

## **Great Powers, The Middle East, and The Cold War (Case Study – Islamic Republic of Iran and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia)**

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### **Abstract**

The Middle East is a highly dynamic and unstructured regional system in which power relations are fluid, competitive, and volatile. Inevitably, the fluidity of power and the competition of a regional hegemonic power have invited external intervention. Furthermore, the region's dynamism not only has exacerbated the subsystem's fragmentation into sub-regions but also has afforded opportunities for the better-endowed small Arab states to play in the greater game of regional power politics. Due to its geopolitical importance, any inter-and intra-state conflict in the Middle East has the potential not only of destabilizing the region as a whole or upset the regional balance of power but also to affect global stability. For these reasons, the Middle East has been a major center of world affairs; an economically, politically, and culturally sensitive area. The purpose of this analysis is to provide an account of international relations and the concept of power in the contemporary Middle East. To address the question of regional order, attention will focus on the policies of the main actors such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Yemen, the United States, and other non-state actors.

**Keywords:** Geostrategic, geopolitical, Middle East, Strategy, Foreign Policy, Geography, Non State Actors, State Actors, Conflict, International Relations



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### **INTRODUCTION**

The term “Middle East” the first time has been coined by the American naval historian Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan. The Middle East occupies a unique geographical and strategic position. Hence, it is not a coincidence that every great power in history has sought to advance its interests in the region. In addition to its geographical and strategic uniqueness, the Middle East is the birthplace and spiritual center of the three most important monotheistic religions, namely Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, as well as the greatest single reserve of oil.

The Middle East as referred to consists of the Arabian Peninsula (comprising Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey). From the foundation of the Ottoman Empire the position of the Middle East, lying as it does across the main arteries of transport between Europe and Southern and Eastern Asia, has been of great significance commercially. The discovery of immense reserves of oil in the states around the Persian Gulf in the first half of the twentieth century and their accelerated advancement in the second half enhanced the commercial importance of the whole region. Following the Second World War, the Western Powers continued to attach great importance to the Middle East as a site for strategic bases.

After the emergence of Israel in 1948 USA sponsored Israel as a bastion of democracy against soviet expansion and Arab radicalism in the region. At the end of British colonial rule in the 1960s and the Six-Day War of 1967, the geostrategic scenario of the Middle East attained a new dimension marked mainly by the two superpowers of two self-made theories, ‘Power Vacuum’ and ‘Reciprocal Escalation”. Until the cold war, the USA’s main national interests in the region were the security of Israel, containment of Soviet expansion, and oil.

At the end of the cold war and the Gulf War in 1991, the USA made remarkable progress to influence Middle East issues through its physical presence in the region. The attack on the Twin Towers on 11 Sep 2001 followed by the US action against Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq, and countering ISIS created a convenient pretext for the USA to further extend its presence in the region. In the present context, the hegemonic attitude of Saudi Arabia and Iran and the conduct of American foreign policy seem to be the principal factor in all the Middle East issues. As per the literature, the review identified the main reasons from the historical perspective to date reasons of the conflicts in the Middle East as follows:

1. The way the Middle East was divided by foreign powers after world wars.
2. The spread of Wahhabism across the region.
3. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
4. The regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.
5. American Foreign policy.

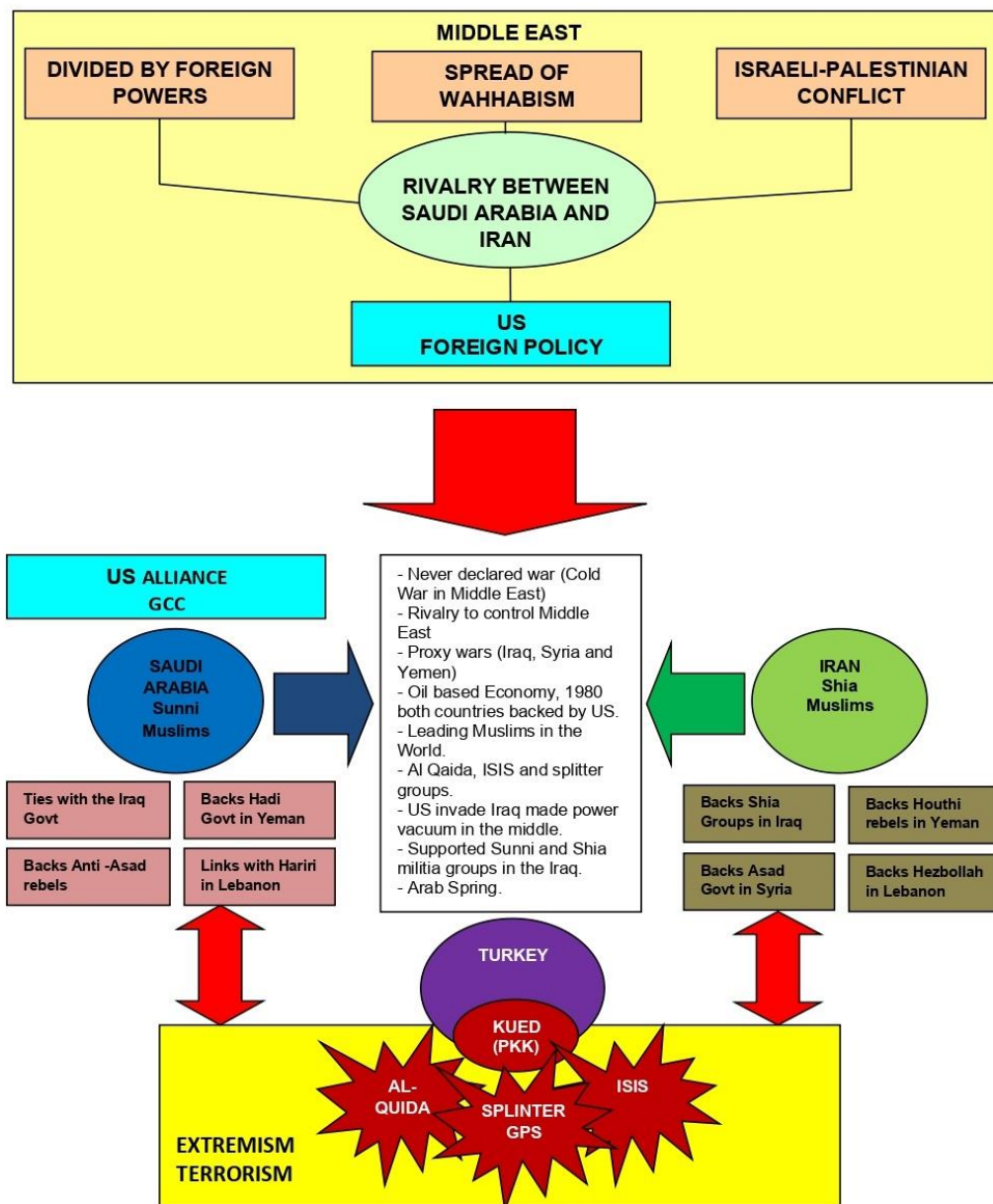
Further, the hope for peace in the region was influenced by a few other factors leading from the above main five factors are the acceptance of Palestinian and Israelis, the new US foreign policy of president Joe Biden, the Syrian conflict, the ongoing war in Yemen, Iran nuclear issue, Al-Qaeda and ISIS and splinter groups, etc. are critical issues.

Due to its geopolitical importance, any inter-and intra-state conflict in the Middle East has the potential not only of destabilizing the region as a whole or upset the regional balance of power but also to affect global stability. For these reasons, the Middle East has been a major center of world affairs; an economically, politically, and culturally sensitive area. The purpose of this analysis is to provide an account of international relations and the concept of power in the contemporary Middle East. To address the question of regional order, attention will focus on the policies of the main actors such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Yemen, the United States, and other non-state actors.

### **Hypothesis**

This analysis is based on three basic elements of international relations the concept of power in the Middle East crisis and how Iran and Saudi Arabia's power struggle affected the region.

## Conceptual Framework



The Middle East is the most militarized region in the world. It seems Iran, Saudi Arabia's rivalry and US influence (foreign policy) as a major root cause of the current problems in the Middle East has led to a rise in Islamic militancy, acts of terrorism, and anti-west sentiment, anti-US in particular.

The idea of security complexes is an empirical phenomenon with historical and geopolitical roots. Security complexes are also generated by the interaction of anarchy and geography. The political structure of anarchy confronts all states with the power-security dilemma, but security interdependence is powerfully mediated by the effects of geography. Because threats operate more potently over short distances, security interactions with state actors and non-state actors near tend to have priority. However, geographical proximity or even sharing of borders does not necessarily imply the presence of strong security interdependence among states. For example, the security interdependence between Iran and

Saudi Arabia is much more complex than Turkey's security interdependence with Iran and Saudi Arabia, which indicates that Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey belong to different security complexes in the same region.

### **Analysis**

The analysis is based on three basic elements of international relations and the concept of power behavior of two main state actors Saudi Arabia and Iran other global actors and regional actors and non-state actors depicted in the conceptual framework. The analysis is conducted based on the conceptual framework and is divided into three sections. The first section takes into account the actors depicted in the conceptual Framework. The second section takes into the process of cooperation competition conflict and integration at present and in the future in line with global power dynamics. The third section focuses on the traditional and nontraditional issues of power competition with Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the US and Israel's actions based on the US foreign policy towards the Middle East. The future use of non-state actors to destabilize the region through covert activities by the actors and other global and regional powers cannot be ruled out in the global power struggle.

### **State Actors**

**Saudi Arabia** - The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is the third Muslim power to be considered a middle or regional power. Saudi Arabia has always had the potential to be a great regional power. KSA's economic foundations have been strong for some years, today making it the region's largest economy with a GDP of \$790 billion. Saudi Arabia's military power (in terms of hardware and training) is also substantial, but in manpower terms, it is still relatively weak. Its military machine is superior to all of its neighbors like Turkey and Israel and is regularly replenished by state-of-the-art purchases from Europe and the United States.

The KSA enjoys strong support from the West and is a firm ally of the United States, but at the same time has close links with such key Asian countries as China, India, and Japan. But due to its demographic vulnerabilities (with a national population base of 23 million in a total population of 29 million), geopolitical vulnerabilities (unstable Yemen, weak states across the Red Sea, a fragile Jordan and Palestinians to the west, and Shia-run Iraq to the north) Kingdom is more cautious of its regional relations. Today, despite glaring structural vulnerabilities, the Kingdom is recognized as a regional power. It is fully aware of the attributes of power that it increasingly freely uses in its regional and international interactions.

**Iran** - Iran, more than thirty years after its Islamic revolution, is still looking for what it regards to be its rightful place in the region. The problem is not simply that it has not found its suitable place in the regional order, but that it is struggling to consolidate its niche as the strategic foe of the United States in the region. Iran's positioning, therefore, causes considerable friction with several of its Arab neighbors in particular. It has, moreover, not managed to contain its revisionist tendencies in its power projection, articulation of aspirations, and most importantly its actions. Furthermore, its vocal and covert support for the al-Houthi rebellion in Yemen, backing for the Shia-led demands in Bahrain, and express support for radical movements across the region have helped push the main Arab actors away from Tehran. The growing distance between Tehran and many neighboring Arab states has been compounded by the latter's fears of Iran's nuclear programme and its confrontational stance toward the West.

The greatest fear of the neighbors of course is a slide toward a war between Iran and Israel /United States which would arguably engulf the rest of the region. Tehran's repeated threats that if attacked it would take action against US interests in the region has been interpreted by the Arab side as a direct threat to their sovereignty, given that virtually all of America's military

assets are either based on Arab soil or within their territorial waters. An Israeli-led attack on Iran, moreover, will not only unleash the gods of war, mobilizing Hezbollah, Hamas, and other sympathizers to Iran's cause but also challenge the political stability of many Arab states who would find themselves in the most unenviable position of trying to resist the calls to go to Iran's defence or confront Israel for its aggression against a Muslim country. Iran's domestic situation also is having a direct effect on its regional behavior. Iran has also pressed ahead with consolidating its presence in Iraq, again to the chagrin of Turkey, Jordan, and the GCC neighboring states.

Tensions with the Gulf states remain high but are also rising with Turkey, for Ankara is increasingly being seen in Tehran as a credible challenger to Turkey. Turkey has a bigger and more advanced economy. Its relations with the United States and the EU are far better than those of Iran. So are its relations with Sunni countries as well as Shiite ones. Iranian leaders will soon be looking for some kind of competitive advantage with their economy in tatters and their country more isolated than before, becoming a nuclear-armed country is likely to be the most attractive and convenient means for Iran's Supreme Leader to gain an edge over Turkey.

**Turkey** - The first middle (regional) power in the Middle East. It is clear that Turkey, since the end of the Cold War and the undisguised hostility from some European Union members (notably France and Greece) to its membership of the European club, has revised its regional relations. Further, it is the second-largest in NATO and stronger and better equipped than the majority of neighboring countries. Turkey's "Middle East pivot" grew with the successive Islamist-led government's reexamination of its security and political links with its neighbours and also those with Israel. With Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE Turkey pressed energy and trade and investment ties, and lately also has deepened links with the Kurdish autonomous region of Iraq.

At the diplomatic level, arguably, Ankara's reorientation towards the Muslim Middle East as part of its Middle East pivot has taken place along three tracks. First, it has put a distance between itself and Israel, to the satisfaction of many of its Middle Eastern neighbours. Secondly, until the Syria crisis weakened the bond with Iran, Turkey had tried to act as an honest broker between Iran and the West in the nuclear crisis. Thirdly, Ankara has taken full advantage of its growing economic muscle to develop closer political and economic links with the Arab region. Ankara's other two main strategies are: the first is the domestic imperatives and interests of an increasingly powerful Islamist-led government taking root in Turkey and being more at ease in looking towards the Muslim world for its daily interactions. Turkey has improved its ties with the GCC states, working closely with Saudi Arabia, but also with the smaller oil monarchies such as Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE in the fields of energy, tourism, construction, and real estate. What is of particular interest is the growing security links between Turkey and the Arab states, often developed as a counterbalance to Iran and Israel.

**The USA** - US President Joe Biden's foreign policy vision of the USA is to restore dignified leadership at home and a respected leader on the world stage. Policies at home and abroad are deeply connected. The security, prosperity, and values of the United States by taking immediate steps to renew US democracy and alliances, protect the US economic future, and once more place America at the head of the table America first, leading the world to address the most urgent global challenges.

The U.S. counter-terrorism on ISIS had implemented various strategies under President Barack Obama and President Trump including degrading ISIS's capability, shaping a global coalition to defeat ISIS, and using trained military armed men for Iraq army forces, the Kurdi army, the Arabian army, and moderate opposition groups to fight against ISIS.

**USA - Israel Relations** - The United States was the first country to recognize Israel as a state in 1948, and the first to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017. Israel is a great partner to the United States, and Israel has no greater friends than the United States. Americans and Israelis are united by a shared commitment to democracy, economic prosperity, and regional security. The unbreakable bond between the two countries has never been stronger. Israel's security is a long-standing cornerstone of US foreign policy. The United States commitment to Israel's security is supported by robust defense cooperation.

**Yemen** - The conflict has its roots in the failure of a political transition supposed to bring stability to Yemen following an Arab Spring uprising that forced its longtime authoritarian president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to hand over power to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, in 2011. As president, Mr. Hadi struggled to deal with a variety of problems, including attacks by jihadists, a separatist movement in the south, and the continuing loyalty of security personnel to Saleh, as well as corruption, unemployment, and food insecurity. The Houthi movement (known formally as Ansar Allah), which Yemen's Zaidi Shia Muslim minority and fought a series of rebellions against Saleh during the previous decade, took advantage of the new president's weakness by taking control of their northern heartland of Saada province and neighboring areas. The Saudi Arabian-led intervention in Yemen on 26 March 2015, led a coalition of nine countries from West Asia and North Africa, responding to calls from the president of Yemen Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi for military support after he was ousted by the Houthi movement, despite the progress in the political transition led by the United Nations at that time. Militants from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the local affiliate of the rival Islamic State group (IS) have taken advantage of the chaos by seizing territory in the south and carrying out deadly attacks in the country threatening the region.

### **Non-State Actors**

There are several non-state actors connected to the power rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. After being defeated by Al-Qaeda and ISIS most of these groups are functioning in isolation threatening regional and global security. Any of the smart power actors who can handle these affiliated groups against state actors or non-state actors cannot be ruled out in the future.

1. ISIS
2. Al-Qaeda
3. Kurd – PKK
4. Houthi movement (known formally as Ansar Allah)
5. IS-K
6. Hayat-Tahrir al-Sham (Jabhat al- Nusra Front/ Jabhat Fatah al-Sham)

### **Traditional and Nontraditional Issues of Power Completion**

Twenty years after the 9/11 attacks, the global jihadist movement has more fighters in more countries than ever before. The way Salafi-jihadi groups, including al Qaeda, have sought to achieve their aims has evolved since 2001, but the core belief that violent jihad must be waged to restore Islam in Muslim societies has not changed. Further following IS's loss of territorial control in the Syrian Arab Republic in March 2019, IS has adapted by reconstituting itself as a covert network in the country, as it had done in Iraq in 2017. While the overall level of violence related to IS has decreased, the group remains a significant threat and has shifted to insurgent tactics. The Islamic State poses a grave danger to the US and its allies in the Middle East and around the world. Its location, the resources it controls, the skill and determination of its leaders and fighters, and ISIS demonstrated lethality distinguish it from other Al-Qaeda-type groups.

In the current situation in Yemen fighting between the Saudi-led coalition and Iranian-backed Houthi rebels continues to harm civilians, drive displacement in the region, and restrict humanitarian access. The fourth-largest ethnic group in the Middle East, Kurds inhabit a mountainous region straddling the borders of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Armenia to obtain a permanent nation-state. The further situation in Syria presents complex governance dynamics and involves several regional and global actors after being defeated in ISIS in Iraq and Syria. These ongoing conflicts are described as a mix of proxy regional and international wars, civil wars, and popular uprisings against authoritarianism and autonomy. States' failure and the war economy have rendered civil society in Yemen, the Kurdish autonomous region, and Syria a "conflict society" an arena where multiple actors, both civil and uncivil, co-exist and compete. Further, this complex situation is only a part of existing conflicts and power dynamics in the Middle East region and this situation has been shaped by mainly Iran and Saudi Arabia's proxy wars against each other, local and international interests, as well as regional and non-state actors.

### **Change of Modus Operandi by Non-State Actors**

With significant loss of territory and its leadership Al Quida, IS and splinter groups have shifted their modus operandi from high-intensity to low-intensity attacks. It clearly shows a significant change in the method and scale of attacks, this can motivate lone wolves in the region, making them think about attacks innovatively utilizing knives, vehicles, petrol bombs, etc.

1. High-intensity to low-intensity attacks.
2. Long wolf/ wolf packs.
3. Cross-border terrorism.
4. Back to insurgency tactics.

The existing situation has led to emerging of splinter groups other than the groups mentioned in the analysis. However, despite this significant loss of territory in the self-proclaimed "caliphate," ISIS has proven remarkably adaptable and resilient than Al-Qaida.

### **Future Traditional and Non-traditional Threats**

ISIS still commands thousands of fighters in Iraq and Syria, and it maintains eight branches, more than a dozen networks, and thousands of dispersed supporters around the world, despite significant leadership and territorial losses. The group will exploit any reduction in counter-terrorism pressure to strengthen its clandestine presence and accelerate rebuilding key capabilities, such as media production and external operations. ISIS very likely will continue to pursue external attacks from Iraq and Syria against regional and Western adversaries, including the United States.

### **Issues**

In the Middle East, it is a combination of proxy force and money that helps the projection of power and those states with the greatest military machines and resources have shown the greatest potential to sustain them, often then managing to set the tone for regional interactions as well.

At the intersection of great-power rivalry and regional competition in the Middle East, there are at least five trends that shape the current Middle Eastern strategic environment:

1. The ongoing rivalry between the Saudi-led coalition and Iran and its proxies.
2. Protracted conflicts in the region, from Syria to Libya and Yemen.
3. The strained US-Iran dynamics.

4. Intra GCC crisis.
5. The 'known unknown' of the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian, and Ukraine war, its potential effects on the security of the Middle East.

These five factors will likely remain crucial as not only will they affect the regions' strategic outlook but also influence the shape of great power rivalry in the Middle East between the US, China, and Russia and the regional cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Other factors affecting regional power rivalry are:

1. Israel's relations with Turkey, and its confrontations with Iran. Israel remains a very powerful actor in the region and Israel does not seem prepared to take any chances with any bloc of Arab states.
2. Israel's tussle with Iran is a regional matter and its escalation could cause severe damage to the regional balance of power.
3. Non-state actors within and across the Arab region leading to several proxy wars and continuing.
4. Iran's nuclear programme and the tussle between Iran and Israel are global geo-security concerns.
5. Turkey, which has a residual European and NATO power base in the region.
6. Iran's economy is severely affected due to ongoing US sanctions against Iran. Its relationships with Russia, China, and even India are at a tactical level. Iran is at present context reactive instead of being proactive.

## **CONCLUSION**

Iran and Saudi Arabia and their allies' proxy wars and power struggles against each other have made several set back to the region during the last few decades. Today three external powers the US, China, and Russia are the leading players behind great power rivalry in the Middle East. The consequences of the Arab uprising, the decline of the post-Cold War order, and increasing global rivalry between great powers have led to this regional competition a new. "The rivalry of great powers, combined with the already existing regional rifts between Iran, Saudi Arabia-led Sunni Arab states, Israel and Turkey, has put its negative mark on the region's stability".

The Middle East is a highly dynamic and unstructured regional system in which power relations are fluid, competitive, and volatile. Inevitably, the fluidity of power and the competition of a regional hegemonic power have invited external intervention. Furthermore, the region's dynamism not only has exacerbated the subsystem's fragmentation into sub-regions but also has afforded opportunities for the better-endowed small Arab states to play in the greater game of regional power politics. The US's political and military power, together with a long diplomatic tradition in the region, and the support of local allies (including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) have allowed the US to maintain a leading force in the region for years. Solely from the security standpoint, even after US forces withdraw from Afghanistan due to its allies the US position in the region is difficult to challenge by any external or local powers.

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