Great Powers and Iran-Saudi Relations

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Abstract

The Middle East and the Persian Gulf have witnessed an escalation in conflict and instability over the past few years where tense relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia has had an undeniable effect in creating such a situation. From Iraq to Syria and from Lebanon to Yemen, the two countries have been competing with each other. Furthermore, Tehran-Riyadh disagreement over energy strategy and nuclear activities has been other source of tension and confrontation between the two countries. There is a concern among researchers that how this crisis can be managed. While some scholars see hegemony of a superpower like the United States or a regional power as the best solution to handle this challenge and the others believe that collective security system is the best option, the research aims to illustrate balancing is the most possible and realistic scenario in the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry for the foreseeable future. Accordingly, first we canvass these two regional powers rivalry in historical context and then offer practical implications and recommendations to change the status quo and reach to the more stable region. The research method would be descriptive-analytical and the data is provided from library and Internet sources.

Key words: *Balance of Power, U.S. Foreign Policy, Iran-Saudi Arabia Ties, Middle East Region*

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Introduction

While Trump's presidency term ended in January, he has not been able to make a sweeping change in Iran's behavior in the Middle East- a region which is reckoning; with uprising, chaos, disturbance, and instability. Although the state to some extent has stemmed from the internal crisis of the countries in the region, the role of regional and trans-regional actors is undeniable. In fact, the rivalry of regional powers that have been accompanied by the presence and influence of superpowers, play an unmatched role in the emergence of this state. Meanwhile, the role of Iran-Saudi Arabia relations as two pivotal regional powers has been out-sized of importance on this trend. These bilateral relations have experienced many ups and downs over the past decades and were heavily influenced by the policies of the great powers. However, a few turning points have been Tehran-Riyadh ties entered into a new stage of tension and hostility.

First, The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 removed a military counter-weight on Iran, has raised Tehran's influence in Iraq ever since and eventually has led to the Tehran-Riyadh competition on Iraq. Then, the rivalry exacerbated as both countries were going to expand their influence when Arab world developments in the North Africa and later in Middle East caused political unrest and upheaval. Syrian civil war has intensified tensions in Iran-Saudi ties since Iran has completely supported Bashar Al-Assad regime throughout the war and in return Saudi Arabia has backed opposition groups including radical Jihadists Sunni militias. Finally, not long after Mohammed Bin Salman took over the Saudi defense minister, Kingdom's foreign policy transformed

from defensive to offensive and confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia has escalated in the region. He has waged a war by the military coalition against Iran-aligned Houthi forces and has tried to portray himself as a reformer leader on international arena although; the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi overshadowed his efforts. In 2016, Donald Trump came to power in the United States and the state has been more complicated. Saudi Arabia-Unites States ties strengthened under Donald Trump presidency and he has backed Saudi-led military coalition against Houthis forces. Trump pulled out of Iran's nuclear deal and has operated maximum pressure campaign against Tehran while former U.S. President Barack Obama wanted Iran and Saudi Arabia to solve their problems together.

This is a question among scholars and politicians how could orchestrate Tehran-Riyadh relations to achieve more stable and peace and are there practical solutions to mitigate confrontation, tension, and hostility? While some countries like Pakistan and Iraq has striven to Play the role of mediator, some scholars see the

hegemony as the best solution to handle regional challenges and others believe that a collective security system is the best option, the present research aims to illustrate balancing is the most possible and realistic scenario in the region for the foreseeable future; A strategy in which the great powers, especially the United States have a major impact in its operation. In practice, Washington should give up unconditional support from Saudi Arabia and tries to be as a balancer in Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry. Likewise, Iran and Saudi Arabia have to put zero-sum game aside and begin negotiating on less sensitive issues and expand it to political and security matters.

I. Theoretical Framework

However, realism theory deals with the ties between great powers; it could be applied in regional powers like Iran and Saudi Arabia especially when and where world powers play a significant role. In the meantime, balance of power has a pivotal position. There is

no single theory regarding the balance of power, but there are different theories. However, the theory of balance of power is conceptually based on two fundamental propositions. First, accumulation of power in any actor will basically reduce the security of other actors. Second, in an anarchic international system, governments for survival and security are forced to counter the concentration of power in the international system. As such, states in an anarchic situation resist actor that seeks hegemony. Based on these propositions, the research defines balance of power as a state in which actors have relatively equal power (Waltz, 1979: 58-69).

To fulfill these conditions in the Middle East which can contribute to peace and stability the research aims to apply contingent realism; The view that has received little attention and for the first time is addressed by Charles Glaser in 1994. Among realists there are fewer theorists who would be optimist and Charles Glaser can be an exception. He is one of these theorists who seek conditions that make cooperation between countries possible despite the existence of anarchy in the international system. Although, Glaser, is structural realist and accepts most of the structural realism, But he believes that if conditions are met, enemies can achieve their security goals by working together. Glaser argues under a wide range of conditions, rivals and even adversaries can achieve their military and security goals through cooperative policies, not competitive ones, and should, therefore, choose cooperation when these conditions prevail. For example, when countries face hesitation and uncertainty about the arms race as it was in the 1970s and 1980s, they will prefer to cooperate (Glaser, 1994: 51). In fact, if the rivals reckon that an arms race would be risky and they do not know who the winner is, they do prefer cooperation rather than competition.

Finally Glaser rejected this preposition that states try to maximize relative power which creates a zero-sum game situation. The claim in favor of maximizing relative power overestimates the security dilemma: a situation that increased its relative power

could make its rivalry less secure and safe, which could in turn increase the value its rivalry places on expansion. War could become more possible, since any deterrent value of increased relative power might be outweighed by the increased benefits that a security-seeking rivalry would see in expansion. As a result, a country could reasonably conclude that accepting rough parity in military capabilities would supply greater security than maximizing its relative power. Second, trying to maximize power could enhance the probability of defeating an arms race. Even a country that would prefer superiority to parity might choose cooperation over arms racing to avoid the risk of losing the race. Furthermore, as the security dilemma stipulates, it is better to accept approximate equality, Instead of maximizing interests which will form a new round of arms race and it costs a lot (Glaser, 1994: 71-72).

II. Islamic Revolution and the Balance of Power

Until the end of World War II, ties between Tehran and Riyadh had limited to Iranian annual pilgrim from the holy cities namely, Mecca and Madina and restricted trade of goods. British residency in the Persian Gulf had ensured balance of power and stability to protect security of India which had known as the Jewel of its Empire and communication paths particularly sea routs. In the late 1960s, the British decided to leave the Persian Gulf and consequently, the region faced with a power vacuum. Since the United States was involved in the Vietnam War, decided to assign regional security and balance of power to the countries of the region. Accordingly, Nixon had adopted twin pillar policy where Iran and Saudi Arabia had taken over regional security to counter the threat of communism, Arabian nationalism, and fill the power vacuum. In fact, U.S. foreign policy decision makers concluded due to the political, economic and geopolitical rivalries in Tehran-Riyadh relations, the only way to maintain stability in the region is to establish a balance of power between the two regional powers. Hence, Iran as a military-security power and Saudi Arabia as an economic pillar implemented U.S. strategy in the Middle

East (Hiro, 2018:51-52).

However, the Yom Kippur War as a turning point provoked rivalry between the two countries where Tehran as the only oil producer in the region did not adhere to Arab oil sanctions against US and European countries in the 4th Arab-Israeli war and continued to export oil to Israel. Following this event, the price of oil soared and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi reached the conclusion that if he dominates the Arabian Peninsula, he will be able to have the main part of oil global demand under control and Iran's position would be impregnable in the region. In achieving this purpose, the only adversary was Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, not have enough power to dominate the region and being under the U.S. strategy, prevented the intensification of competition between the two countries (geopolitical futures, 2016). Of course, the differences between both oil-rich states over oil prices remained until 1979.

Islamic Revolution and The overthrow of the Pahlavi regime fundamentally changed regional balance of power. In bipolar system Tehran ignored both superpowers and adopted independent foreign policy "Neither East nor West but the Islamic Republic". In the wake of the Hostage crisis, the U.S. which was strategic ally of Saudi Arabia severed formal and diplomatic relations with Tehran and imposed sanctions on Iran. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini called for exporting the revolution and sought to sweeping change to establish a fair order in the international relations (Khomeini, 1389: 311). From the Saudi leaders' perspective, Iran's revolution was a rival since it challenged their claim to Islamic leadership, was appealing to deprived Shi'a minority in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, and offered a new definition of resistance to Islamists across the Middle East irrespective of their sectarian hue. Apart from these, Islamic Republic provided a religious model of government and cast a spotlight on the perceived impiety of the Saudi royal family (Wehrey, et al, 2009:13). In September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran and Saudi Arabia backed Iraq as a buffer against Iran.

Conservative Saudi leaders in support of some Arabian countries formed the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and strengthened ties with Washington to counterweight Iran. Iranian leaders contended that Iraq has started the war with the encouragement of the United States and Saudi Arabia. During the war Riyadh along with GCC members and the United States had backed Saddam Hussein Regime. Saudi leaders like Prince Nayef believed Iraq is the only deterrent force against Iran's export of revolution. This point of view also supported in Washington as U.S. National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski underlined that Iraq has a pivotal role in containing Iran (Safran, 1985: 364). Baghdad was also backed by Russia and European powers, while Iran received only a limited amount of some of its military and logistical needs from North Korea, Libya and China. Kingdom used the oil weapon as a political tool against Iran and in 1986 had doubled its production under the pretext of punishment those states did not observe their production quotas. Given the fact, the global oil price was almost halved and Iran perceived it as a hostile action and direct attack to undercut Tehran's position in the war. In the period, Tehran had not only needed more oil revenues to reinforce its military equipment but also, it was going to strengthen its domestic economy (Amirahmadi and Entesar, 1999: 143). Kingdom also contributed more than 24.8 billion dollars to Iraq financially and logistical support (Hadzikadunic, 2019: 8).

Tehran, by contrast, in the wake of the failure of the peace talks on the Palestine-Israel conflict and failing Prince Fahd's proposal for a two-state solution supported Palestinian groups opposed to the peace talks. Iran allied with Syria a country that had failed to reclaim the Golan Heights from Israel (DW, 2019). Syria shut the flow of Iraqi oil down that crossed through its territory although Saudi Arabia reconstructed an alternative pipeline for Iraq. Tehran-Damascus also together supported Shias when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 (Gelbart, 2010: 73).

In August 1987, the violent clash of Saudi securities forces

with demonstrations of pilgrims led to the killing of more than 400 pilgrims including 275 Iranian. Following this incident, Iran's leaders strongly criticized Saudi Arabia (Maloney, 2004: 4). In April 1988, Saudi Arabia severed relations with Iran due to disagreement with Tehran over the quota of Iranian pilgrims and Tehran's call for international intervention to manage *Haj*. This Kingdom's approach towards Iran coincided with the US attacks on Iran's oil platform and right before that, US Congress agrees to sell 450 million dollars arms to Saudi Arabia (Keynoush, 2016: 123-124) That indicated how much the Saudi Arabia's position on Iran is influenced by US policy. On June 1988, following the US attack on the Iranian passenger plane, Iran-Iraq war ended and it resulted in undermining the two regional powers as United States and its allies wanted.

In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait and Iran was the first country in the region to condemn the Iraq. The U.S. forged a military coalition with its allies and liberated Kuwait in the so-called Operation Desert Storm in February 1991. Iran adopted neutral and nonalignment policy during the First Persian Gulf War and the approach was received a warm welcome by Saudi Arabia and As a result of these developments Tehran-Riyadh diplomatic bilateral ties was resumed in June 1991. President Hashemi Rafsanjani called on King Fahd to expand cooperation between the two countries in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Due to economic debt, both sides needed to increase oil prices, while the Iraqi oil embargo had reduced oil supply. As a result of Saudi-Iranian détente and cooperation between the two countries oil price had been raised (Devine, 2017: 4).

Rafsanjani's pragmatic foreign policy followed a plan which proposed Iran as an energy bridge between the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. He also offered to cooperate with GCC members on disarmament, restrict the purchase of military weapons and exchange military information. But these proposals which eventually led to balance of power between regional players did

not materialize as they were accompanied by Washington's dual containment policy. Martin Indyk, Advisor to the President explained "we do not accept the argument that we should continue the old balance of power game, building up one to balance the other" (Hiro, 2003: 69). In fact, the United States had adopted Iran-Iraq dual containment policy and largely due to that, GCC members, led by Saudi Arabia, had refused to cooperate more with Iran. Simultaneous, Washington backed the proposal that would ensure the collective security of the Persian Gulf states in the presence of GCC members plus Syria and Egypt. This proposal known as a Damascus Declaration had failed because of mutual mistrust (Yetiv, 1997: 106). However, in mid-1996, Mousavian, met Crown Prince Abdullah first in Casablanca and then in Jeddah and they agreed on a comprehensive package to improve Iran-Saudi ties. Later, Hashemi Rafsanjani met King Fahd and it is interesting that King of Saudi Arabia emphasized on preserving the balance of power between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. He added Kingdom does not like to expand its relation with Iran if Tehran ignores Saudi Arabia's strategic ties with the United States.

In August 1997, Khatami took office, and even though he did not have full control over Iran's foreign policy, adopted the policy of detente. During his presidency, Tehran-Riyadh bilateral ties expanded, leaders on both sides traveled to each other's country and agreed to maintain high oil prices. Moreover, these two regional powers signed an agreement to cooperate on terrorism, illegal immigration and drug trafficking in 2001. The agreement also considered Middle East tensions, condemned Israel's policy toward Palestine and supported the right of Palestinian to return to Occupied Territories. They legitimized the right of Hezbollah as a resistance group against Israel and backed Syria's right to retrieve Golan Height from Israel (Hiro, 2005: 334).

III. Turning Points Identify Rivalry

Following the events of 11 September 2001, U.S. president

George W. Bush decided to invade Afghanistan and Iraq. When U.S. began the war both Tehran and Riyadh cooperated with Washington and provided humanitarian helps and material aids to build new Afghanistan. However, Washington selected sideline Riyadh and did not look at Tehran as a reliable partner. Tehran even tried to convince Northern Alliance to cooperate with new interim administration where both Iran and the United States interests overlapped. But, the United States tried to go it alone in Afghanistan and even George W. Bush branded Iran as a part of Axis of Evil. Shortly after the events of 9/11, Iran-Saudi Arabia signed an oil agreement that resulted in the increase of the oil prices in international market. However, Kingdom trade minister Osama bin Jafar Faqih believed that U.S. policy toward Iran has severed enhancing Tehran-Riyadh bilateral relations (Keynoush, 2016: 155).

Meanwhile, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the fall of Saddam opened a power vacuum, changed the Persian Gulf geometry of power and radically shifted the regional balance of power. Iraq as a battle ground has been a balance of power game and contest for regional influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both states have sought to fill power vacuum through their partners including parties, groups, figures and political currents. The replacement of Saddam Sunni-dominated government with Tehran friendly Shi'a-dominated has tipped the regional balance of power in favor of Iran and Saudi leaders criticized the U.S. for invasion of Iraq since they argue the overthrow of Saddam handed over Iraq to Iran (Milani, 2013: 82).

At the same time, Iran's nuclear program which has begun during the Iran-Iraq war and Sought to enrich uranium created a crisis. Khatami's Administration strived to solve the crisis and negotiated with three European Union powers, Germany, France and British to find a solution. European side admitted to prevent sending Iran's nuclear program to the Security Council in exchange for temporary suspension of uranium enrichment. Both parties agreed to enter into negotiations to reach a comprehensive

and long-term agreement. An agreement that covered a wide range of mutual concerns, however, reached an impasse due to the lack of US support. Tehran even sent a message to President Bush which indicated Iran's readiness for comprehensive talks and grand bargain. But Bush Administration rejected the suggestion and took the path of confrontation with Iran (Radiofarda, 2020). Following the failure of the Iran-West talks, Saudi concerns intensified. In June 2005, Hassan Rouhani, the then Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council traveled to Riyadh and made a proposal which Tehran-Riyadh hold biannually joint security meetings and enrich uranium jointly. Riyadh rejected Iran's proposal and even Saud al-Faisal Saudi Arabia's foreign minister said that Tehran should accept GCC members as a power bloc (Rouhani, 2012). Iran's regional power increased when Hamas gained control of Gaza in 2005 and Hezbollah won the 33-Day War of 2006 against Israel and became very popular in the Arab world since Iranian supplied rocket barrages targeted northern Israel (Pollack, 2017: 3).

In the middle of 2005 Ahmadinejad elected as a president and Iran resumed its nuclear program. By consequence, Iran's case was sent to the Security Council and by 2010 four resolutions had been approved by the UN Security Council against Iran's nuclear program. In the meantime, Saudi Arabia proposed nuclear consortium between regional countries which manage their nuclear program under the supervision of IAEA. Ahmadinejad responded it is an important suggestion but Iran's nuclear file firstly should return to IAEA and it must be closed in the Security Council. Saudi leaders worried that the Progress of Iran's nuclear program fundamentally transforms the balance of power in the region.

WikiLeaks documents demonstrate that Saudi leaders had urged the U.S. to attack Iran because they were worried about Iran's influence in Iraq and its nuclear activities. King Abdullah had said to the U.S. ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker and General David Petraeus that U.S. should cut off the head of the snake and

roll back Iranian influence in Iraq. The U.S. foreign minister John Kerry later confirmed the accuracy of these documents and claimed Obama Administration has under Saudi Arabia pressure been for attack to Iran (WikiLeaks, 2008). The dispute between Iran and the West over Iran's nuclear program continued until the end of Ahmadinejad's term. Obama administration also feared that Israel do attack against Iran's nuclear facilities. So, Obama team started negotiations with Tehran to reach a deal that restore regional order in favor of United States and its allies in the Middle East.

At the same time, the developments in Arab world since 2011 and civil war in the region has made new battleground for reshaping balance of power in the region. When this turmoil began first in North Africa and then in the Middle East Iranian leaders thought that developments are moving in the direction in which power will shift away from the U.S. and its regional allies including Saudi Arabia into the hands of much more independent forces. Although, in Egypt, pro-America president and Saudi partner against Iran, Hosni Mubarak was toppled, the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood did not go a long way and Abdel Fattah al-sisi supported by Saudi Arabia, came to power through a coup. Even if the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed Morsi stayed in power, Iran could not have restored bilateral ties since Morsi stirred Shia'-Sunni rift up. In Bahrain, where the United States Fifth Fleet is present, Iranian-backed Shiite majority demonstrations were suppressed by Saudi military intervention.

Tehran-Riyadh tension and strife escalated when Syrian civil war began in 2011, spilled over to Iraq, and instead of power-sharing, zero-sum game was resumed in the region. Iran was the first country rushed in to assist Bashar al-Assad and has backed his government throughout the war. While, Kingdom supported opponents, mainly radical Salafi groups, Tehran along with the Russian Air Force and Militia armed groups, have striven to save the Syrian regime from collapse, And it has helped the Assad regime exercise its sovereignty over large parts of Syrian territory.

Also, when ISIS forces advanced on Iraq, Tehran dispatches military advisers to Iraq and provided government and armed groups with intelligence and logistic equipment. At that time, Saudi Arabia strived to increase its oil export in order to reduce oil prices while due to international sanctions, Iran's oil export had reduced less than one million barrels a day and financial constraints had made it difficult for Iran to access oil revenues. As such, Saudi Arabia sought to harm Iran's economy and military power by reducing oil price. Iran's support for the Assad regime and Saudi's opposition groups in Iraq and Lebanon has prompted Riyadh to be on the agenda such a policy (Mirtorabi, 2019: 211-212).

Ultimately, despite the lack of direct cooperation between Iran and the United States in destroying ISIS, both sides succeeded in defeating this great threat. But what worried Saudi Arabia was JCPOA upon which Iran and 5+1 agreed on Iran's nuclear program. The nuclear deal led to thaw Iran-U.S. relations and former U.S. President Barack Obama invited Iran and Saudi Arabia to work together to share the Middle East and balances their power and influence in the region (Lobelog, 2018). Riyadh feared nuclear deal brings Washington and Tehran closer, by consequence, Kingdom's importance in U.S. regional equations is diminished. The Obama administration's approach brought Saudi Arabia closer to Israel. Meanwhile, Mohammad Bin Salman rise to power and his election as Defense Minister and then Crown-Prince shifted Saudi Arabia's foreign policy from Defensive to Offensive and resulted in invading Saudi led-coalition to Yemen. On 26 March 2015, Saudi leaders launched another zero-sum game with the aim to defeat and destroy the Houthi movement supported by Iran and restore the Saudi-backed Hadi government (Darwich, 2018). They also imposed blockade against Qatar, largely due to Doha's independent foreign policy. It illustrates deep rift among the GCC members, a council created for Iran's balancing (Fathollahnejad, 2017).

More importantly, new U.S. president Donald Trump, with

encouragement from Israel and Saudi Arabia, yanked America out of nuclear deal, began the Maximum Pressure campaign on Iran, and imposed the toughest sanctions on Tehran. Riyadh and Tel Aviv supported the new White House foreign policy toward Iran while it further complicated the balance of power and exacerbated skirmish in the region. In the Persian Gulf, ships carrying fuel were attacked and American drone that entered into Iran's territorial borders was hit and shot down. Likewise, attack by Yemeni Houthi drones to the Aramco halved Saudi oil production in a matter of hours (Ajili and Rouhi, 2019: 147-148). Tehran seized The British-flagged oil tanker off as tit-for-tat move since British Royal Marines seized an Iranian supertanker off Gibraltar carrying oil to Syria two weeks earlier. Following the escalation of tensions U.S. drone attacked Qassem Suleimani and Tehran in retaliation fired more than dozen missiles at U.S. bases in Iraq (Guardian, 2020). Moreover, in the wake of the rising global prevalence of COVID-19 disease, Global oil demand has sharply fallen and Saudi oil revenues are estimated to be halved in 2020. Earlier, given the re-impose U.S. sanctions, Iran's oil revenues have been reached from $100 billion to $8 billion in 2019 (BBC, 2019).

Taken together, despite the destructive economic effects of the maximum pressure campaign on Iran, it has not yet resulted in forcing Iran to return to the negotiating table. Not only Iran's influence in Iraq and Syria has not diminished but Israel has forced to do operations against Iran in these countries. Iran's missile program development has not been suspended and even Tehran has reduced its nuclear commitments (Evental, 2020). In return, Saudi Arabia has not yet to gain a remarkable achievement in the Yemen war and it is encountering with severe budget deficit. These conditions require taking Iran and Saudi Arabia practical steps that help to return to normally their relations. It needs Shifting that should accrue in global and regional sphere.

IV. U.S. Foreign Policy and Paradigm Shifting

As noted earlier, struggle for maximizing influence and supremacy between Riyadh and Tehran has created conflicts and disputes in the Middle East. It must be considered there are at least four regional peers (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel) with high capabilities and balancing potential which make it almost difficult and impossible to achieve undisputed regional supremacy where states resist against the country that seeks hegemony, governments see each other as a threat and there is a security atmosphere. Likewise, presence of superpowers like United States and Russia has limited the possibility of hegemonic order either in the past or in the future.

Another option that has come up with peace and stability in the Middle East is the establishment of collective security. This idea seems highly unlikely in turbulent region which is in transition and it is impossible at least for the foreseeable future. Regional coalitions and alliances have also been fragile and unstable and that would not be able to balance between Tehran and Riyadh in the future. As the most notable example, there is no coherency and orchestration between GCC members, and Qatar and Oman try to go it alone.

Irrespective of the internal roots of the Middle East crises, whenever the great powers have tried to balance between Tehran and Riyadh, the region has enjoyed more peace and stability. Yet, whenever great powers have shifted away from one and close to the other, peace and stability in the region has been at stake. Therefore, restoring stability and security through the balance of power is the most or even the best possible future form of regional order (Harrison, 2015).

As a strategic road map, balance of power between Riyadh and Tehran must be revived by the number one superpower which itself has destroyed it. However, Donald Trump and his administration have frequently repeated that Washington would not follow regime change policy in Iran, in practice they are looking for such a politics. As Wendy Sherman, former senior

diplomat in the Obama Administration described it "Ultimately what they're apparently trying to do is incite, if not directly bring about, regime change" (Manson, 2018). United States foreign policy decision makers need to know regime change policy is doomed to fail. Increased sanctions on Iran have the capability to unite Iran's political leader. In return, the Islamic Republic's opposition groups do not have an orchestration and will not be able to collapse the regime. They do not even agree on a series of general principles for Iran's future after collapsing the regime. Moreover, Lack of leadership that could organize them causes regime change in Iran will be impossible at least for the foreseeable future. More importantly, there is no alternative regime for Islamic Republic of Iran in the short run.

Likewise, this point must be taken into account that the developments in the Middle East have subconsciously affected the minds of the Iranian people. As such, they have clearly seen the consequences of events that have occurred in Egypt, Syria and Yemen over the past few years. The Arab world experience since 2011 prevents the widespread rebellions and demonstrations since this turning point has led to failing and failed states, demonstrating that inspired regime changes rarely produce the results their advocates predict. Iranian People do not want to lose their security at the expense of obtaining uncertain hopes that may be realized. In addition, the experience of foreign-imposed regime change in the Middle East and elsewhere has not been promising. Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya are the most notable example of the reality (Walt, 2018). United States should recognize Islamic Republic as a legitimate regime and enters directly into negotiation with Tehran. As Glaser argues, sometimes the balance of power gains through cooperation rather than competition or confrontation (Glaser, 1995: 71-72).

There would be some main benefits for Washington if Iran-U.S. ties to be improved. Firstly, steps for normalizing ties to Iran by the United States helps to advance political reform in Saudi Arabia and forces Riyadh to move towards a more democratic

society. The assassination of Jamal Khashoggi clearly indicated Washington could not be relying on a person to carry out reforms in a country. If the United States seeks deep and real reform in Saudi Arabia, it would rely on trends instead of putting emphasis on a person like Crown-Prince Mohammad Ben Salman (Doersy, 2016: 361). Siding with Riyadh against Tehran regionally can only exacerbate an imbalance in which both parties act to preserve their own regional interests, leading to greater escalation. Likewise, the United States balancing policy in Persian Gulf will resume its role as a mediator in the Middle East once again. If the United States be able to balance between Riyadh and Tehran, it would have a greater impact on trends in the region. Finally, it could help Washington to Shift away from the Middle East to East Asia where challenges are increasing between Washington and Beijing to dominate the region.

So, in practice, United States should return to JCPOA. Grand bargain with Iran could not reach in the short run and it should follow step by step since there is historical mistrust between both sides. They also should recognize Iran's right to enrichment like China and Russia and tries to supervise Iran's nuclear program through International Atomic Energy Organization. Withdrawal U.S. from the JCPOA has provoked a sense of distrust among Iranian leaders, and this could encourage Iran to leave the JCPOA or increase its nuclear capabilities and that can ultimately lead to a nuclear gamble between the countries of the region. As the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz reportedly warned U.S. officials in 2010, "If Iran succeeds in developing nuclear weapons, everyone in the region would do the same, including Saudi Arabia" (Guardian, 2010). Meanwhile, Washington must ratify a deal with Saudi Arabia on nuclear program, which recognizes its nuclear rights. They cannot dissuade Saudi Arabia from having the right to enrich uranium, While, Iran has could achieve significant advances in nuclear technology over the past years. Washington also should not impose contracts such as the 182 contract to the Kingdom. They should put Saudi Arabia in a deal like Iran's

nuclear deal and assure Riyadh that they will balance between the two countries. This will mitigate Saudi's worries over Iran's nuclear program and causes Riyadh doesn't catapult in this direction (Miller and Volpe, 2018: 30).

If the U.S. worries about Iran's missile and military program, it would end the arms race in the region. The continuous American commitment to Saudi security guarantee and providing its arms orders does surely stimulate Iranian foreign policy decision-makers to have defensive regional policies and vice versa (Perthes, 2018: 100). The reality is neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia cannot destroy each other unless the great powers intervene in the war. While Iran has better military personnel and missile arsenal, Saudi Arabia has better air forces and military equipment. Furthermore, as the security dilemma stipulates, it is better to accept approximate equality, Instead of maximizing interests which will form a new round of arms race and reduce security in the long run (Glaser, 1995: 53). Either Iran or Saudi Arabia is involved in economic challenges and both parties should concentrate on their economic plans as mentioned above.

V. The Role of China and Russia

This point must be taken into account that Russia as a super-powers and China as a rising or emerging power will be able to help easing tensions Iran-Saudi Rivalry. Unlike trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran which destroyed another opportunity to reach a grand bargain with Tehran, Moscow and Beijing have established deepening ties with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. While U.S. stringent sanctions on Iran's economy, pushing Tehran to an eastern corner, Saudi Arab has becoming strong trade and economic partner with China and Russia in diversified sectors. These two Eastern powers have also expended cooperation on military and security issues with both Tehran and Riyadh.

Russia partly non-ideological, pragmatic, and secular foreign policy allows it to engage with all state actors in the region such

as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. It balances between both Tehran and Riyadh and does not unite with one against the other. Kremlin not only is not neutral but also cooperates with both sides to meet its interests. For example, Russian forces operate in association with Iran in Syria at the same time that Kremlin cooperates with Riyadh to negotiate over oil prices. In the meantime, Russia has Common interest with both Tehran and Riyadh in combating against terrorism and Islamic radicalism. The experience of Islamic State (ISIS), a group even has threatened Saudi leaders, has shown Moscow and its partners should cooperate against common threat where Moscow is encountering with Chechen rebels and Islamic extremists. In fact, Kremlin seeks to maintain regional stability and preserve current regime in the Middle East since failed states spillover terrorism to Russia and its neighbors. In the global oil market also needs to be cooperated between OPEC members like Saudi Arabia and Iran and non-OPEC members, like Russia and America as it recently occurred by persuading Donald Trump (Gardner and Korsunskaya, 2020).

More importantly, Moscow historical deep ties with Tel Aviv allow Russia to have pivotal role in Israel-Arab peace process; the subject that is one of the most challenges between Iran and Saudi Arabia. While, Kingdom has backed Prince Fahd's proposal for a two-state solution, Iran has supported Palestinian groups opposed to the peace talks including Hamas and Islamic Jihad and it resulted in Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry. As an indication, Moscow has had close coordination with both Iran and Israel in the Syrian theater and strives to be as a mediator these two bitter enemies. In addition, Russia has a warm and friendly relationship with most of the parties involved in the region. While the Russian air force supports the regime of Bashar al-Assad and its allies, it has also had limited ties with some Syrian opposition groups. In Lebanon, Moscow has sought multilateral relations with Iranian-backed Shi'a movement Hezbollah and its Sunni Muslim and Christian rivals. In Iraq, Moscow has ties not only with the Iranian- backed groups and government in Baghdad, but also with the Iranian-

opposed groups and US-backed Kurdish Government. In Yemen, Moscow has recognized the Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi government supported by Saudi Arabia and at the same time is a friend with Iranian-backed Shi'a militia Houthi group as well as its UAE-backed southern ones(Rumer, 2019: 9-20).

China has also strived to balance Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry, keeping both of them content. China's presence in the Middle East has been more economic than military and security in recent years. Beijing provides most of its energy for development from the Middle East and it is the top oil customer of both Riyadh and Tehran (Gurol and Scita, 2020). Also, One Belt- one Road project crosses the Middle East, by consequence, the security of project would be too important for China. It has signed agreements with 21 countries in the region to join the plan. Moreover, it estimates China's import to double from the Middle East by 2035. It will be motivation for China to cooperate with other players as a mediator to makes the region more stable and secure. Strife and skirmish endanger the security of energy transportation in where a significant percentage of energy resources are produced and exported (Lons, Fulton and Sun, 2019: 19). China even tries to cooperate with United States for stability in the region, however, at the same time it seeks to balance Washington in West Asia.

China has also worried about minority Muslim who are resides mostly in the western region of Xinjiang for joining to the Islamic Radicalism. Diplomatic close ties with Tehran and Riyadh would help Beijing to handle this challenge (Wormuth, 2019: 6). Likewise, trafficking and transnational crime are other subjects in which China cooperates with Iran and Saudi Arabia. In overall, it could mention that China has comprehensive strategic partnership level relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In short, Moscow and Beijing are good terms with both rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia and all the stakeholders and key players including Israel and Turkish. It gives them the high diplomatic potential to balance regional foes, mitigates tensions among rivals and helps to reach the more stable region. In addition, Syrian war

has demonstrated that the United States is no longer the only decisive actor it once was and to resolve the regional disputes, the participation of other superpowers is needed. Meanwhile, the countries like Iraq, Pakistan and Even Oman that have friendly relations with both sides would be able to play role as a mediator and mitigate tensions between Riyadh and Tehran. However, these countries cannot balance between two regional powers and bring longstanding peace and stability, but they can help ease tensions. As Imran Khan Pakistan's prime minister has said in an interview with Aljazeera "We have done our best to avoid a military confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and our efforts have succeeded" (Aljazeera, 2020).

Conclusion

At the same time it is better to begin Tehran-Riyadh negotiating on issues which include mutual interests and are less sensitive than security and military challenges. One of the most significant points is that rulers in Riyadh don't put all the eggs in Donald Trump's basket. As the attacks on Aramco displayed American interests take precedence over Saudi's security in Washington's calculations. Tehran has so far repeatedly stated it is ready to negotiate directly with the Saudi side. Before that, both parties should avoid provocative rhetoric as Crown-Prance Mohammed Bin Salman had said "We will not wait until the battle becomes in Saudi Arabia but we will work to have the battle in Iran rather than in Saudi Arabia.

If Sanctions on Iran to be lifted up, oil market will provide common ground on how to manage Iran-Saudi rivalry where Russia and the United States, two major non-OPEC oil producers play an important role in stabilizing the oil market prices, production quotas and market share. Oil factor could be leverage for improving Tehran-Riyadh ties since both parties needs to restore their economy. Iran's Twenty Year Vision Document requires oil and non-oil revenues and stabilizing and increasing oil prices is inevitable for Saudi vision 2030 while both sides are

grappling with the budget deficit.

The Coronavirus Pandemic has made things worse, has fallen global oil demand and has forced Saudi Arabia not to accept foreign pilgrims and it is limited around 1,000 Muslims already living in the kingdom. However, the two sides would be able to work together on this global pandemic. The challenge requires cooperation between countries more than ever whereas Saudi Arabia has the highest rate of infection recorded among the Arab countries and Iran has the highest mortality rate in the region . If the COVID-19 disease would be controlled, handling the Hajj will provide an opportunity for Tehran and Riyadh to negotiate and if Umrah resumes, parties would be able to use it as a venue for dialogue and rapprochement. However, there have been bilateral differences over the Hajj and it has created tensions, as a sign of goodwill, king Salman Bin Abdulaziz can invite Iran's President to attend the Hajj trip (Aljazeera, 2020).

In the meantime, there are crises in the region that need to be resolved if it is supposed to improve Iran-Saudi ties. By persuading Washington and Moscow, Tehran and Riyadh should come to the negotiating table on Syria, Yemen, Iraq and even Lebanon based on power-sharing policy, recognize the role of each other and don't follow zero-sum game strategy for supremacy that so far are completely stalemated. In countries involved in crises the best solution is holding free elections under international supervision in order to determine the share of each party in the structure of power. Tehran and Riyadh also must have commitment to the territorial integrity of the countries, do not use of their minority as Fifth column and they need to avoid overreach to gain their goals.

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