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THE BATTLE FOR REGIONAL DOMINANCE BETWEEN THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA AND THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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Abstract: *This article describes the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia for achieving regional hegemony in the Middle East. Both states have an ambition to be the leader of the Islamic world and there is a constant struggle between them to dominate Middle East and spread their influence in neighboring countries. Both countries fund militant Islamic movements abroad and are engaged in fierce battle for regional dominance. After the establishment of theocratic regime in Iran, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia vehemently opposed Teheran's ambitions to export revolutions and increase its influence in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is determined to counter the Iranian revolutionary threat and constantly opposes Teheran's ambitions to dominate the Arab World. Saudi Arabia and Iran often accuse each other of fueling sectarian violence by backing Shia and Sunni militias in Iraq, Yemen, Syria and Lebanon. Both countries try to avoid direct confrontation with each other. Instead of direct conflict, both sides fight each other indirectly and provide varying degrees of support to different camps in nearby conflicts.*

Keywords: *Hegemony; Iran; Saudi Arabia; Conflict; Middle East*

INTRODUCTION

The struggle for hegemony in the Middle East is taking a new direction. The two strongest states of the region - Iran and Saudi Arabia have hegemonic ambitions and are obviously opposed to each other in a fierce struggle for regional dominance. We have witnessed the emergence of confrontation between these two states in



different countries of the Middle East – in Lebanon and Iraq, Syria and Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and Iran have conflicting military, economic and geopolitical interests.

The confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be traced back the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979. After the establishment of theocratic regime in Iran in 1979, Saudi Arabia was especially worried over the Iran's intentions to export revolution in neighboring countries of the Middle East and expand influence within the Persian Gulf region. Over time, Saudi Arabia became a close ally and strategic partner of the United States, whereas Iran established close ties with Russia. Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia deteriorated since 1979. Today, the diplomatic relations between El-Riyadh and Tehran are non-existent. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were suspended, when Saudi Arabia decided to cut off diplomatic relations with Tehran after groups of protesters attacked its embassy in the capital of Iran and the consulate in the city of Mashad (Paul Dakiki 2016). Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran worsened considerably, when 47 Shiites, including Shia religious leader Nimr al-Nimr, were executed in Saudi Arabia in January 2016. Tehran accused Saudi Arabia of religious persecution of Shiite Muslims and religious minorities. The Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr defended the rights of Shiites in Saudi Arabia and protested against the Shiites persecution and harassment by the Saudi Arabian authorities. The Shiites constitute a minority in Saudi Arabia and form 15% of the population. The death sentence of Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr was followed by protest rallies in Iran. The Iranians protested against the discrimination and oppression of Shiites in Saudi Arabia and tried to burn the Embassy building of Saudi Arabia in Tehran. The situation was so strained that Saudi Arabia decided to evacuate its diplomats from Iran.

The Struggle for Supremacy in the Middle East

The aim of the Sunni Saudi Arabia is to reduce the influence of Shia Iran in the Middle East, including Lebanon, where Iran has an allied military organization "Hezbollah" and many supporters among the Shiite population. "Hezbollah" has been controlling the Shiite populated areas in Lebanon over the last decades and has its representation in the country's legislative body. Shiites constitute approximately 40% of the population of Lebanon. Saudi Arabians believe that Lebanon's former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who was regarded as an ally of Saudi Arabia, resigned as a result of the pressure from Hezbollah and left the post of Prime Minister.

On 4th of November 2017, in a televised statement from Saudi Arabia Saad Hariri announced his intention to resign from office, blaming Hezbollah and Iran for his resignation. He named Hezbollah's intention to assassinate him as the main reason for his resignation. After this announcement, Hariri did not return to Lebanon. The Saudi Arabian government linked the resignation of the former prime minister of Lebanon to the pressures from Hezbollah. Iran's government rejected Saad Hariri's accusations and

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stated that his resignation from office was a provocative action. Iran believes that Hariri's resignation was a provocation by Saudi Arabia, which aims to increase tensions in the Middle East (Tabula 2017). Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq - these are the countries where the geopolitical interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran collide with each other. In the above mentioned countries of the Middle East Saudi Arabia and Iran have their own allies.

Relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia deteriorated rapidly over the last years, especially when Saudi Arabia decided to punish Qatar and impose diplomatic isolation on it. On the initiative of Saudi Arabia six Arab states decided to impose a diplomatic isolation on Qatar due to its close ties with Iran. The above mentioned Arabic states of the Middle East called back their ambassadors stationed in Qatar and introduced trade bans on the country. On 5th of June 2017 Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Mauritania, Egypt and Yemen ceased diplomatic, economic and commercial links with Qatar and accused the Qatar government of maintaining close ties with Iran and supporting "terrorism". Saudi Arabia and its allies have asked Qatar to cut close ties with Iran and shut down the Al-Jazeera TV station, which Qatar's government refused to carry out. Qatar vehemently rejected the Arab states' allegations of supporting terrorism and condemned their actions (Voanews 2017). On 24th of August 2017, Qatar announced that it would restore full diplomatic relations with Iran.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have been competing for decades for regional, political and religious hegemony in the Middle East. After the 2003 Iraq War, the two countries have been fighting against each other in Iraq and are still engaged in religious and sectarian conflicts. Sectarian violence escalated after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and the confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites is still going on in Iraq. Saudi Arabia and Iran are doing their best to increase their influence in Iraq. Iran offers financial and moral assistance to Shiites in this religious war, while Saudi Arabia supports Iraq's Sunni population and supplies them with weapons. Historically the Sunni population of Iraq always discriminated against Shia Muslims in almost every sphere of life. That's why the Shiite population of Iraq supports Iran, while the Sunnis are protected by Saudi Arabia.

The Conflicting Geopolitical Interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Syria

After the emergence of civil war in Syria, the enmity between Saudi Arabia and Iran became even more intense. In the Syrian conflict, Iran supports Bashar al-Assad's regime. Tehran supplies it with arms, helps financially, and sends its military officials to the Syrian army. Saudi Arabia offers moral, financial and economic support to the opposition forces and tries to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria. Iran and Saudi Arabia have contradictory geopolitical interests in Syria. From the geopolitical point of view Syria is a very important country with great strategic significance. It is a bridge connecting the West to the oil rich countries of the Middle East. Syria can serve as a

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transit corridor between Europe and the Arab countries. Via Syria, it is possible to establish connections with the energy reach countries of the Arab world. The West wants to reduce its energy dependence on Russia and diversify energy transportation routes. Therefore, it pays particular attention to the transportation of the Arabian energy resources to Europe through the Syrian territory (Sputnik 2016). Europe consumes 80% of the gas produced by the Russian company Gazprom. The Kremlin's goal is to maintain Russia's dominant position on the European market and become the main supplier of gas for Europe, while Western countries want to reduce energy dependence on Russia because Kremlin often uses natural resources as a political weapon. After the Russian intervention in Ukraine and the occupation of Crimea, US President Barack Obama openly called on European Union to reduce its dependence on Russian gas and try to diversify its energy resources (Charis Chang 2015). Arabic countries had plans to construct new gas pipelines and to supply energy resources to the West via the territory of Syria, but Bashar al-Assad blocked this project because it contradicted with economic and geopolitical interests of Russia and Iran. Iran and Russia are strategic partners of Bashar al-Assad, and this is the reason why he is against the implementation of those energy projects that could inflict financial damage on Russia and Iran. Instead of strengthening ties with Arab countries, he preferred to sign a contract with Iran. Syria remains the only Arab state in the Middle East, which maintains close ties with Iran, causing irritation in Saudi Arabia. This is the main reason why Saudi Arabia wants to end the Alawite minority rule in Syria and bring to power the representatives of the Sunni majority, which will be more loyal to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries (Sputnik 2016).

The sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Yemen

The conflict between the two strongest states of the Middle East - Saudi Arabia and Iran became even more intense after the start of the Civil War in Yemen. Saudi Arabia financially backed the Sunni government of Yemen, which was led by President Abd Rabuh Mansur al-Hadi. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia wants to avoid the spread of Iranian influence on the Arabian Peninsula. Iran supports the Houthi rebels, which is a Shia minority in Yemen. The Houthis fought against the Sunni-led central government and did not spare power to topple Saudi Arabia's ally - Abd Rabuh Mansur al-Hadi's regime in Yemen. Al-Hadi was captured and forced to leave the presidential palace. A month later, Abd Rabuh Mansur al-Hadi fled to his native city of Aden, where he condemned the coup d'état and declared it an anti-constitutional act. The civil war began in Yemen in 2015 between two factions - the supporters of President Saleh and Al-Hadi. Each side claims to constitute the legitimate government of Yemen. Saleh is backed by the Houthis who control the capital of Yemen and other major cities, al-Hudaydah (the largest port city on the Red Sea), Taiz (the third largest city in Yemen)

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and part of Aden (the second largest city in Yemen). Houthis control strategic areas, important cities and military bases. The Sunnis control mostly the desert areas, the eastern part of Yemen. According to the UN estimates, from March 2015 to December 2017, 8670 - 13,600 people died in Yemen, including more than 5,200 civilians. The conflict has led to the world's worst humanitarian crisis. 22 million people are in need of humanitarian aid to survive. Over 8 million Yemenis are on the brink of starvation and more than one million suffer from cholera. There are fears that the epidemic could get worse if the conflict continues (Al Jazeera News 2018).

Relations between the Islamic republic of Iran and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia deteriorated especially, when the Houthis fired missiles at one of the largest aviation bases of Saudi Arabia. As a result of this attack they destroyed 17 bombers F16 and 9 helicopters "Apache", killed 66 and wounded 300 Soldiers. The civil war in Yemen is a sectarian conflict between the Shiites and Sunnis, which can be described also as a military confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia always claimed to be the leader of the Islamic world, but after 1979 a new challenger appeared on the world stage, when Iran was transformed into a theocratic regime. Iran's ambitions grew after the establishment of theocracy, as it had a desire to export revolution to the Gulf and increase its influence in Islamic countries. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran tries to become a leader in the Middle East, causing irritation in Saudi Arabia, which has also ambitions to achieve hegemony in the Arab World. Saudi Arabia is determined to counter Iranian revolutionary threat, weaken Iran's positions and prevent it to strengthen its positions in the Arab world.

CONCLUSION

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be compared with the confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Just like the US and the Soviet Union avoided direct conflict with each other, Saudi Arabia and Iran also try not to engage in direct fight with each other. Instead of direct conflicts, both sides fight each other indirectly and provide varying degrees of support to different camps in nearby conflicts. Unlike the Soviet Union and the United States, that opposed each other for world hegemony, Iran and Saudi Arabia do not hold the superpower status and consequently, they have no ambitions on world dominance. They fight against each other only for achieving hegemony in the Middle East (Tamar Tkemaladze 2018).

The outcome of the conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will have an impact on their allies' status and position in the Middle East. If Iran manages to defeat Saudi Arabia in this conflict, US positions will be weakened in the Middle East. If the opposite happens, then the United States will be able to strengthen its positions in the Middle East.

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Thus, on the strategic chessboard of the Middle East world's major powers confront each other, that have their own geopolitical interests in this oil-rich region. Presumably, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia will continue for a long time. The conflict between them may turn into an open warfare. Everything will depend on the decision of the dominant states of the world, their geopolitical ambitions and their strategic interests in the Middle East. 

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