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INSTITUTIONALIZING INSECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A CONSTRUCTIVIST ANALYSIS OF IRAN–SAUDI PROXY RIVALRY AND REGIONAL FRAGMENTATION

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ABSTRACT

This study is a critical assessment of the Iran-Saudi Rivalry in terms of its proxy character, hence putting forward the assertion, the rivalry is not merely a geopolitical struggle of supremacy but is essentially a system of proxy war, battle of ideologies, and insecurity in the region. Based on the Constructivist Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory, the research examines five of the most prominent cases of proxy operations that include Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain, which saw the weakening of state sovereignty, polarization, sectarian intentions, and external interventions. The evidence would indicate that the instrumentation of religious identity and non-state actors by Iran, as well as Saudi Arabia, has been used to project power with less confrontation. The analysis shows that the strategic payoff on this rivalry is finely balanced by its humanitarian devastation, the collapse of states, and the fragmentation of regions. This dissertation finally suggests a transition into regional dialogue, de-sectarianized diplomacy, de-proxy-Caution, and multilateral conflict resolution policies to overcome the causes and consequences of this long-lasting conflict.

Keywords: *Iran, Saudi Arabia, Proxy Warfare, Sectarianism, Middle East, Constructivism.*

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East used to be a hotbed of ideological, religious, and geopolitical clashes. The strategic rivalry that exists between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the most stable and destabilizing ones in the region. This hostility, which has severe sectarian and ideological roots (Shia revolutionary Islamism versus Sunni Wahhabism), has gone beyond conventional warfare and has become rather an intricacy of proxy warfare. Instead of direct military intervention, the two states act more in an indirect manner as they influence aligned non-state agents, operating in the weak political environments, and transforming Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain into a place of regional domination battles (Mabon, 2023; Dehnavi & Safavipour, 2024). Such a type of conflict is also known as proxy warfare, and it has come to define geopolitics in the Middle

East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Through non-state actors and ideologically loaded militias, Iran, as well as Saudi Arabia, have managed to externalize their geopolitical ambitions at the same time, reducing the cost of confrontation (Mumford, 2013). Proxy war matches up the convenience of deniability, asymmetric escalation, and premature utilization of grievances at home as regional supremacy tools. Saudi Arabia, just like Iran, supposedly supports the Houthis in Yemen, has also come to defend the Hadi government using military force. In Syria, Iran supports the Assad government through Hezbollah and transnational Shiite militias, whereas Saudi Arabia has directed a lot of its resources to Sunni opposition groups (Phillips, 2023; Wehrey, 2013).

This confrontation is not only material, though; it is highly ideational. The theory that is most suitable to analyze such rivalry is constructivist theory, which believes that state behavior is shaped by identities, historical narratives, and ideological build-ups and not by mere interests (Wendt, 1999). Taking the position of shielding the oppressed Shia, Iran repackages its regional interventions to fit the context in the name of the axis of resistance (Valensi, 2015). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia becomes a spokesperson of Sunni orthodoxy and the protector of the Islamic holy sites by challenging the Iranian revolutionary discourse using the Wahhabi ideology (Dorsey, 2016). Animosity is institutionalized by such perceptions and, in turn, contributes to the perpetuation of issues such as feelings of mistrust and violence, and further affects the foreign policies, as well as the regional political affiliation.

In addition to this, the impact of such proxy wars has been destructive. They aggravate sectarianism, undermine state structures, and provoke foreign interferences, including those of international powers like the United States, Russia, and China. The inconsistent security affects neighboring states negatively, resulting in more humanitarian crises and a lack of prospects for sustainable peace. As Gause (2014) asserts, the Saudi-Iran war is not a deep-rooted sectarian hostility but rather a new cold war in the Middle East where sect is used as a strategic tool in aiding the objectives.

The study aims to perform a critical review of the dynamics and implications of Iran-Saudi proxy warfare with the help of constructivism as the guiding tool of theoretical understanding. Recent years have seen the ideational origins of proxy strategies and the geopolitical uses of proxy play tested, with the creation of proxy militias to apply proxy power. This is meant to probe how identity politics and sectarian discourse become institutionalized in insecurity. It also considers the consideration of the influence played by external forces and regional bodies in mitigating or reducing the conflict. The study identifies key structural and ideational dynamics defining the present-day security dynamics in the Middle East, including the use of rigorous case studies and an examination of secondary data.

The Statement of the Problem

In the Middle East, there is the constant worsening of regional fragmentation, not in the classical form of interstate conflicts, but in the form of a network of proxy wars, whose main driver of such proxy wars is the strategic rivalry of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The second reason What makes this proxy conflict exceptionally dangerous is the fact that the conflict has become locked in ideological, sectarian, and historical narratives that have institutionalized violence and insecurity in the region (Mabon, 2023; Gause, 2014). The modern world of the Middle East shows that these proxies ceased being instruments of power, becoming active agents destabilizing sovereignty, authority, and peace.

The major problem is that non-state actors, who were initially portrayed as an instrument of political opposition or national liberation, are nowadays an instrument of transnational interests. These actors are promoted by Iran and Saudi Arabia strategically to enhance their ideological, religious, and political interests. Issues such as in countries like Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Bahrain, local conflicts have been commandeered and globalized, and what were once domestic discord are now geopolitical fault lines (Wehrey, 2013; Phillips, 2023). This change has not just lasted longer than these wars, but it has even changed how war is waged, or better still, the

lines become so blurred about responsibility, accountability, and the rules of engagement.

Most importantly, this proxy war has weakened states, and national identities have been disintegrated. In Yemen, the emergence of the Houthi rebellion, which is backed by Iran, has destabilized one of the poorest nations of the Arab World, forcing Saudi Arabia and allies to offer a costly military intervention. However, the intervention only increased the humanitarian disaster and consolidated sectarian discourses (Cerioli, 2018). In Syria, the military aid by Iran to the Assad government and Saudi Arabian support of the opposition parties made the civil war a regional conflict, reducing the potential of reconciliation and state reconstruction (Phillips, 2023).

Strategically speaking, the tale of sectarianism is, though ideologically important, it has dimensions of strategic manipulation. Whereas Iran presents itself as the defender of the endangered Shia communities, Saudi Arabia is countering this by presenting itself as the custodian of Sunni orthodoxy. This polarization generated based on identity is also artificial; its creation, increase, and its weaponization can be seen in media, preaching of clergy, and the diplomatic language (Valensi, 2015; Dorsey, 2016). This leads to the fact that sectarianism ceases to be an aspect of community cause, but rather a resource of geopolitics, the key to radicalization, fragmentation of identities, and civil unrest throughout the region.

In addition to this, foreign influence by powers like the United States, Russia, and recently China complicates the Saudi-Iranian conflict. Their geopolitical concern tends to align with either of the regional parties, making the conflict more militarized and peace efforts compromised. In particular, Egypt and Israel have represented the U.S. and Iran interests, respectively, and have raised political and military clout to support Saudi-led coalitions, as well as created strategic partnerships with Russia and China to avoid sanctions and secure regional power bases (Loveman, 2003; Wezeman, 2020).

Insufficient effective regional or international mechanisms of mediation are another burning dilemma. Organizations such as the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the United Nations have been relatively weak in ending this proxy escalation. It is an indication of their failure, as the larger issue is that it is accompanied by the deterioration of

The collective security principles in the region and their substitution by the self-help and militarized state practice.

This is to say that the issue is multifaceted in several ways: (1) The proxy policy of Iran and Saudi Arabia has institutionalized instability turning weak states into permanent conflict areas; (2) Ideological discourse is being used to defend the warrantless extensive interventions and militarized patronage; (3) Regional organizations cannot mediate or contain the crisis; and (4) International powers only add fuel to the fire instead of reducing conflict.

Without checks, this trend of proxy warfare will cost the region stability, radicalization of the populace, and chances to create a rules-based order in the Middle East. It is thus imperative and timely to determine the ideational and structural aspects of the conflict to put forward lasting solutions.

Literature Review

The Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict has attracted the attention of scholars to a great extent because it has stabilized regional and global politics. The chapter concentrates a critical focus on literature, by scholars involved in the study of international relations, security studies, politics of the Middle East region, and the politics of sectarianism, with thoughtful decisions on how Iran and Saudi Arabia have used to introduce proxy warfare as a strategic option. In the literature, opposing views are observed, particularly the constructivist and the realistically interpreted perspectives that come out to illustrate the ideological, geopolitical, and institutional aspects of this longstanding conflict.

1. Constructivism: Ideological and Sectarian Origins

The Iran-Saudi conflict looks through the constructivist lens of important literature, which focuses on the role of ideational forces in the determination of the conduct of states in the Iran-Saudi conflict in terms of religious

identity, historical narratives, and revolutionary discourses of states. The Shi is a revolutionary identification of Iran based on the 1979 Islamic Revolution has placed Iran under a responsibility of protecting the interests of the Shia people and resisting the advances of Western imperialism, according to scholars. In contrast, Saudi Arabia derives its authority because it is the custodian of Sunni Islam and Wahhabi orthodoxy (Mabon, 2023; Wehrey, 2013). These identities do not remain fixed; they are constructed and enacted persistently in media, clerical networks, and alliances.

According to Mabon (2013, 2023), such rivalry is beyond material interests, and it has developed into a legitimacy and narrative-control competition. The two states present themselves as saviors of the respective sectarian societies, which makes them propagate the moral grounds to interfere in the internal matters of weak states. It is this ideological struggle that has made identity a foreign policy gadget. According to Valensi (2015), it can be referred to as the construction of narrative legitimacy: a mechanism of how the Iranian axis of resistance and Saudi Sunni alliance turn into ideological blankets of geopolitical expansion.

2. Realist Frameworks: Power, Security, and Strategic Depth

Constructivists have concentrated on identity and narrative, whereas the focal point of realist scholars has demonstrated the power of material and strategic interest. Instead, here Gauze (2014) also brings in an aspect of a New Middle East Cold War, where he explains that the Iran-Saudi conflict serves to emulate Cold War relations, where the work of achieving power projection through sectarian identities is made manageable. Phillips (2023) notices that although Iran has fewer resources than Saudi Arabia, it has been able to exert disproportionate influence in the region owing to its consistent ideological doctrine and alliances (including those with Syria, Hezbollah, Houthis, etc.).

In this view, the proxy war will be seen as a cheap option for gaining hegemony in a region without involving direct military conflict. According to Mumford (2013), proxy war is a declaration whereby an actor in a state pursues part of its foreign policy indirectly by aiding the local warring entities. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia can be heard being financially, militarily, and politically supportive of proxies such as Houthis, Lebanon, and Syria to Hezbollah, Iraq Shi'a militias, and Islamist groups. This type of patronage raises the strategic complexity of both of the nations involved, but also weakens the sovereignty of the host nations.

3. Proxy Arenas Case-Specific Analyses

An increasingly thick literature based on specific cases assesses the localized effects of proxy warfare. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia considers the Houthis to be an existentialist threat supported by Iran, but Iran strategically appeals not to participate directly but to support the Houthis ideologically and through logistical means (Cerioli, 2018; Riedel, 2023). Besides exacerbating the sectarian faults, the civil war has also caused one of the worst humanitarian crises of the 21st century.

The fact that Iran is holding on to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria is a key to its policy in the region. Phillips (2023) mentions that the involvement of the Iranian government in the entrenchment of the transnational Shia ester militias guided by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) led to the survival of the regime, whereas Saudi Arabia and Qatar's assistance in the Sunni rebels extended the internationalization of the war. Despite better resources, Saudi Arabia has been weakened by its inability to develop strategic cohesion, in comparison with the ideologically binding proxies that Iran has been able to develop.

In Iraq, the development of the Shi'a militias under the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) has offered Iran a big payoff politically, as it gives Tehran a stake in the framework of the security system of Baghdad. In contrast, Saudi Arabia has not managed to create reliable Sunni allies, which extends the leverage of Iran further (Haddad, 2020). The Hezbollah in Lebanon is one of the most effective proxies of Iran and was generally regarded to be the most successful proxy and acts as a political party, militant organization, and also in the provision of many social services, which makes Saudi-sponsored elements in Beirut

rather feeble (Norton, 2014; Saad, 2011).

4. Foreign Aspects and the World Power Balancing

The literature also ponders the impact of external forces in enhancing the Iran-Saudi conflict. Historically, Saudi-led coalitions, especially in Yemen, have been assisted by the U.S., UK, and several EU states, which disregard human rights abuses. On the other hand, part of the strategic alliances Iran has with Russia and China (primarily in Syria) has increased its space of operation (Wezeman, 2020). A new twist was well-presented in a recent diplomatic intervention by China between Riyadh and Tehran, with a hint that the interdependence of economies can be used as a mechanism of peace building (Foreign Affairs, 2022; Al Jazeera, 2023).

5. Research Opportunities Gaps and Theories

Although the literature on the Iranian-Saudi rivalry has well defined the ideological and geopolitical scope of the conflict, it leaves huge blank spaces. To begin with, not many studies rigorously assess the long-term institutional consequences of proxy warfare on governance and civil society. Second, transnational organizations such as the Arab League and OIC are still not adequately analyzed, although they could help in resolving conflicts. Third, the economic aspect of proxy patronage, that is, investment in infrastructure, humanitarian aid, and soft-power instruments, should be studied more thoroughly empirically (Davidson, 2018; Hinnebusch, 2015).

In addition, even though some of the scholars employ constructivism, there is little use of theory in deriving the analysis of the case. Methodologically, there is still a gap between theory and praxis. Another shortcoming of this literature is that there is a tendency to treat conflicts independently of each other instead of trying to examine them as a linked regional security complex, and this is where this research tries to fill the gap by using Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT).

Conclusion

Literature offers a distorted yet diverse idea about the Iran-Saudi proxy war. One can see that view, along with all its historical grievances and religious stories, as evidence of the strategic need in proxy warfare is not only a symptom of rivalry but its mechanism. As the constructivist and realist approaches are employed in the discussion, there is an expedient desire to invest in the interdisciplinary and regionally specific research. The approach in this study has helped fill that gap because it takes a hybrid constructivist-RSCT approach, which discusses identity, ideology, and inter-regional factors to comprehend the institutionalization of conflict and the future of peace in the Middle East.

Theoretical Framework

The proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia cannot be disaggregated into the limited resources or military capabilities; rather, it has to be understood by a framework that can articulate ideational structures, identity politics, as well as regional interdependencies that shape the behavior of this conflict. Thus, the paper uses two theoretical perspectives, which are Constructivist Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), to explain the holistic way in which identity and geography institutionalize the proxy warfare in the Middle East.

1. Constructivist Theory: Identity, Norms, and Politics of Meaning

Constructivist theory (in international relations) postulates that state interests and actions may not be pre-determined, but their interests and actions are socially built into the historical discourse, cultural identities, as well as ideational frameworks (Wendt, 1999). The context of the Iran-Saudi rivalry is based on the sectarian affiliation (Sunni and Shia), the revolutionary doctrine, and the discursive framing of political legitimacy that the two states hold in the formulation of their foreign policies.

The foreign policy of Iran after 1979 has been focused on revolutionary export, positioning the country as the sharpening force of suppressed Shi members and the oppositional force against Western ideologies and hegemony. In comparison, Saudi Arabia has attempted to display its position as the

guardian of Sunni orthodoxy and custodian of Islam, locking its place as it has formed an association with Wahhabi clerical establishments (Mabon, 2023; Wehrey, 2013). Besides justifying interventions, these identity-based narratives also promote transnational loyalty between non-state actors with similar ideological or religious affiliations.

In the reading by Wendt (1999), anarchy is what states beget. This is why the competition between the two countries is not only about resources and profits; it is also about values: who creates what is wrong and what is right in Islam? Who speaks in the name of the suppressed Muslims and who determines the order in the region? The concept of constructivism can be used to explain why actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon or Houthis in Yemen are not merely being given military assistance, but being provided with symbolic legitimacy, as allowed within the larger environment of existential defense.

The ideational structures also have the ability to affect domestic politics in the third-party states as the groups identify themselves as being either to the Iranian or Saudi patron, not only to gain material benefits but as a matter of identity. These stories are more likely to prolong and make proxy fights more explosive and difficult to extinguish by normal diplomacy or especially deterrence measures (Valensi, 2015; Phillips, 2023).

2. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT): Dependence of Threats

Although constructivism describes why identity-driven conflicts take place, RSCT is used to describe how such conflicts are deeply rooted geographically and regionally. According to

RSCT was developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Walso (2003), which argues that the highest level of interdependence of security exists between states of a specific region, which generates a regional security complex. They include relationships of friendship and hostility, historical competition, and geographic close dangers which define these complexes.

The Middle East is an example of a classical regional security complex in which the lack of security in one state (e.g., Syria or Yemen) leads to the intervention of regional powers because of the fear of spillover. Iran and Saudi Arabia are regional poles of power, which see the movements of others as zero-sum. Any Iranian win in Iraq or Lebanon is considered to Saudi Arabia as a loss, and it takes some counter-measures by establishing proxy alliances (Gause, 2014).

It is also possible to put in context the continued militarization of fragile states with the help of RSCT. Syria, Yemen, and Iraq have all developed into central holding grounds of the Middle East security complex, where centralized management fails, and external patrons are welcomed to have their say by way of militia groups and ideological loyalties. Although such local conflicts have the look of domestic conflicts, they are so laced within a regional rivalry system that the conflicts are hard to work out without a reordering in the system (Buzan & Waeaver, 2003).

In addition, RSCT reveals how regional organizations like the Arab League and GCC cannot work effectively because their decision-making capacity often becomes stalled due to the same rivalries they are supposed to arbitrate. There is, therefore, a lack of regional security architecture where there is an independent body that can curb the Saudi Iranian escalation.

3. Pulling Together Constructivism and RSCT: A Composite Worldview

The study is a rare combination of constructivism and RSCT, having a multidimensional framework. Constructivism can assist researchers to interrogate reasons as to why sectarianism is being instrumentalized, the ways through which proxy actors acquire legitimation, and how a story is able to create loyalty. These ideational struggles, as highlighted by RSCT, are anchored in regional geography that takes you through the interconnectedness of the proxy wars to enable it, to expand it, and to reproduce it.

Such a compound lens can be analyzed on three levels:

- Ideational: In what terms do Iran and Saudi Arabia frame their interventions in terms of identity?
- Institutional: How are the regional

security apparatus and organizations worsening the conflict, instead of preventing it?

- Operational: What is the effect of proxies as instruments of asymmetric power in the fragile states?

Conclusion

To be able to adequately explain the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is not simply enough to employ materialist or state-centric explanations. It is identity-laden, regionally grounded, and ideological, thus not prone to conventional diplomatic solutions. This study qualifies by implementing a constructivist-RSCT blending paradigm to track the topic of subjective interest as well as structural circumstances that sustain proxy war in the Middle East.

Such a framework not only engages further theoretical rigidity but also prepares a seed for further case-specific analysis in the following chapters, where the balance of identity and security in the region will be studied in relation to the cases of Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain.

CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

The intricacy of proxy warfare between Saudi Arabia and Iran that is severely constrained with ideology, identity, and the ruling security issues cannot be studied using single research design. The chapter provides a qualitative approach to the investigation of the ideological motifs, the geopolitical consequences, and operational principles of proxy warfare in the Middle East, focused on Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. The research design will be based on the interpretivist epistemology that allows for the consideration of case study analysis, discourse analysis, and secondary data appraisal in the framework of Constructivism and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT).

1. Research paradigm: Interpretivist and Constructivist Orientation

Since the interpretation of knowledge, perception, and legitimization of foreign policy by actors like Iran and Saudi Arabia occur differently through identity and ideology, this study embraces the interpretivist paradigm that is consistent with the constructivist epistemology. The constructivist strategies focus on the individual interpretation of social reality, and according to them, ideologies, beliefs, and historical discourses play a critical role in describing international actions (Wendt, 1999). Interpretivism enables the researcher to evaluate how states justify their actions in the interests of religion, history, or security and the extent to which these justifications reach non-state actors and people within the state.

Research Design: Comparative Case Study Approach

Given the spatial and contextual variance in proxy warfare, a comparative case study approach is used to analyze the Iran–Saudi rivalry across five critical proxy arenas: Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of both generalizable patterns and context-specific dynamics (Yin, 2009). Each case is selected based on:

- The presence of significant proxy activity
- Direct involvement or support from Iran and/or Saudi Arabia
- Impact on regional security and sectarian polarization

The cross-case comparison will reveal both similar strategies (e.g., weaponization of identity) and divergent outcomes based on local political, sectarian, and institutional contexts.

2. Collection Method of Data.

The study relies on the secondary data of a qualitative nature that has been generated based on a broad spectrum of academic articles and publications, reports of think tanks, policy briefs, online archives of the news, and speeches and statements by political and religious leaders. Sources include:

- Foreign Affairs, Middle East Journal, Cambridge review of international

affairs, etc.

- The works of such authors as Simon Mabon, Frederic Wehrey, and Christopher Phillips
- The reports of the institutions like the Brookings Institution, Carnegie Middle East Center, SIPRI
- Iranian and Saudi statements during speeches and policies of their authorities
- Intervention, human rights and regional diplomacy- United Nations and Arab League documents

In order to be reliable and limit bias, a systematic source triangulation method is adopted. Other interpretations are also envisioned and compared with those of other sources, as a verification.

3. Analytical Framework

The analysis of the data is a mixture of:

a. Discourse Analysis

To comprehend foreign policies expressed ideologically and morally by Iran and Saudi Arabia, official statements, media discourses, and sermons in religion are analyzed with the help of discourse analysis. The approach assists in evaluating the manipulation of sectarian identity along with historic recollection as part of the bargaining for intervention and proxy assistance (Van Dijk, 1997).

Thematic Coding

The qualitative data in the case study are coded and classified around representative themes, including:

- Forward sponsorship and ideological matching
- Sectarian conceptualization of conflict
- Response in regions and internationally
- Sovereign and governance effects: Impacts on sovereignty and governance

b. Process Tracing

The causal mechanisms that connect the state-level motivations with the performance of proxy groups and geopolitical results are determined with the help of process tracing in each of the case studies (George & Bennett, 2005). As an example of the same, the Syrian situation can be viewed in which Iranian military, ideological, and financial benefactors were given to Hezbollah and Shia militias.

4. Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Nevertheless, despite the strict methodology, one can suggest several limitations:

Access to Data: First-hand interviews or observations were not possible with primary field research in conflict zones (e.g., Yemen or Syria).

Media Report: Media reportage (in both Iran and Saudi Arabia) is usually biased or propagandistic and accredited by the state; this is a reason why cross-verification should be done with caution.

Reactive Political Environment:

The proxy environment is dynamic; any new changes in diplomatic relations (e.g., closer relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia through China) can change the local alignments before the publishing of the findings.

Nevertheless, the factors of focus on the triangulation, as well as peer-reviewing, mitigate most of these issues and provide a plausible basis for the analytical background.

5. Ethical Considerations

The literature follows the rules of academic integrity in that every source labeled as secondary data is mentioned accordingly. These include sensitive material that involves the victim of conflicts, sectarianism, or the use of militarized actors, which is treated in a way that is neutral and objectively scholarly. No personal identifiers or confidential material are utilized.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the methodological framework for examining the Iran-Saudi proxy warfare as a sophisticated and more ideologically inclined affair. The novelty of the research lies in its ability to combine the interpretivist analysis with comparative case studies and themes coding to deliver a complex insight into how sectarian discourse, geopolitical interests, and insecurity in the region come together to institutionalize the proxy war in the Middle East.

Empirical Analysis and Case Studies

The Iran-Saudi proxy competition has not occurred in a vacuum; instead, it is relevant and expressive in varying theaters of war, whereby weak states, sectarian division, and external interference merge. In this chapter, five major case studies that are critical to the proxy dynamics are undertaken, including Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain, where the proxy relationships have defined the regional security order and continue to contribute to the instability. Based on the theoretical framework elaborated above, the following cases are discussed in terms of ideological narratives, regional entanglement, and proxy agency.

5.1 Yemen: The Insurgency of the Houthis and the Militarism of Saudi Arabia

Yemen is the most blatant of the Iran-Saudi proxy conflict. The Houthi movement is a Zaydi Shiite insurgency, which started as a local insurgency, but it gained momentum and external attention after 2011. Saudi Arabia considers the Houthis as an Iranian proxy with a threat to the southern border, whereas Iran, despite denying the direct military support, gives ideological and logistical support (Cerioli, 2018).

The Houthi-controlled areas have been plunged into a humanitarian catastrophe since the Saudi-led coalition started the operation Decisive Storm on March 26, 2015. The process of making the conflict appear as between Saudis and the Iranian expansion, and the anti-Iranian context of the war in Yemen by Saudis, can be compared to the symbolic affiliation of the Houthis to Iran as a member of the axis of resistance (Dorsey, 2016; Riedel, 2023). The equipment provided to Iran consists of the smuggling of arms, the use of drones, and IRGC-assisted training through Hezbollah. Iran has managed to keep Saudi Arabia occupied and bound at the huge cost of its finances and image, despite having had little direct involvement.

This case highlights the constructivists' patterns, with the sectarian discourses being used as a fuel of loyalty by the proxies, whereas the RSCT describes how the unstable condition in Yemen spurs a source of threat perception, which attracts outside forces, and hence it regionalizes civil war.

5.2 Syria: Strategic depth and Sectarian manipulation

The Syrian Civil War is the classic case of a proxy war of multiple levels. The Alawite-dominated regime headed by Bashar al-Assad and linked to Tehran's spirit of Iranian Shia identity politics was heavily dependent on the Iranian military and the trans-border recruitment of foreign fighters, including Lebanon (Hezbollah), Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Iran justified this intervention as protection of sacred shrines and belief of Sunni jihadist threats, and, thereby, surrounded religious appeal with a geopolitical usefulness (Phillips, 2023).

Instead, Saudi Arabia supported rebel groups within Sunni ranks to overthrow the Assad regime and reduce the influence of Iran in the Levant region. Nevertheless, the position of Saudi Arabia is undermined due to intra-Sunni rivalry, unrestrained military assistance, and disorganization of anti-regime coalitions (Dekel et al., 2016). Although Saudi Arabia was financially ahead, the ideological unity and land coordination of the Iranians, which were headed by Qassem Soleimani, was more decisive.

The case demonstrates that the effectiveness of proxies cannot be reduced to their funding dimension alone, but their narrative legitimacy and strategic consistency are also important dimensions. The same can be said about Syria, which also displays the assumption of RSCT that foreign parts intensify domestic disputes, and it is almost impossible to solve them via domestic settlement in isolation.

5.3 Iraq: Proxy Trap and the Post-Invasion Politics

Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran discovered very fertile territories on which to institutionalize its impact by seeking to dominate the political parties, the religious networks, as well as the armed groups. Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) united several other Shia militias trained by Iran. These groups were not only military players but political players of post-Saddam Iraq

(Haddad, 2020).

Saudi Arabia, which had rubbed shoulders with the Sunni tribes and political players, had a hard time developing a coherent counterforce. It favored tribal coalitions and opposition leaders sporadically and, in response to such an action, often looked suspicious to the Baghdad government. In the meantime, Iran tactfully exploited pilgrimage diplomacy, reconstruction aid, and identity narratives to establish itself further.

The Iraq case demonstrates constructivist politics of sectarian narrative building, in which identity is employed as a tool of mobilization and framework of legitimation. In addition, the state and non-state distinction was erased in the background due to proxy militarization, which called into question the issue of sovereignty and governance and the prospect of national integrity.

5.4 Lebanon: The Hezbollah and Strategic Flexibility

Lebanon has been the most successful proxy of Iran. Hezbollah is a militia and is a product of the 1982 Israeli invasion and the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and it is more than a militia but a political movement, a welfare provider, and an ideological arm of Tehran (Norton, 2014). The strength of Hezbollah trumps that of the Lebanese state on many fronts, and it forms an important unit in the Iranian deterrence policy against Israel.

In response, Saudi Arabia has in the past backed Sunni groups like the Future Movement, which is headed by Saad Hariri. But the Saudi credibility has been on shaky ground with repeated crises, such as the controversial 2017 resignation of its prime minister, Hariri, allegedly under the pressure of Riyadh (Salem, 2018). Iran has invested heavily in its infrastructure, ideology, and military strength, causing a permanent asymmetric advantage.

This case displays constructivism in the sense that proxies that are more than ideologically committed are stronger, and RSCT gives us insight into why Lebanon, the country located between Israel and Syria, is strategically crucial when it comes to power projection in the region.

5.5 Bahrain: The Crushing of Identity in the Name of Stability

The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings in Bahrain, orchestrated mostly by their marginalized Shi majority members, were soon presented by the monarchical Al Khalifa establishment, and its Saudi source of influence, as being sedition instigated by Iran. In its turn, Saudi Arabia deployed 1,000 soldiers to the Peninsula Shield Force as its warning to Iran that it will not tolerate any close contacts on its eastern border and oil installations (Cerioli, 2018).

Although there was no solid eye-wash of Iranian planning, the sectarian argument worked both as a tool of domestic control and to justify interventionism in the region. Iran, in turn, supported Bahraini protestors rhetorically, as a part of the Islamic awakening.

The example of instability is Bahrain, where the preventive logic of RSCT rears its head: the perceived instability turned out to be contagious, even stronger states intervened firmly and even proactively. In constructivism, sectarian framing as a feature of geopolitical calculations can pass into a silence or complicity on an international level.

Conclusion

As illustrated in these five case studies, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is not an accident, nor is it some exclusive murder mystery that can be destroyed as it comes along. The rivalry is rather purposeless, shaped, and already ingrained in regional frameworks and myths. Constructivism assists in deconceptualizing identity politics, which grants proxies their robustness and legitimacy, whereas RSCT explains the spread and aggravation of the conflicts in the region.

This is what leads to the emergence of a new model of warfare whereby states are not required to confront each other directly. They do not confront and instead outsource, converting the religious identity, historical grievance, and regional insecurity by making it weapons of strategic depth. The example of this institutionalization of proxy conflict has long-term consequences not only for the Middle East region but of international warfare in the 21st century.

Effect of Proxy Warfare

The geopolitics of long-term proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia have been both significant and far-reaching that is not only confined to the affected nations in the warring areas, but also to the general Middle East and international society. This chapter critically analyses the various dimensional effects of this proxy warfare on its outcomes as regards regional instability, state fragility, humanitarian crisis, sectarian polarization, loss of sovereignty, and distortion of international norms. Based on the two related schools of thought, namely constructivist and regional security complex, the analysis that follows reveals how this type of indirect confrontation has become institutionalized and self-reinforcing.

7.1 Instability in Regions and Failure of State Systems

Among the least vague consequences of Iran-Saudi proxy fighting are the demolition of state organizations and the continuation of civil wars. The central governments of such countries as Yemen, Syria, and Iraq have been undermined or torn apart by the pressures of foreign-sponsored militias and ideological deepening. Patronage of the non-state actors has led to the displacement of state power with its scattered rulership and warlord politics that weaken national sovereignty (Gause, 2014).

In Yemen, the authority in Sanaa held by the Houthis and the Saudi-established government in Aden have established competing authorities and governance, and service delivery, and diplomacy is almost impossible. On the Syrian chessboard, there are several opposition forces and external military forces, which have made the state a geopolitical chessboard. These cases show the capacity of proxy war to change internal conflicts into a perennial civil war area, following the regional security complex theory by Buzan and Waevers (2003), wherein rivalries in the region result in enhanced regionalized rivalries.

7.2 Man-made Humanitarian Disasters and Perpetuated Suffering

It is a disaster to humanity in terms of human life that is lost to a proxy war. Millions have been murdered, evacuated, or exposed to hunger and casualties due to years of war. The war in Yemen is associated with the worst global humanitarian crisis in history, as per the UN estimates. More than 24 million people need humanitarian aid, and hundreds of thousands of people have died as a result of violence, hunger, and diseases that can be easily prevented.

Syria has already lost more than 500 thousand people, and almost 6 million were displaced inside the country. The equivalent trends occur in Iraq and Lebanon, as wars have eliminated infrastructure and gridlocked reconstruction (Foreign Affairs, 2022; Phillips, 2023). Such consequences show why proxy war is not as limited as regular warfare; there is an excess of violence that takes place in proxy wars, and that violence is usually perpetuated by non-state actors, non-state actors have limited accountability.

The culmination of such hecatombs is also the manifestation of the constructivist anxieties that ideologically motivated protagonists might command symbolic successes or living stories at the expense of humanitarian conventions that only augment human misery to satisfy sectarian salvation or immediately justified revolution.

7.3 Polarization and Radicalization Sectarianism

Another major ideological effect of Iran Saudi proxy wars is an escalation of sectarianism. Although sectarian identity is not new in the Middle East, the competition has made it as politicized and militarized than ever before. These Sunni-Shi rifts have gone into the foreign policy of Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as educational and media policies of both, responding to the radicalization and identity mobilization across national boundaries (Wehrey, 2013; Hashemi, 2017).

Such polarization has resulted in the institutionalization of sectarian identity, where communities tend to compare themselves based on the expression of us and them. A case in point is the Shiites in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, whereby minority groups tend to be systematically discriminated against, whereas the Sunni expression in Iraq and Syria is made as one of the alienated parties following an

alleged Iranian hegemony. Such a sectarian construct empowers violence, rationalizes intervention, and maintains the loyalties of proxies, and hence, the instability increases.

7.4 The erosion of Sovereignty and national autonomy

The result of the loss of state sovereignty is an equally severe thing. Proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, PMF in Iraq, Houthis in Yemen, and Shi behind militias in Syria might act independently without executing the governmental guidance of a government. With the support of Tehran or Riyadh, they are funded, structured, and ideologically affiliated independently.

Such hybridization of warfare crosses the border between national forces and external parties, undermining the state monopoly on violence (Haddad, 2020). Conflict zones cannot afford to host such proxies without having to face domestic instability. This results in more political leadership controlled by other powers, and hence they are seeking to undermine national freedom and democracy.

7.5 Incarnation of Foreign Nations and World Competition

Proxy rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has also allowed and institutionalized the external involvement. The US has given Saudi Arabia diplomatic support as well as military support, such as a veto on the UN and the sale of arms. Russia and China, in turn, have strengthened their relationship with Iran, especially in Syria, and based on economic connections (Wezeman, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2023).

Instead of being impartial intermediaries, these international powers tend to increase the conflict forces on one side by providing support to their allies, which extends stalemates. In the case of Syria, the intervention of the U.S and Russia has led to consolidation of the bipolar intervention trend, whereas the recent economic diplomacy between Iran and Saudi Arabia led by China is the manifestation of the emerging transactional diplomacy.

Therefore, proxy warfare is no longer solely a proxy war but also a game of great powers, increasing the potential impact and making the peaceful resolution even further away.

Collapse of Regional Organizations and Multilateralism

The Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) are some of the regional bodies that have been unable to perform as viable peace makers or peace implementers. They are ineffective or biased through their intrastate divisions, and in many cases, these divisions occur between the same rivals that the interstate divisions are attempting to solve (Dorsey, 2016).

The Saudi-led intervention of the GCC in Bahrain and the failure of the Arab League to even react to the violence in Syria reflect the fact that these organizations have transformed and consolidated to reflect foreign policy instruments rather than a means of managing conflict. The set of legal norms associated with the peaceful resolution under the UN Charter Article 2(3) has been in regular decline through the application in the proxy battlefield, where the degradation of international law is a larger-scale problem.

Conclusion

The proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia has yielded systemic effects that are much beyond the bilateral hostility. It has undermined governments, destabilized communities, extremistized the thinking, and gerrymandered foreign affairs. This contest decreases the tendency to defuse violence by ensuring that fragile states are created into instruments of ideological and geopolitical experimentation.

Constructivist theory gives us the answers to how identity and ideology are used to justify the conflict, and we also find the answers when such wars are mixed up regionally in RSCT, that these wars are hard to isolate. Representation of the Middle East will be devastated as long as structural and ideational changes have not taken place, including the de-securitization of sectarian identities, strengthening of multilateral institutions, and accountability to overseas patrons.

Key Findings

The Iran-Saudi proxy conflict is an exemplary model of asymmetric warfare, and it has been

maintained by ideological entrenchment, sectarian identity politics, and strategic regional identities. Based on cross-case analysis, theoretical application, and discourse analysis, the present chapter outlines the main results of the research study.

1. The Proxy Warfare Has Been Institutionalized in the Form of a Strategic Resort to War

The paper establishes that Iran and Saudi Arabia have both systematically institutionalized methods of proxy warfare as a key feature of their foreign policy. Hezbollah, Houthis, and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have become strategic rather than tactical assets that can project power, disrupt the enemy, and the ability to reorganize regional politics without necessarily engaging in active military confrontation (Phillips, 2023; Haddad, 2020).

Such actors are not the direct extensions of their sponsors; rather, they constitute the political, social, and military institutions on their own. Their ability to persist is the fact that they have a two-fold nature in serving the needs of local people as well as external interests of strategic interests.

2. The Sectarian Identity Has Become Politicized and Weaponized

Due to the instrumentalization of sectarian identity, one of the most reliable results of all case studies is its presence. The recent war between the Sunnis and the Shiites, Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively, is not as theological as it is a strategic conflict. Sectarianism is utilized as the rationale and mobilizer of intervention and as a way of legitimizing its a priori interventionist actions and its proxies that exist internally (Wehrey, 2013; Hashemi, 2017).

Such weaponization has also caused such intense sectarian polarization that reconciliation and pluralism are becoming much harder across conflict-torn countries like Iraq, Syria, and Bahrain. This lends credence to the constructivist thesis that identity is a form of constructed and used concept, something not deterministic of an action.

3. Strategic Asymmetry is more advantageous to Iran than to Saudi Arabia

As compared to Saudi Arabia, which is more economically and militarily advantaged, the strategic breadth of Iran as a result of ideologically united and disciplined in nature proxies has been more profitable. Iran has deeply penetrated the loyalties and common ideology networks in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, whereas the Saudi proxies have been disintegrated, short-term and reliant on foreign patronage (Mabon, 2023; Valensi, 2015).

This imbalance indicates the idea that narrative authority and ideological harmony display better possibilities of prevailing influence over time than financial and material gains by themselves in ensuring proxy power.

4. Weak States have been turned into Proxy Areas

Nations like Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain are not only racked by civil war but have also also thrown into international cloak-and-dagger games where they have had to sacrifice their sovereignty and have had divided governments to their disadvantage. These states are ensnared by the regional interdependency issues of security, whereby local conflict evokes strategic threats among regional powers and global powers, and this is the case occurrence as warned by the Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan & Weaver, 2003).

This observation can be described as a cyclical one, in that external intervention is a cause and also a contributor to instability or fragility on the part of the state.

5. The results are humanitarian, and the consequences are dire and insufficiently prioritized

In all the proxy arenas, the investigation establishes that the humanitarian suffering, namely mass displacement, famine, infrastructural collapse, and health crisis, has been mostly ignored or politicized. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran has given humanitarian interests priority in their proxy wars. As an example, one can cite the siege in Syria, the blockade and bombing of Yemen, which became typical of how civilians are often used as tactical targets (Foreign Affairs, 2022; Riedel, 2023).

This is a normative failure, in which there is an abrogation of the laws of war, and principles of international humanitarian law are either not followed or followed selectively.

6. The Regional and Global Institutions Have Not Helped to alleviate the Conflict

The Arab League, GCC, and OIC, among other organizations, have acted in a weak or biased manner to curb proxy violence. Their structural inabilities, politicization, and internal competition make them powerless in conflict management and the enforcement of group norms. Similarly, geopolitical differences and selective meddling have time and again inhibited the United Nations Security Council (Dorsey, 2016; Wezeman, 2020).

These results validate the multilateralism crisis in governing transnational proxy wars, in which most states do not usually get involved in international relations.

7. New Diplomatic Openings Provide Hesitant-but meanwhile-Notable Openings

The China-mediated reconciliation procedure between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023 (even though it is still small-scale) means that there is a strategic realignment in the region.

Although the interests in the territory and ideological claims remain substantiated, the mutual desire to de-escalate in the face of economic necessity and geopolitical exhaustion context was demonstrated by both of these states (Al Jazeera, 2023).

This implies that an economic engagement (or transactional diplomacy), which does not presuppose ideological convergence, can present a plausible way to manage a conflict, provided it is extended continuously and on an institutional basis. Conclusion

The long-term proxy confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a nexus of the unstable Middle East of the contemporary world. This study has criticized the then-competitor in charge, strategic, ideological, and institutional dynamics of this contestation from the perspective of Constructivist Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). It has shown how, looking at case studies in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain, identity politics, ideology, and regional insecurities have all coalesced around the creation of a self-reinforcing, long-term, destructive proxy war system.

A Re-Reading of The Core Argument

The central idea of this research is that proxy war has ceased to be an ancillary or transitional resource of foreign policy but a rationalized tool with which Iran and Saudi Arabia extend power and activate identities, and challenge the order of the region. The ability to cause maximum chaos in the nations of interest and retain minimum risk to the patron state is a defining feature of an indirect type of war as opposed to the conventional one. The actions of both of these states are justified in terms of sectarian and ideological rhetoric, whether they be the rhetoric of revolutionary resistance and Shia solidarity in Iran or the rhetoric of Sunni custodianship and countering an Iranian expansion in Saudi Arabia.

It is a competition not just about geometry, but a competition that is very constructivist, based on different visions of legitimacy in that region and religious identity. These discourses are de facto created, codified, and detached by way of proxies, who subsequently achieve legitimacy by virtue not only of material patronage but also ideological conformity.

General Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

There are a number of theoretical contributions of the study. It has also affirmed Constructivism in guiding and understanding how narrow notions work to influence foreign policy and conflict management, such as sect, ideology, and narrative. It has also strengthened the worth of RSCT in illustrating how conflicts that are based on a local scale, when placed into a region characterized by acute insecurity, internationalize and stagnate.

Empirically, comparison of five conflict zones has shown:

- The tactical staying power and depth of proxies allied to Iran, like Hezbollah and PMF.
- The comparative ineptitude of Saudi surrogate activity is constrained by

the splintering and trade-based unions.

- The metamorphosis of civil proxy arenas has destroyed sovereignty, governance, and civil society in most parts of the World.

Broad Regional and International Implications

Such a proxy war has local spill overs-radicalization, humanitarian catastrophes, and communal polarization, as well as international impact. It has attracted the big players and worsened Cold War kind of animosity between the U.S., Russia, and China, all taking different camps on its side. It has also revealed the inability of the multilateral institutions to mediate or to enable the resolution of such conflicts effectively.

Also, the deployment of non-state actors as standing foreign policies is an indication that the details of war and diplomacy have changed. Proxy war does not respect the traditional norms of state sovereignty, laws of war, and the Westphalian system of international relations. This study emphasizes that the future of conflict can be more and more associated with indirect confrontations, identity-based mobilization, and the forms of hybrid wars.

Roads To De-escalation

Even though the rivalry is a fierce one, the China-brokered détente of 2023 between Iran and Saudi Arabia indicates that a more practical assessment of the costs that the proxy war would have been more realistic. Both powers are experiencing restraints in the domestic and economic spheres that can render sustained conflict impossible. When somewhat permanent, this diplomatic re-engagement may lead to the emergence of a new regional security architecture, a security setup that is no longer sectarian and confrontational, but is based upon cooperation and stability.

This, however, would necessitate:

- Weakness of the de-instrumentalization of the sectarian identity of foreign policy.
- Empowerment of non-aligned regional organizations.
- Decreasing external support of the militia.
- Creation of inclusive settlements in the concerned states.

Final Reflection

This paper finds that the Iran-Saudi proxy war is both a causal factor and a symptom of the instability in the region. It is motivated by competing visions of states, enhanced by identity narratives, and it is carried out by third-party actors. The problem that the Middle East faces is not just overcoming specific conflicts between parties but getting rid of the very system on which proxy war relies. Unstable the region will be, as long as proxies as such and instruments of power, or identity and politics as identity remain politicized.

It is only a change, a paradigm shift in regional norms, institutions, and strategies to break this cycle, one that views the Middle East not as a theater of ideological contestation, but as a collaborative zone built on mutual security as well as political pluralism.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having conducted the research and reached the conclusions, it is possible to provide the following policy recommendations that could help de-escalate the tensions and build a strong regional stability to break the structural incentives of the proxy warfare in the Middle East:

1. The Institutionalization of Regional Dialogue Platforms has to be done

Create a neutral, inclusive regional security body, such as the OSCE, in which Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other interested parties can meet regularly and discuss security issues, develop trust, and find a diplomatic way out.

Take advantage of existing forums like the Baghdad Dialogue or the recent diplomacy of China as the first steps towards the institutionalization of mediation systems.

2. De-Sectarianization of Foreign Policy Discourses

Ask Iran and Saudi Arabia to reorient their regional interactions to get rid of the competing and sect-based identity politics, instead, to move closer to one another based on economic, environmental, and security interests.

Advocate for educational and media transformation in the region to oppose the extremist secularist discourse spread by state-affiliated religious leaders and militant organizations.

3. Proxy Demobilization and Reintegration Programs

DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration) programs of militias and proxy troops ought to be sponsored by the regional and international community, the UN, and the EU, especially in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria.

Focus on economic renewal, vocational education, and political participation to bring these groups to political life and out of an armed struggle.

4. Limit External Shipment of Arms to States that Proxy-enable weaponry

Restrict the arms sale to Iran and Saudi Arabia and their provision of military aid, conditional on their promise to withdraw support to armed non-state actors, in addition to their adherence to international norms governing humanitarian efforts.

Institute a Middle East Arms Monitoring Mechanism that might be an arm of the UN or SIPRI to monitor and report arms trafficking to proxy groups.

5. Re-form and Re-vitalize Regional Organizations

Restore the credibility of the Arab League, the GCC, and the OIC through changing their mandates in order to incorporate the roles of mediating conflicts without being on either side, Early warning mechanisms, as well as setting independent verification mechanisms.

Invite greater involvement of non-Gulf Arab parties, Turkey, and North African players to increase diversity of regional leadership and water down polarities.

6. Neutral Mediation must be supported by the Global Powers rather Than Polarization

Encourage the U.S., Russia, and China not to view the region as a field of an old-Soviet Cold War-like confrontation and urge them to assist multi-lateral diplomacy, de-escalation measures, and economic collaboration.

Promote bilateral security arrangements on maritime security, counter terrorism, and economic corridors between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

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