

Saudi arabia's foreign policy towards iran

[History](#), [Middle East](#)



Realism

According to Nye and Welch, realism focuses on states as the main actors; and they all “ seek power and security” through military might (2013, 56).

From a realist perspective, the anarchy is absolute and not constructed; and each state is a unitary rational actor that seeks to maximize its relative power (Beach 9). The author will focus on structural realism, a system level theory that dismisses domestic factors (Beach 7). When addressing the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, structural realism would discard any ideological differences and only consider “ the structural imperatives” based on each state’s “ relative power” and where it stands in the international system (Beach, 9-10). Therefore, Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy towards Iran, from a realist view, stems from a rational quest for security and survival, an urge to prevent a shift in the balance of power in favor of Iran and a strive for regional hegemony.

From a realist view: Iran would have been seen as a threat to the security and survival of Saudi Arabia, ever since it was accused of inciting Shi’a riots against the ruling family in 1979 (Hameed 2017, 23); and the threat continues as Iran has been supporting Shi’aa groups throughout the region, including “ the militarily capable Houthi movement” on the borders of the kingdom (Haidar 2018, 5-6). Iran has also threatened the balance of power in the region, which, until the war in Iraq in 2003, was in favor of Arabs and Sunnis (Wehrey et al 2010, 19). The Iranian nuclear project is also obviously a very “ realist” threat to security and balance of power. Finally, as Iran has

been seeking to expand its dominance and export its revolution, it became a major rival for regional hegemony.

The same realist concerns would also explain Saudi Arabia's military involvements in the region after the Arab Spring. To explain how Saudi Arabia undertakes its foreign policy towards Iran, realism would focus on military power (Nye and Welch 2013, 57) to counter the Iranian threat. The proxy wars in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen can be seen as an actual exercise of power against Iran; and the ties with the US would be perceived as means to build up the state's military capabilities through alliances. An analysis of Saudi Arabia's "projected" defense budget in 2017 (Caffrey 2017) by Jane's Defence Weekly, ranked it the third in the world, after the US and China. Hence, realism explains the ongoing conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as a zero sum game where Saudis are rationally pursuing security and hegemony. However, one should not forget the ideational frame within which the foreign policy is undertaken.

IPE

IPE looks at international relations in terms of money and economy; including different schools: Marxism, economic liberalism and mercantilism. The author believes that the economic angle in the conflict is weak, compared to the ideational or power perspectives. Hence, IPE is not very convenient to explain Saudi policy. However, applying a mercantilist perspective, which sees the economy as a political tool and "essential means to power, whether for security or for aggression," (Drezner 2010) the oil war can still be understood as one of Saudi Arabia's tools in the conflict. In fact, it is argued

that by using the “ energy markets” in its war against Iran (Seznec 2015, 3), Saudi Arabia exercises a big leverage. In 2015, KSA had “ nearly twice the oil reserves and three times the production capacity of Iran” (Seznec 2015, 3). It is also benefitting from the political isolation of Iran and is keen on keeping the sanctions that limit its power in energy markets. The mercantilist perspective can fall back under the realist understanding of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy; but by focusing on the economy rather than the military as the state's tool.

Liberalism

The author had initially dismissed the liberal paradigm as potential approach to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Iran. However, taking a look at the official messages of the state's foreign policy, published on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including “ establishing cooperative relations with friendly countries and playing an active role within the framework of regional and international organizations,” she decided to test how much this official stance applies on the ground. The above statement strongly fits within liberalism, which predicts a “ progress towards a more peaceful and stable international system” (Beach 11) through trade, transnational contact and international institutions. In fact, Saudi Arabia has had previously shown cooperative tendencies towards Iran (Okruhlik 2003). In 1991, Saudi foreign minister visited Iran and resumed diplomatic ties; in 1997, they established a joint economic mission and industrial committees; and in 2001, they signed a security agreement (Weissbach 2001). However, one could argue that even if liberalism could understand some of the state's foreign policy towards Iran

at one point, it can't be applied today as the stakes got higher and the conflict intensified.

Conclusion

While IPE and liberalism can only understand parts of the conflict, both realism and constructivism can offer a broader explanation of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Iran. However, they can only do so by selectively focusing on one element of the conflict and dismissing the others. The realist perspective may seem more rational and representative of a zero-sum game, where Saudi Arabia is reaching out for military power and allies to preserve its security and hegemony. However, one cannot ignore that Saudi Arabia's legitimacy and survival are based on its ideological supremacy; and that the conflict followed Iran's claim of religious legitimacy on the ground of contradictory beliefs to that of KSA. The author believes that the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran is better understood as a dual conflict of power hunt and ideational divisions.