factors: issues, regime type, and military capabilities.

Chapter 4 presents the 1987 and 2015 crises, with each section having the same 3 sub-sections presented in Chapter 3: issues, regime type, and military capabilities. The 2015 crisis also discusses the influence of the United States upon the escalatory moves discussed.

Chapter 5 presents the reader with a conclusion and an assessment of the three hypotheses presented in Chapter 2, and of their explanatory power when seeking to understand the puzzle presented: the absence of interstate war between Iran and Saudi Arabia from 1979 onwards.

Chapter 2: THEORY, CONCEPTS, HYPOTHESES

Theoretical approaches to the Middle East

Most studies of Middle Eastern state relations and foreign policies take on rather traditional approaches to the field of International Relations (IR). One of these traditional approaches is also the most important, and the one upon which other models are built. Realism, a theory primarily concerned with states and power, has undergone its own share of transformations throughout the years. Classical Realism, represented mostly through the works of Hans Morgenthau and E.H. Carr, holds the state as a unitary actor. Neo-Realists, led by Kenneth Waltz, examine the relationship between states and the international system and posit that security is preserved through a balance of power or through bandwagoning, holding the state as the most important actor.

Realism is an important theory when trying to explain the behavior of any state, Middle Eastern or not. Power considerations are inevitable when assessing conflict between two countries (as we attempt to do so here) and military capabilities are a decisive factor when countries consider initiating war. Neo-Realism places great emphasis on security and alliance building, introducing concepts which help shed light on state behavior (balancing, bandwagoning, security dilemma). Bandwagoning refers to one country's decision to align with a stronger, adversarial power¹¹, and is the opposite of balancing, where states align to prevent a stronger adversary from attaining hegemony¹². Were the Middle East to follow the tenets of Realism, one would expect to see alliances between Middle Eastern states and Israel, the state which is "arguably the most dominant military

¹¹ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 162-163.

¹² Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 127.

power in the region.”¹³ Recent reports have surfaced regarding one such covert cooperation between two important rivals of the region, Saudi Arabia and Israel¹⁴, leading one to believe that Realism can help explain some of the behavior of Middle Eastern countries.

Applying Realism to the Middle East also brings some of the theory’s limitations forward. For one, ignoring internal dynamics and ideology seems like a poor choice to make for a scholar who seeks to understand a region pervaded by ideological battles. The Pan-Arabism of the 1960’s has shown the great influence of trans-state ideologies in the Middle East, an influence repeatedly shown in contemporary news articles discussing the Sunni-Shia divide which pervades the region. Ideology and identity go hand in hand, and the Middle East is a stage for countries that defy the coherent, unitary nation-state notion existing within Realism. As such, Realism might not be particularly well suited to single-handedly explain the behavior of countries which are affected to such an extent by ideology and identity.

The IR theory that most emphasizes identity is Constructivism, and it is therefore of particular interest to scholars seeking to understand the Middle East. Alexander Wendt’s¹⁵ main argument is that a state’s identity is created through interactions with other actors/states, and therefore that the international structure is created through such processes, and not existing inherently: international politics are thus created rather than given. However, Wendt also holds a state centric view of IR and excludes domestic politics

¹³ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 13.

¹⁴ Heller and Kalin, "Israeli Minister Reveals Covert Contacts with Saudi Arabia."

¹⁵ Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It", 397.

from his theory. This “causes problems for insecure identities, and shifting identities”¹⁶, and therefore for the Middle East.

Both Realism and Constructivism rely, as previously mentioned, on an assumption of a unitary state. But the Middle East presents yet another quandary: it does not contain “nation-states” as defined by realists or constructivists. The arbitrary imposition of state boundaries following the fall of the Ottoman Empire has translated into the creation of states containing multiple identities, be they tribal, ethnic, or religious. The Al Saud dynasty itself consolidated its power through bribes offered to tribal leaders in order to ensure loyalty (and even then, that loyalty was and continues to be difficult to maintain); Iran, while a Shi’a Persian nation, also houses Sunnis, Christians, Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Baluchis; Syria is ruled by a Shi’i Alawite minority while the majority of its population is Sunni; Iraq is divided between Sunni and Shia tribes, housing Kurds and other ethnic minorities as well; and the list goes on¹⁷.

When taking these limitations into account, we come to the realization that an analysis of domestic dynamics must be included when trying to understand the region as a whole. The two case studies presented in Chapter 4 show the importance of soft power (diplomacy, economic factors) in explaining the absence of hard power (interstate war). Since soft power is undeniably linked to domestic factors, we are faced with the realization that “in order to fully understand the behavior of a state, one must consider the importance of internal dynamics.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

Because of the need to maintain internal legitimacy leaders pay attention to how their domestic audience perceives external threats. Michael Barnett¹⁹ argues that Middle Eastern leaders are more concerned with perception, and will therefore “attempt to give events political meaning through locating the event within an overarching narrative.” He describes what he calls a “symbolic security dilemma”, where a “spiraling flux of symbolic moves motivates ruling elites to act”²⁰, and argues that this is especially prominent in the Middle East. As we will see, this is particularly important when discussing issues regarding territory and how it is imbued with symbolic meaning.

Jack Levy’s diversionary theory and Graeme Davies’ application of the theory to the Iranian case study are also relevant for the cases presented, because they offer a better understanding of the domestic factors at play in foreign policy decision making. Davies suggests that due to the high levels of unemployment and the economic problems facing the Iranian people, the Tehran “foreign-policy elite [...] has two incentives to engage in aggressive acts with another state (1) divert attention from problems at home and revive a ‘rally-round the flag’ effect and (2) demonstrate a competence in foreign affairs”.²¹ At a cursory glance, one could make the same affirmation about Saudi Arabia, a welfare state which has always been known to quell public dissent by showering its citizens with subsidies, free education and health care, social welfare programs, pensions, monthly benefits and payments for food and utility bills to the poor, elderly, disabled, orphans and workers.²²

¹⁹ Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*, 33.

²⁰ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

²² Sullivan, "Saudi Arabia's Riches Conceal a Growing Problem of Poverty."

The ideas presented by Barnett, Levy, and Davies are important because they offer additional insight into the politics of the Middle East. Their arguments present us with the need to take symbols, perception, and diversionary tactics into account when analyzing the countries of the region -countries whose domestic audience does not enjoy high degrees of freedom and autonomy.

Building upon the theories presented in this section, one can argue that applying a single theory to the Middle East would present us with considerable difficulty. Trying to understand the region through the prism of the Iranian-Saudi relationship would not make much sense without reference to concepts of power, military capabilities, identity, ideology, symbolism, and perception. For the purposes of this thesis I shall therefore attempt to reconcile items of Realism with Constructivist concepts, while keeping an eye out for any domestic factors that might play a part in the decision-making process of Iran and Saudi Arabia's governments.

Iran's Foreign Policy

In order to better understand Iranian foreign policy we must first discuss some overall characteristics of its government. The Iranian polity contains "multiple and overlapping centers of power" that require those interested in its mechanism of operation to "resort to a certain degree of 'extrapolation, analogy and speculation'", making it difficult to "identify who has a say in what issue."²³ The main actors in the Iranian Government are: the Supreme Leader; the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC); the executive branch of government (the president and his ministers, most notably

²³ Wastnidge. *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran*, 20.

the Foreign and Defense Ministers); the Majles (Parliament), and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).²⁴

The Supreme Leader has final say in numerous policy issues (foreign, defense, domestic), is directly in charge of all issues related to national security/interest, controls the armed forces, and can limit the power of the other actors as he sees fit. Throughout the history of the Islamic Republic, one is bound to notice many instances when even the President's role was limited by the Supreme Leader. However, after 1989 and the death of the first Ayatollah, some changes were implemented which granted more power to the office of the presidency, the most important of which being the "significant day-to-day authority over military policy".²⁵ This will be discussed in more detail under the "Regime types" section on page 29.

The SNSC, established after the 1989 constitutional amendments, is a key consultative body chaired by the president which brings together members from various branches of government and helps formulate Iranian foreign, military, and security policies. Both the SNSC and the Parliament will generally "reflect the prevailing political faction in Iran at any one time"²⁶.

A Congressional report explaining Tehran's foreign policy described Iran as facing "constant decisions about whether it is a 'nation or a cause'"²⁷. This perfectly captures the Islamic Revolution's impact upon decision making in the Iranian government. During the days of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's first Supreme Leader, one might have been inclined to lean towards the latter, arguing that Iran is a cause for the Muslim

²⁴ Wastnidge. *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran*, 20-21.

²⁵ Ward, *Immortal : A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*, 304.

²⁶ Wastnidge. *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran*, 22.

²⁷ Katzman. "Iran's Foreign Policy", 1.

communities of the Middle East, an example to be followed. The Islamic Revolution was a beacon of hope for many Muslims of the Middle East, whose families had been oppressed by centuries of occupations. The installation of a Muslim government in one of the region's biggest countries could have been seen as an opportunity for emancipation and autonomy. But since the death of the revolutionary leader matters have not been so clear-cut, and leaders have tended to move further away from the radical ideologies of the 1980's and towards more pragmatic approaches to government (this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, under the "1987 crisis" section).

A Congressional Research Service report argues that Iranian foreign policy has four main motivators: threat perception, ideology, national interest, and factional interests and competition²⁸. Threat perception revolves mainly around the United States and its policies towards Iran. Since the days of the Islamic Revolution, Tehran has considered the Western superpower to be its most vicious enemy. The large U.S. military presence in the Gulf is seen by Iranian policy makers as indicating hostility and intent to attack²⁹, and therefore prevents major strides that could be achieved in Iranian relations with the main regional ally of the Americans, Saudi Arabia.

Iranian ideology revolves around the 1979 Islamic revolution which overthrew its long-standing secular leader and replaced him with a clerical regime. The Iranian government is modeled on the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, which underscores the values of Shi'i thought and derives its rules directly from the *Sharia*. Ayatollah Khomeini abided by this concept and argued that, in the absence of the 12th *Imam* (a religious figure who is

²⁸ Katzman, "Iran's Foreign Policy", 1-3.

²⁹ Maclean, "Khamenei: U.S. Would Overthrow Iranian Government If It Could."

currently believed to be in hiding until the Day of Judgement, a “messiah”³⁰), only jurists (those that undergo the correct religious training) would be able to rule³¹.

Until 1990 Iran was set on exporting its ideology to the region. This policy caused endless diplomatic crises, especially with Saudi Arabia, and ended when national interest took precedence: the economic drain caused by the Iran-Iraq war could no longer be ignored, and friendlier relations with its neighbors were needed in order to help the Iranian economy. But certain features of this ideology have remained present to this day, and some pervade the Iranian government more than others. Political and military leaders across the board are against Western intervention in the region, and see it as an affront to Muslims. The creation of Israel is part of this grievance, and it underscores Tehran’s focus on the “oppressed” people of the region: Palestinians, Shi’ite minorities.

Iranian national interest sometimes clashes with its ideology, and sometimes takes precedence, as discussed in the previous paragraph. It revolves around its Persian identity and seeks to establish Iran as the dominant power of the region. Iranian leaders have not shied away from supporting non-Shia movements if it served their national interest, one such example being the Iranian support of the mostly Christian-inhabited Armenia, rather than Shiite-inhabited Azerbaijan³². As dictated by Realist tenets, matters considered to be existential threats towards Iranian national interest are dealt with accordingly and are handled, if need be, with force and military action.

The fourth motivator of Iranian foreign policy can be found by looking at internal dynamics. The Iranian government is, and has been, divided between different ideological

³⁰ "12th Imam, Key Facet Of Islamic Prophecy, Fuels Middle East Turmoil." CBN.com

³¹ Hooglund and Royce. "The Shi'i Clergy of Iran and the Conception of an Islamic State.", 106.

³² Katzman. "Iran's Foreign Policy", 21.

camps: one aligned with the Supreme Leader and the IRGC, which is more conservative and radical; one that is more moderate, previously led by Rafsanjani and now by the current president, Hassan Rouhani (who seeks to have Iran integrated into the international system); and a more reformist camp, led by former president Khatemi, which has focused more on “promoting domestic loosening of social and political restrictions than on a dramatically altered foreign policy”³³, but which has failed to achieve major successes.

A complex combination of these four factors dictates Iranian foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia:

1. The kingdom is the United States’ main regional ally, and thus falls under the “enemy” category. It is hard to imagine friendly relations between the two neighbors as long as Iranian-American relations remain tense;
2. Riyadh and Tehran follow two different, clashing branches of Islam: Wahhabism (a more radical form of Sunni thought) and Shi’ism. They portray themselves as the leaders of their respective branches (Sunni vs. Shia), and tend to support groups aligned with their ideology –hence all the proxy wars that pervade the region;
3. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia seek regional hegemony, and clash whenever they attempt to manifest their power. Another aspect of their national interest rests within the oil markets, and the two countries have engaged numerous times in debates regarding quotas and prices;
4. Depending on which camp leads the Iranian government, one can notice fluctuations in the relationship between the two countries. Thus we notice

³³ Katzman. “Iran’s Foreign Policy”, 3.

periods of rapprochement when the moderate/reformist camp controls the government, and periods of tension when more conservative presidents are elected. However, this is not always the case, seeing as more factors are involved in determining said fluctuations.

The last point of Iranian-Saudi relations brings forth an interesting debate: is Iranian foreign policy consistent, regardless of the political faction leading the executive branch, or does it vary? Despite the noticed fluctuations in the relations between the two countries, some scholars have emphasized the consistency of the Iranian foreign policy apparatus and have attributed it to “a culturally constituted consensus about the country’s role in international affairs that is strong enough to transcend the factions of –and divisions in – Iranian politics.”³⁴ Consistency is a more likely scenario (rather than a foreign policy dependent on the personality and political inclinations of the president) considering the overall power and influence of the Supreme Leader, who has the final say in most decisions concerning foreign policy and national interest.

Iranian behavior regarding the use of conventional force is discussed in an American Enterprise Institute report. Iran has “not started a conventional war against its neighbors in almost 300 years” and “has not initiated conventional military operations against another state or nonstate actor from a “cold start” since 1979”³⁵. Every overt foreign military campaign conducted by Iranian forces has either been “in response to an attack on its territory or an escalation of action within an existing conflict”³⁶. The report argues that this “lack of historical evidence makes it difficult to assess when Iran would

³⁴ Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic*, 70-71.

³⁵ McInnis and Gilmore, “Iran at War”, 12.

³⁶ Ibid.

be the first to use conventional force in a conflict”, but that “such a decision likely has a very high threshold, requiring a vital or existential threat to the Islamic Republic’s safety and survival”³⁷.

Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy

Saudi Arabia prides itself with being the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and the birthplace of Islam, with Saudi leaders having referred to their country as “the eminent leader of the wider Muslim world”³⁸. The kingdom is the world’s largest producer and exporter of petroleum, a fact that has significantly raised the country’s geopolitical importance in the eyes of the international community. It is also, almost by definition, indistinguishable from the Al Saud ruling family, a fact which has and continues to cause some issues regarding Saudi identity.

The Kingdom is ruled through an interaction of core elites (royal family), religious elites (*ulema*), and commercial and bureaucratic elites³⁹. These elites control the state, its capital (the direct resources of oil revenues, the financial resources derived from it, and the individual financial resources of each member of the elite), its resources of coercion (the Royal Land Force, the National Guard, the Royal Navy, the Air Force, and the Royal Air Defense), ideology, and information⁴⁰. The interaction between these groups is illustrated in Appendix A.

³⁷ McInnis and Gilmore, "Iran at War", 12.

³⁸ "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy."

³⁹ Lecha and Zaccara, "Saudi Arabia: family, religion, army, and oil", 155-161.

⁴⁰ Ibid.,162-167.

Some key features relevant to foreign policymaking are:

1. the dominance of the royal family and of the senior princes, whose opinions may differ;
2. the fluctuating importance of the King;
3. a “degree of personal ‘ownership’ by certain princes over certain aspects of foreign relations”;
4. the “consensus-seeking principle, both within the royal family and between it and other important constituencies”—including the religious establishment.⁴¹

The Saudis therefore benefit from the influence of a powerful domestic audience, which is composed of regime elites. These elites, operating on a consensus principle, are involved in the foreign policy decision-making process, and have the power to constrict and punish the leader in the case of “unnecessary or failed uses of force”.⁴²

Saudi Arabia’s oil revenues are an important determining factor of its foreign policy. Since the 1980s oil revenues have accounted for 70-80% of the kingdom’s total income, and has thus been the variable which has had the greatest impact on the country’s coffers. The country’s foreign policy has therefore been clearly dependent on oil politics and the international oil price, and has resulted in clear alignments with OPEC countries which have had the same pricing requirements, and disagreements with oil exporters which had different interests⁴³.

The kingdom is one of the creators of the Gulf Cooperation Council, established in 1981. It has deep-rooted relations with its Gulf neighbors, but these relations are not

⁴¹ Nonneman, “Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy”, 336.

⁴² Weeks, “Strongmen and Straw Men”, 327.

⁴³ Mason, *Foreign Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia*, 37-38.

always the friendliest of types (one such example is Qatar). Being the largest of them all (both in sheer geographical size and in the size of its economy) Saudi Arabia has often assumed a leadership role in the GCC, which has not always been met with approval from the other members. Turbulent times (like the Arab Spring) brought the GCC countries closer together as they attempted to “maintain their domestic security and regime legitimacy and establish a popular trend that supports stability”⁴⁴, but tensions over intra-GCC trade and investment (which require Saudi approval) remain present.

When “Iran portrays itself as the leader of not just the minority Shiite world, but of all Muslim revolutionaries interested in standing up to the West”⁴⁵, it poses an ideological and sometimes existential threat to Saudi Arabia. A kingdom created through shifty alliances, war, and bribery needs to ensure that its legitimacy as Custodian of the Holy Mosques is untarnished and unchallenged. The numerous Hajj crises that have plagued Iranian-Saudi relations since 1979, as well as the Grand Mosque seizure of that same year, were incidents that challenged Saudi legitimacy and thus threatened its national interest. While there are more levels to the Iranian-Saudi conflict than the ideological one, the Sunni-Shia divide and the discourse and accusations resulting from it are threatening to the rule of the al Saud family. Iran’s influence and alliances with groups in Iraq and Lebanon, as well as with the Syrian government and Yemen, have made the region particularly unstable and present further cause of concern for the Saudi government, whose attempts at expanding its regional influence clash with similar Iranian desires.

Also important to discuss is Saudi Arabia’s outlook on war. A perfect example of this approach is Saudi Arabia’s initial reaction to the RDF –Rapid Deployment Force of

⁴⁴ Mason, *Foreign Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia*, 51.

⁴⁵ "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy."

the GCC. The members of the GCC saw this military force as beneficial, but Saudi Arabia was more reserved and sought to limit its power, arguing that Riyadh “would only take offensive measures in the event of an attack on their own territory or if there was an attempt to close the Straits of Hormuz”.⁴⁶ Thus we see what appear to be the two most important issues for the Saudi government, and the ones for which they would be willing to engage in an interstate war: territory and revenue.

Literature review

Defining the most important concept of this inquiry – interstate war- is crucial when it comes to determining what phenomena will be included or excluded. For the purposes of this research we will be using Singer and Small’s definition⁴⁷ combined with that of the Webster Dictionary⁴⁸, and we shall therefore look at interstate warfare as a state of open and declared armed conflict between states, resulting in a total of 1000 or more battle deaths.

When discussing the causes that lead to an increased possibility for interstate war, there are numerous approaches and proposed explanations. Kenneth Waltz identifies the permissive causes of war and endows international anarchy with the most explanatory power⁴⁹. Greg Cashman discusses the nature of mankind or the specific nature of individual leaders as an explanatory factor, as well as the nature of particular states and how they interact with each other.⁵⁰ Hidemi Suganami offers as possible explanations humans’ “discriminatory sociability”, as well as a sufficient prevalence

⁴⁶ Fürtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia*, 77.

⁴⁷ Singer and Small, *The Wages of War*, 381.

⁴⁸ "War", Merriam-Webster.

⁴⁹ Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*.

⁵⁰ Cashman, *What Causes War?*, 13.

of the belief that there are circumstances under which it is the state's function to resort to arms against another state.⁵¹

Theories discussing the effect of power on war are most relevant when they consider the distribution of power. Scholars like Waltz⁵² and Mearsheimer⁵³ argue that bipolarity is a more stable and peaceful distribution than multipolarity. The mechanism proposed by Waltz states that countries in a bipolar system will utilize internal balancing more than external balancing, and that systems rife with external balancing will be more prone to miscalculations and therefore conflict. In a bipolar system, the major powers will have recurring crises, which act as tests of resolve and proxy for armed conflict. Their advantage is that "tensions are dissipated through third-party conflict in a series of contained environments".⁵⁴

Others scholars argue the exact opposite: that multipolar systems are more stable because the shifting equilibrium of forces encourages conciliation⁵⁵, or because risk-averse states will no longer have the ability to accurately forecast the actions of other states, making them more inclined to negotiate. There have also been quantitative studies arguing that crises in multipolar systems are most likely to degenerate in violence (33%), whereas bipolar systems have a lesser chance of interstate war (24%).⁵⁶

Another perspective is that power concentration is simply not related to war. Bueno de Mesquita is one of the scholars employing this argument, and his explanation

⁵¹ Suganami, *On the Causes of War*, 49.

⁵² Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

⁵³ Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War."

⁵⁴ James, *International Relations and Scientific Progress*, 139.

⁵⁵ Kegley and Raymond, *A Multipolar Peace?*, 51.

⁵⁶ Wilkenfeld and Brecher, *Interstate Crises and Violence: Twentieth-Century Findings*, 286.

argues that any given configuration of power can produce war or peace, but what it ultimately comes down to is whether the leaders are risk-acceptant or risk-averse⁵⁷.

The nature of a particular state's political system has been shown to be an important determinant of war. The first and most basic categorization which we will employ sets Iran's and Saudi Arabia's political systems as autocracies: Iran is a theocracy with a parliamentary system⁵⁸, while Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy⁵⁹.

Other, more specific typologies help us better define and understand the two most important regimes analyzed in this thesis (as well as the third one discussed, that of Iraq). Barbara Geddes classifies authoritarian regimes as personalist, military, single-party, or amalgams of the pure type. According to her, "in military regimes, a group of officers decides who will rule and exercises some influence on policy." In single-party regimes, "access to political office and control over policy are dominated by one party, though other parties may legally exist and compete in elections"⁶⁰ and the "party basically defines political life in the country by controlling access to decision-making authority and providing essential services." These regimes "tend to develop an all-encompassing ideology to legitimize their rule, which rests on public acceptance or at least acquiescence rather than brute force. They are typically governed by cohesive political elites who operate within broadly accepted hierarchies."⁶¹ Personalist regimes differ in that "access to office [...] depend(s) much more on the discretion of an individual leader" who is not constricted by neither the military nor the party of which he is a member.⁶²

⁵⁷ Bueno de Mesquita, *The War Trap*.

⁵⁸ "The Structure of Power in Iran."

⁵⁹ Teitelbaum and Ochsenswald. "Government and Society."

⁶⁰ Geddes, *Authoritarian Breakdown*, 7.

⁶¹ Pickering and Emizet, "Diversionary Despots?", 478-479.

⁶² Geddes, *Authoritarian Breakdown*, 7.

Jessica Weeks complements Geddes' categorization with a discussion of the role domestic audiences play within these regimes, and of the threat of punishment which they possess. She argues that the characteristics of military regimes leaves the leaders open to the possibility of punishment by domestic elites because the support of the military establishment is necessary to maintain the leadership position. In single-party regimes the situation is very similar to that of military ones, seeing as the leader's position is maintained partly because of the support he enjoys from his party. In contrast to these two types, in personalist regimes "there is no domestic audience that can effectively coordinate to sanction the leader" because the leader has the means to punish his domestic critics, and because "the fate of elites is intimately connected to the leader's survival in office".⁶³

Other categorizations discuss the types of domestic audiences to which the regimes answer to. Jessica Weeks argues that "autocratic audiences consisting primarily of civilians are scarcely more likely to forgive unnecessary or failed uses of force than democratic audiences made up of ordinary voters", while "autocratic audiences composed primarily of military officers are more likely to view force as necessary and appropriate [...], primarily because of military officers' particular belief structures regarding the use of military force."⁶⁴

Authors differ in their opinions regarding the types of dyads that are most likely to engage in warfare. Some argue that politically similar states are less likely to engage in conflict than are politically disparate states⁶⁵. Others delve further and identify that the likelihood of interstate war is "lowest in the democratic dyad (pair), highest in the

⁶³ Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve.", 46.

⁶⁴ Weeks, "Strongmen and Straw Men", 327.

⁶⁵ Werner, "The Effects of Political Similarity on the Onset of Militarized Disputes", 343.

autocratic dyad with the mixed dyad in between”⁶⁶, while John Oneal’s quantitative study shows that there is a higher probability for war in the case of a mixed dyad -an autocracy vs. a democracy (10.5%)- than in the case of an autocratic dyad (5%).⁶⁷

The character of the issues at stake -their tangibility- has been shown to matter. Through statistical analysis, Vasquez shows that “as issues become more tangible they will become more cooperative, and as issues become more intangible they became more conflict prone”. He argues that “as an issue acquires more intangible aspects, it will generate more conflict when *any* of the following six conditions are present: there is frequent contention over the issue, it is not linked to other issues, behavior on it is persistent, economic or diplomatic sources are employed, only one resource is employed, or there are many actors.”⁶⁸ He also argues that concrete stakes are more likely to permit compromise, whereas symbolic stakes make actors less flexible.⁶⁹

Research has shown that territorial issues are more likely to produce conflict escalation among rival states. However, if these states are not contiguous, they will be more likely to avoid fighting a major war with each other, unless they are dragged in by third parties.⁷⁰ This argument ties into theories regarding issues and their salience. As John Vasquez rightly points out, the “avoidance of territorial issues is difficult [...] because the intangible quality of the issues separating rivals leads them to search for allies and link as many issues on the global agenda as possible into one overarching issue. This process normally brings in an issue involving contiguous territory, particularly since notions of a

⁶⁶ Tangerås, "Democracy, Autocracy and the Likelihood of International Conflict", 101.

⁶⁷ Oneal, "From Realism to the Liberal Peace.", 60.

⁶⁸ Vasquez, "The Tangibility of Issues and Global Conflict", 188-189

⁶⁹ Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, 81.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 407.

balance of power encourage rivals to ally with minor states bordering on their opponent.”⁷¹

Another factor considered in studies of war causation is the expected utility of war. Bueno de Mesquita finds that positive expected utility is a necessary condition for a state to initiate war; in other words, states will never initiate a war if in doing so they expect to suffer a net loss in value.⁷² Tied into the expected utility of war is the idea of military capabilities: “states with a military advantage are likely to find more cases in which the use or threat of force makes sense.”⁷³ Therefore, a state’s positive assessment of its military capabilities is more likely to result in force, whereas a negative assessment can promote a more cautionary approach: “as the perceived probability of success in war increases, the utility for success can decrease and still satisfy the critical threshold of expectation at which one is willing to commit troops to combat.”⁷⁴

The Realist school of thought is particularly important when assessing ideas of military capabilities. Many “offensive” realists claim that “state leaders will exploit opportunities created by their superior military power”⁷⁵. Gilpin argues that “a change in the capacity of the state to achieve (its) objectives tends to induce a change in state behavior.”⁷⁶ Military capabilities are most easily measured by looking at military spending (both past and present), which can help one gain an understanding of how technologically advanced a country’s military is.

Last but not least are issues pertaining to discourse and how they affect the creation and escalation of conflicts, and their influence on interstate war. Belligerent discourse

⁷¹ Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, 211..

⁷² Bueno de Mesquita, *The War Trap*, 127-129.

⁷³ Fordham, "A Very Sharp Sword", 634.

⁷⁴ De Mesquita, "The Contribution of Expected Utility Theory to the Study of International Conflict.", 642.

⁷⁵ Fordham, "A Very Sharp Sword", 635.

⁷⁶ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 23

(which, for the purposes of this thesis, will be considered to be discourse threatening a government's *raison d'être*, as well as discourse calling for revolutions and change in another country) can directly threaten a government, and even be considered a major threat. Also important to consider is the topic of securitization – casting an issue as an existential threat- which can result in public assent to use extraordinary measures to combat that threat. This concept, introduced and developed by the Copenhagen School, has helped expand the realm of security to include not only the state, but also social constructions of threats. New issues are placed on the security agenda once a political actor has successfully carried out a securitizing speech act, thus transforming a political problem into a security problem, and therefore allowing for more extreme responses.⁷⁷

Hypotheses

This thesis seeks to uncover the reasons behind the absence of interstate war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, from 1979 and until the present time. We seek to discover the factors and mechanisms which are at work once serious crises occur, and how escalation is avoided. Based on the literature review conducted and summarized above, I propose that the factors most likely to affect the possibility for interstate war for Iran and Saudi Arabia are 1. issues and their tangibility; 2. the type of domestic audience the regime answers to (if any); 3. their assessment of their own military capabilities.

Once a thorough analysis of a set of events will be conducted, I expect to notice that:

⁷⁷ Buzan, et al., *Security : A New Framework for Analysis*.

1. Intangible issues/ tangible issues which have acquired intangible aspects will lead to an increased risk for interstate warfare when the countries are contiguous;
2. Civilian domestic audiences will lead to a decreased risk for interstate warfare;
3. The negative assessment of their own military capabilities will lead to a decreased risk for interstate warfare.

Throughout my research I have also encountered a few factors used in explanatory models for warfare –or the lack thereof- which I decided to leave out of my proposed hypotheses. Some of them would not have benefited our analysis because they would not have presented any variation, and would therefore not have qualified as independent variables: anarchy is always a factor to be considered, and belligerent discourse has been employed in every case discussed. Other factors I assessed as being simply less important. The research on power distribution has shown that bipolar systems are least likely to engage in violence (24%), as opposed to and multipolar systems (33%)⁷⁸. This corresponds with the situation analyzed in this thesis: the Iran-Iraq war happened when the Middle East had three power centers –Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia- but, as shown throughout the analysis, other factors played a more important role in determining the initiation of interstate war. The following three sections will focus on the proposed variables, seeking to foster a better understanding of how they are applied to the cases presented in Chapter 3 and 4.

⁷⁸ Wilkenfeld and Brecher, “Interstate Crises and Violence”, 286

Issues and their tangibility

In order to better understand the mechanism which is employed when there is an ongoing crisis between Iran and Saudi Arabia, or between one of these countries and another adversary, it will be useful to distinguish two potential paths: the first pertaining to tangible issues (oil prices), and the second to intangible issues (religion, ideology) or tangible issues infused with symbolic meaning (territory).

As Vasquez correctly observes, “as issues become more tangible they become more cooperative, and as issues become more intangible they became more conflict prone”⁷⁹. Therefore we would expect that in the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia tangible issues would result in more successful negotiations and/or discussions, but intangible ones (or ones pertaining to tangible issues with symbolic associations) would be followed by failed negotiations and some form of conflict escalation. Since concrete stakes are more likely to permit compromise, I expect to see issues such as debates over oil prices resolved via official channels –OPEC negotiations, for example. On the other hand, since symbolic stakes make actors less flexible I predict that attempted negotiations regarding these will most likely fail or lead to escalation.⁸⁰

Religion is one such symbolic stake, and from time immemorial has caused unsolvable debates of the “you’re wrong, I’m right” nature. National sentiment can be rallied around the hatred of another religion or sect, thus helping form the *other* which must be defeated at all costs. The two can be brought together for a variety of reasons, but in the cases presented in this thesis national sentiment and religion are mostly linked for political purposes. This is of particular importance for the puzzle driving this thesis,

⁷⁹ Vasquez, “The Tangibility of Issues and Global Conflict”, 188-189.

⁸⁰ Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, 81.

since Iran and Saudi Arabia pride themselves with being the leaders of their respective branches of Islam –Shia and Sunni, respectively. It is thus not difficult to imagine conflicts arising because of this issue and, because of the unrivaled importance placed by their respective governments on religion (particularly in light of how religion is part of the *raison d'être* of each government), resulting in significant escalation.

Territory is a tangible issue, but there are two situations where it can attain intangible characteristics: when leaders imbue it with symbolic meaning; and when it is of such national importance that it presents the conflicting parties with a zero-sum game. The first situation can be better understood through the lens of Michael Barnett's ideas regarding the importance Middle Eastern leaders assign to perception. His discussion of "symbolic security dilemmas", where leaders will "attempt to give events political meaning through locating the event within an overarching narrative"⁸¹, will be used to understand the events leading up to the Iran-Iraq war, where the disputed territory was imbued with symbolic meaning and placed into an overarching historical narrative revolving around Arab-Persian conflict. The second situation can be found in the Saudi involvement in the First Gulf War, where the territory at stake contained the kingdom's most valuable oil fields. Considering Saudi reliance on oil reserves (oil revenues account for 70-80% of the kingdom's total income⁸²), the possibility of losing this territory was unfathomable and needed to be avoided at all costs.

Research has shown that territorial issues are more likely to produce conflict escalation among rival states, especially when these states are contiguous.⁸³ In the two cases presented in Chapter 3 we are presented with contiguous states (Iran-Iraq, Saudi

⁸¹ Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*, 33.

⁸² Mason, *Foreign Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia*, 37-38.

⁸³ Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, 407.

Arabia-Iraq), and their shared borders made invasion all the more possible. When the countries are not contiguous, I expect that the possibility for interstate war will be reduced.

Regime types

As already established in the section titled “Literature Review”, Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy and Iran is a theocracy with a parliamentary system. They are thus both autocracies. Iraq is also an autocracy, and Barbara Geddes categorizes its regime type under Saddam Hussein as personalist⁸⁴.

Iran’s decision making process ultimately involves the approval of the Ayatollah⁸⁵, but there are also a number of political parties which “legally exist and compete in elections”⁸⁶, and the foreign-policy apparatus involves a complex mechanism which includes other actors (see Appendix B). The revolutionary government relies on an “all-encompassing ideology to legitimize [its] rule”, and is ruled by “cohesive political elites who operate within broadly accepted hierarchies”⁸⁷, both of which are characteristics of single-party regimes.

There are also items pertaining to personalist regimes within the Iranian government: the Ayatollah is the most important figure of the regime, the one who has final say on many policy issues and who controls the military. However, following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini there have been significant changes to the Iranian polity which have moved the regime away from personalist tendencies and closer to those characteristics of single-party regimes. The most important of these changes was the

⁸⁴ Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles*, 229.

⁸⁵ Wastnidge. *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami*, 20.

⁸⁶ Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles*, 229.

⁸⁷ Pickering and Emizet, "Diversionary Despots?", 478-479.

“significant day-to-day authority over military policy” which was granted to the president in 1989. When Rafsanjani was elected his administration was granted “the political strength to undertake changes to rationalize the military establishment and correct administrative problems.”⁸⁸ Thus we can distinguish what appear to be two different stages in the Iranian polity: one with more personalist characteristics, corresponding to the rule of the first Ayatollah; and one in which these characteristics are faded out, and more actors are included in the decision-making process, which is when Ayatollah Khamenei came to power.

Geddes’ categorization omits monarchies like that of Saudi Arabia, and therefore does not clarify whether the leader controls the security apparatus in such governments. Scholars have argued that dynastic monarchies—regimes in which the family forms a ruling institution- are different from nondynastic monarchies, in which the ruler rules alone and which more closely resemble personalist regimes. Herb⁸⁹ argues that in dynastic monarchies the leader does not control appointments and “the family has the authority to remove the monarch and replace him with another member of the dynasty.”⁹⁰ Therefore, autocratic dynastic monarchies like that of Saudi Arabia have a strong ruling elite which can exercise pressure on the monarch. This elite is comprised of Al Saud family members and the *ulema*, and to a lesser extent of ministers and government officials.

When discussing how regime type affects the possibility for warfare, one must look at the domestic audience the government/leaders face. In the case of Saudi Arabia the domestic audience is comprised of mostly civilian regime elites (as shown in the section on “Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy”), which are less likely to support military conflict

⁸⁸ Ward, *Immortal : A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*, 304.

⁸⁹ Herb, *All in the Family*.

⁹⁰ Herb, *All in the Family*, 238.

than those composed of military officers⁹¹. These domestic audiences are important when discussing crisis decision-making because on the one hand, they are more often than not directly involved in the decision-making process, and on the other hand they have the ability to “punish” leaders for their decisions in international conflict.

The Iranian polity presents characteristics of both single-party and personalist regimes. Such cases are not thoroughly discussed by Geddes, but Jessica Weeks mentions these “mixed nondemocracies that fit none of the criteria described” by the former scholar. Weeks argues that “there is no reason to think that individual leaders have inordinate capacities to monitor and punish elite criticism in these states” and that they should not have “a disadvantage in generating audience costs compared to other stable regimes in which elites can coordinate.”⁹² Considering the complexity of the Iranian polity which, as mentioned before, contains “multiple and overlapping centers of power” which make it difficult to “identify who has a say in what issue”⁹³, I believe that there exists a domestic audience (composed of regime elites) which can somewhat constrain the leader’s decisions.

In purely personalist regimes (like the one of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq) there is no powerful, organized domestic audience to be able to exert *ex ante* or *ex post* constraints on the leader’s policy choices. The leader is insulated from free, democratic elections and is usually able to appoint close people to important offices, who then have strong incentives to remain loyal.⁴⁶ This can be noticed in the case of the Iraqi deliberations that led to the Iran-Iraq war, where military leaders and important officials

⁹¹ Weeks, “Strongmen and Straw Men”, 327

⁹² Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve”, 49.

⁹³ Wastnidge. *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami*. 20.

did not dare contradict the autocratic leader, and actually made room for him to make the most important decisions regarding the war.

In order to corroborate the proposed hypothesis and prove the effects of the presence and type of domestic audience on the possibility of interstate war, it is useful to describe the expected behavior of each type of regime. In the regimes of Iran and Saudi Arabia, which benefit from the presence of a mostly civilian domestic audience, I expect to notice increased pressure from the audience when conflicts with other countries arise. In purely personalist regimes I expect to observe no pressure from the domestic audience, and even encouragement in all military endeavors. Therefore I expect more instances of interstate war when a purely personalist regime is involved, and fewer instances when the actors are comprised of hybrid regimes which encompass a powerful domestic audience.

Military capabilities

In the years following the Islamic Revolution, Iran's military capabilities were assessed as second-rate. Its aging military equipment had not had access to upgrades and modernization since 1979 and had not had "large-scale access to the modern weapons and military technology necessary to replace" its equipment⁹⁴. On the eve of the Iran-Iraq war the Artesh, the conventional Iranian military, was "a shell of its former self", having lost between 40 and 60 percent of its manpower due to desertions and purges⁹⁵. The army personnel numbered 150,000 (from its former glory of 285,000), its air force dropped from 100,000 to 65,000 personnel, and the navy lost 5,000 men. Shortages of spare parts, loss

⁹⁴ Cordesman, "Iran's Developing Military Capabilities."

⁹⁵ Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*, 244.

of foreign technicians and military leadership, and the lack of advanced and basic training left the military in disarray.⁹⁶

The Iranian army suffered dramatic losses during the battles of the Iran-Iraq war and has “lacked the ability to find a stable source of parts and supplies for most of its Western-supplied equipment.”⁹⁷ Continued restrictions on arms sales and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a potential ally and source of military aid, compounded the Iranian problem of weapons procurement⁹⁸. Throughout the 1990s “defense spending fluctuated because of lower oil revenues”, but the turn of the century witnessed a relative “recovery in Iranian defense spending”, which was still about 25% of what was needed to “modernize and recapitalize the armed forces” to their pre-1979 levels⁹⁹. Despite some noted progress in Iranian defense, and because of the limitations on procurement, “Iran’s military capabilities are likely to improve only at the margins in accuracy, effectiveness, and lethality in the foreseeable future.”¹⁰⁰ This explains the Iranian desire to obtain nuclear weapons, but progress on this front has been curtailed with the help of the JCPOA (The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action).

Saudi Arabia’s military is exceptional in terms of technological advances, but lacking in manpower. In countries like Iran and Iraq conscription had been used to build large armies, but in Saudi Arabia recruitment remained voluntary.¹⁰¹ Its military personnel -256,000¹⁰²- stands at roughly a third of that of the Iranian army – 934,000¹⁰³, while its

⁹⁶ Ward, *Immortal : A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*, 245.

⁹⁷ Cordesman, "Iran's Developing Military Capabilities."

⁹⁸ Ward, *Immortal : A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*, 309.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁰¹ Cronin, *Armies and State-building in the Modern Middle East*, 209.

¹⁰² "2017 Saudi Arabia Military Strength." GlobalFirepower.com.

¹⁰³ "2017 Iran Military Strength." GlobalFirepower.com.

navy strength numbers a total of 55¹⁰⁴ naval assets (as opposed to the nearly 400 which the Iranian army boasts of¹⁰⁵).

Another issue with which the Kingdom is faced is that the Saudi military and paramilitary forces suffer from “tribal, regional, religious and class distortions”, with sections like the National Guard remaining firmly tied to their tribal base¹⁰⁶. This presents the Saudi forces with a critical issue, that of control and centralization –it is difficult to contain and command military forces when their allegiances are first and foremost with their tribal base, as opposed to the state.

Saudi dependence on foreign training and logistical support also ensures the kingdom’s reliance and subservience to foreign assistance. The presence of foreign troops on its territory following the 1991 Gulf War only deepens this dependency, and the country which provides most of this assistance is the United States. As we will see in Chapter 3, U.S. intervention in 1991 required a special *fatwa* to be issued in order for these troops to be accepted on Saudi territory, but even then their presence was seen by many as being most unwelcome. Despite the crisis of legitimacy which ensued after the introduction of foreign troops on Saudi soil, the multiplication of security threats for the regime has led to “an even greater emphasis on close co-operation with the US”¹⁰⁷, rendering the Kingdom almost entirely dependent on American intervention in the case of interstate war.

This presentation of the Iranian and Saudi military forces, while brief, has shown their major limitations and their most important considerations when analyzing the possibility of interstate war. I believe that the outdated state of the Iranian military and the

¹⁰⁴ "2017 Saudi Arabia Military Strength." GlobalFirepower.com.

¹⁰⁵ "2017 Iran Military Strength." GlobalFirepower.com.

¹⁰⁶ Cronin, *Armies and State-building in the Modern Middle East*, 236.

¹⁰⁷ Cronin, *Armies and State-building in the Modern Middle East*, 238.

lack of manpower of the Saudi forces are the two major factors determining the countries' cautionary approach to interstate war.

Alternative explanations

I have argued that military capabilities influence the decision-making process in the following way: when a country negatively assesses its military capabilities, it is less inclined to use force, whereas abundant military capabilities may increase the chance “that resistance from potential targets can be overwhelmed”¹⁰⁸. This relationship between military capabilities and decision making might seem obvious: governments cannot use force unless they have the means to do so. However, there have also been claims which point to the opposite relation: that the reverse reaction could be the case, considering how other states may avoid conflict with strong opponents, “diminishing the number of disputes in which a militarily strong state can manifest its greater willingness to use force”¹⁰⁹.

When it comes to civilian domestic audiences, this thesis seeks to demonstrate that these types of audiences are less inclined to use force than the ones composed of military personnel. However, scholars have argued that among high-level American decision makers, “civilians have been more likely to advocate the threat or use of force”, due to the participation of veterans in the decision-making process. The point here is that the advocates of military force, uniformed or not, can make a stronger case for their preferred course of action when the state has greater military capabilities.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Fordham, "A Very Sharp Sword", 633.

¹⁰⁹ Fordham, "A Very Sharp Sword", 636.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.,635.

I believe that in the four cases presented in this thesis, evidence to support these alternative arguments cannot be found. The two case studies presented in Chapter 3 have in common an Iraqi aggressor, whose positive assessments of its own military prowess, in contrast to those of the countries it sought to invade (Iran and Kuwait), led it to the decision to engage in interstate war. As for Iran and Saudi Arabia, their avoidance of such a conflict cannot be understood by thinking that they see the other as a much stronger opponent: as I have discussed in the section on “Military Capabilities” of this chapter, both countries have their advantages and disadvantages, but it is mostly the latter which lead the two countries to take a more cautionary approach towards war.

The argument regarding veterans in domestic audiences also does not find support in our cases, and it is most obvious when looking at the 2015 crisis and the Iranian unwillingness to engage in war. Discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, I argue that numerous current leaders in Tehran are more risk-averse because of their memory of the Iran-Iraq war, in which they partook in one way or another.

Methods

Due to the nature of the research question, the methods used will be qualitative only. The purpose of this inquiry is to produce knowledge regarding a class of event –i.e. the absence of interstate war- between two countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia, from 1979 and until the present day. I have brought forth and discussed a series of hypotheses presented by scholars of the International Relations field regarding war causation and prevention, and have also developed three hypotheses which I believe present the reader with the greatest explanatory power for our puzzle.

Based on the conducted literature review I have proposed three hypotheses which seek to explain our dependent variable, the absence of interstate war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Four case studies will be introduced and analyzed - the Iran-Iraq war, Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Gulf War, the 1987 crisis, and the 2015 crisis - which present a total of three dyads.

When analyzing the reasons behind the absence of a class of event –interstate war- it is not only beneficial, but also necessary to discuss cases where the class of event discussed is present, so as to better understand the effect of the proposed independent variables. The first two cases are examples of when Iran and Saudi Arabia engaged in interstate war with another country, and are necessary for a better understanding of the reasons and processes which have led Tehran and Riyadh to war. The last two have been chosen due to the serious escalation steps which have resulted from each individual crisis, most notably the severing of diplomatic ties.

The following two chapters will discuss these case studies, seeking to analyze the series of events and to discuss them in light of the proposed hypotheses. Chapter 3 discusses the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War, seeking to understand the reasons which ultimately led to Iran's and Saudi Arabia's decisions to engage in these two wars. Chapter 4 will discuss the two Hajj crises, that of 1987 and of 2015, and to uncover the mechanisms and factors which have prevented escalation to interstate war.

Chapter 3: WAR

Iran-Iraq War

Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran and Iraq engaged in one of the longest and bloodiest wars of the region since the signing of the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916. The war, which lasted 8 years and claimed the lives of more than 1 million people, commenced on September 22nd 1980¹¹¹.

In June 1979 the newly installed Iranian regime urged Iraq's population to overthrow the Ba'athist regime. Saddam responded by lavishing public money on Shi'a mosques, shrines, and festivals, and Iran responded in turn by sending aid to underground Shi'a movements.¹¹² The Iraqi leader decided on seeking regime change in Tehran, and his belief that the newly installed government and its accompanying military were weak and in disarray led him to believe that victory would be quickly established.¹¹³

In October 1979 Saddam issued the following demands for the newly installed Iranian government:

1. That Iran withdraws from the disputed Gulf Islands and drops other "chauvinistic claims";
2. That Iran voluntarily amends the Algiers agreement and restores Iraqi claims over the Shatt al-Arab;
3. That Iran grants autonomy to its Arabs, Kurds, and Baluchi minorities.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Encyclopædia Britannica, "Iran-Iraq War."

¹¹² Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 44

¹¹³ Wright, "Implications of the Iraq-Iran War."

¹¹⁴ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 87.

The Shatt al-Arab is the waterway separating the two countries, and it represents the border established by the British in 1937. The initial agreement regarding the waterway had favored Iraq, but was abrogated by the Iranian Shah in 1969, and in 1975 the Algiers agreement emerged, giving the Shah a new border along the Shatt al-Arab and overall control over the waterway.¹¹⁵

For the Iraqi leader, the Algiers agreement was a humiliating blow considering that in the Middle East “even small bits of territory can assume an importance far beyond their economic or strategic value”¹¹⁶. Saddam saw himself as the leader of the Arab World, a belief that was exacerbated by the 1978 Camp David accords –which, in Saddam’s eyes, removed Egypt as the historic leader of the Arab World.¹¹⁷ His inability to deliver on his promise (defeating the Zionist entity) to the Palestinians resulted in his enhanced focus on his enemy to the East, the one that delivered that humiliating blow in 1975. The two countries had long competed for regional dominance and had longstanding disputes over territory and support for dissident populations. In Saddam’s view, there was no better strategy than focusing on Iran¹¹⁸.

Issues

The case of the Iran-Iraq war presents two major issues which must be analyzed in light of the existing body of literature discussing their effect on interstate war. The first issue revolves around religion and ideology (religious government vs. secular one). The Iranian Supreme Leader was a firm believer in the idea that the Iranian Revolution he had

¹¹⁵ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 20.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

so carefully orchestrated should be exported to the region, if not the world¹¹⁹. Along with the other Ayatollahs who partook in the revolution, Khomeini saw Iraq as the “largest and most powerful Arab state in the Gulf, a competitor for local hegemony”¹²⁰. Coupled with its sheer size and power was the fact that Arab Shi’is accounted for nearly 60% of the population¹²¹, making it an even more fertile ground for Iranian influence. A potential Iraqi revolution similar to the Iranian one of 1979 would have translated into a huge step for the ideals expounded by the Ayatollah, a magnificent beginning to what he saw as a potential regional phenomenon. When discourse and covert support of underground Shia movements did not result in the desired outcome, the Iranian leader began nurturing the idea of fighting a holy war against a regime that “to him possessed the worst traits of attempting to Westernize and secularize the Islamic world”¹²², and to thus defend and protect his still-unfolding revolution.

On the other side of the border Saddam realized that the deep religious divides within his own country (the south of the country was Arab Shi’i, the central part Arab Sunni, and the north contained substantial non-Arab populations, primarily Kurdish, and to a lesser extent Turkoman)¹²³, coupled with a large Shia population and his government’s secularism, would not allow him to frame the conflict in religious terms. He resorted to nationalist sentiment, employing an Arab vs. Persian framework. An important discussion revolves around the parallel which emerges between Saddam and the Ayatollah: while the Iranian leader sought to export his revolution to the region, Saddam and his Ba’athist party believed that victory over Iran would be the first step

¹¹⁹ Khomeini. "We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology."

¹²⁰ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 43.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 41.

¹²³ Dawisha, "" Identity" and Political Survival in Saddam's Iraq.", 553.

to leadership of the Arab world¹²⁴. The Iraqi leader tried to emulate Nebuchadnezzar, the infamous Babylonian leader, seeking to fashion a common Mesopotamian culture to bind Iraq's society.¹²⁵ Saddam believed Iraq was "the only Middle Eastern state capable of achieving the proper place for the Arab nation in history"¹²⁶ and that "war was the only path to realizing his historic opportunity to unite the Arabs and deal with the conspiracies of his enemies"¹²⁷. He thus employed the Arab vs. Persian divide, seeking to place himself as the leader of the former camp.

Having led an Islamic Revolution, and having placed such emphasis on the importance of religion in government, the Ayatollah attacked Saddam's secularism and used the opportunity to make it seem as if this secularism meant that Saddam was an enemy of all Muslims. Using discourse which emphasized that the Iraqi leader was "fighting to destroy Islam"¹²⁸, the Ayatollah used this difference in ideology as justification for why there was "absolutely no question of peace or compromise"¹²⁹. Once hostilities began in September 1980, Khomeini framed the conflict as "an invasion by an Iraqi non-Muslim Ba'athist against an Islamic country"¹³⁰, and thus attempted to use Saddam's own tactic against him.

The Ayatollah attacked Saddam's secularism and used the opportunity to throttle other Middle Eastern regimes that had chosen secularization over Islam: "You [Iranians] are fighting to protect Islam and he [Saddam] is fighting to destroy Islam [...] There is absolutely no question of peace or compromise and we shall never have any

¹²⁴ Woods and Pease, *The Iraqi Perspectives Report*, 6.

¹²⁵ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 18.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹²⁸ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 41.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

discussions with the [the Ba'athist Iraqi regime and its leaders].”¹³¹ This type of discourse, attacking the very foundation of the enemy’s *raison d’être*, left no room for discussion or compromise: Saddam Hussein’s regime relied on secular, Arab sentiments more than it relied on Islam, and Khomeini made sure that this point was not forgotten.

The second issue, territory, is a tangible issue which, when imbued with symbolic meaning, attains intangible characteristics. As we have mentioned in Chapter 2, scholars argue that “as issues become more tangible they will become more cooperative, and as issues become more intangible they became more conflict prone.”¹³² Research on the tangibility of issues and its effect on global conflict also shows that concrete stakes are more likely to permit compromise, whereas symbolic stakes make actors less flexible.¹³³ Framing the contentious issue of the disputed territories as a Persian vs. Arab dispute helped place the then-current conflict into a wider frame of reference, one replete with centuries of conflict, hatred, and racism. Thus leaders could tap into previously used derogatory remarks and references, helping vilify the other and providing historical justification for their current actions. As Vasquez rightly points out, the “avoidance of territorial issues is difficult [...] because the intangible quality of the issues separating rivals leads them to search for allies and link as many issues on the global agenda as possible into one overarching issue.”¹³⁴

As I have discussed in Chapter 2, research has also shown that territorial issues are more likely to produce conflict escalation among rival states and less likely when the states are not contiguous.¹³⁵ The fact that Iran and Iraq were contiguous neighbors with a long-

¹³¹ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 41.

¹³² Vasquez, “The Tangibility of Issues and Global Conflict”, 188-189

¹³³ Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, 81.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹³⁵ Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, 407.

standing disputed territorial issue dramatically increased the possibility for conventional warfare. Saudi Arabia, a non-contiguous neighbor and now the most prominent regional rival for Iran, presents us with an interesting parallel. The revolutionary leader Khomeini despised the Sunni monarchy, as well as its custodianship of Islam's holiest shrines, and called for the removal of the Al-Saud family, arguing that Muslims should unite as one nation (*ummah*) to administer the holy sites of Mecca and Medina.¹³⁶ Iranian belligerent discourse and funding for underground Shia movements following the Revolution of 1979 were not directed at Iraq alone, but also at Saudi Arabia. In his book the Ayatollah explicitly condemned the Saudi monarchy as an un-Islamic form of government¹³⁷, and therefore threatened the legitimacy of the Al-Saud. In its effort to export the revolution, Iran also supported the Shia movement of the Saudi Eastern province, where it partook in the propagation of leaflets, cassettes tapes and radio broadcasts that castigated the Al-Saud family for corruption and hypocrisy. Its efforts found a receptive audience, seeing as violent demonstrations erupted both in November 1979 and in February 1980, with Shia crowds attacking banks and vehicles while holding placards with Khomeini's picture.⁹²

While Iran does not (at least overtly) seek to gain full control of the kingdom's sacred sites, but rather to place them under a more international administration, we are faced with the realization that in the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia there also emerges the issue of territory imbued with symbolic meaning. Despite this similarity, and of the belligerent discourse directed towards both Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Iran only went to war with the former. It is usually difficult to determine causality in these instances, but

¹³⁶ Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 109.

¹³⁷ Khomeini and Algar. *Islam and Revolution*, 31.

here we have a clear instance of how territorial issues between contiguous neighbors influenced the possibility for interstate war. However, it is important to also keep in mind that Iraq's large Shia population was also a determining factor in the Ayatollah's behavior towards its western neighbor.

Saddam issued the three demands mentioned in the beginning of this section most likely fully aware that the Iranian government would not abide. He imbued the Shatt al-Arab and the three disputed islands with nationalist, Arab sentiment, and declared that "the will of the Arab citizen has been revived" and that Iraq was enough to "repulse the hideous threat of Iran."¹³⁸ His response to Iranian support of underground Shia movements was to bring forth Iraq's Arab identity, which "he hoped would draw a clear ethnic distinction between the Arab Iraqis and the "'racist' and resentful 'Persian' Iranians"¹³⁹. He accused the Iranian ruling clique of "using the face of religion to foment sedition and division among the ranks of the Arab nation" as "a mask to cover Persian racism and a buried resentment of the Arabs"¹⁴⁰. Special booklets for children were circulated, suggesting that Iran was out to steal the river, and asking if they have "ever heard of a thief trying to steal a whole river?"¹⁴¹

Press conferences abounded with references to the long-standing Arab-Persian conflict, and Saddam accused Iran of "unjustly maintain[ing] all the Iraqi territories which the Shah had occupied –the three Arab islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa" and declared that the Iraqi "sovereignty over the usurped Arab territories is clear."¹⁴² A few days before the war was to officially begin, Saddam tore up the Algiers

¹³⁸ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 46.

¹³⁹ Dawisha, "'Identity' and Political Survival in Saddam's Iraq.", 557.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Bengio, *Saddam's Word*, 141.

¹⁴² Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 22.

Agreement and declared that the contested territory “shall again be, as it has been throughout history, Iraqi and Arab in name and reality.”¹⁴³The Iraqi leader had therefore imbued the conflict between the two countries and the disputed territory with symbolic meaning, placing it in the context of a larger narrative and attributing intangible characteristics to what is usually a tangible issue, territory.

Aware of the deep religious divides within his own country Saddam took his focus on nationalist, rather than religious sentiment, even further. In 1980 he revealed the Saudi-backed Pan-Arab Charter which “decreed that should Iraq go to war with a non-Arab state, other Arab countries must rally behind it.”¹⁴⁴ Thus he demonstrated to his people that he benefited from the support of his Arab neighbors, creating a community against a vilified *other*, and further legitimizing his decision to commence an interstate war.

Iranian leaders framed the issue of territory as one between colonialists and natives. The Ayatollah declared that colonialism had “turned the Muslims into separate peoples” and argued that the only way of uniting the Muslim nation was by “liberating its lands from the grip of the colonialists” and by establishing an Islamic government¹⁴⁵. He thus characterized all enemies as invaders, as puppets of imperial regimes, who did not deserve to be leaders of Muslim nations. He placed himself as their savior, and offered freedom and liberty from the oppression of colonialists.

¹⁴³ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 93.

¹⁴⁴ Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 114.

¹⁴⁵ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 40.

Regime type

In Chapter 2, based on Barbara Geddes' regime categories, we established that Saddam's Iraq was a personalist regime, and predicted that we will observe no pressure from the domestic audience, and even encouragement in all military endeavors. Reports of Iraqi meetings that occurred before the war began confirm our initial assumptions, showing that no pressure existed from Saddam's elite military audience and that they did not attempt to change his mind regarding this war, despite believing that they were not properly prepared for such an endeavor.

During a July meeting senior officers meeting in Baghdad were under the impression that such a war would not begin for at least the next two years, which would therefore give them sufficient time to make the necessary preparations. A few days after the meeting, some officials even suggested to the autocratic leader that the "situation of the Shatt al-Arab is [...] very complicated, and might lead to a full scale war", but Saddam convinced them—very easily—of the necessity of a war with Iran. Analysis of meeting transcripts show the "pervasive amateurism of the decision-making processes in Iraq", and how neither Saddam nor his advisors had "a clear idea of what military operations might entail."¹⁴⁶ Despite this clear lack of preparation, officials did not dare oppose the Iraqi leader, and Saddam Hussein continued on with his military adventurism.

The Iraqi leader seems to have reached the decision to go to war with Iran without paying mind to his military advisors, and yet he also sought to legitimize his use of force against Iran in front of the Iraqi people and the world by employing nationalist sentiment and framing its eastern neighbor as an enemy of all Arabs. Since personalist regimes are

¹⁴⁶ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 48.

not restricted or pressured by a domestic audience, what explains Saddam's insistence on the Arab-Persian characteristics of the conflict? We can glean the answer to this question through the lens of Michael Barnett's¹⁴⁷ ideas. Hussein was paying attention to how his domestic audience perceives external threats because of his concern regarding perception. He sought to "give events political meaning through locating the event within an overarching narrative"¹⁴⁸—that of the long-standing conflict between Arabs and Persians. Him being the leader of a personalist regime did not equate with complete disregard for how his people and neighbors perceived his actions. He took his role as leader of the Arab world and defender of Arab people seriously, and most likely realized that in order to maintain appearances he had to somewhat justify the ensuing violence.

The available evidence of the Iranian decision-making process of that period is mainly based on one first-hand account, that of the exiled Bani Sadr. Having briefly held the office of the presidency in 1980-1981 only to be forcefully removed, his account must be taken with a grain of salt (as must all first-hand accounts, due to the possibility of the writer trying to make himself appear in a better light than his adversaries). However, based on his account as then-president and commander in chief of the army, we can infer that the decision-making process of those turbulent times revolved mainly around the Ayatollah, who saw the war as an opportunity and a "blessing"¹⁴⁹.

At the time of the Iraqi aggression in 1980 Iran was witnessing problems often associated with the installation of a new revolutionary regime (problems which were also described by Bani Sadr). The Iranian government's multiple power centers and the

¹⁴⁷ Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*, 33.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Bani Sadr and Deniau, *My Turn to Speak*, 76.

hostility some of them were exhibiting towards Ayatollah Khomeini were calling for the need to distract and unite. The Iraqi aggression helped achieve just that, and “a surge of national unity [was] overshadowing the continued jockeying for power between the Islamic Revolutionary Party and the more moderate forces associated with Bani-Sadr”¹⁵⁰, therefore helping the Iranian government “(1) divert attention from problems at home and revive a ‘rally-round the flag’ effect and (2) demonstrate a competence in foreign affairs”.¹⁵¹

This holy war presented Khomeini with the opportunity to mobilize the Iranian population against an *other*, and therefore remove his opposition. An Iraqi intelligence assessment of Iran’s internal situation in 1980 reported that Iran was descending into a “state of chaos, crimes and law breaking spreading.” It attributed Iran’s problems to multiple power centers and to the fact that many of them were hostile to Khomeini.¹⁵² The opportunity to unite these power centers presented itself in the form of external conflict, and the Ayatollah quickly seized it, without ever imagining that it could result in the prolonged and deadly conflict it became.

Considering the weakness of its military following the post-revolutionary defections (discussed below), the aggressive actions undertaken by the new Iranian regime (the discourse, the support of underground Iraqi Shia movements) can be understood when looking at the government’s internal divisions, and can thus be partly explained using the diversionary war theory and Davies’ subsequent application to the Iranian case study¹⁵³. The fight for power among the ruling elites, coupled with the high levels of unemployment

¹⁵⁰ Wright, "Implications of the Iraq-Iran War."

¹⁵¹ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 226.

¹⁵² Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 45.

¹⁵³ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 226.

and the economic problems facing the Iranian people¹⁵⁴, created the incentives to keep the war going. Bani Sadr himself makes reference to this when he mentions the Ayatollah's belief that the war was a "blessing" which would eventually help remove his adversaries from government positions¹⁵⁵.

The Iranian government of the time mostly resembled a personalist regime, with decision-making revolving mainly around the Ayatollah. While these regime characteristics will be in large part faded out following the events of 1988-1989 (for reasons which will be explained in Chapter 4), it is important to realize that in 1980 Khomeini's desire to remove his political opposition was an instrumental factor in the decision to engage in the expansionary and aggressive moves which predated the war (the support of Shia groups in Iraq, the call to overthrow the Ba'ath regime), as well as in the subsequent refusal to reach a peaceful settlement afterwards¹⁵⁶.

Military capabilities

I have briefly mentioned Saddam's belief that Iran's military was in disarray. Countless intelligence reports and "a steady stream of Iranian military visitors to Baghdad" assured him "that the revolutionary guards were an ill-trained rabble."¹⁵⁷ Transcripts of personal conversations show that Saddam was utterly convinced of Iran's acquiescence once force would become involved, depicting its military as being in "bad military shape", and calculating that the Iraqi troops would be able to easily "reach the heart of Iran."¹⁵⁸ He considered Iran to be exposed, vulnerable, and ready to fall. Both

¹⁵⁴ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 226

¹⁵⁵ Bani Sadr and Deniau, *My Turn to Speak*, 78.

¹⁵⁶ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 336.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁵⁸ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 94-95.

him and the sycophants within the Iraqi bureaucracy calculated that, in light of the Islamic Revolution and the disarray in which it had left the Iranian Army and leadership, victory would soon befall the Iraqi army and thus wipe away the “more than 450 years of history” which had shown “the expansionist covetousness of Iran in the nearby and bordering Arabian lands.”⁹⁷

The Iraqi leader calculated that the Iranian regime would have to give in to his demands in order to survive. During a meeting with his National Command he declared that the Iranians will “have to pull back their army and assume the matter is over and we can [then] do as we please.”¹⁵⁹ Thus, “a combination of apparent Iranian weaknesses, [...], and Khomeini’s active support for terrorists in Iraq led Saddam to seize on what he perceived as a temporary and unique moment.”¹⁶⁰

The actual state of the Iranian military was not very far removed from Saddam’s assumptions. Despite the high level of military preparedness and the advanced technological state of the military during the Shah’s reign, 1980 found the Iranian forces depleted and not fit for warfare. Following the Revolution, leaders, threatened by a potential military coup, thought it wise to disarm large parts of the armed forces, which they considered to possess many “excessively and unnecessarily sophisticated weapons.”¹⁶¹ Iran’s new rulers “systematically purged the military, particularly the army, while establishing their own militia of Revolutionary Guards”¹⁶², which would have no connection with the regular army. This new corps competed with the army for resources

¹⁵⁹ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 97.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Cooper and Bishop, *Iran-Iraq War in the Air*, 49.

¹⁶² Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 78

and volunteers and operated in a system of decentralized guerilla groups, but lacked the military training and arms needed for proper functioning.¹⁶³

Iraqi military assessments noted that the Iranian army was “generally inefficient and operating at only 50 percent of its prior effectiveness”, with many soldiers defecting because of their allegiance to the Shah.¹⁶⁴ During 1980 the Iranian Army’s best units had been deployed to the country’s northwestern region to quell a low-level Kurdish insurgency, and purges following a failed coup left its ranks even more depleted than before.¹⁶⁵ Making matters worse, there was a sharp decline in discipline and morale which some have been attributed to 1. the fact that units were led by committees made up of clergy; 2. the lack of training; and 3. the lack of maintenance or spare parts¹⁶⁶.

The Iraqi army had numerous advantages over its Iranian counterpart. Iraq had doubled the size of its army in the previous decade, and had added thousands of new tanks and armored vehicles. It had also improved the training and equipment of its forces, and had at least 3 times more tanks, combat aircraft, and artillery pieces than Iran¹⁶⁷. Despite these advantages the Iraqi army found itself unable to defeat its enemy, and scholars have argued that “Iraq's crucial mistake was that it did not use its advantage decisively” and that its grand strategy failed “not because it was too ambitious, but because it was too narrow; not because Iraq lacked the military power to attain its national goals, but because it assigned its forces too limited objectives”¹⁶⁸.

¹⁶³ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 78.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁶⁷ Ward, *Immortal : A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*, 248.

¹⁶⁸ Karsh, "Military Power and Foreign Policy Goals".

Realist concepts employed by Stephen Walt can help lead us towards a better understanding of the miscalculations which occurred on both ends. In *Revolution and War*⁸⁵, Walt offers a tentative explanation for the start of the Iran-Iraq war, which revolves around information scarcity –a common occurrence in post-revolutionary states- as well as around the impact of revolutionary ideology on fact distortion. He argues that false perceptions of advantage may occur on both sides, and inaccurate perceptions of intent may distort facts, resulting in a volatile situation with a high probability of escalation. Walt's *balance of threat* approach to foreign policy states that a state's perceived level of threat depends on the enemy's power, "aggressive intentions", the proximity of the threat, as well as its offensive capabilities¹⁶⁹. Iraq saw the newly-installed Iranian regimes as weak, aggressive, and uncomfortably close. Saddam knew that its neighbor's military was in disarray, yet it considered its covert actions (supporting Shia movements in Iraq) and discourse encouraging the spread of the Islamic Revolution as threatening and aggressive, and therefore decided that toppling the revolutionary regime was his best option.

The Gulf War

The second case study proposed to analyze the factors which increase the possibility for interstate war between Iran and Saudi Arabia is the latter's involvement in the First Gulf War (to be referred to as simply the Gulf War) of 1991. The conflict began as Iraq's invasion of its small southern neighbor Kuwait, and its analysis is beneficial for this

¹⁶⁹ Walt, *Revolution and War*, 264.

thesis because it presents us with the only instance since 1979, besides the more recent conflict in Yemen, in which Saudi Arabia engaged in interstate warfare.

The Iran-Iraq war was ended through a United Nations-brokered ceasefire in August 1988, but a year later the two countries had yet to begin negotiating a permanent peace treaty. A July 1989 meeting between the Iranian and Iraqi foreign ministers left the world hopeful: prospects for peace suddenly appeared in sight. Two weeks later the situation in the region once again appeared grim: Saddam accused its neighbor Kuwait of 1. siphoning crude oil from oil fields located along their common border and 2. of over-producing crude oil and thus breaking with OPEC production quotas. He emphasized that low oil prices had resulted in Iraq's deprivation of critical oil revenues and went on to accuse Kuwait of conspiring to keep oil prices low in an effort to cater to Western nations. The Iraqi leader also demanded that Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia cancel approximately \$40 billion of Iraqi foreign debt, accrued as a result of the Iran-Iraq war, declaring that Iraq had performed a service for all Arabs by acting as a buffer against Iran. These loans, which had been provided in order to help restrain the Islamic Republic and its goals of spreading the revolution, were seen by Saddam as grants in support of Iraq's war effort against Iran.¹⁷⁰

President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt initiated negotiations between Iraq and Kuwait when he saw that Iraq had begun gathering troops on Kuwait's border. Hussein broke off the negotiations and on August 2, 1990 ordered the invasion of its smallest neighbor. Emir Jaber, leader of Kuwait, fled to Saudi Arabia where confusion abounded: King Fahd himself deemed the rumors of the invasion as nonsense when they first reached him (he

¹⁷⁰ Paul, "Iraq's Odious Debt."

tried calling Saddam Hussein to discuss and clarify what to him seemed to be a misunderstanding, but could not reach the Iraqi leader¹⁷¹), and the entire country was in disbelief.

Numerous other countries stood behind Saddam's invasion. The support of Palestine was arguably the hardest blow for the Saudis, who had been the largest financial supporter of the Palestinians, having paid approximately \$1 billion or more to the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1980s. Palestinian support of Iraq was therefore seen as a betrayal of trust.¹⁷² Jordan and Yemen also supported the Iraqi aggression, with Yemeni television going as far as redrawing its weather map to "relocate its borders hundreds of miles northwards, painting vast swaths of Saudi territory in Yemeni colors."¹⁷³ Libya, Tunisia, Sudan, Algeria, Mauritania, and the Afghan government, which had been recently installed with the help of Saudi money, distanced themselves from Saudi Arabia¹⁷⁴. The Saudis felt threatened and surrounded.

Despite such obvious aggression the Saudi King still held hopes for a quick and non-violent resolution. After having attempted to call the Iraqi leader, he asked King Hussein of Jordan to try as well, but the latter was also unsuccessful. When he eventually reached Saddam, King Hussein set up a meeting with him and then proceeded to ask President Mubarak to reach out to King Fahd and other Arab leaders and ask them to refrain from any incendiary remarks for the next 48 hours; King Fahd agreed. When he eventually got in contact with Saddam, the latter assured him that the military troop movements were an exercise, and this seemed to be confirmed when the Iraqi

¹⁷¹ Nyang and Hendricks, *A Line in the Sand*, 76.

¹⁷² Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 127-128.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

leader made a statement saying he would withdraw on August 5th. However, no such withdrawal occurred, and all hope was lost when the Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister released a statement saying “certain Arab nations” were conspiring against Iraq by keeping oil prices low.¹⁷⁵

A critical difference emerges in this case when compared to the Iran-Iraq war: Saddam Hussein did not declare war directly on Saudi Arabia, nor did it seem to even wish that such a war with the Custodian of the Holy Mosques happens. It focused on his smallest neighbor Kuwait, believing that the planned invasion would go smoothly and therefore would increase his standing in the Muslim World, as well as his country’s revenues (because of the Kuwaiti oil fields which he expected to acquire). The reasons behind Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the war are therefore all the more important for the puzzle presented in this thesis. Whereas Iran was faced with armed incursions on its territory, Saudi Arabia was not directly threatened –or at least it did not appear to be.

Issues

The reasons behind Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait are beyond the scope of this paper, but they have been briefly mentioned above: oil and money. Iraq expected to have the debt it accrued during the Iran-Iraq war erased, seeing as it had performed a service for all Arabs in helping stop the Persian threat. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates were its biggest lenders, totaling a debt of about 40\$ billion, and Saddam could not see how he would be able to repay this debt, especially considering what he saw as Kuwait’s desire to keep oil prices low in an effort to cater to Western nations¹⁷⁶.

¹⁷⁵ Nyang and Hendricks, *A Line in the Sand*, 77.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait presented Saudi Arabia with one of its biggest political challenges since the kingdom's establishment in 1926. The invasion put Saudi Arabia in an impossible situation, forcing it to choose between protecting its national interest, on the one hand, and abiding by the 1989 non-aggression pact it had signed with Iraq, on the other. The rapid success of the Iraqi army against Kuwait alarmed King Fahd, who now had Iraq's army knocking on the door of the Ghawar oil fields (see Appendix C), Saudi Arabia's most valuable petroleum fields. Iraqi control of this area, in addition to the Kuwaiti and Iraqi reserves it already controlled, would have significantly increased Iraqi oil reserves, giving it a major economic advantage. This shift in the military and economic balance of the region was unacceptable to both the Saudis and the Western powers. Riyadh came to believe that Saddam Hussein was about to invade the oil rich Eastern region of the country, that he was no longer to be trusted and that he therefore should be immediately dealt with in order to avoid any territorial aggression towards Saudi Arabia¹⁷⁷.

Once the Iraqi invasion was official and Saddam declared it had annexed Kuwait, Saudi leaders debated the appropriate path of action. Negative assessments of their own military capabilities (discussed in more detail below) pushed Saudi leaders towards turning to the United States and other NATO members for assistance. Reports of Saudi discussions with the American generals mention pictures provided by the Americans showing Iraqi tanks on the ill-defined Iraqi-Saudi border¹⁷⁸. These pictures, if they indeed existed, would have constituted the reason for the Saudi decision to enter the war and call for foreign assistance. However, reports have since surfaced that the pictures

¹⁷⁷ Alghosaibi, *The Gulf Crisis*.

¹⁷⁸ Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 133.

were either fake or non-existent¹⁷⁹, and I have been unable to find a definite consensus on the matter.

Despite the difficulty of assessing the truthfulness of these pictures, some facts do not change. Iraqi proximity to the Ghawar oil fields was not the only challenge present in the Iraqi-Saudi relationship. The Ba'athist regime had a number of grievances with Saudi Arabia, and Saddam voiced these complaints loud and clear:

1. The authoritarian leader was concerned with the debt it owed to both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, but the money owed to the latter –approximately \$26 billion–represented the bulk of the sum. Initially King Fahd had shown himself willing to forgive the debt, but once Iraq invaded Kuwait the King's resolve against forgiveness strengthened;¹⁸⁰
2. The long desert border between Iraq and Saudi Arabia was also ill-defined and a source of tension¹⁸¹;
3. Saddam's verbal attacks against the kingdom accused the latter of being an illegitimate, American-backed guardian of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Saddam "combined the language of the Islamist groups that had recently fought in Afghanistan with the rhetoric Iran had long used to attack the Saudis. The addition of Allahu Akbar to the flag of Iraq and images of Saddam praying in Kuwait were part of a plan to win the support of the Muslim Brotherhood and detach Islamist Mujahideen from Saudi Arabia."¹⁸² Both the Muslim

¹⁷⁹ Peterson, "In War, Some Facts Less Factual."

¹⁸⁰ Nyang and Hendricks, *A Line in the Sand*, 47.

¹⁸¹ "Gulf War." New World Encyclopedia".

¹⁸² Ibid.

Brotherhood and radical Islamist groups are seen by the government in Riyadh as direct threats to Saudi national security.

Riyadh's concern with Saddam's overt expansionary tendencies and the proximity of the hostilities (both Iraq and Kuwait are its contiguous neighbors) were instrumental factors in Saudi Arabia's decision to become directly involved in Kuwait's protection. From the perspective of the IR school of Realism, Saudi Arabia's decision to enter the war and to call for U.S. assistance is understandable: its livelihood, and therefore its national interest, were directly threatened. The enemy was at its door, and the possibility of Riyadh losing its most important oil fields was unfathomable.

It is worth mentioning that Iraq and Saudi Arabia had been allies for at least the previous decade, and that a non-aggression pact had been signed between the two only two years before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. However, pacts and alliances of these nature are only as reliant as the parties comprising them, and Iraq lost all credibility in August 1991 seeing as it had previously provided assurances that it would not invade Kuwait¹⁸³. Saudi Arabia could no longer count on Saddam Hussein's word, and his actions were beyond threatening. Two additional remarks stand as proof of the danger present for Saudi Arabia: in a March 1992 speech Saddam declared that his greatest mistake was that he did not invade Saudi Arabia when he had the chance, immediately after the Kuwaiti conquest¹⁸⁴; and the Saudi high command admitted later on that "during the first week of August the Iraqi Republican Guard could have occupied al-Hasa province in six hours."¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Nyang and Hendricks, *A Line in the Sand*, 58.

¹⁸⁴ Abir, Mordechai. *Saudi Arabia*, 245.

¹⁸⁵ Cronin, *Armies and State-building in the Modern Middle East*, 238.

The reasons behind Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Gulf War pertain mostly to territory, a tangible issue. The Chapter 2 discussion on territory and contiguity spoke mostly of rival states, and yet here we have two countries which had not been rivals until the point of the invasion. King Fahd's reluctance to engage in this interstate war on the Kuwaiti side shows the difficulty of such a decision when states which had previously been allies are involved. However, when the states in question are contiguous and important territory is threatened, the chances of interstate war are substantially increased, even when the states involved had signed a non-aggression pact two years before hostilities were to commence.

The territory which led to Saudi Arabia's involvement in the war was considered to be of national importance¹⁸⁶: it contained 70 billion barrels of remaining reserves, having more oil reserves than all but seven other countries¹⁸⁷. Saudi Arabia's oil revenues account for 70-80% of the kingdom's total income,¹⁸⁸ and losing its largest oil fields was not a possibility they wanted to even consider. While Saddam had not overtly threatened the Saudi Eastern province (a topic up for debate considering the alleged pictures presented by the U.S. to the Saudi leadership), the possibility of it falling in the hands of the former-ally-now-turned-enemy Iraq was unfathomable.

Regime type

Compared with the case of Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, accounts of the Saudi decision-making process are more detailed in the Gulf War literature. These accounts show how disagreement among the Saudi ruling elite regarding increased Iraqi militancy

¹⁸⁶ "One Map That Explains the Dangerous Saudi-Iranian Conflict."

¹⁸⁷ Cunningham, "Here Are The World's Five Most Important Oil Fields."

¹⁸⁸ Mason, *Foreign Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia*, 37-38.

following the end of the Iran-Iraq war “caused Riyadh to opt for inertia.”¹⁸⁹ The royal house was split between those who advocated a “continuation of Iraq’s appeasement” and those that “recommended the creation of a Saudi-Syrian-Egyptian axis instead of, or in addition to, the feeble GCC.”¹⁹⁰ No final policy decisions were reached when the government was split in such a way, thus showing how important the consensus of the ruling elite was in the decision-making process (a consensus which we have previously discussed the importance of on page 17).

Once there was no denying the Iraqi aggression and proximity to Saudi territories, the leaders in Riyadh debated the possibility of involvement in the Kuwaiti crisis. Behind closed doors, King Fahd was seeking counsel from his ministers, family, the military, tribes, and the *ulema* –the religious sheiks.¹⁹¹ The *ulema* were initially firm in their refusal to accept help from foreign troops, but by August 13th they seemed to understand that, were Saddam to take their most precious oil fields or to eventually march into Riyadh, their unrivaled prestige and closeness to the Saudi centers of power would end. The official announcement of the religious sheiks argued that it was the duty of the good Muslim ruler “to take every means to deter aggressions and the incursion of evil.”¹⁹² An official fatwa was also issued, calling the Iraqi leader “the enemy of God” and blessing “not only all Muslims participating in the war to evict Iraqi forces from Kuwait, but non-Muslims as well”.¹⁹³

The series of events presented at the beginning of this section shows that King Fahd had initially attempted to give Saddam the benefit of the doubt and refrained from

¹⁸⁹ Abir, Mordechai. *Saudi Arabia*, 172.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Miller, “War in the Gulf.”

¹⁹² Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 80.

¹⁹³ Miller, “War in the Gulf.”

incendiary and accusatory remarks. As the days went by it became more and more clear that Saddam's intentions were not peaceful, neither towards Kuwait nor towards the Saudi Kingdom. The leaders in Riyadh had no choice but to take the path that would lead to the protection of their national interest, revenues, and peoples.

The restraint initially manifested by the Saudi government can be better understood when discussing its regime type. The literature review presented in Chapter 2 involved Jessica Week's discussion of autocratic dynastic monarchies and of how the ruling family can exercise pressure on the monarch. King Fahd's counsel with his ministers, brothers, the military, and the *ulema*, coupled with the need for the latter's seal of approval, is directly correlated with the fact that the Saudi Kingdom is an autocratic dynastic monarchy. This audience to which the King partly answers to, comprised primarily of a civilian elite (of which the ministers, brothers, ministers, and *ulema* are part of), needed to be appeased and convinced of the need for engagement in an interstate war. A decision which would not have involved the members of the ruling family and the *ulema* would have presented the monarch with the possibility of losing the family's support and the endorsement of the strong and powerful Saudi religious institution, upon which the creation of the kingdom itself depended in the 1930's¹⁹⁴.

Military capabilities

The Saudi leadership was aware that it was not militarily prepared to engage Iraq and expel it from Kuwait on its own. The Arab bloc which had condemned the Iraqi invasion was also unable to construct a unified, coherent response, being split among

¹⁹⁴ Nonneman, "Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy".

factions which sought different solutions and approaches.¹⁹⁵ The absence of a unified Arab response, coupled with the Saudi assessment of its military strength and subsequent realization that it could not take on the Iraqi military on its own were the most important factors which led to the decision to 1. intervene, and 2. seek foreign assistance in the form of U.S. military troops.

The decision to intervene on the Kuwaiti side can be attributed to the pervading Saudi fear that Iraq would not stop at the Saudi border, but seek to advance even further and thus threaten the Ghawar oil fields, the most important Saudi oil fields which are found in its Eastern province (which is also predominantly Shiite, causing additional concerns¹⁹⁶; for a better understanding of the location of the oil fields, see Appendix C). The Saudi high command admitted later on that “during the first week of August the Iraqi Republican Guard could have occupied al-Hasa province in six hours.”¹⁹⁷ The Kingdom was faced with the realization that the 3 billion dollars which had been invested in the military during the previous 20 years had “left the country practically defenseless”¹⁹⁸, and that it could not protect its territory against a foreign invasion.

Despite the political crisis which the leadership was aware would arise after the introduction of foreign troops on Saudi soil¹⁹⁹, Riyadh was presented with a daunting choice: either accept a potential challenge to their legitimacy (the King himself has the title of Custodian of the Holy Mosques, and the Kingdom prides itself with housing and protecting these holy sites; accepting the inability to protect its territory, as well as inviting foreign, non-Muslim troops within, was seen by many as delegitimizing the Saudi

¹⁹⁵ Alghosaibi, *The Gulf Crisis*, 31.

¹⁹⁶ "One Map That Explains the Dangerous Saudi-Iranian Conflict."

¹⁹⁷ Cronin, *Armies and State-building in the Modern Middle East*, 238.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 238.

monarchy) and deal with it when it arises, or risk losing its major source of revenue, the one which had bestowed upon it its heightened geopolitical importance. The Kingdom chose the former.

CHAPTER 4: AVOIDING WAR

1987 crisis

In April 1988 Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic ties with Iran. With the help of Omani mediation the two countries renewed their diplomatic relations in March 1991, after a series of conciliatory meetings and compromises. Before discussing the steps that led to this escalation, as well as the events that followed it, it is important to place the two countries and the issues at stake in a broader context.

In 1987 the Iraq-Iran war was in its seventh year, with no resolution in sight. The Tanker War was escalating, with 187 ships hit in 1987 –compared to 80 ships the previous year. Following the American reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers and the introduction of foreign escorts in the gulf, an “atmosphere of crisis”²⁰⁰ engulfed the region. Despite having been the aggressor, Iraq was enjoying the support of its Arab neighbors and the U.S., and received billions of dollars in aid, oil, and military equipment. Iran, on the other hand, was internationally isolated and felt the effects of this war on its economy. The Saudi government made use of its strong standing in OPEC to harm Iran and keep oil prices low, thus seriously reducing Iran’s capacity to earn the foreign exchange needed to keep its war machine going.²⁰¹ Iran was left weakened and isolated, a vulnerable position which its adversaries took advantage of.

Increasingly marginalized and secluded, with the war balance tilting in Iraq’s favor and Iranian coffers depleted, the government in Tehran was also dealing with the challenges resulting from its internal struggles. Primary evidence of this domestic

²⁰⁰ Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, 161.

²⁰¹ Fürtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia*, 64.

instability can be found in the autobiography of the ousted Iranian President Bani Sadr, who wrote about the “ideological and political warfare” that had erupted between the Right (represented by Khamenei), the Left (headed by Montazeri) and a center-left group (led by Rafsanjani) in 1985.²⁰² In June 1987 the Islamic Republic Party, the “backbone of the regime” for the previous 7 years, was disbanded. The end of the year “found the regime divided, disoriented, [and] in turmoil from top to bottom.”²⁰³

Issues

The annual Hajj pilgrimage has always been a source of contention between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The controversy is “a conflict that is simultaneously political and sectarian, that combines a present-day clash of interests with the historic clash of sects in Islam”²⁰⁴. From the times of Sunni Ottoman rule Sunnis believed that the Shi’ites felt “compelled to pollute the holy premises” (sometimes even with excrement), while the Shi’ites believed the Sunnis did not “respect Mecca as a sanctuary”²⁰⁵. During the early days of the Saudi Kingdom Ibn Saud occupied, besieged, and bombarded Medina, a place that holds special significance for Shiite Muslims because it is the reputed resting place of the Prophet’s daughter and four of the Twelve Imams. This led to a general strike in Iran, and the Iranian government refused to even recognize Ibn Saud’s rule. Eventually a treaty of friendship was concluded in 1929, guaranteeing that Iran’s pilgrims would enjoy proper treatment during their pilgrimage.²⁰⁶

²⁰² Bani Sadr and Deniau, *My Turn to Speak*, 197.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 200-201.

²⁰⁴ Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, 162.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 163-165.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

In July 1987, during the month of the Hajj, Mohammad Mousavi Koiniha, Iran's former pilgrimage representative and a "champion of extremists who opposed all limitations on Iran's pilgrims", delivered a very provocative speech declaring that during the Hajj "a mere march or demonstration will not suffice."²⁰⁷ He demanded that the Saudis allow the Iranian pilgrimage representative to enter the Great Mosque for one night and there conduct a referendum over the decision of the Emir of Kuwait to invite foreign escorts for Kuwaiti tankers. The statement touched a raw nerve for Saudi authorities, who were also allied with these foreign "escorts", and they began suspecting that Iranian pilgrims would try to take over the mosque in an attempt to humiliate the Saudi government. An unnamed official source in Saudi Arabia went as far as warning the Iranians that consultations in the Great Mosque would constitute an innovation in Islam, and "anyone who attempts to innovate in Islam will go to hell."²⁰⁸

Despite Koiniha's speech, the actual Iranian pilgrimage representative did not request any special accommodations and merely asked that Iranian pilgrims be allowed to conduct their demonstration in Mecca, as they had previously done in the past few years. The Saudis agreed to these peaceful, routine demonstrations, yet remained suspicious and even asked that the march be cancelled, a request that fell on deaf Iranian ears.

The actual events of the Hajj remain shrouded in doubt, but neither country has produced evidence that the other acted deliberately to provoke violence. This did not stop Tehran and Riyadh from making accusations and pointing fingers at the other side. Following the tragic events that left hundreds dead in the streets of Mecca,

²⁰⁷ Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, 171-172.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

provocative remarks and statements became the norm. The Saudi interior minister Prince Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz charged that the “real objective of the Iranian pilgrims was to ‘spoil the pilgrimage’”²⁰⁹, and thus associated the demonstrators with the legendary Shi’ite “defilers”. The Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini declared that the Saudi rulers, “these vile and ungodly Wahhabis, are like daggers which have always pierced the heart of the Muslims from the back”, and called them a “band of heretics”. Rafsanjani himself, a man seen as more tolerant of the Saudis, gave a speech during which he referred to the 19th century Wahhabi massacres of Shiites, and said the Wahhabis are capable of and will “commit any kind of crime.”²¹⁰ Responding to all these inflammatory remarks, an Iranian crowd stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran, resulting in the death of a Saudi diplomat.

The most prominent issue of this crisis revolved around the centuries-old dispute between the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam. Religion, an intangible issue to its core, was endlessly brought forth and carefully located within “an overarching narrative”²¹¹ in an attempt to give the event political meaning. Both the Iranian and Saudi leadership had made reference to historical events which served to diminish the other’s standing and to justify their own actions. The Iranian leaders accused the Saudi leadership of improper management of the holiest sites in Islam, invoking derogatory names which were meant to attack whatever legitimacy the kingdom had in managing these holy places. The Saudis recalled instances of Shiite defilers of the Holy Sites, thus attempting to portray the Iranians as unfit to make demands about the management of these sites.

²⁰⁹ Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, 174.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*, 33.

Following the Hajj tragedy and the embassy attack, both countries engaged in large-scale campaigns to influence Muslim opinion abroad. Saudi Arabia organized an Islamic conference in Mecca, during which all the blame was placed on Iran. Tehran retaliated with its own congress, during which Rafsanjani called for the liberation of Mecca and the establishment of an "Islamic International" that would govern Mecca as a free city. Rhetoric during these gatherings was so inflammatory that during the Iranian conference a Sunni cleric went as far as denouncing the Saudis as Jews, while Saudi clients declared support for the use of force in quelling Iranian "sedition".²¹²

When the time came to think of the next pilgrimage Riyadh was "reluctant to impose an outright ban on Iran's pilgrims, lest they open Saudi Arabia to the charge of denying Muslims the opportunity to fulfill a fundamental obligation of Islam"²¹³. However, they made it clear that no marches would be allowed, and reduced the number of allowed Iranian pilgrims from 150,000 to 45,000, a significant restriction which they were fully aware would lead to an Iranian boycott of the pilgrimage. The Saudi decision was endorsed by the foreign ministers of the forty-six-nation Islamic Conference Organization that met in Jordan in late March. Iran withdrew from the conference, declaring that "the Muslim pilgrimage area is for all Muslims and no one has the right to rule it."²¹⁴

Despite the seriousness of the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran in October 1987, Saudi Arabia did not sever diplomatic ties at the time of the attack. It did so in April 1988, causing many observers to speculate as to the real cause of this diplomatic move. Some have posited that Riyadh waited until April so as to make it impossible for Iranian

²¹² Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, 175-176.

²¹³ Ibrahim, "To Thwart Iran, Saudis Limit Mecca Pilgrims."

²¹⁴ Ibid.

pilgrims to obtain visas²¹⁵. If this was indeed the desired outcome, then the tactic was successful. A combination of both the Saudi restrictions mentioned in the previous paragraph, coupled with the severance of ties, led to the Iranian decision to boycott the pilgrimage. Tehran accused the Saudis of preventing Muslims from fulfilling their Islamic duties, and the Ayatollah accused the Saudis of “sedition and espionage” during his message on the first anniversary of the “massacre”.²¹⁶

The 1987 crisis was another instance of the Sunni-Shia divide, but it was embedded in a fight for regional dominance which had been especially prominent since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Intangible issues of this sort are more likely to “generate more conflict” when “there is frequent contention over the issue” and when “diplomatic sources are employed”²¹⁷ –both conditions being present in this case. Symbolic stakes make actors less flexible²¹⁸, and can thus result in more instances of escalatory moves. Both actors sought to embed the current crisis into a history of conflict, attempting to justify their actions and to portray the other as an enemy of pure Islam.

Once the Gulf War was over, both Iran and Saudi Arabia changed their policies towards each other. Many Iranian political figures understood that the reconstruction of the country should now receive priority, and this involved encouraging investment and trade. Ayatollah Khomeini was seemingly reassessing the Saudi-Iranian relationship and, according to Iran’s Deputy Foreign Minister at the time Abbas Maleki, said during a private meeting that “despite any differences between Tehran and Riyadh, it was vital that the road to Hajj should remain open.” To further signal their intentions, Tehran went

²¹⁵ Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, 176-177.

²¹⁶ Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, 176-177.

²¹⁷ Vasquez, “The Tangibility of Issues and Global Conflict”, 188-189

²¹⁸ Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, 81.

on to curb support for al-Shiraziyyin, a radical group who had a following among Saudi Shiites. Khamenei himself, the Supreme Leader who followed Khomeini, declared that “reconstruction has become our nation’s slogan.”²¹⁹ These conciliatory moves, coupled with Saudi Arabia’s understanding that “it was too unusual for two Muslim countries and near neighbors not to have relations”, led to the decision that the Hajj should remain open for Iran.²²⁰

The same month that Resolution 598 was signed, Iran and Saudi Arabia began secret talks about enhancing bilateral relations. Despite these meetings Riyadh did not immediately renew its ties with Tehran, maintaining that the threat was constant; the Saudi press was even going as far as calling for the removal of the Iranian leadership and supporting Iraq’s push into Iranian territory. According to a Saudi source “Iran had provoked unrest in Arab states and plotted the overthrow of Bahrain’s and Kuwait’s royal families. As a result, the kingdom held on to the view that if Iran were granted a chance, it would likely return to those old policies.”²²¹ Iran went on with its plan to turn over a new leaf in its foreign policy, and did so by trying to enhance relations with the other Gulf States. Seeing that its GCC partners were welcoming of Tehran’s attempts, “the Saudi leaders became aware they were risking a breach in the hitherto solid cohesion of the GCC” and went on to “pressurize the Iraqi leadership to show some flexibility towards Iranian demands following the ceasefire.”²²²

²¹⁹ Fürtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia*, 94.

²²⁰ Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 122-123.

²²¹ Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, 178.

²²² Fürtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia*, 99.

Regime type

The discussion on the Iranian and Saudi regime types of Chapter 2 has shown how both countries have a regime elite which is capable of restricting and punishing the leader in the event of a poorly made decision regarding interstate war. Unfortunately, due to the nature of their closed, autocratic regimes, it has been rather difficult to find evidence of behind the scenes discussions.

The change in the Iranian polity following the end of the Iran-Iraq war, and the signal which it sent to Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries in terms of Iran's intentions, help shed some light on the state of the Iranian government and the decision-making process of the times. As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini significant changes to the Iranian polity moved the regime away from personalist tendencies and closer to those characteristics of single-party regimes. The most important of these changes was the "significant day-to-day authority over military policy" which was granted to the president in 1989. When Rafsanjani was elected his administration was granted "the political strength to undertake changes to rationalize the military establishment and correct administrative problems."²²³ Thus the Iranian decision-making process began to include other actors, most notably the president

The death of Ayatollah Khomeini and the presidency of Rafsanjani also sparked hope on the other side of the Gulf that an improvement in relations might follow. Iranian hardliners continued to wield their influence and would thwart many attempts at reconciliation but, despite their efforts at maintaining the spirit of the Islamic Revolution, they had lost their leader. Iranian diplomacy lost much of its revolutionary élan and

²²³ Ward, *Immortal : A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*, 304.

engaged in more normal state-to-state diplomacy. Elements of the regime never abandoned the rhetoric of, nor the desire for, exporting the revolution, but Iran sought improved relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Turkey, Egypt²²⁴.

Rafsanjani “showed no real interest in the pursuit of Khomeini’s messianic goals and he appeared to want to limit his attachment to these goals to the rhetorical level”, thus helping the country “reassess the priorities of the Islamic revolution and to produce a climate more favorable to economic reconstruction.” National interest “gained the upper hand over the radical philosophy of the revolution”²²⁵, and the president took on more responsibility in the foreign policy department, as shown by his approach to the GCC states²²⁶. Also an example of the increased power of the president was the interdiction he placed on the IRGC and Basij fighters to enter Iraq and help Iraqi Shi’is when a rebellion broke out in 1991²²⁷. This is particularly important considering the power the Ayatollah had previously had over the IRGC and other military groups.

Finding primary sources describing the Saudi decision-making process of the 1987-1991 time period has proven rather difficult, but I believe that an analysis of the actions taken by the Saudi government during this time helps shed light on the inner workings of the government. When the 1987 crisis commenced, Iran and Iraq were in their final year of their protracted war, and Saudi Arabia was supporting Iraq. The Kingdom’s demands towards Iran and the escalatory moves it engaged in (the severing of diplomatic ties) were actions taken mostly in an attempt to further isolate Iran. However, when the Gulf War broke out the Saudi leadership realized that it was now facing two

²²⁴ Fürtig, *Iran’s Rivalry with Saudi Arabia*, 83.

²²⁵ Fürtig, *Iran’s Rivalry with Saudi Arabia*, 94.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 129.

enemies, both of which were the other important power centers of the region. Riyadh was anxious to prevent potential conflict in its Eastern province, and since it believed that there existed the possibility that Saddam would attempt to incite the Saudi Shia population against the state, it decided to take action.

In Chapter 2 we discussed the Kingdom's leadership structure, and mentioned the core elites (royal family), religious elites (*ulema*), and commercial and bureaucratic elites²²⁸, which operate on the basis of a "consensus-seeking principle, both within the royal family and between it and other important constituencies".²²⁹ In light of the perceived danger from the Iraqi leadership and the wish to avoid any turmoil in the Eastern region, the government launched a series of moves aimed at appeasing the Saudi Shi'is. Turki al-Faisal, then Director of the General Intelligence agency, helped King Fahd in his attempts to grant more citizenship rights to Saudi Shi'is. Prince Mohammed, the King's son and then-governor of the Eastern Province, introduced political reforms that "encouraged Shi'i dissidents to return to the kingdom and insist on defending it during the Gulf War."²³⁰ The various elites were thus coming together and putting forward a coherent foreign policy, in line with the country's interests at the time.

Military capabilities

When discussing the 1987-1991 period of turmoil between Iran and Saudi Arabia, any discussion of their military capabilities must take into account their involvement in the two wars presented in Chapter 4. These wars were both instrumental in the absence of

²²⁸ Lecha and Zaccara, "Saudi Arabia: family, religion, army, and oil", 155-161.

²²⁹ Nonneman, "Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy", 336.

²³⁰ Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 128.

interstate war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, seeing as they affected the two countries' militaries and financial reserves, and thus encouraged a more cautionary approach.

When the 1987 crisis commenced, Iran and Iraq were in their final year of their protracted war, and Saudi Arabia was supporting Iraq. The Kingdom's demands towards Iran and the escalatory moves it engaged in (the severing of diplomatic ties) were actions taken mostly in an attempt to further isolate Iran. Although primary evidence of this sort is hard to come by, one can imagine that the leadership in Riyadh was aware that despite its escalation, Iran was militarily and economically depleted, and would not engage in an interstate war with Saudi Arabia when it was still bogged down in the war with its western neighbor.

In June 1988 King Fahd managed to persuade Saddam Hussein to accept a ceasefire. Ten days later, Iran accepted UN Resolution 598, which signaled the end to the Iran-Iraq war. Tehran and its leaders had been finding themselves increasingly pressured to end hostilities, both from the weary Iranian population and from the international community. In addition to the obvious economic strain resulting from the war, another factor that might have played a role in Iran's decision was its fear of wider US involvement in the region: the U.S. had been raising its presence in the Gulf during the Tanker War, and had also shot down an Iranian passenger plane over the Gulf²³¹.

Iran's military following the Iran-Iraq war was in complete disarray. As previously discussed the army was in bad shape following the 1979 revolution (a fact which Saddam was informed of and which led to his aggression), and the 8 year war only depleted its ranks and arms even further. Having been left with very little capacity to fight, one can

²³¹ Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 122-123.

assume that the Iranian leadership's assessment of its military was instrumental towards the more cautionary approach which followed the end of the war²³².

Resolution

Throughout 1990 the two countries maintained contact and continued their attempts at finding a resolution. In September (a month after Iraq invaded Kuwait), the Saudi foreign minister Sa'ud al-Faysal met with Velayati, his Iranian counterpart, to discuss the 1991 pilgrimage. This was the first meeting between senior officials representing the two Muslim nations, and it merely involved a discussion on their respective positions and requests. The meeting was, apparently, a result of the mediation efforts of Syrian President Hafez Assad, a key ally of Iran and Saddam Hussein's rival. Assad, who had also entered into an alliance with the United States and Saudi Arabia against Iraq, visited Tehran and encouraged Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani to speed up efforts to end the feud with Riyadh. Assad appears to have been in a particularly favorable position as a mediator, considering his long-standing relationship with Iran and his newly-developed alliance with Saudi Arabia. He had attempted to mediate between the two countries as early as August 1987, a week after the Mecca riot, and his personal relationship with the Saudi King and Crown Prince helped Riyadh accept the Iranian ally as a mediator.²³³

After their initial meeting, the Saudi foreign minister declared that "we are very eager to see the Muslim people of Iran travel to Saudi Arabia this year to perform their

²³² Ward, *Immortal : A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*, 308-311.

²³³ Hijazi, "Syria Tries to Calm Saudis and Iran on Mecca Riots."

pilgrimage rituals.” Velayati declared that “our pilgrims will be able to perform the important religious-political *hajj* rituals this year.”²³⁴

There was a total of 5 meetings between these 2 diplomats, and with the help of Omani mediation a written agreement was produced, signed in March 1991:

1. It set the number of Iranian pilgrims to 110,000;
2. Iran would be allowed to conduct one rally in a fixed place in Mecca. It was understood that the pilgrims could not criticize Muslim governments;
3. Iranian commitment to prevent “any flow of demonstrating pilgrims from the rallying point”²³⁵.

Thus diplomatic relations were renewed, and Iranian pilgrims attended the 1991 Hajj. Right before the pilgrimage, Rafsanjani and his newly-appointed pilgrimage representative Reyshahri made several statements that set a conciliatory tone for the upcoming religious rituals and demonstrations. Velayati himself arrived as a pilgrim and met with King Fahd and his Saudi counterpart several times, announcing that “Saudi Arabia’s conduct has been proper, and we hope that in view of good understanding between Iran and Saudi Arabia we will see the pilgrimage rituals performed more splendidly than ever before in coming years.” After the *hajj*, the two countries raised their diplomatic ties to ambassadorial level, and Saudi Arabia agreed to receive 3000 Iranians a week over the following 7 months.²³⁶

²³⁴ Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, 178.

²³⁵ Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, 178.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 179-189.

Conclusion

The events following the 1987 Hajj must be analyzed in light of the regional situation at the end of the 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's. The Iran-Iraq War had enormous influence on how the situation progressed, and the Gulf War was also instrumental in determining the outcome of this crisis. The Middle East's most important power centers of the time were Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia (a situation that was not to be repeated in the events that followed the 2015 Hajj). Iraq was an instrumental actor in both the wars that unfolded during those years –it being the aggressor- and therefore its role is undeniably important.

The end of the Iraq-Iran war was crucial in determining the foreign policy trajectory that Iran was to take in the following decade. The newly elected leadership –led by both Rafsanjani and Khamenei- sought a more pragmatic foreign policy than had previously been followed, and acted upon a belief that economic concerns were now fundamental for the survival of the revolutionary regime. The same month that Resolution 598 was signed, Iran and Saudi Arabia began secret talks about enhancing bilateral relations which, despite not immediately evolving into a rapprochement, were nonetheless indicating the shift in Iranian external policies. Tehran, having been left economically and militarily depleted by the 8-year long conflict, realized that it could not afford to engage in another conflict and shifted its focus toward postwar reconstruction and development. It therefore sought to mend relations with some Arab countries, while simultaneously looking to at least defuse tensions with others, i.e. Saudi Arabia.

The Gulf War was similarly important in determining Saudi foreign policy. The Iraqi aggression made Riyadh realize that it was not safe from its northern

neighbor, despite the non-aggression pact the two had signed in 1989. The Kingdom was suddenly faced with the realization that it could not defend itself with no outside assistance, and that the country it once considered an ally was now another enemy to be added to the list. It therefore had to adjust its foreign policy objectives, and find ways to balance both Iraq and Iran in their quest for regional dominance.

The Iraqi aggression directly affected the Iranian-Saudi relations once again, with efforts at mediation between the two materializing only a month after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. With the help of Syrian president Hafez Assad (who was a particularly well-suited mediator considering his relationship with both Tehran and Riyadh), official discussions between Iranian and Saudi officials began in September 1990, and materialized in March 1991 into the agreement that was to help reinstate diplomatic relations (this time with the help of Omani mediation).

To conclude, I believe that the 1987 crisis and the resulting events did not escalate into an interstate war between Iran and Saudi Arabia because of the interaction between two factors: regime type and negative assessments of their military capabilities. An autocratic dynastic monarchy which answers to its elite domestic audience is more inclined to avoid conflict that does not pose an existential threat. The Iranian polity was undergoing changes which involved the inclusion of other actors into the decision-making process, thus moving away from its personalist characteristics and towards a single-party regime which answered to its domestic audience. The thought of engaging into another interstate war after having been involved into the prolonged Iraq-Iran war would have undoubtedly led to domestic unrest, and the government in Tehran was not equipped to quell such dissent (seeing as its military forces were depleted.)

The two governments were also aware that they were not equipped for interstate war. Saudi Arabia had already realized this once the Gulf War commenced, and had had to make significant compromises (inviting U.S. troops on its soil) in order to be able to face that threat. It is difficult to imagine a scenario in which the Saudi leaders, after such a grim assessment of their military capabilities, would have initiated another war with the other major regional power. As for Iran, as I have previously discussed, the Iran-Iraq war had left its economy and military in a dire state. While there are no primary sources discussing the decision-making process, it is safe to assume that the leadership in Tehran realized that engaging in another war would have been disastrous.

2015 crisis

During the 2015 Hajj history repeated itself: 2000 pilgrims were killed in a stampede at Mina, approximately 400 of which were Iranian. Mina is a place notorious for a religious ceremony called the “stoning of the devil”, and has had a history of stampedes: more than 700 people were killed during incidents in 2001, 2004 and 2006²³⁷, and in 1990 1,426 were killed in a similar event²³⁸.

The events discussed in this section differ from those of 1987 in that the Hajj tragedy on its own was not the cause of the escalatory moves that followed. In January 2016, another event rocked the Iranian-Saudi boat and shook the relationship to the core: the execution of the prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, which led to the eventual severing of diplomatic ties.

²³⁷ Beirut, "Hajj: Iran Says Saudi Arabia 'murdered' Pilgrims during 2015 Stampede."

²³⁸ Meshkati, "The Hajj (Mina) Stampede Tragedy in Saudi Arabia, and How to Respond."

Issues

Similarly to the events that followed the 1987 Hajj deaths, rhetoric following the 2015 Hajj tragedy was once again vicious and accusatory. Iran's Supreme Leader called on Saudi Arabia to apologize for the deadly stampede, warning Riyadh of "harsh" measures if the kingdom fails to promptly repatriate the bodies, and President Rouhani declared that "the Islamic Republic is also prepared to use the language of force" in order to obtain the facts²³⁹. The Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir accused Iran of "playing politics" with the disaster, and asked that the Islamic Republic awaits the outcome of an investigation ordered by Saudi Arabia's King Salman (an investigation which to this day has not produced any valuable information²⁴⁰).

Religion and power politics were once again intersecting in Iranian and Saudi discourse. Both Riyadh and Tehran were trying to establish dominance and legitimacy through the use of inflammatory speeches, seeking to embed the religious issues at hand within discussions of diplomacy, law, and military force. Iran had long sought an amendment to the custodianship of the Holy Mosques, seeing the current status as bestowing unrivaled legitimacy and power upon the Saudi Kingdom. Therefore it sought to delegitimize Saudi management of these sites, accusing them of failing to provide a satisfactory investigation into the "facts" of the case. The response from Riyadh involved an investigation ordered by the King himself, a symbolic move which sought to bestow their response with the legitimacy of a royal stamp of approval. The symbolism of this move is further emphasized when considering the failure to produce any concrete information or action.

²³⁹ Riedel, "The Hajj Tragedy Triggers a Saudi-Iranian Confrontation."

²⁴⁰ Beirut, "Hajj: Iran Says Saudi Arabia 'murdered' Pilgrims during 2015 Stampede."

Following the Hajj tragedy and the inflammatory remarks which it had generated, another event led to further escalation of the crisis: the execution of al Nimr. In the wake of the Arab Spring Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr (a prominent Shia cleric and a persistent critic of the Saudi royal family) emerged as an important figurehead. Said to have a strong following among Shia youths, Sheikh Nimr “articulated the feelings of those in the country's Shia minority who feel marginalized and discriminated against.” One year after the protests, the Sheikh was arrested by Saudi police, and during the arresting procedures he was shot in the leg, triggering days of protests during which three people were killed²⁴¹.

Charged with "disobedience to the ruler", seeking foreign meddling, and bearing arms²⁴², Nimr was sentenced to death in a closed trial. Tehran warned the Saudis that the death sentence should not be carried out, but after 4 years of imprisonment, on January 2nd 2016 Sheikh Nimr and 46 others (43 of which were Sunni and had been convicted of involvement with Al Qaeda) were executed. Ayatollah Khamenei responded with a statement condemning the monarchy:

“Killing a knowledgeable man, who promoted virtue and prevented vice and had religious zeal, is certainly a crime, a great crime. It is also a mistake, because the spilled blood will undoubtedly bring divine retribution. Saudi politicians, rulers and policymakers should have no doubt that there will be divine vengeance for this blood. God almighty will not pardon those who spill the blood of the innocent.”²⁴³

²⁴¹ "Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr: Saudi Arabia Executes Top Shia Cleric." BBC News.

²⁴² "A Gulf between Them: Understanding the Saudi-Iran Dispute." BBC News.

²⁴³ "Saudi Allies Cut Diplomatic Relations with Iran." PBS.

This was the first time in Saudi history when a Shia religious leader was executed, and the event held a particularly significant importance for the Shia communities of the world, who look to their religious leaders as the most revered leaders of the community. (It is important to also remember that Iran practices the death penalty as well and, according to Amnesty International, put almost 1000 people to death in 2015 –compared with 158 put to death in Saudi Arabia; this, however, should not diminish the significance of the January execution, but merely offer a larger perspective of the events²⁴⁴.)

For the Saudis, the execution was mostly a symbolic and threatening move which sought to send a message to the Shias of the Eastern province²⁴⁵. For the Iranians, this presented them with another instance in which they could portray the Kingdom as a brutal, criminal regime, which has no business managing Islam's holiest sites. Invoking divine vengeance, the Ayatollah sought to frame the issue as being one between the Saudis and God, and not between the Saudis and Iran, thus elevating the status of the "crime" (i.e. the execution) as worthy of divine intervention.

On the same day as the execution protests erupted in Tehran and a part of the Saudi embassy was torched. The protests lasted a few days, and a day after their conclusion Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic, trade and transport ties with Iran. Protests also erupted in Qatif (in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia), Iraq, and Bahrain. The Saudi Shiite protesters called for the fall of the Saudi regime, while their Iraqi and Bahraini counterparts were protesting the cleric's execution, as well as their limited rights as Shiite citizens.²⁴⁶

As he made his announcement regarding the severance of ties, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir noted that Riyadh is "determined not to allow Iran to

²⁴⁴ "Death Penalty 2015" Amnesty International.

²⁴⁵ "Riyadh Executions Send Message to Saudi Public."

²⁴⁶ Black, et al., "Bahrain, Sudan and UAE Follow Saudis in Diplomatic Action against Iran."

undermine our security. We are determined not to let Iran mobilize or create or establish terrorist cells in our country or in the countries of our allies.”²⁴⁷ Jubeir said the Saudi diplomatic representative had sought help from the Iranian foreign ministry when the building was stormed, but the requests were ignored three times. He accused the Iranian authorities of being complicit in the attack, saying that documents and computers were taken from the embassy building. Calling the incident an act of "aggression", he said Iran had a history of "violating diplomatic missions", citing the attacks on the US embassy in Tehran in 1979 and the British embassy in 2011. "These ongoing aggressions against diplomatic missions are a violation of all agreements and international conventions," he said, calling them part of an effort by Iran to "destabilize" the region.²⁴⁸ The day after the Saudi announcement of severing diplomatic ties, Iran announced that Iranian pilgrims will not attend the 2016 Hajj.

Bahrain, a Sunni monarchy with a large Shiite population, severed diplomatic ties with Iran a day after Saudi Arabia did, citing Iran's "dangerous intervention" and "intent to spread unrest" as reasons for the move²⁴⁹. The government in Manama has had a tense relationship with the one in Tehran, having accused the latter of being behind a low-level insurgency that has been operating since the Arab Spring protests that sought to remove the country's Sunni rulers by the majority Shiite population.²⁵⁰ In June it revoked the citizenship of Ayatollah Isa Qassim, spiritual leader of Bahrain's Shi'ite Muslim majority, and shut down the main Shi'ite political group al Wefaq, accusing it of

²⁴⁷ "Friend of Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr: Shiite Cleric's Execution." Democracy Now!

²⁴⁸ "Saudi Arabia Cuts Diplomatic Ties with Iran." Al Jazeera.

²⁴⁹ Mezzofiore, "Bahrain Severs Diplomatic Ties with Iran."

²⁵⁰ Onyanga-Omara, "Bahrain and Sudan Sever Diplomatic Ties with Iran."

fomenting sectarian unrest and having links to a foreign power – a clear reference to Iran.²⁵¹

Sudan also severed ties with Iran, and the United Arab Emirates downgraded its diplomatic representation in Iran and reduced the number of Iranian diplomats in the country, in a move “likely to reflect the close trade ties between the two countries despite longstanding political tensions.”²⁵² Kuwait and Qatar recalled their ambassadors to Iran, thus showing solidarity with Saudi Arabia,²⁵³ and Turkey and Lebanon also condemned the breach in international norms²⁵⁴.

Before the 2016 Hajj Tehran and Saudi Arabia recommenced their verbal sparring. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei criticized Saudi Arabia over its management of the Hajj and accused Saudi authorities of having "murdered" some of the pilgrims that were killed during the 2015 pilgrimage. He described the Saudi rulers as godless and irreligious, accusing them of denying the pilgrims medical treatment, and declaring that "this incident proves once again that this cursed, evil family does not deserve to manage the holy sites". The Iranian President joined the feud as well, declaring that "unfortunately, [the Saudi] government - by committing crimes in the region and supporting terrorism - in fact shed the blood of Muslims in Iraq, Syria and Yemen".²⁵⁵

Saudi Arabia wasted no time with its reply, and the Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Sheikh accused the Iranian leaders of not being Muslims, but “children of the Magi [whose] hostility towards Muslims is ancient.”²⁵⁶ Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef was quoted as saying that "the Iranian authorities are the ones who don't want the

²⁵¹ Black, "Iran Says Bahrain Has Crossed Line by Stripping Shia Cleric of Citizenship."

²⁵² Black, et al., "Bahrain, Sudan and UAE Follow Saudis in Diplomatic Action against Iran."

²⁵³ "More Countries Back Saudi Arabia in Iran Dispute." Al Jazeera.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ "Saudi-Iran War of Words Escalates over Hajj Row." Al Jazeera.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

Iranian pilgrims to come here for reasons concerning the Iranians themselves and in light of them seeking to politicise the Hajj and turn it into rituals against Islam's teachings and that compromise the safety of Hajj"²⁵⁷. The head of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council hit back on Wednesday, calling Khamenei's remarks "inappropriate and offensive ... and a desperate attempt to politicize" the Hajj.²⁵⁸

Once again one can notice the Iranian tendency to invoke the Saudi mismanagement of the Hajj (calling them murderers who had denied the pilgrims medical treatment), seeking to delegitimize their custodianship and referring to them as a “cursed, evil family”. The Saudi response was meant to attack the Iranian leadership of the Shia branch of Islam, calling them “children of the Magi”²⁵⁹ who turn the Hajj “into rituals against Islam's teachings and that compromise the safety of Hajj.”²⁶⁰ Once again the ideas of Michael Barnett are useful towards understanding these accusatory remarks which create what he calls a “symbolic security dilemma”, where a “spiraling flux of symbolic moves motivates ruling elites to act”²⁶¹. Attempting to locate these events into an “overarching narrative”, the Saudis sought to delegitimize the Iranian claim to Shia leadership by equating them with the Magi and thus associating them with a different religion and tradition.

Following the numerous announcements of countries having severed or downgraded ties with Iran, the Islamic Republic found itself politically and economically isolated. Iran's President asked the country's judiciary to urgently prosecute the people who attacked the Saudi diplomatic mission, stating that "by punishing the attackers and

²⁵⁷ "Saudi Arabia and Iran Spar over Hajj Pilgrimage." Al Jazeera.

²⁵⁸ "Saudi-Iran War of Words Escalates over Hajj Row." Al Jazeera.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ "Saudi Arabia and Iran Spar over Hajj Pilgrimage." Al Jazeera.

²⁶¹ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, 22

those who orchestrated this obvious offence, we should put an end once and forever to such damage and insults to Iran's dignity and national security."²⁶² Continuing his effort to reduce tensions with his Sunni Gulf neighbors, Rouhani went to Oman and Kuwait in an effort to begin normalizing relations with these Gulf States, and declared that "Tehran has always been in favor of resolving problems and disputes through dialogue," and also emphasizing that "Iran's military power is only defensive".²⁶³

In April 2016 Saudi Arabia invited Iranian representatives to Riyadh to discuss further agreements pertaining to the Hajj. On April 14th the Head of Iran's Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization and the Saudi minister of Hajj met, but failed to reach an agreement on Hajj security and travel arrangements for Iranian pilgrims.²⁶⁴ Tehran banned its nationals from traveling for the hajj²⁶⁵, and tensions remained high.

In November 2016 Iran's judiciary issued verdicts for 20 out of the 45 defendants accused of attacking the Saudi mission in January 2016, after having released on bail, in March, all 154 suspects that it had initially arrested in relation to the incident.²⁶⁶ A month later Saudi Arabia sentenced 15 people to death for spying for Iran, and 15 others to various prison terms. Among the accused were 30 Saudi Shi'ite Muslims, one Iranian and an Afghan, all of whom were detained in 2013 on charges of espionage. The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Qasemi denied any Iranian involvement, and declared that "such accusations are baseless and serve political motives".²⁶⁷

By the end of 2016 it seemed as though Iran's moderates (primarily led by President Hassan Rouhani, foreign minister Javad Zarid, and Rafsanjani) were on the same

²⁶² McDowall, "New Saudi-Iran Crisis Threatens Wider Escalation."

²⁶³ "Iran's Rouhani Crosses Gulf on Tour to Improve Relations." Middle East Online.

²⁶⁴ "Iranian Delegation to Meet Saudi Hajj Minister next Week." The Iran Project.

²⁶⁵ "Saudi Prince Warns Iran against 'invading' His Country." Alaraby.

²⁶⁶ Sharafedin, "Iran Court Issues Verdict for Suspects in Saudi Embassy Attack."

²⁶⁷ "Saudi Arabia Sentences 15 People to Death for Spying for Iran." The Telegraph.

page with the country's hardliners (Iran's Supreme Leader, Iran's intelligence ministry, IRGC, the conservative judiciary and the Basij) when it came to Saudi Arabia. Some analysts have pointed out that the moderates were more than happy to jump on the hardliners' bandwagon, because Iran needed an enemy. With the nuclear deal and the rapprochement to the U.S., it was important for Tehran to find another country to shoulder the blame for whatever internal issues Iran might encounter, and Saudi Arabia was the perfect solution. Having an enemy has been a "foundational pillar of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy since its establishment in 1979"²⁶⁸, and there was no better enemy than the leader of the Sunni world.

Once again, however, Iran was faced with the economic reality of its situation and forced to (at least partially) change course. Iran needed OPEC approval to continue boosting its oil production, and it was aware of the difficulty of realizing this goal without Saudi cooperation. During the month of December 2016, after several months of negotiations, an instance of Iranian-Saudi cooperation emerged in the form of a deal on oil quotas: OPEC agreed to cut production in order to boost the price of oil, while Iran, Nigeria and Libya were exempted from output cuts²⁶⁹. The deal was made possible with the help of Russian intervention, whose president conducted an informal mediation between the two countries and helped persuade Saudi officials, while calming Iranian fears²⁷⁰.

The Iranian progress in seeking justice for the 2016 embassy attacks, coupled with the upcoming OPEC meeting of December 2016 and the informal mediation conducted by Vladimir Putin provided a platform for the recommencement of discussions

²⁶⁸ Rafizadeh, "Iran's Shifting Policy on Saudi Arabia".

²⁶⁹ Varzi, "Iranian Media Praises OPEC Deal as Victory over Saudi Arabia."

²⁷⁰ Noble, "How Putin, Khamenei, and a Saudi Prince Made the OPEC Deal."

between the two countries. Later in the month the Saudi media reported that the Saudi minister in charge of pilgrimages, Mohammed Bentin, had invited Iran to discuss arrangements for the 2017 hajj²⁷¹. In February 2017 Iran sent a delegation to Saudi Arabia²⁷², and in March the two countries announced that Iranians will be able to participate in the 2017 Hajj.²⁷³

Regime type

Since the election of Rouhani in 2013 the regime in Tehran has been pursuing a policy of constructive engagement with the world (evidenced mostly through the JCPOA). Within its complicated political system (discussed under the section on Iran's Foreign Policy), making a decision to engage in war is not an easy task and depends on whether "there is political will for such action." There appears to be consensus in the Iranian polity as to a desire to avoid escalation with its Gulf neighbors, as evidenced by the condemnation of the Saudi embassy attack by the Supreme Leader, the president, and the Foreign Minister.²⁷⁴ It is also important to note that the majority of Iran's current leaders were in one way or another involved in the destructive Iran-Iraq war and are thus fully aware of the costs involved in a war with another regional power²⁷⁵. Thus the regime elites play an important role in deterring armed conflict, and even though certain branches of the government (like the IRGC) sometimes favor military action, they are not empowered to take independent action²⁷⁶.

²⁷¹ Hubbard, "Iranian Pilgrims Can Participate in Hajj This Year, Saudi Arabia Says."

²⁷² "Iran Sends Delegation to Saudi for Talks on Rejoining Hajj." Reuters.

²⁷³ Hubbard, "Iranian Pilgrims Can Participate in Hajj This Year, Saudi Arabia Says."

²⁷⁴ Omid, "Five Reasons Why Iran-Saudi Conflict Won't Escalate."

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

In the three cases presented so far the Saudi government, which as we have already seen had been in the habit of operating on a consensus principle, has shown (at least to the public) unity in the decision-making process and a coherent, stable government. Recent developments in the Saudi polity, prompted by Mohammad bin Salman's "multifaceted attempt to reengineer Saudi society, culture, economy and polity", have antagonized the traditional, conservative elites²⁷⁷. What was previously a coherent foreign policy is no longer, as most blatantly exemplified through the adventurous policies on Lebanon, Qatar, and Yemen.²⁷⁸

This revamping of Saudi foreign policy and government does not necessarily mean that it has shifted away from being a dynastic absolute monarchy, but more likely that it finds itself in a period of turmoil and instability. The government has "witnessed a centralization of power in the office of the deputy crown prince, which has amounted to a shift in decision-making from consensual and deliberative to swift and adventurous, most markedly in foreign policy"²⁷⁹. It is therefore more difficult to assess the probability of Saudi Arabia engaging in an interstate war with Iran, especially considering the novelty of these developments, the ongoing "reengineering" of Saudi society, and the unavailability of evidence for the decision-making process. However, considering the emphasis placed by the Crown Prince on the development of the Saudi economy, it is difficult to imagine a situation where it would initiate a war which would undoubtedly deplete Saudi coffers.

²⁷⁷ Etzioni, et. al. "Why Saudi Arabia's Regional Power Plays Won't Lead to War."

²⁷⁸ Ellyatt, "Could Saudi Arabia and Iran Really Go to War?"

²⁷⁹ Karim, "The Evolution of Saudi Foreign Policy."

Military capabilities

I have previously mentioned in the section on “Iran’s Foreign Policy” that a potential Iranian decision to be the initiator of conventional force in a conflict with another country “likely has a very high threshold, requiring a vital or existential threat to the Islamic Republic’s safety and survival”²⁸⁰. The situation of 2015-2017 crisis does not appear to have presented the government in Tehran with such an existential threat, especially considering the Saudi cooperation over oil prices. Moreover, the majority of Iran’s current leaders were in one way or another involved in the destructive Iran-Iraq war and are thus fully aware of the costs involved in a war with another regional power. And even though the IRGC is sometimes in favor of military action, it is not empowered to take independent action²⁸¹.

An important factor to consider when analyzing Iranian behavior is the recent rapprochement between the Trump administration and Saudi Arabia, which will be discussed in further detail in the section below. There is most likely an understanding within the Iranian government that were Iran to initiate an interstate war with Saudi Arabia, the kingdom would have the assistance and support of the United States (whether in the form of military aid and technological assistance, or with actual U.S. troops). While the Iranian army is undoubtedly in better shape than it was in the past decades, it still does not have a steady source of military parts, a problem which has plagued it since the Islamic Revolution, and which would prevent it from standing a chance against the technologically advanced Saudi and American militaries.

²⁸⁰ McInnis and Gilmore, “Iran at War”, 12.

²⁸¹ Omid, “Five Reasons Why Iran-Saudi Conflict Won’t Escalate.”

This desire to avoid a conflict which would involve the U.S. can be dated back to the Iran-Iraq war when, according to certain Middle Eastern scholars, the exact point at which Iran decided to accept UN Resolution 598 seemed to have coincided with the accidental shooting down of an Iranian airliner in July 1988 by a US naval vessel. Rafsanjani noted at the time that "it is obvious the Global Arrogance has decided to prevent our victory." The leading members of the government believed that "a sinister American conspiracy was unfolding which could bring Iran in direct conflict with the iron fist of US military power", sensing that "given Saddam's inability to conquer Iran, the United States had decided to finish the job itself"²⁸².

An important factor which can explain the tendency to avoid interstate war is the realization that, in the absence of a direct U.S. intervention, victory would be uncertain in a potential Iranian-Saudi war. Both countries are aware that "neither has the ability to destroy the other side or impose regime change. Saudi Arabia has more warplanes and modern military equipment, while Iran has better missile capabilities and military personnel"²⁸³. Each country has its own advantages, but also glaring disadvantages which would most likely turn the conflict into a protracted war.

When comparing the two countries, one notices Iran's advantages: a strong military force of approximately 550,000 active personnel, the largest arsenal of short- and medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles in the region, and a dedicated Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps with considerable battlefield experience²⁸⁴. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has a much smaller army, rumored to be "very reluctant to fight" and

²⁸² Takeyh, "The Iran- Iraq War".

²⁸³ Omid, "Five Reasons Why Iran-Saudi Conflict Won't Escalate."

²⁸⁴ Etzioni, et. al. "Why Saudi Arabia's Regional Power Plays Won't Lead to War."

“mainly suited for performance on parade grounds”. The Saudi forces are “like most Arab militaries, built to protect authoritarian regimes from unarmed civilian uprisings, not to fight actual wars.” Despite its impressive Air Force, in the past Saudis outsourced their fighting to Egyptian and Pakistani troops. In the current Yemen war only some Pakistani troops have been deployed to Saudi’s southern border, leading the Kingdom to rely mainly on airstrikes in Yemen (a tactic which has so far has been unable to remove the Houthi presence)²⁸⁵.

The state of its armed forces and its assessment of its military capabilities, coupled with the possibility of Shia revolt in the Saudi Eastern province (which contains the Kingdom’s most important oil fields), and with the fact that Iran controls the Strait of Hormuz (through which the Saudis direct most of their trade), are most likely the main causes preventing Saudi Arabia from initiating war.²⁸⁶ The importance of the oil fields has been discussed in the Gulf War section: Riyadh went to war because it felt that territory to be threatened. As for the Strait of Hormuz, losing access to its main trade route would mean having to redirect it to the Red Sea, which would severely impact Saudi revenues and would most likely be a very difficult endeavor.²⁸⁷

The United States

In contrast to the 1987-1991 crisis, resuming the Hajj in 2016 did not equate with resuming diplomatic ties, nor with a tendency towards a complete resolution of the crisis. This time around, an external factor played a decisive role in Saudi Arabia’s bold foreign

²⁸⁵ Etzioni, et. al. "Why Saudi Arabia's Regional Power Plays Won't Lead to War."

²⁸⁶ Omid, "Five Reasons Why Iran-Saudi Conflict Won't Escalate."

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

policy moves which were to follow the Iranian announcement of the decision to resume the Hajj.

During the month of March 2017 the Saudi-U.S relations began to thaw after a period of differences in policies and interests that had transpired during the Obama administration. In the newly installed U.S. leadership the Saudis saw a partner that would be willing to take a tougher stance on Iran, after having been thoroughly disappointed by the Iran Nuclear Deal (the JCPOA) and the role played by the U.S. in its negotiation. Thus in March, in anticipation of the first visit by the newly installed American president to the Kingdom, the Saudi Energy Minister declared that relations between the two countries “have never been better, and the two nations are fully aligned in confronting Iranian aggression.”²⁸⁸

Ever since his visit the American president has “ramped up support for the bloody, inhumane, and disastrous Saudi campaign against the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen”²⁸⁹; has publicly taken the Saudi side in its campaign against Qatar (through which the Saudi regime sought to force its small neighbor to align its policies with Riyadh’s and away from Iran’s, a campaign which has largely failed considering Qatar has resisted Saudi pressure and has resumed ties with Iran²⁹⁰); and said “nothing about Saudi Arabia’s human rights record or its export of an intolerant and extreme form of Islam abroad”²⁹¹. Trump has publicly endorsed the campaign initiated by Mohammed bin Salman’s large-scale purges of “well-known royals, government ministers, military and business leaders, and media figures, indicating that Saudi Arabia knows exactly what it’s doing”²⁹².

²⁸⁸ Gamble and DiChristopher. "Saudi Oil Minister Praises Trump 'bond.'"

²⁸⁹ Miller and Sokolsky. "Donald Trump Has Unleashed the Saudi Arabia We Always Wanted - and Feared."

²⁹⁰ Fahmy, et. al. "Qatar Says Its Ambassador to Return to Iran: Foreign Ministry."

²⁹¹ Miller and Sokolsky. "Donald Trump Has Unleashed the Saudi Arabia We Always Wanted - and Feared."

²⁹² Ibid.

This American endorsement of all Saudi endeavors, while only espoused by the president (the American Secretary of State has called for a more cautionary approach²⁹³), has nonetheless emboldened the Riyadh leadership, especially the Crown Prince. The Saudi foreign policy decisions of 2017 cannot be thoroughly understood without a look at the rapprochement with the United States.

In light of the OPEC understanding of December 2016, and of the forthcoming IPO of Saudi Aramco, Riyadh understood that its biggest oil company and “crown jewel” might not be valued as expected without higher oil prices, a devaluation which would therefore have threatened Saudi Arabia’s “Vision 2030” objectives (an economic and development plan implemented by the Crown Prince, which would help Saudi Arabia diversify its economy and boost its revenues). Causing further issues were the actions of Iran and Iraq, two OPEC actors who, according to some outside observers, “are exploiting Saudi Arabia’s precarious position by taking steps to boost production”. The two have signed a memorandum of understanding to “bury their differences on joint oil fields and build a pipeline to export crude oil from the Kirkuk fields”.²⁹⁴

These economic challenges, coupled with the continuing proxy wars of the region and with the U.S.-Saudi rapprochement, emboldened Riyadh. In May and June of this year the Kingdom engaged in a bitter war of words with its neighbor Qatar (over media headlines that were later reported as being fake and the result of a hacking operation), and severed diplomatic ties with the country (this move was immediately taken by Bahrain, U.A.E. and Libya; other countries later followed suit).²⁹⁵ Saudi Arabia has cited Qatar’s involvement in terrorism as the main reason for this escalation, but to anyone familiar with

²⁹³ Irish, "Tillerson Calls on Saudis to Be 'more Thoughtful' in Middle East."

²⁹⁴ Upadhyay, "Iran and Iraq Are Making It Harder for Saudi Arabia to Prop up Oil Prices."

²⁹⁵ "Saudi Arabia Cuts off Qatar." The Economist.

the region it seems obvious that this reason alone cannot account for this diplomatic crisis. Qatar's ties to Iran seem more likely to be the underlying motive and, coupled with the assurances Riyadh had been receiving from its most powerful ally, and with Iran's recent moves in the oil market, could explain Saudi Arabia's bold moves. The Kingdom is desperate to see its regional ally isolated, considering Iran's nuclear developments and its emergence from the umbrella of international sanctions. These two developments alone constitute a major threat for Saudi Arabia, who does not wish to lose any more ground to its neighbor across the Gulf.

The policy against Qatar backfired, and the small Gulf country resisted Saudi pressure and even resumed ties with Iran²⁹⁶. In an effort to balance against this miscalculation and further remove the regional Iranian presence which now so pervades the region (the regime in Tehran has close ties to the ones in Iraq, Syria, Qatar; has great influence with one of the ruling parties in Lebanon, Hezbollah; and is also believed to be backing the Houthi rebels of Yemen, thus slowly encircling the Saudi Kingdom²⁹⁷) the Saudi regime turned towards Lebanon and forced its Prime Minister to resign. The goal appears to have been the isolation of Hezbollah, which the Saudis hoped would have made it easier for Sunni Arab states and the U.S. to target the group²⁹⁸. However, this foreign policy decision has once again backfired, having had limited or no support from fellow Arab leaders and showing that "few Saudi allies are willing to confront Iran directly"²⁹⁹.

Not only did the move backfire, but it also caused international condemnation. After Hariri's sudden departure, numerous Lebanese political factions rallied around him

²⁹⁶ Fahmy, et. al. "Qatar Says Its Ambassador to Return to Iran: Foreign Ministry."

²⁹⁷ Sly, "The U.S. Is on a Collision Course with Iran in the Middle East."

²⁹⁸ Bazzi, "Commentary: How Saudi Arabia Has Overreached on Iran, Lebanon."

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

and insisted that his resignation had been coerced and was thus invalid. International concern that the Prime Minister was being held captive by the Saudis led to a general negative outlook towards the Saudi Kingdom, which was also compounded by its actions in Yemen.³⁰⁰

The proxy war in Yemen and the Saudi airstrikes and blockade have been ongoing since 2015. So far the Kingdom has failed to remove the Houthi rebels from Yemen's capital and have helped cause one of the region's worst humanitarian crises. Yemen is a central proxy war between Riyadh and Tehran, as evidenced by Saudi Arabia's "act of war" accusation against Iran. In November, after shooting down a ballistic missile which was headed towards Riyadh, the Saudis accused Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps of having assembled the missile and of having assisted the Houthi rebels with its launch, an accusation which was vehemently denied by both Iran and Hezbollah.³⁰¹

The Saudi blockade of Yemen and the resulting humanitarian crisis have recently drawn condemnation from the person who had initially emboldened and encouraged this new, adventurous foreign policy. President Trump called for an immediate lifting of the blockade, asking the government in Riyadh to "allow food, fuel, water and medicine to reach the Yemeni people."³⁰² While this might be a reason for a cooling down of American-Saudi relations, it is also true that the Kingdom has taken a step back on its policy towards Lebanon, leading observers to believe that the American metaphorical slap on the wrist has served to encourage more caution in Riyadh.³⁰³

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Bazzi, "Commentary: How Saudi Arabia Has Overreached on Iran, Lebanon."

³⁰² Shear, "Trump Urges Saudi Arabia to End Blockade of Goods Into Yemen."

³⁰³ Trofimov, "Saudis Get Reality Check After Lebanon Drama."

Conclusion

The events following the 2015 Hajj and developing until the present day, as well as the ones of 1987, cannot be understood without referencing regional events and power plays. The two states are (very obviously) engaged in a struggle for regional dominance, and their actions must be understood in terms of the power plays they engage in. One can almost recognize a game-like pattern where one country makes a move, only to be countered by the other. Third party influence is undeniably important, especially considering the country that is both the number one enemy of Iran, and the number one ally of Saudi Arabia: the United States.

When the 2015 Hajj stampede occurred, religious issues once again came to the forefront of all discourse used to manage the situation. Accusatory speeches and remarks were not unusual, just like Iran's intention to discredit Saudi Arabia's credibility as the Custodian of Islam's Holiest places was not. While Tehran threatened the use of force, both countries were aware of the fact that the revolutionary regime was not strong enough to initiate a conventional war. Their economic challenges, coupled with Iran's general tendency of avoiding war unless "territory or assets are directly threatened"³⁰⁴, signaled that the threat of actual force was slim to none.

The events of January 2016 are very similar to the escalation that took place in 1987: an attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran led the Saudi Kingdom to take diplomatic measures, severing diplomatic ties Iran, which in turn led the latter to boycott the Hajj. Iran found itself even more isolated from the international system, now that other countries condemned the breach in international norms. It then embarked on a campaign designed

³⁰⁴ McInnis and Gilmore, "Iran at War", 1.

to reduce tensions with GCC countries, which evolved into the negotiation attempts between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which ended up failing.

The Qatar and Lebanon crises can only be understood in light of the U.S.-Saudi rapprochement and the difficulty surrounding oil quotas and production. With the protection and assurances provided by its American ally, Saudi Arabia saw itself as more or less invincible and was therefore more courageous in its diplomatic moves. While its Shia rival usually resorts to unconventional *warfare*, Riyadh is more inclined to use unconventional *diplomacy*. Seeking out a relatively weak neighbor with ties to Iran, and isolating it as a way of putting pressure on its government and forcing it to renounce all forms of alliance with Tehran, is Saudi Arabia's way of promoting its foreign policy interests. Since Iran has harnessed more power in Iraq, and since it has reached a deal with that country's government regarding joint oil fields and pipeline construction, Saudi Arabia sees itself as dangerously surrounded by Shiite powers who seek to undermine it economically. A weak, isolated Iran, with no outside help is more beneficial for the Saudi Kingdom. Since Riyadh is also inclined to use force only in extreme situations, these diplomacy moves coupled with the proxy wars it is engaged in are its way of promoting its foreign policy interests.

Chapter 5: CONCLUSION

In these pages I have sought to uncover why Iran and Saudi Arabia have not engaged in conventional warfare since 1979, the year of the Iranian Revolution. The two Middle Eastern powers, arguably the most influential in the region, are led by different ideologies and national interests, which one would expect to often place them on a colliding course. The existence of numerous diplomatic tensions and rifts, some of which have not been investigated in this paper because of space considerations, has presented their two governments with numerous challenges, which this paper has sought to investigate.

In Chapter 2 we presented the reader with a series of factors believed to be most influential in determining whether or not Iran and Saudi Arabia would initiate an interstate war. The analysis presented in Chapters 3 and 4 has been in line with the proposed hypotheses of Chapter 2:

1. Intangible issues/ tangible issues which have acquired intangible aspects will lead to an increased risk for interstate warfare when the countries involved are contiguous;
2. Civilian domestic audiences (regime elites) will lead to a decreased risk for interstate warfare;
3. The negative assessment of their own military capabilities will lead to a decreased risk for interstate warfare.

In the two cases presented in Chapter 3, the conflict arose between two contiguous states which were faced with intangible issues/tangible issues which had acquired intangible aspects. Coupled with the fact that in each dyad there was at least one

personalist regime which had a limited domestic audience incapable of restricting or punishing the leader, and with one country's assessment that its military was strong enough to challenge the other's armed forces, it resulted in escalation to interstate war.

The Iran-Iraq war arose because of two major reasons. The first was an intangible issue revolving around religion and ideology (religious government vs. secular one). The Iranian Supreme Leader was a firm believer in the idea that the Iranian Revolution he had so carefully orchestrated should be exported to the region, if not the world³⁰⁵, and attacked Saddam's secularism, making it seem as if Saddam was an enemy of all Muslims. On the other side of the border Saddam resorted to nationalist sentiment, employing an Arab vs. Persian framework, and seeking to place himself as the leader of the former camp.

The second reason, territory, is a tangible issue which, when imbued with symbolic meaning, attains intangible characteristics. The fact that Iran and Iraq were contiguous neighbors with a long-standing disputed territorial issue dramatically increased the possibility for conventional warfare. Saddam imbued the Shatt al-Arab and the three disputed islands with nationalist, Arab sentiment, and distinguished between the Arab Iraqis and the "racist' and resentful 'Persian' Iranians"³⁰⁶.

Saddam's personalist regime did not experience any pressure from the domestic audience, and even enjoyed encouragement in all military endeavors. Analysis of meeting transcripts show the "pervasive amateurism of the decision-making processes in Iraq", and how neither Saddam nor his advisors had "a clear idea of what military operations might entail."³⁰⁷ Despite this clear lack of preparation, officials did not dare

³⁰⁵ Khomeini, "We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology."

³⁰⁶ Dawisha, "" Identity" and Political Survival in Saddam's Iraq.", 557.

³⁰⁷ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 48.

oppose the Iraqi leader, and Saddam Hussein continued on with his military adventurism.

The Iranian government of the time mostly resembled a personalist regime, with decision-making revolving mainly around the Ayatollah. Khomeini's desire to remove his political opposition was an instrumental factor in the decision to engage in the expansionary and aggressive moves which predated the war (the support of Shia groups in Iraq, the call to overthrow the Ba'ath regime), as well as in the subsequent refusal to reach a peaceful settlement afterwards³⁰⁸.

When it comes to assessments of military capabilities, we are mostly interested in the ones made by the Iraqi government, since it was the one that initiated the attack. Countless intelligence reports assured the Iraqi leader that the Iranian army was "an ill-trained rabble"³⁰⁹ which would pose no real threat to the Iraqi troops. He considered Iran to be exposed, vulnerable, and ready to fall, and believed that victory would befall the Iraqi army very quickly, in only a matter of days.⁹⁷

The Saudi involvement in the First Gulf War presents us with a rather different situation, in that Iraq had not directly threaten Saudi Arabia, but had invaded its northern neighbor. Nevertheless Riyadh decided to intervene in order to protect the Ghawar oil fields, Saudi Arabia's most valuable petroleum fields. Iraqi control of this area, in addition to the Kuwaiti and Iraqi reserves it already controlled, would have significantly increased Iraqi oil reserves, giving it a major economic advantage. Once again we have two contiguous states fighting over territory, which this time acquires intangible characteristics due to its unrivaled importance for Saudi national interests and revenues.

³⁰⁸ Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 336.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

The characteristics of the Saudi regime ensured that the decision to go to war was reached after discussions among the regime elites -ministers, family, the military, tribes, and the *ulema*- reached a consensus. As for their assessment of their own military capabilities, they represented a factor which took a backseat to considerations of national interest: negative assessments of their own military capabilities pushed Saudi leaders towards turning to the United States and other NATO members for assistance, but did not prevent it from engaging in the war, because the possibility of losing the territory discussed above was too catastrophic. This did not mean that they engaged in the Gulf War with no consideration for their military capabilities, only that their assessment of the lack of preparedness of their military forces led them to seek help from their allies.

The two cases presented in Chapter 4 were presented in order to offer a better understanding of the reasons and mechanisms behind the absence of interstate war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both crises start from an intangible issue –religion- which this time arises between countries that are not contiguous, therefore diminishing the probability for war.

The crisis of 1987 began due to the death of numerous Iranian pilgrims during the annual Hajj, which has always been a source of contention between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The absence of war, despite the significant escalatory moves (boycotting the Hajj, severing diplomatic ties) cannot be understood without making reference to the two cases of Chapter 3 and their effect on military capabilities.

When the 1987 crisis commenced, I believe that what emboldened the leadership in Riyadh was the awareness that Iran had been left militarily and economically depleted by the Iran-Iraq war, and would not engage in another with Saudi Arabia when it was still bogged down in the one with its western neighbor. Iran, on the other hand, had been so

negatively impacted by the Iran-Iraq war, that it most likely could not even fathom engaging in a second one with the other major regional power, Saudi Arabia.

Two years after the war was over, and while the crisis with Iran was still developing, Saudi Arabia found itself bogged down in its own war with Iraq. Its poor military capabilities having led to a request for foreign intervention, it would have been catastrophic had it incited war with Iran. Because of this conflict with its northern neighbor, and because of Iranian isolation and its poor economic and military status, the two countries accepted mediation and resolved their crisis only a few months after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait began.

Changes in the Iranian polity following the end of the Iran-Iraq war moved the regime away from its previously mentioned personalist tendencies and closer to those characteristic of single-party regimes. The Iranian decision-making process began to include other actors, most notably the president, who took on more responsibility in the foreign policy department, placed the country's national interest above matters of ideology and religion, and took more initiative in matters concerning the military.

The Saudi leadership structure remained the same as in the days of the 1980s, maintaining the same structure of regime elites and its emphasis on consensus. While primary sources are hard to come by, the coherent foreign policy put forward by the government is evidence of the Kingdom's reliance on its regime elites and of their influence in the decision-making process. The steps undertaken to appease the Saudi Shi'is show how Riyadh considered Iraq to be the main threat of the time, and how they agreed that the main focus should be on preventing turmoil in the Eastern region. Iran was no longer enemy #1, but now came second, a move which helped the two countries' sit

down and negotiate their issues.

The 2015 crisis also began because of an intangible issue –that of religion. The Hajj tragedy of 2015 and the execution of Nimr al-Nimr in 2016 were the sparks that led to the Iranian boycott of the Hajj and the Saudi decision to sever diplomatic ties. Religion and power politics were once again intersecting in Iranian and Saudi discourse, with both seeking to embed the religious issues within discussions of diplomacy, law, and military force. Tehran sought to delegitimize Saudi management of the holy sites, while Riyadh attacked the Iranian leadership of the Shia branch of Islam.

When analyzing the influence of the regime types upon the absence of interstate war resulting from the most recent Iranian-Saudi crisis, we are faced with a change in the way the Saudi regime operates. Recent developments have antagonized the traditional, conservative elites³¹⁰ and have noticed a “centralization of power in the office of the deputy crown prince, which has amounted to a shift in decision-making from consensual and deliberative to swift and adventurous, most markedly in foreign policy”³¹¹. It is therefore more difficult to assess the probability of Saudi Arabia engaging in an interstate war with Iran, especially considering the novelty of these developments, the ongoing “reengineering” of Saudi society, and the unavailability of evidence for the decision-making process. However, considering the emphasis placed by the Crown Prince on the development of the Saudi economy, it is difficult to imagine a situation where it would initiate a war which would undoubtedly affect Saudi coffers.

The Iranian regime, on the other hand, finds itself in a more stable situation, and pursuing a policy of constructive engagement with the world. Within its political system

³¹⁰ Etzioni, et. al. "Why Saudi Arabia's Regional Power Plays Won't Lead to War."

³¹¹ Karim, "The Evolution of Saudi Foreign Policy".

making a decision to engage in war is not an easy task and depends on whether “there is political will for such action.” There appears to be consensus in the Iranian polity as to a desire to avoid escalation with its Gulf neighbors, as evidenced by the condemnation of the Saudi embassy attack by the Supreme Leader, the president, and the Foreign Minister.³¹² It is also important to note that the majority of Iran’s current leaders were in one way or another involved in the destructive Iran-Iraq war and are thus fully aware of the costs involved in a war with another regional power³¹³. Thus the regime elites play an important role in deterring armed conflict, and even though certain branches of the government (like the IRGC) sometimes favor military action, they are not empowered to take independent action³¹⁴.

An external factor plays a major role in both Saudi and Iranian assessments of their military capabilities over the past year. The recent rapprochement between the Trump administration and Saudi Arabia has most likely led an understanding within the Iranian government that were Iran to initiate an interstate war with Saudi Arabia, the kingdom would have the assistance and support of the United States, which the Iranian army is not equipped to confront.

Each country has its own military advantages, but also glaring disadvantages which would most likely turn the conflict into a protracted war. Iran’s strong military force of approximately 550,000 active personnel, and largest arsenal of short- and medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles in the region³¹⁵ are a few worth mentioning. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has a much smaller army, mostly “built to protect

³¹² Omidi, "Five Reasons Why Iran-Saudi Conflict Won't Escalate."

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Etzioni, et. al. "Why Saudi Arabia's Regional Power Plays Won't Lead to War."

authoritarian regimes from unarmed civilian uprisings, not to fight actual wars.” Despite its impressive Air Force, in the past Saudis outsourced their fighting³¹⁶, leading one to believe that it would stand at a great disadvantage in the event of an interstate war with Iran. The state of its armed forces and its assessment of its military capabilities, coupled with the possibility of Shia revolt in the Saudi Eastern province and with the fact that Iran controls the Strait of Hormuz are most likely the main causes preventing Saudi Arabia from initiating war.³¹⁷

While Iran has resumed the Hajj, the diplomatic ties between the two countries remain severed to this date. The assurances of the relatively new American administration have emboldened Riyadh, leading it to engage in a series of provocative regional moves (Qatar, Lebanon, Yemen), which have only served to further destabilize the region and have not materialized into any Saudi wins. Although rumors emerged of a potential Swiss mediation between the two countries³¹⁸, as of December 2017 no favorable outcome has emerged.

What has also emerged from the analysis is the importance of the interplay between domestic and external factors. In Chapter 2 we offered a brief exploration of the IR approaches to the Middle East and saw the advantages of using more than one theory when analyzing the region. The analysis presented in these pages proves that using multiple theoretical perspectives to connect and clarify our research is not only welcome, but also crucial towards understanding the issue at hand.

Realism has played an important part in this thesis’ attempt to explain the behavior

³¹⁶ Etzioni, et. al. "Why Saudi Arabia's Regional Power Plays Won't Lead to War."

³¹⁷ Omid, "Five Reasons Why Iran-Saudi Conflict Won't Escalate."

³¹⁸ Keaten, "Swiss Formalize Intermediary Role between Saudi Arabia, Iran."

of the three dyads presented. The 1991 Saudi shift from its focus on Iran as its main enemy to that of Iraq reflected the importance the Kingdom placed on its national interest (in the form of the oil fields located in the Eastern) and its willingness to place it in front of religion and ideology. The great emphasis Neo-Realism places on security and alliance building is also exemplified in Saudi behavior, and the most glaring example is the Saudi decision to invite foreign troops on its territory in 1991, while fully aware that it will cause a political crisis. In this particular situation we see that Realism has greater explanatory power than other theories which emphasize domestic dynamics.

Stemming from the need to maintain internal legitimacy is the attention leaders give to how their domestic audience perceives external threats. Michael Barnett's ideas have been used numerous times throughout this thesis, in instances where leaders attempted "to give events political meaning through locating the event within an overarching narrative."³¹⁹ The Iraqi use of the Arab vs. Persian framework, the Iranian references to Wahhabi massacres of Shi'is, the Saudi invocation of the Shiite defilers, all served to locate current events in an overarching narrative, and to thus provide legitimacy and arguments against the invoked enemies.

Jack Levy's diversionary theory and Graeme Davies' application of the theory to the Iranian case study are also particularly relevant, because they offer a better understanding of the domestic factors at play in foreign policy decision making. Davies suggests that due to internal issues the Tehran foreign-policy elite is motivated to engage in aggressive acts with another state so as to "divert attention from problems at home and revive a 'rally-round the flag' effect and demonstrate a competence in foreign

³¹⁹ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, 22

affairs”.³²⁰ This is particularly noticeable in the case of the belligerent Iranian acts taken towards the Ba’athist regime of Saddam Hussein, in the period immediately following the Islamic Revolution, as well as in the Ayatollah’s belief that the war was a “blessing” which would eventually help remove his adversaries from government positions³²¹.

Considering the explanations provided by all these theories, I believe that applying a single theory to the Middle East would have led to significant shortcomings. Trying to understand the region through the prism of the Iranian-Saudi relationship would not make much sense without reference to concepts of power, military capabilities, identity, ideology, symbolism, and perception, concepts which are not found under the umbrella of just one theory.

This thesis has helped provide more insight into the current Middle Eastern state of affairs, insight which is essential when discussing the region and potential approaches for de-escalation. Every war within the Middle East is part of the regional struggle between the Sunni and Shia blocks, led by Saudi Arabia and Iran. Their involvement in the numerous proxy wars of the region is part of how the two countries promote their foreign policy interests, and is a tool used to achieve regional hegemony or to expand their influence. Due to a negative assessment of their military capabilities (or simply because of their unwillingness for all-out war) the two resort to proxy wars as a means of airing their grievances.

The hypotheses tested in these pages show that, due to the lack of territorial contiguity coupled with the presence of powerful domestic audiences (the regime elites which we have discussed), the chances of interstate war between the two regional powers are significantly

³²⁰ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, 226

³²¹ Bani Sadr and Deniau, *My Turn to Speak*, 78.

decreased. However, considering the shift in the Saudi government and the recent adventurism and miscalculations of their foreign policy, one cannot completely dismiss the possibility of such a war arising. While it is true that war will most likely not happen in the absence of a set of extraordinary circumstances, we must not deny the possibility of military conflict happening, nor should we fail to see that the two are walking a tight rope and that crossing certain red lines might lead them to a full display of conventional force. Diplomacy by third-party actors who are seen by both parties as neutral is crucial towards diffusing tensions and de-escalation procedures, and is one of the most important implications for researchers seeking to understand how relations between the two countries can be improved and ameliorated.

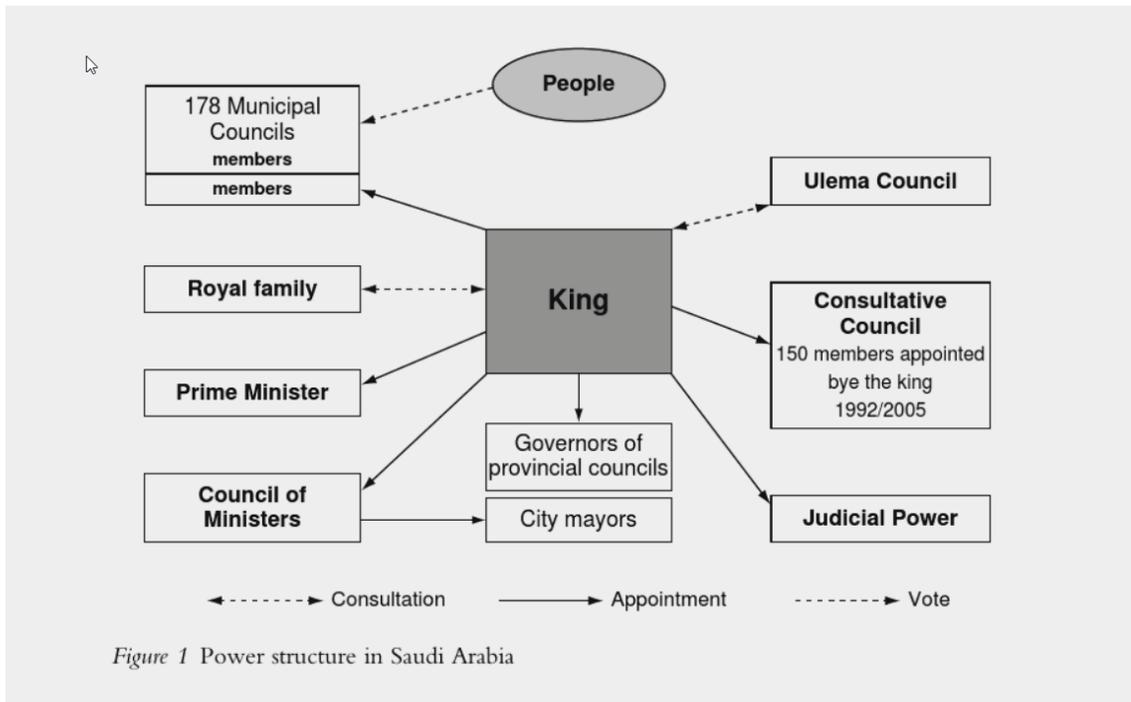
It is also possible that their militaries will one day reach a level which would no longer call for the negative assessments which we have discussed. The lifting of Iranian sanctions and the numerous U.S.-Saudi arms deals could help improve their armies and military forces. It is difficult and rather unpleasant to consider the possibility of Iran and Saudi Arabia one day having such powerful armies that would encourage more adventurism in their military endeavors. Nonetheless, it is a possibility that must be considered, and encourages regional observers and experts to consider ways in which tensions can be lowered.

The influence of the United States, especially on the behavior of Saudi Arabia, is undeniable. The importance of a cautionary American foreign policy towards the Kingdom and Iran cannot be stressed enough, considering the rising tensions and explosive situation currently unfolding. An American administration willing to give the Saudis a green light in all endeavors is arguably as dangerous as a nuclear Iran. Control and moderation must

be considered when engaging the two Middle Eastern countries, and attention towards the stability of the region must come before any other considerations. A Middle East where the two regional powers are at war would cause more instability, more militarism and jihadism, increased oil prices, and humanitarian disasters, all of which cannot be disregarded as trivial or unimportant.

APPENDIX A

Power structure in Saudi Arabia:

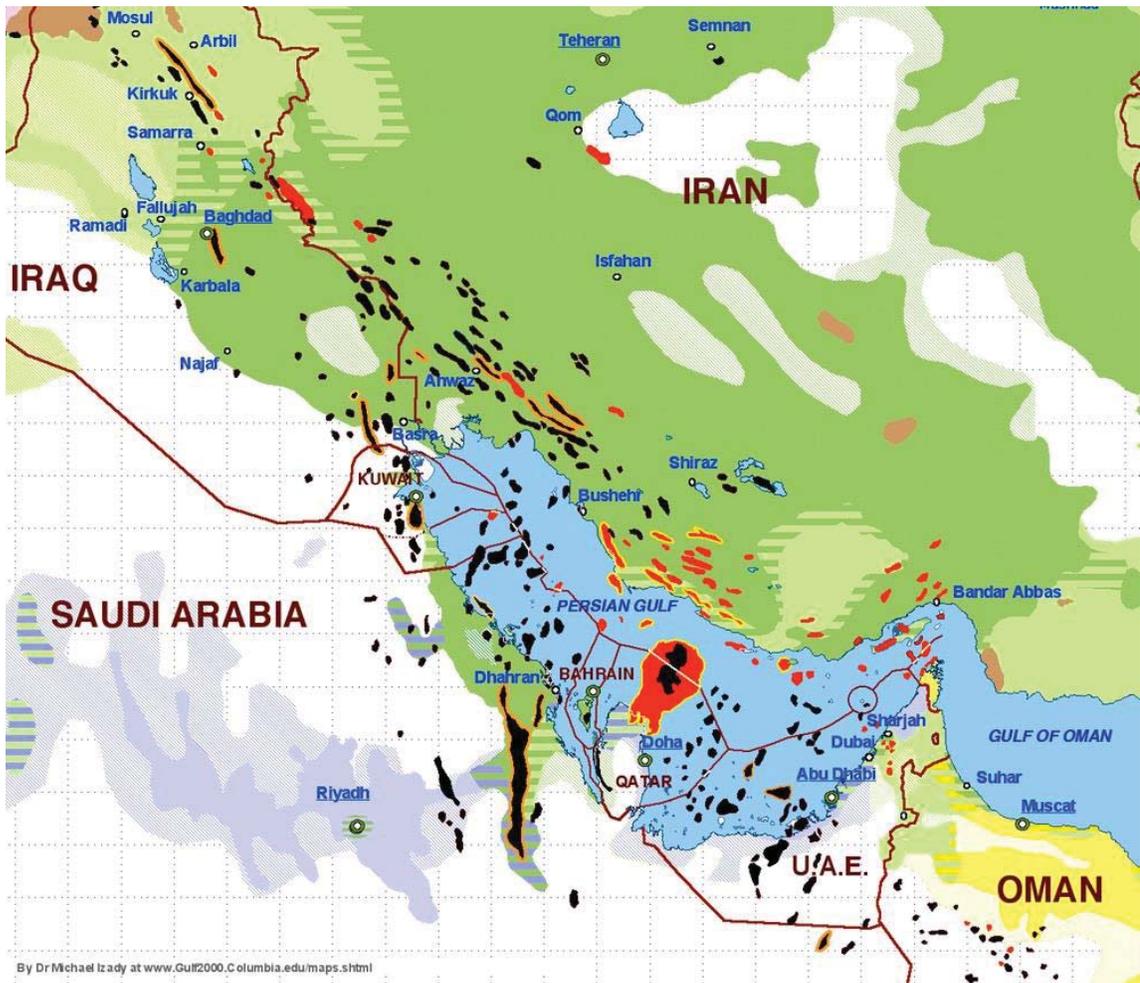


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³²² Lecha and Zaccara, "Saudi Arabia: family, religion, army, and oil", 178.

APPENDIX C

Gulf Oil Fields:



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³²⁴ "One Map That Explains the Dangerous Saudi-Iranian Conflict".

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