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Confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran: The New "Peloponnesian War"

Eurasian and Caucasus Studies

სამაგისტრო ნაშრომის ხელმძღვანელი:
თორნიკე თურმანიძე
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ანოტაცია

წინამდებარე ნაშრომი: *დაპირისპირება საუდის არაბეთსა და ირანს შორის: ახალი „პელოპონესის ომი"*, განიხილავს ახლო აღმოსავლეთის ორი მთავარი სახელმწიფოს მეტოქეობას რეგიონში ჰეგემონიისთვის. ნაშრომის მიზანია გამოიკვლიოს ამ კონფლიქტის წარმოშობის საფუძვლები და გარემოები, აგრეთვე აღწეროს თუ რა გავლენას ახდენს ეს ქიშპი ახლო აღმოსავლეთში მიმდინარე სხვადასხვა პროცესებზე. ნაშრომში დაისმება შემდეგი საკვლევი კითხვა: რა არის საუდის არაბეთსა და ირანს შორის დაპირისპირების გამომწვევი მიზეზი? კვლევის ჰიპოთეზაა, რომ ირანის სიძლიერის ზრდა, იწვევს დაპირისპირებას საუდის არაბეთთან. ჰიპოთეზის ასახსნელად გამოყენებულია გილპინის ჰეგემონური ომისა და კუგლერის და ორგანსკის ძალაუფლების ტრანზიციის თეორიები. ეს თეორიები სწავლობენ ძალაუფლებით მიმართებებს და ურთიერთობების დინამიკას ჰეგემონ სახელმწიფოსა და ახლად აღზევებულ კონკურენტს შორის, რომელსაც არსებული საერთაშორისო წესრიგის შეცვლა სურს. კვლევა ეყრდნობა თვისებრივ კვლევის მეთოდებს, განსაკუთრებით კონტენტ ანალიზსა და ქეისების შესწავლას. ნაშრომში პირდაპირი პარალელებია გავლებული რეგიონში მიმდინარე დაპირისპირებასა და ანტიკურ საბერძნეთში მომხდარ პელოპონესის ომს შორის. ისევე როგორც, სპარტისა და საუდის არაბეთის შემთხვევაში, პელოპონესის ომი აგრეთვე, წარმოადგენდა გაბატონებული სახელმწიფოსა და მზარდი მოქიშპის კონფლიქტს. ურთიერთობების ისტორიის, იდეოლოგიური დაპირისპირებისა და სირიის, იემენის, ერაყის, და ყატარის კონკრეტული ქეისების განხილვის შედეგად, ნაშრომში დამტკიცებულია ერთის მხრივ ირანის ზრდა, ხოლო მეორეს მხრივ ახსნილია, თუ ეს ზრდა საუდის არაბეთსა და ირანს შორის კონფრონტაციის მთავარ მიზეზს რატომ წარმოადგენს.

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Abstract

The master thesis: *Confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran: The New "Peloponnesian War"*, discusses the hegemonic rivalry between two main states of the Middle East. The study aims to examine origins of confrontation, and describe how this enmity affects various ongoing processes in the region. The research question of the thesis is: What is the cause of the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran? The study assumes following hypothesis: the growth of the power of Iran, is causing confrontation with Saudi Arabia. In order to explain hypothesis, Gilpin's theory of hegemonic war, and Kugler and Organski's power transition thesis are used. Both analyze power arrangements and dynamics of the relationships between hegemon and rising challenger, which wants to change existing international order. The thesis is based on qualitative research methods, especially, on content analysis and case study. The study draws direct parallels between ongoing confrontation in the region and the Peloponnesian War of Ancient Greece. As with Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Peloponnesian War represented clash amongst a status quo state and a revisionist state. After researching the history of relation, ideological disputes, and exploring concrete cases of Iraq, Syria, Qatar and Yemen, the study proves that a) Iranian ascendancy is observable, and b) the Iranian rise is main reason of confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

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Introduction

Even quick glance at international news sources is enough to have a clear understanding which part of the world is the most troublesome. Unfortunately, the turbulence and instability seems to be everlasting characteristic of the Middle East. Almost every day tragic events from the region make headline in the world TV channels and newspapers. The abundance of natural resources, strategic location at the crossroads of three continents, and century-long presence of world's dominant powers have not brought neither stability, nor peace to the region. On the contrary, for decades, territorial conflicts, refugee crisis, civil wars, ethnic struggles, terrorism, and religious animosities shaped the perception about the Middle East.

The situation becomes more noteworthy, if we consider demographic factors. Due to significant political and media attention that the Middle East receives, one might assume that it is a heavily populated area; however, the region is home of only 3% of planet's population (International Energy Agency, 2012). Apart from the journalists and politicians who are devoting considerable amount of time and energy to the Middle East, the scholars also have extensive curiosity to study ongoing processes of the region, especially, conflicts, struggles, and power relations among the regional states.

Up this point, the Middle East has been home to some of the longest and protracted ethno-territorial conflicts. Since 1948, Israel and the Arab states have fought at list six wars, and Israeli-Palestinian dispute remains unresolved, impeding peace between Israel and several Arab nations. Moreover, recently, the region has witnessed the unexpected violent political upheaval - the Arab Spring. Since 2011, "the Middle East is undergoing an era of revolutionary change"

(Terrill, 2011, p. iii). The promises of Arab Spring – democracy and freedom – has not been realized and fulfilled (the only exception might be Tunisia). On the contrary, the Arab Spring precipitated destabilization of the region, and the breakdown of old order. Although in some countries, short experiment with democracy ended with counterrevolution and restoration of *ancien* regime (Egypt), for three Middle Eastern states the Arab Spring brought devastating and bloody conflict.

Started as pro-democracy protest, the uprising turned into civil war in Syria, which continues sixth year, with no prospective of ending in the intermediate future. More than 450,000 people died in this conflict, and 4.8 million fled the country, triggering one of the biggest refugee crisis in Europe, since World War II (Durando, 2016). Four infighting groups carved up Syrian territory: Assad regime, rebels backed by Turkey, Kurds, and ISIS. Today, the Syrian statehood is a virtual reality, and the image of the unified country remains only on maps. The neighboring Iraq is in no better condition. The state with already weak state institutions, and severe sectarian strife was unprepared to deal with extension of the Syrian Civil War to its territory. As a result, ISIS resurfaced, and was able to capture nearly third of Iraq's territory (Rosen, 2014). Furthermore, in the southern part of Arab Peninsula, Yemen is engulfed in bloody internal conflict, which already claimed more than 10,000 lives, and made country on the verge of massive starvation (Al Jazeera, 2017). According to the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index Yemen, Syria, and Iraq are in top 20 failed states of the world (2016).

Despite the fact that all these battles have separate and distinct attributes, such as history of origin, and developmental circumstances, the underlying feature of all three conflicts is that they could be characterized as a place of 'proxy war' between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. These two opposing countries are fighting for dominance in the region, to increase "their power and influence" (Grumet, 2015, p. 2), and "for legitimacy as Islamic leaders" (Okruhlik, 2003, p. 114). These wars, together with several other issues serve as an arena, where Iran and Saudi Arabia could face off against each other without direct military confrontation.

From Lebanon to Bahrain, from Iraq to Yemen the Iranian-Saudi hostility "has been reflected in the politics of a number of regional states where these two powers exercise influence" (Terrill, 2011, p. ix). Nowadays, "Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and the Gulf states have all been affected by the growing tension, and there are signs that Iranian influence is becoming stronger in these areas" (Chubin, 2009, p. 165). Furthermore, "the two oil-rich theocracies—one Shiite and one Sunni—are vying for regional dominance. The feud between Iran and Saudi Arabia has fueled sectarianism, resulted in an increase in the flow of weapons and funding to extremists, and spawned numerous militant movements" (Cambanis, 2016, p. 14).

Commenting on the significance of the Arab Spring, the Director of Strategic Studies Institute Douglas Lovelace stated:

> *The Arab Spring [...] have not altered some of the more fundamental aspects of the Middle East regional situation.* **One of the most important rivalries defining the strategic landscape of the Middle East is between Iran and Saudi Arabia.** *The competition between these two states is long-standing, but it is especially important now"* (Terrill, 2011, p. iii).

Andrew Terrill thinks that the regional "divisive[ness] [increases in] times of regional turbulence" (2011, p. 1), and Tali Rachel Grumet elaborates that the "ongoing dispute and Sunni-Shi'ite proxy wars will continue to have important implications for regional stability" and even affect "U.S. national security interests" (2015, p. 1). Consequently, taking into account above mentioned analysis, it could be concluded that the inquiry into Saudi-Iranian affairs, and "their aspirations for Gulf hegemony" (Jahner, 2012, p. 38), gains new importance after the Arab Spring.

The purpose of this study is to examine and review Saudi-Iranian relationship. The research will specifically concentrate on the attempt to define how Iranian-Saudi interactions are related to the struggle for regional dominance. Hence, for the purposes of thesis, the research question will be formulated as following: **What is the cause of the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran?**

Furthermore, while analyzing the conflict, the research will contribute to the Middle Eastern studies by drawing new parallel and historical analogy. In the rich scholarship on the Middle East, I have not encountered historical analogy with the Peloponnesian War. Therefore, I argue that the elements of the growing Iranian-Saudi antagonism strikingly resemble the conflict played out nearly 2500 years ago in Ancient Greece. The Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) was "fought between the two leading city-states in ancient Greece, Athens and Sparta. Each stood at the head of alliances that, between them, included nearly every Greek city-state" (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015). The conformation made "the whole of Hellas became engaged in an internecine struggle to determine the economic and political future of the Greek world" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 601). The aspects of the Peloponnesian War will be used to elucidate current Saudi-Iranian clash, since as Gilpin noted: "the classic history of Thucydides is as meaningful a guide to the behavior of states today as when it was written in the fifth century B.C." (1981, p. 7).

In order, to analyze regional power relations, explore the undergoing changes in the region, and demonstrate the evidence of the struggle for the dominance in the Middle East between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Robert Gilpin's hegemonic stability theory, along with Kugler and Organski's power transition thesis, together with various authors who study regional balance of power, and strive for hegemony, will be applied as an explanatory framework.

In the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides, "the first writer in the realist tradition as well as the founding father of the international relations discipline" (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012, p. 42), while trying to explain the roots of the conflict between Athens and Sparta claimed that "the real cause" of the struggle was "the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon [Sparta]" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 596). Additionally, "Thucydides foresaw that throughout history new states and challenging states like Athens would arise and the hegemonic cycle would repeat itself" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 596). Observing Athenian rise, Gilpin comments that "the increasing power of the second most powerful state in the system, […] precipitated the conflict and brought […]a change in the hierarchy or control of the inter-national political system" (1981, p. 596). The Peloponnesian War deserves special

attention due to the fact of "the massive accumulation of power in Hellas and its implications for the structure of the system" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 593).

The current study assumes similar trends in development of the situation in the Middle East, and more concretely in the Gulf. Paraphrasing Thucydides, I would like to postulate hypothesis for this study: **the growth of the power of Iran, is causing confrontation with Saudi Arabia.** Thus, *growth of the power of Iran* will be the **independent variable**, and *Saudi-Iranian confrontation* represents the **dependent variable**. Some differences should be emphasized between the Peloponnesian War and ongoing Iran-Saudi rivalry. While Sparta, responding to Athenian ascendance, set off the hostility, Saudi Arabia is not direct initiator of confrontation. Iranian rise, expressed, among many other things, in open or covert interventions in the neighboring states, forces Saudi Arabia to take appropriate and assertive countermeasures. However, central constructs of the Peloponnesian War: existence of an established state that exerts hegemony and the rising challenger - are maintained in the study. Following the Peloponnesian framework, Saudi Arabia is the leading power in the region, and Iran – an emerging contestant.

In the beginning, the literature review and the theoretical underpinnings of this study will be discussed. Outline of how international relations theory views trends and patterns occurring in relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia will be presented. Afterwards the research methodology – how the research aims to study this issue, will be described. The research methodology will be followed by the operationalization of variables. Both, independent and dependent variables will be defined by analyzing extensive history between these countries, and emphasizing ideological and political differences. Finally, the conclusion will be offered.

1. Literature Review

The research is based on wide range of scientific articles and books. One of the main sources of the study is Robert Gilpin's main book about the hegemonic stability theory *War and Change in World Politics*. The book represents core theoretical pillar of the thesis, because it analyzes the nature of the transformation in the international politics, how equilibrium in the system is established and then gets disrupted, and how accumulating tensions could only resolved by war. Moreover, the study also employs Gilpin's another work *the Theory of Hegemonic War* for its detailed examination of the Peloponnesian War. Gilpin's theories are complemented with Kugler and Organski's research *the Power Transition: a Retrospective and Prospective Evaluation*. The same power transition theory is elucidated in Lebow and Valentino's *Lost in Transition: A Critical Analysis of Power Transition Theory*. The theory deals with dynamics of change between a status quo state and a revisionist state. Furthermore, to offer some insights in the theory of international relations, and clarify specific and relevant areas Viotti and Kauppi's

fifth edition of *International Relations Theory* will be used. The thorough consideration of the following sources will be provided in the next chapter in context of the theoretical framework.

Furthermore, to examine the details, history and underlying forces of the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran two profound works will be used: a report prepared by Andrew Terrill *the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security*, and the dissertation written by Tali Rachel Grumet *New Middle East Cold War: Saudi Arabia and Iran's Rivalry.* Additionally, Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp's *Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order*, Chubin's *Iran's Power in Context*, Ariel Jahner's *Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle for Power and Influence in the Gulf,* Barry Rubin *Iran: the Rise of a Regional Power* all will be citied in this work.

2. Theoretical Framework

The second chapter of the thesis will try to provide theoretical understanding of the ongoing processes in the Middle East. In order to explain Iranian-Saudi rivalry, the study discusses in details the theory formulated by Robert Gilpin in his book and in subsequent articles. Moreover, Kugler and Organski's power transition thesis will be presented. Both theories deal with the problem of rising challenger and dominant state, and how the conflict between them is going to be resolved.

The purpose of the theory is to prove that "the phenomenon in question was indeed to be expected under the circumstances" (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012, p. 5). Moreover, the theory streamlines what could have been just collection of nonrelated or related facts, into coherent and understandable picture (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012). Both theory and hypothesis assist us to

"mak[e] sense of the world around us" (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012, p. 6). As James Rosenau put it, theoretical thinking is necessary "whenever enlarged comprehension is sought" (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012, p. 22). However, no theoretical framework could claim absolute and exclusive right to explain patterns and trends. To quote again Rosenau, what the best scientists could do "is to build theories in which the central tendencies encompass the highest possible degree of probability, with certainties and absolutes being left for ideologues and zealots to expound" (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012, p. 24). Overall, no scientific theory, apart from extremist ideologies, could assert absolute singularity and validity in explaining facts. The purpose of scientist is to choose the theory that fits the case most appropriately, and gives to the mere gathering of the events, contemporary and scientific relevance.

In his book, Robert Gilpin made an effort to understand "the ways in which international systems function and change in the contemporary era" (1981, p. 7). Gilpin offers thorough examination of establishment, development, and change of international systems. Initially, states establish the international system and "create social structures in order to advance particular sets of political, economic, or other types of interests" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 9). However, the international system has one important characteristic: absence of a 'policemen'. The countries within the system operate without higher authority to restrain their actions, enforce the agreements, or punish the violator, or aggressor. This condition is known in the theory of international relations, as an anarchy. According to Viotti and Kauppi, "in international politics […] there is no […] superordinate authority with power to impose order […] for survival, states are left to their own devices in a world in which each state claims to be sovereign, each with a right to be independent or autonomous with respect to one another" (2012, p. 48). Kenneth Waltz described the mechanism how anarchy works:

> *In anarchy there is no automatic harmony. […] A state will use force to attain its goals if, after assessing the prospects for success, it values those goals more than it values the pleasures of peace. Because each state is the final judge of its own cause, any state may at any time use force to implement its policies. Because any state may at any time use force, all states must constantly be ready either to counter force with force or to pay the cost of weakness. The requirements of state*

action are, in this view, imposed by the circumstances in which all states exist (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012, p. 101).

In addition, it should be underscored that the condition of anarchy in the international system is entirely different from the anarchy at the domestic level, where, in most cases, it signifies disorder and instability. In international relations, "anarchy simply refers to the absence of any legitimate authority above states" (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012, p. 56). The chaos is absent, because the system plays the role of its own custodian. Gilpin agrees with neorealist thought that international system by itself puts limitations on state actions. In his opinion, "international system […] provides a set of constraints and opportunities within which individual groups and states seek to advance their interests" (p. 26), and "the distribution of power among states constitutes the principal form of control in every international system" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 29).

Given the fact that states are sovereign in the condition of anarchy, meaning that they are independent to pursue foreign relations, and exercise supreme authority within the recognized territory, they at any given time are facing variety of problems simultaneously, both domestic and international. Traditionally, the realists assume that hierarchy of issues exists, with matters of national security, defense, and diplomacy taking precedence over every other topics. As Viotti and Kauppi put it "realists assume that within the hierarchy of issues facing the state, national or international security usually tops the list" (2012, p. 40). Gilpin shares the vision that "political realists are correct in stating that security is a primary objective"; however, according to him that pursuit of any objective involves sacrifice and trade-offs, whether it be the national security or economic gains (Gilpin, 1981, p. 19).

If states establish the system, they ought to dominate it. Gilpin repeats classic realist assumption that states are primary actors of international relations. He contends, "the state is the principal actor in that the nature of the state and the pattern of relations among states are the most important determinants of the character of international relations at any given moment" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 18). Like Thucydides, Gilpin presumes that a state and the interstate

relations express "underlying and unalterable nature of what is today called international relations" (1988, p. 591).

According to Gilpin, the nature of state (empire, nation-state, city-state) determines shape and structure of international system. The system is characterized with constant interactions of various intensities between actors. The issue of who is benefitting from the system, who rules it, and whose interests are channeled in the system is decided by distribution of power among states, or coalitions of states (Gilpin, 1981). Whether the equilibrium exists between two or more states or group of states (balance of power), or a state wields unquestionable supremacy (hegemony), the "power is checked most effectively by counterbalancing power" according to Robert Jervis (Brooks and Wohlfort 2008, 22).

Based on structure, three types of international system are identified. If a single state controls the system and leads other states, the structure is called imperial or hegemonic. On the other hand, if instead of one, two dominant states exercise rule over the system then bipolar structure exists. In the balance of power structure, three or more states check each other (Gilpin, 1981). According Kugler and Organski balance of power is "a system in which individual nations seek to maximize power and were restrained from aggression because the opponents were just as strong" (1989, p. 176).

Gilpin introduces five assumptions about how international political change occurs on the international system. Initially, the system is stable and balance or equilibrium exists among states. The state of equilibrium is defined as the condition when "the more powerful states in the system are satisfied with the existing territorial, political, and economic arrangements" and "no powerful state (or group) believes that a change in the system would yield additional benefits commensurate with the anticipated costs of bringing about a change in the system" (1981, p. 11). Afterwards, a revisionist state appears that thinks that the change in the system due to "economic, technological, and other developments" is more favorable than maintaining status quo (Gilpin, 1981, p. 9). Furthermore, the states who perceive change as beneficial and advantageous will "seek to alter the system in ways that favor their interests" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 9). Consequently, disequilibrium emerges, since a revisionist state determines that expected

value for change is high, and the cost low. Additionally, a revisionist state starts to actively engage in "territorial, political, and economic expansion" (1981, p. 10). The change in the system will continue, until revisionist state determines that further expansion becomes more costly than maintaining current gains. In these circumstances, the status quo state finds itself in a situation, where "the economic costs of maintaining the status quo […] rise faster than the economic capacity to support the status quo" (1981, p. 11). Finally, the system tilts toward reflecting new distribution of power among states and expressing "the interests of its new dominant members" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 9).

Disequilibrium and instability remain in the system as long as incapacity persists "to adjust to the demands of actors affected by changing political and environmental conditions" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 13). Hypothetically, according to Gilpin, the system could remain stable for indefinite time, considering that "interests and relative powers of the principal states in an international system remained constant over time, or if power relations changed in such a way as to maintain the same relative distribution of power" (1981, p. 13). Furthermore, "unless it is judged to be profitable to one or another state to change the system, the system tends to remain relatively stable" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 51). However, that is not the case, owing to constantly changing domestic and international circumstances among and within the states. Rarely, if ever, a rising challenger, have peacefully succeeded the previous dominant state.

Gilpin considers the main destabilizer of the equilibrium between states to be "differential growth in power of the various states in the system" and subsequent alteration of the balance of power arrangements (1981, p. 13). Among many meanings and definitions of *power*, for Gilpin, the power simply denotes "the military, economic, and technological capabilities of states". He notes that peaceful resolution of crisis in disequilibrium is possible, though, are rare, arguing that "the principal mechanism of change throughout history has been […] hegemonic war (i.e., a war that determines which state or states will be dominant and will govern the system)" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 15). Thucydides was the first scholar who came up with "this fundamental idea - that the uneven growth of power among states is the driving force of international relations", which Gilpin identifies the basis of the theory of hegemonic war - one

of the central ideas of international relations (1988, p. 591). The hegemonic war would occur between declining and rising powers, because imbalances in the system would destabilize status quo (Gilpin, 1988). Organski and Kugler concur stating:

> *The fundamental problem that sets the whole system sliding almost irretrievably toward war is the differences in rates of growth among the great powers and, of particular importance, the differences in rates between the dominant nation and the challenger that permit the latter to overtake former in power. It is this leapfrogging that destabilizes the system (Lebow & Valentino, 2009, p. 390).*

In *the Theory of Hegemonic War*, Gilpin outlined the features of stable and unstable international systems. The stability of a system is based on its capacity to absorb small and gradual changes without "threaten[ing] the vital interests of the dominant states and thereby caus[ing] a war among them" (1988, p. 592). Such international order is symbolized with "an unequivocal hierarchy of power" presided over by "an unchallenged dominant or hegemonic power" (1988, p. 592). On the other hand, "an unstable system is one in which economic, technological, and other changes are eroding the international hierarchy and undermining the position of the hegemonic state" (1988, p. 592). Gilpin argues that hegemonic war is distinct from any other war, since it is caused by significant political, economic, and strategic changes, and it has systemic scale implications (1988).

Initially, the international system is relatively stable, clear distribution of power among states exists, with the hegemonic state, at the top of hierarchy, able to dictate the rules of the interstate relations. Gradually, one of the states starts rising and challenging the existing order, and status quo. The dominant state is not willing to accept or accommodate new rival; ensuing crisis forces the remaining states in the system to take sides, and eventually the situation is resolved with hegemonic war, which establishes new distribution of the power in the system (Gilpin, 1988). As Daniel Drezner underscored: "if hegemon is supplanted by rising power, the likelihood of a great power war spikes" (2011, p. 35). It is not necessary for the threatened hegemon to become the instigator of war; "the theory does not necessarily concern itself with whether the declining or rising state is responsible for the war" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 602).

To achieve certain objectives, a state involves itself in a transformational behavior. Gilpin outlines three main objectives, which states historically tried to achieve. First, the acquisition of territory to further political, economic, and other interest. Second and the most pertinent to our study, objective is to exert influence over activities and behavior of other states. The states engage in various actions such as "the use of threats […] coercion, the formation of alliances, and the creation of exclusive spheres of influence" in order to establish "political environment and rules of the system that will be conducive to the fulfillment of their political, economic, and ideological interests" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 24). The third objective represents an attempt to have a meaningful stake in or to control work world economy (Gilpin, 1981).

Gilpin groups the change into three category. Systems change implies change in the nature of the international systems itself. Systemic change denotes internal change within the system, emergence of a new principal state, and degeneration of an old one. Finally, interaction change involves modifications of the forms of political, economic, and other relations between members of an international system (Gilpin, 1981).

According to Gilpin, the concept of prestige has the same importance as the notion of power. The prestige plays the same role in international politics as authority plays in domestic politics. Gilpin's book relies on the definition of Dahrendorf that Authority/Prestige is the "probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons" (1981, p. 30). Both power and prestige serve one goal: ensuring that weaker states in the system follow the command of a dominant state. Like authority, prestige is not only backed by threat of use of force but it has certain moral foundations. The states follow the lead because they accept the legitimacy of an established order. For Kissinger legitimacy "implies the acceptance of the framework of the international order by all major powers, at least to the extent that no state is so dissatisfied that, like Germany after the Treaty of Versailles, it expresses its dissatisfaction in a revolutionary foreign policy" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 12).

Although both power and prestige are key components of international system, Gilpin draws clear distinction between them. If power represents military, economic and other means of the state "prestige refers primarily to the perceptions of other states with respect to a state's

capacities and its ability and willingness to exercise its power" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 31). Prestige is state's willingness to take assertive measures, when necessary to achieve its objectives, or defend international order (Gilpin, 1981). Once state prestige is acknowledged, it will command obedience without using radical methods. In the words of E. H. Carr "if your strength is recognized, you can generally achieve your aims without having to use it" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 31). Moreover, power determines prestige and not vice versa: "the hierarchy of power among […] states defined and maintained the system and determined the relative prestige of states, their spheres of influence, and their political relations" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 595). The concentration of economic and military power define degree of prestige the country enjoys (Gilpin, 1981).

Gilpin discusses the existence of hierarchy of prestige among states. The stability and tranquility in the international system is corresponded with the period when "prestige hierarchy has been clearly understood and has remained unchallenged" (1981, p. 31). On the other hand, decline of hierarchy of prestige and following uncertainty could lead up to the conflict (Gilpin, 1981). The concept of prestige was important factor in the Peloponnesian War, because "nuanced reading of Thucydides indicates that Spartiates felt threatened by Athens' rising prestige, not its military power, and went to war to protect their identity, not their security" (Lebow & Valentino, 2009, p. 402).

Gilpin tries to explain underlying reasons behind state's desire for change. First of all, any state aims to promote and safeguard own interests. The interests are diverse and encompass all aspects of politics, power, economy, and welfare. Despite the fact that any attempt of change is subjected by state to rational cost-benefit analysis, ultimately the decisions are "highly subjective" and depends on perceptions of the "ruling elites and coalitions in a society" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 51). The elite dissatisfaction could be caused by belief that the society is not getting "their due from the international order" (Kugler & Organski, 1989, p. 173). Never will a state stop to press demands to the international system that it thinks is unjust. As Kissinger explained: "no power will submit to a settlement, however well balanced and however 'secure,' which seems totally to deny its vision of itself" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 52). In many cases, Gilpin argues that neither status quo nor a revisionist state benefit from change but a third party. This

was the case in the Peloponnesian War. The Athenian – Spartan rivalry left "both sides exhausted and thereby open[ed] the way to Macedonian imperialism" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 601).

Besides Gilpin, Organski and Kugler, who formulated power transition theory, diligently researched the change in the international system. The power transition model rejects the notion of anarchy in the international system. It assumes the hierarchical ordering of states in the system. The model considers the distribution of power as determinant of hierarchy. Alike to neorealist ideas, according to power transition model, "actors accept their position in the international order and recognize influence based on differences in the power distribution among nations" (Kugler and Organski 1989, 172). According to Lebow and Valentino:

> *Organski and Kugler attempt[ed] to distinguish themselves from realists by asserting that power transition theory regards the international system as more ordered than anarchic. This is the result of the ability of the dominant power to impose its* preferences on other actors (2009, p. 390).

Unlike traditional realists, the theory discards the separation between foreign and domestic domains, "no major differences [exist] in the rules governing the domestic and international arena" (Kugler & Organski, 1989, p. 172). More exactly, domestic developments are presented as vehicle for the change in the international system, "the overtaking process at the international level is an externality of the domestic transition" (Kugler & Organski, 1989, p. 178). The maximization of net gains, rather than power is presented as main objective of the state.

Furthermore, according to the power transition theory, at the top of the hierarchy of states is a dominant nation, a most powerful country in the system, followed by countries with lesser capabilities: great powers, middle powers, small powers and colonies. The power transition theory emphasizes the role of a power in forming and shaping international order; however, the theory supplants realist tradition with notion of satisfaction – the concept of how content is the state with the distribution of goods in the system. Kugler and Organski note that "degrees, of satisfaction as well as power are critical determinants of peace and conflict" (1989, p. 173). The peace in the system is maintained by dominant nation with the help of smaller

states that are "satisfied with the distribution of benefits and the rules by which it is run" (Kugler & Organski, 1989, p. 173). The stability in the system is achieved when a dominant nation has an overwhelming power advantage over any other country in the system. The peace starts to unsettle when, growing in power, a revisionist country attempts to "seek to establish a new place form themselves in the international order, a place to which they believe their increasing power entitles them" (Kugler & Organski, 1989, p. 174). In sum, the dominant nation is "main architect of the international order" while challenger assumed to be dissatisfied (Kugler & Organski, 1989, p. 186). The dissatisfied challenger is a state that has "grown to full power after the existing international order was fully established and the benefits already allocated" (Lebow & Valentino, 2009, p. 390).

The power transition theory assumes that when a challenger state achieves relative power parity with the dominant nation, the risk of instability increases. The established power will fear that the revisionist state might overtake leading positions in the system. Moreover, the principal state is afraid of increased defiance from the rising power. Finally, the hegemon suspects that the challenger will question entire power structure of the system (Kugler & Organski, 1989). As Lebow and Valentino put it: "the dominant nation and its supporters are generally unwilling to grant the newcomers more than a small part of the advantages they derive from the status quo" (2009, p. 390).

The theoretical framework has provided the clear view on the issue of the interstate relations within the system. The challenger, who grows in power, questions the supremacy of the hegemon. The hegemon is faced with then dilemma: either to forcefully respond thereby retaining the prestige and influence, or attempt to peacefully accommodate revisionist state, and share power. As theoretical review has exemplified, rarely if ever the hegemons are content with latter. To quote Gilpin:

> *The fundamental problem of international relations in the contemporary world is the problem of peaceful adjustment to the consequences of the uneven growth of power among states, just as it was in the past. International society cannot and does not stand still. War and violence remain serious possibilities as the world*

moves from the decay of one international system toward the creation of another (Gilpin, 1981, p. 230).

3. Research of Methodology

After formulating hypothesis and presenting theoretical framework, the hypothesis will be tested through application of theory. The study will mainly rely on "traditional or qualitative approaches" such as "case studies, historical methods, and reasoned argument" (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012, p. 6). The quantitative methods will be used in comparing military strength of respective countries. The research will mainly concentrate on analysis of secondary sources such as historical records, news reports, and official statements. The study emphasizes the necessity of historical analyses, since "by examining the span of the modern history of the Middle East, it is evident that individual events, domestic and foreign policies, and significant moments have built upon one another to shape the current tensions and will continue to shape the future in a notable manner" (Grumet, 2015, p. 28).

The examination of the content of public speeches given by the officials of both countries is especially important for this research. The official statements will provide insights about how leaders of respective countries perceive the competitor, and the role that their country have to play to counterbalance the challenger. I would like to mention that all emphasis within quotations are mine, unless indicated otherwise. Moreover, the research will take a case-study approach. As Odell observed:

> *The disciplined interpretive case study interprets or explains an event by applying a known theory to the new terrain. The more explicit and systematic the use of theoretical concepts, the more powerful the application. Although this method may not test a theory, the case study shows that one or more known theories can be extended to account for a new event. This type of research will interest critics as well as defenders of the theories, even those who care little about the particular event (2001, p. 163).*

In order to exemplify rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and demonstrate their "willingness to directly become engaged in civil conflicts within the region as a means to foster their influence" (Grumet, 2015, p. 105), recent developments in Qatar, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria will be analyzed, and "case-specific historical evidence" will be brought to audience (Lebow & Valentino, 2009, p. 390).

The research will be based on the state and international levels of analysis. The state level analysis deals with the nature of state and domestic society, while international level is concerned with relations between states and distribution of power among them (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012). The thesis discusses domestic arrangements of states and their ideological underpinnings. At the same time, the research examines power distribution of the states in the region. Hence, both levels of analysis are utilized.

Both Gilpin, and Kugler/Organski formulated their theory on international scale. One of the challenges of this study will be to apply the global theories to regional level and context. As Morten Valbjørn wrote in his review "applying parsimonious IR theory to the Middle East, remind[s] us of the usefulness of IR theory in relation to the Middle East, and of how, in turn, developments in this region can be of interest to IR debates" (2003/2004, p. 125).

Finally, the chapter on methodology should address the issue of territoriality: what is meant under the word 'region'? Terrill wrote: "Saudi Arabia and Iran have viewed themselves as serious rivals for influence in the Middle East, particularly the Gulf area" (2011, p. 1). Grumet added, "traditionally, the most important arena of conflict between rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran has been the Gulf" (2015, p. 102). Therefore, the research will concentrate simultaneously on the Middle East, with significant attention given to the Gulf, because "the most important arena of Saudi-Iranian conflict traditionally has been the Gulf, although this competition has recently expanded to include" other Middle Eastern countries (Terrill, 2011, p. 14). Even the naming of 'the Gulf' shows the extent of Iranian-Arab rivalry: "Arab nationalists reject the designation "Persian Gulf," preferring to call that body of water that adjoins the world's richest oil reserves the "Arab Gulf"" (Rubin, 2006, p. 143).

4. The Operationalization of Variables

In order to carry out the operationalization of variables, the study has to delve into the history of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The wide-ranging historical overview on the one hand will provide evidence for Iranian rise; on the other hand, will exemplify the confrontation between two nations. As Grumet stated, "history is dynamic. It is a process that is constantly evolving and it reveals a story of seemingly unconnected events that are in fact crucial to understanding the variety of perspectives and beliefs defended by the nations, tribes and ethnicities formed by these historical narratives" (2015, p. 28).

Furthermore, the link will be shown how Iranian growth fuels the tensions in the region. Gilpin remarked: "whether or not a state will seek to change the international system depends ultimately on the nature of the state and the society it represents" (1981, p. 54). Because the ideology has been one of the main drivers of the nations' foreign policy, the examination of the ideological basis of the respective states deems to be appropriate. Since "Iran and Saudi Arabia have not confronted each other militarily, but rather have divided the region into two armed camps on the basis of political ideology" (Grumet, 2015, p. 1).

It will be demonstrated that Iran is not satisfied with existing power arrangements in the region, and attempts to reshape regional order .On the other hand, Saudi Arabia tries to halt Iranian ambitions. As Gilpin said, if a country cannot realize its gains "in the framework of the existing system, [then] states (or rather the domestic coalitions they represent) may believe that their interests can be served only by more sweeping and more profound changes in the

international system" (1981, p. 46). The move for change will always cause disturbance in the system and countermeasures from status quo nations, since "other states will believe that the meeting of such demands will jeopardize what they regard as their own vital interests" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 46).

Additionally, it will be demonstrated that Saudi [counter]interventions in the neighboring states serves as tool for Iranian deterrence. Lebow and Valentino argue that "it usually makes more sense for leading powers to attack targets of opportunity (i.e. lesser and declining powers) as a means of augmenting their power. They may then be in a stronger position to deter or buy off a challenger" (2009, p. 401).

4.1 The History of Relations Prior 1979

The affairs between Iran and Saudi Arabia were not always tense, but remained quite warm throughout the significant period of XX century. Prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, despite Shia-Sunni split, two nations enjoyed relatively stable and open relations. Under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Saudi monarchs, Saud, and then Faisal, the connections were strengthened to protect stability of respective regimes, and foster economic cooperation (Jahner, 2012). The diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran was established in 1928, but it was only in 1966, when King Faisal visited Iran, and Mohammad Reza Shah reciprocated visitation in 1968 (Heydarian, 2010).

During 1960s and 70s, "the two pro-Western monarchs coordinated their policies in the face of the mutually sensed threat from Abdul Nasser's Egypt to the Arabian peninsula and Persian Gulf" (Chubin & Tripp, 1996, p. 9). They combined "the common interest in fighting socialist and radical-nationalist influences in the Gulf region, in ensuring a stable flow of oil and gas, and increasing wealth through exports" (Fürtig, 2007, p. 628). Moreover, contrary to the current religious struggle between two countries, neither confessional, nor ethic distinctions were emphasized during that time; those "linguistic, cultural, and religious differences were overcome by more pressing domestic and international issues that joined the two dynasties together in a friendly and harmonious relationship" (Jahner, 2012, p. 39). David Long observed

the primacy of political rather sectarian struggle in the Gulf: "prior to the [Iranian] revolution, the primary political confrontation in the Gulf was neither Sunni-Shii nor Arab- Persian but conservative-radical" (Fürtig, 2007, p. 628). Interestingly, even "Shah's vision of Iran's state identity to be modern, secular and […] Westernized did not threaten Saudi interests" (Grumet, 2015, p. 48). In 1970's Iran and Saudi Arabia represented "two solid pillars" of the region (Fürtig, 2007, p. 628). Under "Nixon Doctrine" both countries were armed, and designated as policemen of the Gulf, in order to maintain stability in the region, and sustain conservative, pro-Western policies (Grumet, 2015). Already in exile, recalling this period, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi wrote:

> *I had traveled on several occasions to Saudi Arabia, a country whose integrity and independence are sacred for all Muslims. Twice I had the great joy of making the supreme pilgrimage. As a faithful Muslim and Defender of the Faith, I hope that Saudi Arabia will always remain the guardian of these holy places, Mecca and Medina, where millions of pilgrims travel every year on the path to God (Al Toraifi, 2012, p. 112).*

4.2 The Iranian Revolution

The situation has dramatically changed after the overthrow of Shah. The Iranian revolution marked "rare occasion where [Shia] Islamists have successfully taken over a constituted political authority" (Grumet, 2015, p. 53). The Islamic revolution ended the period of collaboration and shared interests between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Jahner, 2012), and opened an era of "a bitter rivalry" (Grumet, 2015, p. 1). After 1979, "Saudi Arabia and Iran's enmity has grown and has resulted in the dissolution of relations between these two states as well as the establishment of two competing entities" (Grumet, 2015, p. 50). The deposal of the Shah caused "drastic shift in Iranian foreign policy that threatened al-Saud legitimacy in addition to challenging the status quo of monarchical rule in other countries in the region" (Jahner, 2012, p. 39). The Kingdom considered Ayatollah Khomeini as "genuine threat to the [dynasty], due to his claims of a divine right to rule" (Okruhlik, 2003, p. 115). Moreover, Saudi Arabia viewed "Tehran as a threat to the entire region and feared the export of revolution" (Okruhlik, 2003, p. 115).

In addition, Iranian behavior did not provide any assurances to the contrary. The newly promulgated republic did exactly what Saudis were afraid: it started to interfere in domestic affairs of bordering states and disrupt regional stability. Chubin and Tripp noticed: "in the first decade after the revolution Iran left a trail of devastation in its regional relations, littered with spontaneous utterances and unfettered intervention in neighboring states, upsetting in a few months the confidence that had taken years of diplomacy to build" (1996, p. 9). Saudi Arabia was one the main objects of Iranian attention: "Iran targeted Saudi Arabia as a focal point to spread revolution, constantly voicing their contempt of the Saudi government and encouraging young followers and other Shi'ites to demonstrate their support of the true Islamic regime, Iran" (Grumet, 2015, p. 56). Writing about early stages of Iran's foreign policy after the revolution, Grumet emphasized:

> *Ayatollah Khomeini's formation of the first Islamic Republic and his popularization of Islamic fundamentalism posed a substantial challenge to Sunni sensibilities, thereby directly affecting the Saudi Kingdom. Khomeini made it clear that his ambitions extended beyond Iran and that he wanted to be accepted as the leader of the Muslim world. [...] He also aimed to transpose the Iranian Revolution as an Islamic Revolution, so that Sunnis would accept his authority* (2015, p. 54).

Saudi Arabia struck back. The kingdom started "counter-campaign denounce[ing] the insufficiencies of the revolutionary regime in Iran and described it ultimately as 'non-Islamic'" (Fürtig, 2007, p. 629). Then Crown Prince, and afterwards King of Saudi Arabia, Fahd, declared that Iranian revolution was "contrary to the interests of Islam, the entire Muslim world, and the stability of Middle East" (Okruhlik, 2003, p. 115). Moreover, the Defense Minister of Saudi Arabia, Sultan, blamed revolution on "international communism", warning that Iran might follow Afghan path, and move to the Soviet orbit (Okruhlik, 2003).

Together with other Arab states in Gulf, Saudi Arabia "felt threatened by Iran's revolutionary zeal that seemingly had a hegemonic trajectory" (Heydarian, 2010). As publication from Council on Foreign Relations notes: "the transformation of Iran into an overtly Shia power after the Islamic revolution induced Saudi Arabia to accelerate the

propagation of Wahhabism, as both countries revived a centuries-old sectarian rivalry over the true interpretation of Islam" (The Sunni-Shia Divide, 2014). Wehrey at al. agreed that sectarianism as tool of domestic and foreign policy was predominantly used by Saudis, rather Iranians (2009).

Thus, after the Islamic Revolution, Saudi Arabia regards Iran as international pariah, which represents considerable threat to stability and permanence of the al-Saud regime. Besides, Iran is also perceived as destabilizer of the Gulf, and opponent of Saudi leadership in the Middle East, and particularly in the Gulf. In terms of power transition theory, the status quo state is threatened by challenger nation that wants to disrupt existing order in the region.

4.3 The Regional Dynamics

Ariel Jahner outlines three main factors that cause Saudi-Iranian rivalry: sectarian divisions, disagreement of OPEC policies, and the dispute about who will dominate the Gulf (2012). In the subsequent sections, I will describe regional interactions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, followed by discussion about their ideological disagreements.

As was mentioned above, since 1979, fierce rivalry takes place between two countries. However, it is interesting to overview regional power relations. What is the standing of each country in the region? According to Lebow and Valentio classification, the dominant power is "a state that is so much more powerful than others that it has the capability to impose order on the system in the form of rules governing interstate trade and the conduct of war and peace" (2009, p. 392). However, even the leading states, which "are recognized as leaders" have their limitations, as "Organski and Kugler acknowledge that dominance is never absolute, but assert it is sufficient to impose a hierarchical order" (Lebow & Valentino, 2009, p. 392).

Gilpin explained: "the struggle between [...] contenders for preeminence and their accumulating alliances leads to a bipolarization of the system" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 596). Divisions and groupings between states is characteristic to the Middle East. The Saudi Arabia dominates the "Sunni bloc" (Cambanis, 2016, p. 12), with "ascrib[ing] itself the role of a 'regional

coordinator' and an intra-Arab consensus builder through a proactive diplomacy" (Kamrava, 2012, p. 98). To apply Gilpin's definition: "a single powerful state controls or dominates the lesser states in the system" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 29). Sparta enjoyed similar standing in the Ancient Greece. According to Lebow and Valentino: "Spartan identity was sustained by hegemony in Greece, with hegemony (he̅gemonia) being an honorific title conferred on a polis by other city states for its accomplishments on behalf of the community as a whole" (2009, p. 402). Grumet offers us political classification of two regional alliances: Iran is representing 'the revolutionary bloc', while Saudi Arabia heads 'the status quo bloc' (2015).

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia aims to preserve "the status quo in the Gulf region"; for this goal it "works closely with the smaller Gulf Arab monarchies" even "sometimes assuming the role of a well-intentioned, if somewhat overbearing, 'older brother'" (Terrill, 2011, p. 1). Even without exercising absolute hegemony, Saudi Arabia is clearly a leading state of the Gulf and greater Middle East, with ability to influence other countries actions.

One sequence of events, clearly exemplifies the prominent standing that the Saudi Arabia enjoys in Sunni Muslim community, not only in the Gulf Region. On January 2, 2016, Saudi Arabia executed Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr along with 46 other people. Angry Iranian crowed attacked and stormed Saudi embassy in Tehran (Cambanis, 2016). On January 3, 2016, Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic relations with Iran. The move symbolized the tipping point of rising tensions between the Kingdom and the Islamic Republic. Following the Saudi example, the Bahrain also cut diplomatic relations with Iran, and Kuwait, UAE and Qatar recalled their ambassadors. Even non-Gulf countries like Sudan and Djibouti broke diplomatic ties with Iran (Al Jazeera, 2016). Despite the fact that some Gulf States (e.g. Oman) enjoy relatively friendly relations with Iran, there is a common perception in the Gulf of Iran as "revolutionary Shia giant to the north with its seemingly endless supply of radical, undiplomatic leaders" (Kamrava, 2012, p. 101).

Antithesis to Saudi Arabia, Iran consistently tries to challenge Saudi leadership in Gulf. Hinnebusch argues that by "contesting the validity of the Saudi's 'American Islam'" Iran represents "both a military and ideological threat" to Saudi Kingdom (2003, p. 131). According

to Grumet, "Iran seeks to mobilize with local Arab Shi'ite communities as a means to leverage pressure on the Gulf governments on issues important to Iran" (2015, p. 102). Terrill concurred: "Tehran also seeks to establish some degree of influence with local Arab Shi'ite communities in order to pressure the Gulf Arab governments on issues of particular importance to Tehran" (Terrill, 2011). However, "in the struggle for Gulf influence, Saudi Arabia has consistently maintained a vastly higher level of political clout with local states than Iran" (2011, p. 14). Wehrey et al. underscored the idea that Saudi Arabia is an established state while Iran is rising challenger:

> *Saudi Arabia and Iran are divided by long-standing structural tensions. Each has aspirations for Islamic leadership, and each possesses different visions of regional order. Whereas Tehran regards Riyadh as America's proxy and a buffer against Iran's rightful primacy in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia worries about Iran's asymmetric power and regional ambitions, especially its expanding influence in post-Saddam Iraq and its alleged pursuit of a nuclear weapon. A particular concern in Riyadh is Iran's ability to challenge the legitimacy of the al-Saud before regional and domestic audiences by upstaging them on pan-Arab issues such as Palestine (2009, p. ix).*

The rebellious Iran with its "militant interpretation of Islamic obligation", "revolutionary foreign policy", and plans to spread the revolt to the neighborhood is growing source of anxiousness to Saudi Arabia (Chubin & Tripp, 1996, pp. 49-50). Shahram Chubin described how Iranian foreign policy plays out in the Middle East:

> *In the regional context this translates into calls for the expulsion of the Western presence and support for the Palestinian and other 'resistance' forces. Iran's challenge to the regional order is not military, but political: it is about exerting influence, appealing to the masses or the 'street', demonstrating that Iran can confront injustice, presenting a viable model of 'resistance', and 'framing the regional agenda' (2009, p. 166).*

Iran attempts to project its regional influence by supporting various pro-Iranian groups and Shia communities in the several Middle Eastern countries: Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, Assad regime in Syria, Houthi rebels in Yemen, Shias in Bahrain and Iraq. As Khamenei's foreign adviser, Ali Akbar Velayati, stated: "to support Palestine is to support Iran […] to

support Lebanon is to support Iran […] to support Iraq is to support Iran" (Chubin, 2009, p. 171). Even in Saudi Arabia "Iran has been vocal about its support for disenfranchised Shia minorities, who are concentrated in the world's most oil-rich region of Dammam" (Heydarian, 2010).

It should be stressed that Iran is not a classic imperial power; rather "it is a revisionist state in terms of status, not territory" (Chubin, 2009, p. 166). Rubin observed:

> *While Iran might not be a "crazy state", it is also not a normal one guided by pragmatic ideology, limited aims, and realpolitik. The Iranian ruling establishment certainly shows signs of caution at times and an ability to read the balance of power, but this is a slender reed on which to base the future of the Middle East, much less of the world (2006, p. 150).*

Iran tries to present itself as leader of Shias and the defender of the "deprived masses in the world of Islam and the wronged people who have been trampled upon by tyranny" (Chubin, 2009, p. 166). The Jordanian King Abdullah II called Iranian expansionism, stretching from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia, "Shia Crescent" (The Economist, 2015). Furthermore, former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice eloquently summarized Iranian behavior:

> *The Iranian regime pursues its disruptive policies both through state instruments, such as the Revolutionary Guards and the al Quds force, and through nonstate proxies that extend Iranian power, such as elements of the Mahdi Army in Iraq, Hamas in Gaza, and Hezbollah in Lebanon and around the world. The Iranian regime seeks to subvert states and extend its influence throughout the Persian Gulf region and the broader Middle East. It threatens the state of Israel with extinction and holds implacable hostility toward the United States. And it is destabilizing Iraq (2008).*

Kugler and Organski commented that "regardless of their power relationship, two nations satisfied with the status quo in the international order have no incentive to challenge each other and, hence, no need to deter each other" (1989, p. 186). This is clearly not the case with Saudi Arabia, since the kingdom is committed to curb Iranian expansionism and prevent creation of Shia bloc as a political reality in the Middle East, at any price. Moreover, "Al Saud are required to respond to the sectarian nature of the ideological challenge posed by Iran" (Mabon, 2012, p. 93). The kingdom cannot retreat or abandon its positions, because as Gilpin

remarked: "in a diplomatic conflict the country which yields is likely to suffer in prestige because the fact of yielding is taken by the rest of the world to be evidence of conscious weakness" (1981, p. 32).

To conclude, two regional groups face off in the Middle East. The Sunni or status quo block, headed by Saudi Arabia aims to preserve its dominance, and prevent any challenger form becoming major political force in the region. The Shia Crescent or revolutionary block with Iranian leadership tries to stir up the resistance, and undermine existing regional order. As Andrew Terrill highlighted:

> *While both nations define themselves as Islamic, the differences between their foreign policies could hardly be more dramatic. In most respects, Saudi Arabia is a regional status quo power, while Iran often seeks revolutionary change throughout the Gulf area and the wider Middle East with varying degrees of intensity (2011, p. ix).*

4.4 Ideological Differences

The ideology and ideas play prominent role in this conflict. It is worth recalling that the Peloponnesian War was "an ideological war" where Athens and Sparta fought "largely over two different ways of life, based on two conflicting and irreconcilable political philosophies. The austere communistic totalitarianism of Sparta competed with free democratic ideal of Athens" (Dabney, 1972, p. 25). Gilpin mentioned, "the position of the dominant power may be supported by ideological, religious, or other values common to a set of states" (1981, p. 34). Besides, he emphasized the importance of ideology and religious objectives in conduct of foreign policy: "in the early modern era, religious objectives weighed heavily in the foreign policy of western European states. Following the French Revolution, the political ideologies of liberalism and conservatism became important determinants of foreign policy" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 22).

Since the Islamic revolution, Saudi Arabia and Iran became the main ideological and political rivalries. Their relations are marked by "the ideological 'Cold War'" (Wehrey, et al.,

2009, p. x). This conflict was "often fueled by significant ideological and geopolitical differences" exacerbated by regional developments" (Terrill, 2011, p. 1).

The respective countries have diametrically opposed views on how a Muslim nation should be ruled, and to whom the political power should belong. The countries are further divided by political ideologies, and the forms of governance. Iran is a clerical republic, while Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy. Not only is the Kingdom an absolute monarchy, but it is "opposed to Arab democracy or any democratic reform of the existing monarchical systems" (Terrill, 2011, p. iv). The Saudi Arabian government "rests on a careful symbiosis with the clerical establishment, but accords ultimate authority to the al-Saud dynasty based on their claim to custodianship of the Islamic holy sites in Mecca and Medina and their genealogical ties to the founder of the Kingdom, Ibn Saud" (Wehrey, et al., 2009, p. 3).

Iran tries to delegitimize Saudi Arabia by attacking main tenants of Saudi rule: many times the Republic has questioned the legitimacy of al-Saud custodianship of the holy sites (Okruhlik, 2003). Additionally, Iran depicts Kingdom as an illegitimate Western tool to control the region. Khomeini considered al-Saud monarchy "as a mere extension of American interference and aimed to overthrow what he viewed to be a corrupt and unpopular dictatorship, using the same methods that he used to successfully overthrow the Iranian Shah" (Grumet, 2015, p. 55). Moreover, "Iran's Khomeinist ideology is vehemently anti-monarchical, formalizes clerical authority in politics and [...] trumpets an explicitly populist line" (Wehrey, et al., 2009, p. 3).

According to Ayatollah Khomeini's "political theory of the *velayat al-faqih* – the government of the Supreme Jurist [...] which roughly parallels the divine right of (religious) kings [...] a cleric should rule as a regent for ninth-century Imam, Mohammad al-Mahdi, who Shias believe remains alive but in occultation pending the Day of Judgement. The theory [is] the cornerstone of the Islamic Republic's constitution" (Mansfield, 2013, p. 483). By declaring the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini "propagated the notion that a monarchy was basically non-Islamic and that a republic was the only form of state adequate to Islam" (Fürtig, 2007, p. 629).

Furthermore, "ideological regimes can often emerge as bitter rivals […] viciously denounce[ing] each other for failing to understand and implement the correct path (Terrill, 2011, p. 10). Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in some sort of 'religious competition' "over Islamic legitimacy": as to which of them follows more genuine and accurate interpretation of Islam, at the same time "both regimes claiming religious leadership" (Okruhlik, 2003, p. 115).

Iran claims to have moral high ground in faith: "the Iranian leadership contrasts its own caring, 'striving', activist, self-reliant Islam with that of Saudi Arabia, depicted as conservative, selfish and dependent - one is independent, the other takes orders; one is liberated, the other servile" (Chubin & Tripp, 1996, p. 48). Likewise, Wahhabism denies Shias "as a legitimate Islamic community" (Al-Rasheed, 2011, p. 513), and some of the Wahhabi followers consider Shia Islam to be "a Jewish heresy" (Mansfield, 2013, p. 455). Even "al-Qaida's Abu Musab al-Zarqawi openly called for a jihad against Shi'as [in 2005], in effect denying that they were Muslims at all" (Rubin, 2006, p. 146). In sum, both countries are Islamic theocracies with the difference: in Saudi Arabia, the king rules in the name of God, and in Iran – religious cleric.

The rivalry for hegemony between Saudi Arabia and Iran is not confined only to the religious antagonism, but "exacerbated" by it (Chubin & Tripp, 1996, p. 64). Like between Athens and Sparta, the confrontation encompasses all aspects of "political, economic and ideological struggle" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 601). At the core of disagreement is strive "to shape the regional balance of power, not sectarian division, which in reality are just utilized" for political purposes (Jahner, 2012, p. 44). Saudi Arabia does not identify Iran "primarily as a Shia threat – on the contrary, Iran is mostly seen as a rival for political power in the region" (Chubin, 2009, p. 169). Wehrey et al. indicated that the religious divisions "certainly factors into the calculus of the leadership"; however, "is either encouraged or downplayed as a tool in larger game of geopolitical maneuvering" (2009, p. xi).

4.5 How Saudi Arabia sees Iran?

The power transition theory emphasizes significant role that perception and conviction play in determining state action and responses. Lebow and Valentino noticed, "dominant powers must **believe** that a rising challenger threatens not only their standing in the system but their security and material interests" (2009, p. 400). Discussing perception, it is worth quoting Viotti and Kauppi's analysis of Thucydides in full length:

> *Thus, according to Thucydides, the real or underlying cause of the war was fear associated with a shift in the balance of power—a systems-level explanation. Sparta was afraid of losing its preeminent role in the Hellenic world and therefore took countermeasures to build up its military strength and enlist the support of allies. Athens responded in kind. In the ensuing analysis, the situations, events, and policies Thucydides described lend themselves to comparison with such familiar notions as arms races, deterrence, balance of power, alliances, diplomacy, strategy, concern for honor, and* **perceptions** *of strengths and weaknesses (2012, p. 43).*

The analysis of the statements made by Saudi high officials facilitates reconstruction and demonstration of the Saudi assessment of Iran. The Saudi perception of Iranian politics was clearly emphasized by Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, when he rhetorically asked, "whether [Iran] is a nation state or a revolution?" (Almashabi, 2016). Furthermore, after the execution of Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, he asserted in the New York Times, "the Iranian government's behavior has been consistent since the 1979 revolution. The constitution that Iran adopted states the objective of exporting the revolution" (Al-Jubeir, 2016). On May 20, 2017, during the press conference with U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, al-Jubeir when asked about Iran, answered:

> *From our perspective, we judge Iran by its actions, not by its words. The Iranians have in the past said some things and done something else. They want to have better relations with us, but then they attack our embassies and assassinate our diplomats. They plant terrorist cells in my country and in countries allied to us. They supply militias that want to destabilize countries, like Hizballah and like the Houthis and others in Syria, with weapons. They intervene and meddle in the affairs of Arab countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. They support terrorism. They created the world's foremost terrorist organization, Hizballah. They provide comfort and support for al-Qaida with many of the al-Qaida leaders*

living in Iran for now more than 15 years. They are – they have a relationship with the Taliban that destabilizes Afghanistan.

*And so when Iran does all of these things, when they execute terrorist attacks in my country – in 1996, Khobar Towers bombings, where the Iranian military attache in Bahrain, Brigadier General Sharif, he was the control officer, where the heads of the plot escaped and fled to Iran and have been living in Iran ever since – this is not the behavior of good neighborliness, and this is not the behavior of a country that wants others to treat it with respect. **This is the behavior of a state sponsor of terrorism** who deservedly is on the list of state sponsors of terrorism and who deservedly is sanctioned by the international community for this behavior.*

*So if Iran wants to be a **normal** country and wants others to treat it like a normal country, it has to act in accord with international law and the values and the morals of the international system that have existed for centuries. We welcome an Iran that's open to the world. We welcome an Iran that lives at peace with its neighbors. We welcome an Iran that doesn't interfere in the affairs of other countries. But this is not the Iran we see (U.S. Department of State, 2017).*

From above stated, it is apparent that for the Foreign Minister Iran does not fit the description of a normal country. Saudi top diplomat considers Iran as a revolutionary destabilizer state that supports terrorism. Al-Jubeir is not alone in deeming Iran as extremist country, with aims to subvert Saudi Arabia. Commenting on possibility of having a dialogue with Iran, Deputy Crown Prince and the Minister of Defense Mohammad bin Salman[1] stated:

*How do you communicate with someone or a regime that's completely convinced that its system is based on an **extremist ideology** that relies on texts in its constitution and in Khomeini's legacy and that stipulates that it must control Muslims in the Islamic world and spread the Twelver Jaafari sect in the Islamic world so Imam Mahdi comes. How do I convince these of anything? What interests are there between me and them? How do I communicate with them? When there's a problem between me and another state, we begin by solving it. For example, if there's an economic problem, we communicate and I see what you want and you see what I want and we understand how to address the problem. If, for example, it is a political problem, like the case is with Russia and how we communicate regarding Syria, we discuss what their interests are and*

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[1] On June 21, 2017 Mohammad bin Salman has been appointed as the new Crown Prince.

what my interests are. How do we communicate on Yemen? We discuss interests. But with Iran, how do we communicate? **Their logic is based on the notion that Imam Mahdi will come and that they must prepare the fertile environment for his arrival and they must control the Muslim world.** *They deprived their own people of development for more than 30 years and put them through starvation. The people have bad infrastructure because the regime only wants to achieve this aim related to Imam Mahdi. The regime will not change its mindset overnight; otherwise, its legitimacy inside Iran will come to an end.* **The mutual points, which we can agree on with this regime, are almost non-existent.** *This regime was tested during more than one phase, like during the time of Rafsanjani and everything turned out to be mere charades. The* **strategy of expansion** *was adopted after the Khomeini revolution happened. When the world got angry, they brought a peaceful leader and at the time it was Rafsanjani. They did that to gain the trust of the world and our trust. They gained our trust. After that they got to another phase of providing a good environment, an extremist leader was assigned so the expansion resumes. This is what we saw during the reign of Ahmedinejad and we saw how they expanded in Iraq, Syria and other areas. Then they'd assign another leader to maintain the gains and satisfy the rest of the world. Then they'd again assign an extremist leader to resume expansion. This will not happen. This is over. A believer is not bitten from the same hole twice. We were bitten once. We will not be bitten again. We know we are a major target for the Iranian regime. Reaching the Muslims' qibla is a major aim for the Iranian regime.* **We will not wait until the battle is in Saudi Arabia but we will work so the battle is there in Iran and not in Saudi Arabia** *(Al Arabiya English, 2017).*

For Mohammad bin Salman all possibilities of negotiation and cooperation with Iran are exhausted. To him, the Iranian expansionism has to be met with force, and the longer Saudi Arabia waits the greater the chance that situation will be worse for the Kingdom. Addtionally, speaking at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit in the presence of the American President, King Salman of Saudi Arabia declared:

The Iranian regime has been the spearhead of global terrorism since the Khomeini revolution until now. We have been in this country for 300 years, and have known no terrorism or extremism until Khomeini revolution began in 1979. Iran has turned down all good neighborliness initiatives offered by our nations

> with good will. It has responded with expansionist aspirations, criminal practices,
> and interference in the internal affairs of other countries. Thus violating the
> principles of international law, good neighborliness, mutual respect, and
> coexistence (Zatat, 2017).

To summarize the analysis, the Saudi governing elite perceives Iran as religious challenger, aggressor state, and the sponsor of terrorism with the aims to destabilize Gulf and impinge upon Saudi sovereignty. In addition, for Saudis no reconciliation with Iran could be anticipated, as long as Iran continues the policy of the export of revolution. The Kingdom has abandoned the policy of temporary reconciliations with Iran, as infective that could only strengthen the Islamic republic.

4.6 Resemblance to the Peloponnesian War

As was mentioned in the Introduction, the noticeable similarities exist between current relationships between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the situation in the Ancient Greece. With Saudi Arabia having more in common with Sparta, and Iran – with Athens. Sparta was an established leader in the Greek city-system, while Athens represented rising challenger.

The causes of the Peloponnesian War trace its roots into profound ideological differences between Athens and Sparta. Sparta was the conservative, slaveholding, continental empire, with dominant position among Greek city-state system. On the other side, Athens started to emerge as democratic, commercial and naval power with expansionist ambitions (Gilpin, 1988). The two powers represented different models of development and governance in the Greek world, "ideological disputes, that is, conflicting views over the organization of domestic societies, were also at the heart of the struggle; democratic Athens and aristocratic Sparta sought to reorder other societies in terms of their own political values and socioeconomic systems" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 601).

With the rising confrontation, the minor Greek city-states started to group into two major coalitions. As Thucydides described, "at the end of the one stood Athens, at the head of the other Lacedaemon, one the first naval, the other the first military power in Hellas".

Ultimately, "in order to prevent the dynamic and expanding Athenians from overturning the international balance of power and displacing them as the hegemonic state, the Spartans eventually delivered an ultimatum that forced Athens to declare war" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 599). In the end, after 27 years of fighting, Athens was defeated by Sparta.

4.7 Relations after 1979

4.7.1 Iraq

Over 35 years Saudi Arabia pursues policy of containing Iran's efforts for regional domination, and attempts to challenge regional order. The first opportunity was the Iran-Iraq war. According to Rubin: "deciding not to wait until Iran was able to launch an Islamist revolution in his country, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980 in what was partly a preemptive strike and partly an imperialistic aggression" (2006, p. 143). The Saudi Kingdom supported Saddam Hussein, and provided $40 billion loan to Iraq (Jahner, 2012), because "Iraq [represented] the only credible local military deterrent to Iranian ambitions" (Chubin & Tripp, 1996, p. 10).

According to power transition theory "alliances [are] stable and reliable instruments created to support-the international order that cannot be easily altered in the short run" (Kugler & Organski, 1989, p. 173). Consequently, to fortify anti-Iranian regional alliance, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar established the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. As GCC Secretary-General Abdullah Bishara stated in 1982: "Iran's quest for supremacy in the Gulf was the primary threat to stability of the GCC" (Okruhlik, 2003, p. 116). The GCC has evolved "into a useful instrument for advancing its members' conservative approach to regional security" (Terrill, 2011, p. 14). However, in contrast, Iran regarded the GCC as a Saudi tool to project domination over the gulf region (Chubin & Tripp, 1996).

During Iran-Iraq War, Iran was "openly belligerent" to Saudi Arabia, even labeling the monarchy as "un-Islamic" (Okruhlik, 2003, p. 116). In response, Saudis increased their oil

output in 1985-1986, causing decrease on oil prices, and reducing significantly Iranian revenue (Jahner, 2012). In general, Saudi Arabia can accept more market flexibility and "long-term view of the global oil market" while "Iran is compelled by its smaller oil reserves and larger population to focus on high prices in the short term" (Wehrey, et al., 2009, p. x). In 1988, the countries cut their diplomatic relations for the first time in response to Saudi security forces violent suppression of protests of Iranian pilgrims in Mecca by killing 275, and wounding 303 (Jahner, 2012).

Saddam's invasion of Kuwait completely changed the regional dynamics. It started period of reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, since "two once again united against common enemy" (Jahner, 2012, p. 42). After Iran-Iraq War, Iran had strong resentment towards Iraq, and Saudis realized that Iraq was more dangerous than Iran (Jahner, 2012). The diplomatic relations were restored in 1991. The normalization continued thought 90's, especially after election of relatively moderate president Rafsanjani. In 1997, GCC welcomed "the Iranian Government's intention to open a new page in its relations with the GCC member states" (Jahner, 2012, p. 43). In 1998, for the first time since the revolution, Iranian president Khatami visited the Kingdom (Okruhlik, 2003, p. 118).

As it was explained earlier in the theoretical chapter, the system puts limitation on the state behavior. The Saudi – Iranian rapprochement was brief and ended suddenly "due to changing events in the region" (Jahner, 2012, p. 43). The removal of Saddam Hussein, and effective elimination of Iraq from regional power politics, opened up the new phase of rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Heydarian, 2010). The United States effectively neutralized Iran's two major enemies: Taliban from the East and Baathist Iraq from the West (Sick, 2011). This action once again changed power dynamics in the Gulf, spoiling Iranian Saudi relations once again (Jahner, 2012).

The triangular system of power, where Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia were balancing and counterbalancing each other, got disrupted (Fürtig, 2007), "flaming extremist tendencies that heightened sectarian divisions not only between the West and the East but also between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims" (Jahner, 2012, p. 43). By neutralizing Saddam's regime, "the United States

eliminated Iraq as an effective regional buffer vis-à-vis Iran, whose influence over its neighbor immediately increased" (Chubin, 2009, p. 168). The changes affected "the strategic landscape of the Middle East, radically shifting the regional balance of power" (Wehrey, et al., 2009, p. ix). As a consequence, "Iran's meteoric rise in the last decade has reinforced Arab fears of a 'Pax Persiana' in the region" (Heydarian, 2010).

Not only power dynamics altered in the region, but also, drastic changes occurred within Iraq. The overthrow of governing Sunni elite by US "overturned four centuries of Sunni dominance of Shias" (Mansfield, 2013, p. 440). The political elevation of Shias increased Iran's influence over the region. The "instrumentaliz[ation]" of the Iraqi Shias became "the best tactics for achieving" the objective of turning the country into "the major native regional power in the Gulf" (Fürtig, 2007, p. 634).

4.7.2 The Arab Spring

The Iraqi War was followed by another major political predicament, the Arab Spring, which represented substantial challenge to the entire region. For the monarchy, which was always emphasizing "regime security in both domestic and foreign policy pursuits" (Kamrava, 2012, p. 97), observing how long-standing authoritarian governments, were falling one after another, was alarming and disturbing. According to Jahner: "these revolutions represent[ed] an enormous threat to the al-Saud family, which fear[ed] the spread of political protestors with the goal of regime change to their own kingdom" (2012, p. 45). As Terrill underlined: "the Saudi leadership is uncomfortable with the idea of expanding regional democracy, and often looks with concern on the possibility that Arab monarchies or other conservative states will be replaced by radical, liberal, or populist governments" (2011, p. 2).

The wave of popular protests unseated the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Tunisian leader Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, followed by collapse of Qaddafi's Libya, and unrests in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. At the outset of the Egyptian revolution, Saudi King Abdullah condemned the uprising calling the protests "malicious upheaval and *fitnah* (creating discord

and chaos within the Islamic community)" (Terrill, 2011, p. 11). The region has not witnessed such tumultuous events since the Iranian Revolution (Kamrava, 2012).

Under these circumstances, Saudi Arabia decided to "reassert its position of prominence and leadership within the GCC" and lead "a counterrevolution to contain, and perhaps to even reverse, the Arab Spring as much as possible" (Kamrava, 2012, p. 96), and prevent the domino effect (Al-Rasheed, 2011). According to Al-Rasheed: "in response to the Arab Spring, sectarianism became a Saudi pre-emptive counter-revolutionary strategy that exaggerates religious difference and hatred and prevents the development of national non-sectarian politics" (2011, p. 513).

Iran, on the other hand, "saw some potential opportunities", in the revolutionary uprising (Terrill, 2011, p. ix). The Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Ali Khamenei "stated that region-wide regime-changing upheaval and demands for Islamic government were natural extensions of Iran's 1979 Revolution" (Terrill, 2011, p. 12). Moreover, Iran had great chances to capitalize on revolutionary changes due to the fact that "Tehran's influence has always been greatest in places with entrenched authoritarianism", and the Islamic Republic had "exploited the illegitimacy of Arab rulers by highlighting their dependence on the United States and their impotence (or ambivalence) on pan-Arab issues, such as the conflicts in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories" (Kaye, Wehrey, & Doran, 2011).

4.7.3 Bahrain

Bahrain become the first battleground against "the Arab Spring contagion" (Kamrava, 2012, p. 99), and Iranian influence. The very survival of conservative Sunni monarchies was at the stake. The situation of Bahrain was exacerbated by the fact that the small Arab country in the Gulf, consists predominantly of Shia population, however, it is ruled by Sunni al-Khalifa dynasty (Gengler, 2014). An estimated 75% of Bahrainis are Shia (Mabon, 2012).

The case of Bahrain represented one of the few examples, where Iran and Saudi Arabia had disagreements before 1979: after British withdrawal Iran favored the idea of incorporation

Bahrain into its domain, while Saudi Arabia was categorically opposed (Mabon, 2012). Some circles in Iran even today consider Bahrain to be an Iranian territory; "Hussain Shariatmadari, the editor of the Iranian newspaper *Kayhan*, [suggested] that 'Bahrain was an inseparable part of Iran'" (Mabon, 2012, p. 86). Moreover, in 2009, "Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri […] former speaker of the Majlis -- declared that Bahrain had been 'the fourteenth province of Iran until 1970'" (Khalaji, 2011). Due to "significant number of Shi'ites" Bahrain considers itself "particularly vulnerable to Iranian subversion since Shi'ite communities are often considered more susceptible to Iranian propaganda than Sunni Muslims" (Terrill, 2011, p. 15).

Ever since independence, Saudi Arabia assumed the role of the protector of Bahrain and its ruling family from Iranian interference; "Al Saud are eager to prevent increasing Iranian involvement within Bahrain, given such close proximity to the Kingdom, and they perceive the stability of the Al Khalifa as necessary for achieving this" (Mabon, 2012, p. 87). The security of Bahrain has strategic importance for Saudi Arabia, because any unrest in Bahrain threatens "the stability of the [Saudi] Eastern Province" which is Shia populated (Mabon, 2012, p. 92). The Eastern Province has the great concertation of Saudi oil fields and produces 10% of world's oil daily (Henderson, 2011). As Mabon noted, "Saudi Arabia has long feared the increasing might of its own Shia population. The rising power of these Shia has historically coincided with Shia gains across the region, as seen in the aftermath of the revolution in Iran" (2012, p. 92). Former President of Egypt perfectly described common attitude that hardline Sunnis have toward Shia Arabs: "the Shiites are always loyal to Iran. Most of them are loyal to Iran and not to the countries in which they live" (Rubin, 2006, p. 146).

The wave of the Arab Spring quickly reached Bahrain. Despite the fact that the most protestors were Shia, the demonstrations did not have a sectarian agenda. The demands included "political and democratic reform and the devolution of a degree of power from the palace to the elected parliament" (Mabon, 2012, p. 87). As in case of Syria, the peaceful protest turned violent, after crack down by Bahraini security forces. The government of Bahrain "believe[d] that any political challenge by the island's Shiite majority must be quickly suppressed -- a view backed by the royal family in neighboring Saudi Arabia and violently

enforced in Bahrain despite significant Sunni participation in the protests" (Henderson, 2011). After one months of infighting in the capital, "Bahrain invoked a GCC security clause that triggered the arrival of Saudi and GCC forces under the aegis of the Peninsula Shield Force" (Mabon, 2012, p. 89).

Saudi Arabia intervened militarily in Bahrain to suppress the unrest and support Bahrain's royal family. The Saudis refused to accept the idea that Bahrain's uprising was a pro-democracy struggle, but rather regarded it as "an Iran-backed insurgency" to destabilize a Sunni kingdom (Obaid, 2015). Although, Simon Mabon assumes that finding of "empirical evidence" or determining "exact level" of Iranian involvement in Bahraini uprising is "difficult" there is a high degree probability that "Iran supported, if not instigated, these protests" (2012, p. 90). In 2011, the GCC meeting requested from "the international community and the Security Council to take the necessary measures to stop flagrant Iranian interference and provocations" (Kamrava, 2012, p. 99).

This was not the first case of Iranian meddling in the Bahraini affairs. Soon after the Iranian revolution, the Islamic Front for Liberation of Bahrain, an organization supported by Iran, attempted to overthrow the government in 1981.

4.7.4 Syria

Ensuing from the Arab Spring, the Syrian Civil War posed crucial challenges for both countries. Syria, one of the few Arab allies of Iran, "served as Tehran's entrée onto the Arab stage, enabling it, at least symbolically, to overcome its fundamental isolation as a Persian power" (Kaye, Wehrey, & Doran, 2011). Moreover, "Iran and Syria have maintained the longest continuous regional alliance since the states of the Middle East gained their independence in the years after World War II" sharing aversion towards Iraq and US domination in the region (Kaye, Wehrey, & Doran, 2011).

If President Bashar al-Assad and Alawite rule in Syria were to be overthrown, Iran would have lost its major ally, "key state partner in the Levant" (Kaye, Wehrey, & Doran, 2011),

and be cut off from the main supply routes to Hezbollah, Iran's surrogate in Lebanon. Grumet mentions: "Iran has used Syria as a gateway to fund, train, arm and provide logistical assistance to Hamas and Hezbollah" (2015, p. 126). The alliance between Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hezbollah has been described as 'the Axis of Resistance' "represent[ing] the Shi'ite, anti-Western, anti-Israel ideology" (Grumet, 2015, p. 127). Discussing importance of Syria for Iran, Marisa Sullivan explained:

> *Syria [represents] the primary hub in Iran's power projection in the Levant. The war in Syria presents a significant, even existential, threat to this strategic alliance by endangering one of its primary members and the chief conduit for Iranian support to Hezbollah. At the same time, Iran cannot afford to lose its most important foothold in the Levant, and Hezbollah cannot risk losing its access to critical Iranian and Syrian support.* **Maintaining the Axis of Resistance is also a matter of great ideological importance for Iran and its commitment to exporting its Islamic revolutionary principles**. *For all of these reasons, Iran will go to great lengths to preserve its foothold in Syria (2014, p. 9).*

On the contrary, Saudis considered this war as an opportunity to disrupt the establishment of Shia Crescent, remove the government of religious minority from the predominantly Sunni country, and roll back the Iranian influence. As Nawaf Obaid put it "[Saudi Arabia] will be there to stop [Iran] wherever they are in Arab countries […] We cannot accept Revolutionary Guards running round Homs" (McElroy, 2013). Consequently, Saudi Arabia emerged as major sponsor of Sunni rebels providing "several billion dollars" of support (Mazzetti & Apuzzo, 2016). Currently, after six years of fighting, Bashar Assad still is in power and with the help of Russia and Iran, the Syrian army inflicts major setbacks to Saudi funded rebels (Casagrande, Kozak, & Cafarella, 2016).

Meanwhile, with the rise of ISIS, Iranian support for counterterrorist operations in Iraq became vital; "to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity, Iran opted to arm proxy groups and provide political, military, economic and humanitarian aid to key stakeholders […] mainly Shi'i and Kurdish […] Iran was 'the first country to provide [the Kurds] with weapons and ammunition'" (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015, p. 7).

4.7.5 Yemen

In Yemen, likewise as in Syria, Iranian support for the Houthi rebels (Bayoumy & Ghobari, 2015), and their advancement triggered direct military intervention from Saudi Arabia "to confront perceived Iranian expansionism in its southern neighbor" (McDowall, Stewart, & Rohde, 2016). Saudi foreign minister offered the Kingdom's rationale for intervention:

> *A friendly government asked for support; we intervened […] The Houthis are less than 50,000 in a country of 28 million. It is unacceptable that they would be allowed to seize power and get away with it. And so we and a coalition of countries have been fighting to restore the legitimate Government of Yemen […]***we will not allow [Yemen] to fall prey to a radical militia allied with Iran and Hizballah** *(U.S. Department of State, 2017).*

The Houthis are radical movement originated in the Zaydi sect of Shia Islam. The rebel groups official name is *Ansarallah* (partisans of God) (Grumet, 2015). The Iranian foreign minister called the group "the one force that has proved adept at beating back Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula" (Zarif, 2017). However, for Saudis it is "a radical militia allied with Iran and Hizballah in possession of ballistic missiles and an air force that has taken over a friendly government" (U.S. Department of State, 2017). 2015 was not first time Saudi Arabia deployed army against Houthi rebels. In 2009-2010, the Kingdom also conducted military operations against Houthi incursions (Terrill, 2011).

After three years of campaign, the Saudi failed to achieve the decisive victory, since "the kingdom's armed forces have often appeared unprepared and prone to mistakes" (McDowall, Stewart, & Rohde, 2016). However, the imposed "naval blockade has also left two thirds of Yemen's population—around 18.8 million people—without vital humanitarian aid, and has deprived more than 7 million people of sufficient food and water" (Bendix, 2017). Moreover, "instead of being the centerpiece of a more assertive Saudi regional strategy, the Yemen intervention has called into question Riyadh's military influence" (McDowall, Stewart, & Rohde, 2016).

Despite the failures Saudi Arabia remains the largest military power in the region, with commitment to maintain the lead over Iran. The Kingdom accepts military expenditures as

unavoidable process in "cementing its regional role" (Dorsey, 2015), because "the proportions of total outputs devoted to defense would increasingly determine the power and position of states in the international system" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 124).

In 2010-2015, Saudi Arabia has spent more than $100 billion on military development, and is intending to allocate extra $50 billion during the next two years (Obaid, 2015). Iran has spent less than half of that amount (Sick, 2011). For example, in 2012, when Saudi Arabia military expenditures amounted $56.5 billion, Iran spent only $10.6 billion for military purposes (Cordesman, 2015). Chubin stressed the military weakness of Iran, since its "conventional military capabilities, especially its power-projection capabilities, are limited, even with respect to, or in comparison with, its immediate neighbours" (2009, p. 180). The republic's relative military weakness accounts for Iran's ostensible strive for nuclear weapons. Rubin argued:

> *As expensive as nuclear weapons are, it is cheaper and easier to build them (and the long-range rocket delivery vehicles) than to rebuild a conventional military. After all, the latter option would require building or buying hundreds of tanks and planes as well as other equipment. Moreover, if Iran can build its own nuclear weapons, it would not be dependent on buying and maintaining high-tech items from other countries, which involves the risk that supplies could be cut off in case of war or policy disputes (2006, p. 149).*

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, pursues policy of conventional rearmaments. Just recently, during President Trump's visit to the Kingdom, Saudi Arabia and U.S. agreed on $110 billion arms deal over next ten years. The package includes "tanks, fighter planes, combat ships, and precision-guided bombs", and has one of the main aims to "improv[e] Saudi Arabia's ability to challenge regional adversaries like Iran" (Bendix, 2017). Iranian Foreign Minister criticized the agreement, stating:

> *If past performance is an indicator of future success, another $110 billion worth of weapons will neither reduce "the burden" on the American military nor support "the long-term security of Saudi Arabia," as the State Department argues. The last time the Saudis spent that kind of money was when they provided*

billions to the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in the 1980s to arm his war of aggression against Iran. Look what that bought them and the world (Zarif, 2017).

4.8 Findings

The cases of Iraq, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen exemplified the scale and extent of regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. As was argued in the introduction, the examples of Bahrain and Yemen demonstrates how Iranian interference causes Saudi counter intervention. The case of Iraq display Saudi efforts to contain Iran, via arming a surrogate. Finally, the case of Syria reveals Saudi determination to disrupt Iranian regional alliance by attempting to remove Iran's allied regime form power.

All the cases exhibit the trends of the regional power relations. Saudi Arabia, an established state, tries to maintain existing order, and prevent challenger from becoming significant player in the region. Iran, an rising revisionist challenger, seeks to shift regional order and balance of power to its favor through assisting the friendly governments, and allied religious, political, and paramilitary movements.

5. Saudi Arabia and the Regional Escalation

Similar to Sparta, which "found [...] increasingly encircled by the expanding power of the Athenians" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 598), Saudi Arabia discovers itself in more and more hostile environment. For long time Saudi Arabia "feared encirclement from various combinations of the republican and Marxist Yemens in the south, Islamic Iran, and Ba'thist Iraq [...] the Saudis perceive the Middle East as a cauldron of instability that could spill across their borders" (Hinnebusch, 2003, p. 131).

No signs that regional dynamics might change to the Kingdom's benefit: the Syrian impasse continues - Assad is still in power despite Saudi Arabia's best efforts to overthrow; Iran dominates Iraq, exerts significant influence in Lebanon, and the Houthis are still not defeated. The power vacuum that emerged on territory of Syria and Iraq "has been filled not only by the Sunni jihadists of Islamic State (IS) but also by the makings of a transnational Shia force backed by Iran" (The Economist, 2015).

In times when the Arab world is in disarray, Iran starts to arise as a key power in the region. Rubin notes that Iran is set "to become a regional great power" of the 21ˢᵗ century (2006, p. 142). Power transition theory emphasizes demographic capabilities as one the factors of countries strength (Kugler & Organski, 1989). Currently, Iran's population "exceeds the number of people in all the Arab states of the Gulf combined" (Rubin, 2006, p. 142). Iran is home for 74 million people, while GCC – 47 (International Energy Agency, 2012). Furthermore, Gilpin's description clearly reflects the current Middle Eastern reality: "the once dominant state is decreasingly able to impose its will on others and/or to protect its interests. The rising state or states in the system increasingly demand changes in the system that will reflect their newly gained power and their unmet interests" (1981, p. 33).

5.1 The Situation in Qatar

One of the last Saudi attempts to 'impose its will on others' is the latest developments in Qatar. On June 5, 2017 Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE, Bahrain, internationally recognized government of Yemen, and the Maldives cut diplomatic relations with Qatar, closed their air space, and stopped all sea and land traffic. Currently, Eastern government of Libya, Mauritania, Senegal, Comoros also severed their ties with Qatar, and Jordan, Djibouti, Chad and Niger downgraded diplomatic relations (Al Jazeera , 2017). The official Saudi statement accused Qatar:

> *[of] secret and public aiming at dividing internal Saudi ranks, instigating against the State, infringing on its sovereignty, adopting various terrorist and sectarian groups aimed at destabilizing the region including the Muslim Brotherhood Group, Daesh (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda, promoting the ethics and plans of these groups through its media permanently,* **supporting the activities of Iranian-backed terrorist groups** *in the governorate of Qatif of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Kingdom of Bahrain, financing, adopting and sheltering extremists who seek to undermine the stability and unity of the homeland at home and abroad and using the media that seek to fuel the strife internally; and it was clear to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia the support and backing from the*

authorities in Doha for coup Al-Houthi militias even after the announcement of the Coalition to Support the Legitimacy in Yemen (Saudi Press Agency, 2017).

From the beginning, it was obvious that Iranian factor was crucial to this escalation. The UAE newspaper's editorial with the headline, *Qatar must choose sides over Iran* declared: "rather than see itself as part of the GCC, [Qatar] wishes to remain neutral, half in the Arab Gulf camp, half in Iran's camp" (The National, 2017). Moreover, list of 13 demands, presented to Qatar only strengthens the assumption that Qatar is punished for independent foreign policy and close ties with Iran. Apart from closing down Al Jazeera network, stopping support for opposition groups in Gulf, expelling members of opposition from the country, handing over persons wanted by other Arab states, and halting construction of Turkish military base, Qatar was commanded to:

- *Scale down diplomatic ties with Iran and close the Iranian diplomatic missions in Qatar, expel members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard and cut off military and intelligence cooperation with Iran. Trade and commerce with Iran must comply with US and international sanctions in a manner that does not jeopardise the security of the Gulf Cooperation Council.*
- *Sever ties to all "terrorist, sectarian and ideological organisations," specifically the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIL, al-Qaeda, Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as the Nusra Front) and Lebanon's Hezbollah. Formally declare these entities as terror groups as per the list announced by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and Egypt, and concur with all future updates of this list.*
- *Align Qatar's military, political, social and economic policies with the other Gulf and Arab countries, as well as on economic matters, as per the 2014 agreement reached with Saudi Arabia (Al Jazeera, 2017).*

Considering legal definition of bullying: "acts or written or spoken words intended to intimidate or harass a person or to cause physical harm to a person or his or her property" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), it could be argued that Qatar is essentially bullied into the following Saudi line in foreign policy. As primary state in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia tries to enforce regional order, punish the violator, and prevent future more grave misconduct from regional states. The same UAE newspaper stated that "Qatar cannot continue to face two ways, supporting groups and regimes that are actively harming the region. The GCC is a club, with

common goals. If Qatar cannot agree with those goals, it should not hope to remain part of the club" (The National, 2017).

Qatar considers the GCC behavior as a "siege" and an "illegal blockade [that] has nothing to do with combating terrorism. It is about limiting Qatar's sovereignty, and outsourcing our foreign policy" (Al Jazeera, 2017). The Saudis deny the fact of blockade. According to Adel al-Jubeir: "there is no blockade of Qatar. Qatar is free to go – the ports are open, the airports are open […] So technically, this is not a blockade. We have exercised our sovereign right to prohibit them from using our airspace" (U.S. Department of State, 2017). The Foreign Minister of Qatar Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani rejected list of demands stating that "everyone is aware that these demands are meant to infringe the sovereignty of the state of Qatar, shut the freedom of speech and impose auditing and probation mechanism for Qatar," he said" (Al Jazeera, 2017).

While Qatar was ostracized by its Arab neighbors, who supplied 80% of necessary food (Reuters, 2017), Iran expressed solidarity with Qatar, and stepped in to save it from virtual trade embargo. The republic supplied food to the besieged Emirate by air, with only land border with Saudi Arabia closed (VOA News, 2017). The delivery amounted 100 tones of fruit and vegetable daily (Reuters, 2017). The President of Iran Hassan Rouhani regarded "the siege of Qatar as unacceptable", and promised Emir of Qatar that "our air, ground, and sea routes are always open to our brother and neighbour country of Qatar". Furthermore, the President criticized Saudi policy by stating:

> *We believe that if there are disagreements among countries of the region, pressure, intimidation, and sanction are not good ways for settle the disagreements […]We view cooperation with the Qatari government as continuous cooperation and believe that there are very good opportunities to further deepen relations between the two countries and these opportunities must be exploited (President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2017).*

For Iranian circles, it was clear, that Saudi Arabia attempted to manifest its force. Alexander Azadgan a geopolitical analyst, asserted:

Saudi Arabia feels quite threatened by Iran and of course Qatar is part of that. Because they lost the war and the narrative in Iraq and Syria and hopefully soon in Yemen we see all these kinds of cracks in (P)GCC […] Saudis are trying to play a hegemonic role. They erroneously think that they can play the role that Iran played in the pre-revolution years and the demands that it is imposing on its neighbors is quite ridiculous. I am hoping that the Qataris would come to their sense and would go a separate way and would send a strong message to (P)GCC that more of these countries could separate from this horrible coalition (PressTV, 2017)

5.2 Iranian Ascendancy

Gilpin noted: "a military or technological innovation may dramatically reduce the cost and increase the benefits of territorial conquest and thereby encourage military expansion" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 22). In Saudi opinion, one of the main factors contributing to Iran's surge is the nuclear deal reached with the West. They perceive it as an attempt of "a society [to] develop technological capabilities in order to gain an advantage over other states" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 55). Although, Saudi Arabia publicly endorsed the Iranian nuclear deal (Presutti, 2015), in private it "felt abandoned" and "betrayed" (Cambanis, 2016, p. 14) by the US. The ultimate expression of disagreement over Iranian and Syrian policy was the fact that "Saudi Arabia's king declined to meet President Obama when he arrived at the airport in Riyadh" (Williams, 2016). The Saudis believe that the nuclear deal and the removal of sanctions facilitates "Iranian ascendanc[y]" by "boost[ing] Iran's revenues and reintegrat[ing] Iran's Islamic Republic into the global economy and the international community" (Cambanis, 2016, p. 15). Moreover, if Iran ever manages to get nuclear weapon "Tehran will be the most strategically powerful Muslim state in the world" (Rubin, 2006, p. 145).

Indeed, Iranian conduct might help to validate these fears: in defiance to U.N Security Council resolution, the Islamic Republic continues to conduct the ballistic missile tests (The Washington Post, 2016). At the same time, when decrease in oil prices risks to deplete Saudi monetary reserves, "the lifting of sanctions on Iran, the great Saudi rival, will bring 1 million

new barrels of oil per day to the marketplace, shifting global market share, and the Middle East's balance of power, in Iran's direction" (Bremmer, 2016, p. 16). The increased economic strength is one of the factors contributing to the country's rise (Kugler & Organski, 1989). According to Gilpin: "the distribution of economic power and the rules governing international economic regimes have become critical aspects of the process of international political change" (1981, p. 24).

Kugler and Organski underlined, "consistent with the fundamental assumption of power transition, it has now been shown by others that dissatisfaction with the status quo is an essential precondition for conflict" (1989, p. 186). Additionally, the existing tense situation is exacerbated when "the dissatisfied nation is […] catch[ing] up with the dominant nation [which] is the setting created for challenges that lead to major conflict (Kugler & Organski, 1989, p. 174).

Iran no longer accepts its role as second-rate player in the Middle East. According to Kugler and Organski rising challengers, "seek to establish a new place for themselves in the international order, a place to which they believe their increasing power entitles them" (Kugler & Organski, 1989, p. 174). As a rising nation, Iran demands to have a say in the regional processes, because, "Iran is relatively more powerful today than at any time in modern history" (Rubin, 2006, p. 151). Lebow and Valentino contended that "by far the most sensible policy for leading powers in dealing with rising powers ought to be efforts to moderate their challenge by incorporating them into the system if they are outside it, or, if they are inside, to provide more symbolic and material benefits to reconcile them to the status quo" (2009, p. 401). This Idea was reflected in the remarks of Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif:

> *Iran and Saudi Arabia can **accommodate each other** in the region if they each define their specific interest in all these palaces. But that specific interest in order to be accommodated should not be the exclusion of the other party. Unfortunately, Saudi Arabia has followed a practice of exclusion (RUPTLY, 2016).*

Additionally, in the New York Times op-ed, Zarif, discussing the ways to stabilize the region, wrote: "what will work is a genuine effort to forge inclusive engagement among the

regional powers based on a policy of coexistence and acceptance that military solutions are futile" (2017). He proceeded with reversing Saudi argument, claiming that the Kingdom is the source of instability:

> *While Saudi Arabia spends countless millions promoting fear of Iran to distract from its global export of Wahhabism — which inspires the extremist ideology of Al Qaeda, the so-called Islamic State and many other terrorist groups wreaking havoc from Karachi to Manchester — Iran has been aiding the victims of extremism in Iraq and Syria. By helping to prevent the Islamic State from seizing Baghdad and Damascus, Iran is actively promoting a political solution to the conflicts in both countries (2017).*

Gilpin assumed "evolutionary" mode "of international political change" due to "continual adjustments [that] are made to accommodate the shifting interests and power relations of groups and states" (1981, p. 45). The question is whether Saudi Arabia is willing to accommodate Iran. The answer is negative. The Saudi foreign minister stated:

> *While Iran claims its top foreign policy priority is friendship, its behavior shows the opposite is true. Iran is the single-most-belligerent-actor in the region, and its actions display both a commitment to regional hegemony and a deeply held view that conciliatory gestures signal weakness either on Iran's part or on the part of its adversaries […] Saudi Arabia will not allow Iran to undermine our security or the security of our allies. We will push back against attempts to do so (Al-Jubeir, 2016).*

However, Saudis, with its determination to stand firm against Iran, might risk to overstretch resources, and Iran could end up as beneficiary: "dominant states make cumulative commitments that eventually exceed their capabilities. Imperial overstretch 'creates challenges for the dominant states and opportunities for the rising states of the system'" (Lebow & Valentino, 2009, p. 391). Citing Keohane, Kugler and Organski noted that a ""hegemon" declines because of the burden imposed on it by the need to maintain the international order" (1989, p. 178). Moreover, the chance of miscalculation exists, where "Saudi Arabia may overestimate Iranian involvement in any regional crisis and at times conflate Shi'ite assertiveness with Iranian activism on the basis of their own form of worst-case analysis and

very little evidence" (Terrill 2011, x). The real challenge for Saudi Arabia is to maintain "peace that protects and guarantees its vital interests" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 8).

Conclusion

Middle East is going through serious challenges. Traditional order in the region, which meant dominance of conservative Sunni monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, with moderate toleration of 'revolutionary' republics, is imploding. The Islamic Republic of Iran has been attempting to create Shia Crescent, and thereby establish political domination over the Middle East and the Gulf region. Saudi Arabia, de-facto head of the GCC, and traditional dominant of the region, is clearly neither willing, nor is ready to accept Iranian predominance and ambitions. As Iran becomes stronger, Saudi Arabia barely manages to hold Gulf States unified.

Iran represents a dissatisfied state, which is not content with its regional role. To the contrary, Iran thinks it is a victim (Chubin, 2009). The republic assumes that the system does not reflect its international standing and distinction, and tries to capitalize on recent political upheavals and developments. Although, the country has never been a subordinate to the Arabs, Iran is tired of being underdog, and watching how regional order "advances the wealth, security and prestige of the dominant power, but typically at the expense of the other great powers" (Lebow & Valentino, 2009, p. 390). Rubin noted that Iran is a "determined enemy of the status quo in the Arab and Muslim worlds" (2006, p. 150). The revolutionary Shia activism – the foreign policy, which Iran pursued with various intensity since 1979 - aims to exert greater influence on the Gulf states, and on wider Middle East. Iran wants to become one of the primary actors in setting the rules in the 'neighborhood'. Iran thinks that Saudi Arabia undeservingly wields too much power in the region, without intention to share.

The research attempted to examine the cause of confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and prove the hypothesis that Iranian rise fuels the tensions. For this reason, rich historical overview was offered, including outlining ideological and political components of the competition. Moreover, the study tried to argue that the new Peloponnesian War is unfolding in the Middle East. The parallels were drawn between current situation and in Ancient Greece.

The study, by analyzing several cases, showed that Iranian rise threatens Saudi Arabia. The detailed account of Syrian, Bahraini and Yemeni cases demonstrated extent and the scale of

confrontation. As an established power, any disruption in the region is to the detriment for the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia finds itself engulfed in several conflicts, where either it has to take assertive measures to defend status quo and prestige, or let Iran become stronger.

The research attempted to provide theoretical underpinnings of this rivalry. Applying Robert Gilpin's and Kugler/Organski's theories to regional level, the study showed how hegemony and dominance of an established state is threatened by rising power, who is not satisfied with the power distributions, and seeks to alter the existing arrangements. Furthermore, Saudi countermeasures perfectly fit in the counterbalancing strategy that dominant state pursues to fend off the challenger. Avoiding major direct confrontation yet, Saudi Arabia consistently opposes Iran in every ongoing conflict in the Middle East using military, economic, and political means. The Saudi refusal to accommodate Iran is perfectly in line with the scholarly description of unwillingness of the dominant power to allow a revisionist state to make changes to the system.

Up to this point, both sides avoided direct military confrontation, and only faced each other in proxy wars; however, "whatever happens in this round of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, things promise to get worse, not better" (Cambanis, 2016, p. 15). The contradictions might become unresolvable, whereas both sides have "aspirations for Islamic leadership and differing visions of regional order" (Jahner, 2012, p. 46). Similar to Spartans which determined that "Athenian expansionism threatened [their] vital interest" and "decided that war was inevitable" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 604), Saudis, someday in the future, may decide to not tolerate Iran's aggressive behavior anymore. The fundamental shift toward military resolution of conflict may happen if Saudi Arabia ascertains "that time [is] moving against them and in favor" (Gilpin, 1988, p. 605) of Iran. Susan Shirk summed up this perspective: "history teaches us that rising powers are likely to provoke war" (Lebow & Valentino, 2009, p. 389).

Some might argue that such dire escalation of events is almost impossible in XXI century; nevertheless, in *Theory of Hegemonic War*, Robert Gilpin asserted:

> *The fundamental characteristics of international affairs unfortunately have not been altered and, if anything, have been intensified […]. International politics*

continues to be a self-help system. In the contemporary anarchy of international relations, distrust, uncertainty, and insecurity have caused states to arm themselves and to prepare for war as never before" (1988, p. 611).

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