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Examining the history of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia shows two Muslim-majority nations divided by religious beliefs, committed to nationalism and aggressive policies. This religious division stems from the two major sects of Islam, Shia-ism and Sunnism, to which the majority of Iran and Saudi Arabia respectively adhere. Throughout their recent histories, both states have determined their positions as leaders of their respective Islamic sect, aiming to protect the Shia or Sunni faith from outsiders. These self-created roles have fostered the tumultuous relationship that we see even to this day. Further analysis highlights the role that religion and politics play in their division. Although such agendas play a prominent role, the conflict is inherently a political phenomenon that has grown to foster a complicated division with implications on not just the Middle East, but the entire global community.

Since the first caliph, Shi'as and Sunnis have continuously clashed over the politics of the Muslim world. This clear schism between the two denominations exemplifies sectarianism is set of societal ideas that are often linked to familial, local, regional, and even broader kinds of loyalty and affiliation. Any increase in sectarian conflict is largely the result of the struggle for hegemony through socioeconomic and political power and over which interpretation of Islam should influence societies and new leaderships.^[1] Abdo unpacks the notion that the Shi'a-Sunni divide between Iran and Saudi Arabia is inherently political with a religious front. The majority of the current population (about 75 percent) of Iran lists the Shi'a sect of Islam as its religious affiliation, with Iranian Sunni Muslims making up about 12 to 25 percent of the population.^{[2], [3]} In Saudi Arabia, about 85 to 90 percent of the population identify as Sunni Muslim, while about only 10 to 15 percent identify as Shi'a. However, Saudi Arabia's Shi'a population resides in the oil-rich eastern region of the Kingdom, a region crucial to the nation's economy.^[4] The place of residence for the Saudi Shi'a Muslims is important as it serves host to the oil company Saudi ARAMCO and many large oil fields, giving the population inherent socio-economic and political influence, as a regional uprising could cripple the oil-dependent economy of the Kingdom.^[5]

For the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, sectarianism is an idea that has its roots in the internal political dynamics of both states, which trickles outwardly to international relations. Case and point can be understood from the rivalry and competition that has been formed surrounding who lays claim to the holiest sites in Islam has been unveiled, with Saudi Arabia clearly winning such inferior rivalry. Saudi Arabia has custody of the two

holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina, which has given the Kingdom unrivaled power and prestige in the Islamic world, along with an equal determination to preserve it. This concept is challenged by Iran, for it aims to preserve its holy sites for the global Shi'a population and serve as a place where such Shi'as can find solace (e.g. sending zakat donations to Iran) but none of which stand up to the religious sanctity that is that of Mecca and Medina.^[6] Yet in a period in which Iran struggles to compete versus that of Saudi Arabia, any small victory will do. While this idea of a religious rivalry over holy sites is important, the acquisition of any margin of influence by one of the rival states can serve as a means to advancing political goals in a region where the political climate is often uncertain.

Thus, the invocation of religion as a category of analysis for understanding Iran-Saudi affairs misleads; conflating a religious identification with really a political one, and ignoring class, family, local, national and regional networks within which self-expression has invariably been ingrained. In short, the idea of religiously-inspired sectarian relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia disregards the other facets of society to which both communities subscribe. Therefore, one can argue that the current political dynamic is ultimately a sociological and socio-political one etched throughout history, covered with the veil of religious undertones to attract support.

We can examine that the political agendas of Iran and Saudi Arabia has moved to focus more on expansionist advances of respective relative influence of the Shi'a or Sunni minority population of their respective neighbor. There is an inherent fear of political and possibly even regime upheaval that is rooted in ideology from the other nation, which makes the entire relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia ultimately political, despite its veil of religious allusion. The leadership of Iran were keen to export their fervor and beliefs beyond their borders. The first supreme leader of the state, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, abundantly backed Shi'a militias and parties abroad. In response to this, Riyadh sought closer relationships with other Sunni governments, creating numerous alliances and dividing a region.^[7] This point is one to make note of, particularly in examining the role of influence and the political back and forth that Iran and Saudi Arabia face in their relationship. These tensions arise as both Iran and Saudi Arabia jockey for position over fellow Middle Eastern powers in their cross-Arabian Gulf rivalry.

In speak to Arabian Gulf affairs, the Shi'a revival in Iraq may not have been directly created or even occurred in Iran but given the depth of the Shi'a identity and its connection to Iran, the Islamic Republic will ultimately continue to benefit politically and economically regardless of whether Iraq were to maintain its internal stability. Due to its religious majority and stance as a global hegemon for Shi'a Muslims, Iran has a very particular and

distinctive hand in the politics of its neighbors Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Bahrain, and even distant relative Lebanon. This is true because of the overwhelming amount of pressure and fear that a Shi'a majority state in Iran puts on the neighboring Sunni states via its ties to the respective Shiite populations, with the origins of such sentiment tracing back to recent historical events.

Iran and Saudi Arabia's dominant sentiment arose most prominently in the 20th century at the height of the Cold War in 1971, fueled by a pressurized feeling to defend a respective sect of Islam. There was a time, however, when the Iranian and Saudi relationship was relatively peaceful, and foreign intervention from the United States triggered lasting instability in the Middle East. In 1971, global politics were extremely unstable and the American-Soviet relations were at a boiling point. Amid the threat of expansion from the latter power spreading into the Middle Eastern countries, the United States drastically increased military arms imports to the region. These imports were expected to help fight the spread of communism in the region and counter the potential Soviet expansion. In this same year, President Richard Nixon unveiled the "Twin Pillars" policy, developed under what has been deemed the Nixon Doctrine, which accelerated arms sales to Saudi Arabia and Iran. What this policy accounted for was the large economy of Iran and well-trained army in Saudi Arabia, making these powers central to its success.^[8]

The history of Sunni-Shi'a relations reached a turning point in the 1970s, via what has become known as the Siege of Mecca and the Iranian Revolution. The year began on the tail end of the first boom of oil sales for Saudi Arabia, allowing the Kingdom to benefit from such profits. Confident and wealthy, the Kingdom had reached a new status level in the Middle East. Comparatively, Iran was at a much different stance just a few weeks into the new year. At the time, Iran had one of the more stable regimes in the Middle East but was relatively closed off to Western influence. Taking place in February, the revolution was not religious in nature, it was inherently political in focus, as it aimed to overthrow the prior regime in power and instill an Islamist, clerical regime in its place. In what has been difficult to describe by many political theorists, the Iranian Revolution did the opposite of what many others in the region have done, create an Islamic Republic after a collective representation from society rose up; unseating a more binary political system.^[9]

The overthrow of the Iranian shah, an authoritarian regime, was clearly a politically motivated occurrence. What Katouzian fails to touch upon is the idea that the revolution was nationalistic at first glance and remained so, despite it reflecting an idea of being Shi'a influenced in spirit and ideology. The 1979 revolution gave Shi'a cleric and soon-to-be leader Ayatollah Khomeini the opportunity to implement his vision for an Islamic

government with Shi'a values.^[10] Khomeini, and many other Shi'a clerics believed that the government should be ruled by the "guardianship of the jurist" (velayat-e faqih)^[11]. While this idea is controversial among many clerics and completely opposed by Sunnis, Khomeini argued that his clerics had to be in power to properly enact their function of implementing Islam as God intended through Shi'a *imams*.^[12] What is apparent within the Iranian Revolution is the clear political motivation to overthrow a regime and change the constitution of a government, regardless of what was used as a pillar for attracting local support. The Iranian Revolution and its aftermath played a major role in the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, particularly given the immediate and dramatic rise to power that a Shi'a religious figure would have in a neighboring state and the rivalry that would soon ensue between the major Islamic powers.

About nine months after the unforeseen Iranian Revolution, a then-modernizing Saudi Arabia witnessed its own form of revolt, with severe consequences to future national policies. During the 1979 siege, a group of seven hundred rebels entered the Grand Mosque in Mecca on November 20, 1979 and began to open fire. Over time, the rebel group took over the mosque and seven minarets, giving them effective control of the entire downtown of Mecca. The rebels, led by a former corporal of the Saudi National Guard, Juhayman al-Uteybi, now controlled the holiest site in the Islamic world.^[13]

News of the siege in Mecca broke in Washington at a State Department briefing, twenty-four hours later, amidst the Iranian hostage crisis. The news of the siege initially led American officials to believe that Iranian fundamentalists were responsible for the attack. In response to American presumptions, the Iranians accused the United States of starting the siege themselves to defile the holiest shrine of Islam and upend regional stability, beginning a sentiment of disdain and distrust between Iran and Saudi Arabia that continues to be apparent today.

Back in Mecca, the Saudi Army came under intense fire from the rebels in the minarets while trying to surround the holy mosque. On only the second day of battle, the Saudi soldiers lowered their weapons and refused to fire upon the mosque because the Islamic scripture says that Mecca is an area of peace.^[14] In accordance with Islamic law, the Saudi government had to secure an Islamic decree, known as a *fatwa* from Muslim clerics.^[15] The clerics agreed to let the government storm the mosque, in exchange for the halt of modernization in the Kingdom, an important stipulation that still plays out in global politics vis a vis the Kingdom.^[16] This halt of modernization and the calls for consolidation of the national government came at a pinnacle of the higher points in the Saudi oil economy.^[17]

A government assault on modernization and seizure of the holiest sites of Islam were enough for political leaders, those with religion as a cover for dubious political agendas, to call for a shift in Saudi national society. Aspects of Saudi modernization (at the time) were ceased by clerics, who focused on more conservative societal actions including the removal of women from television strict alcohol legislations and the shift of government allocations to cleric-sponsored missionaries and the spread of the Saudi-led Sunni sect of Islam through the Islamic world.^[18] In the pre-siege Saudi Arabia of 1979, women were living a very normal life, driving cars, going to movie theaters, and working everywhere, like in the rest of the Gulf countries. Yet some will argue that the Saudi society was not as modernized as the siege made the world think.^[19]

With the Kingdom closing its doors to the rest of the world, halting processes of modernization and shifting its economic policies to become more theological created an infrastructure that added hostility to international relations and (according to some) allowed Al-Qaeda militants to breed throughout the Arab world.^[20] Trofimov explains that the Kingdom via its leadership, the House of Saud, moved to embrace Wahhabi orthodoxy, a wise survival policy.^[21] However, the Saudis failed to realize that such orthodoxy, an extremely conservative understanding of the Sunni faith would soon bleed into all aspects of society and politics.^[22] This political agenda, rooted in Wahhabist ideology, served as the foundation for the terrorism that arose from Saudi Arabia two decades later. Therefore, it was only after decades of this political event and regime indoctrination that senior princes realized the extent of the folly. The political events of the 1970s, from the indoctrination of the Nixon Doctrine to revolution in 1979, changed the course of the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, driving the already intense regional rivalry deeper.

When analyzing the history between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the events of 1979 and their subsequent aftermath stand out as the most significant. The Siege of Mecca and the Iranian Revolution changed the course of the Arabian Gulf region geopolitically. By the 1980s, Saudi Arabia, together with other Arab states in the region, began to feel threatened by revolutionary Iran and feared that ripple effects could lead to revolutions across the Arabian Gulf. Nearby, Saudi Arabia was making its domestic social agenda more conservative and religious-focused. The situation in Iran was most concerning as nearby countries like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain hosted large Shi'a minorities that could potentially be mobilized by Iranian influence from its revolution.^[23] Some argue that the fear within the Iranian-Saudi rivalry began before the states were founded, but has transformed since 1979 and that Saudi Arabia is a regional status quo power. Comparatively, Iran often seeks revolutionary change throughout the Gulf area and the wider Middle East with varying degrees of intensity. The most important difference between the two nations is that Saudi Arabia is a

conservative Sunni Muslim Arab state, while Iran is a Shi'ite state with senior politicians who often view their country as the defender and natural leader of Shi'ites throughout the region. The rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran has been reflected in the politics of a number of regional states where these two powers exercise influence, but never in direct conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, always via a third party to mask true intentions.

The foreign policy of these two states is important to consider. While Saudi Arabia has had strong ties with Western nations, Iran has historically moved to an opposing political agenda that aims to focus on its own state sovereignty and less on the assistance from outsiders. This does not mean that Iran has neglected foreign policy and that Western powers have only sought relations with Saudi Arabia. Instead, conceptualizing the foreign relations of both Iran and Saudi Arabia is helpful for our analysis of the relationship between the two powers. The Iranians have historically chosen to ally with powers who accept its version of history and support the regime's decisions. These allies for the Iranians are often not allies of Saudi Arabia, metaphorically creating stormy waters across the Arabian Gulf in Riyadh that came to fruition in the summer of 1980.

The events of August 1980 and those that followed symbolize sectarian relations in the Arabian Gulf and have laid the foundation for subsequent political division in the region. Framed as a conflict that was inspired by religious division, the Iran-Iraq War of 1980 was ultimately about the use of political strategy; pitting neighboring nations against one another via the use of respective Islamic sects. The after effects of this war are embedded into the regional geopolitical power struggle that we see in the 21st century. Both Iran and Iraq, eager to continue the metaphorical waves of dissent that were lingering from the events of the Siege of Mecca and the Iranian Revolution just the year prior consciously mixed individual and religious identity with politics, in order to boost potential alliances and forge international support. For Iran, revolutionist Ayatollah Khomeini aimed to defend the Shi'a faith and protect the national borders following a massive upheaval that was still ongoing (in what is now known as the Iranian Hostage Crisis).^[24] For Iraq, Saddam Hussein was doing the exact same but reverse, to curb the Shi'a rhetoric from his western neighbor and eventually acquire the wealth of oil resources that were located in the southwestern region of Iran (the first, Khuzestan, was known to be symbolically important to Iran and oil-rich).^[25] For Hussein, the revolutionist Shi'a mentality that had arisen from the Iranian state just one year prior was enough to gain regional support from the likes of Sunni-led Saudi Arabia and Jordan, both of whom were fearful that their respective Shi'a communities would be exposed to the revolutionist aura within the region.^[26] Hussein expertly crafted narrative throughout the conflict, using identity, paranoia, fear and force to build his reinforcements on the battlefield and achieve more resources or political support off of it. He also aimed to

make this conflict much deeper than more current affairs, pitting Arabs against their historical nemesis – the Persians.^[27] The acquisition of resources, fear of political revolution, and use of Sunni rhetoric for financial gain was clearly a political agenda.

The sectarian relations in the Arabian Gulf intensified with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, beginning the Persian Gulf War I. At 2 AM, Iraqi forces invaded its neighbor, the State of Kuwait. Within hours, Kuwait City fell and Iraq set up a provincial government in the Kuwaiti capitol. This annexation by force, which occurred within hours, granted Iraq access to both the Arabian Gulf (to which it never before had access) and more importantly, to twenty percent of the global oil reserves at the time.^[28] The first Persian Gulf War did not end there. In January 1991, U.S. President George H.W. Bush announced the famous “Operation Desert Storm,” which aimed to liberate Kuwait of Iraqi control. After a lengthy assault by air and sea, a final ground mission started in February 1991, and a ceasefire was achieved in less than one hundred hours by service members from two dozen countries.^[29] The forces drove Hussein-led Iraq from Kuwait, but then left him in power to rule over Iraq, to immense detriment in the coming years.

While it became clear in later years that the leaders of “Operation Desert Storm” made a grave mistake by leaving Hussein in power, due to the mass atrocities that resulted, this was not the only repercussion that the first Persian Gulf War left within the region. Foreign intervention from the conflict changed the region, opening up the likes of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq and even Iran to the world that soon fought over the wealth of oil resources^[30]. This claim for resources has since made the region a battleground for political and economic ventures, with foreign powers added into the mix.^[31] The role of the United States and other western countries sheds clarity on the notion that foreign intervention has been present to this day, most particularly following the events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent Second Persian Gulf War.

Iran and Saudi Arabia both attempt to be the “police force” of the region, fearing the expansion of the other and spread of their rivals’ religious beliefs.^[32] While these two powers have had a convoluted relationship filled with tension for many years, the two powers have never gone to war on either Iranian or Saudi soil. Instead, they have elected to move forward with respective agendas via conflicts in other territories, thus making places like Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Afghanistan and Yemen seem like “battlegrounds”.^[33]^[34] These efforts in foreign lands suggest that both Iran and Saudi Arabia have no interest in going to war in traditional conflict, but aim to expand their respective political agendas via influencing the respective Shi’a or Sunni populations in other states.

The expansion of a political agenda can be masked by a variety of claims. For example, while Iran aims to protect the Shi'a faith around the world, it ultimately benefits socio-economically as long as it maintains the role as a quasi-beacon or a leader for Shi'a Muslims. In turn, the same can be said for Saudi Arabia, which serves as the leading Sunni-majority state, despite its extremely poor handling of its relations with its Shi'a populous in the eastern parts of the country. With Iran and Saudi Arabia both having a role to play in ongoing proxy wars in places like Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria, relations between the two are entirely indirect. The more prominent and current case of the three is that of Yemen, where the Iranians support the Houthi Shi'a rebels and the Saudis, the fractured Yemeni governance.^[35] The case in Yemen serves as a contemporary, ongoing example of the political rivalry that has been incorrectly deemed religious sectarianism, for it serves as more of a battleground for regional supremacy, with the winner having a victory over the loser (Sunni over Shi'a or vice versa). Yet if one were to look at this conflict more closely, they would see that the Houthi rebels are not fighting for regional claims, simply domestic. The missile launches that have been documented by Saudi Arabia, the more infamous of those in Riyadh, were retaliatory for the Saudi strikes that killed innocent civilians in Yemen.^[36] To cause more complications the United States is once again mottling within regional politics, supporting the Saudis by selling bombs and munitions to the military per an issue by the Trump Administration.^[37] The fact that Iranian-Saudi relations are continuously taking place outside of their respective territories, yet the states remain increasingly paranoid at the influence of one another, highlights the political pressures that are at the root of this long-lasting conflict. Given the political, rather than religious inclinations, of these situations, the question is: what will future consist of for Iran and Saudi Arabia?

Having used the essence of religion in order to mask political agendas, both states are left in a zero-sum game. Religion is present here, but political hegemony and the extension of the Saudi or Iranian sphere of influence in the Middle East takes priority, yet are veiled in religious schisms, leaving what remains and what will remain in the coming years. Including the proxy wars occurring within Syria and Yemen, Saudi Arabia is currently trying to keep its quarrels with neighboring Qatar and regional neighbor Turkey at bay, while Iran continues battling sanctions from the United States. Sectarian interests may be too interwoven with regional politics to subside anytime soon. Shi'a and Sunni leaders see political interests in exploiting this divide, willing to take advantage of anxieties on the ground to defend their rule and protect their interests. There is no true effort amongst leaders to close the divide, heal the wounds, and put forth a shared vision of an inclusive future, as the aforementioned history suggests. It is fair to say that what remains is a winner-takes-all scramble.^[38]

The future of Iranian-Saudi relations is ultimately unclear. Both states are currently at a difficult point, as Iran battles sanctions from the international community over its inability to manage its nuclear program and Saudi Arabia battles ongoing internal tensions and modernization practices spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. Given that the events of history have ultimately compounded Iranian-Saudi relations into what they are today; filled with fear of political action and regime upheaval due to religious differences, it is clear that the political sectarianism that is in place between states will remain for many years to come and may never truly subside until the sects are able to align harmoniously.

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