# Genuine Fear or Securitization: Iran and Saudi Arabia's Threat Perception

**Mohammad, Soltaninejad**

Department of West Asia and North Africa, Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran, soltaninejad@ut.ac.ir

## Abstract

Saudi Arabia expresses fears from Iran that are in some cases genuine and in other cases insincere. To see whether or not Saudis are sincere in their fear expressions from Iran, an analytical tool is developed in this paper linking securitization theory to theories of truth-verification. Analyzing Mohammad bin Salman's interview about Iran with Jeffrey Goldberg from the Atlantic using the indicators extracted from context-oriented theories of deception-detection, this paper demonstrated that the assertions the Saudi Crown Prince made about Iran reflect both true apprehensions and unfounded misrepresentations, with the balance in favor of the latter. This study demonstrated that context-oriented truth verification theories of social sciences are useful in foreign policy studies to distinguish states' securitizing moves from their sincere fear expressions. The methodology of this article is based on a descriptive-explanatory approach that seeks to shed light on how Saudi leaders try to securitize Iran's identity in the region.

**Keywords**: securitization, sincerity, fear expression, truth verification, Saudi Arabia, Iran.

## 1- Introduction

The relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia since the Iranian revolution are best characterized by persistent tensions (Soltaninejad, 2019). Iran is known to be Saudi Arabia's archrival in the Middle East and during the last four decades the two countries have found themselves in opposing regional alignments. From a Saudi perspective, Iran is "the number one cause for concern" (AlSaud, 2016) and Riyadh has consistently accused Iran of interfering in Arab countries affairs (see Reuters, 2007). These Saudi claims have been understood in two opposing ways. Some have taken Riyadh's introduction of Iran as a threat at face value, affirming the Saudi's position that Iran is, indeed, a danger to the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of the Arab states in the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East (Yaalon, 2016). For others, Saudi Arabia has a motivation to exaggerate the threat emanating from Iran (IFAIR, 2012) and such Saudi claims are devised to securitize Iran (Mabon, 2017). The truth between these two is elusive. In this paper, I confirm the idea that Saudi Arabia has some real

fears from Iran. The nature of the Iranian revolution in 1979 that brought to power a popular political structure was terrifying for Saudi Arabia and created deep-seated fears in Riyadh that have continued to date. Such fears are inherent, generated by the Saudi Arabia's apprehensions from losing its sense of singularity as the sole state that gains its identity from Islam alone (Darwich, 2016). The real fears of Saudi Arabia from Iran also emanate from Iran's material power and its strategic depth. I also see credibility in the view that these fears are routinely instrumentalized for strategic purposes particularly from the time Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) came to power as the Saudi Arabia defense minister in 2015 and then crown prince in 2017 (Al-Rasheed, 2018).

The crucial task and the main contribution of this work is to see when the first and when the second views explain Saudi's expressions of fear from Iran. I try to provide an analytical tool to distinguish between Saudi Arabia's genuine expression of fear from Iran and Saudi Arabia's acts of inflating the Iranian threat or misrepresenting it. Without this, the truth behind Saudi Arabia's calls against Iran as a threat would remain always unrealized. It is always possible that Saudi officials are telling the truth about their fears from Iran, or the other way around, they are fabricating misinformation to construct an existential threat out of it. As I argue, distinguishing true from false in this context is possible through linking securitization theory to the literature on deception detection in the social sciences. By doing so, an analytical framework would be developed that remedies an important yet surprisingly unaddressed flaw in securitization theory that is about ignorance of the fact that securitization is in place only when the security utterances are insincere. Developing such analytical instrument, I will put it to use to see how sincere Saudi Arabia's officials are when they talk about Iran as a source of existential threat. Using this

analytical framework, MBS's interview with Jeffrey Goldberg published by the Atlantic1 in which he extensively talks about Iran's threats is studied for its veracity and to see whether his expressions of fear about Iran are genuine or they are insincere aimed at constructing an existential threat.

**I-The Inauthenticity of Fear Expression from Iran**

As illustrated before, I study Saudi Arabia's fear expressions about Iran in the context of Iranophobia; to see whether Saudi officials generate an ungrounded phobia from Iran or they are sincerely revealing their real apprehensions from that. Iranophobia defined as exaggeration of the threats Iran poses to its adversaries (Chubin, 2009, 165) is an established notion in the academia. Haggai Ram has conducted an outstanding analysis of Iranophobia in Israel distinguishing it from logical geopolitical apprehensions of the Jewish state. As he argues, Israel's obsession about Iran is rooted in similarities that aim Israel's ontological security rather than geopolitical considerations and politics of difference. The rise of Iranophobia in Israel is linked to the Ashkenazi as a dominant ethnic group buttressing the western and modern elements of Israeli identity and represented by the Likud party ascending the ladders of power from late 1970s. Iranophobia helps Ashkenazi and the Likud to negate similarities between Iran and Israel who are both dragging a contradiction between tradition and modernity (Ram, 2009). In the same way, Porter argues that expression of alarm by Israeli prime ministers about Iran since 1993 is instrumental and serves foreign and domestic political purposes. As he demonstrates, Israel's misrepresentation and

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1 See the interview here:

https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/

manipulation of facts about Iran helps it advance its interests on other issues particularly its standing with the Unites States (Porter, 2015: 43-62).

A similar trend of exaggerating Iran's dangers is observable in the United States where Iran has been constantly seen as a threat to the US interests. William Beeman attributes the negativism about Iran to accusations the US makes about Iran. These accusations, as Beeman argues, are unsubstantiated and fall into several categories of supposition which can be summarized as forward accusations about what Iran might do in future like building a nuclear weapon, accusations about Iran's involvement in attacks against the United States and finally accusations about Iran's cooperation with the US foes like Al-Qaida (Beeman, 2005: 87-88). As Paul Pillar argues Iran has become an obsessive concern for the US in two ways. First is that a big part of the US foreign policy discourse is dedicated to Iran and second this obsessive concern is disconnected from the actual context of any threat Iran could pose to the US interests and goals. Iran is neither intent nor capable of creating a grave challenge to the US interests. Pillar attracts our attention to the fact that the threat Iran poses to the US doesn't correspond to the focus it receives: Iran's threat is exaggerated (Pillar, 2013: 211-231).

While the US and Israel's use of *Iranophobiatic* strategies is well studied, the literature on Saudi Arabia's misplaced use of Iran's threats has not come under proper light so far. Madawi Al-Rasheed (2018) is the exception here writing unequivocally about the role generation of fear from Iran plays in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy under Mohammad bin Salman. Her work excluded, the English literature on Saudi Arabia's policies vis-à-vis Iran dose not problematize the Saudi's persistent referral to Iran as a source of threat. Rasheed's arguments are reflected in the Persian literature on Saudi Arabia's policies

with respect to Iran. For instance, Asadi (2019) expands on Al-Rasheed's idea arguing that exaggeration of Iran's threats and depiction of Tehran as an imminent threat to Saudi Arabia and the larger Middle East is not only a way to overshadow Saudi Arabia's internal problems but it can also highlight the standing of Mohammad bin Salman in the Saudi power structure and to help him ascend to the king position. In light of this underdevelopment of the literature on genuineness/inauthenticity of the fear expressions from Iran by the Saudi leaders, in the remainder I propose a theoretical framework to tell true from false in threat expressions by political leaders and apply it to examine a particular case of MBS's introduction of Iran as a malign state and a sources of threat.

## II-Securitization and Sincerity in Fear Expression

There is abundant evidence that security issues are often result of political leaders' efforts to shape the world rather than being reflective of the objective and material circumstances (Balzacq, 2005: 171). Securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, 1998) aims at explaining the reasons and mechanisms of this reality. Securitization is "a technique of government which retrieves the ordering force of the fear of violent death by a mythical replay of variations of the Hobbesian state of nature. It manufactures a sudden rupture in the routinized everyday life by fabricating an existential threat" (Huysmans, 1998: 571). Securitization occurs when a securitizing actor uses rhetoric of existential threat to take an object out of normal politics (Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, 1998) and to make it a subject of extraordinary politics (Williams, 2015). This crystalizes the fact that securitization moves are about threat construction rather than being a response to real existing threats.

The cues-reliant approach in deception detection has certain shortcomings and the meta-analyses have demonstrated that the links between lying and nonverbal cues are weak, influenced by a set of intervening and moderating factors. Since deception is an individual psychological process no cue or cues to deception could be accurate (Masip, 2017: 150). This insufficiency and inaccuracy of the cue based approach has led the study on lie detection to take a turn towards context that is more objective, more understandable and less dependent on the unobservable individual level signs of deceiving. Two major context-based theories of deception detection are Adaptive Lie Detector Theory (ALIED) (Street, 2015) and Truth Default Theory (TDT) (Levine, 2014). Contextual information involves aspects such as physical evidence, third-party information, liar's confession, and inconsistencies with prior knowledge. In fact, since the link between the veracity of the statement/message and the behavior of the sender is weak (with the exception of some obvious lies) deception cannot be detected accurately by observing the behavior of the sender but it is rather discovered later on through their confessions, outer evidences and inconsistency with their other behaviors or statements (Park, Levine, McCormack, Morrison and Ferrara, 2002). It could be said that, people decide over the correctness of the statements they receive using diagnostic cues but the less these cues are the more people use context-general information to assess veracity of statements. According to ALIED, people usually believe in the veracity of what others say but they heed the intention and goal of the sender. If telling the truth is inconsistent with the intentions and goals of sender's people doubt correctness of what they hear (Street, Bischof, Vadillo and Kingstone, 2016).

Levine's Truth Default Theory very well elaborates on the contextual factors that are used to verify truthfulness of an actor. According to TDT most people do not lie if their goals

can be attained telling the truth therefore when the truth is inconsistent with the sender's goals people may doubt veracity. Other "triggers" raising suspicion are a lack of coherence (internal logical consistency) in message content, discrepancies between the message and the known reality, and third-party information revealing deception. If these triggers are strong enough, the person will scrutinize the message to assess veracity. Deception triggers may not occur at the time of the deception because (except for a few transparent liars) the relationship between veracity and behavior is poor, deception is not accurately detected by passively observing the senders' behavior at the time the lie is told; instead, whenever deception is detected, this occurs later in time via the liar's confession, external evidence, or correspondence (Masip, 2017: 151).

The two major theories of ALIED and TDT demonstrate a number of criteria that the receivers use to determine whether truth is being told or not. These criteria can be summarized as: physical evidence; third-party information; liar's confession; inconsistencies with prior knowledge; lies detected long after they are told; considering what is normal or possible in a given situation; knowledge about the sender's normal activities; beliefs about how a given situation typically unfolds; the laws of physics and nature; information about how people normally perform in a given situation; doubting veracity when the truth is inconsistent with sender's goals and lack of coherence (internal logical consistency) in message content. These criteria are interrelated and could be overlapping. Therefore, I make a categorization of them into the following aggregated list: 1- consistency with the known realities; 2- consistency between truth and the sender's goals, 3- knowledge about the sender's normal activities and beliefs, 4- normalcy and plausibility of assertions, 5- Claims Supported by Evidences, 6- degree of being judgmental, subjective and negative about the object. In

the remainder, these criteria are put to use to study how sincere the Saudi Crown Prince is when he talks about the threats posed by Iran.

## III-The Source of Saudi Arabia's Fears

The Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran was a turning point in regional security dynamics that transformed Saudi Arabia's perception of the threats targeting the Saudi state. The idea is that the Iranian revolution, by its own nature, was perceived threatening by the Saudi rulers. Darwich develops this argument saying that "the Saudis perceived the threat emanating from the Islamic Revolution as prominent. When the Islamic Revolution broke out, the Kingdom feared losing its unique Islamic credentials" (Darwich, 2016). She supports this theme discussing that before the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Saudi state was the sole model of establishing politics on the foundations of religion. Saudi Arabia was a distinct state in the whole Islamic world that received all its legitimacy from its Islamic credentials. Unlike all other prominent Arab states that had adopted nationalism as a source of state identity, the Saudi state had no nationalist claims (Darwich, 2016). Mohammad Ibn Saud managed to found the first Saudi state by uniting the tribes of Hejaz around a common allegiance to the Wahhabi reading of Islam (Yemelianova, 2015). From the beginning, "no nationalism but the religious fervor" (Twitchell, 1959) played role in formation of Saudi Arabia. The Islamic uniqueness was the primary source of legitimacy for Saudi Arabia state that was challenged with the advent of the Islamic revolution in Iran that created a state with Islamic claims of unifying the Muslim world.

These threats that Saudis perceived of Iran were deep-rooted and survived throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. The nature of such threat perception that is directed by ideational

and identity-based concerns is also reflected in the fluctuations in the level of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the mentioned three decades. That explains the success Iran gained to reduce tensions with Saudi Arabia by addressing such ideational concerns of its southern neighbour during the late 1980s and the whole 1990s when Iran's foreign policy was pursuing regional détente and normalization of relations with its Arab neighbours. During this period, Iranian policy was guided by pragmatist and reformist ideas that gained superiority over pursuing the Revolutionary ideals of the first years of the revolution. The further Iran demonstrated an accommodating posture away from revolutionary zeal the more Saudi ideational concerns were assuaged giving room to a détente in the bilateral relations that reached the level of signing a security agreement between the two countries in 2001 "as a sign of growing trust" (Schneider, 2001).

The revival of the revolutionary discourse in Iran in the aftermath of Ahmadinejad's election as president in 2005 and his "attempt to revive a very specific idea of what the original revolution was about" (Parsi, 2012) combined by the geopolitical shifts in the region as a result of the US overthrow of the Baath regime in Iraq in 2003 as well as the changes in the Lebanese political landscape to the detriment of Saudi Arabia's allies were all conductive to resurfacing of the Saudi concerns over an increasingly powerful Shia neighbour that, by its inherent qualities, questioned the legitimacy of the Saudi state. The ideational concerns of Saudi Arabia are combined by the fears Saudi Arabia feels from the material capabilities and the hard power of Iran. In fact, Iran's connections with the Shia populations in the region grants it a strategic depth and an advantage over its rivals including Saudi Arabia. The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq are mainly organized by Iran and are in consultation with Tehran (Mansour and Habar,

2017). In the same way, the Houthis in Yemen look at Iran as an inspiration source. These two elements alone can give Iran a strategic superiority over Saudi Arabia in crunch times of escalated conflict between the two countries. Add to that Iran's missile capabilities and the developing nuclear power. These elements combined by the inspirational and ideational influence of Iran throughout the region make it a formidable rival for Saudi Arabia.

**IV-Dimensions of Iran's Power in the Region**

Saudi Arabia perceives Iran as a threat to its identity as the sole model that derives its legitimacy from Islam. Iran's strategic depth as well as the material capabilities add to the Saudi Arabia's concerns about Iran. Such fears that emanate from both ideational and material sources has formed the foundations of the geopolitical rivalries between Iran and Saudi Arabia for more than four decades. During this time, despite being in rise and fall, the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia were kept in a manageable domain. However, from 2015, the Saudi's disapproval of Iran and its desire to confront Iran was heightened in an unprecedented way. Besides taking the side of the Syrian opposition, Saudi Arabia entered a full blown-war in Yemen against the Houthis. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia upped the ante by working against the negotiations between Iran and the great powers over Iran's nuclear program. When the nuclear deal was signed in spite of all Saudi's endeavors against that, Riyadh tried to nullify it particularly after Donald Trump was elected president of the US in 2016.

The idea here is that the rise in Saudi Arabia's tensions with Iran is again a reflection of the aggravation of Saudi Arabia's apprehensions regarding its security that are in this period less related to the real threats Iran could pose to the Saudi State. In fact, in contrast to the real fears Saudis traditionally felt from

Iran, this time around, the sources of Saudi Arabia fears were less related to Iran but Riyadh played a blame game against Iran using Tehran as a scapegoat concealing the actual fears Saudis had and were emanating from sources within the Saudi State and also from the shifts in its relations with the US. As Al-Rasheed argues the primary concern of Saudi Arabia has been the internal threats rather than those emanating from outside the state (Al-Rasheed, 2018). Cordesman approves this idea, saying that internal stability is the primary security priority of Saudi Arabia that is more intense than the threats posed by Iran (Cordesman, 2010). In 2015, Salman Bin Abdul-Aziz was crowned as the last King of Saudi Arabia from the first generation of the Saudi state founder's descendants. He appointed his son Mohammad to the sensitive position of defense minister in the same year and, in a radical move, casted his brother's son Muhammad bin Nayef aside and declared MBS as the new crown prince two years later. To secure his position and prevent surfacing of discords within the ruling family, Mohammad executed a number of refining and adjustment policies through detention of selected figures in the royal family under the banner of fighting corruption (Al-Arshani, 2020). In parallel with that, MBS implemented a radical social and economic reform plan, vision 2030, aimed at providing more social freedoms for the Saudi citizens and diversifying the sources of the national income away from dependence to the oil revenues.

Social liberalization initiatives such as giving driving licenses to the Saudi women, reopening the cinemas, holding mixed public events for both genders and allowing the music concerts, were considered radical moves in an ultraconservative society in which the Wahhabi Ulema had the superior position in the cultural and educational affairs. MBS reforms "were touching nothing but changing everything" (Farouk and Brown,

2021) in a conservative country. More importantly, MBS tried to limit the influence of the Wahhabi Ulema in the political and state affairs questioning the Saudi-Wahhabi pact that was tightened in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution. He said in this respect that "what happened in the last thirty years is not Saudi Arabia" (Barmin, 2018). These developments are relevant to the Saudi Arabia's feeling of insecurity in the sense that they are discomforting for some segments of the Saudi society and they also change the traditional Wahhabi-state relations. Such measures may go wrong and cause people to seethe at Mohammad bin Salman's reforms (The Economist, 2022). In the economic domain, the Saudi situation is no better. The country was once responsible for thirty per cent of the global oil exports. This figure is now dropped to only twelve per cent (Middle East Eye, 2020). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the global decline in oil demand and subsequently plummeting of oil prices in 2019 and 2020 the sources of Saudi Arabia's revenues were squeezed so that the GDP contracted by 4.1 per cent (Arab News, 2020).

In the foreign domain, Saudi Arabia's fears of being abandoned by the US were heightened in reaction to the conclusion of the nuclear deal between Iran and the great powers causing speculations that the old enmity between Tehran and Washington may subside. In fact, "Saudi Arabia, as the main US ally in the Persian Gulf, profits from a hawkish US view on Iran. The enmity between the US and Iran is one major factor in the close relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States" (Wehrey, Thaler, Bensahel, Cragin, Green, Kaye and Oweidat, 2009). This enmity is the backbone of the US-Saudi Arabia alliance in the years after the Iranian revolution and if dissipated the Saudis would find themselves in a crisis to redefine the traditional custodian role they had been playing both in their relations with the US and also in the Muslim world.

This made Saudi Arabia "concerned about a relative rapprochement between the United States and Iran at the kingdom's expense" (Steinberg, 2014). These fears of abandonment made Saudi Arabia strive to destroy the nuclear accord by even joining forces with Israel (Sen, 2015).

Under such immense internal and external pressures "the Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman instrumentalized the traditional view of Iran as the common enemy for his own purposes". In fact, the said uncertainties have played a major role in transformation of the way Saudi rulers have been using Iran to deflect their internal challenges. As Al-Rasheed says "The current uncertainties are so grave that Mohammad bin Salman is currently unable to resolve to his own advantage. Consequently, these challenges contribute a great deal to perpetuating the rivalry with Iran" (Al-Rasheed, 2018). Al-Rasheed further argues that "the prince's anti-Iranian rhetoric and the promises to roll back Iran are meant to create a war-like situation in which internal dissent is silenced. Under the threat of Iran, his domestic policies have become sacrosanct" (Al-Rasheed, 2018).

**V-Genuine Fear or Exaggerated Phobia: Bin Salman's Rhetoric's**

Now that it is established that Saudi Arabia has both genuine fears of Iran and strong motivation to fabricate misinformation about that, the analytical frame developed in the theory part (retrieved indicators from the context-reliant approaches to truth verification) is put to use to study MBS's interview with Jeffery Goldberg from the Atlantic (Table 1) in which he talks about Iran to see in which of the two categories it mostly falls. Is it basically about the genuine Saudi fear or, to the contrary, his speech is devised to inflate the Iranian threat and misrepresent the facts about Iran.

Table 1: MBS talking about Iran in his interview with the Atlantic – Goldberg

| Theme | Direct Quote |
|---|---|
| Iran`s Shia Ideology | First in the triangle we have the Iranian government that wants to spread their extremist Shiite ideology. |
| Iran's Ideology | The Iranian revolution [created] a government based on an ideology of pure evil. |
| Iran Nuclear Deal | The economic benefits of the Iran nuclear deal are not going to the people. They took $150 billion after the deal—can you please name one housing project they built with this money? |

**Consistency between Truth and the Sender's Goal:** The other factor to test the veracity of MBS's assertions about Iran in this particular interview is to interpret them in light of the knowledge we have about the general policies the Saudi crown prince pursued vis-à-vis Iran between 2017 and 2020 and the aims behind those policies. Since rising to power in Saudi Arabia, MBS has clearly made known his negative views about Iran. In fact, MBS "has demonstrated his intention to change the country's foreign policy on many regional issues by pursuing a more aggressive anti-Iranian rhetoric" (Chara, 2018, p. 230). Iran has traditionally been regarded as the primary rival of Saudi Arabia in the region. What MBS has done is to instrumentalize the apprehensions the Saudis traditionally have had about Iran to serve the new Saudi domestic and foreign objectives. MBS has fostered a siege mentality and a form of Saudi patriotism that is reliant above everything on demonizing Iran (Sons, 2021). AS Koç puts it "demonization of Iran and its allies is a pillar of MBS foreign policy" (Koç, 2019). This demonstrates why Saudi Arabia rebuffed Iran's repeated overtures for rapprochement (Behravesh, 2019). In view of that, telling truth about Iran was inconsistent with the Saudi

objectives of demonizing Iran and therefore justifies insincerity of some of the assertions the Saudi crown prince made about Iran.

**Knowledge about Sender's Normal Activities and Beliefs:** MBS's assertions about Iran can also be verified against his normal modes of conduct and his belief system. Despite being scarce, the resources that provide accounts about the Saudi crown prince's character reveal that he is an overly ambitious and self-confident individual who is ready to take risks: "His aides say he consistently opts for action over caution. The risk inherent in change, he tells associates, is less than the risk of doing nothing" (Richter, 2020: 99). His self-confidence described as 'bordering on bravado' (House, 2019) has a role to play in the bold positions MBS takes vis-à-vis varying foreign and domestic issues. What this personality type that 'feels absolutely no guardrails' (Isikoff, 2021) tells us about the veracity of the words he expresses about Iran is a matter of the degree to which his judgments are close to soundness. A closer look at the normal actions of the prince reveals that on many occasions bin Salman took positions or made decisions that soon turned out to be hasty. For instance, the way Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudi dissident and journalist was murdered and the ensuing discrediting of the Saudi government suggests that the decision to commit the murder in that way was not carefully studied. There are other cases of MBS's ill-devised political and strategic decisions. His pressuring of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, to resign from his post during his 'strange sojourn' in Saudi Arabia (Barnard, and Abi-Habib, 2017) is a fine example. The failed blockade that Saudis imposed on Qatar and "had the perverse effect of pushing Qatar to become even more independent of the GCC" (Kabbani, 2021) is another instance of MBS's incautious decisions. MBS's entrance to a war in

Yemen only to lose it to the Houthis (Al-Dawsari, 2020) is the last of the foreign policy decisions that could have been crafted more carefully.

These actions suggest that the unprecedented way MBS addressed Iran and his choice of words cannot be relied upon as accurate. This can be better understood when considering that MBS "built his reputation through a bold foreign policy agenda designed to restrict Iranian influence across the region" (Mabon, 2018: 54). The evident self-confidence of the Saudi crown prince is reflected in the rare claims he made about Iran.

**Normalcy and Plausibility of Assertions:** Mohammad bin Salman's claim that Iran spreads an extreme Shia ideology so that the *hidden Imam* will come back and rule the world from Iran is implausible as a strategy that a modern state would follow. Bin Salman's statement about the advent of the twelfth Shia Imam is based on a specific reading of Shia and is identifiable within the Shia jurisprudence. So, this is not alien to Iran's internal politics discourse. However, despite the fact that Iran is an ideological actor, there are no evidences suggesting that Tehran has crafted its foreign policy strategies to hasten the advent of the twelfth imam. No political circle in Iran is committed to such a heavenly foreign policy agenda. Again, unlike what MBS claims no legal instrument in Iran has ever embodied anything about the relation between the advent of the twelfth Imam and Iran's foreign policy strategy and conduct. Another case of making an implausible assertion is when MBS regarded Iran as a state that aims at *conquering the world*. There are some facts about Iran's regional policy that Iran's rivals find disturbing. Iran's regional involvements are routinely seen as destabilizing by the United States, Israel and some Arab countries including Saudi Arabia. The coalitions that Iran has built with some state and non-state actors in the Middle East that are either Shia or act against the West and its

regional allies are also a source of apprehension for Washington, Tel Aviv and other US allies in the region most notably Riyadh. Iran's alliance with the Shia political factions in Iraq has long been a matter of objection on the part of Saudi Arabia and Iran's support to Hezbollah has uncomforted Riyadh. The controversies over Iran's regional involvements, though, have never been about Iran's intentions to conquer a country in the region let alone the whole world.

**Claims Supported by Evidences:** Mohammad bin Salman's claims about Iran can also be verified against the evidences that could validate or discredit them. The Saudi crown prince has not supported most of his claims by brining evidences. These include Iran's intention to reestablish the caliphate, building an empire by force and spreading the Shia ideology to hasten the advent of the hidden Shia Imam. One case of clear disagreement between MBS claim and the observable evidence is about how Iran spent the money he received after the nuclear deal. In the conversation under study, MBS claims that the economic benefits of the nuclear deal didn't go to the Iranian people. He said that no project is built using the billions of dollars that Iran received after the conclusion of the JCPOA. The veracity of such claim can be verified by reviewing the facts about Iran's economy before and after the nuclear deal.

In 2012 that is the year Iran started direct talks with the US over the nuclear issue after the sanctions had showed their adverse effects, Iranian Rial lost two third of its value compared with the preceding year. The rate of unemployment rose by 12 per cent and the revenues acquired from oil exports dropped to 69 billion dollars from 95 billion dollars of 2011 (Central Bank of Iran, 2016). This simple comparison demonstrates how bad Iran's economy was hit by the sanctions. These dire conditions were improved considerably after the nuclear deal. According

to a report released by Iran's central bank, in 2016 Iranian exports increased by 22.6 per cent raising the revenue gained from that by 9.1 per cent (Central Bank of Iran, 2016). Perhaps the most relevant indicator to the daily life of the ordinary Iranians is inflation rate that decreased from 40.4 per cent in 2013 to 8.6 per cent in 2016 (Central Bank of Iran, 2016). The above figures demonstrate that the nuclear deal had a considerably positive impact on improvement of the Iranian economy from which the whole population would benefit. It is unlikely that all the benefits of the deal were devoured by the political-military establishment alone, as MBS implies, while the whole population are suffering in poverty. Despite this, MBS can be right if his intention is that a part of the said money is spent to fund Iran's regional involvements. Even then, this could be expressed in a more balanced way. Moreover, the figure of 150 billion dollars that MBS mentioned is not reliable as there are contending narratives of how much Iran received from the US after the deal with the Iranian confirmed figure standing at 29 billion dollars (Greenberg, 2018).

**Being Judgmental, Subjective and Negative:** The truthfulness of MBS claims can also be examined by seeing whether they are objective or, to the contrary, subjective and judgemental. The idea is that the more MBS exaggerated the threat emanating from Iran, the more he distanced from neutrality and resorted to wordings crafted to discredit Iran. On this very basis, MBS's assertions are in some cases diverted from objectivity and gain a negative tone. Using the term *pure evil* to address Iran is utterly negative and judgemental pointing towards demonization of Iran. The other case of MBS's explicit diversion from objectivity is when he gathers Iran as an established nation-state together with the terrorist organizations such as *ISIS* and *Al-Qaida* in a single group.

## VI-MBS's Sincerity and Dishonesty

Application of the six indicators demonstrates that the Saudi Crown Prince has grounded reasons to express his countries' fears from Iran. Iran's support of the revolutionary currents in the region is irritating for Saudi Arabia as a conservative Sunni-dominated state with a monarchical establishment known for its history of opposition to the revisionist forces. Iran's pursuit of Shia ideology is similarly unsettling for the Saudi ruling family that is challenged by a Shia minority that demands more political participation and an elevated status in the national social and political life. In view of these, bin Salman's assertions about the ideology that Iran upholds and revisionist policies it implements are consistent with the known realities. This being said, there are other assertions that come in contradiction with the established knowledge about Iran and its policies. Iran is not after building a caliphate as MBS asserts. Iran's political agenda is way different from ISIS and other extremist Sunni groups in the region with whom Iran has a history of hostility. Iran's spread of its ideology is also a matter of serving its material interests and deepening its strategic depth rather than realization of a heavenly promised status as MBS claims. MBS's assertions on Iran lean towards dishonesty more when they are put in context. In the time MBS delivered the analysed speech on Iran, Saudi Arabia was following the aim of demonizing Iran both for internal political consumption and also as a means to discredit Iran as a reliable interlocutor for the West. The reliability of bin Salman's assertions is further questioned in view of a series of indeliberate foreign policy actions from the failed siege of Qatar to the killing of the dissident journalist Khashoggi and forcing the Lebanese prime minister to resign. The inflation of Iran's threat is also discernable from the implausibility of some of his assertions about Iran's objective to conquer the world or Iran's spread of

its ideology to hasten the advent of the hidden Imam. What further questions the veracity of a part of bin Salman's assertions and is more convincing that he intends to inflate Iran's threats is the lack of evidence supporting such assertions most notably his claim that economic benefit of the nuclear deal did not go to the Iranian people.

## Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's fear expression from Iran is inauthentic aimed at constructing an existential threat out of Iran. The idea is that in the former case, the Saudi officials that express fear from Iran are sincere and in the latter case they are insincere trying to generate fear from Iran with political purposes.

In some cases, MBS's claims about Iran correspond to the known realities. There are scholarly contributions that confirm MBS's assertions that Iran follows a certain ideology and promotes Islamic/Shia thoughts abroad. This can be threatening to Saudi Arabia. However, there are cases of MBS's claims that contradict the known realities. The claim that Iran together with MB and ISIS shape a *triangle of evil* aimed at reestablishing the caliphate has elements that contradict the existing knowledge. Shia Iran cannot be added to ISIS as a terrorist organization that has been in the fight with Iran since its inception. Similarly, talking about Iran as a state trying to reestablish the caliphate is not supported by historical facts. The assertion that Iran tries to facilitate the advent of the twelfth Shia Imam through strategic means is also inconsistent with the known realities. Such matters are not included in any Iranian law, constitutional or common. Saying that Iran aims to *conquer the world* is another claim that contradicts the basic knowledge about Iran's intentions and capabilities.

Inflating Iran's threat is in conformity with the MBS's aim to confront Iran in the time span from 2017 to 2020. The

literature on Saudi Arabia's perspective about Iran confirms that Saudi Arabia had an interest in misrepresenting Iran to cope with the threats that targeted the Saudi national security. It is also in conformity with the knowledge available about MBS's personality as a self-confident and risk-taker individual who prefers action over caution. Implausibility of such claims that contradict a basic measurement of Iran's capabilities is another indication that Iran's threats are exaggerated in this particular interview. The Saudi crown prince's use of negative adjectives about Iran support the idea that he inflated the threats Iran could pose to the Saudi state.

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