Saudi Arabia and Iran: Rivalry and Regime Security in the Persian Gulf, 1979-2011

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements 9

Chapter 1: Introduction 13

1.1 The Question, the Argument and the Contributions 17

1.1.1 The Argument 17

1.1.2 The Theoretical Contributions 19

1.1.3 The Conceptual Contributions 21

1.2 The Structure of the Thesis 22

Chapter 2: The Literature on Saudi-Iranian Relations 23

2.1 The Material-Ideational Debate: The Question of Causes 23

2.1.1 Realism and the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry: "It's the Balance of Power, Stupid" 24

2.1.2 Constructivism and the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry: The Primacy of Ideas and Identities 27

2.2 The External-Internal Debate: Which Level of Analysis? 32

2.3 The Absent Debate: Saudi-Iranian Relations and Interstate Rivalries 34

2.4 Towards a Synthesis: Rivalry and Regime Security 38

Chapter 3: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Threat Perception 41

3.1 Theory and Social Scientific Inquiry 42

3.2 The Primacy of Regime Security in the Persian Gulf 43

3.2.1 "We Must Hang Together or Surely We Shall Hang Separately" 44

3.3 The Dual Nature of Threats in the Persian Gulf 49

3.3.1 Internal Stability 50

3.3.2 External Security 52

3.4 Explaining Evolving Perceptions of Threat: Ideology, Geopolitics, and Saudi-Iranian Relations 53

3.4.1 Ideological Dissonance and Perceptions of Threat 55

3.4.2 Geopolitical Dissonance and Perceptions of Threat 59

3.5 The Typology of Threat Perceptions in Saudi-Iranian Relations 62

3.6 Conclusion 63

Chapter 4: Research Design and Methodology 65

4.1 Ontology and Methodology 65

4.2 Aims, Objectives and the Case Study Approach 67

4.3 The Method of Process Tracing 69

4.3.1 Operationalization of the Subversion Mechanism 71

4.3.2 Operationalization of the Expansionist Mechanism 73

4.4 Data Sources 77

4.5 The Design of the Empirical Analysis 79

4.6 Conclusion 81

Chapter 5: Revolution and War 83
5.1 Perceptions of Threat in Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1979-1989 83
5.1.1 Saudi Arabia's Perception of Iran 84
5.1.2 Iran's Perception of Saudi Arabia 85
5.2 The Ideological Dimension of Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1979-1989 86
5.2.1 Seizing the Revolution.....87
5.2.2 The Erosion of Internal Stability in Saudi Arabia 94
5.2.3 Saudi-Iranian Confrontation at the Hajj 100
5.3 The Geopolitical Dimension of Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1979-1989.....104
5.3.1 Iraq's Invasion of Iran, 1980-1982.....105
5.3.2 Iran's Counter-Invasion of Iraq, 1982-1986.....111
5.3.3 The End of the Iran-Iraq War, 1987-1988.....116
5.4 Competing Theoretical Explanations.....119
5.4.1 Balance of Power Perspectives: "Change? What Change?" 119
5.4.2 Ideational Perspectives: Ontological Security and Its Limitations.....120
5.5 Conclusion 122

Chapter 6: The Rapprochement.....125
6.1 Perceptions of Threat in Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1990-2002 125
6.1.1 Saudi Arabia's Perception of Iran.....126
6.1.2 Iran's Perception of Saudi Arabia 127
6.2 The Ideological Dimension of Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1990-2002 128
6.2.1 Iran's Pragmatic Turn 129
6.2.2 Khatami and the Path towards Rapprochement.....134
6.3 The Geopolitical Dimension of Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1990-2002 139
6.3.1 The Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait and the Reorientation of Saudi Threat Perception 140
6.3.2 Iran and the Gulf Crisis of 1990-1991.....145
6.3.3 The Question of Regional Order after the Gulf War 148
6.4 Competing Theoretical Explanations 151
6.4.1 Balance of Power Perspectives: The Changing Regional Power Game ..151
6.4.2 Ideational Perspectives: A New Norm of Non-Intervention?.....153
6.5 Conclusion 154

Chapter 7: The Unravelling.....157
7.1 Perceptions of Threat in Saudi-Iranian Relations, 2003-2011 158
7.1.1 Saudi Arabia's Perception of Iran.....159
7.1.2 Iran's Perception of Saudi Arabia 160
7.2 The Ideological Dimension of Saudi-Iranian Relations, 2003-2011.....161
7.2.1 Internal Stability in Saudi Arabia after 2003 163
7.3 The Geopolitical Dimension of Saudi-Iranian Relations, 2003-2011 169
7.3.1 The Extension of Iranian Influence into Iraq 170
7.3.2 The Extension of Iranian Influence Elsewhere in the Middle East 178

7.4 Competing Theoretical Explanations 182
7.4.1 Balance of Power Perspectives: Yes, But ... .182
7.4.2 Ideational Perspectives: Iran's Resistance Discourse..... 184
7.5 Conclusion.....185

Chapter 8: Conclusion 189
8.1 The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Politics of Regime Security..... 189
8.2 The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and Middle East International Relations 195
8.3 The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and Interstate Rivalries..... 198

Bibliography..... 201

English Abstract 215

Danish Abstract.....217

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the early hours of September 14, 2019, a swarm of cruise missiles and drones armed with explosives set ablaze Saudi Arabia's massive oil facilities in Khurais and Abqaiq. The attacks were directed at the core of the Saudi oil system and led to damages that temporarily cut the production from the world's leading exporter of oil in half. The strikes against Khurais and Abqaiq created the largest short-term disruption to the oil market in history and also represented the most severe attack from the outside on critical infrastructure in the Kingdom since the inception of the Saudi state. In the words of one Saudi security analyst, "the attack is like September 11th for Saudi Arabia, it is a game changer."[1] Within hours of the attack, the Houthi movement in Yemen claimed to be behind the operation. On the one hand, this was not entirely implausible as Houthi militants have indeed been responsible for a series of attacks on Saudi territory, especially since Saudi Arabia began its military intervention in Yemen in 2015. On the other hand, however, the scale of the attacks on Khurais and Abqaiq, and the fact that it was carried out with sophisticated military precision at a distance much further into Saudi territory than the Houthis usually have targeted, raised questions over their proclaimed role in the operation. Indeed, a fact-finding mission from the United Nations which evaluated the technical evidence subsequently concluded that the Houthis were not involved in the attack and suggested instead that Khurais and Abqaiq "were approached respectively from a north/northwestern and north/northeastern direction, rather than from the south, as one would expect in the case of a launch from Yemen."[2] This added further to suspicions among Saudi and U.S. authorities that Iran coordinated the attack via its militia-allies in Iraq or launched the operation from its own territory – or possibly some combination of the two. While Iran has staunchly and repeatedly rejected those allegations, there are strong indications that it was involved, at least at some level. A report from the UN Secretary-General presented to the Security Council in June 2020 concluded that the weapons systems used in the attacks were "of Iranian origin".[3] Other independent investigations have suggested that the strikes were authorized by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and that they were launched from a military base outside Ahwaz in southwestern Iran.[4] Moreover, there is also the circumstantial element in that the attacks on Khurais and Abqaiq took place as just as

[1] Reuters: Costly Saudi Defenses Prove No Match for Drones, Cruise Missiles, (September 17, 2019).
[2] Reuters: U.N. Investigators Find Yemen's Houthis did not Carry Out Saudi Oil Attack, (January 8, 2020).
[3] AP: UN Links Items in Arms Shipment and Missile Attacks to Iran, (June 13, 2020).
[4] Reuters: "Time to Take Out Our Swords": Inside Iran's Plot to Attack Saudi Arabia, (November 25, 2019)

Iran had begun to much more assertively push back against the Trump administration's policy of "maximum pressure" and was engaged in an increasingly tense confrontation with the United States in and around the Persian Gulf.[5]

If Iran was indeed behind the attacks on Khurais and Abqaiq, it would mark another defining moment in the longstanding rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. For all the different ways in which the two sides have been at odds and posed serious threats to each over the years, rarely have they confronted each other militarily and never before has one side executed a direct strike on the other side's territory. At a more general level, and regardless of how Iran was involved in the attacks on Khurais and Abqaiq, it added to the downward spiral and the state of flux that has characterized Saudi-Iranian relations in recent years. Indeed, in the aftermath of the seismic shifts and the massive turbulence that developed from the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the 2011 Arab Uprisings, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has become the single most important political conflict in regional affairs and perhaps the most intense and consequential interstate dispute in the early stages of the 21st century. As many Arab states have descended into full-scale civil war or deep domestic political crises, Saudi Arabia and Iran have consistently adopted irreconcilable positions and backed opposing sides – in different ways and to different extents – in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. While the terrible tragedies that have unfolded in so many places across the Middle East have their own specific causes and have been facilitated and sustained for a range of different reasons, there is no question that the Saudi-Iranian confrontation has added further fuel to these fires. Certainly, Saudi Arabia and Iran's respective efforts to mobilize support and back actors abroad largely along Sunni and Shi'a confessional lines have contributed to the spectacular surge in sectarian polarization and violence that has become such a salient feature of the regional political landscape.[6] Another barometer for the extent of problems between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the fact that the two sides have not had diplomatic relations for more than five years. Saudi Arabia severed those ties in January 2016 after its diplomatic missions in Iran – the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the Saudi consulate in Mashhad – were attacked during protests over the execution of the Saudi Shi'a cleric Nimr al-

[5] After the United States imposed new sanctions on Iran and announced further military deployments to the Persian Gulf in mid-2019, Iran was very likely behind the attacks on six oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, and it was definitely responsible for the seizure of several international ships and the shooting down of an American surveillance drone. On the United States' policy of maximum pressure against Iran and the Iranian response to it, see International Crisis Group: Averting the Middle East's 1914 Moment, (Middle East Report No. 205, 2019).

[6] As Hinnebusch has argued, in the post-Arab uprising period, Saudi Arabia and Iran have "intervened with arms, fighters and financial aid to governments or insurgents in the identity fragmented and failing states in [the Middle East]. Sectarianism was the main tool of these interventions, with each rival state favoring sectarian groups aligned with its own sectarian composition." See, Raymond Hinnebusch: The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East, (R/evolutions: Global Trends & Regional Issues, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2016), pp. 120-152. Quote on p. 142.

Nimr. The diplomatic fallout was accompanied by a further escalation of the war of words between Riyadh and Tehran which even found its way to the Op-Ed pages of The New York Times. Writing under the headline "Saudi Arabia's Reckless Extremism", Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif accused the Saudi leadership of being "determined to drag the entire region into confrontation." He suggested that "the real global threat" was Saudi Arabia's "barbarism" and its "active sponsorship of violent extremism." According to Zarif, there was a direct line between "the outrageous beheading" of Nimr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia and "masked men [who] sever heads" outside the Kingdom. "Let us not forget", Zarif wrote, "that the perpetrators of many acts of terror, [and most] members of extremists groups like Al Qaeda and the Nusra Front, have been either Saudi nationals or brainwashed by petrodollar-financed demagogues who have promoted anti-Islamic messages of hatred and sectarianism for decades." More than that, Zarif noted, Saudi Arabia was dedicated to "perpetuate – even exacerbate tensions in the region" through its war in Yemen and continued acts of "provocation" against Iran, including "the routine practice of hate speech not only against Iran but against all Shiite Muslims." Zarif ended his piece with a thinly-veiled warning, "We have until now responded with restraint; but unilateral prudence is not sustainable."[7] The following week, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir offered a counter in the same newspaper in which he scolded Iran for its "dangerous sectarian and expansionist policies." He blasted Zarif for the "outlandish lie" that Saudi Arabia was a promoter of extremism. To the contrary, al-Jubeir argued, "We are not the country designated a state sponsor of terrorism; Iran is. We are not under international sanctions for supporting terrorism; Iran is. We are not the nation whose officials are on terrorism lists; Iran is." According to al-Jubeir, Iran's behavior "has been consistent since the 1979 revolution", and it has long cemented its role as "the single most belligerent actor in the region." Iran's support for its armed Shi'a clients, "Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and sectarian militias in Iraq", al-Jubeir suggested, was evidence of the "commitment to regional hegemony" and the inherent sectarianism that underlie Iranian foreign policy. Al-Jubeir issued his own warning as he declared that Saudi Arabia would "not allow Iran to undermine our security" and was entirely committed to "responding forcefully to Iran's acts of aggression".[8]

It is a truism that to understand the present, we must know the past. Yet it is perhaps one that is particularly relevant when it comes to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. It has been a key facet of the modern history of the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East and a part of – at times, at the very center of – some of the most dramatic and momentous political evolutions in international politics in the past several decades. At all times, the two sides have regarded each other with a healthy dose of suspicion and mistrust. At the same time, as two prominent intellectuals from Saudi Arabia and Iran recently wrote in joint letter:

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[7] Mohammed Javad Zarif: Saudi Arabia's Reckless Extremism, (The New York Times, January 10, 2016).

[8] Adel al-Jubeir: Can Iran Change?, (The New York Times, January 19, 2016).

> During the past four decades, relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran have oscillated between confrontation and competition, but also cooperation. Today, we are at the bottom of a cycle. Yet we share a sense that while our governments stand at odds on a range of regional issues, there is nothing inevitable about this enmity – nor is it condemned to be permanent.[9]

There is also widespread agreement about this fluctuating character of Saudi-Iranian relations in the scholarly literature.[10] The question rather is how to account for those changes analytically and thus more fundamentally what is at the core of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. In the following chapter, I provide a detailed review of the various positions that have been advanced in the scholarly literature. Let me just emphasize here that when it comes to explaining the causes and dynamics of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, the vast majority of the existing literature fall in one of two overall categories, each of which come with some internal variation. Some argue that Saudi-Iranian relations are best understood through the prism of realist balance of power theory. Others emphasize the centrality of ideational factors and present frameworks grounded in different varieties of constructivism. This study differentiates itself from the existing scholarly literature on Saudi-Iranian relations in two important ways. The first is theoretical. The case I will make throughout this thesis is that the single most important element in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is the politics of regime security. Rather than changes in the balance of power or the normative environment, it is more specifically the extent to which they find their respective regime security interests compatible or in conflict that provide the best explanation of the ups and downs of Saudi-Iranian relations. I provide a further sketch of the argument I make below and present it in more detail in Chapter 3, when I outline my theoretical framework. The second way in which my study is distinguished from other inquiries is conceptually. As I will elaborate further in the next chapter, a common denominator in the scholarly literature on Saudi-Iranian relations is that there is surprisingly little attention devoted to the very concept of rivalry itself. Despite the fact that all contributors to the literature are somehow making claims about the Saudi-Iranian *rivalry*, there is little to no engagement with basic questions of what it means to be in a rivalry relationship or what we should focus on analytically when we study one. This is especially puzzling given that we have a quite large literature on interstate rivalries in international politics which can provide some guidance on these issues. This is also a point I return to in the next chapter. Let me just note here that the specific question I ask in this study, and the approach I take to answer it, follow from the perceptual approach to rivalry analysis which is known as "Strategic Rivalries".

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[9] Abdualaziz Sager & Hossein Mousavian: We Can Escape a Zero-Sum Struggle Between Iran and Saudi Arabia – If We Act Now, (The Guardian, January 31, 2021).

[10] For a good short piece on these changes, see Mustafa Menshawy & Simon Mabon: Saudi Arabia and Iran Have Not Always Been Foes. Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/3/13/sectarianism-and-saudi-iranian-relations.

1.1 The Question, the Argument and the Contributions

The research question I aim to answer in this study is the following:

> *What are the drivers of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and how have perceptions of threat between the two sides evolved in the period from 1979 to 2011?*

1.1.1 The Argument

In order to provide an answer to this question, I introduce what I term "the neoclassical realist theory of threat perception" in this thesis. Underlying the theoretical framework I present is what I find to the single most important aspect about the nature of interests and threat perception in Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Persian Gulf region. That particular facet is the distinct disposition of the political leaderships in the region to view these themes through the lens of their own regime security. Whatever goals, ambitions or commitments they pursue at any particular moment, they all flow from or are subordinated to the overarching interest in protecting their regimes from internal and external challenges to their survival. The primacy of short-term considerations of regime security is the key for understanding the behavior of individual regimes and interactions between them in the Persian Gulf.

The case I will make requires us to appreciate that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has two primary dimensions to it. There is an *ideological dimension* as Saudi Arabia and Iran represent two distinct political systems which each rely on religion to justify their rule and claim to represent the ideal model of how Islam relates to legitimate political authority. There is also a *geopolitical dimension* as Saudi Arabia and Iran are located in one of the more volatile and militarized regions of the world and thus place a premium on the environment around them and try to the best of their abilities to influence it in accordance with their interests. Each of these dimensions make Saudi Arabia and Iran competitors and wary of each other as they both involve the potential for infringements on red lines and core interests that relate directly to their regime security. Ideology or geopolitics do not, however, necessarily or inherently disposition them towards conflict and hostility. What matters, crucially, are specific priorities and courses of action and how they are viewed by the Saudi and Iranian leaderships as affecting their ongoing concern for the internal stability and external security of their regimes. That dual understanding of what security is for these regimes is essential. Indeed, what makes regime security a persistently short commodity – and, in turn, such a priority – is that have they continuously have to worry about threats emerging from within their own societies and outside their borders. Because Saudi Arabia and Iran think in terms of their short-term regime security and because regime security has that particular duality to it, it follows that there are four possibilities at any particular moment: Saudi Arabia and Iran can view the other as 1) not an active threat to its internal stability or its external security; 2) a threat to its internal stability; 3) a threat to its external security; or 4) a threat to both its internal stability and external security.

The central claim of my theoretical framework is that perceptions of threat between Saudi Arabia and Iran form and change according to the presence or absence

of what I refer to as ideological and geopolitical dissonance. Dissonance is commonly understood as referring to "a lack of agreement, consistency or harmony". It can be contrasted with consonance, which is usually defined as "situations in which people agree with each other, or when things seem right or suitable together".[11] In short, my theoretical framework suggests that ideological dissonance causes perception of threat to increase as it undermines a regime's internal stability. Likewise, geopolitical dissonance causes perception of threat to increase as it compromises a regime's external security. In chapter 3, I explain in detail the causal mechanisms that link ideological and geopolitical dissonance to elevated threat perceptions. For now, I will merely highlight that if we understand perceptions of threat in Saudi-Iranian relations as tied to two dimensions that each involve a spectrum from consonance to dissonance, it means that there are four distinct understandings of threat that Saudi Arabia and Iran can have which correspond to the categories suggested above. Depending on the particular levels of ideological and geopolitical dissonance at any given moment, Saudi Arabia and Iran will perceive the other as either a *Latent Threat*, a *Subversive Threat*, an *Expansionist Threat*, or an *Omnipresent Threat*:

Figure 1.1: The Typology of Threat Perception in Saudi-Iranian Relations

		Ideological Dissonance	
		-	+
Geopolitical Dissonance	-	Latent Threat	Subversive Threat
	+	Expansionist Threat	Omnipresent Threat

I show in the empirical analysis how changes in the levels of ideological and geopolitical dissonance have caused shifts across these perceptual prisms of threat three times in the period from the 1979 revolution in Iran to the 2011 Arab Uprisings. I devote a chapter to explain why particular perceptions of threat emerged for Saudi Arabia and Iran and how they were subsequently sustained and guided their respective policies to one another in the periods from 1979-1989, 1990-2002, and 2003-2011. Individually, the empirical chapters account for the major changes in the trajectory of Saudi-Iranian relations that occurred on each of these three time periods. Collectively, they demonstrate how – more than any other factors – it is the levels of ideological and geopolitical dissonance that serve as the regulators of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and add specificity as to why relations between them deteriorate when they do and how their interests converge at certain other times. In the most basic sense, the case I make in this study can be illustrated in the following way:

[11] These definitions are from the Cambridge Dictionary.

Figure 1.2: Perceptions of Threat in Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1979-2011

Time Period	**Saudi Arabia's Perception of Iran**	**Iran's Perception of Saudi Arabia**
1979-1989	Omnipresent Threat	Expansionist Threat
1990-2002	Latent Threat	Latent Threat
2003-2011	Expansionist Threat	Latent Threat

1.1.2 The Theoretical Contributions

This study makes two key theoretical contributions. First, I show how the argument and the causal connections I point to have explanatory leverage when it comes to accounting for shifts in Saudi-Iranian relations over time. We are beginning to have a quite extensive collection of books, journal articles, and various other analytical publications from research groups and thinks tank. However, we actually have very few efforts to explain the ups and downs of Saudi-Iranian relations over several decades where a theoretical argument has been subject to empirical investigation in book-length format. We have studies that focus on Saudi-Iranian relations before 1979.[12] We have even more that concentrate on the impact of the Iranian Revolution and the 1980s.[13] We have studies that focus on the rise and fall of the rapprochement process of the 1990s.[14] We have analysis of the implications of the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 for Saudi-Iranian relations.[15] And more recently, we have witnessed a surge in analysis on the nature of Saudi-Iranian relations after the 2011 Arab Uprisings.[16] Thus, we have a number of good studies that has advanced our understanding of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and provided frameworks for how to think about it

[12] Al Faisal bin Salman al-Saud: Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf: Power Politics in Transition, (I.B. Tauris, 2004).

[13] Shahram Chubin & Charles Tripp: Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order, (Routledge, Adelphi Paper 304, 1996); Henner Fürtig: Iran's Rivalry With Saudi Arabia Between the Gulf Wars, (Itacha Press, 2002); & May Darwich: Threats and Alliances in the Middle East: Saudi and Syrian Policies in a Turbulent Region, (Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 54-91.

[14] Adel al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making: The Rise and Demise of the Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement, 1997-2009, (PhD Thesis, London School of Economic, 2012); & Thomas James Devine: Accommodation Within Middle Eastern Strategic Rivalries: Iranian Policy Towards Saudi Arabia 1988-2005, (PhD Thesis, McGill University).

[15] Frederic Wehrey et al.: Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy, (RAND Corporation, 2009).

[16] Gregory Gause: Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War, (Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, 2014); & Bassel Salloukh: The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East, (The International Spectator, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2013), pp. 32-46. The references here and above are of course not exhaustive but just to illustrate the point.

at various critical junctures. But efforts to explain changes across several of these eras from one theoretical perspective and in a long format are few and far between. In that sense, this study joins a rather small club.[17]

Second, this study also contributes to broader theoretical debates about security dynamics in the Middle East, particularly those that revolve around threats, threat perception, and regime security as an analytical approach. We have some really good studies on these topics that I also build and expand on when I present my theoretical framework in chapter 3.[18] While we share a similar theoretical emphasis – subject to some qualifications – there is a key difference between these other studies and mine. Whereas these other studies treat threats perception as the cause (or independent variable) for some particular outcome (or dependent variable) – namely alliance choices – I study the perceptions themselves as the outcome. As suggested above, I show how specific levels of ideological and geopolitical dissonance (as causes or independent variables) are tied to particular perceptual prisms of threat. Rather than the binary threat/non-threat reflected in particular alliance choices, my theoretical framework allows for a more fine-grained understanding of these threat perceptions as it works with a four-fold typology of perceptual prisms of threat that Saudi Arabia and Iran can ascribe to each other at any given moment. The analytical value-added is that we can both account for increases and decreases in threat perception, and at the same time we can also maintain that threat perception can be triggered for different reasons. For instance, we can all agree that something clearly happened to Saudi Arabia's threat perception after 1979 and 2003, but were the causes necessarily the same? I don't think they were, and I think it is analytically important that we are able to distinguish between them.

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[17] Banafsheh Keynoush: Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); & Simon Mabon: Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East, (I.B. Tauris, 2013). Keynoush's and Mabon's books are to my knowledge the only others that cover the period between 1979 and the 2011 Arab Uprisings in a long format. Needless to say, others also have something to say about other time periods, but the empirical focus of the analysis tends to fall in one of the categories suggested above. We do also have other books that provide longer narrative accounts, but while these are information-rich and valuable, they do not work with a theoretical framework to support the empirical analysis. For one such recent effort, see Kim Ghattas: Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry That Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East, (Henry Holt and Company, 2020).

[18] Gregory Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Gregory Gause; Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Persian Gulf, (Security Studies, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2003), pp. 273-305; Curtis Ryan: Inter-Arab Alliances: Regime Security and Jordanian Foreign Policy, (University Press of Florida, 2009); & Darwich: Threats and Alliances in the Middle East. Darwich stresses the importance of regime security, but she sees ontological security is a crucial facet of what regimes seek, and thus she makes a different kind of theoretical argument than Gause, Ryan and the one I present.

1.1.3 The Conceptual Contributions

The key conceptual contribution this study makes lies in the effort to make the concept of rivalry a part of the debate in the scholarly literature on Saudi-Iranian relations. As suggested earlier, there is an implicit understanding that we agree on what we mean by rivalry and what is analytically important when we study one. This applies to the study of Saudi-Iranian relations and to Middle East IR more broadly. However, I don't think such consensus exists at all. Rather, I think we are more likely to find that – as the economists tend to say – "six different scholars have seven different opinions". And this is precisely the point. We should be more conceptually clear, not because it would somehow allow us to *settle* the debate on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry (or other rivalries in the Middle East), but rather because it would *move* the debate forward in a productive way. I think there is a lot of untapped potential in Middle East IR in thinking more systematically about rivalry dynamics and how we can explain trajectories of specific rivalries as well as similarities and differences across time and space. But in order for that to happen, we need to have some conceptual clarification on what makes a rivalry *a rivalry*. As I will substantiate further in the next chapter, I think the best and most obvious place for us to develop a more self-aware and transparent position on such a key concept as rivalry is to engage the literature on interstate rivalries and more specifically those parts of it that deals with "Strategic Rivalries". I should note that it is not only scholarship on Saudi-Iranian relations – and Middle East IR more broadly – which would benefit from an engagement with the field of rivalry analysis. This is very much a two-way street. As Colaresi et al. have suggested:

> Our own best guess (…) is that the next step forward will come from less aggregated examinations of specific rivalries. (…) Why do they turn hot and cold, sometimes bitterly hostile and other times marginally peaceful? (…) These questions can certainly be pursued in the aggregate. However, we suspect that they will be answered better by developing arguments about dynamic interactions over time. (…) Not all rivalries will be susceptible to longitudinal analysis, but enough should qualify to take our understanding of rivalry relationships to the next level.[19]

To be clear, this study is not grounded on the premise that its findings should be applicable outside the context of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. This is a single-case study all the way through. At the same time, however, I also think it is at least possible that the framework I develop here could have some explanatory leverage when it comes to rivalry dynamics elsewhere. I discuss this at some more length in the methodology chapter. Suffice it to say here that as very practical way of bringing the study of Saudi-Iranian relations and Middle East IR closer to the field of rivalry analysis, I provide some reflections on what I think would be the scope conditions within which the framework could potentially be applicable to other strategic rivalries. I do this after the empirical analysis.

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[19] Michael Colaresi, Karen Rasler & William Thompson: Strategic Rivalries in World Politics: Position, Space and Conflict Escalation, (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 287.

1.2 The Structure of the Thesis

Having specified the research question and presented the argument in its short version in this introductory chapter, the rest of the thesis is structured in the following way. In chapter 2, I review the literature on Saudi-Iranian relations. Chapter 3 presents my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception in detail. As I have already suggested, it is firmly grounded in regime security theory, and I explain why I find that to be such an important analytical wager when it comes to Saudi Arabia and Iran. I elaborate on what regime security means and what threats against regime security are in the Persian Gulf. I clarify why we need to focus on ideological and geopolitical *dissonance*, outline the causal mechanisms that link each to increases in threat perception, and expand on the typology of threat perception that was introduced above. Chapter 4 lays out the methodology and research design of the thesis. I discuss the case study approach that underlies the thesis and the use of process tracing as the primary research method. I operationalize the causal mechanisms and specify the structure of the empirical analysis. On this basis, Chapters 5-7 turn to the empirical analysis of Saudi-Iranian relations from 1979 to 2011. Chapter 5 covers the period from 1979 to 1989. It explains how and why the Iranian Revolution and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War introduced intense ideological and geopolitical dissonance in Saudi-Iranian relations that caused decisive changes in their perceptions of threat that lasted all-throughout the 1980s. Chapter 6 covers the period from 1990 to 2002. It details the convergence of interest that occurred in the early 1990s and set the course for a decade marked by a much more pronounced element of ideological and geopolitical consonance in which perceptions of threat between the two sides were sharply reduced. Chapter 7 covers the period from 2003 to 2011. It demonstrates how the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to the emergence of mutually exclusive concerns and priorities that destroyed the geopolitical consonance between them and replaced it instead with and intense worry in Saudi Arabia over Iran's outsized ability to project power and build influence outside its own borders, first and foremost in Iraq. In Chapter 8, I summarize the main conclusions of the thesis and discuss how the findings help advance the analytical study of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and broader theoretical debates on regime security and threat perception in Middle East IR. As mentioned above, I also provide some further reflections on the potential for a deeper engagement between Middle East IR and the field of rivalry analysis and offer some tentative guidelines for the conditions under which the framework presented here could inform the study of other strategic rivalries.

Chapter 2:
The Literature on Saudi-Iranian Relations

The topic of Saudi-Iranian relations has generated a multifaceted scholarly literature that has increased substantially in scope in recent years. I think the best way to provide an overview of the current status of scholarship on Saudi Arabia and Iran is with reference to two axes of debates that each pertain to a particular analytical question. The first debate – which I call "The Material-Ideational Debate" – revolves around the basic question of what the underlying drivers and the primary causal factors that shape the Saudi-Iranian rivalry are. Without doing too much injustice to the nuances and particularities of each individual contribution to the literature, I do think it is fair to suggest that the main fault line in this debate is between realists who emphasize balance of power dynamics on the one the hand and varieties of constructivism that emphasize the centrality of ideas and identities on the other. The second debate – which I refer to as "The External-Internal Debate" – is related to the first but deals more specifically with the level of analysis that should be emphasized to explain state behavior in Saudi Arabia and Iran and interactions between them. As I have hinted at above, there is a third debate that I think in many ways is just as important as the two others, but one that has been surprisingly overlooked in the scholarly literature thus far. I call this "The Absent Debate", and it refers to the basic conundrum that for a body of literature that either explicitly or very implicitly focuses on explaining the Saudi-Iranian *rivalry,* there is rarely any reflection over what that designation actually implies. This is unfortunate because by clarifying the more fundamental questions of what creates and sustains a rivalry relationship, we are provided with a coherent reasoning for why we need to connect insights from various theoretical perspectives and how to do so in a consistent manner. On the pages that follow, I review the literature with point of departure in these first two debates and open the door for the third by explaining which lessons I think we should take from the study of interstate rivalries, and how it substantiates the research question and the theoretical approach I take to answer it.

2.1 The Material-Ideational Debate: The Question of Causes

The assertion that we can divide the literature on Saudi-Iranian relations into two broad positions should come with some qualifications and clarification. Needless to say, some realists have different points of emphasis than others, and the same holds true among the constructivist-inspired works. There are also overlaps as realists rarely claim that ideational factors do not play some role and most constructivists likewise do not deny that material factors also can exercise some influence.[20] At the

[20] May Darwich has offered a good discussion of what defines material and ideational factors respectively. She follows Anders Wivel in understanding material factors as "the capabilities or resources, mainly military, with which states influence one another". Ideational factors,

same time, however, when it comes to identifying the primary drivers of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and specifying the causal connections at work, there *is* a paradigmatic fault line between these two positions and a strong tendency to – explicitly or implicitly – privilege either material or ideational factors over the other.[21]

2.1.1 Realism and the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry: "It's the Balance of Power, Stupid"

On one side of this debate, we find a cluster of realist analyses that all argue that Saudi-Iranian relations are best understood as a classic balance of power contest.[22] These perspectives begin from two core assumptions about the nature and dynamics of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. First and foremost, Saudi Arabia and Iran are "structurally inclined towards rivalry."[23] Indeed, for realists, it is that structural disposition more than historically or socially contingent processes that underlies the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. According to Chubin & Tripp, these structural factors revolve around "geopolitical differences, such as disparities in demography and geography, and consequent differing perspectives on regional issues. Questions about their respective influence in and leadership of Gulf affairs, oil issues, and the role of outside powers compose the traditional 'national interest' agenda."[24] Second, these studies stress the centrality of realist power politics over ideational influences on state behavior in Saudi Arabia and Iran and in interactions between them. According to Keynoush,

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by contrast, are "diverse element such as culture, norms, values, beliefs, identity and ideology." I think this is a useful overall distinction to make when it comes differentiating between different kinds of causal claims in the scholarly literature on Saudi-Iranian relations. However, as we shall see, I do not agree with the theoretical implication Darwich draws from that distinction, namely that material factors produce tangible or physical security threats whereas ideational factors produce intangible, or ontological, security threats. See, Darwich: Threats and Alliances in the Middle East, pp. 33-34; & Anders Wivel: Explaining Why State X Made a Certain Move Last Tuesday: The Promise and Limitations of Realist Foreign Policy Analysis, (Journal of International Relations and Development, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2005), pp. 355-380.

[21] The key difference here is between attributing the causes to something and recognizing the influence of other things. The former is stronger than the latter.

[22] For examples, see Chubin & Tripp: Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order; Keynoush: Saudi Arabia and Iran: Wehrey et al: Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam; Kayhan Barzegar: Balance of Power in the Persian Gulf: An Iranian View, (Middle East Policy, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2010), pp. 74-87; Mohsen Milani: Iran and Saudi Arabia Square Off: The Growing Rivalry Between Tehran and Riyadh, (Foreign Affairs, October 2011); Faisal bin Salman al-Saud: Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf; Salloukh: The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East; Gause: Beyond Sectarianism; & Gregory Gause: It's the Balance of Power, Stupid, (H-Diplo/International Security Studies Forum, Policy Roundtable 2-4, 2018). Among these studies, Gause's is the only one to explain how the argument is different from the conventional understanding of the balance of power concept. I deal more in-depth with his work in the chapter 3.

[23] Wehrey et al.: Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam, p. 75.

[24] Chubin & Tripp: Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order, p. 4.

Saudi Arabia and Iran "make foreign policy choices based on 'reasons of state'".[25] Ideological and religious differences can aggravate tensions at particular moments in time, but they do not cause those tensions. Rather, according to Wehrey et al., "ideology and religion have a certain instrumentality and utility – regimes in Tehran and Riyadh can emphasize, highlight or minimize differences to serve broader geopolitical aims." Thus, to attribute too much weight to ideational factors, they warn, is to conflate the "symbolic vocabulary" of the rivalry with its "[geopolitical] substance".[26] These themes – the structural roots of the rivalry and the primacy of material interests over ideational factors – form the core around which realists make claims about the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. From that common core, arguments have been advanced in both defensive realist and offensive realist varieties.[27]

Banafsheh Keynoush has offered the most comprehensive analysis from a defensive realist position. "The goal of this critical relationship", she writes, "is to achieve balance to ensure Gulf security, and beyond that a degree of stability in the Middle East."[28] In other words, Saudi Arabia and Iran are defensive positionalists and security-maximizers – as defensive realism holds – they are not power-maximizers. Keynoush's main argument is that the Saudi-Iranian relationship cannot be adequately understood without reference to the role played by the United States. On that point, she is on solid ground, and others have made the same case. As Chubin & Tripp have noted, the role of the United States in the Persian Gulf region is "seen in diametrically opposite ways by Tehran and Riyadh: For Iran, it constitutes a military threat; for Saudi Arabia it constitutes its best guarantee of its military security."[29] Keynoush, however, goes beyond emphasizing the United States as a factor; she identifies American policy as *the* source of tension in Saudi-Iranian relations. Indeed, she specifies that "this rivalry is caused by regional instability generated by foreign interventions in the Gulf, which disrupts the balance of power between the two local states."[30] Note that she writes not "affected" or "aggravated," but *caused* by. This is a strong statement because it necessarily implies that if we could somehow remove the United States from the equation, there would be no Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Again, there is no question that the United States through its actions can aggravate Saudi-Iranian relations, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq is only one and an all too clear illustration of that. At the same time, however, it pushes a good argument too far to attribute all the complications between Saudi Arabia and Iran to the United States. The two sides have agency of their own and can create their own tensions. After all, the Iranian

[25] Keynoush: Saudi Arabia and Iran, p. 18.
[26] Wehrey et al.: Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam, p. 43.
[27] I should note that these are not necessarily labels these scholars use themselves. I do think, however, it follows directly from the kind of arguments they advance.
[28] Keynoush: Saudi Arabia and Iran, p. 230.
[29] Chubin & Tripp: Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order, p. 8.
[30] Keynoush: Saudi Arabia and Iran, p. 2. She concludes that, "To date, the United States has not fully appreciated the Saudi and Iranian regional roles, thereby disrupting opportunities to restore the balance of power between them to the detriment of securing peace in the Middle East." Quote on p. 232.

Revolution – the single most important event in Saudi-Iranian relations in history – was not exactly an American invention.

Others make the case that the main driver of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is a competition for regional hegemony. This is the offensive realist variety because it theoretically assumes – even if that point is not always articulated – that Saudi Arabia and Iran are power-maximizers that constantly look to change the balance of power between them in their favor. Some make this case with reference to offensive realist theory.[31] Others refer to a struggle for regional hegemony without necessarily reflecting on what this means theoretically.[32] However, if one defines the root cause of the rivalry as a competition for regional hegemony, then one is – consciously or not – making an argument firmly based in offensive realist thinking. Indeed, this is John Mearsheimer's fundamental point; regional powers aspire to be regional hegemons, and because they do not want peer competitors, they concentrate their resources and focus their policies on dominating other aspiring hegemons.[33] What makes offensive realist theory internally consistent is the assumption that states are inherently revisionist, and this is precisely where its application to the Saudi-Iranian context becomes dubious. Saudi Arabia has been the status quo actor par excellence in the Persian Gulf throughout most of its existence.[34] Even if we accept that this has changed in recent years, this just as easily could be – and in my view, should be – understood in light of a perceived need to counter threats and developments that it finds unacceptable rather than a bid for regional hegemony. Iran has certainly shown traits of revisionism, but that element has shifted over time. It was strong in the early days of the revolution, but Iran was much more of a status quo-actor in the 1990s.[35] In other words, the core assumption of offensive realism – that states are fixed in their disposition towards revisionism – is problematic, to say the least, when it comes to

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[31] Ali Fathollah-Nejad: The Iranian-Saudi Hegemonic Rivalry, (German Council on Foreign Relations, 2017); Ben Rich & Kylie Moore Gilbert: From Defense to Offense: Realist Shifts in Saudi Foreign Policy, (Middle East Policy, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2019), pp. 62-76; Muharrem Eksi: Regional Hegemony Quests in the Middle East: From the Balance of Power System to the Balance of Proxy Wars, (Journal of Gazi Academic View, Vol. 11, No. 21, 2017); pp. 133-156.

[32] James Dorsey: The Battle for Hegemony That the Kingdom Cannot Win, (Przeglad Strategiczny, No. 9, 2016), pp. 357-373.

[33] John Mearsheimer: The Tragedy of Great Power Politics, (W.W. Norton & Company, 2001). According to Mearsheimer, regional powers "are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals, with hegemony as their final goal. This perspective does not allow for status quo powers, except for the unusual state that achieves preponderance. Instead, the international system is populated [by units] that have revisionist intentions at their core." Quote on p. 29.

[34] See Nadav Safran: Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security, (Harvard University Press, 1985). Safran concludes that "Saudi policy even in the best of circumstances is essentially defensive, stemming from a recognition of the Kingdom's limitations." Quote on p. 454.

[35] Mohsen Milani: Iran, The Status Quo Power, (Current History, Vol. 104, No. 678, 2005), pp. 30-36.

Saudi Arabia and Iran. The offensive realist template with its emphasis on confrontation and domination is perhaps appealing given the multitude of conflicts in the Middle East in which Saudi Arabia and Iran are involved today. Indeed, the tendency to refer to Saudi-Iranian relations as a contest over regional hegemony has proliferated in recent years. But I think we miss something important about the nature of those conflicts and the reasons why Saudi Arabia and Iran participate in them when they are seen as expressions of a broader Saudi-Iranian struggle for regional hegemony. More than that, if the *causes* for the Saudi-Iranian rivalry are to be found here, the quest for regional hegemony should be a basic feature of state behavior in Saudi Arabia and Iran and should reveal itself across time and space. I don't think this is what the empirical record tells us.

Defensive and offensive realists have emphasized different dynamics when it comes to explaining Saudi-Iranian relations, but they do so from a shared theoretical emphasis on the balance of power. Beyond the specific problems I have pointed to, then, there is also a more general problem with the underlying premise of their frameworks. Indeed, balance of power theory is very specific in terms of what states do: they *balance power*. That is to say, states focus their resources on and engage in alliances against those with the larger concentrations of material capabilities, in particular military ones. This is the core of balance of power theory. It is thus somewhat of a contradiction that alliance choices in the Persian Gulf have rarely reflected that disposition.[36] Explaining why that is requires analytical sensitivity to how ideas and identities also serve as "important power resources in Middle Eastern rivalries."[37] It requires, in other words, a relaxation of the core principles that underlie balance of power theory, and rarely are such theoretical adjustments and fine-tuning made explicit.[38]

2.1.2 Constructivism and the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry: The Primacy of Ideas and Identities

Needless to say, as we transition into the constructivist-inspired work on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, we find studies with much more of an analytical emphasis on, and a more refined theoretical vocabulary for making assertions about, how ideas and identities shape relations between the two sides. To appreciate the various positions that have been advanced in the scholarly debate, it is perhaps most instructive to begin outside the academic literature. One of the more widespread conjectures in news coverage and media analysis has been the assertion that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is fundamentally rooted in sectarian antagonism and divisions between Sunnis and Shi'as that dates back 1400 years to the early days of Islam.[39] Sunnis and Shi'as, the argument goes, have always been at odds over the most basic questions of Islamic

[36] Gause: Balancing What?, pp. 294-303.

[37] Ibid, p. 278.

[38] See footnote 22.

[39] For one example, see Washington Post: Why Sunnis and Shiites Are Fighting, Explained in Two Minutes, (January 22, 2014).

theology, and relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as the two leading centers of Sunnism and Shiism, are thus a continuation of that longstanding religious divide and necessarily bound to be conflictual. I don't think we find that essentialist or primordialist reading of Saudi-Iranian relations in its pure form in the scholarly literature. Vali Nasr's "The Shia Revival" and Geneive Abdo's "The New Sectarianism" are sometimes identified as representatives of that position, but I don't think that is an entirely warranted or particularly helpful categorization of their work.[40] The more substantial and accurate criticism of Nasr and Abdo, I believe, is that their works are first and foremost empirical inquiries and neither of them ground their analysis in a theoretical framework to support the causal claims they make. Even so, I think both Nasr and Abdo offer fairly mainstream constructivist arguments about the potency of sectarian identity politics in the Middle East and how it has become particularly salient after 2003 (in the case of Nasr) and 2011 (in the case of Abdo).[41] Neither of them make the case that religious identities are inherently fixed or that Sunnis and Shi'as constitute monolithic communities, but they clearly both begin from the premise that there are deep religious divides that are not just a product of present-day politics. For Nasr and Abdo, those divisions are not only immensely important at a societal level, but also at the state level and particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Indeed, for Nasr, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is firmly rooted in "the sectarian substructure that runs beneath Middle East politics."[42] Abdo makes an even stronger claim and suggests that the nature of Saudi-Iranian relations and the broader post-2011 regional landscape is evidence that "sometimes, it really is all about religion."[43]

There are good points raised in Nasr and Abdo's work, but I think it is underspecified in two important ways. First, the assertion that religious differences constitute *the* major fault line between Saudi Arabia and Iran cannot account for variation over time. If religious differences are what matter most, the intensity of sectarian animosity and conflict should be severe at all times, not something that fluctuates quite substantially. Second, Nasr and Abdo do not adequately unpack other influences on state behavior in Saudi Arabia and Iran outside of religious ones. Both raise the point that Saudi Arabia and Iran also "use" or "exploit" religious identities to advance "strategic and geopolitical ends", as Abdo puts it. The problem is that they are almost entirely mute on the nature of those ends and interests. However, if Saudi and Iran also "encourage religious differences for their own political [reasons]", it

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[40] For a good overview of the status of the scholarly literature on sectarianism, see Morten Valbjørn: Beyond the Beyond(s): On the (Many) Third Way(s) Beyond Primordialism and Instrumentalism in the Study of Sectarianism, (Nations and Nationalism, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2020), pp. 91-107. Valbjørn makes the point about Nasr and Abdo and I agree with it.

[41] Vali Nasr: The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future, (W.W. Norton & Company, 2006); & Geneive Abdo: The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide, (Oxford University Press, 2017). While Saudi-Iranian relations are not the object of study as such, they loom large in the background at all times and each book devote a chapter to discussing relations between them.

[42] Nasr: The Shia Revival, p. 22.

[43] Abdo: The New Sectarianism, p. 146.

seems to be quite important why that is and what those reasons are.[44] In other words, if religion is also an instrument, then what is it an instrument for? And if religion can advance particular interests at some times, is the reverse not also true that it can act as a barrier to specific political priorities at others? How are these competing pressures then reconciled? I think these are important analytical questions for understanding how and why religion matters for Saudi Arabia and Iran, and I don't think we find the answers to them in Nasr or Abdo's work, which is focused more on making the empirical case that sectarianism matters than engaging in these kinds of debates.[45]

We do have a number of studies that try to explain how ideational factors shape Saudi-Iranian relations through the use of theory. I think we can distinguish between two types of arguments that each emphasize the centrality of ideas and identities, but in different ways. The first is rooted in a variety of "soft constructivism" that focus first and foremost on the exogenous ways in which ideational factors shape their interests and interactions.[46] By contrast, the second is a form of "hard constructivism" as it has a decidedly more "inward" focus on questions of self-identity and meaning-making in its account of causation.[47] Simon Mabon and Lawrence Rubin are among the exponents of the first position. Mabon and Rubin both stress the centrality of religion, although in a quite different way than Nasr and Abdo do. Incidentally, both Mabon and Rubin ground their analyses in particular varieties of the security dilemma, and thus follow in the footsteps of Michael Barnett in terms of showing how a concept with a strong realist legacy can also be applied to the realm of ideas.[48] For Mabon, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is a "soft-power rivalry", the dynamics of which should be understood in the context of what he refers to as an "incongruence dilemma". The core of Mabon's argument is that Saudi Arabia and Iran are marked by identity incongruence – that is, the presence of ethnic, tribal, and religious identities that are stronger than the sense of national identity – that places them in constant internal security dilemmas vis-à-vis their own populations. Because they both rely on Islam as a legitimizing tool to foster cohesion and resolve their internal security dilemmas, it leads to a "soft power security dilemma guiding

[44] Ibid, p. 145.

[45] For other takes on the role of sectarianism in Saudi and Iranian foreign policy, see Afshon Ostovar: Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016); Madawi al-Rasheed: Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring, (Studies in Ethnicities and Nationality, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2011), pp. 513-526.

[46] Mabon: Saudi Arabia and Iran; Lawrence Rubin: Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics, (Stanford University Press, 2014); Robert Mason: Foreign Policy in Saudi Arabia and Iran: Economics and Diplomacy in the Middle East, (I.B. Tauris, 2015); & Fürtig: Iran's Rivalry With Saudi Arabia Between the Gulf Wars.

[47] Adel al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making; Darwich: Threats and Alliances in the Middle East; & Arshin Adib-Moghaddam: The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A Cultural Genealogy, (Routledge, 2006).

[48] Michael Barnett: Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order, (Colombia University Press, 1998).

the rivalry" between Saudi Arabia and Iran as "any reference to Islamic leadership necessitates a response from the other, resulting in a spiral of ideological competition."[49] This then spills over onto the broader regional stage as Saudi Arabia and Iran look to export their ideological values to enhance their religious legitimacy and to deflect attention from internal problems.[50] Rubin's "ideational security dilemma" develops an argument along somewhat similar lines, although he focuses more specifically on the ideological threat Iran has posed to Saudi Arabia since 1979 and the Saudi response to it. Like Mabon, Rubin also stresses the concern with domestic sociopolitical mobilization and the importance of religious soft power, or what he calls "ideational power", in Saudi-Iranian relations. He suggests that a leadership will see ideational power as threatening when "an adversary's projection of ideas and symbols during a societal crisis will undermine beliefs about its legitimacy, facilitate social mobilization and threaten its survival."[51] In response to the projection of ideational power, it will resort to "ideational balancing", which is to say that it will work to bolster and leverage its own ideational resources to attack and delegitimize the ideological threat, thus moving the two sides into the spiral of the ideational security dilemma.[52] Mabon and Rubin each show in an innovative way how the security dilemma can be modified to capture dynamics in Saudi-Iranian relations other than those emphasized by realists. They offer a coherent reasoning for why religious ideology and identity is important and do so in a way that stresses political contingency rather than theological determinism. Still, however, the theoretical focus on ideological competition and drive for religious legitimacy also comes at a cost. For Mabon, it is that he does not give those instances where ideological confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been reduced the analytical attention it deserves. Indeed, Mabon does not go into any detail on the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement of the 1990s, but only mentions it in passing. For a full-length book on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry after 1979, this is somewhat unfortunate, particularly because it is precisely in that contrast between open confrontation and pragmatic cooperation and the shifts between them that the guiding principles of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry are most clearly expressed. Rubin makes a good and very specific case for how ideas inform perceptions of threat. His framework captures the ideational challenge from Iran and the Saudi response to it around 1979 exceptionally well. At the same time, however, Rubin *only* considers ideas as a source of threat. Major regional events such as the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War of 1990-91 are entirely absent from his account. Can we really explain Saudi Arabia's threat perception without reference to the broader regional geopolitical landscape and Iran's actions – good or bad – during these conflicts? I don't think we can.

At the end of the material-ideational spectrum, we find a cluster of studies with a somewhat different take on how ideas and identities inform Saudi-Iranian rela-

[49] Mabon: Saudi Arabia and Iran, Chapter 3.
[50] Ibid, p. 173.
[51] Rubin: Islam in the Balance, p. 37.
[52] Ibid, pp. 37-40.

tions. These perspectives begin from the premise that the need for ontological security takes precedence over questions of physical security in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Ontological security, as Jennifer Mitzen has explained, "is security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice."[53] From this position, May Darwich has argued that Saudi Arabia's alliance choices in three regional crises – the Iran-Iraq War from 1980-1988, the 2006 Lebanon War, and the 2009 Gaza War—were a response to the threat Iran or its regional proxies posed to the ontological security of the Saudi leadership. The key challenge from Iran has thus not revolved around tangible security concerns, but rather has to do with the stability and distinctiveness of the Saudi identity narrative.[54] There are many merits to Darwich's highly innovative theoretical framework, which does suggest that both material and ideational forces can exercise influence on threat perception. Nevertheless, she maintains a basic dichotomy between them as threats either have to have to do with physical security or ontological security, and when it comes to Saudi Arabia, it is concerns with the latter that dominate decision-making from Darwich's perspective.[55] Arshin Adib-Moghaddam also stresses the centrality of self-identity and ontological security for explaining Iranian foreign policy. Iran makes the decisions it does, Adib-Moghaddam asserts, because of "a 'utopian-romantic' meta-narrative" that fuses Islamism and anti-imperialism and has formed a "culturally constituted consensus", which combines to produce "not only a set of ideas, but a mentality, a Geist, a systemic phenomenon that is strong enough to penetrate the strategic thinking of Iran's foreign policy elite."[56] Indeed, for Adib-Moghaddam, state behavior and state interaction in the Persian Gulf are exclusively a question of cultural influences on state identity and resulting Self-Other delineations.[57] The basic problem that confronts each of these studies, however, is that there are longstanding trends in and aspects of political decision-making in Saudi Arabia and Iran that are difficult to account for through the lens of ontological security. If incompatibilities in state identity are a cause for conflict and if leaders work to avoid discontinuities in their own narratives, then how do we explain Saudi Arabia's relationship with the United States? It brings all sorts of challenges for the Saudi leadership, not least when it comes to the consistency of its identity narrative, and yet it has remained the single most important dimension of Saudi foreign policy for more than seven decades. Similarly, if it were disparities in state identity that were at the

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[53] Jennifer Mitzen: Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma, (European Journal of International Relations, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2006), pp. 341-370. Quote on p. 344.

[54] See, May Darwich: Threats and Alliances in the Middle East, Chapters 3-5.

[55] Ibid, pp. 28-52. See also, Darwich: The Ontological (In)security of Similarity: Wahhabism Versus Islamism in Saudi Foreign Policy, (Foreign Policy Analysis, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2016), pp. 469-488.

[56] Arshin Adib-Moghaddam: Islamic Utopian Romanticism and the Foreign Policy Culture of Iran, (Middle East Critique, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2005), pp. 265-292.

[57] Adib-Moghaddam: The International Politics of the Persian Gulf. See also, Al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making.

core of the conflict between Iran and Iraq in the decade after 1979, how do we explain the puzzle that Iran was at war with the secular Ba'athist Iraq and at the same time formed an alliance with secular Ba'athist Syria? Why was Iran, at the height of its revolutionary fervor, willing to work with the United States and Israel, the very same states it condemned as the Greater Satan and the Lesser Satan, during the Iran-Iraq War? These are just some demonstrations that Saudi Arabia and Iran can very well prioritize security of the body even if means that security of the self suffers from it. The more fundamental analytical point here is that just as there are too many important aspects about Saudi Arabia and Iran that we miss without reference to ideas and identities, we run into the same kinds of problems if we do not appreciate that there is also a very pragmatic side to their behavior and a willingness to compromise on professed ideals when conditions demand that they do. Just as the balance of power perspective comes with theoretical presuppositions about the drivers of policy in Saudi Arabia and Iran that do not quite fit what we see in the real world, so too does constructivism. Nicholas Kitchen has put it pointedly, but I think he is basically correct:

> Where neorealism states that ideas don't matter, constructivism tells us that material capabilities aren't important. The unavoidable conclusion is that where structural realism reduced ideas to interests, social constructivism reduces interests to ideas. Neither can capture the sense in which both ideas and interests play roles – sometimes competing, sometimes complementary – in formulating the direction of states' foreign policy.[58]

2.2 The External-Internal Debate: Which Level of Analysis?

If one debate in the scholarly literature revolves around the question of what the underlying causes for the Saudi-Iranian rivalry are, a second debate relates to the question of whether it is Saudi Arabia and Iran's external or internal political spheres that deserve particular emphasis when we try to make sense of relations between them. The intention here is not to give the impression that everyone – or even most – work from the assumption that such a dichotomy exists. I agree with that premise. Yet some do make the case that the external or internal environment is more important. It is that particular distinction we are interested in here.

Some realists tend to stand firmly on one side of this debate, which of course is in line with the commitment to the balance of power position. Keynoush makes the point clear: domestic politics – like ideational factors – is "secondary to the vital impact of international politics on Gulf affairs." Foreign policy in Saudi Arabia and Iran, Keynoush asserts, is "dominated by sovereignty concerns", which from this particular perspective means military challenges from the outside. Saudi Arabia and Iran are not immune to domestic opposition, she notes, but the political status quo is deeply entrenched in both places, in large part because they have the financial wealth

[58] Nicholas Kitchen: Systemic Pressures and Domestic Ideas: A Neoclassical Realist Model of Grand Strategy Formation, (Review of International Studies, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2010), pp. 117-143. Quote on p. 123.

to sustain it. As a result, "the Saudi-Iranian relationship has so far remained sufficiently armored against rapid internal change." Thus, for Keynoush, "the two states retain a substantial amount of autonomy from their people in formulating their mutual ties and foreign relations."[59] In other words, Saudi Arabia and Iran are free to focus on what really matters – the balance of power in the Persian Gulf – without much distraction from their own domestic environments. Others are not necessarily as categorical in their delineation of the internal and external spheres, but also emphasize the importance of the latter. For instance, we have a range of analyses that see the fallout in Saudi-Iranian relations since the mid-2000s as a product of the collapse of state authority across the Arab Middle East, which has pushed and pulled the two sides into a zero-sum competition to influence these power vacuums.[60] Some view Saudi Arabia and Iran's regional interventions in the context of a contest over regional hegemony, as discussed earlier. Others see the two sides as engaged in a "geo-sectarian contest over the Gulf" or as the primary protagonists in a "new Middle East cold war".[61] The motivations ascribed to Saudi Arabia and Iran differ in each of these perspectives, but the common denominator is that it is regional geopolitical circumstances that shape relations between them from the outside-in. As Gause articulates this view, "Saudi and Iranian involvement in these states is driven not just by ambition, but by the structure of regional international relations. To stay out of these messy conflicts risks ceding the field to your rivals and placing yourself at dangerous disadvantage."[62]

By contrast, others stress how domestic politics shape Saudi-Iranian relations from the inside-out. These arguments come in different varieties, but they all emphasize how state behavior in Saudi Arabia and Iran and interactions between them are an extension of processes that play out in the domestic political sphere. One line of reasoning is that security threats can hardly be viewed as something that only comes from the outside. To the contrary, Ayoob suggests, "conflicts in this region have their origins – in terms of beginning and causes – in the domestic political sphere."[63] Along similar lines, Watkins has made the case that the surge in Saudi foreign policy activism has more to do with profound domestic insecurity than a need to counter Iran in the regional power game and thus is "driven more by parochial

[59] Keynoush: Saudi Arabia and Iran, pp. 16-20.

[60] For examples, see Wehrey et al.: Saudi-Iranian Relations since the Fall of Saddam; Gause: Beyond Sectarianism; & Salloukh: The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East.

[61] Emad Kaddorah: The Regional Geo-Sectarian Contest Over the Gulf, (Insight Turkey, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2018), pp. 21-32; & Gause: Beyond Sectarianism.

[62] Gregory Gause: Iran's Incoming President and the New Middle East Cold War, (Markaz Blog Post, July 8, 2013).

[63] Mohammed Ayoob: Subaltern Realism Meets the Arab World, in Shahram Akbarzadeh (ed): Routledge Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East, (Routledge, 2019). The quote appears in the abstract to the article.

concerns than by power politics."[64] The key challenge from Iran, she asserts, has always been the potential that it could inspire revolutionary fervor among Saudi Arabia's own Shi'a population. The assertiveness of Saudi foreign policy and its patterns of alignment in recent years have reflected its internal threat perception and the need to counter Shi'a opposition as well as "suppressing other political movements whom they deemed damaging to their own domestic interests."[65] Others also stress the centrality of domestic politics, but for somewhat different reasons. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry, according to Tabaar, is "factional politics all the way down".[66] From this perspective, the domestic political systems in Saudi Arabia and Iran do not represent the kind of cohesion that some realists tend to ascribe to them. Rather, they are highly fragmented and involve an ongoing factional infight between members of the elite for domestic power. That competition for state domination, according to Tabaar, "parallels, if not overshadows, the states' competition for regional domination. To that end, in each state elites construct and deploy specific identities as force multipliers that correspond to their internal threat perceptions and locus within the domestic political system." Thus, according to Tabaar, Saudi Arabia and Iran's foreign policy choices are to a large extent determined by the balance of power *within* their respective leaderships. "What looks like moves to increase the state's power or ideological influence", he suggests, "are, in fact, survival strategies of ruling factions."[67] Al-Toraifi also sees domestic politics as part and parcel of the ups and downs of Saudi-Iranian relations. More specifically, for al-Toraifi, changes in the factional balance in Iran have been accompanied by changes in its state identity and largely shaped its relations with Saudi Arabia. According to al-Toraifi, it was the rise of the reformist movement in Iran that facilitated the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement of the 1990s. When hardliners seized power in the mid-2000s, Saudi-Iranian relations suffered as a consequence.[68]

2.3 The Absent Debate: Saudi-Iranian Relations and Interstate Rivalries

As the previous pages have made clear, we have a range of perspectives on the relative weight of material and ideational factors as well as different points of emphasis when it comes to whether the external or internal environment is more important in

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[64] Jessica Watkins: Identity Politics, Elites and Omnibalancing: Reassessing Arab Gulf State Interventions in the Arab Uprisings from the Inside Out, (Conflict, Security and Development, Vol. 20, No. 5, 2020), pp. 653-675. Quote on p. 658.

[65] Ibid. See also, Lawrence Rubin: Islam in the Balance; & Toby Matthiesen: The Domestic Sources of Saudi Foreign Policy: Islamists and the State in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings, (Working Paper, The Brookings Institution's Rethinking Political Islam Series, August 2015).

[66] Mohammed Ayatollahi Tabaar: Iran-Saudi Relations: Factional Politics All the Way Down, (H-Diplo/International Security Studies Forum, Policy Roundtable 2-4, 2018).

[67] Ibid.

[68] See, Al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making, Chapters 7 and 8.

shaping Saudi-Iranian relations. Yet what everyone agrees on, irrespective of where they stand in these debates, is that Saudi Arabia and Iran are rivals, and that they are in some shape or fashion making claims about the Saudi-Iranian *rivalry*. However, despite the centrality of the concept of rivalry to the scholarly literature on Saudi-Iranian relations, there is surprisingly little attention devoted to even some of the most basic conceptual and analytical questions that seem quite important: How do we define "rivalry"? Where should we focus our analytical attention when we study one? For what reasons and with what implications? The lack of engagement with questions such as these is especially surprising given the fact that there is a large literature on interstate rivalries in international politics that has explored these issues quite extensively. A recent critique put it in the following way:

> For MENA dedicated-studies, it is common to find loosely defined concepts of rivalry used in studying regional conflict and various forms of security relations. (…) However, very few works on the MENA provide theoretically driven analysis and engage rivalry as a distinct field of study.[69]

Indeed, to my knowledge, there are only a few studies that have tried to connect the study of Saudi-Iranian relations to the study of interstate rivalries.[70] This study makes such an effort. I do so in a somewhat biased or instrumental way, however. By that I mean that whereas the study of interstate rivalries has very much focused on finding general explanations for rivalry dynamics that are valid across cases, my focus is on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Thus, I use insights from the literature on interstate rivalries as a way of qualifying the research question that will guide this study and the kind of theoretical focus that I think is required to answer it. Indeed, the major advantage of engaging with the field of rivalry analysis is that it points us in a direction that allows us to connect and synthesize the material-ideational and external-internal debates on Saudi-Iranian relations and do so in a way that is theoretically consistent and justified. So how does it do this?

The study of interstate rivalries in international politics began from the empirical observation that some pairs of states are more prone to crises, conflicts, and wars than others. According to Thompson:

> The basic idea underlying an interest in rivalries is that a few pairs of states are disproportionately associated with the disputes and wars that constitute some of the more dramatic aspects of international relations. All states do not have an equal

[69] Imad Mansour & William Thompson: Introduction: A Theory of Shocks and Rivalry, in Mansour & Thompson (eds): Shocks and Rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa, (Georgetown University Press, 2020), pp. 1-12. Quote on p. 1.

[70] Devine: Accommodation Within Middle Eastern Strategic Rivalries; & John Calabrese: The Saudi-Iran Strategic Rivalry: "Like Fire and Dynamite", in Mansour & Thompson (ed): Shocks and Rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa, pp. 59-80. It is somewhat instructive that these efforts have come from a PhD thesis and from within the field of rivalry analysis respectively.

> likelihood of becoming involved in conflict with all other states. Yet some states seem to have high propensities for engaging in conflict relations with certain other states.[71]

From this basic interest in explaining why some states' relations are evidently that more tense, the field of rivalry analysis has developed two primary schools of thought on how to conceptualize and study international rivalries. The first focuses on what is called "Enduring Rivalries" and it emphasizes the "density" of the conflicts a pair of states engages in. The idea here is that because conflict – in some shape or fashion – is at the core of these relationships and because violence can be seen as the ultimate expression of conflicts, rivalry analysis should focus on those states that have engaged in X number of militarized disputes within Y number of years. This allows for the collection of a neat dataset, but of course it also comes with some serious limitations. To suggest that states engaged in multiple militarized disputes are rivals tells us precious little about the underlying issues of contention since the rivalry, by definition, did not start until after violence has erupted. Moreover, it leaves out a number of extremely conflictual relationships simply because they have not met an arbitrary threshold of repeated physical confrontations set by the analyst. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to argue that there have been no inter-Arab rivalries in the 20th century and of course Saudi Arabia and Iran would also not qualify as one.

It was in response to this very rigid and underspecified approach to rivalry analysis that a second approach developed, which I find much more compelling and from which we can learn some important lessons. This approach is called "Strategic Rivalries", and it takes a more interpretivist and psychological approach to the study of rivalries. From this perspective, a rivalry is defined as "a perceptual categorizing process in which actors identify which states are sufficiently threatening competitors to qualify as enemies."[72] To tie rivalry analysis to specific levels of violence is to begin from the wrong premise about what creates and sustains a rivalry relationship. "Whether the states actually clash physically is beside the point", Thompson & Dreyer argue, "What matters is how decision-makers decide which actor(s) is (are) more threatening at any point in time."[73] To explain why that is, we first have to appreciate that rivalries in part are about competition over overlapping interests and goals. As Colaresi et al. put it, "we cannot have as much as we would like of objects with value because there is usually not enough of them to go around. If desired objects are scarce, someone's gain usually means someone else's loss."[74] Conflicting interests and priorities lead states into competition with others, particularly when they are deemed "capable of playing in the same league" over certain issues.[75] But competition between states need not be overtly conflictual. More often than not, states

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[71] William Thompson: Principal Rivalries, (Journal of Conflict Resolution, Vol. 39, No. 2, 1995), pp. 195-223. Quote on. p. 196.

[72] Colaresi et al: Strategic Rivalries in World Politics, p. 15.

[73] William Thompson & David Dreyer: Identifying and Categorizing Interstate Rivalries, in Thompson & Dreyer (eds): Handbook of International Rivalries, (CQ Press, 2011), pp. 11-21. Quote on p. 12.

[74] Colaresi et al: Strategic Rivalries in World Politics, pp. 23-24.

[75] Ibid, p. 25.

are able to have rather cordial relations with their competitors and reach some sort of compromise over issues that divide them. In other words, while all rivals are competitors in some sense, it is not all competitors who view each other as rivals. "Rivals", as Thompson has argued, "are thus competitors who have been singled out for special attention in some way."[76] He goes on to make the crucial point:

> In the end it is actors themselves who transform some of their competitors into rivals by bestowing greater threat potential on them than others. This greater threat potential is what separates rivals from other adversaries. It is the element of insecurity that differentiates full-fledged rivals from competitors. (…) The premise here is that without the possibility of a future coming to blows over the issues that divide them, competitors are apt to remain competitors. A security threat is not sufficient to generate a strategic rivalry, but it seems to be a necessary ingredient.[77]

In other words, the distinctive feature of a rivalry is that the actors involved recognize that there is something about the nature of their relationship that makes it qualitatively different from more regular competition over specific issues of contention. That particular element is that they at all times view each other as at least a potential source of threat to their most important interests. For that reason, interstate rivalries are marked by a pervasive condition of mutual suspicion and mistrust. Both sides tend to expect hostile behavior from the other side and they "proceed to deal with the adversary with that expectation in mind."[78] At the same time, it is also a dynamic process that evolves over time as conflicts of interests are exacerbated or alleviated and perceptions of threat are adjusted. It is precisely in this context that rivalry should be understood as a "perceptual categorizing process" in which decision-makers' perceptions of threat are a central part of the equation. As Colaresi et al. have argued,

> Rivalry relationships are based on decision-maker expectations about the intentions of adversaries [and their ability] to do harm (…). These expectations are first formed and subsequently maintained by external and internal processes. They then condition which strategies decision-makers select to cope with domestic demands and external threats. Rivalries thus afford an excellent opportunity to investigate the evolution of foreign policy as a result of interacting psychological processes and interpretations of the internal and external environments in which decision-makers operate.[79]

From my perspective, the perceptual perspective that underlies the strategic rivalry approach gets to the core of what rivalries are all about and offers the best direction with respect to how we should approach the analytical study of one. On the one hand, it is very specific in the sense that it suggests that what makes it possible to refer to *a rivalry* as a distinct category of interstate relationships is that something is at

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[76] William Thompson: Why Rivalries Matter and What Great Power Rivalries Can Tell Us About World Politics, in Thompson (ed): Great Power Rivalries, (University of South Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 3-28. Quote on p.3.
[77] Ibid, p. 13.
[78] Colaresi et al: Strategic Rivalries in World Politics, p. 27.
[79] Colaresi et al: Strategic Rivalries in World Politics, p. 287.

stake. I think it precisely true that it is the element of threat that elevates and separates rivalries from more benign forms of interstate competition and makes it a useful analytical category. Without reference to perceptions of threat, I think we are hard-pressed to explain what a rivalry is and the logic by which it unfolds. On the other hand, while rivalries share some very basic common traits, the strategic rivalry approach is also broad enough in the sense that it allows for a rivalry to be understood on its own terms, sensitive to its particular history and how specific sets of priorities and concerns divide the actors in question. It calls for specification of how decision-makers define their core interests and how they perceive threats to those interests. More specifically, we need to be able to explain the conditions under which conflicts of interests emerge and escalate, why they subside at other times, and how perceptions of threat form and change as a result thereof. This is the approach that guides this study of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the connections it has set out to make – and it is precisely why I focus on the particular research question that was specified in the previous chapter.

2.4 Towards a Synthesis: Rivalry and Regime Security

The discussion of the previous pages provides strong support and a coherent reasoning for the regime security perspective I adopt to study the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. If the most important element in a rivalry relationship is "the decision-makers and their perceptions of sources of threat", then we need we need to emphasize dynamics of regime security to understand the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.[80] As I suggested in the previous chapter, and as I will substantiate further in the next chapter, the primacy of regime security is the central arc around which decision-making and threat perception revolves in Saudi Arabia and Iran. This is also the point where we begin to reach a full circle. Indeed, if the perceptual approach to rivalry analysis is a strong argument in favor of the regime security position, the regime security approach – in turn – is perfectly situated to synthesize and add specificity to the material-ideational and external-internal debates on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry that I have highlighted in this chapter. As Curtis Ryan have argued, "the link between these paradigmatic debates (…) is the ruling regime."[81] And as he has elaborated,

> Focusing on regimes and their security concerns (internal and external [as well as] material and ideational) allow us to use the regime security approach to link otherwise competing paradigms. (…) A regime security approach is not only compatible with, for example, realist and constructivist approaches, but it also provides a bridge between them.[82]

I would take it a step further and suggest that a regime security lens *requires* the integration of realist and constructivist insights. Realists are quite right to stress the

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[80] Ibid, p. 33.

[81] Curtis Ryan: Inter-Arab Alliances, p. 11.

[82] Curtis Ryan: Regime Security and Shifting Alliances in the Middle East, in POMEPS: International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East, (POMEPS Studies No. 16, 2015), pp. 42-45. Quote on pp. 43-44.

importance of the external strategic environment and security concerns in the very traditional sense of the term. Constructivists are equally right to highlight how ideas can be every bit as threatening. What is true of both realist and constructivists insights is that they remain limited unless they are understood in the more specific context of regime security. A regime security perspective thus widens the theoretical scope, but it also adds analytical precision to it. Indeed, it is only with reference to the interplay between these factors and the recognition that threats for Saudi Arabia and Iran are both material and ideational and that they worry about both the internal stability and external security of their regimes that we can begin to make sense of the rivalry between them and adequately account for its evolution over time. In the following chapter, I expand on these premises and present the theoretical framework that allow us to make these connections.

Chapter 3:
A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Threat Perception

Understanding the general predispositions held by decision-makers is an important step in explaining their specific perceptions.[83]

- Robert Jervis

How do Saudi Arabia and Iran come to think about each other in particular ways? Why are relations between them intensely conflictual at some times and rather stable at other times? In short, what drives the Saudi-Iranian rivalry? In the first chapter I briefly introduced the theoretical framework that will guide the analysis of Saudi-Iranian relations from 1979 to 2011 which I provide in this thesis. This chapter presents the details of my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception.[84] As I have already suggested, the case I will make here and throughout this study is that the single most important factor in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is the extent of convergence or conflict of their regime security interests. More specifically, I argue that changes in the extent ideological and geopolitical dissonance causes the formation of particular perceptual prisms of threat in Saudi Arabia and Iran and thus shape interactions between them. The chapter proceeds as follows. I begin with a short outline of my view on what a theory is and what a theoretical framework should be able to do. The remainder of the chapter is divided into two overarching sections with different points of emphasis. In the first, I substantiate why we need to focus on the ruling regimes in Saudi Arabia and Iran and define what threats to regime security are. On this basis, the second part ties my argument to image theory and explain how the

[83] Robert Jervis: Perception and Misperception in International Politics, (Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 146.

[84] Why do I refer to this as a neoclassical realist theory and not something else? While I certainly think there are problems with too strict (or structural) understandings of realism, the argument I advance here is best understood as one that is formed around a realist core and accepts constructivists insights rather than the other way around. I do subscribe to basic realist premises about the centrality of security and self-interest in political life and in the international realm in particular. As I will argue in this chapter and show in the empirical analysis, the kinds of security threats that Saudi Arabia and Iran mostly worry about are very *tangible* and not simply social constructions with no material bases. I buy completely that realist analyses too often are too underspecified – and this is true beyond the context of Saudi Arabia and Iran – but when it comes to the most basic questions of how the world operates, I think realism gets more things right than it gets wrong. We cannot do without reference to ideas, but I very much agree with Gregory Gause's assertion that "Recognition of the importance of ideas does not negate Realist insights about anarchy, power and conflict in the Persian Gulf; it contextualizes those Realist insights by giving us a fuller understanding of how state leaders define their interests and understand the power resources at their disposal." See, Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 243. I discuss the tenets of neoclassical realism later on in the chapter.

concepts of ideological and geopolitical dissonance allow us to build the four-fold typology of threat perception which was referenced in the first chapter. In doing so, I address the causal questions of how ideological and geopolitical dissonance are linked to increases in threat perception and introduce the two causal mechanisms that specifies the process.

3.1 Theory and Social Scientific Inquiry

A sound theoretical framework is the most important element in our efforts to make sense of the social and political world. It is our theories that establish the parameters for where we should focus our analytical attention and provide us with guidance as to how to interpret the findings we make. I subscribe to the view that the use of theories in the social sciences serves two primary purposes, and that to evaluate the merits of any theoretical framework is to ask to what extent it is successful in terms of meeting those ends. First, theories are simplifying prisms that highlight certain features of reality as more important for understanding a particular phenomenon as opposed to others. Since the international sphere – like that of any system that involves human interactions – is marked by high levels of complexity, theory development necessarily involves a critical element of reducing that ambiguity through the clear and explicit delineation of why some factors need to be emphasized to the exclusion of others. In other words, the best analogy to the primary function of a theory is that of a map. As Mearsheimer & Walt have pointed out, theories and maps "[b]oth aim to simplify a complex reality so we can grasp it better. A highway map of the United States, for example, might include major cities, roads, rivers, mountains, and lakes. But it would leave out less prominent features such as individual trees, buildings, or the rivets on the Golden Gate Bridge. Like a theory, a map is an abridged version of reality."[85]

Second, a theory needs to provide an account of causation. That is, it needs to provide a coherent reasoning for how the factors it emphasizes interact in certain ways to produce particular outcomes. In doing so, theories provide us with explanations of events and patterns in the empirical world that may otherwise have seemed random or particularly puzzling. For that explanation to achieve any accuracy or depth and ultimately advance our collective understanding of the subject under investigation, the premises it builds on must be anchored in the real world. That is to say that "the assumptions that underpin the theory must accurately reflect – or at least reasonably approximate – particular aspects of political life."[86] The theoretical framework I develop in this chapter assumes the primacy of regime security in Saudi Arabia and Iran. I will make my case for why I believe that to be an entirely reasonable proposition, but if we entertain the thought that it is misleading or outright inaccurate, there would indeed be good reasons to bring my causal explanation into

[85] John Mearsheimer & Stephen Walt: Leaving Theory Behind: Why Simplistic Hypothesis Testing Is Bad for International Relations, (European Journal of International Relations, Vol. 19. No. 3, 2013), pp. 427-457. Quote on p. 431.
[86] Ibid, p. 432.

question. Like a traveler is likely to lose patience with a map that is found to be demonstrably wrong, a theory will fail to convince others of its explanatory power if it builds on erroneous assumptions about how the world operates. In other words, the gold standard for theoretical frameworks in IR are those that successfully combine the need for theoretical parsimony with convincing explanatory ability. That is the approach that informs this study, and the ideal it should ultimately be weighed against.

3.2 The Primacy of Regime Security in the Persian Gulf

The rulers of the states bordering the Persian Gulf – Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates – devote most of their time and resources towards improving their security conditions, and yet the single most distinctive characteristic of the region is the pervasiveness of insecurity. At the core of that basic security dilemma is the fact that the regional system is populated by units that make their decisions based on short-term considerations of regime security. In dealing with a multitude of actual and potential threats from within their own societies and in their relations with outside powers, they routinely prioritize quick-fix answers to what they find to be the most serious and immediate challenge to their rule and tend to do so in ways that only create further problems for them down the line.[87] The primacy of regime security in the Persian Gulf is very much a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In emphasizing the centrality of regime security, I follow in the footsteps of others who argue that the empirical realities in the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East require us to rethink and specify core assumptions that much scholarship within the field of International Relations usually begins from. Curtis Ryan has put it best:

> The regime security approach (…) begins with the premise that even such central concepts as state, security, and the national interest can best be seen as having looser and more multifaceted meanings in [the Middle East]. The real question then turns on what the state really is, or more appropriately, *who* is the state? And this question leads to an equally important set of questions such as whose security is really at stake in the making of state policy, and who is in a position to define national security in the first place? (…) The key interest is not the nebulous "national interest" invoked by political elites, but the specific interest of that elite in its own security and survival. (…) And security of the "state", particularly in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian developing

[87] This is the contention of Curtis Ryan who ties his theoretical focus on regime security in the Middle East to security dilemma theory. See, Ryan: Inter-Arab Alliances, pp. 23-42; & Ryan: Regime Security and Shifting Alliances in the Middle East. For a good discussion of security dilemma dynamics in the Persian Gulf region more specifically, see Mehran Kamrava: Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf, (Cornell University Press, 2018). According to Kamrava, a key aspect of the security dilemmas in the region is that "across the Gulf, the paramount of objective of foreign policy is regime security." Quote on p. 18.

> countries is achieved by thwarting threats to the continued tenure of the ruling regime, whether those threats are based internally or externally.[88]

There are two reasons why regime security as a conceptual lens to study Saudi-Iranian relations is not only warranted, but in my opinion entirely necessary. The first is empirical. These are regimes that have been in power for decades, and it is simply a fact that they have built their domestic political systems around the premise that they should be. To emphasize regime security is to make an analytical assumption about how Saudi Arabia and Iran come to think and act as they do, but it is also one that makes perfect sense when one considers how these regimes are organized and operate. The second reason is theoretical. Indeed, when we focus on the survival imperatives of these regimes, we can move beyond debates on whether material or ideational factors matter more and whether we should privilege the internal or external environments in our analyses. A regime security perspective offers a theoretical justification for connecting these themes and allow us instead to focus instead on the more important analytical questions of how, why and when they matter. And for that reason, it gives us the opportunity to provide some very specific answers to those questions. The following sections expand on both of these overall points.

To strengthen the case that we need to emphasize "the regime" as the primary unit of analysis in Saudi Arabia and Iran, I begin with a brief elaboration of who these regimes are. Because the internal workings of the regimes in Saudi Arabia and Iran are entire research projects in their own right, I limit this discussion to the most basic features in terms of their structure and organization. I subsequently turn to the questions that are more important from a theoretical perspective, namely what the emphasis on regime security means for Saudi Arabia and Iran in terms of the kinds of threats that they find themselves subject to and continuously work to protect themselves against.

3.2.1 "We Must Hang Together or Surely We Shall Hang Separately"

As former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson once accurately observed, the national purpose of Saudi Arabia is "to survive, perchance to prosper," but with the all-important qualification, "under the Al Saud dynasty".[89] As one of the few states in the world named after its ruling family, Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policy priorities have been defined and pursued by the royal family since Abdulaziz al-Saud established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the early 1930s. Indeed, the single most important element in shaping the worldview of the members of the Saudi royal fam-

[88] Ryan: Inter-Arab Alliances, p. 13.

[89] Quoted in Hermann Frederick Eilts: Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy, in L.C. Brown (ed): Diplomacy in the Middle East: The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers, (I.B. Tauris, 2001), pp. 219-244. Quote on p. 219.

ily has been to see "their own permanence as an essential facet of the country's survival".[90] To be sure, personal rivalries and competition among different power centers within the Al Saud have also been a part of royal family politics since the inception of the Saudi state. For instance, the fierce split in the 1950s and early 1960s between King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal nearly resulted in the collapse of the Saudi monarchy and was only resolved when the former was forced into exile. In spite of – or perhaps precisely because of – such public displays of disunity, the Al Saud has since developed a remarkable ability to solve its differences privately in order to act as a cohesive unit publicly.

Saudi Arabia is a prototypical example of what Michael Herb has referred to as *dynastic monarchies*, which helps explain why the Al Saud has avoided both disintegration from within and challenges to its monopoly on power from the wider Saudi society. According to Herb, dynastic monarchies are different from other authoritarian monarchies in that members of the ruling royal family control the security apparatus and the portfolios of the Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Defense ministries.[91] Because the highest offices of the state are held by individuals whose loyalty lies with the royal family as an institution, it is immensely difficult to use the state apparatus to overthrow the established domestic order. The wide distribution of princes in the state bureaucracy also provides the Al Saud with an information network, effectively ensuring that "those who make decisions have the information necessary to adjust ruling family policies in ways that reinforce the allegiance of its supporters while dampening the ire of its enemies."[92] Membership of the Al Saud gives access to privilege, status and wealth, but it does not necessarily translate into political influence. As Gause explains:

> The key decisionmaking body in Saudi Arabia is that group of senior members of the Al Saud family who, by reason of their official position or their standing within the family, decide all major issues of policy. When there is a strong King, (…) decisionmaking on foreign policy is concentrated in his hands. When the king is not a forceful personality, the decisionmaking circle widens. People outside the ruling family play important roles as advisers, but the key decisions are made within the Al Saud.[93]

Beyond the cohesion of the royal family itself, two factors have been essential for the Al Saud's ability to maintain and consolidate its power at home and extend Saudi influence abroad. The first is oil. For most of its existence, Saudi Arabia has been the world's leading producer and exporter of oil, and it controls almost a fifth of the world's proven oil reserves. And with that leverage also come advantages. Certainly,

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[90] Adeed Dawisha: Saudi Arabia's Search for Security, (Adelphi Paper, No. 158, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1979), p. 7.

[91] Michael Herb: All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies, (State University of New York Press, 1999). Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE also qualify as dynastic monarchies.

[92] Ibid, p. 238.

[93] Gregory Gause: The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia, in Anoushiravan Ehteshami & Raymond Hinnebusch (eds): The Foreign Policies of Middle East States, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), pp. 185-206. Quote on p. 204.

Saudi Arabia would not have developed the relationship it has with the United States – and attracted the security guarantees that has come with it – were it not for oil. The wealth the Saudis have built from oil, in turn, has provided it with the financial means to build loyalty and attract support domestically and use money to push its interests internationally. The second factor is religion. Saudi Arabia is home to the two most important places in Islam, Mecca and Medina, providing the royal family with a claim to Islamic leadership and religious legitimacy. The Al Saud has further enhanced its religious authority by virtue of its longstanding alliance with the clerical establishment and particularly the Al-ash Sheikh, the influential family that descends from Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, whose conservative and puritanical interpretation of Sunni Islam in the 18th century is at the center of what today is commonly referred to as Wahhabism. This political bargain has granted the clerical establishment a significant influence in cultural and social spheres at home in exchange for a religious sanctioning of the Saudi royal family's right to rule and subordination to the Al Saud in economic, military, and foreign affairs.[94]

If it makes analytical sense to focus on the security interests of the regime in Saudi Arabia, how about Iran? After all, unlike in Saudi Arabia, where the regime revolves around the primacy of the royal family, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 precisely dismantled such a system of family-based hereditary rule. This is perhaps a good opportunity to emphasize that it is not the particular configuration of a regime which is the reason why we should focus on regime security. Authoritarian regimes differ greatly in their structures. In the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East, they have come in several different varieties: some secular, others Islamist; some republics, others monarchies; some highly personalized, others highly factionalized. What they all have in common and what makes it possible to emphasize "the regime" as an analytical category is the overall ambition of the ruling elite to keep in place the system they preside over and devote their time and resources towards that end. Iran after 1979 is a very different regime than Saudi Arabia – and both are very different from, say, Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Yet, if we understand regime security as "the condition where governing elites are free from violent challenges to their rule", that fundamental interest has guided decision-making for each of these regimes despite the differences in their internal organization.[95]

That being said, there is no question that it *is* a more difficult exercise to identify the boundaries of the Iranian regime than those of Saudi Arabia's. The power structure in Iran *is* more multifaceted, the political landscape *is* more complicated, and precisely for those reasons, leadership dynamics in Iran tend to be more fluid and diverse than they are in Saudi Arabia. That fluidity and diversity does not mean that

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[94] See Gregory Gause: Official Wahhabism and the Sanctioning of Saudi-US Relations, in Mohammed Ayoob & Hosan Kosebalaban (eds): Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009), pp. 135-148. For an excellent study of the Saudi religious establishment, see Nabil Mouline: The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia, (Yale University Press, 2014).

[95] Richard Jackson: Regime Security, in Alan Collins (ed): Contemporary Security Studies, (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 200-214. The definition quoted here appears on p. 200.

political decision-making in Iran is not every bit the top-down process it is in Saudi Arabia or that elite consensus is not every bit as integral to that process. It simply means that the institutional setting in Iran is by default and by design one of complexity and that the Iranian regime mirrors that to a certain extent. Wilfried Buchta's *Who Rules Iran?* is an excellent study of the internal structure of the Iranian regime and offers a useful framework for reducing some of the ambiguities that surround it. According to Buchta, the key for understanding the Iranian regime lies in its power structures, which are both formal and informal. The formal power structures are "the major institutions that constitute the heart and soul of the regime".[96] These include the Assembly of Experts, the Guardian Council, the Office of the President, and the leadership of the coercive institutions – that is, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the regular military (the Artesh), and the police and security services. The authority and responsibilities of each these formal centers of power are overlapping, and the presence of these parallel institutions makes for a very opaque and diffuse political system – but also one that has an underlying logic to it. Specifically, it aims to prevent "any one center of power from gaining undue influence over the entire system", and to ensure "the overall survival and security of the regime and the central position of the Supreme Leader."[97] Indeed, the final arbiter and ultimate decision-maker in Iran is the Supreme Leader, personified first in Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini from 1979 to his death in 1989, and in Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ever since. Karim Sadjapour describes the position of the Supreme Leader in the following way:

> Neither a dictator nor a democrat – but with traits of both – Khamenei is the single most powerful individual in a highly factionalized, autocratic regime. Though he does not make national decisions on his own, neither can any major decisions be taken without his consent. He has ruled the country by consensus rather than decree, with his own survival and that of the theocratic system as his top priorities.[98]

The formal power structures are important for understanding how the Islamic Republic operates, but it is the informal power structure in Iran that specifies how – and around whom – the regime is organized. According to Buchta, the Iranian regime is best understood according to four concentric "rings of power" that increase in size from the inner to the outer circles and where influence in the regime increases as one moves from the periphery to the core. The central ring of power – what Buchta refers to as "the patriarchs" – is the inner circle of the regime and "serves as its central nervous system."[99] It consists of a relatively small number of the most powerful

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[96] Wilfried Buchta: Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic, (The Washington Institute for Near East Studies, 2000), p. XII.

[97] David Thaler et al: Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics, (RAND Corporation, 2010), p. 22.

[98] Karim Sadjapour: Reading Khamenei: The Worldview of Iran's Most Powerful Leader, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), p. 1.

[99] Buchta: Who Rules Iran?, p. 6. According to Buchta, the five most influential patriarchs in 1999 were Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Head of the Expediency Council Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani, Head of the Judicial Branch Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, President Mohammed Khatami, and Head of the Guardian Council Ahmad Jannati.

political clerics from the executive, judicial, and legislative branches, the religious institutions, and of course the Supreme Leader. It is the consensus among these individuals – or more precisely, the positions that they hold – that has the single most important weight on decision-making in the Islamic Republic. The second ring of power consists of the highest-ranking governmental officials and bureaucrats who play an important role in implementing political decisions and also – but to a lesser extent – can influence these guidelines. The third ring of power is the regime's power base and are those individuals who control the different organs that are loyal to the regime, such as the security bodies, the revolutionary foundations, and much of the media. Finally, the fourth ring of power includes those individuals who formerly played an influential role in the regime, but now operate on the fringes between the system and civil society, and sometimes form a semi-loyal opposition to the regime.[100] One can question specific elements in Buchta's model – which he also asserts is a simplified one – but the gist of his argument, that the Iranian regime should be understood with reference to these concentric circles, is one I agree with. Within these formal and informal centers of power in the Iranian system – and in Iranian society more broadly – —there is space for diversity on specific issues of policy. One can be more or less socially and religiously conservative, and one can be more or less in favor of Iran's integration into the international community. Any given position can be more or less politically expedient at particular moments in time, but there is room for differences of opinion in terms of *how* Iran confronts its problems. Crucially important, however, is that there is a clearly defined red line to all these debates, and that is to not question the system itself or work against important decisions once they have been made. For that reason, "Iranian leaders, regardless where they stand on the political spectrum, are principally concerned with the Islamic republic's survival and perpetuation."[101] Differences between them are about the road to that end, not the end itself. Incidentally, I don't think this all that different from the politics of the Saudi royal family, where different individuals also have differences of opinion on specific matters of policy. To be sure, there is much more emphasis on keeping those deliberations in-house in Saudi Arabia. But the basic proposition that differences of opinion are acceptable as long as they are kept within certain guidelines, I believe, applies to both the Saudi and Iranian regimes. On the most important questions that relate directly to Iran's security, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) has since 1989 been the central organ for consensus-building among Iran's power centers and the primary decision-making body in the Islamic Republic. The SNSC brings together leading members or representatives of the inner circle of the regime, the top officials from the government, and the leaders of Iran's military and security services. Because the members of the SNSC have different institutional affiliations and thus can also represent competing institutional interests, there can be substantial disagreement when a topic appears on the Council's agenda. However, once consensus is reached, and it has been approved by the Supreme

[100] Ibid, pp. 6-10.

[101] International Crisis Group: Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East, (Middle East Report, No. 184, April 2018), p. 2.

Leader, the decisions of the SNSC are final and all parties fall in line.[102] Thus, as a report from the International Crisis Group concluded,

> Key national security decisions are made by a small group of senior officials, who are both relatively insulated from, and yet reflect, alterations in formal institutional structures as a result of elections or personnel changes. These decision-makers, who are mostly the original revolutionaries, have been in the inner power circles for nearly four decades and have intertwining personal histories. (…) This continuity reinforces the coherence of Iran's regional policies stemming from the SNCS's consensual approach to decision-making, while increasing the risk of groupthink. Nevertheless, the process is highly effective in making tactical decisions and often slow in strategic turnabouts.[103]

3.3 The Dual Nature of Threats in the Persian Gulf

If it makes empirical sense that we focus on the ruling elites in Saudi Arabia and Iran and their particular interests in preserving and protecting their own regimes, the operative question becomes *from what*? That is, what does security mean for these regimes, and what are the kinds of threats that they worry about? I begin my discussion of these important questions from Gregory Gause's observation that the regimes of the Persian Gulf at all times focus on two categories of threats. The first kind of threat is efforts by outsiders to encourage dissent against a regime from inside its own borders. The second kind of threat consists of more conventional military challenges from outside its borders.[104] Outsiders thus can be threats in two different ways. Although Gause stresses the importance of both of these categories of threats, he argues that Gulf rulers ultimately view the first type of threat as more dangerous than the second type. Specifically, he suggests that "words – if it is feared they will find resonance among a state's citizens – were seen as more immediately threatening than guns" when regional states prioritize among the threats they face.[105] I differ somewhat from Gause on two points. First, I think his claim is probably accurate most of the time, but I don't think it is accurate all of the time. The threat that Saddam Hussein's Iraq posed to the security of the regimes in Iran and Saudi Arabia in 1980 and 1990 respectively was, in fact, more about guns than about words. I also don't think that the challenge Saudi Arabia has come to see from Iran after 2003 is best explained by the kind of threat Gause emphasizes. In other words, I don't think it is entirely accurate that regimes in the region inherently and necessarily view the threat of domestic destabilization as more of a problem. Rather, I think they prioritize the threat they find more urgent and severe, regardless of whether the threat is to their internal stability or external security.[106] Second, and relatedly, I think Gause's oper-

[102] Ibid, p. 8.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Gregory Gause: Threats and Threat Perception in the Persian Gulf Region, (Middle East Policy, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2007), pp. 119-124.
[105] Gause: Balancing What?, p. 274.
[106] This is also the position Curtis Ryan holds. See, Ryan: Inter-Arab Alliances, pp. 14-19.

ationalization of how regimes identify threats to their external security is too restricted. He uses military power as that indicator, which makes sense as this is what conventional realist wisdom tells us to do, and Gause's aim is precisely to show that realist prescriptions about threat identification are underspecified. I agree that they are. But I think the inference we should draw from this is not that external security is relatively less important to these regimes, but rather that there is more to how they think about threats to their external security than simply concentrations of military power. This is a point I return to and spell out more clearly later on in the chapter. The important takeaway from Gause's work on regime security and threat perception in the Persian Gulf, and where I absolutely agree with him, is that we have to begin from the premise that these regimes think and act in terms of their own security and that they worry about threats to their internal stability and external security. Let us consider why in more detail.

3.3.1 Internal Stability

There are two primary reasons why the regimes of the Persian Gulf worry about their internal stability. The first has to do with the authoritarian nature of their political systems and the particular kind of political order they have imposed on their societies. As Kamrava has noted, "the implicit bargain underlying the nature of political rule in the region has required citizens to surrender their political and social rights to participatory government. They are expected to accept the legitimacy of ruling regimes, however grudgingly, and are rewarded with a variety of goods and services in return."[107] There is no doubt that the ability to provide their citizens with material benefits is an important reason for their staying in power. Yet even oil wealth cannot bridge the fundamental divide between ruler and ruled in repressive authoritarian states or conceal the inherent legitimacy deficits that follow from it. As Curtis Ryan has succinctly put it, "Opposition charges against the assorted royal families and against the military-bureaucratic regimes of [the Middle East] range in terms of specifics, but in a broader sense they look quite similar: they all focus on what they perceive to be economic, political and moral corruption. In short, internal opposition groups throughout the region, whether secular or Islamist, are tapping into deep reservoirs of domestic discontent."[108] The extent of the regimes' anxieties over this ever-present potential for mobilization against them is directly reflected in the progressive growth of their institutions of coercion and control. Each of them has built extremely efficient domestic security apparatuses – with a multitude of secret police agencies, intelligence services and paramilitary security forces – all aimed at ensuring that their own populations remain politically passive and punish those who do not toe the line. Yet, for all their draconian effectiveness in terms of maintaining stability, the cost for the regimes is that this all too clearly illustrates the basic crisis of legitimacy

[107] Mehran Kamrava: Introduction, in Kamrava (ed): Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East, (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 1-13. Quote on p.2.
[108] Ryan: Inter-Arab Alliances, p. 36.

that underlies their relationships with their own populations.[109] It is no small irony, then, that the regimes of the Persian Gulf are almost pathologically sensitive about their legitimacy and their right to rule.

This ties directly into the second reason why regimes worry about their internal stability, namely the strength of transnational identities in the region and the power of ideas and ideologies that are grounded in those identities to drive political mobilization within states as well as across borders. As Gause has summarized:

> The Persian Gulf region is characterized by a number of transnational identities – Arab, Kurdish, Muslim, Shi'i, Sunni, tribal. Arab identities cut across every border in the Gulf region, including the Iraq-Iran border with the large Arab minority community in Khuzestan province (southwestern Iran). The Kurdish identity spans the Turkish-Iraqi-Iranian borders. Iran, Iraq and Bahrain are majority Shi'i countries, there are important Shi'i minorities in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The larger Muslim identity transcends all the region's borders.[110]

As Gause argues, transnational identities and ideologies are thus very potent power resources in the regional politics of the Gulf that represent both opportunities and challenges for the regional regimes. On the one hand, it is by claiming to represent particular identities that regimes justify the domestic order and their right to rule. Because of the presence and power of transnational identities, regimes can not only rally important constituencies within their own societies, but they also have the ability to play in the domestic politics of their neighbors. On the other hand, precisely for that reason, it also adds to these regimes' concern for their internal stability as the reverse is also true. Because identities and ideologies cannot be monopolized, but are necessarily open to different interpretations, others can just as well exploit these cross-border linkages to exacerbate societal fissures and "stir up regime challenges from within their own polities".[111]

Saudi Arabia provides an illustrative example of how appeals to those identities can be a doubled-edged sword. The ability to raise the banner of Islam and rally public support has been crucial for Saudi Arabia to counter regional opponents, whether in the form of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s or revolutionary Iran after 1979. However, the promotion of the austere and puritanical version of Islam in Saudi Arabia and the accompanying suggestion that the Saudi Kingdom is the exemplary Islamic state also presents it with serious challenges. It has put a spotlight on the royal family and opened it up to criticism when it has acted in ways that seem inconsistent with that stance. Saudi Wahhabism has also provided a fertile ground for Sunni Islamist militant activism to thrive beneath the surface and at times evolve into opposition, as the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 and Al Qaeda's campaign after 2003 exemplify. Thus, as Ennis & Momani put it, "Religion

[109] Ibid.

[110] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, pp. 9-10.

[111] Ibid, pp. 10-11.

provides the Saudi leadership with a sharp legitimacy tool that, like any sharp tool, has the potential to cut its handler."[112]

3.3.2 External Security

If the regimes of the Persian Gulf have good reasons to worry about their internal stability, the same holds true when it comes to their external security. The reason is simple: They are located in a region of the world that very likely is the most volatile and definitely is the most militarized. Since the oil revolution of the 1970s, the regional states have consistently devoted enormous amounts of their financial wealth to build up their military arsenals, greatly exacerbating the suspicion and fear between them. From 1975 to 1979, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq combined to account for nearly one quarter of all arms purchases in the world, and each decade since has seen accelerating arms races.[113] The best illustration of the classic security dilemma is found in the modern history of the Persian Gulf. But it is not only the capacity for violence in the region that makes external security such a priority for the region's regimes. It is also the fact that regional and international powers have proven willing to use force and coercion to advance their specific agendas. Military invasions followed by immensely destructive wars were launched in the Persian Gulf in the 1980s (the Iran-Iraq War), the 1990s (the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait and the Gulf War that followed), and the 2000s (the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq). In the period I cover in this thesis, from 1979 to 2011, the Persian Gulf was a theater of war more than half the time. Two regional regimes were removed from power during these military conflicts (though the Kuwaiti royal family was later reinstated), and there are good indications that others also believed that their days could soon be numbered.[114] Though we should be careful not to overstate this point as the sample size is not very large, it is nonetheless the case that since 1979 regime change in the Persian Gulf has been imposed from the outside, not resulted from internal social upheaval. The more important point here is that the heavy militarization and the instability of their neighborhood has had very real impacts on all of the Gulf regimes. Threats of violence or aggression from outside parties vary over time, but the basic understanding that they live in a dangerous environment that they need to protect themselves from is a constant. Thus, while they certainly can – indeed often do – view threats to their domestic security as a more immediate concern, they cannot prioritize their internal stability at the expense or to the neglect of their external security. If that was the case, the most consistent element in Saudi foreign policy would not have been its relationship with the United States, given the reputational costs

[112] Crystal Ennis & Bessma Momani: Shaping the Middle East in the Midst of the Arab Uprisings: Turkish and Saudi Foreign Policy Strategies, (Third World Quarterly, Vol. 34, No. 6, 2013), pp. 1127-1144. Quote on p. 1132. See also, Gause: The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia, pp. 197-198.

[113] Toby Craig Jones: America, Oil, and War in the Middle East, (Journal of American History, Vol. 99, No. 1, 2012), pp. 208-218. The number cited here is from p. 213.

[114] This was the case for Iranian leaders in both 1980 and 2003. The Saudi leadership also viewed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 as an existential threat.

and potential for domestic backlash that it entails. It is precisely because Saudi Arabia *also* has ongoing concerns about its external security that explains why it has consistently found that it is better off with the United States than without it. What this so clearly illustrates, and what the points raised above also indicate, is that we need to see external security as a facet of regime security that exists alongside considerations regarding internal stability, and thus not as something that is necessarily or inherently subordinated to it.[115]

I have spent some time in the first part of this chapter making two main points because each of these are extremely important for understanding the evolution of Saudi-Iranian relations. First, that we need to focus on the ruling regimes in Saudi Arabia and Iran as the primary units of analysis, and the guiding principle when these regimes make their decisions is to counter threats to their own security and survival. Second, that threats to regime security need to be understood along two distinct dimensions as regimes worry about both their internal stability and external security. If we can begin from those premises – the primacy of regime security and the two-fold nature of threats that outsiders can pose – it follows that there are four options at any given moment: Saudi Arabia and Iran can view the other as 1) not an active threat to its internal stability or its external security; 2) a threat to its internal stability; 3) a threat to its external security; or 4) a threat to both its internal stability and external security. The task that remains is thus to specify more clearly when and why perceptions of threat increase at particular moments in time, which in turn allow us to account for when each of these four understandings of threat are operative. These are the questions that we turn to now.

3.4 Explaining Evolving Perceptions of Threat: Ideology, Geopolitics, and Saudi-Iranian Relations

As noted at the outset of this chapter, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is best understood as having two primary dimensions. It is in part ideological. Indeed, since 1979, the two sides have "represented two opposite poles of Islamist politics – a revolutionary republic versus a conservative monarchy, each claiming that it speaks most legitimately for 'Islam' in the political sphere."[116] It is also geopolitical. Indeed, as an internal memorandum from the U.S. State Department phrased it in the 1960s, there

[115] On this point I differ from some of the early scholarly work on regime security, which does equate regime security with internal stability and thus as juxtaposed to external security. This may very well be true in the particular places that these studies focus on, but I don't think it is accurate when it comes to the Persian Gulf for the reasons given here. May Darwich and Curtis Ryan also sees external security as a facet of regime security as I do, while I think Gause is a bit more ambiguous and perhaps closer to the earlier works. For examples of these early works on regime security, see Brian L. Job (ed): The Insecurity Dilemma: National Security of Third World States, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), & Steven R. David: Explaining Third World Alignment, (World Politics, Vol. 43, No. 2, 1991), pp. 233-256.

[116] Gregory Gause: Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement? The Incentives and the Obstacles, in POMEPS: The Gulf's Escalating Sectarianism, (POMEPS Briefings No. 28, 2016), pp. 61-64. Quote on p. 61.

is a "basic conflict (…) between the Iranian assumption that Iran has the mission of controlling the Gulf, and the Saudi assumption that Saudi Arabia is responsible for everything on the Arabian Peninsula."[117] That the Saudi-Iranian rivalry should be understood with reference to these two dimensions should not be particularly controversial. However, I think we can – and should be – more specific than that. To be sure, these ideological and geopolitical contests make Saudi Arabia and Iran wary of each other, but they do not necessarily lead to enmity or conflict between them. For a more complete understanding of how ideology and geopolitics matter in Saudi-Iranian relations, these factors need to be tied to their ongoing concern for the internal stability and external security of their regimes. The conceptual framework I present and that allows us to do so is rooted in image theory. Image theory offers "a way to structure the study of perceptions in International Relations."[118] It is predicated on the view that in a complex social world, foreign policy decision-making involves the use of perceptual prisms through which information is filtered and interpreted.[119] Whereas other cognitive approaches emphasize how political leaders' values and belief systems influence a state's general foreign policy priorities, image theory focuses specifically on dyadic relationships as it emphasizes "the policymaker's perceptions and beliefs concerning a particular actor in world politics."[120] The images that evolve from those ideas "provide categories that allow people to sort and make sense of the political environment and their relationships in it. As cognitive simplifications, they manage inevitable information overload and facilitate decision-making."[121] Thus, the operative question decision-makers ask when evaluating the image of another state becomes, "Do the other actor's intentions threaten to reduce my country's current achievement of valued objectives or does the actor present an opportunity for me to advance my country's interest?"[122] How a political leadership answers that question and the particular image it ascribes to a counterpart in the process guides the strategy it pursues towards that other actor.[123]

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[117] Quoted in Roham Alvandi*:* Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The Origins of Iranian Primacy in the Persian Gulf, (Diplomatic History, No. 36, Vol. 2, 2012), pp. 337-372. Quote on p. 344.

[118] Richard K. Herrmann: Image Theory in International Relations, in Huddy, Sears & Levy (eds): The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology, (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 285-314. Quote from the abstract.

[119] See, Robert Jervis: The Logic of Images in International Relations, (Princeton University Press, 1970); & Jervis: Perception and Misperception in International Politics.

[120] Jerel Rosati: A Cognitive Approach to the Study of Foreign Policy, in Neack, Hey & Haney (eds): Foreign Policy Analysis: Continuity and Change in its Second Generation, (Prentice Hall, 1995), pp. 49-70. Quote on p. 60.

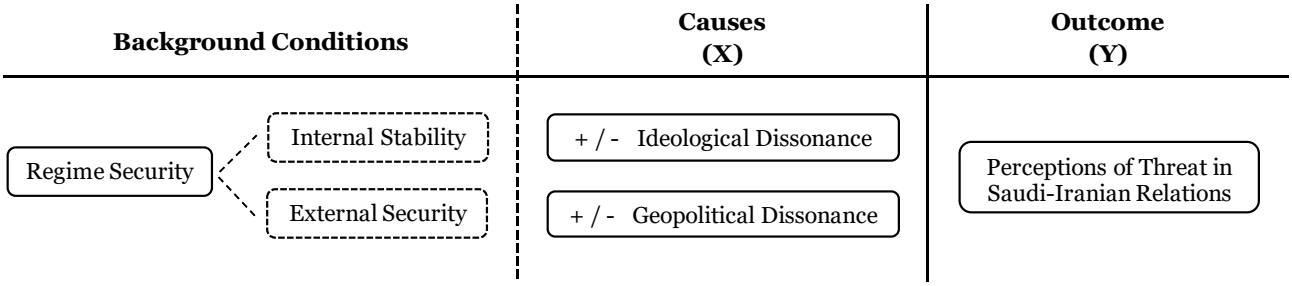
[121] Richard K. Herrmann: Image Theory in International Relations, p. 294.

[122]Richard K. Herrmann et al: Images in International Relations: An Experimental Test of Cognitive Schema, (International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 41, No. 3), pp. 403-433. Quote on p. 408.

[123] See, Manjeet Pardesi: Image Theory and the Initiation of Strategic Rivalries, (Oxford Research Encyclopedias, 2017). Available at http://politics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-318

As I suggested in the previous chapter, the central claim of my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception is that for Saudi Arabia and Iran, those images of the counterpart form and change according to the presence or absence of ideological and geopolitical *dissonance*. I also noted that we conventionally understand dissonance as "a lack of agreement, consistency or harmony" and consonance as "situations in which people agree with each other, or when things seem right or suitable together."[124] At any particular moment, Saudi Arabia and Iran can be more or less comfortable with each other's ideological profiles and they can view their geopolitical interests as more or less aligned. It is these changes in the direction of dissonance or consonance in the ideological or geopolitical sphere that leads to changes in perceptions of threat for Saudi Arabia and Iran. Thus, it is these elements that serve as the key regulators of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The causal logic of my theoretical framework can be illustrated in the following way:

Figure 3.1: Model of the Neoclassical Realist Theory of Threat Perception



In the following, I explain why and how increases in perceptions of threat are caused by ideological and geopolitical dissonance. In short, I argue that ideological dissonance between a regime and an outsider increases perceptions of threat because it undermines the regime's internal stability; geopolitical dissonance between a regime and an outsider increases perceptions of threat because it compromises the regime's external security. I develop two causal mechanisms – the subversion mechanism and the expansionist mechanism – that allow us to identify these processes. I end the discussion with an elaboration of the typology of four distinct images of threat Saudi Arabia and Iran will ascribe to one another at any particular moment. The remainder of this chapter provides the theoretical reasoning and the causal connections of my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception. I return in the next chapter to a more detailed discussion of how we can identify these theoretical constructs and causal connections in the real world.

3.4.1 Ideological Dissonance and Perceptions of Threat

As I introduce the concept of ideological dissonance and explain its connections to matters of internal stability, I build on the work of Mark Haas, who has convincingly argued that political ideologies play a particularly prominent role in shaping perceptions of threat. While I ultimately argue that some modifications to the causal logic

[124] These definitions are from the Cambridge Dictionary.

suggested by Haas are needed, I follow him in defining ideologies as "leaders' preferences for ordering the political world, both domestically and internationally." "Ideologies", he continues, "are the specific, often idiosyncratic political principles and goals that leaders value most highly and use to legitimate their claim to rule."[125] The central argument advanced by Haas is that ideology is the key factor from which political leaders draw inferences about the ultimate intentions of other states. States that share similar ideas about what constitutes legitimate political authority are likely to view each other as potential levers of support and have strong incentives to cooperate, whereas states whose core ideological principles are at odds are dispositioned to view each other with suspicion and as potential sources of threat. According to Haas, it is the particular *ideological distance* between a state and any outsiders that determines the patterns of who it views as its friends and who it views as its foes. For Haas, the most important element in determining that distance is the level of difference in political leaders' ideological beliefs; that is, their "central domestic political, economic and social goals."[126] As he explains, "the more dissimilar different decision makers' ideological beliefs, the more likely they are to both mistrust and to view each other as a subversive danger to their domestic power. Conversely, the greater the ideological similarities uniting states' leaders, the more likely they are to see the other as supports to their core international and domestic interests, and therefore less of a threat."[127] Haas's general point that there is a causal relationship between ideology and threat perception is well taken. His description of the effects of ideological antagonism is also clear and to the point:

> Ideological rivals' relations are (…) often tragic. Even if no objective conflicts of interests exist between them, ideological enemies will frequently feel compelled to adopt hostile policies because of the belief that the other intends them harm. Moreover, even if leaders are made aware that their ideological differences may be creating self-fulfilling dynamics, this understanding is unlikely to change their policies. The belief that ideological enemies are inherently untrustworthy and aggressive will make it difficult for decision makers to risk conciliatory policies, despite the awareness of the potentially tragic nature of this choice.[128]

However, the theoretical proposition that those hostilities are caused by the ideological *distance* suffers from two shortcomings. First, it misses that leaders who claim allegiance to similar ideological principles have often viewed each other as obstacles to their respective domestic interests, as the history of Middle East regional politics so clearly demonstrates. One dividing lines in the Arab Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s was certainly between "reactionary" and "progressive" forces that promoted profoundly different ideologies, but struggles between leaders on the same of side of

[125] Mark L. Haas: The Clash of Ideologies: Middle Eastern Politics and American Security, (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 3-4.
[126] Mark L. Haas: The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, (Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 32.
[127] Haas: The Clash of ideologies, p. xv.
[128] Ibid, p. 8.

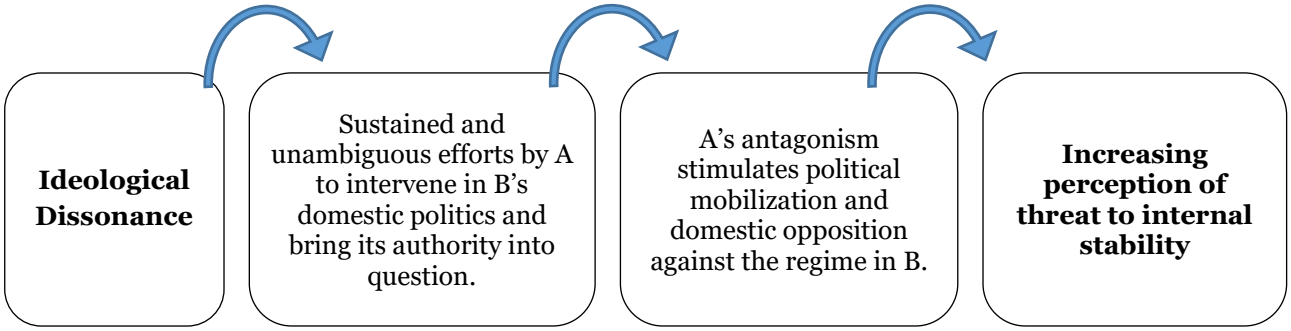
that divide were often just as intense.[129] From Haas's theoretical perspective, we should also have expected to see the ideological similarities of the Ba'athist regimes in Syria and Iraq lead to close cooperation and similar foreign policy priorities between the two sides throughout the latter part of the 20th century. That has hardly been the case.[130] More recently, we can also point to the hostile relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the only two countries in the world that subscribe to the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam as official state doctrines. In other words, ideological similarities have not discouraged conflict among Middle East regimes to the extent Haas's framework suggests they should. Second, it is also not clear that substantial ideological distances are necessarily an impediment to security cooperation for the states in the region. It certainly has been the case that perceived ideological inconsistencies have prevented alliances from forming.[131] However, as I have also suggested earlier, Saudi Arabia and Iran's most important external alignments (with the United States and Syria respectively) developed between states that by any objective measure were far more ideologically divided than united. Yet those partnerships have endured for decades. Because the empirical record has so many anomalies in terms of conflicts between ideologically similar states and alignments between states whose professed ideological orientations differ greatly, there is reason to question the causal links between ideological distances as such and changes in perceptions of threat.

We can account for those anomalies if we focus on the level of ideological dissonance, rather than ideological distance, as the link between ideology and threat perception. Specifically, by ideological dissonance I mean the *active* challenge by an outsider to a regime's political authority and the core ideological principles that underlies its domestic system of governance. The key difference is that whereas Haas sees ideology as systemically shaping perceptions of threat, I argue that ideology is tied to threat perception for very particular reasons that relate to a regime's concern for its internal stability. The origins of an outsiders' political ideology is not the central issue for Saudi Arabia and Iran. Islamists and secularists can be allies; they can also be threats. Rather, what matters is what others *do* with their ideological commitments and more specifically whether they are seen as supporting (or at least respecting) a regime's claim to political power or not. Thus, there is a critical element of intentionality and political activity needed for ideology to become operative in shaping perceptions of threat. Indeed, as Lawrence Rubin has argued, "an ideology must be projected for it to be considered a national security threat."[132] He is also precisely right in specifying that an ideological threat "requires an environment of shared characteristics because it must have the potential to resonate due to some

[129] Malcolm Kerr: The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970, Oxford University Press, 1971). See also, Barnett: Dialogues in Arab Politics.
[130] For a thorough analysis, see Eberhard Kienle: Ba'th v. Ba'th: The Conflict Between Syria and Iraq 1968-1989, (I.B Tauris, 1990)
[131] Gregory Gause: Ideologies, Alignments, and Underbalancing in the New Middle East Cold War, (PS: Political Science & Politics, Vol. 50, No. 3), pp. 672-675.
[132] Rubin: Islam in the Balance, p. 4.

shared set of values or beliefs. [It] is thus highly dependent on domestic politics and, in particular, a regime's perception of its own legitimacy."[133] These conditional qualifications for when ideology triggers insecurity and threat perception is why the relevant dichotomy is not between short or long ideological distances, but rather between ideological consonance and dissonance. Regardless of the ideological distance between them, a regime will tend to view the ideological orientations of outsiders as fairly consonant with its own as long as they do not work to undermine its legitimacy and authority at home. It is precisely when an outsider supports dissent or promotes alternative ideas about how to organize domestic politics, and a regime has qualified reasons to believe that it "strikes a chord" within its own society, that concerns are raised and perceptions of threat increase.[134] The causal mechanism linking ideological dissonance to increases in threat perception, which I refer to as "the subversion mechanism", can be formulated in the following way:

Figure 3.2: The Subversion Mechanism



The shift in theoretical emphasis from ideological distance to ideological dissonance is important because it leads to different expectations about when outsiders will be viewed as ideological threats and when they will not be. From Haas' perspective, once a pair of states' ideological orientations diverge beyond a certain threshold, they will tend to view each other as threats regardless of their political behavior towards each other. From my perspective, by contrast, it is precisely that actively demonstrated hostility and the potential that it reverberates domestically that is at the core of the ideological threat. And because it is created and sustained for these very particular reasons, it is also subject to change as outsiders can alter their behavior – and to the extent that this reduces the internal pressures against a regime, those qualitative differences are ultimately highly consequential. It is the extent of ideological dissonance between a regime and an outsider that comes from specific courses of action and their consequences, not a fixed ideological distance between them, which links ideology to perceptions of threat.

[133] Ibid, p. 27.
[134] Ibid; & Gause: Balancing What?, pp. 283-284.

3.4.2 Geopolitical Dissonance and Perceptions of Threat

If the concept of ideological dissonance allows us to explain when Saudi Arabia and Iran will view the other as a threat to their internal stability, the concept of geopolitical dissonance similarly allows us to clarify the conditions under which they will view the other side as a threat to their external security. I begin my discussion of why that is from Mouritzen & Wivel's important observation that a key weakness of the neoclassical realist literature is that it suffers from what they refer to as "a spatial blindness".[135] Neoclassical realism as a distinct perspective on international politics begins from the assumption that it is necessary to relax the neorealist emphasis on the causal effects of the international system in order to increase the depth and explanatory leverage of realist analyses.[136] Gideon Rose first coined the term "neoclassical realism" to refer to an emerging body of realist scholarship that argued that "systemic pressures [are] translated through intervening variables at the unit level."[137] This assertion – that it is factors *within* states that explain what systemic theories cannot – has remained a key feature of neoclassical realist scholarship.[138] The problem, as Mouritzen & Wivel point out, is that "as the neoclassical realists took the reasonable step of adding factors to the systemic perspective, they elegantly jumped over the spatial factors and landed in states' domestic societies and decisionmaking procedures."[139] The implication is that if neorealism is insensitive to how state behavior is shaped by its immediate surroundings, the neoclassical realist emphasis on unit-level attributes does little to solve the problem because it still theoretically assumes that there is "no salient environment, no neighbors, no buffer zones".[140] It is important to note that Mouritzen & Wivel's aim is not to discredit neoclassical realism or to suggest that it is somehow fundamentally flawed. Like me, both of them identify as neoclassical realists. Rather, the point they raise is that the next step forward is for neoclassical realists to provide a more coherent theoretical

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[135] Hans Mouritzen & Anders Wivel: Explaining Foreign Policy: International Diplomacy and the Russo-Georgian War, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), pp. 7-8.

[136] Key works in Neoclassical Realist literature include Randall L. Schweller: Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power, (Princeton University Press, 2006); Thomas Juneau: Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iranian Foreign Policy, (Stanford University Press, 2015); & Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro & Steven E. Lobell: Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics, (Oxford University Press, 2016).

[137] Gideon Rose: Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy, (World Politics, Vol. 51, No. 1, 1998), pp. 144-172. Quote on p. 146.

[138] The most comprehensive overview of the Neoclassical Realist literature is Ripsman et. al.'s "Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics". The authors identify four clusters of intervening variables – "Leader Images", "Strategic Culture", "State-Society Relations", and "Domestic Institutions" – that neoclassical realist scholars have emphasized. All are located in the domestic sphere. See, Ripsman et al: Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics, pp. 33-57.

[139] Mouritzen & Wivel: Explaining Foreign Policy, p. 8.

[140] Ibid.

base for making assertions about how political trends in a state's neighborhood condition its strategic priorities and foreign policy behavior. In short, what they advocate, and what I second here, is for neoclassical realism to bring geopolitics back in. Geopolitics is one of the more ambiguous terms in the IR vocabulary. Not only has it been mostly ignored by modern realism, in both its structural and neoclassical varieties, but even among those scholars of international security who do invoke the language of geopolitics there is an unfortunate tendency to apply the term rather loosely without much theoretical reflection of how or why it actually matters.[141] Geopolitics is best understood as "the influence of geography on the political character of states, their history, institutions, and especially relations with other states."[142] To emphasize geopolitics is to begin from the understanding that states have specific locations and that their external security concerns are mostly focused on their adjacent environments. At its core, then, geopolitics takes seriously the notion that precisely because proximity and physical distances matter, states often find it necessary to create and preserve spheres of influence beyond their borders in order to ensure that the political trajectory of those areas corresponds as much as possible to their own interests and to keep potential adversaries at bay. As Robert Jervis has noted, "In order to protect themselves, states seek to control, or at least to neutralize, areas on their borders. But attempts to establish buffer zones can alarm others who have stakes there, who fear that undesirable precedents will be set, or who believe that their own vulnerability will be increased."[143] This is the essence of geopolitics.

In no area of the world are these themes as pronounced as among the regimes of the Persian Gulf. Throughout their existence, each of them has confronted the fundamental problem that they are "surrounded by (…) states that are either too strong or too weak: the former threaten aggression, and the latter invite it, especially since several of both are also extremely rich."[144] It is the combination of this structural condition and each regime's particular historical experience of being subject to foreign domination or acts of aggression that explains why the most consistent theme shaping their geopolitical outlooks has been a "highly developed encirclement syndrome".[145] That is, regardless of what the realities of the present suggest, they tend

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[141] As Buzan & Wæver have noted, "Within the discipline of IR, the mainstream lost geography in its search for abstract theory. (…) In the policy literature, titles with 'The Geopolitics of…' are common (of Caspian Oil, of the Yugoslav wars, etc), but this usually means an atheoretical survey of some power politics." See, Barry Buzan & Ole Wæver: Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 70.

[142] William Hay: Geopolitics of Europe, (Orbis, Vol. 47, No. 2, 2003), pp. 295-310. Quote on p. 296.

[143] Jervis: Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma, (World Politics, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1978), pp. 167-214. Quote on p. 169.

[144] Nadav Safran: Saudi Arabia, p. 3.

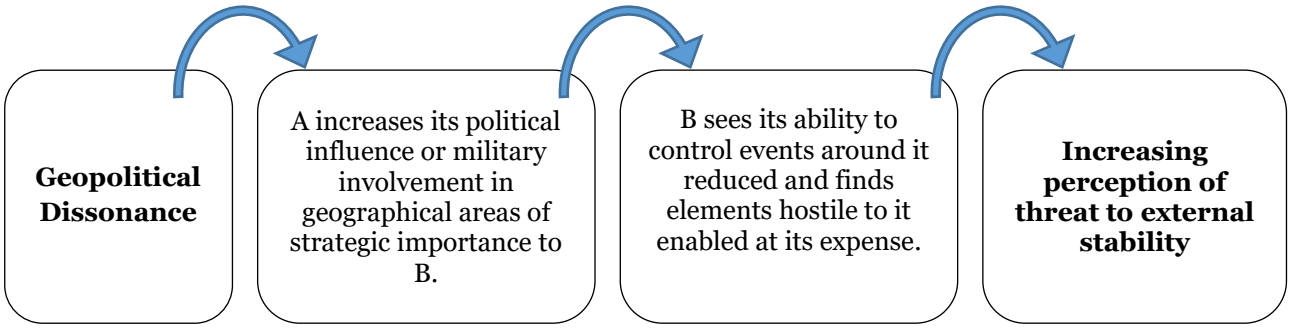
[145] David E. Long & Sebastian Maisel: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, (University Press of Florida, 2010), pp. 145-146. See also, Hermann F. Eilts: New Security Dilemmas in the Persian Gulf and How They Are Treated, in Fariborz Mokhtari (ed): Persian Gulf Beyond Desert Storm: U.S. Interests in a Multipolar World, (U.S Army War College, 1993), pp. 7-20. Quote on pp. 12-13.

to view themselves as perennially isolated and vulnerable entities that are under siege from multiple directions by outside forces that have the means to threaten their most vital interests, including their territorial integrity, should they choose to do so. As former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Herrman Eilts has explained, "the nature of the 'encirclers' has changed over the years, but the concept, the encirclement syndrome, (…) i.e. the perceived omnipresent external threat, is always there."[146]

The basic understanding that Saudi Arabia and Iran worry about their proximate environment and place a premium on the ability to control events in it is what underlies the concept of geopolitical dissonance. It builds on the assumption that despite the volatility of their neighborhood, the key element that informs their perceptions of threat to their external security are not imbalances of military power. Military capabilities certainly matter, but more important are the political priorities and activities of those that possess them. More specifically, geopolitical dissonance between a regime and outsider are disparate positions on how, where, and for which political ends coercive resources are put to use. Thus, the level of geopolitical dissonance is shaped by how the most important questions related to regional security should be resolved. That is, who is worthy of support in local regional crises and wars? Where do legitimate spheres of influence begin and end? What role should international outsiders play in the region? The more commonalities they find in their answers to those questions, the more established is the element of geopolitical consonance between them. Conversely, the more they diverge – which is to say, the deeper the extent of conflicts of interests those questions give rise to – the more pronounced the element of geopolitical dissonance will be. In practice, then, the spectrum between geopolitical consonance and dissonance will necessarily reflect a continuum, but there is a break-off point that allow us to treat it analytically as dichotomous categories. That break-off point is when an outsider becomes more assertive in its pursuit of transformative change beyond its borders in ways that exacerbates a regime's sense of encirclement. It is exactly when an outsider moves its physical presence or political influence closer to their borders, or to locations that they value, and uses that leverage to more assertively pursue political outcomes that intensify the external pressures against the regime that alarms are raised and perceptions of threat increase. The causal mechanism linking geopolitical dissonance to increases in perceptions of threat, which I refer to as "the expansionist mechanism", can be formulated in the following way:

[146] Eilts: New Security Dilemmas in the Persian Gulf and How They Are Treated, pp. 12-13.

Figure 3.3: The Expansionist Mechanism



In other words, it is the extent to which outsiders share similar concerns about the nature of challenges in the environment and pursue complementary political ends to address them that shape the patterns of who are viewed as levers of support for their external security and who are identified as the primary threats against it. The stronger the common interest a regime shares with an outsider in terms of advancing particular regional agendas that they deem important, the less likely it will be to view that outsider as an external threat regardless of its military strength. It is the extent of geopolitical dissonance, which comes from conflicting priorities in regimes' proximate environments and how control over that environment should be exercised, that explain why they come to view outsiders as threats to their external security.

3.5 The Typology of Threat Perceptions in Saudi-Iranian Relations

As I suggested earlier in the chapter, I return to a more detailed discussion of "the subversion mechanism" and "the expansionist mechanism" in the next chapter. The important point to be raised here is that if we can explain why perceptions of threat increase at particular moments in time with reference to the concepts of ideological and geopolitical dissonance and these two causal mechanisms, it allows us to suggest that Saudi Arabia and Iran's threat perceptions at any particular moment will fall in one of four categories. Depending on the specific configuration of ideological and geopolitical dissonance, Saudi Arabia and Iran will view the other as either a Latent Threat, a Subversive Threat, an Expansionist Threat, or an Omnipresent Threat:

Figure 3.4: The Typology of Threat Perception in Saudi-Iranian Relations

		Ideological Dissonance	
		-	+
Geopolitical Dissonance	-	Latent Threat	Subversive Threat
	+	Expansionist Threat	Omnipresent Threat

One regime will perceive the other as a *Latent Threat* when it finds the other sides ideological profile and geopolitical priorities sufficiently consonant with its own to conclude that the other side does not challenge its internal stability or external security. The dictionary definition of "latent" is something that is "capable of emerging or developing, but not visible, obvious or active".[147] Similarly, a Latent Threat is one that in its present form is not considered an immediate challenge to a regime's primary security interests but has the potential to evolve into one in the longer term. A perception of the other side as a Latent Threat also implies that a regime is preoccupied with other and more immediately threatening adversaries. Because it is likely to find the other side's interests aligned with, or at least not in opposition to, its own in a number of critical areas, political expediency is likely to lead the regime to prioritize those short-term commonalities over its concern that the Latent Threat may develop into a more direct security threat in the future. A regime will view the other side as a *Subversive Threat* when the other side actively challenges its domestic political authority and encourages dissent against it. When a regime has a perception of the other as a Subversive Threat, it has little doubt that the other side holds hostile intentions since it is subject to very public acts of political antagonism. It is that propensity to disregard a regimes' domestic red lines and work to destabilize it politically that defines the Subversive Threat rather than its ability to inflict physical damage directly on its own from the outside. A regime will view the other side as an *Expansionist Threat* when it extends its military reach or works to create unfavorable outcomes in geographic areas that are particularly important to the regime. An Expansionist Threat need not be openly hostile to a regime but it applies its resources beyond its borders in ways that limit the regime's control over its adjacent environment. In other words, it is the other side's support for or active involvement in belligerent activities that ultimately compromise the regime's external security that defines the Expansionist Threat. A regime will view the other side as an *Omnipresent Threat* when the threat it poses combines the elements of domestic subversion and coercive pressure from the outside. The Omnipresent Threat is thus viewed as a source for instability at home and as a destabilizing presence in the regime's near abroad as well. And because it has that duality to it, it only makes it even more of a priority for a regime to resist the Omnipresent Threat.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has presented my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception which allows us to explain how and why perceptions of threat between Saudi Arabia and Iran form and change. In the first part of the chapter, I made the case that it makes both empirical and analytical sense to focus on the ruling regimes in Saudi Arabia and Iran and their security concerns, if we are to understand interactions between them. In doing so, I explained why we need to see threats to regime security as a twofold phenomenon as they worry intensely about their internal stability as well as their external security. I specified how outsiders thus can be a threat to the security of

[147] According to Merriam-Webster.

their regimes for two different reasons and in two different ways. Based on this discussion, I turned in the second part of the chapter to the questions of how, why and when perceptions of threat change between Saudi Arabia and Iran. I did so in four sections. I began by clarifying how my analytical framework is rooted in image theory and made the case that we need to tie the ideological and geopolitical dimensions of the of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry to their ongoing concern for the internal and external security of their regimes. In the two subsequent sections, I explained why we therefore need to see the ideological and geopolitical spheres as something that oscillates between consonance and dissonance. I specified how ideological and geopolitical dissonance are tied to increases in threat perception and introduced the two causal mechanisms which explain these processes. Finally, I expanded on the four-fold typology of threat perceptions with which we can chart evolving perceptions of threat in Saudi-Iranian relations. With the theoretical framework in place, we can now focus on questions of methodology, research design, and how we can apply the theoretical framework to the empirical study of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. These are the topics that we turn to next.

Chapter 4:
Research Design and Methodology

In the previous chapter I presented my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research design of the study and specify how the analysis will proceed. A research design, according to Robert K. Yin, is best understood as "a logical plan for getting from here to there, where *here* may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and *there* is some set of conclusions (answers) about these questions."[148] The following pages, to build off that metaphor, provide the guidance that makes the road from "here" to "there" easier to follow. The chapter proceeds as follows. I begin by clarifying the ontological assumptions and methodological commitments this study begins from and which underlie the choices I make. Second, I explain why the research question and the overarching objectives of the study place it squarely within the field of case-based research. Third, I introduce process tracing as the particular research method I use in this thesis and operationalize the two causal mechanisms that I presented in the previous chapter. Fourth, I discuss the source material that I use. Finally, I specify how the empirical analysis is organized and will proceed.

4.1 Ontology and Methodology

More than a theoretical paradigm that shares certain assumptions about how international politics operates, scholarship developed in the neoclassical realist tradition is also claimed to work from similar methodological commitments that predispose it to certain types of empirical analyses. As Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell have noted, "Since neoclassical realism requires researchers to investigate, among other factors, the role of idiosyncratic state institutions and processes on policy choices, it lends itself to careful, qualitative case studies, rather than Large-N quantitative analysis."[149] They see neoclassical realism as firmly based on a common epistemological foundation, which they term "soft positivism". I agree with their overall premise about the study of international politics, namely that researchers can make "contingent causal inferences" about how actors operate in the international realm, which can be substantiated "through careful case research using process tracing techniques."[150] At the same time, I also question the extent to which the positivist position they advocate allows us to do so and can be said to be representative of neoclassical realist inquiries in any meaningful sense. Indeed, Kenneth Waltz and Hans Morgenthau, the major exponents of the two theoretical paradigms neoclassical realism have set out to integrate, both viewed positivism as detrimental to the study of

[148] Robert K. Yin: Case Study Research: Design and Methods, (SAGE Publications, 1994), p. 26.
[149] Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro & Steven Lobell: Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics, (Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 131.
[150] Ibid, p. 105.

international politics,[151] as do two of the most influential contemporary realists, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt.[152]

I am not so sure that there is, in fact, a common methodology for neoclassical realism, but the position I take is more accurately described as a commitment to the principles of scientific realism.[153] Scientific realism shares with positivism the basic principle of ontological dualism, namely that there is a real world "out there" that exists independent from our understandings and representations of it. That is, there are facts that an analyst can collect, assess, and derive essential features from in ways that correspond to that objective reality in more or less accurate ways.[154] However, scientific realism radically departs from positivism on the question of how causal inferences are made in the social sciences and thus how we generate and evaluate theoretical explanations. For positivists, causality is inherently tied to the Humean dictum of observing "constant conjunction" between cause and effect. From this perspective, what we can directly experience or observe underlies valid knowledge claims, and it is the finding of sufficient empirical regularities and repetition, which allow for causal inferences to be made.

By contrast, scientific realism holds that we have to move beyond empirical observations and correlations in order to make causal inferences. "To ask for the cause of something", as Sayer asserts, "is to ask 'what makes it happen', what 'produces', 'generates', 'creates' or 'determines' it, or, more weakly, what 'enables' or 'leads to' it."[155] Scientific realism is premised on the view that objects and entities that exist in the world have specific causal properties, which are not detectable by human sense capabilities.[156] More specifically, a causal property is one that "confers disposition on the particulars that have it to behave in certain ways when in the presence or absence of other particulars with causal properties of their own."[157] For scientific realists, then, it is the specific interaction of objects with real, yet unobservable, causal properties that underlie the events or activities that we can observe empirically. This view

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[151] For example, see Kenneth Waltz: Evaluating Theories, (American Political Science Review, Vol. 91, No. 4, 1997), pp. 913-917.

[152] See, Mearsheimer & Walt: Leaving Theory Behind. Mearsheimer and Walt self-identify, as I do, as scientific realists.

[153] Needless to say, scientific realism refers to a paradigm within philosophy of science and is different from realism as a theoretical perspective on international politics.

[154] The best work on the different ontologies of dualism and monism and their relevance to IR is by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson. For examples, see Patrick Thaddeus Jackson: Foregrounding Ontology: Dualism, Monism, and IR Theory, (Review of International Studies, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2008), pp. 129-153, & Jackson: The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics, (Routledge, 2011).

[155] Andrew Sayer: Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach, (Routledge, 1992), p. 104.

[156] For an excellent discussion, see Jackson: The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations, pp. 83-122.

[157] Anjan Chakravartty: A Metaphysics for Scientific Realism: Knowing the Unobservable, (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 108.

of causation has specificity and contextual sensitivity at its core in ways that go beyond the positivist stance that causes are merely "probability raisers" that can be inferred through conjectures of co-variation. As Patrick Jackson explains, "Causal properties give rise to observed probabilities; they explain *why* occurrences and phenomena are linked, and thus go beyond simply noting that they *are* linked. This makes it possible, for example, to refer to a *tendency* of balances of power to recur under conditions of anarchy, or for democracies to refrain from going to war with one another, (…) and mean by that something other than the existence of a mere *observed probability*."[158] The central point I want to make here is that the methodological procedures we engage in and the particular research methods we adopt should – or perhaps rather, must – follow from an underlying conception of what causation is and what causal explanation entails. Scientific realism provides a philosophical justification for why we need to focus on the underlying causal processes and mechanisms that bring a phenomenon into being. The method of process tracing allows us to do exactly that, and I will discuss why it is particularly well-suited for the purposes of this study in greater detail later on in the chapter. For now, I will merely suggest that if neoclassical realist analyses should aim to make "contingent causal inferences (…) through careful case research that follows the process tracing method", as Ripsman et al. call for, that particular claim is more methodologically coherent when it is made from a platform of scientific realism rather than the soft positivist position they advocate.[159]

4.2 Aims, Objectives and the Case Study Approach

Different approaches to causal inference in the social sciences each come with specific advantages and limitations. The design of a study and the choice of a particular research strategy thus ultimately depend on the nature of the research question and the types of debates it seeks to inform. This is a single-case study of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry from 1979 to 2011 that is guided by the overarching ambition of making analytical claims about the drivers of that particular relationship. According to George & Bennett, a case study is "the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events."[160] This study as a whole actually encompasses both the elements of theory-building and theory-testing. Indeed, the neoclassical realist theory of threat perception I have presented is very much an effort in eclectic theorizing and adapting various perspectives into a coherent framework in the hope that it better reflects the empirical realities Saudi-Iranian relations operate in. However, when it comes to the empirical analysis, the study is distinctly theory-testing. Indeed, the most important objective of the empirical analysis is to provide a test of the theoretical framework and its ability to explain how and why perceptions of threat change in Saudi-Iranian

[158] Jackson: The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations, p. 112. Italics in the original.
[159] Rispman et al.: Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics, p. 105.
[160] Alexander George and Andrew Bennett: Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences, (MIT Press, 2004), p. 5.

relations. I return to a more detailed description of how the empirical chapters are organized and how they provide us with such a test later on in this chapter. For now, I will merely emphasize that the case study approach has a number of advantages for the purposes of this study. First, at the most basic level, case studies are "uniquely predisposed to taking into account a broad and diverse set of explanatory factors."[161] For that reason, a case study has the distinct advantage of allowing for empirically rich and nuanced analysis of the real-life context in which the primary units under investigation operate. Second, whereas large-N studies are open to criticisms of "conceptual stretching" because they are interested in as many cases as possible, a case study approach allows the researcher to work with more refined theoretical concepts and to develop empirical indicators that most accurately reflect the ideas behind those concepts. Case studies are therefore more likely to exhibit high levels of conceptual validity.[162] Finally, and perhaps most importantly, "Case studies are superior to large-N studies in helping the researcher to understand the perceptions and motivations of important actors and to trace the processes by which these cognitive factors form and change."[163] Since this is exactly what this study has set out to do, the decision to adopt the case study approach is an easy one.

One important topic deserves some further discussion here, namely the question of whether the causal connections identified in a within-case analysis of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry are only relevant in that particular context or whether we can be more ambitious than that? This is of course a topic we should approach with some caution, as case study research stresses contextual sensitivity and this is particularly true of the method of process tracing that I rely on. I have also made the case that this study is firmly grounded in the intrinsic importance of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and thus is not premised on the ability to draw conclusions outside of it. At the same time, however, I also think we should seize the opportunity to consider how the analytical framework potentially could be extended to a larger population of cases for the very specific reason of encouraging the broader engagement between Middle East IR and the field of rivalry analysis that I called for in the first chapter. If we want to assert that an analytical framework applied to a single-case study has potential explanatory value in other unstudied cases, we need to establish a causally homogenous population of cases that share similar characteristics to an extent that we have qualified reasons for making claims to generalization. As Beach & Pedersen explain, "we need to be able to claim that what we have found in the studied case (…) should also be found in the rest of the population based on the logic 'we found mechanistic evidence of the relationship in case 1. Cases 2 and 3 are similar on a range of causally relevant factors, ergo we should expect the relationship to be present in cases 2 and 3'."[164] I

[161] Joakim Blatter & Markus Haverland: Designing Case Studies: Explanatory Approaches in Small-N Research, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 5.

[162] George & Bennett: Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences, p. 19.

[163] Blatter & Haverland: Designing Case Studies, p. 6.

[164] Derek Beach & Rasmus Brun Pedersen: Causal Case Study Methods: Foundations and Guidelines for Comparing, Matching, and Tracing, (University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 51.

think this can be done in a way that is theoretically and methodologically coherent, but it requires a somewhat technical discussion of how we define the case universe. A "case", according to Beach & Pedersen, is "an instance of a causal process playing out, linking a cause (or set of causes) with an outcome."[165] In this sense, the "cases" I work with are changes in perceptions of threat in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. However, there is no *a priori* reason why we could not see these cases as belonging to a wider population of cases of evolving threat perceptions among strategic rivals in international politics. Indeed, we know that these relationships are precisely defined with reference to decision-makers' perceptions of threat, which makes it plausible – at least in principle – that my theoretical framework also has explanatory leverage when it comes to some of these cases. The most recent dataset on strategic rivalries has a total of 173 strategic rivalries since 1816, and the Saudi-Iranian dyad is one of the 39 strategic rivalries that are presently active.[166] While I think that membership of the class of strategic rivalries is a good place to begin the search for a causally homogenous population of cases, I don't think we should end there. For instance, the primacy of regime security is integral to my theoretical framework, and while some cases of strategic rivalry will share that feature, many – if not most – others will probably not. In the concluding remarks of this thesis, I clarify what I think are the scope conditions of my theoretical framework and specify how this allows us to identify a sub-set of strategic rivalries that should form a causally homogenous population of cases within which my theoretical argument is likely to fly. The important point here, then, is that the test of my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception is not only relevant for those with an interest in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as such, but also those with an interest in rivalry dynamics more broadly understood.

With this general discussion of the case study approach and how it relates to the broader objectives of this thesis, we can now turn to more specific questions that concern its implementation. I do so in three steps. First, I present the method of process tracing as the main analytical tool used in this study and subsequently outline in detail how we can translate the two causal mechanisms from theoretical linkages into tangible empirical phenomena that can be observed in the real world. Second, I discuss the nature of the source material I rely on. Third, I explain the structure of the empirical analysis and provide an overview of the basic template that each of the empirical chapters follows.

4.3 The Method of Process Tracing

Process tracing can be defined as "a research method for tracing causal mechanisms using detailed, within-case empirical analysis of how a causal process plays out in an actual case."[167] Thus, we should make it clear what causal mechanisms are. Causal

[165] Ibid, p. 16.

[166] For a further discussion of the coding of strategic rivalries, see Colarest et al.: Strategic Rivalries in World Politics, pp. 28-36.

[167] Derek Beach: Process Tracing Methods in Social Science, (Oxford Research Encyclopedia, 2017).

mechanisms are best understood as "relational concepts" that clarify the causal links between inputs and outputs.[168] They consist of *entities* that engage in *activities* that "move the mechanism from an initial or start condition through different parts to an outcome."[169] Causal mechanisms, according to Mahoney, "explain the existence and location of the arrows in the causal graph; for instance, in the causal graph *X -> M -> Y*, mechanisms explain why the causal arrow must exist between *X* and *M* and between *M* and *Y*."[170] In other words, by engaging in the study of causal mechanisms, we are able to infer not only whether there is a causal relationship between X and Y, but also what goes on between them. As Beach & Pedersen assert, the comparative advantage of process tracing as a research method is that it "can enable us to make strong within-case causal inferences about causal mechanisms based on in-depth single case studies that cannot be made with other social science methods."[171]

It should be noted, however, that the literature on process tracing methodology distinguishes between two different understandings of causal mechanisms. One is *minimalist* in the sense that the mechanism takes the form of a sketch that works on a higher level of abstraction as it tends to rely on assumptions rather than explicitly unpacking each step of the causal process. The other sees mechanisms as *systems,* as it, in contrast, provides a detailed explication of a mechanism in multiple steps while specifying how causal powers are transmitted through each of them.[172] It would be wrong to infer that this distinction marks the difference between bad and good process tracing, but it is true that the latter more explicit about the causal process at work. The choice between adopting a minimalist or systemic understanding of causal mechanisms depends, as all methodological choices do, on the task at hand. The approach I take leans towards the former in the sense that it could be argued that the two-step causal mechanisms I develop could be distilled into additional steps that would provide us with more detailed information on how the causal processes work. I nevertheless justify that decision on the grounds that the ambition of the study is, as I highlighted above, precisely to offer a preliminary test of the theoretical framework I introduce. Furthermore, the timeframe I cover spans more than three decades, meaning that the processes it traces necessarily involve more general propositions than the "uninterrupted process" that the systems approach would require us

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[168] Tulia G. Falleti & Julia F. Lynch: Context and Causal Mechanisms in Political Analysis, (Comparative Political Studies, Vol. 42, No. 9, 2009), pp. 1143-1166. Quote on p. 1147.

[169] According to Beach & Pedersen, "The more precise nature of entities and activities in conceptual terms depends on the type of causal explanation along with the level at which the mechanism works and the time span of its operation. Entities [are] things that can have properties, structures or orientations that enable them to engage in activities. (…) Activities [are] what entities do in terms of something that can transmit causal forces to the next part of the theorized process." See, Derek Beach & Rasmus Brun Pedersen: Process Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines, (University of Michigan Press, 2019), pp. 70-71.

[170] James Mahoney: Mechanisms, Bayesianism, and Process Tracing, (New Political Economy, Vol. 21, No. 5, 2016), pp. 493-499. Quote on p. 494.

[171] Beach & Pedersen: Process Tracing Methods, p. 2.

[172] Ibid, pp. 35-41.

to establish. This study can therefore be seen as probing the plausibility of the causal mechanisms I have developed here, but it leaves it to future research to engage in more fine-grained process tracing to further elucidate the causal connections.

Whether one works from a minimalist or system approach, it needs to be established how a theorized causal mechanism can be identified empirically in order to determine whether it was present in the given case. That is, we need to define what kinds of mechanistic evidence should be reflected in the empirical record to support our confidence in the proposed causal logic. Specifically, we need to answer the question of "What empirical fingerprints might the activities of the entities, if operative, leave in the selected case?"[173] The following sections operationalize the two causal mechanisms – the subversion mechanism and the expansionist mechanism – and thus provide the answer to that question.

4.3.1 Operationalization of the Subversion Mechanism

In the previous chapter, I made the case that ideological dissonance, rather than the ideological distance as suggested by Mark Haas, is what links ideology to perceptions of threat. Specifically, I defined ideological dissonance as "the *active* challenge by an outsider to a regime's political authority and the core ideological principles that underlies its domestic system of governance" Thus, I argued that it is not the ideological commitments of an outsider per se that determine whether it is seen as a threat or not, but rather how it actively relates to a regime's political authority. This is what explains why alliances can form between states at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum and why conflicts of interest also sometimes emerge between states that are ideologically proximate. I subsequently developed a two-part causal mechanism that explains how ideological dissonance leads to increases in perceptions of threat. The question then remains: How can we identify that process empirically?

The answer is that we would need to find two kinds of evidence reflected in the empirical record. First, we would have to find evidence of internal subversion against the regime. Subversion refers to "the undermining or detachment of the loyalties of significant political and social groups within the victimized state, and their transference, under ideal conditions, to the symbols and institutions of the aggressor."[174] In other words, to engage in subversive activities against another regime is to work to increase challenges to that regime from within its own domestic society. The practice of subversion can take on a number of specific forms, but what we are first and foremost interested in here is the rhetorical kind; that is, openly expressed antagonism towards the other regime, political support for domestic opposition groups, or outright calls for its citizens to rise up against it. Because these are very much public activities, we should have available to us a wide variety of sources where such declarations and appeals are made. The most obvious place to begin is with the rhetoric of the leading representatives of the regime in the speeches they make, the interviews

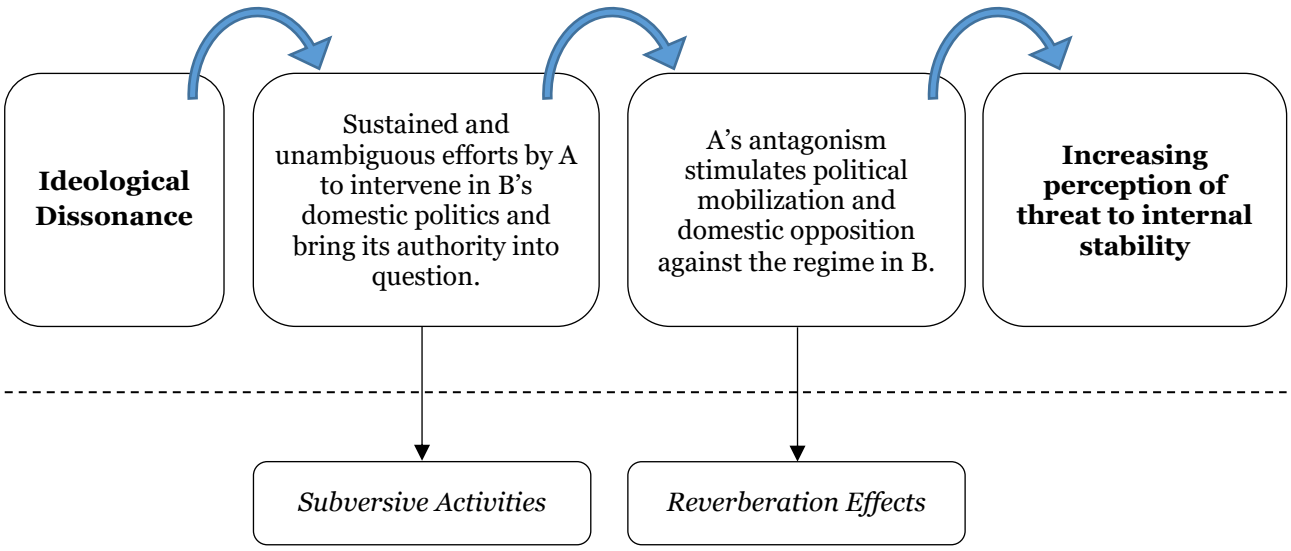
[173] Ibid, p. 171.

[174] Paul Blackstock: The Strategy of Subversion: Manipulating the Politics of Other Nations, (Quadrangle Books, 1964), p. 56.

they give and the material they write. We can also look to state media institutions as the opinions and narratives expressed there tend to reflect the agendas of those who control them. In short, we are looking for evidence of public propaganda from one regime against the other. If it is rather straightforward to define what we mean by subversive activities and how to identify them empirically, the question of just "how much" animosity one regime should exhibit toward another for concerns to be raised merits some further discussion. After all, states sometimes do – and those in the Middle East rather often do – fall out over relatively minor issues, recall their ambassadors and exchange a great deal of unpleasantries in the process. Shortly after, those issues are resolved, ambassadors are returned, and things are back to normal again. To avoid confusion, I purposely set a high threshold as the causal mechanism requires "sustained and unambiguous" hostility to take place. Of course, there are some elasticities to these terms, but at least it allows us to specify what we are *not* interested in. We are not interested in isolated diplomatic hiccups or the scattered use of strongly-worded language. Rather, what needs to be demonstrated is that one regime is engaged in what the other can only interpret as a comprehensive and concerted campaign of interfering in its domestic politics with the ultimate aim of encouraging its citizens to mobilize against it.

Figure 4.1: Operationalization of the Subversion Mechanism

Theoretical Level



Empirical Level

The second kind of evidence we should be able to identify is what we can call reverberation effects. Reverberation effects are tangible signs of popular discontent or increased political activism within the country that is the target of subversion from the outside. It is this mobilization of the regime's domestic political scene and acts of defiance against it from its own society that elevate the threat it is subject to from

being potential and indeterminate to actual and specific. In short, reverberation effects are evidence that the subversion somehow "works" in the sense that it leads social or political groups to become more assertive in their pursuit of transformative change. In an ideal world, we would assess citizens' attitudes towards their governments with reference to data based on public opinion surveys. Even in authoritarian states, public opinion polls can yield many valuable insights about citizens' views on a range of important topics. Yet there are two reasons why we should not rely on them to make inferences about patterns of political activism and popular attitudes toward the political leadership. First, public opinion polls conducted by independent, reputable agencies are a rather recent phenomenon among the Persian Gulf countries. To my knowledge, there is no data available that allow us to assess changing levels of political mobilization, or any other issue for that matter, that date back several decades. Second, even if such data were available, what type of confidence would we have in their results? Would we trust a survey on popular attitudes on sensitive issues in times of domestic crises when respondents know that their answers can later be held against them? My answer would be no. What we can do in the absence of reliable survey data on political sentiments is to focus instead on tangible manifestations of domestic dissent.[175] These can be largely peaceful in the form of public protests and demonstrations, or they can be violent in the form of coordinated attacks against government institutions or public life. While we cannot know the extent to which such expressions of opposition to the domestic political order are reflective of sentiments among the population at large, it should provide us with a reasonable measure of the internal pressures a regime is subject to and the extent of control it has over its own society.

It is when we find these two elements connected in the empirical record – unmistakable subversive activities from the outside and tangible evidence of reverberation effects from the inside – that we should feel comfortable in inferring that a regime's perception of threat increases due to concerns for its internal stability. When these conditions are met, a regime will view the other as a Subversive Threat.

4.3.2 Operationalization of the Expansionist Mechanism

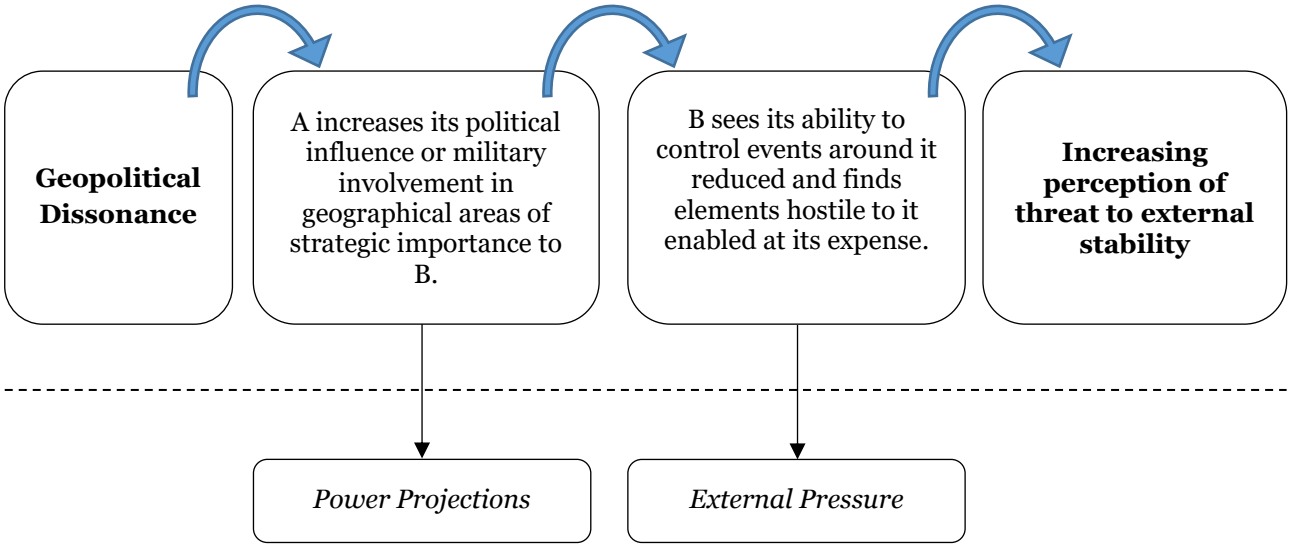
In the previous chapter I also argued that it is the extent of geopolitical dissonance, not merely the military balance as such, that informs perceptions of threat to external security among the Persian Gulf regimes. Because they tend to find themselves in a turbulent neighborhood, Saudi Arabia and Iran strive to have as much control and leverage over their proximate environment as possible, and they have a fundamental aversion to outside encroachment in what they define as their sphere of influence. In this context, I defined geopolitical dissonance as "disparate positions on how, where, and for which political ends coercive resources are put to use". I subsequently developed a two-part causal mechanism that links geopolitical dissonance to

[175] See also, Gregory Gause: Oil and Political Mobilization, in Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer & Stéphane Lacroix: Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political, Economic and Religious Change, (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 13-30.

increases in threat perception. What do we need to find in the empirical record that would allow us to substantiate that process?

Figure 4.2: Operationalization of the Expansionist Mechanism

Theoretical Level



Empirical Level

Again, we should expect to see two types of empirical manifestations. The first is that we should expect to see one side engage in projections of power beyond its borders. In the most basic sense, power projection involves "the overall capability to develop an infrastructure of influence [and] the capacity to inject appropriate instruments of influence and force over distances."[176] In other words, power projections are the allocation of assets that provide a state with more direct access to shape regional events in accordance with its own interests and especially the ability to affect outcomes outside of its own territory in times of conflict or crises. According to Ehteshami, "In the Middle East, it is the combination of brute force and money that help the projection of power and those states with the greatest military machines and resources have shown the greatest potential to (…) set the tone for regional interactions."[177] This is not to say that ideational elements are unimportant for states' ability to project power and gain levers of influence abroad. Certainly, states that are able to speak to particular ideological commitments or collective historical memories tend to have more opportunities available to them for doing so than those that are unable to make

[176] William Scot Thompson: Power Projection: A Net Assessment of U.S. and Soviet Capabilities, (National Strategy Information Center, 1978), pp. 7-8.
[177] Anoushiravan Ehteshami: Middle East Middle Powers: Regional Role, International Impact, (Uluslararasi Iliskiler, Vol. 11, No. 42, 2014), pp. 29-49. Quote on p. 34.

such connections.[178] Ultimately, though, what we are interested in here is not so much the potential for power projections but rather actual demonstrations of it – that is, projections of power that involve the commitment of tangible resources that expand the reach of the state and strengthen its ability to push regional events to its advantage, underpinned by the threat or use of force. More specifically, we are looking for evidence of power projection expressed in one of two ways. It can be *direct* in the sense that it involves the deployment of a regime's own coercive instruments in foreign interventions or military operations abroad. These can be enacted alone or in concert with others, and they can be undertaken with or without the consent of the government in which they take place. Yet the key characteristic of direct projections of power is that the regime applies elements of its conventional military apparatus beyond its borders to advance its interests. Thus, they are relatively rare, but highly visible when they do occur. The more common types of power projections are the *indirect* ones. Indirect projections of power are best understood with reference to what Kamrava has referred to as the conduct of "subtle power" – that is, "the ability to exert influence from behind the scenes".[179] More precisely, then, indirect power projections are concerted efforts to enable and support outside actors to work for – and when necessary, fight for – the realization of important strategic goals by providing military or financial assistance to them. Those outside actors can be states or they can be non-state actors; what is important is that they share with the regime a similar understanding of who the main threats or challengers are and are willing to take on the primary burden of confronting them in exchange for the support they receive. Indirect power projections are more difficult to identify, but we should be able to find pieces of information about that support – financial backing, military training, or supplies of military hardware – that allow us to make qualified estimations of their scope and durability.

Regardless of the specific form they take, projections of power tend to raise suspicion elsewhere. This is certainly true in the Persian Gulf region, where regimes even in the best of times already approach one another with a healthy dose of caution and mistrust. Yet the projection of power is a necessary condition in increasing perceptions of threat, not a sufficient one. Given the right circumstances, a regime may well see the power projections by others as largely complimentary to its own interests. In other words, the political and geographical aims of those power projections matter. It is when another side is seen as expanding its sphere of influence by moving its military presence closer to the borders of the regime, or by providing material support for actors in the regime's vicinity whose agendas are diametrically opposed to its own, that concern for its external security intensifies. The second element that we would have to find in the empirical record is evidence that those power projections result in a loss of leverage and control over a regime's immediate environment, manifested through enhanced external pressures against it. External pressure pre-

[178] Gause: Beyond Sectarianism, pp. 19-22. See also, Afshon Ostovar: The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War, (Security Studies, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2018), pp. 159-188.
[179] Mehran Kamrava: Qatar: Small State, Big Politics, (Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 60.

cisely captures what we are interested in here, but since it is also a somewhat ambiguous term, we should specify what we mean by it. External pressure is the sum of activities that a regime finds detrimental to its ability to protect the physical security or territorial integrity of the state. This implies that we should think of the intensity of external pressure as something that ebbs and flows along a continuum over time.[180] What we need to establish, then, is that one regime finds itself towards the severe end of that spectrum and that it views the other side as a main reason why this is so. Recall from our discussion in the previous chapter that the baseline outlook for Saudi Arabia and Iran is shaped mostly by an underlying fear of encirclement from hostile outside forces, whether those are regional or extra-regional in origin. As a result, they orient their foreign policies towards establishing an environment around their perimeters that allows them, to the best of their abilities, to keep actual or potential adversaries in check and at bay. The extent of the external pressures they find themselves subject to is first and foremost a function of their success in that endeavor. We cannot escape the reality that determining changing levels of external pressure is necessarily an imperfect exercise. The fact that Saudi Arabia and Iran do not have a history of publishing reports on national security or intelligence estimates that could provide us with some guidance only makes it more difficult. Again, however, we should be able to put together different pieces that allow us to make informed assessments. At its core, external pressure is about the likelihood of unwillingly becoming a party to armed conflict. Thus, the most tangible manifestations of external pressure are those that involve actual attacks, or credible threats thereof, against a regime's territory. Likewise, losing important allies or partners also clearly places it in a disadvantageous and more vulnerable position. Ultimately, however, the best measure of the extent of external pressure a regime is subject to is likely to come from its own behavior. Indeed, studies of other states have found "strong associations between the level of external pressure and the degree of coercion" exhibited in their foreign policy behavior.[181] That is, the more pronounced the extent of external pressure against a state, the more assertive it becomes in its efforts to reduce that pressure, and the more likely it will be to leverage all the means it has at its disposal to do so. This is also consistent with what cognitive psychologists have referred to as "prospect theory". Prospect theory suggests that how decision-makers behave under conditions of risk and uncertainty is determined by how they interpret their situations. When decision-makers perceive themselves as operating in a domain of gain, which is to say that they find themselves to be operating from an advantageous position, their behavior is likely to be risk-averse and cautious. When they perceive themselves as operating in a domain of loss, i.e. when they sense that

[180] This is also the contention of Elias Götz who has offered a good discussion on how external pressures conditions Russia's foreign policy in its adjacent environment. See, Elias Götz: Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine Policy, 1991-present, (Contemporary Politics, Vol. 22, No. 3), pp. 301-323.
[181] Ibid, p. 316.

their situations are getting worse, their behavior is likely to be risk-acceptant and opportunistic.[182]

It is when we find these two elements connected in the empirical record – that is, when we see projections of power by one regime and we are able to reasonably assert that it raises the external pressure against the other – that we have justification for inferring that a regime's perception of threat has increased due to concern for its external security. When these conditions are met, a regime will view the other as an Expansionist Threat.

4.4 Data Sources

Where do we find information on these matters? How do we avoid charges that we are simply picking and choosing whatever information fits our purposes and conveniently leaving out contradictory evidence? The great strength of case studies lies in the potential to substantiate the causal claims with compelling empirical evidence derived from different kinds of sources. However, that comparative advantage is only maintained insofar as we are also sensitive to potential challenges with the empirical material we rely on and how we use it to draw inferences.

This study does work under some constraints in collecting relevant information for two different reasons. The first is that I do not have the requisite language skills to consider or use sources in Arabic or Farsi. I use a wide array of empirical material in English, which I will expand on below, but this is just to flag that there are particular kinds of sources that I do not work with because of the language barrier. The second and perhaps the more consequential restriction comes from the fact that Saudi Arabia and Iran are extremely closed political systems, even when compared to other authoritarian states. As suggested above, whereas China and Russia rather frequently publish official reports on their foreign policy priorities and security doctrines, Saudi Arabia and Iran do not. We also do not have a rich archival record of internal meetings and deliberations, nor can we say that we have many detailed and substantive accounts from central decision-makers who reflect on why they engaged in particular courses of action. To the contrary, there is a strong and long-established preference for keeping sensitive issues away from public scrutiny. As the saying goes in Saudi Arabia, "Those who know don't talk, those who talk don't know".

With these general caveats in mind, let us instead focus on what we *do* have at our disposal. I use different kinds of primary sources. While Saudi Arabia and Iran are anything but forthcoming themselves, we actually do have some very insightful archival material. For instance, "The Foreign Relations of the United States" series (FRUS), which documents the diplomatic history of the United States, contains a range of formerly classified information from meetings between high-level officials, embassy cables, and reports from ambassadors. Wikileaks has released similar kinds

[182] For a discussion of prospect theory and International Relations, see Jeffrey W. Taliaferro: Prospect Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis, (Oxford Research Encyclopedias, 2010). Available at https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-281.

of documents that, unlike the FRUS series, have not been subject to a process of declassification. Of course, like any other archival material, these kinds of sources are subject to their own fallacies and should be treated with caution. At the same time, I do think they can help us understand what goes on behind closed doors and thus provide a kind of insight that is difficult to obtain through other sources. In other words, while these documents cannot stand alone, they provide a valuable way of corroborating and substantiating assertions about threat perception at particular moments in time. Other kinds of primary sources that I use include personal memoirs, public speeches, and official statements and documents. However, the vast majority of the empirical material I use is derived from secondary sources in the form of newspaper articles and particularly the scholarly literature. The reason for this is quite simple: The objective of my thesis is distinctly analytical and theoretical. Though I may use some material that others may not necessarily have used, by no means do I claim to have found sources that completely change the nature of the empirical record or our understanding of how particularly important events played out. Rather, what I do offer is a new conceptual framework and a lens through which we can analyze and interpret Saudi-Iranian relations. Needless to say, we want the best kind of empirical support for our claims, but what counts as good evidence also follows from the task at hand. As Skocpol has put it, "If a topic is too big for primary research and if excellent studies by specialists are already available in some profusion, secondary sources are appropriate as the basic source of evidence for a given study."[183] The topic of Saudi Arabia and Iran qualifies on both accounts.

However, we should not discount the fact that relying on secondary sources does introduce the potential problem of selection bias. "The question", as Lustick has suggested, "is how to choose sources of data without permitting correspondence between the categories and implicit theoretical postulates used in the chosen sources to ensure positive answers to the questions asked about the data."[184] Put in somewhat simpler terms, the issue raised by Lustick is that historical scholarship does not simply observe and report "history" in a neutral or objective way, but particular representations of it that reflect the dispositions of those who produce it. The problem is when social scientists – consciously or not – choose to validate or test their work against empirical material from scholars whose theoretical biases are similar to their own and thus do not adequately consider contradictory evidence.[185] I think this is a very important point. I deal with the potential problem of selection bias in two ways. First, I follow Lustick's recommendation that we should triangulate across different sources. In practical terms, this means that I make a very conscious effort to demonstrate how the claims I make are supported by several and different kinds of sources. It is also in this context that the quite extensive number of citations and sources ref-

[183] Quoted in Ian S. Luctick: History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias, (The American Political Science Review, Vol. 90, No. 3, 1996), pp. 605-618. Quote on p. 606.
[184] Ibid, p. 608.
[185] Ibid. See also, Beach & Pedersen: Process-Tracing Methods, pp. 220-221.

erenced in this study should be understood. Second, I test my argument against alternative theoretical explanations in the scholarly literature. I do this precisely to compare and contrast how we see things differently and why we do so. This is a point I return to in the section below. Let me just emphasize here that I think the concern with selection bias is one we should take seriously, and that from my perspective these two strategies – corroboration of various kinds of evidence and engagement with arguments advanced from different theoretical perspectives – offer the most constructive way to address or manage it.

4.5 The Design of the Empirical Analysis

As I mentioned in the first chapter, the empirical analysis is divided into three time periods or sub-cases.[186] Each chapter represents a change in perceptions of threat in Saudi-Iranian relations and thus the empirical analysis is organized according to changes in the outcome, or what others would call the dependent variable. The three chapters are:

- Revolution and War, 1979-1989, (Chapter 5)
- The Rapprochement, 1990-2002 (Chapter 6)
- The Unravelling, 2003-2011 (Chapter 7)

The chapters follow the same basic template, which involves three overall steps. Each chapter begins with the conclusion, so to speak. By that I mean that each chapter starts out by providing an overview of the main trends in Saudi-Iranian relations during that time period and by specifying their particular perceptions of threat. Recall that my theoretical argument suggests that there are four perceptual prisms of threat that each can view the other through. Thus, the first analytical task in each of the chapters is to chart where Saudi Arabia and Iran are located in the typology of threat perception that we have referenced in the previous chapters. Let us bring it back once again:

Figure 4.3: The Typology of Threat Perception in Saudi-Iranian Relations

		Ideological Dissonance	
		-	+
Geopolitical Dissonance	-	Latent Threat	Subversive Threat
	+	Expansionist Threat	Omnipresent Threat

[186] In thinking about how to design this study and organize the empirical analysis, I have been inspired by Elias Götz's excellent study on Russian foreign policy. See, Elias Götz: Russia's Quest for Regional Hegemony, (Politica, 2013). He presents his research design on pp. 73-89.

The second analytical task is the actual empirical analysis, where I look to substantiate those claims in detail. What I rely on to do so are the two causal mechanisms, "the subversion mechanism" and "the expansionist mechanism". To reiterate, the subversion mechanism is the process by which ideological dissonance leads to increases in threat perception for reasons that relate to a regime's internal stability. The expansionist mechanism is the process by which geopolitical dissonance leads to increases in threat perception for reasons that relate to a regime's external security. It is whether we find these causal mechanisms and the processes they point to operative or not that allows us to claim a particular perceptual prism for Saudi Arabia and Iran. In order to do so with more analytical clarity, the empirical analysis in each of the three chapters is sub-divided into two overarching categories. I refer to these as the ideological dimension and the geopolitical dimension respectively, and what we want to establish in the first is whether "the subversion mechanism" is operative or not, and in the second whether "the expansionist mechanism" is operative or not. Needless to say, we want to do this for both sides. Let us illustrate with some hypothetical examples: If we are to substantiate why one regime views the other as a Latent Threat in one particular time period, we do so on the basis that neither of the causal mechanisms were operative at the time. The reasons can be multiple; either of the causal mechanisms can fail to "get going"– if, say, we find a high element of ideological consonance between them – or one of the causal mechanisms could break down along the way – for instance, if we find evidence of subversive activities, but they don't have any reverberation effects. Either way, the results are the same: The causal mechanism was not operative at the time, and when we find that to be case for both mechanisms, we conclude that one side viewed the other as a Latent Threat. Likewise, if we are to argue that a regime found the other to be an Expansionist Threat during a particular time period, we have to find the requisite evidence that allows us to suggest that "the expansionist mechanism" was operative, and that "the subversion mechanism", for whatever reason, was not. Vice versa for the Subversive Threat. Finally, the Omnipresent Threat requires us to find both mechanisms operative. That is to say that the empirical record in that particular time period should include the combination of both subversive activities and reverberation effects *as well as* evidence of both power projections and external pressure.

The third analytical step is to test my argument against other theoretical explanations of Saudi-Iranian relations in the time period under investigation. In each of the three chapters, I compare and contrast the account I offer to those that provide a balance of power reading as well as works from constructivists. These other studies are careful and nuanced, and they make a number of points that I very much agree with. However, there are also areas where we differ in important ways, and it is those differences that come from different theoretical and analytical points of emphasis that we are interested in dissecting further. Because these other studies point to different causal connections than I do and because they do so from very different theoretical perspectives, they offer a broad set of counters to my explanation. The active engagement with arguments advanced from both a balance of power position and by

constructivists should increase our confidence that we are not conveniently overlooking important factors or avoiding contradictory pieces of evidence. I would therefore also like to emphasize that when I point out where I think these other studies "get it wrong", my intention is by no means to discredit other scholars or call into question the value of their work. Rather, I engage with their work for two reasons. First, I do so precisely to make sure that I have adequately covered my bases and considered other and very different works on their own terms. And second, I do so to test the explanatory leverage of my theoretical framework and assess how it fares against some of the leading scholarly work on Saudi-Iranian relations.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the research design of the study and its methodological underpinnings. I have specified how this is a single-case study of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry from 1979 to 2011 that aims to test the explanatory potential of my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception and its ability to account for shifts in perceptions of threat between the two sides during that time period. I have presented process tracing as the research method I rely on in the empirical analysis, operationalized the two causal mechanisms, and thus specified how we can identify the process by which they lead to increases in perceptions of threat. I have discussed the nature of the empirical material on which I rely, highlighted potential problems with it, and discussed how I work to address those issues. Finally, I have provided an overview of how the empirical analysis is organized and explained the various analytical steps that each of the empirical chapters follows. In short, to paraphrase Yin again, I have presented the map that makes the path from "here" to "there" easier to follow. With all these considerations in place, let us now turn to the empirical analysis of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry from 1979 to 2011.

Chapter 5:
Revolution and War

We should try hard to export our revolution to the world (…) because Islam does not regard various Islamic countries differently and is the supporter of all the oppressed people of the world. (…) All the superpowers and all the powers have risen to destroy us. If we remain in an enclosed environment, we shall definitely face defeat. We should clearly settle our accounts with the powers and superpowers and should demonstrate to them that, despite all the grave difficulties that we have, we shall confront the world with our ideology.[187]

- Ayatollah Khomeini, 1980

On February 1, 1979, after almost 15 years in exile, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran. Two weeks earlier, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran through nearly four decades, had finally conceded that the revolutionary currents in the country were too powerful to control and left for exile in Egypt. As Khomeini returned, a massive crowd of several million Iranians escorted him from the airport in Tehran to the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery where Khomeini announced his intentions to lead the formation of a Provisional Revolutionary Government that would eliminate all remnants of the Shah's monarchical order and prepare for the establishment of an Islamic Republic. In the days that followed, the already disintegrating Pahlavi state collapsed entirely. Desertions from the security institutions accelerated as revolutionaries seized control of police stations, military bases and government buildings. Large numbers of officials from the Shah's regime were summarily executed. On February 11, 1979, the military leadership of the Imperial Armed Forces of Iran, the institution that more than any other had symbolized the might and power of the Shah, ordered its units to stand down and return to their bases in what was the final a capitulation to the revolutionary forces.[188]

5.1 Perceptions of Threat in Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1979-1989

The revolution in Iran was a seismic shift in the history of the modern Middle East with profound effects in the domestic politics of regional states and dramatic consequences for interactions between them. That it happened at all shook the other Gulf

[187] Quote from speech by Khomeini delivered in June 1980. The speech is available in its entirety at https://merip.org/1980/06/khomeini-we-shall-confront-the-world-with-our-ideology/

[188] For excellent accounts of the origins of the Iranian Revolution, see Mohsen Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic, (Westwood Press, 1994); Nikki Keddie: Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution, (Yale University Press, 2006); & Roy Mottahedeh: The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran (Oneworld Publications, 1985). The section above relies on information from pp. 129-133 in Milani's book.

regimes to their cores. As Gause notes, "for all the regional elites, the example of a popular revolution unseating an apparently strong regime with superpower backing was extremely disturbing."[189] There are two primary reasons why relations between revolutionary Iran and Saudi Arabia became so incredibly conflictual in the decade that followed. The first was the increasing efforts of the new Iranian leadership to present the overthrow of the Shah as a model for others to emulate and to encourage and support popular dissent throughout the region. Because of Iran's active efforts to export its revolution and the presence of longstanding social and political grievances in the other Gulf countries, particularly among the Shi'a communities, the Iranian revolution became a catalyst for popular mobilization that threatened the foundations of domestic political order in the conservative monarchies as well as in Ba'athist Iraq. The second major source of tension derived from Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's decision to take on the revolutionaries directly and launch a full-scale invasion of Iran in September 1980. The Iran-Iraq War would continue until 1988, making it one of the longest conventional interstate wars of the twentieth century and by far the most destructive and deadly conflict in the Middle East. Though the war had its origins in the ideological challenge revolutionary Iran posed to the domestic political stability of the Arab Gulf states, it added a distinct military component to the threat perceptions of all the regimes of the Persian Gulf. From the very beginning of the war to its very end, Saudi Arabia and Iran would both make political choices and devote massive resources towards realizing objectives that necessarily implied enhanced insecurity for the other side. In other words, whereas a core of common interest had worked to preserve a rather cordial relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran up until 1979, the aftermath of the revolution would introduce intense ideological and geopolitical dissonance between, causing decisive and durable shifts in their mutual threat perceptions that were sustained over the course of the 1980s.

5.1.1 Saudi Arabia's Perception of Iran

The effects of the Iranian Revolution were felt regionally and internationally, but in few places would the contrast between "before" and "after" 1979 be as pronounced as in Saudi Arabia. "The Iranian upheavel", according to Safran, "revived the old Saudi dread experienced in the hey-day of Nasserism, of a combination of external military pressure and internal subversion."[190] This is precisely true. As the dust from the post-revolutionary power struggle in Iran began to settle, the new political leadership actively encouraged and supported domestic opposition in Saudi Arabia. Ayatollah Khomeini openly and repeatedly made it clear that the institution of monarchism was irreconcilable with Islam and thus used the very premise of the Saudi system as a mean to incite opposition against the Saudi royal family. The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War added a new dimension to the threat from Iran, particularly as Khomeini decided to continue the war into Iraqi territory in 1982 after Iran had re-

[189] Gause: International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 47.
[190] Safran: Saudi Arabia, p. 433.

pelled Saddam Hussein's invasion. Not only did this prolong the war and the instability it created, but it also raised the highly disconcerting possibility that Iran could actually emerge victorious and reorder the political geography of the Persian Gulf. In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, then, Saudi Arabia saw the relatively comfortable security situation it had built over the course of the 1970s evaporate. Instead, the Saudi royal family found itself subject to a series of open challenges to its rule from within its own society, as well as faced with an exceptionally unstable external environment and an ongoing potential for becoming more deeply embroiled in a severe military conflict than it already was. In short, Saudi Arabia saw threats to its internal stability and external security intensify and Iran was at the center of both of those worries. From the Saudi perspective, Iran was an Omnipresent Threat.

Figure 5.1: Saudi Arabia's Perception of Iran, 1979-1989

Latent Treat	Subversive Threat
Expansionist Threat	**Omnipresent Threat**

5.1.2 Iran's Perception of Saudi Arabia

The primary threats to regime security in Iran in the first decade after the revolution came from two sources. The first was from various domestic political movements that participated in the overthrow of the Shah but also opposed the creation of the Islamic Republic. Saudi Arabia was not a threat to Iran's internal stability. Though they would also launch their own propaganda warfare against Iran, the Saudis simply did not have the ideological appeal or the ability to build relationships with opposition groups to make it much of a player in Iranian domestic politics. Moreover, as Milani has noted, as early as 1982 "Khomeini and his dedicated supporters were in total control of the state and the revolutionary institutions. For all practical purposes, the opponents of the Islamic Republic had been either silenced, killed or exiled."[191] Rather, it was through the lens of its war with Iraq – the second Iranian preoccupation that became the all-important one – that Iran came to see a threat from Saudi Arabia. For Iran, "the imposed war" was fought by Saddam Hussein, but it was as much a product of the extensive diplomatic, financial, and military support that outsiders provided to Iraq. Indeed, Iranian leaders never viewed the Iran-Iraq War as contest between two belligerents but have continuously defined it as a "conflict between Iran and a powerful group of states."[192] Saudi Arabia threw its weight behind

[191] Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, p. 197.

[192] This is the contention of Tabatabai & Samuel who base their study on extensive use of primary sources. They find further that "Iranian sources emphasize the 'terrible inequality of the two belligerent camps' [and] asserts that the numerous supporters Iraq drew to its side came not because of any particular affinity for the Iraqi regime, but because of Iraq's 'vindictive opposition to Iran'. As the war dragged on, the common animosity toward the

Saddam Hussein from the moment Iraqi forces crossed the border into Iran, and it would go on to contribute more to the Iraqi war effort than any other outside power. The details of that support are outlined later in the chapter, but here I will merely suggest that the outcome of the Iran-Iraq War could have been entirely different had it not been for Saudi Arabia's active involvement in it. For Iran, then, Saudi Arabia was an Expansionist Threat, not because it worried about a Saudi military threat as such, but because the Saudis so decisively leveraged their resources in support of a campaign that had set out to bring the Iranian regime to its knees.

Figure 5.2: Iran's Perception of Saudi Arabia, 1979-1989

Latent Treat	Subversive Threat
Expansionist Threat	Omnipresent Threat

5.2 The Ideological Dimension of Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1979-1989

The Iranian revolution and its aftermath is perhaps the most instructive example of how and when ideology becomes a driver in perceptions of threat among the regimes of the Persian Gulf. It is widely accepted that Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran and Saudi Arabia's decision to support Iraq throughout the war both followed directly from the Iranian Revolution and this is undeniably true. Yet what is often not fully appreciated are the conscious efforts made by Iran's neighbors to seek de-escalation and engage with it politically, despite their unease about the revolution. Indeed, more than 18 months separated the departure of the Shah from Iran from the onset of the Iran-Iraq War, which leaves us with the fundamental question of *why*? Why did their policies shift from trying, however apprehensive those efforts were, to work with post-revolutionary Iran to a much more confrontational approach that ultimately resulted in Iraq's declaration of war and the Gulf monarchies rallying to the Iraqi side? The reason was the mounting ideological dissonance with revolutionary Iran that elevated the other Gulf states' initial worries about Iran's political trajectory to a more specific understanding that it posed a threat to the internal stability of their regimes. More precisely, what changed was the progressive concentration of political power in Iran in the hands of the more radical Islamist elements among the Iranian revolutionaries centered around Ayatollah Khomeini, which sidelined the voices for moderation and instead placed control of the country in the hands of people who openly embraced the idea that their revolution had an international component to it. The combination of the more aggressive Iranian rhetoric towards Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf states and the escalation of political crises and violent protests

Islamic Republic proved powerful enough to unite otherwise unlikely partners even more closely." See, Ariane Tabatabai & Annie Samuel: What the Iran-Iraq War Tells Us about the Future of the Iran Nuclear Deal, (International Security, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2017), pp. 152-185. Quotes on pp. 165-166.

within their own societies explains why they came to view revolutionary Iran as a threat to their own domestic power and why their behavior towards it changed accordingly.

To support the theoretical assertion that it was the trend towards ideological dissonance that increased the perception of threat among Iran's neighbors, we need to distinguish between two periods after Khomeini's return from exile. The first was that of the Provisional Revolutionary Government under Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, which came into office in February 1979, and ended when Bazargan and his cabinet were forced to resign following the hostage crisis on the American embassy in Tehran in early November 1979. This left Iran under the sole authority of the Council of the Islamic Revolution, an organ created by Khomeini and over which he had complete oversight, and which was backed by institutions that reflected his more radical Islamic revolutionary agenda. It was in this second period that Iran's relations with its neighbors escalated rapidly and seriously.[193] The following analysis has three main sections. The first explains the post-revolutionary power struggle in Iran and why the sense of threat felt in Saudi Arabia remained somewhat indeterminate throughout much of 1979. The second details how this uncertainty and ambiguity was replaced after the fall of Bazargan's government in November 1979 with a much more specific sense of internal threat in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, it is from this moment that we begin to see the subversion mechanism – unmistakable efforts to undermine the domestic order followed by enhanced political mobilization against the regime – in full effect. Third and finally, I discuss how Iran over the course of the 1980s would use the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, as an occasion to stir up opposition against the Al Saud, thus sustaining and confirming the perception among the Saudi leadership of Iran as a threat to its internal stability.

5.2.1 Seizing the Revolution

Shortly before he returned to Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini established the Council of the Islamic Revolution to prepare for the post-revolutionary period once the Shah was removed from power. Among the Council's members were former students and supporters of Khomeini including Ali Khamenei, who would eventually become Khomeini's heir, and Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani, another towering figure in the Islamic Republic. Because the religious clerics in the Council had little experience in politics and government, however, one of Khomeini's first acts when he arrived in Iran was to appoint Mehdi Bazargan as Prime Minister of the new Provisional Revolutionary Government on February 4. Bazargan was a longtime leading figure in the National Front, Iran's largest pro-democracy movement, and a moderate religious intellectual. His strong liberal inclinations stood in sharp contrast to Khomeini's theocratic worldview, but Bazargan was well-respected both among Iranian liberal nationalists

[193] On the importance of the events of November 1979 for the direction of the Iranian Revolution, see R.K. Ramazani: Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 57-60; & Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, Chapters 8 and 9.

and in Islamic circles and thus viewed as a uniting figure in a time of turbulence. When Bazargan subsequently appointed a cabinet of likeminded moderate technocrats, Khomeini declared that "opposition to [Bazargan's] government is blasphemy and punishable."[194] The appointment of Bazargan as Prime Minister gave some credence to the declaration that Khomeini had made on several occasions, namely that he did not seek for himself, or for the religious clergy more generally, any direct political power in Iran. In some of Khomeini's last interviews before his return from exile, he made it clear that "our intention is not that the religious leaders should themselves administer the state" and categorically stated that the clerics "will not participate in the official government".[195] It is instructive that Khomeini and his supporters stopped the circulation of his main philosophical and radical work, "Islamic Governance" based on the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, within Iran over the course of 1978 because they recognized that it would likely alienate too many important constituencies.[196] At no time did Khomeini refer to velayat-e faqih as the protests against the Shah's regime mounted or in the months that followed his return from exile.[197] According to Keddie, "even privately, [Khomeini] indicated that he had renounced his ideas [on velayet-e faqih], and in the initial period of his rule he gave the same impression in both word and deed."[198] Indeed, when the Provisional Revolutionary Government introduced a draft resolution for Iran's new constitution in June 1979 that avoided any reference to velayat-e faqih, Khomeini endorsed the document.[199] This is not meant to suggest that Khomeini was not thoroughly committed to establishing a theocratic state. Rather, the point that should be emphasized is that it was rather difficult, for Iranians and for outsiders, to decipher what the political project of establishing an Islamic Republic entailed more specifically because Khomeini was deliberately vague about it when he first returned to Iran. Khomeini was certainly an ideologue, but he was also an opportunist who was willing to engage in tactical alliances and disguise his intentions when necessary in order to let political momentum build in his favor.

At the same time as Khomeini voiced his support for Bazargan's official and largely secular government, he simultaneously worked to establish new religious institutions under the control of the Council of the Islamic Revolution, which continued to operate as a parallel authority. Under the direction of Khomeini, the Council took charge of prosecuting representatives from the Shah's regime by setting up the

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[194] Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, pp. 129-145. Quote on p. 143.

[195] Quoted in James Bill: Power and Religion in Revolutionary Iran, (Middle East Journal, Vol. 42, No. 1, 1982), pp. 22-47. Quote on p. 31.

[196] Khomeini's political theory on *velayat-e faqih* is the idea that true Islamic governance can only be achieved if it is led by the religious clergy and overseen by a ruling faqih that served as the supreme political and religious authority.

[197] Keddie: Modern Iran, p. 241.

[198] Ibid.

[199] Said Saffari: The Legitimation of the Clergy's Right to Rule in the Constitution of 1979, (British Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol 20. No. 1, 1993), pp. 62-84. For the point made here, see p. 66.

Revolutionary Courts in February 1979. Over the course of the following nine months, the Revolutionary Courts would execute some 600 military and political officials from the Shah's regime for "sowing corruption on earth". Thousands more were imprisoned.[200] While Bazargan would fiercely criticize the utter disregard for due process in these trials, the Revolutionary Courts' swift and decisive settling of old scores was much more in line with the popular demand for retribution and revenge among large segments of Iranian society.[201] Encouraged by Khomeini, loyalist clerical members of the Revolutionary Council, including Khamenei and Rafsanjani, formed the Islamic Republican Party that would become the primary driving force in mobilizing popular support behind a distinctly religious revolutionary agenda. Most importantly, with Iran in the midst of revolutionary chaos and with the regular security institutions either dismantled entirely or decimated by ongoing purges, Khomeini recognized the need for having armed units and security forces under his undisputed control. While Bazargan was working to disarm and dismantle the vast number of revolutionary committees and local militias that had emerged all throughout Iran, Khomeini was working to mobilize and recruit them to his ranks. By far the most important institution that developed from these efforts was the formation of the *Sepah-e pasdaran-e engelab-e eslami*, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. From its inception, the IRGC was compromised of individuals fiercely loyal to Khomeini and deeply committed to the elimination of all "counter-revolutionary" forces, as he would define them. Over the course of 1979, the IRGC would transform "from a poorly funded, loose coalition of Islamist guerilla factions into a formidable armed force with a national reach."[202] Each of these institutions not only grew individually, but they also reinforced each other collectively – and above all they cemented the central position of Khomeini. As Mohsen Milani explains:

> From February to November 1979, the fundamentalists created a state within the state that remained outside the jurisdiction of the provisional government. Khomeini was its undisputed leader and its source of inspiration; the Islamic Republican Party was its parliament and brain; the Komites its police; the Pasdaran [IRGC] its national army; the revolutionary courts its judiciary (…) This mini-state was a channel for the indoctrination and mobilization of the masses. It was skillfully used by the fundamentalists in the Islamic Republican Party to destroy their opponents and pave the way for their own ascendancy.[203]

None of this, however, was immediately clear by the time Khomeini first returned from exile. Thus, it is in the context of these dual centers of power – the official government of Bazargan and Khomeini's enormous, yet elusive, influence from behind

[200] Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, pp. 149-150.
[201] Ibid. See also: James Bill: The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations, (Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 261-263.
[202] Afshon Ostovar: Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards, (Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 41. For Ostovar's excellent account of the origins of the IRGC, see pp. 39-61.
[203] Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, p. 151.

the scenes – that Saudi Arabia's reaction to the early stages of the post-revolutionary period in Iran must be understood and assessed.

It is almost certainly true that the Saudi leadership did not like Khomeini or the kind of populist agitation that he represented. Yet the more immediate problem the Saudis faced after his return was how to interpret the new situation in Iran and the kind of challenge it posed, and how to deal with it politically. These questions deepened a split that had been developing in the Saudi royal family, between King Khaled and Prince Abdullah on the one side and Crown Prince Fahd on the other, over the broader orientations of its foreign policy.[204] With regard to Iran, the position advanced by Khaled and Abdullah was to adopt a wait-and-see approach in which Saudi Arabia would engage the revolutionaries and work to be on good terms with them. By contrast, Fahd was much more skeptical about Khomeini's return to Iran. Fahd had been the Shah's most ardent supporter among the Saudi leadership, and he had maintained that the Shah was the legitimate ruler of Iran up until the very end of his tenure. Yet even Fahd's main concern about the presence of Khomeini in Iran was that it would eventually empower the communist elements in the country.[205] Despite all the Saudi reservation about Khomeini, some of his first acts were somewhat encouraging, and at the very least, did not escalate their unease about the situation. The appointment of the decidedly moderate Bazargan to lead the political transition in Iran was a positive sign. From his first day in office, Bazargan would continuously stress the importance of cooperative ties among the Gulf countries. In late February, in one of Khomeini's first statements on foreign policy, he also asserted that Iran had no interest in serving as the Gendarme of the Gulf, as the Shah had done, that Iran was seeking good relations with its neighbors, and that it had no intention of exporting its revolution.[206] Shortly after, Iran withdrew its remaining forces from Oman, which had helped defeat the Dhofar rebellion, but whose continued presence on the Arabian Peninsula had been an irritant for the Saudis.[207] These actions seemed to provide some tentative vindication for King Khaled's and Prince Abdullah's more accommodating position on Iran. In February, a Kuwaiti newspaper published an article under the headline "Saudi Arabia Praises the Iranian Revolution" in which it cited examples of support for Iran in Saudi media outlets since Khomeini's return.[208] When the Islamic Republic of Iran was officially declared after a national referendum on April 1, King Khaled sent a congratulatory letter to Khomeini stressing how Islamic solidarity between the two would form the basis of strong ties between them and that the birth of Islamic Republic "echoed well throughout the Kingdom".[209] In-

[204] For a full analysis of this split, see Safran: Saudi Arabia, pp. 303-308.
[205] Ibid, p. 306.
[206] Christin Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy: From Khomeini to Khatami, (Routledge, 2003), pp. 63-64.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Kim Ghattas: Palestine Is a Victim of the Iranian-Saudi War, (Foreign Policy, December 22, 2017).
[209] Arab News: Khaled Congratulates Khomeini on Republic, (April 3, 1979).

cidentally, that same week Crown Prince Fahd left Saudi Arabia for an "indefinite holiday" in Spain. He would stay abroad for three months.[210] In June, Prince Nayef, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Interior, called for all the Gulf states to work closely with Iran in their common struggle against communism.[211] Prince Abdullah went so far as suggesting that Saudi Arabia's interests were more aligned with revolutionary Iran than they had been with the Shah:

> The new regime in Iran has removed all obstacles and reservations in the way of cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Islam is the organizer of our relations. Muslim interests are the goals of our activities and the Holy Koran is the constitution of both our countries. (…) The fact is we are very relieved by the Islamic Republic of Iran's policy of making Islam, not heavy armaments, the organizer of our relations, a base for dialogue, and the introduction to a prosperous and dignified future.[212]

Though the conciliatory tone from Saudi Arabia likely exaggerated just how comfortable it was with the situation in Iran, it did reflect a more fundamental understanding that prevailed all the way through the spring and summer of 1979; namely, that – while certainly unnerved about the example that the Iranian revolution had set – Saudi Arabia did not view Iran as openly hostile to it or as actively working to destabilize it politically. This conclusion is also supported by internal discussions at the highest levels in the United States. In a meeting at the White House in May, the intelligence services, the military, and the executive branches all agreed that "The Saudis are primarily concerned by external threats, not by internal social upheavel. (…) The most immediate dangers as perceived by the Saudis stem from inter-Arab conflicts."[213] A report from the U.S. Ambassador in Saudi Arabia, John West, which took stock of the lessons learned in Saudi Arabia from the six months after the fall of the Shah, came to a somewhat similar conclusion. The Iranian revolution, the ambassador argued, had surely raised the generic question of "can it happen here?" among the Saudi leadership and made internal stability a more immediate priority. However, in terms of the more specific question of which outside powers were likely to foment domestic instability, the report did not mention Iran but rather noted that "South Yemen, Libya, and Iraq (approximately in that descending order)" topped the list of who Saudi leaders did not like and did not trust.[214] In other words, even after the return of Khomeini to Tehran and the declaration of the Islamic Republic, the challenge Iran posed to Saudi Arabia remained somewhat unclear and the understanding that it posed a specific threat to its internal stability had yet to materialize.

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[210] Safran: Saudi Arabia, p. 306.

[211] Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, p. 64.

[212] Quoted in Safran: Saudi Arabia, p. 308.

[213] Document titled "Summary of Conclusions of a Special Coordination Committee Meeting" and dated May 11, 1979. Available in Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1977-1980, Volume XVIII, Middle East Region & Arabian Peninsula, p. 633.

[214] Document titled "The Lesson of Iran – After Six Months" and dated July 15, 1979. Available in FRUS: 1977-1980, Volume XVIII, Middle East Region & Arabian Peninsula), p. 643.

Rather, it was towards the end of 1979, precipitated by drastic changes in domestic politics in Iran and the course of the revolution, that the change in Saudi threat perception would occur. The underlying driver of those changes was that the institutions set up by Khomeini upon his return to Iran were beginning to pay their dividends. In August, when elections were held for the first Assembly of Experts, the Islamic Republican Party won a majority of the 73 seats. This was significant as the primary task of the Assembly of Experts was to prepare the final constitution that would form the basis of the political system of the new Islamic Republic. Over the coming months, the Islamic Republican Party would transform the largely secular draft of the constitution that Bazargan had proposed – and which Khomeini had not opposed – into a model for a theocratic order. It was during this process that the concept of velayat-e faqih was introduced as the guiding principle of that order.[215] The increasing political influence of the clerics was backed by enhanced coercive powers of the IRGC, which by the fall of 1979 had developed into the largest and most powerful militia in Iran with over 10,000 members.[216] That the momentum of the revolution was swinging towards the radical fundamentalists in Iran was also evident from the fact that some of them were beginning to indicate that the revolution should be exported beyond Iranian borders. For instance, Ayatollah Sadeq Rouhani, a leading Iranian cleric, declared in September that he had informed the ruling family in Bahrain that "if you do not stop oppressing the people and restore Islamic laws, we will call on the people to demand annexation to the Islamic government of Iran."[217] According to Ramazani, Rouhani's comment marked "the first example of the revolutionary claim to religious primacy in the Gulf region."[218] Prime Minister Barzagan immediately denounced the comments as irresponsible and the Iranian ambassador to Saudi Arabia reassured the Gulf countries that "we respect other nations' sovereignty and Iran has no claims or ambitions of any sort on any part of the Gulf."[219]

The mounting tensions between official and unofficial authorities in Iran were not lost on Bazargan, however. When asked about the domestic political situation in Iran in late October, he candidly responded, "from an official standpoint, the government is in command, but from an ideological and revolutionary standpoint, Khomeini is in command – Khomeini with his revolutionary councils, his revolutionary committees, his revolutionary guards and his relationship with the masses."[220] Days after Bazargan made this comment, on November 4 1979, a group of several hundred Iranian students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran in an act that would ultimately break the moderate forces in the Iranian revolution. Anti-American sentiment had been prevalent among both leftist and Islamist elements throughout the revolution, but it reached unprecedented levels after Iranians learned that the Shah had been

[215] For a full discussion, see Saffari: The Legitimation of the Clergy's Right to Rule in the Constitution of 1979, pp. 64-82.
[216] Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, p. 150.
[217] Quoted in Marchall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, p. 34.
[218] Quoted in Ramazani: Revolutionary Iran, p. 49.
[219] Ibid.
[220] The New York Times: "Everybody Wants to Be Boss", (October 28, 1979).

allowed entry into the United States on so-called "humanitarian grounds". This led to massive rallies in Iran in which approximately two million demonstrators chanted "death to America" and demanded the immediate extradition of "the criminal Shah".[221] It was in this context that a group of Khomeini loyalists climbed over the walls of the embassy and took 66 Americans as hostages. Whether they acted autonomously, as they claimed they did, or on orders from Khomeini remains unclear.[222] What is beyond dispute, however, is that Khomeini came to view the takeover of the embassy and the climate of anti-American fervor as an opportunity to sideline the opponents of clerical rule in Iran. Whereas Bazargan immediately demanded the unconditional release of the hostages, Khomeini voiced his unequivocal support for the seizure of the embassy. When he refused to change his position, Bazargan and his cabinet resigned in protest on November 6. Khomeini subsequently announced that the Council of the Islamic Revolution would take full control of running Iran's affairs and declared the beginning of "Iran's second revolution, more important than the first one."[223]

The hostage crisis and the fall of Bazargan's Provisional Government had two crucial effects on the trajectory of the Iranian Revolution. First, it allowed Khomeini and his allies to channel the passionate anti-Americanism in Iran into popular support for the theocratic constitution they desired. With the moderate forces swept away and other critics effectively portrayed as American colluders or opponents of the revolution, the constitution that was ultimately adopted in early December 1979 was one that openly embraced the concept of velayat-e faqih as the defining feature of the new political system in Iran. The constitution not only specified that Khomeini would serve as Supreme Leader for life with ultimate oversight over Iran's domestic and foreign policy, but he was also referred to as "Imam of the Muslim ummah" and "the embodiment of Islamic leadership" with a divinely sanctioned authority to "determine the interests of Islam".[224] Second, the consolidation of formal power around Khomeini also became the catalyst for much more coherent and concerted emphasis among Iranian leaders on revolutionary export.[225] Indeed, the preamble to the new

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[221] James Bill: The Eagle and the Lion, pp. 294.

[222] The prevailing view is that Khomeini did not learn about the attack on the embassy until after it had taken place. For excellent counters, see Mohammed Ayatollahi Tabaar: The Causes of the US Hostage Crisis in Iran: The Untold Account of the Communist Threat, (Security Studies, Vol. 26, No. 4. 2017), pp. 665-697; & Gary Sick: All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran, (Random House, 1986). According to Sick, "the Ayatollah was at least generally aware of the plans for an attack on the embassy and consciously exploited it for his own domestic political purposes. (…) the fate of the Shah was never the real issue. The real issue was Khomeini's constitution and the realization of an Islamic republic." (p. 251).

[223] Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, pp. 162-167. Quote on p. 166.

[224] Quoted in Ervand Abrahamian: A History of Modern Iran, (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 164.

[225] As Ostovar has noted, the idea of "exporting the revolution" is best understood as "a form of revolutionary or radical internationalism, which (…) sees international relations through the lens of conflict. A common characteristic of this type of internationalism is political or

constitution specified that the mission of the Islamic Republic was "to ensure the continuation of the revolution at home and abroad." It declared further that "in the development of international relations, the constitution will strive with other Islamic and popular movements to prepare the way for a single world community (…) and to assure the continuation of the struggle for the liberation of all deprived and oppressed people in the world."[226] Following the fall of Bazargan's government, Iran would not only commit in principle to the doctrine of exporting the revolution, but also work comprehensively to implement it in practice.

5.2.2 The Erosion of Internal Stability in Saudi Arabia

It was the combination of the radicalization of the domestic political scene in Iran and the fact that it was followed almost immediately by a series of domestic political crisis in the Kingdom that decisively changed Saudi Arabia's orientation towards revolutionary Iran. While unrest and demonstrations had taken place elsewhere in the Gulf, particularly among the Shi'a communities, there had been no visible signs of domestic instability in Saudi Arabia prior to November. A CIA analysis from October, shortly before the fall of Bazargan's government, asserted that "there is no evidence of dissident activities among Saudi Shias since Khomeini came to power last February."[227] While this likely reflected the view at the time, it is not entirely accurate. Leaflets supportive of Khomeini had circulated among Shi'a citizens in Qatif and the surrounding areas in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province over the course of 1979. In late November, some 4,000 Saudi Shi'a in Safwa defied the official ban from Saudi authorities on conducting public rituals related to the Ashura where Shias annually commemorate the death of Imam Hussein. When the peaceful processions were brutally put down, the following days evolved into mass demonstrations and violent clashes all throughout the Eastern Province between protestors and Saudi security forces, which included 20,000 soldiers from the Saudi National Guard. On November 28 tens of thousands of people – perhaps as many as 70,000 – took to the streets chanting anti-regime slogans such as "Oh [King] Khalid release your hands [from power], the people do not want you". Some openly called for the death of the Saudi royal family.[228] Protesters attacked police stations and government buildings, while the Saudi National Guard used live ammunition to disperse the riots. According to

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armed intervention, usually expressed through a revolutionary state's collaboration with like-minded armed groups as a means of influencing the internal political dynamics of foreign states." See Ostovar: Vanguard of the Imam, p. 103.

[226] For the entire text of the Iranian constitution and a discussion of its main principles, see R.K. Ramazani: Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, (Middle East Journal, Vol. 34, No. 2, 1980), pp. 181-204.

[227] CIA: Iran: The Shi'a Revolution and Iran's Neighbors, (National Foreign Assessment Center, October 19, 1979).

[228] Toby Craig Jones: Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, and the Shiʿa Uprising of 1979, (International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2006), pp. 213-233; & Toby Matthiesen: The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent, and Sectarianism, (Cambridge University Press, 2015) pp. 91-112.

Toby Jones, "over the next few days, at least two dozen people perished and hundreds fell wounded in a crescendo of mayhem and violence that the regime effectively sealed off from the rest of the world."[229] While the root cause of the uprising was decades of institutionalized discrimination against the Shi'a community in Saudi Arabia, the specific timing of the rebellion cannot be divorced from the trajectory of the Iranian Revolution and the increasing success of the radical forces in it. Among the key activists and instigators of the opposition was Hassan al-Saffar, a young Saudi Shi'a cleric who had founded the Shi'a Reform Movement in 1975 and advocated for improved social and economic conditions for Saudi Arabia's Shi'a minority. According to Louër, somewhere in the fall of 1979, al-Saffar and his supporters "reached the conclusion that, due to the changing regional context, the time was ripe for an intensification of pressure on the regime, including by violent means."[230] As protests emerged in late November, they announced the formation of the Organization for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula, or OIRAP, and began to issue pamphlets calling on fellow Shi'as to rise up and engage in acts of violence. OIRAP also issued a direct threat of retaliation against American employees at the oil facilities in the Eastern Province if the United States – as many expected at the time – were to launch a military operation from Saudi soil to free the hostages in Iran. English-language letters sent to hundreds of Americans stated that "we will not permit you to use our land and our resources against our Muslim brothers. Therefore, if your oppressive government takes any aggressive and military action against Iran, then you will be its victims."[231] This action seems to have been encouraged by the students involved in the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran, who used their public exposure to call on Saudi oil workers to rise up against American domination in the Eastern Province.[232] The question of whether Iran's role in the uprising extended beyond the merely inspirational – which certainly was the case – to a more direct organizational role is difficult to answer with any certainty. According to Louër, "the details of the actions were probably planned by the local activists but it is at least not unlikely that the initial impulse was given from Iran."[233] What we do know is that in mid- to late November, Iran began to more openly criticize Saudi Arabia and its leadership in what was most likely an effort to stir up passions around the Ashura. According to Trofimov, "with astute timing, Tehran radio had notched up its revolutionary rhetoric that week, filling the airwaves with denunciations of the Saudi Kingdom."[234] Television broadcasts from Iran reached audiences in Qatif for the first time on November 20 inciting opposition against the Al Saud. As the riots escalated a week later, the chief of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Directorate for the East-

[229] Jones: Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: p. 223.
[230] Laurence Louër: Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf, (Hurst Publishers, 2008), p. 163.
[231] Quoted in Jones: Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery, p. 225.
[232] Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, pp. 33-35.
[233] Louër: Transnational Shia Politics, p. 165.
[234] Yaroslav Trofimov: The Siege of Mecca, (Doubleday, 2007), p. 184.

ern Province, General Maliki, briefed American authorities that "Shi'as have been exceptionally agitated by Khomeini and other outside influences."[235] We also know that after the violence had ebbed in early December and Saudi authorities began to search for those responsible hundreds of OIRAP members and supporters fled Saudi Arabia with many of them settling in Iran. From Tehran, OIRAP continued its opposition throughout the 1980s by holding annual conferences on what they would refer to as the *1979 Intifada* while also producing extensive material critical of the Al Saud and calling for revolution against it.[236]

Simultaneous with the unprecedented violence in the Eastern Province, an equally disturbing event was playing out in Mecca. On November 20, 1979, the first day of the year 1400 in the Islamic calendar, several hundred insurgents seized control of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, barricaded the entrances and took several thousand worshippers as hostages. Early reports suggested that the takeover of the Mosque was linked to Iran, and this was also the prevailing assumption among American officials.[237] Indeed, American diplomats in Saudi Arabia sent a cable to Washington suggesting that the news from Mecca "may be related to information we have just obtained [of] recent Iranian attempts to agitate Saudi Shi'as."[238] As it turned out, the information was correct, but the context was wrong. The highly organized attack was in fact undertaken by a group of Sunni fundamentalists led by Juhayman al-Otaibi.[239] After having taking control of the Grand Mosque, the insurgents denounced the Al Saud and called for other "true believers" to revolt against it. For more than two weeks, the holiest place in Islam was a place of guerilla warfare that only ended with the help of French security forces after several attempts by the Saudi authorities to solve the crisis on their own had failed. Official numbers put the casualty figures in the hundreds, but unofficial accounts placed the number at more than 4.000.[240] Whereas the uprising in the Eastern Province was undertaken by elements that were deeply resented by the mainstream Saudi religious establishment, Juhayman and his movement were a product of Saudi Wahhabism. They represented a call for a return to Islamic orthodoxy and demonstrated with their actions that even

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[235] Quoted in Matthiesen: The Other Saudis, p. 116.

[236] Ibid, p. 109-110. See also, Toby Craig Jones: Embattled in Arabia: Shi'is and the Politics of Confrontation in Saudi Arabia, (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Occasional Paper Series, 2009), pp. 14-18.

[237] See, for example, The New York Times: Mecca Mosque Seized by Gunmen Believed to Be Militants From Iran, (November 21, 1979).

[238] This and many other declassified cables related to the Mecca incident have been released by the Intelwire Project. The quote appears on p. 9 of the collection which is available at https://fliphtml5.com/xhhy/swit.

[239] For an analysis of the ideology of Juhayman and his movement, see Thomas Hegghammer & Stéphane Lacroix: Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-Utaybi Revisited, (International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2007), pp. 103-122.

[240] For excellent overviews of the Mecca siege, see Trofimov: The Siege of Mecca; & Lawrence Wright: The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11, (A.A. Knopf, 2006), pp. 84-94.

within the Al Saud's traditional power base, there were currents of strong discontent that regarded the royal family as morally corrupt and were willing to resort to violence against it. In other words, the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca "added to the sense that, in the wake of the Iranian revolution, the Islamist political challenge was shaking all of the Gulf regimes."[241] While Iran was not involved, its media outlets used the opportunity to point out how the Gulf regimes failed to represent their populations and denounced their reliance on "foreigners to protect their hollow monarchies."[242]

What we see beginning in November 1979 is a decisive surge in the extent of hostile revolutionary rhetoric emanating from Iran and the emergence in Saudi Arabia of the most serious internal security crisis in its history. In other words, over the last two months of 1979 we start to see the subversion mechanism in full effect in the form of persistent Iranian efforts to incite opposition in Saudi Arabia and a manifest increase in political activism and acts of violence within Saudi society. It was during this phase that the uncertainty and ambiguity that characterized the Saudi leadership's initial reaction to the revolution in Iran were replaced by an unequivocal understanding that it constituted a severe and imminent threat to its domestic regime stability. A good illustration of the change in Saudi threat perception, and what led to it, was the stark contrast between two reports from U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, John West, released within the span of a few months. In his earlier report, which was written before the fall of Bazargan's government and was quoted earlier, Ambassador West had not referenced any signs of Iranian subversive activities, nor had he listed Iran among the key concerns in Saudi Arabia. By contrast, in early January 1980, he reported back to Washington that the "constant broadcast by Iranian militants over Radio Tehran calling for the overthrow of 'the corrupt Saudi monarch'" now served as "an almost daily reminder of the dangers that can emanate from a fanatical government in a neighboring state." According to Ambassador West, it was the events of November that "brought home to the (…) Saudi ruling family" the Iranian threat.[243] Subsequent events further cemented this understanding. The same month, Iranian radio stations announced in Arab-language broadcasts that the Islamic Republic intended to create formal organizations for the export of the revolution.[244] In January and February 1980, new outbreaks of protests and deadly violence occurred in the Eastern Province. Iranian newspapers claimed on February 1 – the one year anniversary of Khomeini's return to Iran – that the demonstrations were extensions of the Iranian revolution, and published statements from OIRAP leaders who pledged that protests would not end until an Islamic Republic was declared in

[241] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 48.

[242] Rubin: Islam in the Balance, p. 56.

[243] Document titled "Saudi Arabia – An Assessment as of January 1st 1980" and dated January 11, 1980. Available in FRUS: 1977-1980, Volume XVIII, Middle East Region & Arabian Peninsula, pp. 660-662.

[244] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 48.

Saudi Arabia.[245] Beginning in February 1980, Iranian TV and radio began broadcasting shows in Arabic dedicated to denouncing the Al Saud and calling for "death to the criminal and mercenary government of the Saudi family".[246] Iranian propaganda continuously issued statements along the following lines all throughout the spring of 1980:

> Revolutionary masses, heroic people in Qatif (…) resist the government from the desert where there is neither, education, awareness nor culture (…) resist your oppressive enemies [and] challenge the authorities' forces by directing blows at them (…) where are the arms? (…) where are the molotov cocktails prepared by the women and children?[247]

To counter the threat of revolutionary contagion within its own society, Saudi Arabia did two things. First, it worked to address some of the grievances among its Shi'a population in the Eastern province. In the aftermath of the protests and violence, Saudi authorities announced a large number of development projects in and around Qatif to improve standards of living. When King Khaled visited Qatif in late 1980, the first visit by any Saudi monarch in history, he also pledged to release the scores of opposition activists who had been imprisoned during the uprising. According to Matthiesen, "the announcement of their release just days before Muharram 1980 and the permission to hold limited Ashura processions were seen as part of a slight shift in state policy. But it was also harsh repression and the large scale deployment of security forces that restored a sense of calm to the Eastern Province."[248] The second element, which was pursued with far greater passion and far more resources, was that Saudi Arabia went on the offensive to demonstrate that it, not the radical revolutionaries in Iran, represented true Islam. Between 1980 and 1985, Saudi Arabia increased its spending on "religious activities" – from building of mosques to dissemination of Wahhabi ideology – by 900 percent compared to the previous five years.[249] . The priority given to the mission of restoring Saudi Arabia's religious image following the Mecca incident and the ongoing Iranian efforts to discredit it was so strong that these massive investments were enacted despite a severe drop in Saudi oil revenues in the early 1980s. Wahhabism was always the official state ideology of Saudi Arabia, but from the early 1980s onwards its core foundations – deep social conservatism and intolerance towards "non-Muslims", particularly Shi'as – was emphasized much more in Saudi domestic society and in the Islamic world more generally. Indeed, as Vali Nasr has asserted,

> Saudi Arabia pursued its strategy of containing Shi'ism by working closely with the Wahhabi ulama to build a network of seminaries, mosques, educational institutions,

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[245] Matthiesen: The Other Saudis, p. 107.

[246] Anthony Cordesman: Saudi Arabia Enters the 21st Century: The Political, Foreign Policy, Economic, and Energy Dimensions, (Prager Publishers, 2003), p. 113.

[247] Quoted in Jakob Goldberg: The Shi'i Minority in Saudi Arabia, in Juan Cole & Nikki R. Keddie (eds): Shiism and Social Protest, (Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 230-246. Quote on pp. 242-243.

[248] Matthiesen: The Other Saudis, p. 110-112. The quote is from p. 111.

[249] Rubin: Islam in the Balance, p. 58.

> preachers, activists, writers, journalists, and academics that would articulate and emphasize Sunni identity, push that identity through the greater Middle East in the direction of Wahhabism and militancy, draw a clear line between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, and eliminate Iran's ideological influence.[250]

The single most tangible expression of those efforts was Saudi Arabia's support for the Afghan mujahedeen over the course of the 1980s. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in the last days of 1979 was another potential disaster for Saudi Arabia, but at the same time, it also took place at an incredibly expedient moment for the Saudi leadership. With its religious integrity openly challenged, the attack on a poor and largely Sunni Muslim country by a communist superpower provided the perfect opportunity for Saudi Arabia to demonstrate its central role in defending Muslims and Islam from outside aggression.[251] From the very first days of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia involved itself passionately and in a variety of different ways in support of the Afghan resistance. The Saudi state immediately launched a campaign with the United States and the ISI, the Pakistani intelligence service, that provided money and weapons to the Afghan militia fighters. Saudi Arabia pledged to double the financial support provided to the mujahedeens by the United States and these donations would reach several hundred million dollars from the mid-1980s onwards.[252] But beyond that covert state-sanctioned military support, Saudi citizens were also encouraged to contribute to the Afghan cause. Sheikh Abdullah bin Baz, the highest authority in the Saudi religious establishment, declared in a fatwa that "helping and aiding our fighting and exiled brothers is an individual duty on Muslims today, financially and physically or one of the two according to one's capability."[253] Prince Salman, the governor of Riyadh, oversaw a private fundraising effort that probably raised between $20 million and $25 million in private donations per month.[254] And the Saudi state not only allowed a religious sanctioning for the Afghan Jihad, but it also actively embraced the efforts by figures as Osama bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam to mobilize and recruit Arabs – and Saudis in particular – to fight

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[250] Vali Nasr: Regional Implications of Shia Revival in Iraq, (The Washington Quarterly, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2004), pp. 5-25. Quote on p. 14.

[251] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 137. For other good accounts of Saudi Arabia's role in the Afghan jihad, see Thomas Hegghammer: Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979, (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 24-29; Wright: The Looming Tower, pp. 99-120; & Bruce Riedel: Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the United States since FDR, (Brookings Institution Press, 2019) pp. 74-82.

[252] According to Hegghammer, "The Saudi financial support to the Afghan mujahidin between 1984 and 1989 was larger than that provided to the PLO in any five year period since the 1970s. The PLO received a total of [$992 million] from the Saudi government in the fourteen-year period from 1978 to 1991, while the Afghan mujahidin received a total of at least [$ 1.8 billion] in the three years from 1987 to 1989. See, Hegghammer: Jihad in Saudi Arabia, p. 25.

[253] Quoted in Hegghammer: Jihad in Saudi Arabia, p, 25.

[254] Riedel, Kings and Presidents, p. 79.

in Afghanistan. The trials and heroics of the "Afghan Arabs" received extensive coverage in official Saudi media and as their notoriety increased, Saudi authorities also made air plane tickets from the Kingdom to Peshawar, the geographical center of the Afghan resistance, available at a 75 percent discount.[255] The Saudi support for the Afghan jihad provided the Kingdom with public identification with a cause that had widespread sympathies in the Arab and Islamic world, thus helping alleviate some of the pressure from Iran. At the same time, though, the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s also created the conditions that allowed for a new kind of transnational Sunni militant Islamism to emerge and form an organizational infrastructure that would eventually be turned against the Saudi leadership, as we shall see in the following chapters.

5.2.3 Saudi-Iranian Confrontation at the Hajj

As the wave of demonstration and unrest that hit the Gulf regimes in 1979-80 failed to dislodge any of them from power, the Hajj – the annual pilgrimage to Mecca – became a primary focus in Iran's efforts to advance its revolutionary agenda.[256] Over the course of the 1980s, the Hajj would serve as the symbol of the intense ideological dissonance between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the main platform from which Iranian leaders would continue their campaign of subversion against the Al Saud. For Saudi Arabia, the ability to facilitate the orderly conduct of one of the most important rituals in Islam and to accommodate the more than two million pilgrims who convene every year in the holy cities to perform it has always been a central feature of its claim to legitimacy and Islamic leadership. Beginning in the early 1980s, Iranian leaders, and Khomeini in particular, would fiercely reject the Saudi position that the Hajj was exclusively a spiritual exercise and therefore by definition an apolitical event. Rather, according to Khomeini, the largest gathering of Muslims in the world was precisely the occasion for them to express their grievances and to unite around issues of common concern. For the Iranian revolutionaries, then, the massive crowds and the emotionally charged atmosphere at the Hajj was viewed as an ideal opportunity for rallying popular support and as a potential stepping-stone for increasing the internal pressures against the other Gulf regimes, above all Saudi Arabia.[257]

The first serious confrontation at the Hajj was in 1981. In his address to the pilgrims in the days before the Hajj, Khomeini accused some "so-called leaders of Islamic countries" of prolonging the sufferings of Muslims by actively suppressing the

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[255] The number of Saudi nationals that travelled to Afghanistan is disputed with some estimates in the tens of thousands. According to Hegghammer, "the number of Saudis who underwent substantial weapons training (…) is more likely to have been somewhere between 1,000 and 5,000." See, Hegghammer: Jihad in Saudi Arabia, p. 59.

[256] The one place where Iran did have tangible success was in Lebanon with the creation of Hezbollah. For a good analysis, see Ostovar: Vanguard of the Imam, pp. 112-117.

[257] Excellent discussions of the Hajj issue in the 1980s appear in Ramazani: Revolutionary Iran, pp. 93-97 & Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, pp. 45-55, & Jacob Goldberg: Saudi Arabia and the Iranian Revolution: The Religious Dimension, in David Menashri (ed): The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World, (Westview Press, 1990), pp. 155-170.

social and political aspects of the pilgrimage. In defiance of Saudi warnings, a segment of the 65,000 Iranian pilgrims proceeded to organize political demonstrations in Mecca and inside the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, leading to clashes with Saudi security forces.[258] Ahead of the Hajj in 1982, Khomeini appointed Ayatollah Mussavi Khoeiniha – the mentor of the students who had occupied the U.S Embassy in Tehran – as Iran's official representative for the pilgrimage. Khoeiniha led a series of demonstrations in which Iranian pilgrims in Mecca, Medina and Jeddah carried pictures of Khomeini and shouted slogans critical of the Al Saud, which again led to open confrontation with Saudi security forces and the arrest of more than 100 Iranians, including Khoeiniha.[259] According to Prince Nayef, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Interior, the demonstrations were part of a larger plot that involved armed insurrection as Saudi authorities had seized weapons that IRGC had attempted to smuggle into the Kingdom.[260] As the Hajj of 1983 approached, Iranian leaders began to not only question Saudi Arabia's ability to administer the hajj but also more assertively challenge its role as the protector of the holy sites. For example, Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi categorically asserted that "Mecca and Medina must not be governed by such a regime" but rather should be "under the supervision of forces belonging to all Muslim nations."[261] Despite Saudi opposition, Iran launched a number of demonstrations and protests at the 1983 Hajj, including a "Liberation from Infidels" march in Mecca.

Beginning in 1984, Saudi-Iranian relations took some small steps towards improvement. The underlying driver was an effort by Iran to end Saudi Arabia's support for Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War. At least at the diplomatic and official level, Iran's stance towards Saudi Arabia was more conciliatory and accommodating. For instance, in what was most surely an effort to re-assure Saudi Arabia, Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani in his capacity as Speaker of the Iranian Parliament addressed the Saudi leadership in July 1984 and asserted that "we have no intention of controlling Ka'ba and Mecca [which are] located in your country and it is up to you to run them."[262] Iran also extended an invitation to Prince Saud, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, whose subsequent visit to Tehran in May 1985 marked the first official visit to Iran by a high-ranking Saudi official since the revolution. During this easing of tensions, the two sides reached an informal agreement on the Hajj issue that allowed Iranian pilgrims to stage political protests in which criticism of the United States and Israel would be tolerated, but any opposition to the Al Saud was strictly prohibited. In return,

[258] The 1980 Hajj took place less than a month into the Iran-Iraq War and thus the number of Iranian pilgrims attending was much reduced. Nevertheless, Iranian participants did stage smaller demonstrations in which they called for the overthrow of the Al Saud, and according to Saudi authorities they also distributed "subversive Iranian propaganda which had nothing to do with the aim of pilgrimage." This quote and the one above cited are from Jacob Goldberg: Saudi Arabia and the Iranian Revolution, p. 159.

[259] Ramazani: Revolutionary Iran, p. 95; Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, p. 50.

[260] Arab News: Khomeini Designed Riots, Naif Reveals, (October 14, 1982).

[261] Quoted in Ramazani: Revolutionary Iran, p. 95.

[262] Quoted in Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, p. 51.

Iran would see its quota of pilgrims allowed to attend the hajj raised to 150,000, almost double the number of the preceding years. In sharp contrast to his earlier messages, Khomeini instructed the Iranian pilgrims in 1984 to "be peaceful towards the authorities [and] not stand up and confront them." From 1984 to 1986, the hajj occurred with only minor disturbances.[263] At a more fundamental level, then, this also provide us with some indirect support for the proposition that, more than anything else, it was the active Iranian subversion against Saudi Arabia that was at the center of the ideological challenge from the Saudi perspective. When Saudi Arabia sensed signs of a more moderate – or rather, less antagonistic – Iranian orientation towards it, it was more than willing to reciprocate.

The tentative understanding was shattered by the catastrophic events at the Hajj in 1987, in which more than 400 people were killed and several thousand were wounded. According to the official Saudi figures, the death toll included 275 Iranian pilgrims and 85 members of the Saudi security forces. Precisely what happened on that day in late July 1987 remains fiercely contested, with each side accusing the other of engaging in premeditated violence.[264] In the weeks leading up to the Hajj, a number of fiery statements from Iranian leaders escalated Saudi concerns that Iran was actively planning a riot. One indication was Khoeiniha's call for Iranian pilgrims to devise alternative forms of expression at the Hajj because, as he asserted, "a mere march or demonstration will not suffice."[265] Likewise, in his annual address to the pilgrims, Khomeini reminded that the Hajj was not only an act of worship but also "a battlefield" and urged attendees to "go from holy hajj to holy jihad by bathing yourselves in blood and martyrdom."[266] In anticipation of trouble, Saudi authorities ramped up security measures during the Hajj, which included placing armed soldiers outside the Grand Mosque in Mecca. According to the Saudi version of the disaster, the many deaths were caused by a stampede after a group of tens of thousands of Iranian pilgrims attacked the Saudi security forces in an effort to take over the Grand Mosque. To support its case, Saudi Arabia cited interrogations of arrested Iranian pilgrims who "admitted" that they were part of an Iranian scheme to destabilize Saudi Arabia and ultimately lead a revolt in the Kingdom.[267] Iran categorically denied this and instead accused Saudi Arabia of having committed a deliberate massacre on unarmed civilians. According to the Iranians, the Saudi authorities had first authorized the demonstration and subsequently dispatched the National Guard to crush it, with the intent of discouraging protests and propaganda at the Hajj. Iran pointed to the fact that many of the injured were women and elderly and that most of the victims

[263] Ibid. See also, Ramazani: Revolutionary Iran, pp. 96-97.
[264] On the 1987 Hajj, see Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, pp. 52-55; & Martin Kramer: Islam's Enduring Feud, in Itamar Rabinovich & Haim Shaked (eds): Middle East Contemporary Service, Vol. XI, (Westview Press, 1987), pp. 153-179.
[265] Quoted in Kramer: Islam's Enduring Feud, p. 174.
[266] Quoted in Jacob Goldberg: The Saudi Arabian Kingdom, in Rabinovich & Shaked (eds): Middle East Contemporary Service, Vol. XI, pp. 597-614. Quote on p. 589.
[267] Ibid.

had died from gunshots.[268] If the causes of the violence were intensely disputed, its effects were plainly clear, as it removed all pretenses about dialogue and compromise. Khomeini responded immediately to the incident by stating that Mecca was in the hands of "a band of heretics" and called for the overthrow of the Al Saud. He continued:

> It is not surprising to see those who lay claim to guarding Mecca and the House of God drenching Mecca's streets and side streets with the blood of Moslems. If we wanted to prove to the world that the Saudi Government, these vile and ungodly Wahhabis, are like daggers that have always pierced the heart of the Moslems from the back, we would not have been able to do it as well as has been demonstrated by these inept and spineless leaders of the Saudi Government.[269]

The events at the 1987 Hajj became a catalyst for more radical internal opposition among Shi'a communities in Saudi Arabia. A week after the tragedy at the Hajj, a newly formed group – Hezbollah al-Hijaz – released a statement disavowing the Al Saud and pledging to fight it through violence.[270] From its inception, Hezbollah al-Hijaz was inspired and supported by Iran, with many of its members receiving military training in Iran and by the IRGC in Lebanon. In August 1987, less than a month after the Hajj, it conducted the first of a series of terrorist attacks against Saudi oil facilities and infrastructure that would continue over the course of 1988 and 1989. Incidentally, Iranian leaders attributed these attacks to "invisible hands".[271] Hezbollah al-Hijaz also initiated an assassination campaign against Saudi diplomats abroad, killing or wounding Saudi officials in Turkey, Pakistan, and Thailand.[272] The fallout after the Hajj of 1987 led Saudi Arabia to cut its diplomatic relations with Iran in early 1988.

Let me just briefly recapitulate the argument I have advanced in the first part of this chapter. The three sections above have all contributed to the larger analytical point that at the core of the ideational threat from Iran for Saudi Arabia in the 1980s was the ideological dissonance that followed in the aftermath of the revolution. I began by devoting some time to explain the course of the revolution and the sequence of events that followed immediately after Khomeini's return from exile. The point I made was not that Saudi Arabia was not unnerved about the revolution or did not look at the situation in Iran with considerable trepidation. If the Saudis could have their way, they much would have preferred that the Shah's regime remained in place. But the point I did make was that there was an evolution in Saudi Arabia threat perception over the course of 1979 that is very important from an analytical and theoretical perspective. Despite the uncertainties, Saudi Arabia was working to engage

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[268] Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, pp. 53-54.

[269] The New York Times: Excerpts From Khomeini's Speeches, (August 4, 1987).

[270] The best study of Hezbollah al-Hijaz is Toby Matthiesen: Hezbullah al-Hijaz: The History of the Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group, (Middle East Journal, Vol. 64, No. 2, 2010), pp. 179-197.

[271] Goldberg: The Saudi Arabian Kingdom, p. 603.

[272] See, Matthiesen: Hezbollah al-Hijaz.

with revolutionary Iran for much of 1979 and what made that possible was the fact that there were many competing trends among the revolutionaries and the immediate focus for the more radical elements centered around Khomeini was on consolidating their position domestically. It was when the moderates were pushed aside in November 1979, and the export of the revolution became a major point of emphasis in Iran, that Saudi Arabia's orientation towards revolutionary Iran irreversibly changed. Indeed, as I subsequently demonstrated, it was the turn towards active Iranian subversion and the emergence of severe domestic political crises in the Kingdom that elevated and cemented the perception in Saudi Arabia of Iran as a very tangible threat to its internal stability. And that perception would remain in place over the course of the 1980s because the conditions that supported it by and large did not change. Even if Iranian leaders did moderate their stance somewhat for a period in the mid-1980s, Iran never seized its support for Saudi dissidents or opposition movements nor was the open hostility towards Saudi Arabia far beneath the surface. Rather, the 1980s ended largely as they began with very vocal denunciations of the Saudi leadership and calls for opposition to it emerging from Iran.

5.3 The Geopolitical Dimension of Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1979-1989

At the same time as the 1980s was an era marked by the ideological threat revolutionary Iran posed to the domestic status quo in the other Arab Gulf states, it was also a decade of war. The Iran-Iraq War certainly had its origins in the Iranian revolution, but it led to threats for all the regional regimes that were qualitatively different from the fear of internal instability within their own societies. For eight years, Iran and Iraq unleashed the military prowess that each had so vastly expanded over the course 1970s, causing incredible physical damage and devastating human suffering among the two belligerents, and a more or less permanent state of anxiety for all the regimes in the region. A detailed analysis of the many facets of the Iran-Iraq War is beyond the scope of this study, and it has received extensive and nuanced coverage elsewhere.[273] I focus here on explaining the impact of the war on Saudi-Iranian relations, and more specifically why each side came to view the other as a threat to their external security as a direct result of the geopolitical dissonance the war created. In other words, I argue on the following pages that over the course of the war, we see the expansionist mechanism play out in both directions. To make that case, we need to distinguish between the three overall phases that comprised Iran-Iraq War. The first phase began with the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 and left the nascent Islamic Republic, already in domestic political chaos, in a desperate struggle for its survival. As Iraq occupied Iranian territory and threatened to destroy the regime

[273] The best analyses of the political dynamics are Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, pp. 57- 85; Ramazani: Revolutionary Iran, pp. 57-143; & Shahram Chubin & Charles Tripp: Iran and Iraq at War, (I.B Tauris, 1988). The standard works on the military dimension are Anthony Cordesman & Abraham Wagner: The Lessons of Modern War – Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War, (Westview Press, 1990) and Williamson Murray & Kevin Woods: The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History, (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

militarily, Saudi Arabia soon emerged as Saddam Hussein's most important external backer by supporting the Iraqi war effort politically, logistically, and – above all – financially. The second phase began in July 1982 after Iran had succeeded in expelling Iraqi forces from its own territory and decided not to end the war, but instead launch its own military offensive into Iraq. With the fortunes of the war seemingly turned and the majority of the fighting taking place in Iraq until 1987, Saudi Arabia was both more directly exposed to the war and had to more closely confront the extremely worrying question of what would happen in case of an Iraqi defeat. The third phase began when Iraq, due to the massive external support it received, was able to regain the initiative and inflict heavy losses on Iran that ultimately led Khomeini to accept a ceasefire. In other words, in each of these three phases, political choices made in Riyadh and Tehran profoundly escalated the sense of threat that the other side posed to the security of their regimes.

5.3.1 Iraq's Invasion of Iran, 1980-1982

Iraq's orientation towards the early phases of the Iranian revolution followed a trajectory largely similar to that of Saudi Arabia. Like Saudi Arabia, the Iraqi leadership was certainly uncomfortable with the radical revolutionaries, but it also viewed Bazargan's moderate government as a restraining factor and made an effort to be on good terms with it. It was when that bulwark disappeared in early November 1979 and Iranian leaders and propaganda began more openly and concertedly to incite domestic opposition against its neighbors that Iraq's position on Iran changed seriously. As Ramazani has put it, "It is doubtful whether there would have been a war between Iraq and Iran at all if the nature of the Iranian revolution had not changed drastically. For all practical purposes, the war may be said to have been prompted by Iran's 'second revolution' [in November 1979]."[274] On October 15, 1980, the Iraqi Foreign Minister Saadoun Hammadi delivered an instructive address to the U.N. Security Council in which he explained Iraq's rationale for going to war. According to Hammadi, after the fall of Bazargan's government,

> … the arena was left free for Khomeini and his followers. At that time, Khomeini reached the point of unmasking the true intentions of his Islamic revolution by deciding to export it to Iraq and the Arabian Gulf region. The decision was reached to overthrow our government through subversion, sabotage and terrorism [hoping that] a popular uprising would bring it down. (…) We witnessed all over our country, and particularly in the central and southern parts, acts of sabotage and terrorism of mounting magnitude.[275]

Among the central perpetrators of violence was Iraq's main Shi'a opposition group, al- Da'wa, which had moved its headquarters to Tehran and formed a military wing in late 1979. In response to the escalating opposition from Shi'a Islamists, the Iraqi government passed a law in March 1980 making all members of al-Da'wa and others

[274] Ramazani: Revolutionary Iran, p. 57.
[275] United Nations: 2250th Meeting of the Security Council, (October 15, 1980, S/PV2250)

that sided with Khomeini subject to the death penalty. On April 1, Shi'a militants affiliated with al-Da'wa attempted to assassinate Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz during a speech at a university in Bagdad. Aziz survived but several in the audience were killed. The Iraqi government charged Khomeini with complicity and viewed the attempted murder of a key member of Saddam Hussein's inner circle as a major escalation. In retaliation, Saddam Hussein ordered the execution of Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr, a high-ranking member of the clerical establishment and the leading political ideologue of al-Da'wa. At the same time, thousands of suspected al-Da'wa sympathizers were arrested and a deportation of tens of thousands of Iraqi Shi'as to Iran was initiated. The crackdown led to reinvigorated calls from Khomeini and other Iranian leaders for Iraqis to rise up against Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath party.[276] There is strong circumstantial and anecdotal evidence that the Iraqi war decision was made in the immediate aftermath of the events of early April 1980. According to Gause, Saddam Hussein's rhetoric changed drastically, from avoiding personal attacks against Iranian leaders and threats of war before that point to consistently doing both from April onwards.[277] According to Ramazani, Arab diplomats likewise suggested that Iraqi preparations for the war began at that time.[278]

It was Saddam Hussein's perception that he needed to act decisively against the Iranian revolutionaries to ensure the political survival of his regime which was the root cause and primary motivation for the Iraqi invasion of Iran. But the understanding that the strategic setting was overwhelmingly in Iraq's favor was a further incentive for war from the Iraqi perspective. First and foremost, the regular Iranian military was severely weakened due to declining budgets, repeated purges among the military leadership, and large-scale desertions since the revolution. In July 1980, the Iranian army was reduced to roughly 40 percent of its pre-revolutionary manpower.[279] Secondly, Iran had succeeded in antagonizing most of the regional and international powers, thus severely limiting the extent of outside support it was likely to receive in an armed conflict. The Gulf monarchies all wanted to see an end to the Khomeini regime and likely conveyed that message to Saddam Hussein over the summer of 1980. Moreover, the hostage crisis and the fundamental transformation of U.S.-Iranian relations since the revolution made it a virtual certainty that America would not intervene or interfere on behalf of Iran. In other words, there was a high degree of confidence in Baghdad that Iraq's superior power position would allow it to destroy the Khomeini regime in short order or that a military invasion would further divide the domestic political scene in Iran and lead to a collapse of the regime from

[276] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 59; Ramazani: Revolutionary Iran, pp. 59-60; & Charles Tripp: A History of Iraq, (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 229.

[277] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, pp. 62-63.

[278] Ramazani: Revolutionary Iran, p. 60.

[279] Cordesman & Wagner: Lessons of Modern War, p. 42.

within.[280] On September 22, 1980, Iraq launched an extensive air campaign, and more than 200,000 Iraqi soldiers crossed the border into Iran.

Despite Iraqi advances into Iranian territory and some modest victories in the first few weeks of the war, the invasion failed to deliver the knockout punch that Saddam Hussein had anticipated. This was partly attributable to the fact that the main competency of Iraq's security forces was fighting domestic insurgencies, not interstate wars. Indeed, as one study concluded, "both the initial air attack and land invasion was so badly planned and executed that they cost Iraq virtually all of the initial advantages it obtained from surprise, superior forces, and the disorganization of Iran's military forces."[281] Much to the surprise of Iraqi leaders, the Arab population in Iran's Khuzestan province – the main focus of Iraq's invasion – did not rally to support the Iraqi cause. To the contrary, a number of atrocities at the outset of the invasion, including summary executions of Iranian Arabs for "treason", strengthened the local communities' suspicion of the Iraqi army and their orientation towards the Iranian regime. It took a month of heavy fighting and thousands of casualties on each side before the Iraqis were able to capture the first major city, Khorramshahr, in the province. If Iraqi leaders had expected to sweep through Khuzestan, they found themselves controlling only a third of the region two months into the war.[282] As Saddam Hussein came to the realization that the Iranians would not immediately succumb to the Iraqi campaign, he announced that Iraq was willing to negotiate a ceasefire on the condition that the territories it had acquired were recognized as Iraqi and that Iran agreed to "abandon its evil attempts to interfere in the domestic affairs of the region's countries." Khomeini, in turn, declared that Iran would not enter any negotiations until "he [Saddam Hussein] withdraws his forces, leaves Iraq, and then abandons his corrupt government."[283] With these irreconcilable positions and both parties unable to enforce their will on the other side, the Iraqi invasion turned into something quite different than the quick show of force that Saddam Hussein had envisioned would be sufficient to break the Iranian regime. While the battle lines did not change much in the following months, Iraq did inflict substantial physical and psychological damage on Iran. Less than a year into the war, Iran was estimated to have suffered upwards of 50,000 dead and wounded, several cities were destroyed and approximately 1 million refugees were forced to flee their homes. The economic costs of the damage caused by the Iraqis was estimated at close to $100 billion.[284]

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[280] Chubin & Tripp: Iran and Iraq at War, pp. 28-30. According to the account of one Iraqi general, "the Iraqi leadership figured that if the Iraqi Army advanced 10-20 kilometers deep into Iran along the borders, Khomeini would have to send [Iranian] forces from the surrounding area of Tehran. This would leave Tehran exposed and give the opportunity [to other groups] to revolt against the religious leadership and gain control of Tehran. So the idea was to bring the militia out of Tehran to weaken the revolution for a counter-revolution." Quoted in Murray & Woods: The Iran-Iraq War, p. 95.

[281] Cordesman & Wagner: Lessons of Modern War, p. 78.

[282] Ibid, p. 95. See also, Murray & Woods: The Iran-Iraq War, pp. 114-115.

[283] Quoted in Chubin & Tripp: Iran and Iraq at War, p. 38.

[284] Cordesman & Wagner: Lessons of Modern War, p. 120.

Saddam Hussein certainly overestimated the strength and competence of his own military forces, but he was also guilty of a profound misreading, if not outright hubris, of the kinds of social and political trends that war would set in motion in Iran. Not only did the Iraqi leadership expect the Arabs in Khuzestan to rise up in solidarity, but they also seemingly assumed that the invasion would only accelerate the deep divisions in Iran. They did not foresee that it could have quite the opposite effect and become an incredibly potent tool for popular mobilization in the hands of the regime. This was perhaps Iraq's most serious miscalculation. Indeed, the invasion allowed Khomeini to "link Iranian nationalist sentiment to his Islamic revolutionary platform and to brand his domestic opponents as not only 'enemies of Islam', but also as traitors to the nation."[285] In the first days of the war, tens of thousands of Iranians responded to Khomeini's calls to join the "sacred defense" of Iran by volunteering to join the IRGC and the newly formed Basij militia. Khomeini and his allies used the heightened revolutionary fervor to act against the most powerful domestic opponents of the Islamic Republic and cracked down severely on the Islamist Mujahedin-E Khalq organization and the leftist Tudeh party, both of which were effectively eliminated from Iran by 1982.[286] It is no small irony, then, that while Saddam Hussein undertook the invasion with the expectation that the revolutionary regime in Iran would collapse under the weight of its own internal contradictions, the onset of the Iran-Iraq War contributed more than any other factor to consolidating the power of the regime and the revolutionary institutions.

From the outset of the war, Iran charged Saudi Arabia with responsibility for inciting Saddam Hussein to launch the invasion and for actively contributing to a war of aggression against it.[287] On the second point, Iran was absolutely correct, as I will return to below. It is less obvious that Saudi Arabia pushed Saddam Hussein to undertake the invasion. There is little doubt that Saudi Arabia, at the very least, was generally aware of Iraq's intention to strike militarily against Iran. In early August 1980, Saddam Hussein paid a two-day visit to Ta'if, where he met the Saudi leadership. Senior members of the Al Saud later asserted that during the meeting Saddam Hussein announced in no uncertain terms that Iraq would invade Iran.[288] Whether Saudi Arabia actively encouraged that decision or tried to dissuade Iraq from doing so, as Saudi leaders have since held, is difficult to answer with any certainty. It is certainly within the realm of possibility that Saudi anxieties over Iranian subversion in 1980 had reached a point where the Saudis viewed military action against Iran as entirely necessary. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia did not trust Saddam Hussein and worried greatly about the prospects of having to deal with an even more powerful and ambitious Iraq once it had defeated Iran. What we can say is that once it was clear to the Saudi leadership that war was inevitable, it decided that the short-term threat from revolutionary Iran outweighed its long-term concern over the improved position of Saddam Hussein in case of an Iraqi victory. Forced to choose sides

[285] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 66.
[286] Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, pp. 186-193.
[287] Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, p. 68.
[288] Cordesman & Wagner: Lessons of Modern War, p. 39. Note 26.

in a dilemma with two undesirable options, Saudi leaders prioritized what they perceived to be the most immediate threat to their regime security and opted to back the Iraqi war effort.

From the earliest stages of the war, Saudi Arabia provided crucial assistance to Iraq in two primary ways. The first was through logistical support. An early example of this was Saudi Arabia's decision to allow Iraqi fighter jets to disperse to air bases in the Kingdom to prevent them from being destroyed after the air campaign that started the war had failed miserably and left most of the Iranian Air Force intact. In the first days of the war when Iran announced a blockade on all Iraqi ports and severely restricted Iraq's ability to import and export goods, Saudi Arabia worked with Kuwait and Jordan to make sure that civilian and military supplies could reach Iraq through their territories. As the war gradually turned into a protracted stalemate and the Iraqi need to acquire new military hardware became more pronounced, the volume of that support intensified. In February 1981, when Iran was making its first attempts to push the Iraqi army away from its territory, news reports suggested that 100 Soviet tanks bound for Iraq had arrived at Saudi ports on the Red Sea.[289] As early as 1981, there was speculation among American officials that Saudi Arabia not only made its infrastructure available for Iraq to sustain the war, but that the Saudis also transferred some of their own military equipment purchased from the United States directly to Iraq without official U.S. approval. Such allegations would reappear in subsequent years, and after the war had ended a report from U.S. congressional investigators confirmed that "among other material" Saudi Arabia had provided "an undisclosed number of 2000 pound American-made bombs to Iraq".[290] The second type of Saudi support for Iraq was extensive financial aid. According to a Kuwaiti newspaper, the first direct economic support for Saddam Hussein was provided on September 19 1980, only a few days before Iraq initiated the war, when Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies extended a $14 billion loan to Iraq to support the military attack.[291] Over the course of 1981, economic support from the Gulf monarchies to Iraq amounted to upwards of $24 billion, with Saudi Arabia providing approximately half of the money.[292] This assistance allowed Iraq to continue to sign new and expensive arms deals even as its oil revenues were drastically declining due the Iranian blockade on its ports. Beyond these direct financial contributions, Saudi Arabia also offered to pay the entire cost for rebuilding Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, which was destroyed in an Israeli air strike in June 1981 over concerns that Iraq would soon be able to produce a nuclear weapon.[293] In other words, from the moment Saddam Hussein's forces crossed the border into Iran, the Iranian leadership had good reasons for viewing Saudi Arabia's policies and priorities as a threat to its

[289] The New York Times: Iraqis Reported to Get About 100 Soviet Made Tanks, (February 4, 1981).
[290] Los Angeles Times: Kuwait, Saudis Supplied Iraq With U.S. Arms, (September 12, 1992).
[291] Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, p. 68.
[292] Ibid, p. 71.
[293] The New York Times: Saudis Will Pay for Repairs on Iraq's Reactor, (July 17, 1981)

external security. Saudi Arabia, much like Iraq, may have seen its actions as defensive in origin and as natural responses to Iran's provocations and acts of subversion. For all practical purposes, Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf states could make a good case that Iranian leaders and Khomeini in particular brought the invasion upon themselves. None of this changes the fact that Saudi Arabia, by applying significant resources to supporting the Iraqi military campaign and the occupation of Iranian territories, exacerbated both the sense of threat felt in Iran and its enmity towards the Saudi leadership.

By late 1980, when the Iraqi invasion had come to a halt, Saudi Arabia began to explore additional opportunities for protecting itself against the prospects of a prolonged regional war. The United States, even more committed to the defense of Saudi Arabia after the fall of the Shah, was more than willing to come to the Saudis' aid. In 1981, the two sides agreed to the largest arms sale in American history as Saudi Arabia acquired the advanced AWACS aircraft reconnaissance system. Both the Carter administration and the Reagan administration, which came into office in January 1981, extended offers to Saudi Arabia to deploy a direct American military presence in the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia kindly rejected those appeals as it found it necessary to avoid open identification with the United States for domestic political reasons.[294] Instead, Saudi Arabia focused on bringing the policies of the Gulf monarchies into closer and more formal coordination. In May 1981, the six Gulf monarchies announced the formation the Gulf Cooperation Council in Riyadh. While the GCC was presented as a vehicle for promoting economic and social integration, there is no question that its primary raison d'être was security and the threats that emerged from the Iranian Revolution and the onset of the Iran-Iraq War. From its inception, the GCC's efforts to prevent the spread of the war were caught between a strong desire to see it end on the one hand and the imperative that Iran did not emerge from it victoriously on the other.[295] The first objective led the GCC to adopt an official position of neutrality, support various ceasefire initiatives set forth by the United Nations and even make its own attempts at brokering talks between the warring sides. Yet, as dynamics on the battlefield began to swing in favor of Iran in late 1981, those efforts were increasingly undercut by the second objective, which demanded continued support for Iraq. These inherent contradictions were acknowledged by Abdullah Bisharah, the Secretary General of the GCC. In an interview with a Qatari newspaper in January 1982, he frankly asserted that the members of GCC members were not impartial bystanders in the war, but actively involved in it. He continued by asking, "how can we be mediators in an issue in which we are a major party?"[296]

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[294] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 69; & Safran: Saudi Arabia, pp. 410-412.

[295] Gerd Nonneman: The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War: Pattern Shifts and Continuities, in Lawrence Potter & Gary Sick (eds): Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 167-192.

[296] Quoted in R.K. Ramazani: The Gulf Cooperation Council: Record and Analysis, (University Press of Virginia, 1988), p. 191. According to Ramazani, "it is clear that during the crucial

The primary exception to the overwhelming Arab support for Saddam Hussein was Syria. From the outset of Iraq's invasion, Syria's President Asad fiercely criticized Saddam for having initiated "the wrong war at the wrong time against the wrong enemy".[297] Syria proceeded to provide Iran with critical military supplies and intelligence estimates that helped bolster the Iranian resistance to the Iraqi invasion and eventually strike back against it. Syria also supported Iran politically by actively opposing initiatives through the Arab League to support Iraq and by closing an Iraqi oil pipeline through Syrian territory, which further restricted Iraq's ability to export its oil.[298] While Iran was able to sway the trajectory of the Iran-Iraq war with considerable Syrian assistance, the alliance between them is perhaps even more important for what it tells us about the underlying drivers of policy in the Islamic Republic even at the height of its ideological crusade. Indeed, Iran found itself at war with Ba'athist Iraq, which it continuously depicted as blasphemous and criminal, while Iran at the same time relied on the support of Ba'athist Syria, which was every bit as secular and repressive. Yet, even the fact that Asad was engaged in a ruthless repression of Islamist political movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s was not a hindrance to a continued deepening of Syrian-Iranian ties. It took a savage massacre of more than 10,000 people in Hama in 1982 before Asad finally defeated the Islamist challenge to his rule.[299] Not once did Khomeini or other Iranian leaders waver in their support for Asad as he took on the Islamists, nor did the blatant mass murder during the uprising in Hama elicit any response from Iran or change in its policy. From the perspective of Iran's leadership, Syria was an asset that enhanced its ability to survive the Iran-Iraq War. Those considerations were more important than revolutionary ideology.

5.3.2 Iran's Counter-Invasion of Iraq, 1982-1986

Despite the many disadvantages it had faced from the outset of the Iraqi invasion, Iran had firmly secured the initiative in the war by 1982. Relying heavily on human wave assaults by scores of young men from the Basij, Iran increasingly succeeded in overwhelming Iraqi positions, though its victories also came at a terrible human cost. Over the course of the spring, Iranian forces offensives drove the Iraqis back from

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1979-1980 period the Gulf Arab monarchs and Saddam Hussein shared the common perception that revolutionary Iran was a threat to their regimes. This perception was shared particularly by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman. But only the first two of these states were in a position to aid Iraq when the war broke out. They wished to help Iraq because they believed it invaded Iran at least in part for the purpose of containing the contagion of the Iranian Revolution." Quote on the same page.

[297] Patrick Seale: Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East, (University of California Press, 1988), p. 157.

[298] For a comprehensive overview of Syria's support for Iran, see Jobin Goodarzi: Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East, (I.B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 33-52.

[299] On the domestic challenge from militant Islamists in Syria and the Hama massacre, see Seale: Asad of Syria, pp. 317-338.

much of Khuzestan, culminating in the recapture of Khorramshar in May. Shortly after, on June 10, 1982, Saddam Hussein ordered the withdrawal of the Iraqi military from Iranian territory and announced a unilateral ceasefire. This left Iranian leaders with two options: Iran could declare victory and end the war by agreeing to Saddam Hussein's ceasefire, or it could take the fighting into Iraqi territory in an effort to topple his regime. Though there is evidence that Khomeini had reservations about continuing the war,[300] he was ultimately persuaded by his advisors that the destruction of Saddam Hussein's regime was required to "completely secure the country".[301] And with its recent successes on the battlefield as well as mounting political and economic woes in Iraq, an Iranian invasion could secure the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime and at the same time provide momentum for the expansion of the Islamic revolution. Khomeini made it clear that an invasion of Iraq would both aim to punish Saddam Hussein and revise the political geography of the Gulf. In June, he noted that "If the war continues and if in the war Iran defeats Iraq, Iraq will be annexed to Iran (...) If Iran and Iraq can merge and be amalgamated, all the diminutive nations of the region will join them."[302] While Iran did formally announce its conditions for accepting a ceasefire in early July, it extended the offer knowing full well that the Iraqi leadership could never agree to those terms. The proposal called for Iraq to claim full responsibility for the war; pay reparations of $100 billion; accept the return of 100,000 Iraqi Shi'as who had been deported since the beginning of the war; and that Saddam Hussein was removed from power and turned over to an international tribunal for prosecution as a war criminal.[303] If there was any doubt just how unacceptable those demands were to Saddam Hussein, he made sure to set the record straight by personally executing the Iraqi Minister of Health during a cabinet meeting for having the audacity to propose that Saddam could temporarily step down as president in order to reach an agreement with Iran.[304] On July 13 1982, a month after Iraqi forces withdrew from Iranian territory, Iran launched its own offensive into Iraq.

The depth of the despair and panic that the Iranian invasion gave rise to in Saudi Arabia cannot be overstated. As well-informed observers have phrased it, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies "regarded with horror the imminent prospect of an Iranian-led Islamic juggernaut rolling south from Baghdad to Basra and into their principalities."[305] Indeed, Saudi Arabia had resorted to every means available to it in an effort to discourage Iran from continuing the war into Iraqi territory. It had tried to persuade Egypt to intervene militarily to halt the Iranian advances in the spring.[306]

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[300] For one account, see Ali Alfoneh: The War Over the War, (AEI, September 30th 2012).
[301] Quoted in Tabatabai & Samuel: What the Iran-Iraq War Tells Us About the Future of the Iran Nuclear Deal, p. 164.
[302] Quoted in Chubin & Tripp: Iran and Iraq at War, p. 164.
[303] Murray & Woods: The Iran-Iraq War, p. 190.
[304] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p, 67; & Tripp: A History of Iraq, p. 236.
[305] Chubin & Tripp: Iran and Iraq at War, p. 164.
[306] Safran: Saudi Arabia, pp. 381-383.

When the Egyptians declined, Saudi Arabia instead extended an offer of $25 billion to Iran in exchange for a commitment to end the war.[307] As Iran ignored the offer and proceeded with its invasion, Saudi media outlets dropped all official pretenses about neutrality and warned Iran that it would be at war "with the whole Arab world", if it broke through Iraq's line of defense. A year later, Crown Prince Abdallah was even more explicit on the same theme, noting that "Iran cannot enter Baghdad because that would mean an all-out war with Iran [by us]."[308] Keeping in mind the Saudi leadership's longtime preference for caution in its approach to foreign policy, the fact that it took the unprecedented step of promising war with Iran speaks to just how severe a threat Saudi Arabia perceived the Iranian counter-invasion of Iraq to be. At a more fundamental level, then, this only underscores the importance of distinguishing theoretically between subversive threats to a regime's internal stability and expansionist threats to its external security. If Saudi Arabia was only concerned about the ideological threat from Iran, that would not explain the heightened sense of urgency in Saudi diplomacy around 1982 and why it more openly aligned itself with Iraq from that point on. Though still intensely fearful of Iranian subversion, Saudi Arabia was more in control of its domestic situation in 1982 than it was in 1980. Rather, it was Iran's projection of power into Iraq with the specific intent of replacing Saddam Hussein, the virtual certainty that Baghdad would be under some form of control by Iran if it succeeded, and the potential that Iran, from an enormous position of strength, would subsequently turn its attention towards Saudi Arabia that was so profoundly disturbing. If Iran was willing to continue the war in order to punish Saddam Hussein, how would it treat those that actively supported him?

Thus, with the survival of Saddam Hussein's regime hanging in the balance, Saudi Arabia increased its already substantial commitment to the Iraqi war effort. In the first ten months after the Iranian offensives began, Saudi Arabia provided another $10 billion to Iraq in financial assistance. At the same time, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait began to allocate 330,000 barrels of oil per day from a shared oil field to be sold on Iraq's behalf. By 1986, economic aid provided by the GCC countries had surpassed $40 billion, with Saudi Arabia by far the leading contributor.[309] Credible sources place the total amount of Saudi money provided to Iraq over the course of the war at $60 billion.[310] Whatever the specific number, it is clear that Saudi Arabia did more than just side with the Iraqis. The support provided by Saudi Arabia was so extensive and so essential that the Iraqi war effort very likely would have collapsed entirely without it. After the war had ended, Ghazi al-Qusaibi, an experienced diplomat who served as the Saudi ambassador to the United Kingdom in the 1990s, summarized Saudi support for Iraq in the following way:

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[307] Nonneman: The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War, p. 177.

[308] Both quotes are from Dilip Hiro: The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict, (Routledge, 1991), p. 114.

[309] Nonneman: The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War, pp. 176-180.

[310] Riedel: Kings and Presidents, p. 90.

> Not only was King Fahd Iraq's primary financier, he also urged that the other countries of the GCC provide every kind of aid to Iraq. The Kingdom's assistance to Iraq included monetary gifts, oil loans, the transport of Iraqi oil in a pipeline passing through Saudi territory, the financing of arms deals, intelligence cooperation, the provision of Iraq with information obtained by AWACS aircraft, the placing of Saudi ports and roads at the disposal of the Iraqi army, and the provision of food.[311]

The Iranian offensives that started in July 1982 and lasted through 1986 involved some of the largest military battles since the Second World War. While Iran certainly held the initiative during this phase, it also committed a number of costly errors and tactical judgements quite similar to those Saddam Hussein had made in 1980. Much like Saddam, Iranian leaders assumed that their invasion would ignite an internal revolt. The Iraqi Shi'as never rallied to the Iranian side. Iran also continued to rely heavily on its human wave assaults as a means to overwhelm the Iraqi forces, thus failing to appreciate that the Iraqis now had the advantage of fighting from well-fortified defensive positions and increasingly with access to more sophisticated military hardware thanks to its outside supporters. Thus, while Iran launched a series of major offensives, it was only able to make limited territorial gains in Iraq and suffered massive casualties in the process. At least from 1983, and possibly as early as July 1982, Iraq also resorted to the use of chemical weapons against advancing Iranian forces. Iraq certainly relied on chemical weapons as a military instrument, particularly when it came under pressure, but they were employed as much as an instrument of psychological warfare to break popular support for the war in Iran and force the Iranian leaders to agree to a ceasefire. At the same time as Iraq would publicly deny any use of chemical weapons, it would also use every opportunity to hint that it had access to such weapons and that it intended to use them. For instance, in September 1983, Iraqi leaders openly warned that they were now "armed with new weapons". They continued,

> These modern weapons will be used for the first time in war. [They] were not used in previous attacks for humanitarian and ethical reasons. (…) If you execute the orders of Khomeini's warmongering regime and go to the fronts, your death will be certain because this time we will use a weapon that will destroy any moving creature on the front.[312]

The Iranian decision to continue the fighting into Iraq also became the catalyst for more pronounced international support for Saddam Hussein, not just from the Gulf monarchies, to prop up the Iraqi regime and prevent an Iranian victory.[313] The

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[311] Ghazi al-Qusaibi: The Gulf Crisis: An Attempt to Understand, (Kegan Paul, 1993), pp. 28-29.

[312] Quoted in Cordesman & Wagner: The Lessons of Modern War, p. 514. The authors estimate that upwards of 45.000 Iranians were exposed to chemical weapons over the duration of the war. See pp. 506-518 for their discussion of the use of chemical weapons in the war.

[313] For a good overview of the major disparity in flow of arms to Iran and Iraq over the course of the war, see Cordesman & Wagner: The Lessons of Modern War, pp. 48-53. They note that "Iraq was consistently able to benefit from superior access to arms (…). [The] Iraqi lead

Reagan administration removed Iraq from its list of state sponsors of terrorism in 1982, allowing for more open channels between Washington and Baghdad. Though the United States did not technically provide major arms, it did sell "dual-use" technology to Iraq with the understanding it would be used for military purposes. The United States also engaged in extensive intelligence-sharing with the Iraqis on Iranian troop formations, even in the face of mounting evidence of chemical weapons usage.[314] Moreover, as discussed earlier, the United States tacitly accepted that its regional allies, including Saudi Arabia, passed American military equipment on to Iraq. With Iraq proving adept at repelling the Iranian offensives and the battlefield dynamics again trending towards stalemate, by 1984 the United States seemingly felt confident enough that Saddam Hussein's regime was not about to collapse that it also began to enter secret negotiations with Iran. In what became known as the Iran-Contra affair, the United States sold weapons to Iran and directed the profits of those sales to the Contras in Nicaragua, flatly violating its own official policy in both instances. In return, Iran would use its clout in Lebanon to secure the release of American hostages held there. Israel played an important role in both facilitating talks and as a transit for the delivery of weapons to Iran. The clandestine cooperation ended when it was revealed by a Lebanese newspaper in November 1986, causing enormous embarrassment in both Washington and Tehran.[315] However, the whole affair did provide another highly instructive example of the order of priorities in Iran as the need for outside assistance clearly proved to be more important than the sources of that assistance.

With Iran unable to break through Iraq's defensive positions, yet steadfastly insisting on continuing the war, Saddam Hussein decided to escalate the conflict beyond the war on the ground to change the calculus in Iran and involve international outsiders more directly. From 1984, he ordered extensive air raids and missile attacks, first on Iranian cities near the front lines and later on major Iranian population centers, including Tehran, Isfahan, and Tabriz, specifically targeting civilians. Iran responded with its own air raids on Baghdad and Basra.[316] Iraq also began a campaign to suffocate the Iranian economy by intensifying attacks against Iran's oil facilities and ships carrying Iranian oil in the Persian Gulf. As Iraq's oil was transported by land through friendly neighboring states, Iran retaliated instead against oil tankers en route to and from other Gulf states, primarily Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Over the course of 1984 and 1985, Iran and Iraq combined attacked more than 100 international ships in the Persian Gulf. By 1988, the tanker war resulted in more than 450

in spending and access to high-technology arms continued throughout the war." Quote on p. 48. They also show that from 1982 to 1986, the value of Iraq's arms imports were more than four times that of Iran's. See the table on p. 53.

[314] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p, 78.

[315] Ibid, p. 79.

[316] Murray & Woods: The Iran-Iraq War, pp. 234-239; & Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, pp. 74-75.

attacks on ships from 32 different countries.[317] In June 1984, Saudi Arabia and Iran came into direct military confrontation when the Saudi air force shot down two Iranian fighter jets close to its territory. Iran responded immediately by attacking a Saudi tanker, and President Khamenei took the opportunity to warn the Gulf monarchies that their continued support for Saddam Hussein would have consequences:

> Stop making available your ports, your money, your propaganda. Get out of this war (…) If you continue, then we will have the right to act with firmness against all who oppose us. We do not want to fight Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and others [but] this is on condition that they do not get mixed up in this war.[318]

Statements such as this was indicative of a growing tension in Iran's policy towards Saudi Arabia and the rest of the GCC. On the one hand, Iranian leaders had come to view GCC support for Saddam Hussein as the primary obstacle to winning the war and had a vital interest in seeing it end. On the other hand, Iran was unable to articulate a coherent strategy to achieve that goal and instead offered a constant stream of contradictory positions that alternately attempted to reassure its neighbors, explicitly threaten them with retaliation, or – as the quote above suggests – do both at the same time. While Iran by 1985 was making serious efforts to convince the Gulf monarchies that it was no longer working to install a government similar to its own in Iraq, it consistently made it clear that it would settle for no less than the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Essentially, then, it was asking the Gulf monarchies to cease their support for Iraq and trust that the Iranians would stand by their word after Saddam had fallen. This was hardly a compelling argument in Saudi Arabia, which continued to view Saddam Hussein as a bulwark against Iranian dominance in Iraq. Thus, Iran's most important objective in the war – the ouster of Saddam Hussein – remained an entirely unacceptable outcome for Saudi Arabia. This fundamental divergence locked the two sides in a circular logic in which continued Saudi and GCC support for Iraq would only lead to further Iranian anger and retaliation which again reinforced the understanding among the Gulf monarchies that Saddam Hussein constituted the lesser of two evils.

5.3.3 The End of the Iran-Iraq War, 1987-1988

After more than four years where an Iranian victory seemed likely – at times even imminent – the fortunes of the war changed dramatically in Iraq's favor over the course of 1987 and 1988. In early 1987, Iran launched its largest attack on Basra since 1982. Though Iran committed 150,000-200,000 soldiers and did penetrate deep into Iraq's defensive fortifications, it failed again to break through. In a few weeks of brutal fighting, Iran suffered upwards of 80,000 casualties, including large scores of victims due to extensive use of chemical weapons by the Iraqis. Already exhausted from the toll of war, this was another severe blow to popular support for the war in

[317] On the tanker war, see Cordesman & Wagner: Lessons of Modern War, pp. 530-566. The figures cited here are from pp. 545-6.
[318] Quoted in Ramazani: Revolutionary Iran, p. 139.

Iran. It would also mark the last major Iranian offensive into Iraq.[319] In March, Iran suffered a further setback when the United States decided to involve itself directly in the war. A request from Kuwait, strongly backed by Saudi Arabia, to provide protection for its oil tankers from Iranian attacks led to the deployment of a large U.S. naval presence in the waters of the Persian Gulf. From the U.S. perspective, the intervention aimed at reassuring its Gulf allies after the Iran-Contra fiasco while at the same time increasing the pressure on Iran to end the war. Two days after the United States formally began its operations, that pressure was further enhanced when the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 598, which demanded an immediate ceasefire and a return to the internationally recognized borders. Unlike previous resolutions from the Security Council, Resolution 598 authorized the use of force by the permanent members of the Council to ensure Iraqi and Iranian compliance.[320] That the United States was to interpret this quite selectively was best illustrated when an Iraqi fighter jet, presumably by mistake, fired two missiles at the USS Stark, resulting in the death of 37 of its crew members. The Reagan administration publicly charged Iran with responsibility, though it had privately received an immediate apology from Saddam Hussein. In the following months, Iran and the United States would come into open confrontation on several occasions leading to the destruction of Iranian war ships and oil installations.[321]

With Iran isolated diplomatically, crippled economically, and depleted militarily, the momentum of the war was swinging decisively towards Iraq by early 1988. For 52 consecutive days, from late February to mid-April, Iraq fired ballistic missiles towards Tehran. More than a million people fled the city out of fear that Iraq would arm the missiles with chemical weapons. Those concerns were not unfounded, as Iraqi forces at the very same time were shelling villages in Iraqi Kurdistan with chemical weapons, killing 5000 in Halabja on March 16.[322] Over the course of the spring, Iraq launched a series of major military offensives in which it forced the Iranians on the defensive and recaptured all of the territory it had lost since 1982. Iraq not only achieved in a short span of time what it had failed to accomplish for the past many years, but it did so in an utterly crushing fashion that inflicted heavy Iranian casualties and forced the remaining forces to flee in disarray.[323] In July 1988, with Iraqi forces back on Iranian soil and threatening again to advance towards Tehran unless Iran was willing to negotiate, Ayatollah Khomeini finally changed his tune. On July 16, he sent a letter to leading members of the regime explaining his reasons for accepting a ceasefire. The letter, which was made public by Rafsanjani in 2006, offers

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[319] Murray & Woods: The Iran-Iraq War, pp. 291-304; & Cordesman & Wagner: The Lessons of Modern War, pp. 247-254.

[320] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, pp. 81-85.

[321] Ibid. See also, The Washington Post: Reagan Pays Tribute to Victims, Says Iran is “the Real Villain”, (May 20, 1987).

[322] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 83; & Cordesman & Wagner: Lessons of Modern War, pp. 363-368.

[323] Murray & Woods: The Iran-Iraq War, pp. 311-330; & Cordesman & Wagner: Lessons of Modern War, Chapter 10.

unique insights into why Iran was now willing to agree to terms it had so emphatically rejected since the onset of the war. According to Khomeini, he had recently received an "unsettling report" from the commander of the IRGC, Mohsen Rezaei, which suggested that Iran would not be able to go on the offensive for the next five years and that "probably much longer will be required to defeat Saddam." Political and military leaders had also informed Khomeini that Iran was "unable to acquire even one tenth of the advanced military equipment" that outside powers had made available for Saddam Hussein. Moreover, according to Khomeini, "our recent military losses have given our people the impression that we cannot win the war anytime soon. This has apparently weakened their willingness to go to frontlines and fight for their country." Khomeini ended his letter by noting that the decision to accept a ceasefire was similar to drinking poison, but one that was necessary in order to ensure "the safekeeping of the Islamic Republic."[324] On August 8, 1988, the Iran-Iraq war came to a formal end as the United Nations announced that both sides had accepted the terms outlined by Resolution 598. After eight years of horrific fighting, at least 500,000 deaths and more than one million injured, and at an economic cost that exceeded one trillion dollars, Iran and Iraq returned to the borders that existed at the outset of the war.

From a theoretical perspective, the course of the war testifies to the importance of political geography and projection of power in shaping threats to regime security in Saudi Arabia and Iran. From early on in the war, Saudi Arabia and Iran both devoted enormous resources in pursuit of political causes that necessarily implied an enhanced sense of external pressure and insecurity for the other side. This was certainly the case for Iran in 1980 when Saudi Arabia threw its weight behind Saddam Hussein's invasion. Up until that moment, Iranian leaders may not have particularly liked the Saudi leadership, but they did not view Saudi Arabia as a threat to the security of their regime. That changed when Saudi Arabia decided to support a military campaign that specifically aimed to bring down the Iranian regime. Saddam Hussein may have started the war, but it was the external support he received from outsiders that allowed him to continue to fight it. From the very beginning to the very end, no other country was more involved in subsidizing and enabling the Iraqi war effort than Saudi Arabia. For Saudi Arabia, Iran's ability to change the trajectory of the war and particularly its decision to continue the war into Iraqi territory from 1982 added new layers to the threat that the revolutionary regime in Tehran posed to it. Not only did it raise concerns in Saudi Arabia that the war would spill over and involve the Gulf monarchies more directly, but it also made the prospect of an Iranian victory, a scenario that seemed unfathomable at the outset of the war, a real possibility. If having an ideologically hostile regime in Tehran was already a cause for great anxiety in Saudi Arabia, it was all the more worrying to see Iran go on the offensive to force the collapse of a strong and oil-rich regime right on the Saudi border.

[324] The letter can be read in full in James Blight et al: Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran- Iraq War, 1979-1988, (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), pp. 345-47.

5.4 Competing Theoretical Explanations

Based on my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception, this chapter has made the case that the emergence of ideological and geopolitical dissonance in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution caused decisive changes in perceptions of threat between Saudi Arabia and Iran that were sustained all throughout the 1980s. The emphasis on regime security in the account offered here can be contrasted with those that offer a more strict (or structural) realist reading as well as those that locate the causal factors exclusively within the realm of ideas and identities. Though there are valid points raised by proponents of either of those perspectives, there are also inconsistencies between the causal explanation offered and the actual empirical record. In the following pages, I focus on specifying where and why those alternative theoretical explanations come up short in accounting for Saudi and Iranian threat perceptions in the decade after 1979.

5.4.1 Balance of Power Perspectives: "Change? What Change?"

Some scholars have advanced the argument that despite the many differences between the Shah's Iran and the Islamic Republic, there were also strong lines of continuity in terms of their most important objectives. For example, Trita Parsi has noted that "though the methods and justifications for the Pahlavi and Khomeini regimes differed considerably, their strategic goals were remarkably similar – regional leadership and primacy."[325] Thus, at the core of the challenge from Iran to its neighbors, the argument goes, was always its more robust conventional power base and this was true before and after 1979. It is with a foundation in this line of thinking that Keynoush argues that after the revolution, "Iran's key challenge to the Kingdom remained nonideological."[326]

I think there are at least two problems with explaining the trajectory of Saudi-Iranian relations after the revolution through the prism of balance of power theory. The first is that the presuppositions of neorealist theory divert analytical attention away from the domestic political threat that revolutionary Iran posed to the Arab Gulf states and Saudi Arabia in particular. Indeed, as the quote from Keynoush cited above suggests, the ideological challenge from Iran is understood as clearly subordinate to conflictual strategic interests in the Persian Gulf rather than as an independent source of threat in its own right. In other words, the narrow and underspecified conception of security and threat inherent to neorealism make such analysis insensitive to the fear of revolutionary contagion and Iranian subversion among its neighbors. The second problem is that precisely for this reason, the empirical realities in

[325] Trita Parsi: Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S., (Yale University Press, 2007), p. 88. As the title of Parsi's book suggests his focus is not on Saudi-Iranian relations. I cite it here because it is a good statement of the continuities of Iranian foreign policy before and after 1979.

[326] Keynoush, Saudi Arabia and Iran, p. 113. See also, Efraim Karsh: Geopolitical Determinism: The Origins of the Iran-Iraq War, (Middle East Journal, Vol. 44, No. 2, 1990), pp, 256-268.

terms of the alliance choices made by Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies in the aftermath of the revolution run counter to the expectations of balance of power theory. As I made clear in this chapter, Saudi Arabia allied with Saddam Hussein at the outset of the Iran-Iraq war at a moment when the conventional power balance between Tehran and Baghdad was increasingly in favor of the Iraqis. Saudi Arabia made this decision even with the understanding that Iraq would enhance its power position in the Persian Gulf even further once it had defeated the Iranians. Simply put, if conventional balance of power considerations was the driver of decision-making in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies, they should have supported Iran. The fact that they did not is a good illustration that in times of crises and when the most important decisions are to be made, short-term considerations of regime security are more important than long-term concerns over power imbalances.

5.4.2 Ideational Perspectives: Ontological Security and Its Limitations

Constructivist scholars have emphasized issues of identity as the key driver of threat perception between Saudi Arabia and Iran after 1979. The most ambitious and important theoretical counter to the account I have offered here comes from those constructivists who emphasize the centrality of ontological security. From this perspective, then, it is the incongruence between their respective state identities after the revolution that is the primary cause for conflict and insecurity between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While many scholars have developed arguments along those lines, it is May Darwich who has offered the most comprehensive theoretical explication of how ontological security is linked to threat perception.[327] Because she has also made the most elaborative case that Saudi Arabia's perception of threat was dominated by the challenge that the revolution in Iran posed to the distinctiveness of Saudi identity, I use her analysis to elucidate the differences between a theoretical emphasis on ontological security and the regime security perspective I have offered. To make those distinctions clear, let us first consider Darwich's argument in more detail. According to Darwich, after the revolution,

> (…) the new identity of the Islamic Republic caused Saudi ontological insecurity. The Saudi regime identity was based on pan-Islamism, which provided the Kingdom with the source of distinctiveness in the region. (…) In 1979, the Islamic Revolution in Iran constituted a 'critical situation' that endangered the stability of the Saudi regime identity. The Kingdom feared that it would lose its unique Islamic credentials once the revolution adopted a similar pan-Islamic identity. In other words, the distinction according to which the Kingdom had consolidated its own identity vis-á-vis the other states in the region became irrelevant.[328]

[327] Darwich: Threats and Alliances in the Middle East. See also, Darwich: The Ontological (In)security of Similarity; Adib-Moghaddam: The International Politics of the Persian Gulf, pp. 21-51; & al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making; pp. 125-154.

[328] Darwich: Threats and Alliances in the Middle East, p. 68.

For Darwich, then, "identity does the causal work in explaining [Saudi Arabia's] threat perception."[329] I believe that there are two primary problems with Darwich's account, which also applies to other efforts to explain Saudi and Iranian threat perceptions after the revolution from the position of ontological security. The first is that the Iran-Iraq War is not granted the attention it deserves as a source of threat that is different and independent from the ideational conflict between revolutionary Iran and the Arab Gulf states. Some constructivists, including Darwich, refrain from going into much detail about the war itself.[330] Others who do discuss the Iran-Iraq War from a position of ontological security see it entirely as a "war for ideological primacy" that was fought through "clashing narratives of state identities competing for dominance."[331] Regardless of whether the Iran-Iraq War is mentioned only in passing or is seen as merely a manifestation of a larger and more important ideational struggle, the underlying assertion is that the outbreak and the trajectory of the war does not really "do" anything to Saudi Arabia or Iran's threat perception. Needless to say, I disagree with this proposition and have made my case that it very much did so in this chapter. The second problem is that I believe that the emphasis on self-perception and the quest for "inner stability" on which the ontological security perspective is premised ultimately raises more questions than it answers. The subtle but very important differences in how scholars of ontological security view the causal connections between ideas and threat perception and the one I subscribe to are best illustrated in our very different readings of why and when Saudi Arabia came to view Iran as a threat in 1979. To her credit, Darwich is very specific about the case she is making: It was not the Iranian shift towards emphasizing the export of the revolution and the instability that followed in Saudi Arabia in late 1979 that was the driver of Saudi threat perception. Rather, she writes,

> I argue that the domestic dimension became relevant only because the narrative of self-identity is inextricably related to the interaction with the other, which was disrupted following the critical situation created by the Islamic Revolution. The domestic dissent only magnified the shakiness of the regime's identity narrative and its ontological insecurity.[332]

In other words, from the ontological security perspective, it was the very fact of the revolution *in and of itself* that triggered Saudi threat perception, and the fundamental source of that insecurity was not the concern that it would create instability in Saudi *society*, but rather that it immediately created instability in the *minds* of its political leadership. Thus, whereas I made an effort to emphasize how Saudi Arabia's perception of threat evolved and deteriorated over the course of 1979, the ontological

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[329] Ibid, p. 89.

[330] Darwich' discussion of the Iran-Iraq war is limited to brief overview on p. 59. The same is the case in Rubin: Islam in the Balance, p. 57. Though not writing from a perspective of ontological security, Rubin does locate the sources of Saudi threat perception strictly in the ideational sphere.

[331] Adib Moghaddam: The International Politics of the Persian Gulf, p. 23.

[332] Darwich: Threats and Alliances in the Middle East, p. 75.

security perspective sees the Saudi threat perception as essentially fixed from early 1979. This is why particular activities at particular moments are so very important. Indeed, if the ontological security perspective is correct and the Saudi leadership viewed its identity as existentially threatened, why did they react to the official declaration of the Islamic Republic in April 1979 by endorsing it and offering it legitimacy? Why did senior Saudi leaders emphasize Iran's Islamic credentials and why was Saudi media allowed to do the same?[333] There is no doubt that Saudi Arabia began to much more aggressively emphasize Sunni identity, as Darwich also points out. However, Lawrence Rubin is precisely correct that Saudi Arabia engaged in this kind of "ideational balancing" *after* Iranian leaders began to engage in open acts of subversion against the Al Saud around the time of the fall of the Bazargan government.[334] Incidentally, Darwich also observes this pattern, but she does not reflect on what this implies for the causal argument.[335] For these reasons, then, I believe there is a much stronger theoretical and empirical case to be made that Saudi Arabia's threat perception increased, not because of the abstract challenge to its ontological security, but for the very specific reason that Iran actively began to encourage and support domestic dissent against the Al Saud.

5.5 Conclusion

As we round off this chapter, let me emphasize three points from the analysis of the previous pages. First and most obviously, the Iranian Revolution marked the beginning of a monumental shift in Saudi-Iranian relations. It transformed Iranian politics in virtually every direction and shattered the core of common interests that had resulted in relatively stable relations between the two sides over the course of the 1970s. It began an era in which Iran would openly challenge the foundations of political rule in the other Gulf countries and particularly emphasize how Islam was fundamentally incompatible with the institution of monarchy. The revolution set in motion the dynamics that led to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, which placed Saudi Arabia and Iran on opposite sides in one of the largest and most devastating interstate military conflicts in the history of the Middle East. The extensive ideological and geopolitical dissonance that followed in the aftermath of the revolution caused decisive and durable shifts in Saudi Arabia and Iran's perceptions of threat that were sustained all throughout the 1980s. Second, I have made the case that Saudi Arabia came to view revolutionary Iran as an Omnipresent Threat as it was both concerned with the internal subversion that threatened stability within its borders as well as the projection of Iranian military power outside the Kingdom. I demonstrated in the first part of this chapter how Saudi Arabia responded to the fall of the Shah by attempting

[333] Recall, for instance, King Khaled's assertion that the birth of the Islamic Republic "echoed well throughout the Kingdom" and Prince Abdullah's similar praise that was referenced earlier in the chapter.

[334] Rubin: Islam in the Balance, pp. 52-59. None of the examples Rubin points to as evidence of Saudi Arabia's "ideational balancing" occurs before November 1979.

[335] Darwich: Threats and Alliances in the Middle East, pp. 65-68.

to maintain a working relationship with the revolutionaries in Iran. It was not until the moderate forces were swept away in late 1979 that Iranian leaders openly and concertedly began to challenge the legitimacy of the Al Saud and call for domestic opposition to it. The combination of Iran's increasing emphasis on exporting the revolution and the series of domestic political challenges to the Al Saud that occurred alongside it in late 1979 and early 1980 was what decisively changed the Saudi orientation towards Iran in the aftermath of the revolution. Iranian subversion and efforts to incite opposition in Saudi Arabia would continue in the following years, particularly at the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, which in effect turned a key pillar in Saudi Arabia's claim to religious authority into a perennial security concern. While it was the threat of revolutionary contagion in its own society that led Saudi Arabia to support the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980, the course of the war itself added a territorial and military component to the Saudi threat perception. As Iran carried the war into Iraq in 1982 to impose a new political order, it exacerbated Saudi Arabia's concern that it could have a hostile revolutionary state on its borders with a large military presence and a score to settle. It also made Saudi Arabia subject to acts of retaliation and explicit threats of further military escalation. What Iran would have done had it been able to defeat Saddam Hussein is a fascinating question, but also one that cannot be given a definitive answer to. Yet, given Khomeini's contempt for the Al Saud and the ideological zeal with which Iran conducted its foreign policy, it is certainly clear that Saudi Arabia believed it had every incentive to keep Iranian influence out of Iraq. Third, whereas Saudi Arabia viewed Iran as both an internal and external threat, Iran's threat perception was a product of its war with Iraq. For Iran, Saudi Arabia was an Expansionist Threat, not because the Saudis posed a military threat as such, but because they so decisively leveraged their resources in support of what Iranian leaders categorically viewed as a war of aggression against it. Not only did Saudi Arabia side with Saddam Hussein at the outset of the Iraqi invasion, but it continued to support him right through his worst atrocities. Saudi funding played a crucial role in preventing the collapse of the Iraqi regime early on in the war and in allowing Iraq to build a military machine that Iran simply could not compete with as the war came to an end.

Ten years after he returned to Iran to lead the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini died in Tehran on June 3, 1989 at the age of 86. Khomeini captured and elevated the revolutionary fervor in Iran by virtue of his personal charisma and uncompromising posture, but he would channel those energies in ways that earned Iran a pariah status in regional and international affairs. Though he certainly brought revolutionary change to Iran, he did so by building a political system that proved to be every bit as repressive and intolerant towards dissent as the one the Shah had presided over. The Islamic Republic Khomeini left for his successors was one that had suffered through a traumatizing war experience, found itself in a deep economic crisis, and badly needed to break its international isolation to change its conditions. Thus, with the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the death of Khomeini, the overarching symbol of Iran's revolutionary revisionism, a space opened up for easing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. And as this space opened up, Saddam Hussein would

once again take actions that would have lasting effects on perceptions of threat to regime security in Saudi Arabia and Iran and relations between them. This time, though, in a very different direction.

Chapter 6:
The Rapprochement

We must stop making enemies.[336]

- President Rafsanjani, 1989

We have decided to take a big step toward security between our two countries. We consider Saudi Arabia's security as Iran's security and Iran's security as our security.[337]

- Prince Nayef al-Saud, 2001

The hostility and confrontation that characterized Saudi-Iranian relations in the first decade after the revolution was replaced in the 1990s by a gradual easing of tensions and a progressive move towards working on issues of common concern. Diplomatic relations were restored in 1991, and that same year the Hajj was performed without any confrontations between the two sides for the first time since 1980. This trend would continue in the following years. From the mid-1990s through the early 2000s, Saudi Arabia and Iran expanded their diplomatic activities in a series of high-level official visits that aimed to address outstanding issues and strengthen coordination between them. The tangible results of these efforts included an expansion of economic ties, close collaboration on oil policy, and the signing of the 1998 Cooperation Agreement and the 2001 Security Accord. Indeed, as one observer noted, the improvement in Saudi-Iranian relations over the course of the 1990s was "unprecedented".[338]

6.1 Perceptions of Threat in Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1990-2002

The underlying driver of this profound transformation was the convergence of interests and the reorientation of perceptions of threat to regime security in Saudi Arabia and Iran that followed in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Khomeini. Specifically, two dynamics were at the center of that change. The first was a clear trend in Iran under its new political leadership – advocated strongly by the new President Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani and endorsed more tacitly by the new Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei – of reducing the commitment to revolutionary export and focusing instead on improving its own domestic situation. The war with Iraq brought the Iranian economy to the brink of collapse. As the war ended, nearly a third of all

[336] Quoted in Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, p. 219.
[337] Quoted in al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making, p. 218.
[338] R.K. Ramazani: Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy, (Middle East Journal, Vol 58, No. 4, 2004), pp. 549-559. Quote on p. 558.

Iranians were unemployed. In the early 1990s, economic grievances were at the center of some of the largest popular protests in Iran since the early days of the revolution.[339] Rebuilding the Iranian economy was imperative for Iran under Rafsanjani and his successor, Mohammed Khatami, and both saw healthy relations with the Gulf monarchies – and above all, Saudi Arabia – as integral to that goal. The moderation of Iranian foreign policy was neither instantaneous nor entirely consistent. Crucially for Saudi Arabia, though, the fact that Iranian leaders made serious efforts to emphasize co-existence and non-interference represented a qualitative shift from the open hostility and active efforts to destabilize Saudi domestic politics that were so prevalent in the 1980s. That trend only grew stronger as the 1990s progressed. The second important factor that changed the dynamic between Saudi Arabia and Iran – and in the Persian Gulf region more broadly – was Saddam Hussein's decision to turn on his former allies and launch a military invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Like Iran, Iraq also emerged from the war in a deep financial crisis and with a desperate need to change its situation. However, whereas Iran's road to recovery was to abandon its revisionist agenda and essentially become a status quo player in regional politics, Iraq under Saddam Hussein made a transition in the opposite direction. The Iraqi annexation of Kuwait had several important effects. It looked, if only for a brief moment, to catapult Saddam Hussein into a position of unparalleled power in the Gulf. It led Saudi Arabia to take the difficult decision of allowing the United States to deploy massive military force on its soil to deter Saddam Hussein from continuing his raid into the Kingdom. It sparked another regional war and began a vast expansion of the American military presence in the Persian Gulf. Perhaps most importantly for Saudi-Iranian relations, it facilitated the understanding in Riyadh and Tehran that the containment of Saddam Hussein was a common priority of the highest importance. In other words, the period between the two major crises in the Gulf in the post-Cold War era – the Gulf War of 1990-91 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 – was one in which the ideological and geopolitical dissonance between Saudi Arabia and Iran was replaced by a much more pronounced element of consonance of their regime security interests, and one in which perceptions of threat between them changed accordingly.

6.1.1 Saudi Arabia's Perception of Iran

The prevailing tendency in Saudi Arabia to see Iran as the primary threat to its internal stability and external security ended with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The conquest of a close ally and the positioning of more than 100,000 Iraqi soldiers at the Saudi-Kuwaiti border, only a short distance from some of the largest oil fields in the Kingdom, represented a serious and imminent threat. It brought to the forefront the basic dilemma in Saudi Arabia between the ultimate need for U.S. military protection against outside aggression and the potential for domestic backlash that the

[339] For a discussion of Iran's economic problems, see Nikki R. Keddie: Modern Iran, pp. 263-267; & Said Amir Arjomand: After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors, (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 56-67.

American connection also brings. Iran could have aggravated the precarious position Saudi Arabia found itself in during and after the Gulf War. It could have accepted one of the many offers it received from Saddam Hussein to side with Iraq against the Gulf monarchies. It could have used the sensitive issue of the American military presence in the Kingdom to call for domestic opposition to the Al Saud. Iran did none of those things. Thus, the understanding that formed among the Saudi leadership, which began with the Gulf War and was sustained over the following decade, was that it was Iraq – not Iran – that represented "the single greatest political and military threat the Kingdom face[d]."[340] By no means did Saudi Arabia see relations with Iran as free from tensions. It consistently worried that changes in Iranian domestic politics would empower the radical elements in Iran and revive the revolutionary fervor. Saudi Arabia also remained fearful that Iran, following Iraq's decisive defeat in the Gulf War, would once again see an opportunity to take on a more dominant role in regional politics. Unlike the previous decade, however, Iran in the 1990s did not engage in similar kinds of subversion of Saudi Arabia, nor did it resort to the same kind of power projection to facilitate changes beyond its borders. Thus, even if mistrust and suspicion continued to linger, Saudi Arabia in the 1990s did not see Iran as a clear and imminent threat to either its internal stability or its external security, as it had in 1980s. Rather, Iran was a Latent Threat, which was – as the Shah had been in the 1970s – something short of a trusted political partner, but also not an open adversary.

Figure 6.1: Saudi Arabia's Perception of Iran, 1990-2002

Latent Treat	Subversive Threat
Expansionist Threat	Omnipresent Threat

6.1.2 Iran's Perception of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia was a major focus for Iran in the 1990s, but not because of the threat it posed. Rather, Iran under Rafsanjani and Khatami came to view engagement with Saudi Arabia as part of the solution to its primary internal and external challenges. First and foremost, the need for domestic development and the dire state of the Iranian economy was an area where cooperation with Saudi Arabia – with its financial muscle and influence on the oil market – could really make a difference. Indeed, a key theme for the Rafsanjani administration was its commitment to the basic view that Iran saw Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies "not as ripe pawns to be toppled, but as cash-rich investors to entice."[341] Rather than a threat to its internal stability, Saudi Arabia was for Iran a potential way out of its domestic hardships. Iran's external security concerns also did not primarily revolve around Saudi Arabia

[340] Anthony Cordesman: Saudi Arabia Enters the 21st Century, p. 52.
[341] Afshin Molavi: Iran and the Gulf States, (Commentary on The Iran Primer website, October 13, 2010). Available at https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-gulf-states.

but were focused instead in two directions. First, Iran continued to see a threat emanating from Iraq and regarded the containment of Saddam Hussein as a primary objective of its regional policy. The fact that Saudi Arabia and the rest of the GCC came to share that assessment and almost certainly would not back Iraqi aggression in the future was a major and very tangible improvement for Iran's external security. The basic Iranian concern with and aversion to Saddam Hussein did not change, but the sense of imminent threat from Iraq was not the same for Iran in the late 1990s as it had been a decade earlier. The second source of external threat for Iran in the 1990s was the build-up of American military power in the Persian Gulf in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Whereas it was easy for Saudi Arabia and Iran to agree on Iraq, the expanded role of the United States was decidedly more contentious. As we shall see, both the Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations invested heavily in trying to convince the Gulf monarchies that security in the region was better maintained without an American military presence in the area. The major innovation that occurred under Khatami was that Iran seemingly realized no amount of Iranian pressure could force Saudi Arabia to give up its reliance on the United States for protection. The best way for Iran to achieve the goal of reducing American involvement in the Gulf was to build confidence with the Gulf monarchies so they would see less of need for outside assistance.[342] In other words, working with Saudi Arabia became for Iran a means to improve its domestic conditions and deal with its external challenges. For Iran, Saudi Arabia was a Latent Threat in the 1990s.

Figure 6.2: Iran's Perception of Saudi Arabia, 1990-2002

Latent Treat	Subversive Threat
Expansionist Threat	Omnipresent Threat

6.2 The Ideological Dimension of Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1990-2002

For good reason, the Iranian revolution and the events of the 1980s have produced a wealth of scholarship on how ideas inform perceptions of threat in Saudi-Iranian relations. As a result, we have a rich and nuanced literature with a wide array of theoretical tools and frameworks that purport to explain the causes of change. For less obvious reasons, the 1990s have failed to generate the same kind of scholarly attention. This is unfortunate because the vastly improved trajectory of Saudi-Iranian relations over the course of the 1990s is as instructive and demands as much explanation as the hostility of the 1980s. For Saudi Arabia, the important ideational change that took place was not that Iran ceased to be a competitor for leadership in the Islamic world. Iran continued to represent an alternative model of Islamic governance and it continued to vie for the sympathies of Islamist political movements. What did change was Iran's rhetoric, and specifically its orientations towards Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies. As Ray Takeyh has summarized, Iran in the 1990s

[342] Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, pp. 66-77.

> … shifted its focus away from the internal composition of the Gulf states and concentrated on influencing their international orientation. (…) Instead of seeking to instigate Shiite uprisings and exhorting the masses to Iran's revolutionary template, Tehran now called for greater economic and security cooperation. By implication this new policy accepted the legitimacy of the monarchical regimes and the sovereign privileges of the very states that [Khomeini] had long maligned.[343]

From an analytical perspective, then, it was the transformation of the ideological dissonance of the 1980s that was the single most important factor in explaining the rapprochement that took place in the 1990s. In the first part of this chapter, I show how this change took place in two stages. The first section explains Rafsanjani's efforts to emphasize pragmatism and moderation over revolutionary radicalism in Iran's foreign policy, but also how his conciliatory approach was complicated by the legacies of the preceding decade and domestic pushback against that agenda. The second section explains why it was the landslide victory of reformist candidate Mohammed Khatami in the 1997 Iranian presidential election that elevated Saudi-Iranian relations to a new level. Khatami not only continued Rafsanjani's policy of reconciliation, but he also represented an even more ambitious rethinking of the Islamic Republic's role in the region and in the world. Khatami made good neighborly relations his top foreign policy priority, and he recognized that the key issue that needed to be addressed for that to happen was the continued fear of Iranian subversion. Indeed, in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies, Khatami's election was viewed as "potentially a real break from Iran's revolutionary past, and thus an end to Iranian opposition to their own rule in their states."[344]

6.2.1 Iran's Pragmatic Turn

By design, the constitution adopted by the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 was one that invited factional competition. It created both a prime minister and a president, a regular and an irregular military force, and a wide range of institutions occupied by members that were either elected by popular vote or selected by official decree. The many checks and balances were enacted precisely to ensure that no individual or institution would emerge as challenger to the central position of the Supreme Leader and thus the system itself. What allowed the system to function despite its built-in deficiencies was Ayatollah Khomeini. In the Islamic Republic's first decade, Khomeini's personal charisma and massive popularity allowed him to mediate factional disputes and to end them decisively when he decided on a course of action. In Milani's words, Khomeini was "a unique product of unique historical circumstances [and] simply irreplaceable."[345] No other religious leader in Iran commanded the same type of respect and authority to intervene in politics as effectively as he could,

[343] Ray Takeyh: Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs, (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 131.
[344] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 131.
[345] Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, p. 225.

and no political figure could deal effectively with Iran's massive challenges in a system where the central government was deliberately kept weak and divided. As his health deteriorated, Khomeini and those around him also recognized that adjustments to the management of the Islamic Republic were needed in order to avoid its disintegration after his death.[346] In the months before he died, Khomeini ordered a revision of the Iranian constitution, which would lead to two important changes. The first was that the qualifications for the position of Supreme Leader were scaled back significantly. This allowed for the elevation of Ali Khamenei as the new Supreme Leader even though he was only a middle-rank cleric without much of a base in the religious establishment. Such were the politics of the Islamic Republic when Khomeini died that the new Supreme Leader was chosen, not because of his religious credentials, but because he was the candidate around whom consensus could be reached.[347] The second important change was that the revised constitution greatly enhanced the powers of the presidency. The position of prime minister was eliminated and that portfolio extended to the president, who was now solely responsible for formulating and implementing policy. The president was placed in charge of the powerful Planning and Budget Organization and the newly created Supreme National Security Council, which further increased his ability to conduct economic and foreign policy.[348] The result of these changes, then, was that Khomeini's role as the undisputed leader of the Islamic Republic was replaced by much more of a dual leadership between Ali Khamenei as the new Supreme Leader and Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani, who became Iran's new president in August 1989. It was up to these two longtime aides of Khomeini to continue the project of the Islamic Republic and at the same time unmake the grave difficulties Iran were facing.

As Rafsanjani assumed his new position as president, he announced that Iran was about to enter an "era of reconstruction" in which the rebuilding of Iran's war-ravaged economy was to take precedence. Reflecting the need for technical rather than religious expertise, Rafsanjani proceeded to appoint only four clerics to his cabinet over the course of his two presidential terms.[349] From his first day in office, Rafsanjani was very candid about the poor performance of the Islamic Republic over its first decade and maintained that it called for introspection among Iranian leaders. If Iran was to recover from its deep economic woes, it required not only competency to be emphasized at home, but also the pursuit of a more restrained foreign policy abroad. In his inaugural address, Rafsanjani specifically called for those who continued to advocate for the export of the revolution to "forego their extremism".[350] For Rafsanjani, Iran's ideological adventurism and reluctance to comprise had been

[346] Ibid, pp. 219-223. See also, Arjomand: After Khomeini, pp. 36-41.
[347] Ibid.
[348] Ibid. For a further discussion, see Mohsen Milani: The Evolution of the Iranian Presidency: From Bani Sadr to Rafsanjani, (British Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 20, No. 1, 1993), pp. 83-97.
[349] Takeyh: Guardians of the Revolution, p. 113.
[350] Quoted in Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, p. 231.

counterproductive and he readily conceded that its behavior towards the Gulf monarchies was in need of change. According to Rafsanjani,

> One of the things we did in the revolutionary atmosphere was to constantly make enemies. We pushed those who could be neutral into hostility and did not do anything to attract those that could be friends. It is part of the new plan that in foreign policy we should behave in ways not to needlessly [antagonize others].[351]

Along similar lines, Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akhbar Velayati made it a point to emphasize that "Iran respects the independence of all and particularly its neighboring states", while Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammed Larijani pointed out that "every country should be accepted as it is, as the status quo. We do not have to change any regime."[352]

The primary target of the Rafsanjani administration's efforts to turn a new leaf was Saudi Arabia. This followed directly from its domestic agenda; if Iran was to break its isolation and improve its economic situation, it was only prudent to seek normalization of ties with the Saudis. At the same time, though, Rafsanjani's conciliatory approach was also met with domestic criticism, particularly from more radical and conservative circles. Several of the leading newspapers reminded readers that Khomeini had explicitly rejected any relations with Saudi Arabia. Former Minister of Interior Ali Mohtashami, who remained one of the main advocates for the continued export of the revolution, called for the Al Saud to be put on trial for "the crimes it has perpetrated (…) against Islam." Mehdi Karroubi, the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, stated that Saudi leaders were "disqualified to administer the holy sanctuaries". Under pressure to demonstrate the legitimacy of his selection as Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Khamenei sided with the radicals. In his first public appearances as Supreme Leader, Khamenei denounced the Al Saud as the "sinful idols of arrogance and colonialism", charged them with being "ignorant of God" and accused them – as Khomeini had done – of representing "American Islam".[353] Thus, while Saudi Arabia viewed the Rafsanjani administration's call for moderation as an important step in the right direction – and did agree to meet with it in private – it was still not prepared to have open relations with Iran because of the sense that Khomeini's revolutionary agenda remained very much alive.

What changed the dynamic in both Iranian domestic politics and for Saudi Arabia was Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in early August 1990. I return to a more detailed analysis of the convergence of interests that the Gulf crisis created for Saudi Arabia and Iran later on in the chapter. Here, I will merely emphasize that it also greatly strengthened the moderate and pragmatic factions in Iran at the expense of the radical elements. It allowed the Rafsanjani administration to demonstrate domestically that Iran could benefit from a more restrained foreign policy and at the same time signal to Iran's neighbors that it had the authority to back up its rhetoric

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[351] Quoted in Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, p. 95.

[352] Quoted in Takeyh: The Guardians of the Revolution, p. 131.

[353] These quotes are from David Menashri: Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society, and Power, (Routledge, 2001), p. 241 and p. 258 (footnote 84).

of reconciliation with concrete political action. It was in March 1991 – in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf war – that Saudi Arabia and Iran restored full diplomatic relations. When Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal visited Tehran in July, news reports suggested that Iran had pledged to stop support for "dissenters of any color" in Saudi Arabia and the other GCC countries. Afterwards, the official Saudi news agency characterized Saudi-Iranian relations as "excellent".[354] The transition away from revolutionary radicalism in Iran was further evident in the run-up to the 1992 parliamentary election in Iran, when the Guardian Council – with the backing of both Rafsanjani and Khamenei – disqualified more than 1000 candidates, including a large number of hardline clerics, from running in the election.[355] With the curbed influence of the radical clergy, Ayatollah Khamenei was allowed greater leeway in terms of identifying more closely with Rafsanjani's policy of accommodation with Saudi Arabia. Indeed, there was a qualitative difference in Khamenei's public stance on Saudi Arabia before and after the resumption of diplomatic ties in 1991. Whereas Khamenei at first seemed to continue Khomeini's hostile agitation against Saudi Arabia, he was careful to avoid direct criticism of the Al Saud after 1991. Rather, when he did intervene, Khamenei tended to direct his criticism against political positions held by the GCC as a collective body, not the internal characteristics of its respective members.[356] After Iranian pilgrims were again allowed to attend the Hajj in 1991, Khamenei explicitly warned them in his annual address not to against engage in activities directed against the Al Saud.[357] In sharp contrast to the 1980s, when the Hajj was used by the Iranians to apply domestic political pressure against the Saudi royal family, there were no Iranian-instigated demonstrations against the Al Saud, nor any violent clashes between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi security forces at the Hajj in the 1990s. In 1992, Mohammed Ali Hadi, the new Iranian ambassador to Saudi Arabia, referred to the two sides as "the two wings of Islam without which it could not fly."[358]

Though Iranian foreign policy under the dual leadership of Rafsanjani and Khamenei was more inclined towards caution, particularly in its dealings with the Gulf monarchies, it was also marked by contradictions that would often impair its efforts to change its international isolation. Even though Iran decisively abandoned the political objective of exporting the revolution, it continued to be linked to activities that raised questions over the depth of its moderation. In the early 1990s, Iran was believed to be behind a series of assassinations of political opponents in exile, including the murders of former Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar in Paris in 1991 and four Kurdish leaders in Berlin in 1992.[359] Iran was also suspected of involvement

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354 Furtig: Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia Between the Gulf Wars, p. 105.

355 Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, p. 229.

356 Al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making, p. 192.

357 Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, pp. 56-57.

358 Ibid, p. 57.

359 The New York Times: Berlin Court Says Top Iran Leaders Authorized Killings, (April 11, 1997).

in the bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1994 that killed 85 people and injured more than 150. The criminal investigations in all these cases would eventually conclude that the actions had been authorized by the very top of the Iranian leadership.[360] On June 25, 1996, a massive truck bomb exploded outside the Khobar Towers, a housing complex used by U.S. military forces stationed in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Nineteen American soldiers were killed and some 500 were injured in an explosion that was later determined to be the largest non-nuclear blast on record. Saudi Arabia and the United States each conducted their own independent investigations of the attack on Khobar Towers and both found that those responsible were Saudi Shi'a affiliated with Hezbollah al-Hijaz acting with support from Iran.[361]

As the Iranian connection to the bombing became clear to the Saudis, it also exposed them to a political dilemma. On the one hand, it clearly illustrated that despite the official Iranian commitment to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference, Iranian subversion was not quite a thing of the past. Although the bombing was almost certainly intended as a message to the United States rather than the Saudi royal family per se, it was still a case of unacceptable Iranian meddling on Saudi soil. On the other hand, however, Saudi leaders also recognized that the more the Iranian role in the bombing was emphasized, the more pressure there would be on the United States to retaliate militarily against Iran. It also threatened to reverse the considerable improvements in Saudi relations with Iran and empower the radical elements in the Islamic Republic. The political sensitivity of the Khobar Towers attack and the potential that it could seriously damage its relations with Iran led Saudi Arabia to play its cards extremely close to the vest and do what it could to prevent scrutiny of the Iranian connection. Much to the chagrin of the Clinton administration, Saudi Arabia was very reluctant to share intelligence or provide access to witnesses or suspects. Indeed, it took more than two years for Saudi Arabia to cooperate with American investigators in any meaningful way, and even then the Saudis refused to implicate Iran in public.[362] When the United States eventually made its case for direct Iranian involvement in 2001, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Saud responded by saying that "it is not a good thing to launch accusations here and there

[360] Ibid. Argentinian authorities determined in 2006 that "the decision to carry out the [Buenos Aires] attack was made, and the attack was orchestrated by, the highest officials in the Islamic Republic of Iran at the time, and that that these officials instructed Lebanese Hezbollah (…) to carry out the attack." Afterwards, international arrest warrants were issued for eight leading officials, including former President Rafsanjani and former Foreign Minister Velayati. Quoted in Matthew Levitt: Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God, (Hurst Publishers, 2013), p. 77.

[361] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 129. See also, Matthiesen: Hizbollah al-Hijaz, pp. 191-194, & Levitt: Hezbollah, Chapter 7. According to Levitt, who has provided a comprehensive analysis of the available evidence, "Iran's role in orchestrating the bombing [was] crystal clear." Quote on p. 199.

[362] Ibid.

regarding a matter on which the investigation has not been completed."[363] In private, Saudi leaders were more straightforward. According to one account,

> [In 1997], Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah met in Pakistan with the outgoing Iranian President, Hashemi Rafsanjani, and brought up the terrorist attack. "We know you did it", Abdullah told Rafsanjani, according to two sources with knowledge of the conversation. Rafsanjani, in this account, insisted that he was not involved personally, but if any Iranian had a role "it was he" – Ayatollah Khamenei, the country's supreme leader – and he pointed upward.[364]

For Saudi Arabia, then, Iran under the Rafsanjani presidency remained somewhat of an enigma. The Saudis were certainly much more comfortable with Iran's rhetoric and posture when Rafsanjani ended his second term in 1997 than when he began his first in 1989. Yet, while it did not perceive Iran as immediately hostile, the Khobar Towers bombing demonstrated that Iran could and would still cross red lines in Saudi domestic politics. There was thus the potential for a fallout in Saudi-Iranian relations between the 1996 bombings and the 1997 presidential elections in Iran. It would serve the Saudis well that they chose not to escalate against Iran during this period.

6.2.2 Khatami and the Path towards Rapprochement

It was after the election of Mohammed Khatami as Iran's new president in May 1997 that Saudi-Iranian relations would reach their zenith. As head of the reformist movement in Iran, Khatami came to represent the growing demand for accountability, social justice, and the expansion of civil liberties in the Islamic Republic. His overwhelming electoral victory – Khatami won nearly 70 percent of the vote with a 90 percent turnout – was a testament to the strong desire among Iranians to see those virtues realized. For Saudi Arabia, the appeal of Khatami stemmed not so much from his democratic inclinations, but rather from the fact that the movement he represented was even more committed to relinquishing Iran's revolutionary past than Rafsanjani had been. Among its constituents were moderates and liberals, but it also included a large number of former prominent radical clerics and revolutionaries who had made the transition from being strong advocates of revolutionary export in the 1980s and early 1990s to renouncing that agenda entirely as Khatami won the presidency.[365] For Khatami, the aspiration for a more pluralistic Islamic Republic was tied to its reintegration into the international community. This required Iran to con-

[363] The Daily Star: Investigators Haven't Given Up on Solving Khobar Bombing, (May 23, 2001).

[364] Elsa Walsh: Louis Freeh's Last Case, (The New Yorker, May 7, 2001).

[365] Among the notable radicals-turned-reformists were Ayatollah Montazari, Moussavi Khoeiniha, Mir Hossein-Moussavi, and Mehdi Karrubi. On the transformation of revolutionary ideology and the rise of the reformist movement, see Arjomand: After Khomeini, pp. 73-111.

tinue along the path of détente that Rafsanjani had set and at the same time recognize that it needed to do more to alleviate the mistrust and suspicion among its neighbors and the outside world more generally. As Takeyh explains:

> For Khatami and the reformist movement, the concept of democratic accountability at home was married to a responsible foreign policy. (…) The essence of this vision was its implicit acknowledgement that Iran's isolation stemmed partly from its own conduct. It was Iran's penchant for terrorism and subversion and irresponsible statements that had placed it outside the community of nations.[366]

The Khatami administration immediately made it clear that good neighborly relations with the Gulf monarchies was its top foreign policy priority. In his inaugural address, Khatami stressed the importance of dialogue and pledged that his government would "avoid any action or behavior causing tension."[367] He proceeded to take a range of initiatives aimed at building confidence in that message. Indeed, the election of Khatami was followed by the most comprehensive changes to the top levels of Iran's military and security apparatus since the revolution. Khatami appointed an entirely new cabinet, thus replacing figures such as Foreign Minister Velayati, who had served in that capacity since 1981, and Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian, who had been directly implicated in Iran's terrorist activities abroad. With pressure from Khatami, most of the leadership of the IRGC was also changed, including its longtime top commander Mohsen Rezaei.[368] Khatami's work to replace a large number of political and military leaders who had served in key roles since the early days of the revolution was read by the Gulf monarchies as a tangible sign of his commitment to change. In particular, the appointment of Ali Shamkhani, a dedicated moderate and an ethnic Arab, to the position of Defense Minister was viewed among the Saudi leadership as a positive gesture.[369] Shamkhani would later receive the Order of Abdulaziz al-Saud, the highest recognition in Saudi Arabia, for his efforts in improving Saudi-Iranian relations. The centrality of improving relations with Saudi Arabia to the Khatami administration was further underlined when new Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi travelled to Riyadh for his first visit abroad.

Saudi Arabia enthusiastically welcomed the outreach from Iran. King Fahd was the first leader in the region to congratulate Khatami on his victory and he immediately dispatched one of his closest political advisors to Tehran. Newspapers in all of the Gulf monarchies described the election of Khatami as a potential game-changer, and one emphasized that Iran was now entering "a healthy and sound future with clear set policy of non-interference in the affairs of its neighbors."[370] As a matter of

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[366] Takeyh: Guardians of the Revolution, p. 197.

[367] Quoted in Menashri: Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran, p. 208.

[368] Eisenstadt et al: Iran Under Khatami: A Political, Economic and Military Assessment, (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), pp. 72-74.

[369] Keynoush: Saudi Arabia and Iran, p. 143.

[370] Inter Press Service: Khatami's Overtures Go Down Well in Gulf, (August 6, 1997). See also, Fahad Alsultan & Pedram Saeid: The Development of Saudi-Iranian Relations since the 1990s: Between Conflict and Accomodation, (Routledge, 2017), pp. 108-110.

practical reciprocation, Saudi Arabia reiterated its support for Iran to host the OIC Summit in Tehran in December 1997. Saudi Arabia had agreed to support an Iranian bid to host an OIC summit as part of the resumption of diplomatic ties in 1991, but the Saudis had also insisted that it would have to wait until Saudi Arabia felt more certain about Iran's trajectory. After the election of Khatami, Saudi Arabia not only followed through on its commitment but also announced that it would send a high-level delegation to the summit headed by Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler in the Kingdom since King Fahd suffered a stroke in 1995. This marked the first official visit to Iran by the top leadership of the Al Saud since the revolution.

The 1997 OIC summit in Tehran was highly successful for Iran both in terms of rehabilitating its international image and especially in its efforts to improve relations with Saudi Arabia. Khatami used the summit to launch his vision of "Dialogue Among Civilizations", and he took the opportunity to reiterate once again that Iran would not meddle in the internal affairs of others. This point was also highlighted by Ayatollah Khamenei in his speech to the assembly, in which he made it clear that "Iran poses no threat to any Islamic country." The language of moderation was a common theme through all the official statements and resolutions agreed to at the summit. For instance, the Tehran Declaration adopted at the conclusion of the summit emphasized "the need for cooperation, dialogue and positive understanding among cultures and religions while rejecting the ideology of confrontation which creates mistrust and diminishes the grounds for cooperation among nations."[371] Over the course of the summit, Crown Prince Abdullah met with Ayatollah Khamenei, former President Rafsanjani, and twice with President Khatami. Though the details of those talks were kept private, there is little doubt that the bilateral discussions added to the positive atmosphere and the sense in Saudi Arabia that Iran was genuinely interested in moving on from past hostilities. Crown Prince Abdullah praised Iran for its hospitality and noted that with "the achievements of the Muslim people of Iran and their invaluable contribution (…) it is no wonder that Tehran is hosting this important Islamic gathering." Along similar lines, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal commended Iran for using the OIC Summit to "give the world a message, not one of shadows but one of substance, that they want to improve relations."[372]

The success at the OIC Summit in Tehran became the catalyst for increasing diplomatic activity between Saudi Arabia and Iran and straightened the path towards rapprochement. In February 1998, former president Rafsanjani led a large Iranian delegation on a fifteen-day visit to Saudi Arabia. As head of Iran's Expediency Council and one of Ayatollah Khamenei's closest advisors, Rafsanjani remained an enormously influential figure within the Iranian regime. He was the most prominent political leader in Iran to visit Saudi Arabia since the revolution. The primary motiva-

[371] Transcripts of speeches and official documents from the summit are available at http://ww1.oic-oci.org/english/conf/is/8/8th-is-summits.htm

[372] The quotes are from Cordesman: Saudi Arabia Enters the 21st Century, pp. 46-47. See also, al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making, pp. 176-178.

tion for Rafsanjani's visit was a common desire to move Saudi-Iranian relations beyond the process of accommodation of recent years and into more tangible political and economic cooperation. The fact that the Iranian delegation that accompanied Rafsanjani included seven Ministers or Deputy Ministers from Khatami's cabinet attested to the depth with which better coordination was pursued. All of the Iranian officials met with the senior Saudi leadership, including King Fahd and Crown Prince Abdullah.[373] The Saudi Foreign Minister Saud bin Faisal was subsequently asked at a press conference whether the visit was an indication that Saudi-Iranian relations was about to enter a new era. He answered, "I think it has in fact already started."[374]

Shortly after Rafsanjani's visit to Saudi Arabia, Saud bin Faisal and Iran's Foreign Minister Kharrazi signed the Saudi-Iranian Cooperation Agreement on May 27, 1998. According to the agreement, Saudi Arabia and Iran committed to "develop and support cooperation between their two countries in a spirit of friendship and mutual respect and understanding." It stipulated further that "this cooperation will be in the fields of economics, trade, investments and technical matters."[375] The focus on economic aspects of cooperation reflected the fact that, after Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War and with internal opposition largely under control, the most immediate challenge in both Saudi Arabia and Iran remained their economic situations. With oil prices low since the early 1980s, fast-growing populations, and massive expenditures incurred from the regional crises of the recent past, the economic outlook for both Saudi Arabia and Iran was increasingly disquieting. The situation worsened over the course of 1998 as oil prices fell from $20 per barrel in January to below $10 in December because of the financial crisis and recession in Asia. In March 1999, Saudi Arabia and Iran took the lead in brokering a deal with other major oil producers that cut production significantly to push the prices back up. As an olive branch to Khatami, Saudi Arabia agreed to take on most of Iran's cuts in return for an Iranian commitment not to exceed its quota as it had in the past. The Saudi-Iranian coordination proved successful, as oil prices would average $18 per barrel over the remainder of 1999 and reach nearly $30 in 2000, thus averting a serious and imminent economic crisis for both sides.[376]

In May 1999, President Khatami's four-day visit to Saudi Arabia represented another milestone in Saudi-Iranian relations. Khatami was greeted at the airport by all the senior members of the Al Saud, including Crown Prince Abdullah and King Fahd, who was confined to a wheelchair. According to a joint Saudi-Iranian statement released at the conclusion of the visit, the two sides had exchanged viewpoints in "an atmosphere of mutual trust and a spirit of fraternity and understanding." It further noted that each side had "expressed their satisfaction with the steady growth of their

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[373] Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, pp. 144-45.

[374] Quoted in Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, p. 144.

[375] The text of the 1998 Cooperation Agreement can be found in al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making, pp. 289-91. For his analysis, see pp. 209-213.

[376] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 134; & Cordesman: Saudi Arabia Enters the 21st Century, p. 47.

relations (…) and their desire to continue developing relations between them."[377] Though it was not outlined in the communique, one of the main aims of Khatami's visit was to advance discussions about closer security collaboration, which the 1998 Cooperation Agreement had not covered. For reasons that will be elaborated further on in the chapter, Iran was eager to adopt a comprehensive regional security framework that left it to the local states to ensure stability between and within their borders. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia preferred to rely on the United States as the ultimate guarantor of its external security. What is important for our discussion here, however, is that by the late 1990s Saudi Arabia was comfortable enough with Iran's ideological profile that it was willing to enter negotiations with Iran about cooperation on domestic security. Just how much the threat from Iranian subversion had receded over the course of the 1990s was illustrated when King Fahd took the unprecedented step of inviting Ayatollah Khamenei to Saudi Arabia to visit the holy sites and perform the Hajj. Khamenei responded by thanking the Saudis for their invitation and praising the improving ties between the two sides.[378]

The tangible political manifestation of years of reconciliation and confidence building was the signing of the Saudi-Iranian Security Accord in April 2001, which would serve as the high-water mark of the rapprochement process. While the specific details of the Security Accord were not disclosed, the two sides issued a joint communique that referred to the agreement as "the most important event in the history of the two countries during the last two decades."[379] Though the two sides did not provide much information on the exact provisions of the accord, subsequent scholarship based on interviews with negotiators from both sides has helped us understand its content and its significance. According to al-Toraifi, the accord consisted of six articles, five of which identified issues of common concern – including terrorism, drug smuggling, and money laundering – and provided specific guidelines for how Saudi Arabia and Iran could enhance cooperation through exchange of information and collaboration among their respective law enforcement agencies. This was certainly of value to both sides, but the more important aspect of the Security Accord was the fundamental understanding that underpinned it. This was outlined in the very first article of the accord, in which the two sides committed to "respect the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the other and refrain from inciting violence or lending any support to groups or organizations that seek to undermine the internal security of either state."[380] More than anything else, then, the Saudi-Iranian Security Accord of 2001 was a non-subversion pact that codified and made explicit the most basic elements of the Khatami administration's policy towards Saudi Arabia, namely that healthy relations with the Saudis required Iran to not challenge – by words or by deeds – the domestic political status quo in the Kingdom.

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[377] BBC: Saudi, Iranian Leaders Issue Joint Statement, (May 19, 1999).

[378] New York Times: Saudi King Invites Iran's Supreme Leader for Landmark Visit, (February 19, 2000).

[379] The entire text of that communique can be found in al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making, pp. 296-303.

[380] Ibid, p. 219.

As Khatami ended his first presidential term in mid-2001, the sense in Saudi Arabia that Iran was a threat to its internal stability was entirely different than it had been a decade earlier. The intense ideological dissonance of the 1980s was transformed over the course of the 1990s to such an extent that all of Iran's political leadership, from Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami and their cabinets to the Supreme Leader, came to view stable relations with Saudi Arabia as among Iran's top political priorities and announced as much in public. In the first part of this chapter, I have argued that this transition was initiated by the Rafsanjani administration, which set out to replace the mantra of revolutionary export with a more modest foreign policy agenda. Under Rafsanjani, Iran scaled back significantly its antagonistic rhetoric towards Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies. For Saudi Arabia, this had the very tangible effect of making the Hajj much less of a security concern than it had been in the 1980s. Iran also did not use the most sensitive issue in Saudi Arabia the early 1990s, the American military presence in the Kingdom, to mobilize popular support against the Al Saud. At the same time, Rafsanjani was unable – or perhaps, unwilling – to break decisively with Iran's history of facilitating violence abroad, including in Saudi Arabia, as the bombing of the Khobar Towers seemingly demonstrated. It was after the election of Khatami that Saudi-Iranian relations began to improve significantly. Though Khatami in many ways represented a continuation of Rafsanjani's outreach policy towards Saudi Arabia, he was more sensitive to the fact that the Saudis remained fearful of potential Iranian subversion and did more to address it. Indeed, the first four years of Khatami's presidency were marked by a higher rate of diplomatic activity between Saudi Arabia and Iran than any other era in history. While that deepened interaction was incentivized by the recognition that both sides could benefit from cooperation, particularly economically, the more fundamental driver was that Iranian leaders signaled their acceptance of the Al Saud's political authority and acted accordingly.

6.3 The Geopolitical Dimension of Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1990-2002

The profound changes in Saudi and Iranian threat perception that occurred in the 1990s were the result of particular political decisions taken in Riyadh and Tehran, but they were also precipitated by developments beyond their control. Less than two years after the Iran-Iraq war had come to a formal end, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 caused another major regional crisis, which forced all of the Gulf monarchies to reassess where the most immediate threat to the security of their regimes emanated from. The Iraqi annexation of Kuwait and its aftermath became a catalyst for a more pronounced sense of geopolitical consonance between Saudi Arabia and Iran for two primary reasons. First and foremost, it turned the dynamic of Saudi-Iraqi-Iranian relations completely on its head. If the Saudis had seen Iraq as a necessary counterweight to Iran in the 1980s, they came to share Iran's deep aversion to Saddam and the need to contain him in the 1990s. Second, the Gulf crisis of 1990-91 was an early opportunity for the new political leadership in Iran to demonstrate to the Gulf monarchies that it shared their preference for stability and

continuity in regional affairs. The second part of this chapter explains the trend towards geopolitical consonance in the 1990s and is divided into three sections. The first explains how the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the ripple effects it would create presented Saudi Arabia with far more immediate threats than Iran. The second shows how Iran had ample opportunities for deepening the crisis Saudi Arabia found itself in in 1990 but chose to act with restraint during and after the Gulf crisis. Finally, I explain how and why Saudi Arabia and Iran found a way to work around the one major issue they did not agree on, namely the expansion of American military power into the Persian Gulf.

6.3.1 The Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait and the Reorientation of Saudi Threat Perception

Shortly after midnight on August 2, 1990, some 150,000 Iraqi soldiers crossed the border into Kuwait. Within a few hours, the Iraqi army had crushed the scattered resistance that the Kuwaiti military was able to mobilize and seized control of all of Kuwait's territory. The Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Jabah al-Sabah, and most senior members of the Kuwaiti royal family narrowly managed to flee to Saudi Arabia. The younger brother of the Emir decided to stay in Kuwait and was killed by the Iraqis.[381] A detailed answer to the question of why Saddam Hussein ordered the invasion of Kuwait lies beyond the scope of this study and has been covered extensively elsewhere. I will simply note that scholars have convincingly argued that from an analytical perspective, the causes of the invasion of Kuwait were quite similar to those that led Saddam Hussein to go on the offensive against Iran in 1980. As Karsh & Rautsi have explained:

> Like the invasion of Iran a decade earlier, Hussein's latest aggression had less to do with a premeditated grand design than with his perennial sense of insecurity. In both cases, war was not his first choice but an act of last resort taken only a short while before the outbreak of hostilities, following a prolonged process of heightening threat perception. (…) The occupation of Kuwait (…) was designed to provide vital financial resources for the economic reconstruction of Iraq, on which Saddam Hussein's political survival hinged.[382]

For Saudi Arabia, the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait was profoundly disturbing for several reasons. The deposition of a monarchical regime through military force was a dangerous precedent in itself. The prospect of Saddam Hussein in control of 20 percent of the world's oil reserves was also deeply unsettling. More than anything else, the Iraqi incursion into Kuwait exposed the Saudi leadership to the most tangible threat of invasion of the Kingdom in modern history. Indeed, in the days that followed the invasion of Kuwait, intelligence reports from the CIA suggested that the Iraqi military was deploying troops and equipment on the Saudi border, the scale

[381] Lawrence Freedman & Efraim Karsh: The Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order, (Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 67-68.
[382] Efraim Karsh & Inari Rautsi: Why Saddam Hussein Invaded Kuwait, (Survival, Vol. 33, No. 1, 1991), pp. 18-31. Quote on p. 18. See also, Charles Tripp: A History of Iraq, p. 252.

and nature of which indicated that further offensives were in the making. On August 5, William Webster, the director of the CIA, told the National Security Council that the threat to Saudi Arabia was "immediate and dangerous".[383] Compounding the fear in both Washington and Riyadh was the fact that Saudi Arabia was in no position to fend off a potential Iraqi invasion. According to Prince Khalid bin Sultan, the commander of the Saudi military forces during the Gulf crisis of 1990-91, "our intelligence and senior military staff had paid little attention to Iraq, and no one had anticipated that a threat to the Kingdom would come from that direction."[384] Even as the Saudis became aware of the gravity of the situation and rushed troops to the Kuwaiti border, the Saudi military estimated that the Iraqi forces could take control of the oil fields of the Eastern Province in six hours and the entire country in three days.[385] There is no definitive evidence that Saddam Hussein did in fact intend to continue his offensive into Saudi Arabia. It is entirely conceivable, perhaps even likely, that the Iraqi military build-up in Kuwait was meant to dissuade others from forcing the Iraqis to retreat. What is perfectly clear, however, is that this was not a bet the Saudi leadership was willing to make. According to Prince Bandar, the Saudi Ambassador to the United States, the Saudi mindset was that "he who eats Kuwait for breakfast is likely to ask for something else for lunch."[386] On August 6, the Bush administration dispatched a delegation headed by Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney to Saudi Arabia to convince King Fahd to accept the deployment of American military forces to the Kingdom to deter Saddam Hussein. According to the account of Chas Freeman, the U.S Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, King Fahd did not need much persuasion. After American military commanders had briefed the Saudis on their plan to deploy 220,000 soldiers to the Kingdom, Crown Prince Abdullah asked King Fahd in Arabic whether more time was needed to discuss internally before the Saudis could accept the offer. Fahd replied that "we don't have any time. We have to make the decision now, or what happened to Kuwait will happen to us."[387] Following the green light from King Fahd, the airlifting of American soldiers into Saudi Arabia began immediately.

Saudi Arabia's decision to invite American military forces into the Kingdom would lead to two important developments. The first was that it became the starting point for a more direct and permanent American military presence in the Persian Gulf region that would remain intact even after the Kuwait crisis had passed. After the Saudi decision, the smaller Gulf monarchies – Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the UAE – immediately followed suit and also opened up their facilities to American military forces. This provided a physical infrastructure from which the United States

[383] Riedel: Kings and Presidents, p. 102-105.
[384] Ibid, p. 103.
[385] Jacob Goldberg: Saudi Arabia, in Ami Ayalon (ed): Middle East Contemporary Service: Vol. XIV, (Westview Press, 1992), pp. 590-629. See pp. 605-609.
[386] Quoted in Freeman and Karsh: The Gulf Conflict, p. 88.
[387] See the ambassador's personal account in William Morgan & Charles Stuart (eds): American Diplomats: The Foreign Service at Work, (iUniverse, 2004), pp. 253-264.

would gradually increase its pressure on Iraq to adhere to the overwhelming international consensus in favor of its unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait. The trajectory of events that transformed Operation Desert Shield, the defensive protection of Saudi Arabia, into Operation Desert Storm, the offensive military campaign to expel the Iraqi army from Kuwait, are well-documented and need not be repeated here. I will merely stress that more than 540,000 American forces were present in Saudi Arabia when the offensive began in January 1991, and that the American-led international coalition completely pulverized the Iraqi army and compelled Saddam Hussein to agree to a ceasefire that returned the Persian Gulf to the status quo that existed before August 1990. The more fundamental point is that the Gulf crisis of 1990-91 emphasized to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies the crucial value of American military protection to the external security of their regimes. With their inability to protect themselves, individually or collectively through the GCC, so clearly exposed, all of them continued to accept an American military presence on their territory after the threat from Iraq had been brought under control. Once they had first crossed the bridge of allowing U.S. forces into their countries, the American military infrastructure was not only retained after the Kuwait crisis; it was vastly expanded. Massive military bases were built in Qatar and Kuwait, while Bahrain became the headquarters for the U.S. Fifth Fleet in 1995. Though Saudi Arabia was the only one of the Gulf monarchies not to sign a formal security agreement with the United States after the Gulf War, it also allowed the U.S. forces increased access to its facilities and would permanently host an entire squadron of the U.S. Air Force along with at least 5000 soldiers.[388] In other words, the Gulf crisis of 1990-91 demonstrated to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies the absolute centrality of the United States as the ultimate guarantor of their external security, and became the catalyst for a much more direct – and much more prolific – American military involvement in the region.

The second important fallout of the Gulf crisis was the serious domestic backlash against the Al Saud that the decision to invite the American military into the Kingdom also produced. The surge in Islamist opposition in Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s would come from two different directions, but both would use the issue of the American military presence as a lever for a broader critique of the Al Saud, its Islamic credentials, and its political hegemony. One cluster of critical voices emanated from within the mainstream religious establishment in the form of the Sahwa movement, a somewhat diverse grouping of highly conservative religious scholars and activists. Whereas the top of the religious leadership immediately sanctioned King Fahd's decision to call for American military protection as legitimate, the leading members of the Sahwa vehemently opposed it. Two of its most prominent figures – Safar al-Hawali and Salman al-Awda – were particularly outspoken and delivered a series of lectures and sermons in which they criticized the political and religious leadership for having crossed a red line. According to al-Hawali, "if Iraq has occupied Kuwait, then America has occupied Saudi Arabia. The real enemy is not Iraq. It is the

[388] Gause: International Relations of the Persian Gulf, pp. 127-28.

West."[389] The Sahwa movement attracted widespread sympathies and support for its categorical stance on the issue of American forces in the Kingdom, and it would use that platform to advocate for wide-ranging structural reforms of the Saudi political system. Several leaders of the Sahwa movement, including al-Hawali and al-Awda, were imprisoned in 1994 as part of larger crackdown on Islamist dissidents.[390] Unlike the Sahwa movement, which focused its energies on mobilizing popular pressure to reform the existing system, the second type of Islamist opposition came to define their goal as the overthrow of the Al Saud through the use of violence. It originated among the militant Islamists who returned from the jihad in Afghanistan, and the most important individual among them was Osama bin Laden. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Saudi Arabia actively encouraged and supported the cause of the "Arab Afghans" in the 1980s, and Saudi media extensively covered the heroic struggles of its own citizens involved, particularly bin Laden. Thus, when he returned to Saudi Arabia after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989, bin Laden was "better known than all but a few princes and the upper tier of the Wahhabi clergy – the Kingdom's first real celebrity."[391] Beyond his public notoriety, bin Laden returned with a more orthodox conviction that not only was it *necessary* to fight against the oppression of Muslims and expel infidels from Islamic territories, but also that that he and his fellow mujahedeens had demonstrated in the Afghan war that they were *capable* of doing so. As bin Laden came back to Saudi Arabia, he immediately approached the Saudi leadership with an offer to overthrow the communist government in Yemen, and when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, bin Laden also presented leading members of the Al Saud with a plan for how to expel the Iraqis through guerilla warfare. On both occasions, he was politely asked to mind his own business.[392] King Fahd's decision to instead allow American forces into Saudi Arabia irreversibly changed bin Laden's view of the Saudi leadership. Before he left Saudi Arabia in 1991, bin Laden delivered a series of lectures and sermons scolding the American military presence and criticizing the Al Saud for allowing it, which would circulate among Saudi Islamists in the early 1990s. From abroad, bin Laden's anti-Americanism and his antipathy towards the Saudi royal family became increasingly pronounced. After his Saudi citizenship was revoked in 1994, bin Laden set up the Committee for Reform and Advice, based in London, that would publish his criticism of the Al Saud. When bin Laden issued his "Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Mosques" in 1996, it was a call for Muslims to fight the United States, but it was also another serious indictment and disavowal of the Al Saud. In fact, for bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network, the cause

[389] Quoted in Joshua Teitelbaum: Holier than Thou: Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition, (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), p. 30.
[390] Ibid, pp. 25-48. The authoritative account of the Sahwa movement is Stéphane Lacroix: Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia, (Harvard University Press, 2011). For Lacroix's analysis of the challenge from the Sahwa in the early 1990s, see Chapter 5.
[391] Wright: The Looming Tower, p. 145.
[392] Ibid, pp. 153-158.

of fighting the United States became linked to the overthrow of the Al Saud in that the eviction of Americans from Saudi Arabia would facilitate the fall of the royal family.[393] As Hegghammer has summarized,

> In the eyes of [bin Laden], the continued US military presence was not only a casus belli against America, but also the final nail in the coffin for the legitimacy of the Saudi regime. By inviting US troops and allowing them to stay indefinitely, while at the same time stifling domestic opposition, the regime had become an accomplice to the crusader occupation. Bin Ladin rarely, if ever, literally said that the regime or any of its individual members were infidel, but he went a long way in denying the political and religious legitimacy of the Al Sa'ud. There was in other words an important revolutionary dimension to the global jihadist doctrine (...).[394]

Osama bin Laden was thus instrumental in harnessing some of the widespread resentment in Saudi society over the American military presence in the Kingdom that emerged from 1990 onwards and channeling it in the direction of a more militant Sunni Islamist challenge to the domestic order in Saudi Arabia. The severity of that challenge was brought home to the Saudi leadership in November 1995 when a car bomb exploded at a training facility for the Saudi National Guard, killing seven people and wounding 60 others in what was the first large-scale bombing attack on Saudi soil in history. Three of the four men who were later convicted and beheaded for the bombing were returnees from Afghanistan.[395] Beginning in the mid-1990s, Saudi authorities would arrest many hundreds of Islamists who were identified as potential security threats. Though this helped bring the short-term challenge from militant Islamism under control – there were no known attacks in the Kingdom in the late 1990s – the severe repression and the widespread use of torture of those detained would only accelerate the radicalization of Saudi militant Islamists and their anger towards the state.[396] The more fundamental point here is that the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the ripple effects it created changed the threat environment entirely for Saudi Arabia. Both in its domestic society and in the environment around it, the focus for the Saudi leadership shifted away from the challenge posed by Iran and towards much more immediate threats to its regime security. That transition was made also made easier because of how Iran prioritized its interests and executed its policy during the Gulf War and its immediate aftermath.

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[393] Hegghammer: Jihad in Saudi Arabia, pp. 102-108.

[394] Ibid, p. 105.

[395] Teitelbaum: Holier Than Thou, pp. 75-77.

[396] Hegghammer: Jihad in Saudi Arabia, p. 74-78. According to Hegghammer, "The crackdowns had a traumatising effect on the jihadist community because the police made widespread use of torture. The evidence of torture in prisons such as al-Ruways in Jidda between 1995 and 1998 is overwhelming and unquestionable. (...) There is strong evidence to suggest that many of the detainees genuinely did not consider the regime as infidel, but were rather classical jihadists supportive of pan-Islamic struggles outside Saudi Arabia. By the time they left prison they were naturally more critical (...) of the regime. The authorities thus created the very phenomenon they were trying to counter." Quote on p. 74.

6.3.2 Iran and the Gulf Crisis of 1990-1991

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait presented Iran with a set of competing challenges. On the one hand, the prospect of Saddam Hussein substantially increasing his power position in the region was completely unacceptable. Though Iraq and Iran had agreed to a ceasefire to end the fighting between them in 1988, they had yet to work out the parameters for peace and remained in a state of quasi-war. Thus, Iran was the first country to condemn the Iraqi invasion, releasing a statement within hours of the attack that denounced "any form of resorting to force as a solution to regional problems." It further specified that "Iran considers respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and non-interference in their internal affairs as an absolute principle of intergovernmental relations."[397] At the same time, however, Iran was also deeply skeptical and concerned about the buildup of American military power near its borders. These conflicting pressures led Iran to adopt a position that has aptly been described as "active neutrality," in which it would play a background role and instead focus on drawing rewards from the leverage that the Iraqi invasion also provided it with.[398] Iran was highly successful in doing so from the first days of the Kuwait crisis. For instance, up until that moment, Saddam Hussein had emphatically rejected the Iranian position that the 1975 Algiers Agreement – which Saddam had declared null and void when he invaded Iran in 1980 – should serve as the basis for a lasting peace between them. However, Saddam Hussein changed his tune soon after the invasion, presumably because he wanted to make sure that Iran did not use the Iraqi fixation on Kuwait to launch new attacks against Iraq. He wrote a letter to Rafsanjani on August 14 in which he made it clear that Iraq would abide by all Iran's conditions for ending the war once and for all, including that the Algiers Agreement would mark the official border between them and that Iraq would withdraw its troops from areas in Iran still under occupation. "Now that you have gotten everything you wanted", Saddam declared in his letter to Rafsanjani, "we must work together to expel the foreign troops."[399] Indeed, Saddam Hussein would make serious efforts to draw Iran into an alliance against the United States and the Gulf monarchies. These included an offer of $25 billion extended in August 1990 and a commitment to even further concessions delivered in January 1991, shortly before the military campaign to expel Iraq from Kuwait was initiated.[400] Despite internal pressure from radical clerics and politicians to join Saddam Hussein, President Rafsanjani – with the backing of Ayatollah Khamenei – consistently stuck to Iran's position of restraint and neutrality over the course of the Kuwait crisis. When Saddam Hussein ordered more than 100 military airplanes to disperse to Iranian airbases during Operation Desert Storm,

[397] The entire statement can be found in Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, pp. 106-107.
[398] Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, pp. 232-240.
[399] Ibid, p. 236.
[400] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 107.

Iran subsequently announced that it would keep the airplanes themselves as economic reparations for the Iran-Iraq war.[401] Thus, by rejecting all of Saddam Hussein's proposals and offering him no material or political support throughout the crisis, the new Iranian leadership sent a signal to the outside world, and particularly the Gulf monarchies, that its stated commitment to a more cautious foreign policy agenda was more than just words. Even the United States recognized that Iran played a constructive role and rewarded it by compensating Iran for undelivered weapons bought under the Shah and by not opposing Iranian efforts to obtain loans from the IMF and the World Bank to fund its domestic reconstruction.[402]

If Saudi Arabia was comfortable with Iran's behavior up to and during the military campaign, that sense was reinforced by Iranian decisions taken in the immediate aftermath of the war. Though Saudi Arabia intensely disliked Saddam Hussein, it also did not want to see him removed from power because of the fear that it would result in increased Iranian influence in Iraq. The Bush administration shared some of the same concerns, but it did not equate the future of the Iraqi state with the personal fate of Saddam Hussein in quite the same way as Saudi Arabia did. According to Colin Powell, who headed the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, "in none of the meetings of the war I attended was dismembering Iraq, conquering Baghdad or changing the Iraqi form of governance ever seriously considered. We hoped Saddam would not survive but his elimination was not a stated objective. Our practical intention was to leave Baghdad enough power to survive as a threat to Iran."[403] Having destroyed much of the Iraqi army and driven the rest of out from Kuwait by late February 1991, the Bush administration decided not to continue the pursuit of the Iraqi forces all the way to Baghdad to get rid of Saddam Hussein. President Bush, however, did state on numerous occasions that Saddam Hussein did not have a future as the political leader of Iraq. In mid-February, he explicitly called on "the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside."[404] Leaflets dropped by coalition airplanes in Iraq during the ground war urged Iraqis to "fill the streets and alleys and bring down Saddam Hussein and his aides." In early March 1991, large parts of Iraq erupted into open rebellion against Saddam Hussein, particularly in the predominantly Shi'a-populated areas in the south and the Kurdish territories in the north. Demonstrations started in Basra and spread like wildfire to most of the larger cities in southern and northern Iraq, and within a few weeks less than half of Iraq was under government control. The uprising certainly had deeper causes, but the sense that Saddam Hussein was weaker than ever and that the United States would support a rebellion against him were the main reasons why it happened when it did. When push came to shove, however, the United States decided not to support the rebellions, though it

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401 Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, pp. 111-112.

402 Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 107; Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, p. 237-240; & Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, pp. 106-117.

403 Quoted in Riedel: Kings and Presidents, p. 111.

404 The New York Times: Bush, Scorning Offer, Suggests Iraqis Topple Saddam, (February 16, 1991).

very easily could have done so.[405] Instead, Saddam Hussein was allowed to crush the uprising city by city in the most cynical and indiscriminate way, using all the weapons available to the Iraqi army, including chemical weapons. In Najaf, the tanks deployed to retake the city had the words "no Shi'a after today" written on them.[406] By April, the most serious internal challenge to Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq had come to an end, though reprisal violence and atrocities would continue long afterwards.

Iran was the other outside power that very likely could have made a difference in the uprising. Yet, while Iran had fought a war for eight years precisely to topple Saddam Hussein, it resisted the temptation to involve itself directly in Iraq. Rafsanjani did call for Saddam Hussein to resign and Iran did allow some of Iraqi opposition groups it hosted to present themselves as a government in exile.[407] At the same time, however, Iran made a very conscious decision not to send any of its regular or irregular forces into Iraq to affect the course of the uprising. It also did not attempt to incite resistance or portray developments in Iraq as an extension of its 1979 revolution.[408] Rather, like most of the outside world, Iran simply watched in passive silence as Saddam Hussein brutally suppressed the uprising. Other interests – and specifically that of repairing its relations with the Gulf monarchies – were more immediately important to Iran. Indeed, it was amidst the uprising in Iraq, on March 19, 1991, that Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to resume their diplomatic relations.

By resorting to the military invasion and occupation of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein inadvertently aligned Saudi and Iranian interests more closely and thus helped reduce tensions between them. Not only did his action lead to a profound shift in Saudi Arabia's internal and external threat environment, but it also allowed Iran to demonstrate that it was to be counted among the status quo powers of the Persian Gulf. With the decimation of Iraq's military forces, the 1990s were a decade of stability in the Persian Gulf region with which Saudi Arabia and Iran were both rather content. There were important differences in their specific views on the kind of regional security architecture that would allow stability to be maintained, particularly with regard to the issue of the American military presence in the Persian Gulf. However, the shared interest in keeping Saddam Hussein's expansionist proclivities contained and

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[405] For an excellent and comprehensive analysis of the 1991 uprisings, see Fanar Haddad: Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity, (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 45-84. On U.S. policy during the uprising, see Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, pp. 114-120. According to Gause, "the single most important reason for the failure of the Iraqi intifada was the decision of the United States, which occupied considerable parts of southern Iraq as the rebellion was occurring, not to support it." Quote on p. 117.

[406] Ibid, p. 116.

[407] Milani: The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution, p. 239.

[408] Ibid. Fanar Haddad provides a lengthy analysis of Iran's role in the uprising. He concludes that "Organized forces, be they Badr, the Da'awa party or Iranian forces, were unlikely to have entered Iraq or to have played a role due to time constraints, unpreparedness and strategic considerations. (…) The perception that Iran, the Supreme Council and Badr were involved in or responsible for the uprising was fostered by prejudice but perhaps nurtured by misunderstanding." See Haddad: Sectarianism in Iraq, pp. 76-80. Quote on p. 79.

the common preference for continuity in regional affairs rather than the volatile disruptions of the 1980s and early 1990s generated a much more pronounced element of geopolitical consonance in Saudi-Iranian relations after the Kuwait crisis.

6.3.3 The Question of Regional Order after the Gulf War

The decisive defeat of Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War began a period of rather calm and stable relations among the regimes of the Persian Gulf. All of them were well-entrenched domestically and none of them had the capacity or political will to enforce sudden or drastic political change beyond their borders. The most important and contentious issue in the Persian Gulf region over the course of the 1990s was the active role taken by the United States in managing regional affairs and the expansion of American military power to support that end. Shortly after coming into office in 1993, the Clinton administration announced that the "dual containment" of Iran and Iraq was at the center of its strategy towards the Persian Gulf. The rationale behind the policy of "dual containment" was articulated in a speech delivered by Martin Indyk, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, in May 1993. According to Indyk, the need for the United States to reassess its policy in the Gulf was not because of fundamental changes to its interests in the region. Like its predecessors, the Clinton administration regarded the primary objective for American policies in the region as inherently tied to "an abiding interest in the free-flow of Middle Eastern oil at reasonable prices." Rather, a new approach was needed as the strategic situation in the aftermath of the Cold War and the defeat of Saddam Hussein was one in which "the United States stands as the dominant power in the region, uniquely capable of influencing the course of events." Moreover, according to Indyk, "as a result of the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War, we are also fortunate to inherit a balance of power and a much reduced level of military capability to threaten our interests." Thus, whereas previous administrations had aimed to protect U.S. interests by balancing against either Iran or Iraq, the objective of "dual containment" was to maintain the American position of regional dominance by actively countering both simultaneously. As Indyk explained, "we do not accept the argument that we should continue the old balance of power game, (…) we reject it because we don't need to rely on one to balance the other."[409] In other words, the buildup of the American military presence that began with the Gulf War was continued by the Clinton administration with the specific purpose of making sure that Iran did not benefit from the weakening of Saddam Hussein in the regional power game and to sustain Iran's economic, political, and military isolation.[410]

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[409] Indyk's speech, "The Clinton Administration's Approach to the Middle East", is available at https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-clinton-administrations-approach-to-the-middle-east.

[410] Ibid. Indeed, Indyk specified that "we will work energetically to persuade our European and Japanese allies, as well as Russia and China, that it is not in their interests to assist Iran [in acquiring weapons]. Nor do we believe it is in their interest to ease Iran's economic situation (…) Iran is a bad investment in both commercial and strategic terms, not just for the United States but for all responsible members of the international community."

Unsurprisingly, then, the Clinton administration's policy of "dual containment" had the effect of intensifying Iran's concern with and opposition to the American military presence in the Persian Gulf. For that reason, Iran made the promotion of an entirely different regional security system a central focus of its foreign policy agenda. Over the course of the 1990s, Iran would consistently call for the creation of a collective security architecture in which the Gulf states would cooperate to maintain stability in regional affairs and where the direct involvement of outside powers was rejected as a matter of principle. President Rafsanjani explained the Iranian position in the following way:

> The policy approach that we recommend for governing the region is one which requires countries to cooperate and help solve each other's problems in an atmosphere of friendship and mutual understanding. Help one another in areas where they are deficient and utilize the resources and riches of the Persian Gulf together. (…) Extending an invitation to foreigners does not solve anything. Foreigners do not come here for the sake of our people or our interests. (…) It serves no purpose for them [Western powers] to remain. The only reason is to provoke us so we will fight one another. Hence, if there are any points of contention among us, we should resolve them ourselves.[411]

The vision of Gulf security advanced by Iranian leaders in the 1990s was quite similar to the one the Shah had subscribed to in the 1970s, which also had the expulsion of foreign influences from the region at its core. The key difference, of course, was that whereas the Shah had been reasonably successful in that endeavor precisely because he had the backing of the United States, Iran in the 1990s had little to no leverage that would allow it to translate its theory of regional order into actual practice. At no time were any of the Gulf monarchies willing to surrender the protection that the U.S. military presence provided to them. For domestic political reasons, they preferred – and this was particularly true of Saudi Arabia – to keep that American connection as far away from public scrutiny as possible, but the very notion of a regional system that did not include direct American participation was simply not one they were going to enter into serious negotiations about.[412] This did not mean, however, that Saudi Arabia supported "dual containment" as a viable alternative. The central premise of that policy – that Iran and Iraq were threats of equal magnitude to the stability of the Persian Gulf – reflected an assessment of regional politics that was not shared by Saudi Arabia, nor elsewhere in the GCC.[413] They wanted a U.S. presence in the Gulf as a deterrent in case either Iran or Iraq should return to the kind of territorial revisionism that each had exhibited in the recent past. Yet they also regarded the U.S. insistence on the complete isolation of Iran as dangerously counter-

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[411] R.K. Ramazani: Address by Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, (Middle East Journal, Vol. 44, No. 3, 1990), pp. 458-466. Quotes are from pp. 464-465.

[412] Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, pp. 163-166.

[413] For a good discussion of the skepticism towards "dual containment" in the Gulf monarchies, see Abdullah Al-Shayeji: Dangerous Perceptions: Gulf Views of the U.S. Role in Region, (Middle East Policy, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1997), pp. 1-13.

productive, particularly at a moment when Iran was actively working to distance itself from its revolutionary policies and had acted responsibly during the Gulf War. As Cordesman has noted, Saudi Arabia took the position that the best way to affect Iran's behavior was to "support [Iran] in developing its economy and energy exports and [make sure] it does not feel encircled or threatened by a combination of Iraq, the United States, Israel, and the Southern Gulf states."[414] Unlike the United States, then, Saudi Arabia was perfectly willing to work with Iran on issues of common concern at the same time as the Saudis remained entirely unreceptive to any Iranian suggestions that the American military presence in the Persian Gulf should be eliminated.

Though this would remain the Iranian position throughout the 1990s, there was an important evolution among the Iranian leadership, from viewing the departure of American forces as an immediate priority to more of a long-term objective. This stemmed partly from the recognition that there was little Iran could do about it. But it was also because of the sense that the active U.S. role in the region was actually somewhat complementary to Iran's regional interests. In particular, it kept a military pressure on Iraq and prevented it from building up its armed forces in ways that Iran could not have achieved on its own. Moreover, the United States was first and foremost interested in preserving the regional status quo, and while the Clinton administration certainly opposed Iran, it was not willing to do much to change the regime.[415] This allowed Iranian leaders to become more flexible in their opposition to the American presence, and particularly after the election of Khatami in 1997 Iran began to subordinate the goal of a U.S. withdrawal from the region to that of improving relations with the Gulf monarchies. Indeed, at the same time as Khatami worked to address the fears of Iranian subversion among the Gulf monarchies, as discussed earlier in the chapter, he also understood that they would not and could not give up their security ties with the United States. For Iran to expect them to do so, or believe that it could apply political pressure that would compel them to do so, was fanciful and only served to obstruct any meaningful accommodation. Simply put, Khatami's approach was that Saudi Arabia and Iran should agree to disagree on the question of the United States. The best Iran could do was to build confidence with the Gulf monarchies and hope that they eventually would see no need for American military protection.[416] As Ray Takeyh explains,

> In essence, Khatami compartmentalized Iran's relations. Tehran continued to object to the U.S. military presence in the Gulf and persisted in calling for an indigenous network to displace the American armada. The refusal of the Gulf states to embrace Iran's proposals did not, however, trigger a counter-reaction and an unleashing of terror. Khatami was willing to normalize relations with the Gulf states despite their attachment

[414] Cordesman: Saudi Arabia Enters the 21st Century, p. 62.
[415] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 135.
[416] Marschall: Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, pp. 66-77; & Ray Takeyh: Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic, (Times Books, 2006), pp. 63-70.

> to the United States. For all practical purposes, Iran was willing to live in a Gulf whose balance of power was determined by the United States.[417]

By and large, then, the 1990s was a decade that re-introduced a foundation of geopolitical consonance in Saudi-Iranian relations and markedly reduced the sense of external threat between them as a direct result. While they did not agree on every item on the regional security agenda, as the question of the American military presence demonstrates, Saudi Arabia's and Iran's interests converged in two crucial ways. The first was the shared understanding that Saddam Hussein was the primary regional threat that needed to be kept under control. Indeed, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait permanently ended the propensity in Saudi Arabia to see Saddam Hussein as the lesser of two evils and made it clear that the more serious and immediate external threat emanated from Baghdad. The second important common characteristic was the preference for continuity and stability in the Persian Gulf that informed the regional outlook in both Saudi Arabia and Iran. That status quo orientation was certainly strengthened by the fact that the Persian Gulf in the 1990s was a much more consolidated regional system than it had been in the turbulent 1980s. The incentives and the opportunities for engaging in the kinds of power projections that occurred in the 1980s were simply more limited in the 1990s. However, even when opportunities for extensions abroad presented themselves – as they did for Iran during the uprising in Iraq in 1991 – they were deliberately not seized. Thus, in the decade between the two American wars against Saddam Hussein – the 1990-91 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq – Saudi Arabia and Iran were each relatively comfortable with the trajectory of regional politics and the kind of political ends that the other side pursued in it.

6.4 Competing Theoretical Explanations

This chapter has explained the improvement of Saudi-Iranian relations over the course of the 1990s through the lens of my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception. The emphasis on regime security to account for that change can again be contrasted with a more strict realist reading as well as constructivist explanations. That Saudi-Iranian relations were markedly different in the 1990s is not controversial and a basic premise that we all agree on. But we take different paths to get there. Where do we differ and why do I believe that there is more explanatory power to the argument advanced here?

6.4.1 Balance of Power Perspectives: The Changing Regional Power Game

From a balance of power perspective, the question of why Saudi-Iranian relations improved in the 1990s is relatively straightforward. According to Keynoush, it was "[the] disturbed (…) regional balance of power between Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, [that] offered a brief opening in Saudi-Iranian relations, upon which Rafsanjani

[417] Takeyh: Hidden Iran, p. 68.

seized."[418] In other words, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait set in motion dynamics that are explained by balance of power theory 101. Had Iraq been able to consolidate control over Kuwait, Saddam Hussein would have gained enormous and unparalleled leverage over regional politics. For good realist reasons, that common challenge provided strong incentives for Saudi Arabia and Iran to lay aside their differences and pursue closer collaboration. At first glance, then, balance of power dynamics seems to offer fairly coherent explanation of why Saudi-Iranian relations followed the trajectory it did in the 1990s.

On closer inspection, however, there are some quite important gaps in a balance of power reading. Specifically, there are two problems with the theoretical assertion that it was the common concern with Iraqi power per se that brought Saudi Arabia and Iran closer together. The main problem is that there was a quite substantial imbalance of power even before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Indeed, Iraq emerged from the Iran-Iraq war as the dominant military power in the Persian Gulf, with a "million man army" that was one of the best equipped in the world. Though the war itself ended in a draw, there is no doubt that there was a substantial power disparity in favor of the Iraqis.[419] Thus, if balance of power considerations were the primary driver of Saudi policy, there were strong incentives for it to reach an accommodation with Iran in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war. Yet Saudi Arabia did not respond to those incentives. To the contrary, it continued its alignment with Iraq right up until the invasion of Kuwait. Saudi Arabia continuously refused to re-establish diplomatic ties with Iran, and as late as the spring of 1990, the Saudis signed a non-aggression pact with Saddam Hussein.[420] The simple and quite logical explanation for this deviation from the expectations of balance of power theory is of course that Iran was still viewed as the primary threat to Saudi Arabia in the late 1980s. It was only with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait that this calculus changed entirely. The second problem for a balance of power perspective is that the steadily expanding and improving nature of Saudi-Iranian relations over the course of the 1990s occurred precisely as Iraq's relative power position was declining. In the late 1990s, Iran had surpassed Iraq in the regional power equation, but it was precisely at this juncture that its cooperation with Saudi Arabia deepened. In other words, Saudi Arabia and Iran tilted further towards each when the incentives to do so – at least, from a balance of power perspective – were less obvious and perhaps even should have discouraged it. Again, what looks to be an anomaly from a balance of power perspective makes perfectly good sense when we focus instead on considerations of regime security. Any misgivings in Saudi Arabia over Iran's improved position in the regional power game were clearly outweighed by the reduced sense of threat from Iran particularly after the election of Khatami. Far more important than relative gains for Saudi Arabia was the

[418] Keynoush: Saudi Arabia and Iran, p 135.

[419] Recall the IRGC estimation in 1988 that Iran would not be able to win any victories on the battlefield against Iraq for at least a decade, which was referenced in the previous chapter.

[420] Gause: Balancing What?, p. 298.

absolute gain of having an Iran with a vested interest in maintaining regional stability and that moved away from subversion of the domestic order in the Kingdom. From my perspective, a balance of power reading is too insensitive to this crucial dynamic.

6.4.2 Ideational Perspectives: A New Norm of Non-Intervention?

The argument presented in this chapter can also be contrasted with those that locate the causal factors squarely within the realms of ideas and identities. As mentioned at the outset of the chapter, we don't have too many constructivist inquiries into Saudi-Iranian relations in the 1990s. We do have a few. Both al-Toraifi, who focuses specifically on Saudi Arabia and Iran, and Adib-Moghaddam, who focuses on Persian Gulf dynamics more broadly, ground their analyses in the theoretical perspective of ontological security. Both see the improvements of the 1990s, bilaterally and in the region at large, as caused by a shift in Iran's state identity. This was why, al-Toraifi asserts, "their enmity transformed into relative friendliness".[421] This change in Iranian state identity under Khatami was important, he writes, because it…

> (…) presented Iran as a nation that seeks coexistence and respect of others' values. This marked a departure from the state identity of the Khomeini era, since it entailed the recognition of other states' sovereignty – most importantly that of the neighbouring GCC states. (…) Khatami's vision of a new state identity entailed that Iran no longer try to impose its normative views on the region, either by exporting revolutionary ideals or seeking to incite troubles in neighbouring countries.[422]

I think this is very accurate. At the same time, though, I also believe it reveals some internal contradictions to the ontological security position. Recall from the discussion at the end of the previous chapter that the central argument advanced from this position was that it was the *fact* of the revolution in 1979 which was key the ideational threat for Saudi Arabia, not that Iran came to emphasize revolutionary export as I suggested. Whereas I stressed that what happened in Iran over the course of 1979 was tremendously important, the ontological security position saw the Saudi threat perception as essentially fixed from the moment Khomeini returned to Iran. But if it was not the emphasis on revolutionary export that was at the center of the threat for Saudi Arabia in 1979, how can a de-emphasis on revolutionary export explain the absence of threat for Saudi Arabia in the 1990s? Something is not entirely consistent here. Again, I think al-Toraifi is quite right in terms of what distinguished the 1990s

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[421] Al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making, p. 205. According to Adib-Moghaddam, "Regional order was [re-established] because of the shift in the identity of the Iranian state on the hand side and the reassertion of sovereignty norms (…) on the other. The modifications were hence both intra-regional, caused by shift in the cultural preferences of the system itself, and externally determined, caused by the pressures towards isomorphism by global structures." See, Adib-Moghaddam: The International Politics of the Persian Gulf, p. 68.

[422] Al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making, p. 174.

from the 1980s, but I think it also tells us something important about what the ideational threat from Iran was for Saudi Arabia in the first place. Beyond that internal contradiction, I think that are two areas in which a theoretical emphasis on ontological security comes up short. The first is that the inward focus on how Saudi Arabia and Iran came to define their state identities in ways that were more compatible diverts analytical attention away from how their interests also came to converge in other areas, and most notably around Iraq. I criticized the balance of power perspective for getting the specifics wrong, but the basic assertion that Iraq was a crucial part of the picture is from my perspective absolutely true. The common need for Saudi Arabia and Iran for containing Saddam Hussein and the shared tangible interest in continuity in the environment around them is something that is missed by the ontological security position. The second problem is related to the first, but also one that I think needs particular emphasis, namely Saudi Arabia's decision to accept American military protection in 1990. There is little doubt that this was a decision that was not taken lightly by the Saudi leadership and an ontological security lens may help us understand why that was. But I think we also have to acknowledge that at that particular moment, there was clearly an inverse relationship between Saudi Arabia's physical security and its ontological security. Essentially, it could respond to its security needs in one realm, but only at the expense of creating profound insecurity in the other. It is in those rare moments when the most important decisions are to be made and different demands are pulling in opposite directions that the underlying drivers of policy are most clearly expressed. Short-term considerations of regime survival can explain why the Saudis prioritized as they did in August 1990; an ontological security perspective cannot.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an analysis of the détente and rapprochement in Saudi-Iranian relations over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s. Let me conclude by highlighting three key analytical points I have made on the previous pages. First, the single most important reason why Saudi-Iranian relations followed an entirely different trajectory in the 1990s was the trend towards ideological and geopolitical consonance and thus away from the dissonance that dominated in the 1980s. As a result, and in sharp contrast to the previous decade, Saudi Arabia and Iran did not see a serious threat to the security of their regimes emanating from the other side in the 1990s. Because they did not view their core regime security interests as diametrically opposed, but actually somewhat complementary, there was a sustainable space available for negotiation, cooperation and compromise that only widened as the 1990s progressed. Second, the analysis has offered strong empirical support for the causal connections between ideology and threat perception that my theoretical framework points to. I have demonstrated how Iran under Rafsanjani and Khatami progressively moved away from the active subversion of Saudi Arabia in favor of a political stance that neither in words nor in deeds challenged the domestic order in the Kingdom or the legitimacy of the Al Saud. Iran remained the Islamic Republic and thus still represented an alternative model for how an Islamic state ought to be organized,

but that change to its ideological profile – from emphasizing revolutionary export and appealing on religious grounds for the overthrow of the Saudi leadership in the 1980s to operate within their domestic red lines in the 1990s – made a world of difference for Saudi Arabia. That basic contrast between what Iranian leaders did do in the 1980s and what they did not do in the 1990 further illustrates the conditions under which ideology becomes a driver in threat perception and when it does not. Indeed, it is when we appreciate that ideology matters for very specific reasons of domestic regime security that we can explain why Saudi Arabia came to see an ideological threat from Iran in the aftermath of the 1979 and why it rescinded in the 1990s – and do so in a way that is theoretically coherent and can be empirically substantiated. Third and finally, at the same as I have stressed the crucial role of agency, I have also suggested that factors that Saudi Arabia and Iran did not control also helped bring them together. Most important among these was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. It is a fascinating question to ponder what the implications would have been if Saddam Hussein had not made that fateful decision. So many different dynamics were set in motion because of the Gulf War, so there is no way of answering it. What we can say for certain is that it greatly strengthened the geopolitical consonance between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In part, because Saudi Arabia came to share Iran's aversion to Saddam Hussein, but also because it allowed Iran to demonstrate so clearly through its actions during the Gulf War that it shared Saudi Arabia's preference for continuity and stability in regional affairs. That Iran stayed on the sidelines during the Iraqi uprising of 1991 and did not seize the opportunity to facilitate the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was a very tangible statement of its priorities. With the decimation of the Iraqi military, it was more important to pursue accommodation with the Saudis, a process that would have been derailed with an extension of Iranian influence into Iraq. The geopolitical consonance that developed between Saudi Arabia and Iran after 1990-91 was also somewhat self-reinforcing. Because Iran, all of the Gulf monarchies and the United States were all relatively content with the regional status quo, the regional system itself also became progressively more entrenched. There was thus neither the incentives nor the opportunities for the regional states to engage in projections of power beyond their borders to advance their interests. This key feature of regional politics in the Persian Gulf changed fundamentally with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. How and why this would again alter the course of Saudi-Iranian relations in an entirely different direction are the questions that we turn to next.

Chapter 7:
The Unravelling

For us, Iraq is the most important country in the world.[423]

- Iranian Minister of Intelligence Ali Younesi, 2004

The Iranians now go in this pacified area that the American forces have pacified, and they go into every government of Iraq, pay money, install their own people (…) even establish police forces for them, arms and militias that are there and reinforce their presence in these areas. And they are being protected in doing this by the British and the American forces in the area (…). To us it seems out of this world that you do this. We fought *a war together to keep Iran from occupying Iraq (…). Now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason.*[424]

- Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, 2005

Since the United States first began to focus its attention on the Persian Gulf towards the end of World War II, the single most important element for successive U.S. administrations was to promote continuity and preserve a status quo order in regional affairs. Every major strategic decision taken by the United States in the latter half of the 20th century – including the "twin pillar" policy of the 1970s, the support for Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War, and the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait – followed directly from the same basic understanding of what the American role in the region was. Even as the United States expanded its military footprint in the Persian Gulf in the 1990s, it did so to consolidate the status quo order, not force changes to it. What caused the new Bush administration to break decisively with that guiding principle and decide that offensive military action against Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein was imperative has been the topic of heated public and scholarly debate. I will not go into that debate in any detail, but simply note that I find the most persuasive argument to be that the terrorist attacks on September 11 changed the Bush administration's strategic outlook in fundamental ways, including its orientation towards the Persian Gulf.[425] The invasion of Iraq was neither a war for oil nor was it rooted in a

[423] Quoted in Kamran Taremi: Iranian Foreign Policy Towards Occupied Iraq, 2003-2005, (Middle East Policy, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2005), pp. 28-46. Quote on p. 28.

[424] This comment was made during a session at the Council of Foreign Relations on October 25th, 2005.

[425] The case that 9/11 led directly to the invasion of Iraq has been made most comprehensively by Gregory Gause. As Gause concludes, "There is no indication in the public record of war decision before 9/11, and substantial support for the proposition that the president was undecided on the Iraq issue then. There is compelling evidence that, shortly after 9/11, he decided on a course of war with Iraq. In a textbook example of the well-documented psychological process, once that decision was made, the administration searched for substantiation of its suspicions about Iraqi WMD and Iraqi ties to al-Qaeda to justify the decision, ignoring

desire to spread democracy. Rather, it followed directly from the Bush administration's understanding that in the aftermath of 9/11, the United States should much more assertively and aggressively use military power to change regimes that were considered to be hostile. And the swift toppling of the Taliban from power in Afghanistan for its connection to al-Qaeda in the first few months of 9/11 further accelerated the drive within the Bush administration to bring transformative change to the Persian Gulf.[426]

7.1 Perceptions of Threat in Saudi-Iranian Relations, 2003-2011

Like the 1979 revolution in Iran, the 2003 invasion of Iraq was one of those rare moments that profoundly rearranged the regional politics of the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East. Indeed, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the breaking of the Iraqi state would unleash dynamics with lasting effects on the regional political landscape and interactions within it. It abruptly ended the tripolar structure of the regional system with Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia as the three major powers who all had to account for one another. Though this system had not discouraged conflict per se, it had provided each of the three sides – and particularly Saudi Arabia – the flexibility to move closer to one side when the other appeared more assertive or threatening. By removing Iraq from the equation, the 2003 invasion eliminated that elasticity and balancing mechanism from the regional system. The Iraq War was also a turning point in that it greatly increased the potency of sectarian identity as a driver of popular mobilization and political violence. Sect-based cleavages were part of the social fabric of the Persian Gulf countries before 2003, more so in some places than in others, but there is no doubt that the disintegration of the political order in Iraq and the dramatic surge in sectarian violence that followed made Sunni-Shi'a tensions a much more prevalent aspect of the regional political setting.

Yet the single most important element in understanding the trajectory of Saudi-Iranian relations after 2003 was that the Iraq War and the power vacuum it created became the catalyst for an expansion of Iranian influence in the Arab Middle East that was simply unprecedented. Indeed, the major cause for the unraveling of Saudi-Iranian relations after 2003 was the erosion of the geopolitical consonance of the 1990s and early 2000s and the emergence of two mutually exclusive sets of concerns and priorities in the post-2003 regional landscape: On the one hand, an Iranian fix-

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the weakness and ambiguity of much of the data it generated to support those suspicions." Though I agree with much of Gause's analysis, I disagree with his contention that a democratic transformation in the Middle East was an important objective in its own right. The United States was interested in the promotion of democracy precisely where regimes were deemed to be hostile against it, such as Iraq and Iran. There was no desire for a democratic transition among its allies in the Gulf monarchies. So-called democracy promotion was a means to a particular end in particular places rather than a principle to be followed consistently. For Gause' analysis, see The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, pp. 184-240. Quote on p. 185.

[426] Ibid, pp. 193-194.

ation on what it believed to be an existential threat from the United States that required Iran to work much more assertively and proactively outside its borders, and on the other hand, a growing frustration and apprehension in Saudi Arabia over the extension of Iran's political and military reach. That basic divergence of regime security interests was the major fault line between the two sides after 2003.

7.1.1 Saudi Arabia's Perception of Iran

The post-2003 era is another useful illustration of the dual nature of threats to regime security in the Persian Gulf states, and why it makes analytical sense to distinguish between them. The change in Saudi Arabia's threat perception that occurred after 2003 was not caused by the sense that Iran had returned to its old habits of stirring up domestic opposition to the Al Saud. As we shall see, the most serious internal security challenge in Saudi Arabia after 2003 came from al-Qaeda, not from Iranian interferences in the Kingdom. There is no doubt that Saudi Arabia worried – as it consistently had since 1979 – about the potential for Iranian subversion among its own Shi'a population, and the increasing sectarian polarization of the regional political landscape certainly did not make those worries any less pertinent. However, at the same time as Iran was actively supporting the empowerment of Shi'as in Iraq and certainly contributed to stoking regional sectarian tensions by arming Shi'a militias there, Iran was also careful not to agitate Saudi Shi'as against their own regime. This held true even as the reformist era in Iran came to an end with the election of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad as the new president in 2005. For all the differences between Khatami and Ahmedinejad, and though the rise of Ahmedinejad did represent a shift in the factional balance towards the more hardline elements, the general principles of Iran's policies towards the Gulf monarchies did not change from those that emerged in the 1990s. Indeed, as one study concluded,

> Unlike Iran in the 1980s, Ahmedinejad's Iran has not embarked on attempts to subvert the sheikhdoms and has not revived its links to the Gulf terrorist organizations unleashing violence as a means of fostering political change. Although the assertive nationalists that have taken command of Iran's executive branch have dispensed with their predecessors 'dialogue of civilizations' rhetoric and display a marked suspicion of America, they are loath to jeopardize the successful multilateral détente that was the singular achievement of the reformist era. As far as the Gulf is concerned, Iranians seemed to finally have buried Khomeini's dictates and moved to an era of uncontested pragmatism.[427]

In other words, the change in Saudi Arabia's threat perception after 2003 had little to do with a sense that Iran was a threat to the internal stability of the Kingdom. Rather, it was caused by the fundamental transformation of the geopolitical consonance that existed between them up until the invasion of Iraq and its replacement instead by an intense worry over Iran's projection of power beyond its borders and ability to affect political events away from home in ways that circumvented Saudi interests and influence. At the center of that geopolitical dissonance was Iraq. As the

[427] Ray Takeyh: Hidden Iran, p. 70.

previous chapters have made clear, Saudi Arabia had consistently viewed Iraq through a zero-sum prism since 1979: either Iraq was controlled by Saddam Hussein or – if he was removed from power – a regime under some sort of influence by Iran would emerge in its place. Despite all of its reservations about Saddam Hussein, and even after Saudi-Iraqi relations worsened in the early 1990s, Saudi Arabia consistently preferred that he remain in power. The U.S. invasion of Iraq created precisely the scenario that Saudi Arabia had attempted to avoid for the past 25 years and transformed Iraq from being a shared concern and a source for cooperation in Saudi-Iranian relations before 2003 to being the primary source of tension between them after 2003. Saudi Arabia's concern with Iran's more assertive behavior and expanding influence in the Gulf was reinforced by developments in the broader Middle East. From the mid-2000s, Iran's allies and partners in the Levant – Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine – were increasingly sidelining their Saudi-backed domestic political opponents.[428] Moreover, by the late 2000s, there was also evidence that Iran provided funding and weapons for the Houthi movement in Yemen, thus challenging a core principle of Saudi foreign policy, namely that Yemen was strictly and exclusively a Saudi zone of influence.[429] The cumulative effect of all these political evolutions was to progressively build the understanding among the Saudi leadership that the regional political landscape after 2003 was one marked by Iranian fingerprints – and sometimes, footprints. In other words, for Saudi Arabia, Iran was very much an Expansionist Threat.

Figure 7.1: Saudi Arabia's Perception of Iran, 2003-2011

Latent Threat	Subversive Threat
Expansionist Threat	Omnipresent Threat

7.1.2 Iran's Perception of Saudi Arabia

Whereas Iran's extraterritorial activities became the predominant concern among the Saudi leadership that would increasingly shape its regional outlook after 2003, Saudi Arabia did not occupy a similarly central role in Iran's threat perception. The reasons were two-fold. First, the major and overriding focus for the Iranian leadership after 2003 was the threat posed by the United States. Indeed, Iran found itself in the unusual position in the run-up to the Iraq War of advocating that Saddam Hussein remain in power in Iraq. Though Iranian leaders intensely despised Saddam Hussein, they much preferred to have his isolated and weakened regime in control of Baghdad, rather than a belligerent United States that had recently designated Iran as a member of the "axis of evil". Former president Rafsanjani made this point clear in early 2003, noting that "We consider the United States to be more dangerous than

[428] Gause: Beyond Sectarianism.

[429] Thomas Juneau: Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment, (International Affairs, Vol. 92, No. 3, 2016), pp. 647-663.

Saddam Hussein and the Baath party."[430] Thus, at the same time as Iranian leaders recognized that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein offered unprecedented opportunities for Iran to exploit, there was also a deep anxiety among them over the prospects of having the United States – already involved militarily in Afghanistan – on Iran's eastern and western borders. At the center of that worry was the concern that the United States would use the overthrow of Saddam Hussein as a springboard to launch an invasion of Iran and enforce regime change there as well. When the invasion of Iraq did occur in March 2003 and the Iraqi army and the entire security apparatus collapsed within a few weeks, the sense among the Iranian leadership that it was next in line was elevated even further. As one Iranian analyst put it, "the day Baghdad fell was probably the darkest in the history of the Islamic Republic."[431] For Iran, then, the invasion of Iraq only reinforced the understanding that the United States was the single greatest threat to its security, and at the same time made it clear to the Iranian leadership that, more than ever, its own fate at home was tied to Iran's success abroad, first and foremost in Iraq. The second reason why Iran was not overly concerned with Saudi Arabia was the simple fact that if the post-2003 era began a more open competition for regional influence between them, Iran was clearly the winner of that contest. As suggested above, from Iraq to the Levant it was Iranian influence that was ascendant, and the Saudis who struggled to develop a coherent strategy to reverse that trend. The combination of these two factors – the intense focus on the threat from the United States and the sense that Saudi Arabia was not really able to deal Iran any significant setbacks – was why Iran's threat perception remained essentially unchanged. For Iran, Saudi Arabia continued to be a Latent Threat.

Figure 7.2: Iran's Perception of Iran, 2003-2011

Latent Treat	Subversive Threat
Expansionist Threat	Omnipresent Threat

7.2 The Ideological Dimension of Saudi-Iranian Relations, 2003-2011

If the rise of the reformist movement was the defining feature of Iranian factional politics in the 1990s, the 2000s marked the ascendency of hardline conservatives and the arrival of the IRGC as the major domestic political force in Iran. A more exhaustive analysis of how and why that swing in the factional balance took place

[430] Quoted in Kamran Taremi: Iranian Foreign Policy Towards Occupied Iraq, 2003-2005, p. 35.

[431] Ibid. See also, David Hastings Dunn: "Real Men Want to Go to Tehran": Bush, Pre-emption and the Iranian Nuclear Challenge, (International Affairs, Vol. 83, No. 1, 2007), pp. 18-39; & Mohsen Milani: Tehran's Take: Understanding Iran's U.S. Policy, (Foreign Affairs, Vol. 88, No. 4, 2009), pp. 46-62.

can be found elsewhere,[432] but let me just emphasize two important factors involved. The first was that, in contrast to his impressive foreign policy achievements, Khatami's domestic record fell well short of expectations and left much of the massive popular base, which had voted for him in anticipation of transformative change, feeling disillusioned and cynical. The disconnect between Khatami's vision of change *within* the parameters of the existing system and the desire among elements of his constituency to see a more fundamental change of the system itself came to head during the student protests of July 1999. In the most widespread public demonstrations since 1979, tens of thousands of Iranians across the country called for democratic rights and freedom of expression, leaving Khatami with a very clear choice between siding with his base or supporting the violent suppression of their demands. Khatami chose the latter. At the height of the protests, he appeared on Iranian television and charged that the protestors were led by "devilish aims" because they "intended to attack the foundations of the system" and made it clear that "we shall stand in their way".[433] This unmistakable illustration that Khatami was first and foremost a man of the system marked the beginning of the end for the reformist movement. The second important factor that helped shift the balance of Iranian domestic politics towards the hardliners was the United States. Khatami was a strong advocate for improving relations with the United States, and after 9/11, he would again make the case that common enmity towards the Taliban and al-Qaeda was an opportunity to start a new chapter in U.S.-Iranian relations. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei gave the green light for Iran to provide substantial assistance for the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan over the course of the fall of 2001, and he also sanctioned the setup of a back channel between U.S. and Iranian diplomats that was the first direct bilateral link between the two sides since 1979.[434] Nevertheless, the small window of opportunity was decisively shut with President Bush's "axis of evil" speech in January 2002, which left no doubt that regime change in Iran, one way or the other, was official U.S. policy. The turn towards an openly belligerent stance against Iran played right into the hardliners' hands and strengthened their position that reconcilement with the United States was futile and bound to fail. With the disintegration of the reformist movement and relations with the United States more tense than ever, conservative hardliners dominated the 2004 parliamentary elections in Iran and in 2005 the hardliners' candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was elected as Iran's new president.

The election of Ahmadinejad and the broader conservative backlash in Iran that it represented is often identified as the primary cause for the deterioration of Saudi-Iranian relations in the 2000s. For instance, al-Toraifi asserts that "the rise of the conservative faction within Iran [led it onto] a radical confrontation path resembling that of the early revolutionary period of the 1980s. (…) It is for this reason that the

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[432] Arjomand: After Khomeini, pp. 149-165; & Takeyh: Guardians of the Revolution, pp. 205-236.

[433] The New York Times: Chaotic Protests Reign in Tehran; Vigilantes Active, (July 14, 1999).

[434] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, pp. 168-169; & Takeyh: Guardians of the Revolution, pp. 212-216.

Saudi-Iranian rapprochement process stalled."[435] I disagree with this contention. There is no question that the ascension of the hardliners led to a more defiant and confrontational Iranian foreign policy. It is also almost certainly true that Saudi Arabia did not particularly like Ahmadinejad and much preferred Khatami's cautious profile to Ahmadinejad's erratic personality. However, political preferences are different from political threats. Crucially important was that there were limits to Iran's international rejectionist posture that made it qualitatively different from the revolutionary challenge of the 1980s. The case I make in the first part of this chapter is that while Saudi Arabia's threat perception did increase during the Ahmadinejad presidency, that change was not caused by any fundamental shift in Iranian policy towards Saudi Arabia or because it was seen as an instigator of domestic problems for the Al Saud. Saudi Arabia did see its internal security situation deteriorate in the 2000s, but not for reasons that had to do with Iran.

7.2.1 Internal Stability in Saudi Arabia after 2003

The theoretical assertion that it was not the ideological challenge from Iran to the internal stability of the Kingdom that led to the change in Saudi threat perception is supported by three factors. The first, and arguably the most important, was that Iran under Ahmadinejad retained the conciliatory public stance towards Saudi Arabia that it had developed over the course of the 1990s. Ahmadinejad became the sixth president of the Islamic Republic of Iran on August 3, 2005, only two days after the death of King Fahd and the formal elevation of Crown Prince Abdullah as the new Saudi monarch. One of Ahmadinejad's first acts in his new role was to express his support for King Abdullah and note that Saudi Arabia remained in good hands after the official transfer of power as the new King was both a "capable" and "experienced" political leader.[436] Because Ahmadinejad did not have much of political track record – particularly not in foreign policy – he and other Iranian leaders did much to emphasize to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies that the Iranian policy of détente initiated by Rafsanjani and Khatami would continue. In his first press conference, Ahmadinejad noted that "great progress has already been made, and more progress will be made" and stressed that "a priority in our foreign policy [is to] seek understanding and friendly relations with the countries of the Persian Gulf."[437] To underscore that message, Ayatollah Khamenei sent his top advisor, the former Foreign Minister Ali Akhbar Velayati, to Saudi Arabia in November 2005 to give a personal assurance from the Supreme Leader to King Abdullah that Iran remained committed to the rapprochement process. After meeting with Velayati, King Abdullah issued the following statement:

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[435] Al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making, pp. 239-240.

[436] Alsultan & Saeid: The Development of Saudi-Iranian Relations since the 1990s, p, 136.

[437] Quoted in Mohammed Hossein Hafezian: Iran-GCC Relations under President Ahmadinejad, 2005-2009, (Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 1, No. 4, 2011), pp. 87-114. Quote on p. 96.

> The message by Ayatollah Khamenei is a valuable move. The relations between [us] are very longstanding and solid, and we have a great deal of respect for the Iranian leadership and nation. We value the viewpoints and moves of the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards the objective of bringing the Islamic countries closer to one another.[438]

This is not to say that Ahmadinejad was not a markedly different political acquaintance for the Saudis than Rafsanjani and Khatami had been. There is no doubt that Ahmadinejad would embrace and espouse a kind of radical populism that the Saudi leadership has always been uncomfortable with. An early example of this came at the 2005 OIC Summit in Mecca, which the new Saudi king had organized to discuss the rise in Islamist violence and extremism and promote a more moderate image of Islam. That agenda faded entirely into the background when Ahmadinejad in interviews at the sidelines of the summit called for Israel to be relocated to Europe and raised questions about the authenticity of the Holocaust. While such rhetorical interventions in Arab politics from Iranian leaders certainly existed before Ahmadinejad, they did become more pronounced during his presidency. What is important for the purposes of our discussion here, however, is that Ahmedinejad's ideological assertiveness never crossed the red line of questioning the legitimacy of the Al Saud or calling for domestic opposition against it. As Kamrava has noted, "Ahmadinejad may have resurrected slogans such as 'death to the Great Satan' that were beginning to die down under Khatami's watch, but he has been careful not to condemn monarchy, much less Iran's neighboring monarchies, as corrupt and un-Islamic, as was popular in the early days of the revolution."[439]

A good indication that both sides were interested in maintaining a working political relationship is the fact that Ahmadinejad would visit Saudi Arabia four times over the course of his first presidential term, more than any of his predecessors. As late as December 2007, King Abdullah invited Ahmadinejad to perform the Hajj pilgrimage, which was the first time an acting Iranian president had done so. The same year, Ahmadinejad also became the first Iranian leader to be invited to and participate in the annual summit of the GCC. In other words, it is difficult to reconcile the level of diplomatic activity that occurred under Ahmadinejad's first presidential term and the symbolic gestures that the Saudis extended to him in the process with the assertion that Saudi Arabia viewed Iran as a domestic political threat similar to the revolutionary era of the 1980s. Ahmadinejad may have been an irritant to the Saudi leadership, but he was nevertheless one they were willing to work with politically precisely because he directed his rhetorical excesses elsewhere and not in the direction of the Saudi state or system itself.

The second factor that suggests that the threat from Iran was not driven by concerns over internal stability was the nature of relations between the Saudi state and

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[438] Quoted in al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making, p. 241.

[439] Mehran Kamrava: Iranian Foreign and Security Policies in the Persian Gulf, in Kamrava (ed): The International Politics of the Persian Gulf, (Syracuse University Press, 2011), p. 199.

the Shi'a minority. Indeed, the 2000s saw some signs of accommodation and reconcilement between the Al Saud and the Saudi Shi'a community that were – by Saudi standards, at least – somewhat remarkable. That process had begun in 1993 when Saudi authorities agreed to release hundreds of Shi'a activists from prison and allow some 1400 that had fled into exile to return home on the condition that they give up opposition activities. Though the Al Saud also indicated that it would work to address some of the grievances of the Saudi Shi'a, it would not do much to deliver tangible improvements over the course of the 1990s.[440] However, the attacks on the United States on 9/11, and the fact that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens, would have a profound effect on Saudi domestic politics. The links between 9/11 and Saudi Wahhabism became a topic of intense international focus in media, academic, and policy circles, thus exposing internal Saudi affairs to outside scrutiny in ways it had never been before. The critical international focus on the inner workings of the Saudi state became the catalyst for a brief opening of the domestic political space, which groups across the Saudi socio-religious spectrum seized upon to request various modes of reform. In April 2003, some 450 of the leading Shi'a clerics and political activists would submit their own petition, entitled "Partners in the Nation", calling for an end to incitement against them from Sunni clerics, equal social rights, and recognition by the Saudi state of Shiism as a legitimate branch of Islam.[441] The petition was notable not only because it was the most comprehensive call for political reforms set forth by the Saudi Shi'a, but also because the writers qualified their demands by stressing their unconditional loyalty to the Al Saud. Among the signatories was Hassan al-Saffar, the most important political and religious leader among the Saudi Shi'a, and the man who had previously founded OIRAP and played a leading role in the 1979 uprising in the Eastern Province. Whereas al-Saffar in the late 1970s and the 1980s would use his status among Saudi Shi'a to call for revolutionary change, he made the transition over the course of the 1990s and 2000s to become one of the primary advocates for engaging and working with the Al Saud. From 2003 onwards, al-Saffar and other former leading members of both OIRAP and Hezbollah al-Hijaz would participate in the National Dialogue sessions, an initiative launched by then-Crown Prince Abdullah that invited representatives from various segments of Saudi society to debate and offer advisory opinions on a range of topics such as religious tolerance and socio-economic challenges. The National Dialogue was in a sense a very narrow and top-down response to the question of political reform, and there were clear limits to the kinds of issues that the Al Saud would allow to be placed on the agenda. Nevertheless, for the Saudi Shi'as, the National Dialogue was seen as a step in the right direction that did result in some tangible improvements.[442] In 2004,

[440] On the 1993 deal and relations between the Saudi state and the Shi'a in the 1990s, see Toby Matthiesen: The Other Saudis, pp. 140-165.

[441] Ibid, pp. 181-185. For a Sunni-centric perspective on the question of reform, see Lacroix: Awakening Islam, pp. 245-249.

[442] Matthiesen: The Other Saudis, p. 186. See also, Fredric Wehrey: Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings, (Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 109-112.

Shi'as in the Eastern Province were allowed to perform the Ashura in public for the first time since the inception of the Saudi state. Restrictions on their ability to publish books and journals were also eased. In the 2005 local municipal elections, the first of their kind since the 1960s, Shi'as turned out to vote on a much larger scale than other Saudi citizens did and thus succeeded in achieving some representation in local governance, though in organs with very limited political influence. In a 2007 interview, al-Saffar suggested that these achievements were evidence that the Saudi leadership was "much more focused on delivering rights than ever before."[443] Yet, even if some concessions were made, the core of the issue – the institutionalized disenfranchisement of the Saudi Shi'a – remained largely unaddressed. By the late 2000s, the conciliatory and pro-dialogue position represented by al-Saffar and most of the Shi'a leadership would be challenged by a much more confrontational and rejectionist kind of activism. The key figure in that ideological current was Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a Shi'a cleric with a long history of opposing engagement with the Al Saud. Though al-Nimr was not among the leading religious or political figures in the Shi'a community, his outspoken criticism of the Al Saud resonated among many frustrated Saudi Shi'a, particularly the young, in the mid- to late 2000s. For al-Nimr, the National Dialogue was "a sham" and "a public relations exercise for audiences external to the Kingdom".[444] The Saudi leadership, al-Nimr believed, would not simply provide meaningful change for the Shi'as on its own; it would have to be forced to do so through pressure. Al-Nimr demanded that a larger share of Saudi Arabia's oil resources be given to the Shi'as, and he warned that violent confrontation was inevitable if their subordinate sociopolitical status was not changed.[445] In February 2009, a large group of Shi'a pilgrims clashed with the religious police in Medina, leading to dozens of arrests and injuries. When scattered protests subsequently emerged in the Eastern Province, al-Nimr delivered another fiery speech in which he lambasted the Al Saud for its complicity and suggested that the Shi'as should strive for secession from the rest of Saudi Arabia. Yet, even with the simmering discontent and the emergence of Nimr al-Nimr, there are several indications that the Saudi leadership viewed the challenge from within the Shi'a community more as a problem to be managed than a source of danger per se. It was important that Iran, as suggested above, did not work to increase the internal pressure against the Al Saud. There is no evidence in the public record that suggests any Iranian support for al-Nimr and his followers. Rather, as one careful analyst concluded, "Iran has taken care to avoid the appearance of deliberately inciting the Saudi Shi'a toward confrontation with the Saudi regime."[446] There was also the fact that al-Nimr would go into hiding in early 2009 to evade arrest and would not reappear in public until February 2011. During his absence, much of the Saudi Shi'a religious establishment would denounce al-Nimr as

[443] Quoted in Fredric Wehrey: Sectarian Politics in the Gulf, p. 109.

[444] Cable from the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh titled "Meeting With Controversial Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr" and dated August 23, 2008. Available at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH1283_a.html

[445] Ibid. See also, Wehrey: Sectarian Politics in the Gulf, pp. 117-121.

[446] Wehrey: Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf, p. 116.

an extremist and reiterate that there was no viable alternative to working with the Al Saud.[447] Finally, the way in which the resources of the Saudi security apparatus were deployed also does not suggest that the Eastern Province was a particular emphasis for the Saudi authorities. According to a former official in the Saudi intelligence services, throughout the 2000s there were some 100 officers assigned to collect information on opposition activities in the Eastern Province, which is the largest and one of the most populous of Saudi Arabia's regions. By contrast, the Qasim Province, much smaller in area and number of inhabitants but a strong recruiting ground for Sunni radicalism, would have ten times as many officers assigned to it.[448]

This brings us to the third reason why it was not the ideological challenge from Iran to the internal stability of Saudi Arabia that led to the change in Saudi threat perception after 2003. That reason is that the single most important domestic security threat in the 2000s and the overriding internal focus of the Saudi leadership was the challenge from Sunni Islamist militancy, and al-Qaeda in particular. Indeed, after 9/11, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda would turn their attention "back home" and launch a coordinated campaign to bring down the Saudi monarchy. That effort would see its beginning in May 2003 with a bomb attack in Riyadh that killed 35 people and wounded more than 100. It is important to stress just how severe and unprecedented the insurgency that followed was. In the words of Riedel & Saab, it would become,

> (…) the longest and most violent sustained internal struggle against the Saudi monarchy and establishment since the founding of the modern Saudi state in the early years of the twentieth century. Not even the uprising in the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 was as serious of a threat to the House of Saud as the al Qaeda challenge. The insurgency was well organized and widespread.[449]

The challenge from al-Qaeda had two primary facets. First, it presented the Saudi authorities with an intense outbreak of domestic terrorism that it was ill-prepared for.[450] Between 2003 and 2007, al-Qaeda would execute around 25 operations inside Saudi Arabia, including attacks against high profile targets as the Saudi Ministry of Interior, the U.S. Consulate in Jeddah and the world's largest oil refinery in Abqaiq. This number includes neither the series of other large-scale attacks that were foiled by Saudi authorities nor the massive stream of shootouts that occurred between al-Qaeda militants and Saudi security forces all across the Kingdom. From May 2003

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[447] Cable from the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh titled "Calm Prevails in the Eastern Province as Shia Commemorate Ashura" and dated January 10, 2010. Available at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10DHAHRAN14_a.html

[448] Wehrey: Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf, p. 136.

[449] Bruce Riedel & Bilal Y. Saab: Al Qaeda's Third Front: Saudi Arabia, (Washington Quarterly, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2008), pp. 33-46. Quote on p. 36. The most comprehensive analysis of the al-Qaeda campaign in Saudi Arabia is Thomas Hegghammer's Jihad in Saudi Arabia. See Chapters 8-10.

[450] As late as November 2002, Prince Nayef, the Minister of Interior, confidently suggested that there were no al-Qaeda cells in Saudi Arabia. See, Arab News: Naif Says Muslim Brotherhood Cause of Most Arab Problems, (November 28, 2002).

to November 2004, there were more than 100 such engagements. According to the Saudi authorities, the violence had resulted in 221 deaths and more than 700 wounded by February 2005.[451] The deteriorating security situation raised questions outside the Kingdom about the ability of Saudi authorities to stem the wave of violence in the short term and the viability of the royal family itself in the longer term.[452] The Saudis placed Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the deputy Interior Minister, in charge of an enormous counterterrorist effort to dismantle al-Qaeda. By 2006, the situation was somewhat under control, though there were occasional al-Qaeda-linked activities afterwards. For example, in 2009, bin Nayef barely survived an assassination attempt in what was the most serious attempt to kill a member of the Al Saud since the shooting of King Faisal in 1975. As serious as the violence after 2003 was, the challenge from al-Qaeda was something more than just a terrorist campaign. It was also an ideological attack on the foundations of the Saudi system and an effort to mobilize the broader Islamist scene against it. In the early 1990s, the Sahwa movement had seized on the outbreak of a regional crisis and the role of the United States in it to challenge the Al Saud on religious grounds. Though there is debate over the extent to which al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia was connected to the Sahwa, there is no question that Osama bin Laden sympathized with much of the Sahwist agenda and used the repression of its leaders in the mid-1990s to present himself and al-Qaeda as the logical and necessary extension of it.[453] The more important point here, then, is that the al-Qaeda leadership saw in Saudi Arabia a potential to appeal to or revive the Sahwist legacy of political activism and dissent, and push it in the direction of Islamist militancy and ultimately confrontation with the regime. That al-Qaeda launched its campaign when it did – in the spring of 2003, shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq – was very likely no coincidence. Rather, it was precisely intended to capitalize on the intense anti-American fervor, which had soared to new heights in much of Saudi society. Senior Saudi leaders would also express this understanding in private.[454] The problem for al-Qaeda was not so much that its ideology was considered too extreme or that jihadism was rejected out of hand by the religious establishment or the broader Saudi Islamist scene. According to leaked internal documents, the Saudi authorities estimated that right after 9/11 nearly 80 percent of the mosques in Saudi Arabia had voiced support for bin Laden.[455] Rather, the fundamental problem for al-Qaeda – other than the major resource disparity between it and the Saudi state – was that there was precious little

[451] For a chronology of the violence, see Hegghammer: Jihad in Saudi Arabia, pp. 244-248.
[452] The Guardian: The Oil Connection, (May 31, 2004).
[453] Lacroix: Islamic Awakening, pp. 198-200.
[454] Riedel & Saab: Al-Qaeda's Third Front, p. 35.
[455] Cable from the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh titled "Saudi Arabia: General Jones' January 12, 2010 Meeting with Prince Mohammed bin Naif, Assistant Minister of Interior" and dated January 19, 2010. Available at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10RIYADH90_a.html. Along similar lines, Hegghammer notes that "[a] Saudi intelligence survey of educated Saudis between the ages of 25 and 41 from mid-October 2001 (…) allegedly concluded that 95

momentum for revolutionary change in Saudi Arabia, either in the wider Islamist circles or among Saudis more broadly. This was clear from the very first attack in May 2003, which was condemned instantaneously across the religious spectrum, including by the most prominent figures from the Sahwa. Moreover, the brutality of the al-Qaeda campaign and the killing of civilians further eroded its efforts to mobilize popular support and provided ample material for the propaganda blitz from Saudi authorities. Indeed, as Hegghammer has noted, "The state used all available outlets, from the media to the official religious sector to the educational system to convey one overarching message, namely that the militants were confused rebels bent on killing Muslims and creating disorder."[456]

In the first part of this chapter, I have argued that it was not through the prism of its domestic security that Saudi Arabia viewed the Iranian challenge after 2003. The three trends in the post 2003-era highlighted above – an Iranian stance towards the Saudi state and the royal family that remained within acceptable bounds; a Saudi Shi'a community that was restive but under control; and the overwhelming focus in the Kingdom on the threat from Sunni Islamist militancy – offers strong support for that reading. In other words, it is an analytical mistake to equate Saudi Arabia's perception of the Iranian challenge of the 2000s to that of the revolutionary era of the 1980s. The persistent Iranian efforts to destabilize Saudi domestic politics and support internal opposition against the Al Saud that were at the core of the revolutionary challenge after 1979 were not a part of the equation after 2003. Simply put, Saudi Arabia did not see Iran as a subversive threat in the 2000s. Yet something clearly changed for the Saudis. To account for that change, we need to focus on Iranian actions outside the borders of the Kingdom.

7.3 The Geopolitical Dimension of Saudi-Iranian Relations, 2003-2011

The major cause for the deterioration of Saudi-Iranian relations after 2003 was the mounting geopolitical dissonance that began with the U.S. invasion of Iraq. As suggested at the outset of this chapter, the question of Iraq after Saddam Hussein locked Saudi Arabia and Iran into two irreconcilable positions. For Iran, the major worry was that the ouster of Saddam Hussein would encourage the Bush administration to follow a similar template in Iran. Even if the American military threat was not actualized, the only thing worse for Iran than Saddam Hussein in control of Iraq would be his replacement by a similarly hostile regime that was also backed by the United States. Thus, for reasons of short- and long-term security, it was essential for Iran to extend its influence into Iraq and work to sway its political trajectory in a direction more conducive to Iranian interests. For Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, the major worry was precisely Iranian interference in Iraq and the potential that it would lead to a new political order that did not provide a counterweight to Iran as Saddam Hussein had done.

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per cent of them had 'sympathies' for bin Laden's cause [against the United States]." See, Hegghammer: Jihad in Saudi Arabia, p. 144.

[456] Hegghammer: Jihad in Saudi Arabia, p. 219.

This intrinsic divergence over Iraq illustrates a crucial and more general feature of the geopolitical dissonance between Saudi Arabia and Iran that emerged after 2003, namely the fundamental difference in optics. For the Iranian leadership, the motivations behind its more active and assertive role abroad were inherently *defensive*. It was an entirely necessary reaction to the mounting instability on Iran's borders, the sense of an ongoing and credible military challenge from the United States, and the basic understanding that Iran had neither the military power nor reliable international allies to deter outside aggression. Given those perceptions, Iranian leaders found it more important than ever to cultivate ties to militant groups outside their own territory in order to increase Iran's political leverage and military capacity away from home and ultimately convince its foreign adversaries – first and foremost the United States – that military confrontation with Iran was not worth the cost. Though Iran had supported foreign militants since the early days of the Islamic Republic, it was only after 2003 that those relationships "transformed into a sophisticated system of power projection [of] immense strategic value." [457] For the Saudi leadership, it was precisely that projection of power by Iran and its outsized ability to take advantage of political vacuums in the weak states of the Arab world that was the major concern after 2003. Indeed, for the Saudis, Iran's behavior appeared anything but defensive. Rather, it was increasingly viewed as opportunistic expansionism that both created and thrived on political instability and did so in a way that was resistant to compromise and the concerns of other outside parties.

The task at hand in the final part of this chapter is to substantiate how we see the expansionist mechanism in full effect after 2003. That is, we see both projections of Iranian power and a demonstrated reduction in Saudi Arabia's ability to shape and control the political trajectory of its adjacent environment as well as of the broader Middle East. The sense of Iranian encirclement that this gave rise to over the course of the 2000s was why Saudi Arabia's perception of threat changed.

7.3.1 The Extension of Iranian Influence into Iraq

Few – if any – conflicts in the modern era have been subject to the same kind of public exposure and scholarly attention as the invasion and occupation of Iraq from 2003 onwards. The devastating human suffering that the Iraq War would bring, and the challenges that the United States would meet – and create for itself – in building a new Iraqi state on the ashes of Saddam Hussein's regime are well documented elsewhere.[458] I focus here on explaining how Iran became the primary benefactor of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and emerged as the key external power broker in Iraqi politics after 2003. To call this a paradox is probably an understatement. The best indication of the sense of imminent crisis among the Iranian leadership over the launch of the

[457] Ostovar: The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients, p. 14.

[458] A particularly good insider account by a member of the Iraqi parliament is Ali Allawi: The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace (Yale University Press, 2007). For a narrative of the major events during the military invasion and the subsequent occupation, see Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, pp. 148-168.

Iraq War and the speed with which American forces reached Baghdad was the scale of concessions it was willing to give to diffuse that threat. In early May 2003, days after President Bush delivered his infamous "mission accomplished" speech, Iranian officials submitted a proposal to the United States of a "grand bargain" that would place all major issues between the two sides on the negotiating table. With the backing of the Supreme Leader, Iran offered to provide full transparency on its nuclear program, end its opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process, and support the disarmament of Hezbollah if the United States would end its policy of regime change and lift economic sanctions against Iran. Though the specific details remained elusive and subject to negotiation, it was by far the most serious effort to arrive at a comprehensive and lasting understanding between Iran and the United States since the revolution.[459] The Bush administration immediately rejected the proposal and made it clear that it would not enter any negotiations with the current Iranian regime. With the United States' military success and the dismissal of Iran's diplomatic overtures, the stakes involved for Iran in Iraq were raised even further.

The key for understanding Iranian policy on Iraq after 2003 lies in the specific objectives it was designed to achieve. As suggested above, Iran consistently pursued two overarching – and at times, competing – goals in Iraq: First and in the short term, to dissuade American military action against Iran by working to keep the United States preoccupied in Iraq and by establishing pressure points against it there. Second and in the longer term, to work for the creation of a central authority in Iraq that was friendly to Iran (and thus preferably Shi'a), and which was strong enough to maintain Iraq's territorial integrity yet not powerful enough to emerge as a threat to Iran down the line.[460] In 2004, an Iraqi official described the strategy Iran pursued to strike the right balance between these two primary objectives in the following way:

> The Iranians think that if there is stability in Iraq, the United States would consider moving against Iran next. I don't think that the Iranians want to create uncontrollable chaos in Iraq, though. They want a manageable chaos.[461]

From the first phases of the Iraq War, Iran would work to mobilize and expand its levers of influence in Iraq to enhance its ability to simultaneously instigate and arbitrate disorder. The primary entity responsible for implementing that effort was Iran's Qods Force, the external wing of the IRGC, under the direction of General Qassem Soleimani. By the late 2000s, Soleimani would be widely recognized as the most influential figure involved in Iraqi politics, an assessment shared by both American

[459] For a comprehensive discussion of the Iranian proposal, see Parsi: Treachous Alliance, pp. 243-257. For various draft texts, see pp. 341-345 in the same book. See also, Takeyh: Guardians of the Revolution, pp. 217-218.

[460] Milani: Tehran's Take, pp. 58-60; & International Crisis Group: Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?, (Middle East Report, No. 31, 2005), pp. 10-21.

[461] Quoted in Crisis Group: Iran in Iraq, p. 22.

and Iraqi officials.[462] The Iranian policy that Soleimani would execute and which would earn him that reputation consisted of two broad and parallel tracks.

The first element was that Iran would support the official process of building a new Iraqi state and encourage all the major Shi'a political groups to work together to ensure that the new political system was one that reflected their demographic weight. For Iran, a political process that led to democratic elections in Iraq was seen as working to its advantage precisely because it was likely to empower the Shi'a majority and political actors that Iran had longstanding connections to.[463] Indeed, Iran had helped set up the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) as an Iraqi government-in-exile in the early 1980s and had sponsored its opposition activities against Saddam Hussein from Iranian territory ever since. Likewise, much of the political leadership of al-Dawa, Iraq's oldest opposition movement, had spent their years in exile in Iran. After the toppling of Saddam Hussein, SCIRI and al-Dawa, the two best organized Shi'a Islamist parties, returned to Iraq and began to mobilize popular support for an end to the occupation and transfer of power to the Iraqis. Among those that returned from exile in Iran were also thousands of members of the Badr Brigade, the armed wing of SCIRI, which had been created by the IRGC out of deported Iraqis in the 1980s and had fought alongside the Iranians in the Iran-Iraq War. After 2003, the Badr Brigade would change its name to the Badr Organization and expand its activities to also become a social and political movement, though it remained at its core a paramilitary group – and an important source of coercive influence for Iran from the early days of the U.S. occupation.[464] At the same time, though, we should also be careful not to see the exiled Iraqi opposition merely as agents of Iran. Each had their own specific political agenda, and while being on friendly terms with Iran was important to all of them, they were also highly sensitive to the fact that overly close identification with Iran was not a winning formula to achieve political power in Iraq. This was partly because entering the political process ultimately required a stamp of approval from the United States, but also because of the substantial suspicion towards Iran prevalent in most of Iraqi society, including among the Shi'a population. SCIRI, in particular, would work to strengthen its Iraqi credentials and shake off its historical affiliation with Iran, for instance by acknowledging the leadership of Ayatollah al-Sistani, the leading religious authority for the Iraqi Shi'a, over the clerical establishment in Iran. The decision to drop the word "revolution" from its name in 2007 and instead become the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI) should also be understood in this context.[465] The important point here is that while the exiled opposition groups that returned to Iraq were clearly allies of Iran, they were not controlled from Tehran. A key feature

[462] For a good profile of Suleimani, see Dexter Filkins: The Shadow Commander, (The New Yorker, September 13 2013).

[463] Allawi: The Occupation of Iraq, p. 306.

[464] On Iran's relations with the exiled Iraqi opposition, see International Crisis Group: Iran in Iraq, pp. 15-19. See also International Crisis Group: Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council, (Middle East Report No. 70, 2007).

[465] International Crisis Group: Shiite Politics in Iraq, pp. 15-17.

of Iran's political strategy was therefore also to not rely exclusively on its longtime partners, but back almost the entire range of Shi'a political parties and movements as a way of constantly hedging its bets and preserving the ability to broker deals behind the scenes. There was thus an element of truth to the conclusion reached by an Iraqi journalist that "it is impossible to oppose Iran because they are paying all the pro-Iranian parties – and they are paying all the anti-Iranian parties as well."[466] More than Iran's relationship with any particular group, it was that diversity of ties to actors involved in the political process that provided Iran with leverage in Iraq that it could translate into tangible political influence on even the most important decisions. For instance, after the 2005 parliamentary elections, it was Qassem Soleimani who mediated an agreement between the major Shi'a and Kurdish political parties that allowed Nouri al-Maliki, Iran's preferred candidate, to become the new Iraqi prime minister and Jalal Talabani, a longtime friend of Iran, to serve as president.[467] It was also under intense Iranian pressure that the 2008 security pact between Iraq and the United States came to include a specific timetable for a full withdrawal of U.S. military forces before the end of 2011 and also contained clauses that prohibited the United States from using military bases in Iraq to conduct military attacks against Iraq's neighbors.[468]

The second aspect of the Iranian strategy was that, parallel to its embrace of the political process, Iran would also work outside the official channels to arm, fund, and train Shi'a militias to have assets on the ground that could apply military pressure against the United States and allow for the ability to expand it if necessary.[469] The initial focus of that effort was on the militant resistance to the U.S. occupation that emerged from the Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, the movement around him, and the militia it presided over, the Mahdi Army. The relationship between Iran and Moqtada al-Sadr was an ambivalent one. Moqtada al-Sadr was a strong Iraqi nationalist who was greatly opposed to foreign interferences in Iraq, and he would often warn against rising Iranian influence. He was also engaged in an ongoing struggle with Iran's main political allies over leadership of the Iraqi Shi'a that at times turned violent. Yet, for Iran, the appeal of Moqtada al-Sadr was that he – in contrast to the political groups that returned from abroad – was fundamentally opposed to the U.S.

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[466] Quoted in Patrick Cockburn: Moqtada al-Sadr and the Shia Insurgency in Iraq, (Faber & Faber Limited, 2008), p. 167.

[467] See, Filkins: The Shadow Commander.

[468] On the 2008 security pact between Iraq and the United States, see Patrick Cockburn: Line in the Sand: US-Iraq SOFA Agreement Sets Withdrawal of All US Troops By 2011, (Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2008), pp. 1-7. As Cockburn notes, "The SOFA finally agreed is almost the opposite of the one which the US started to negotiate in March. This is why Iran, with its strong links to the Shia parties inside Iraq, ended its previous rejection of it. The first US draft was largely an attempt to continue the occupation without much change from the UN mandate which expired at the end of the year." (Quote on p. 3)

[469] The most comprehensive study of that effort is Joseph Felter & Brian Fishman: Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and "Other Means", (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Occasional Paper Series, 2008). See Chapters 3 and 4.

occupation of Iraq, and that he had a large base of popular support among Iraqi Shi'as who were willing to resist it with violent means.[470] In the summer of 2003, Moqtada al-Sadr announced the formation of the Mahdi Army as part of a "general mobilization to fight the American and British occupiers".[471] By the spring of 2004, when Moqtada al-Sadr directed a series of violent confrontations with the United States, thousands of armed volunteers poured into the ranks of the Mahdi Army, making it the largest Shi'a militia in Iraq. According to reports from Arab media outlets, Iran had supported the Mahdi Army with some $80 million, though this figure may well be exaggerated.[472] In fact, while Iran certainly viewed Moqtada al-Sadr's efforts to disrupt the United States as beneficial and very likely extended some support to it, it also came to view him as unpredictable and ultimately too unreliable. Indeed, the basic concern among the Iranian leadership was that al-Sadr's independence "might lead him to start, or cease, military activities at an inopportune moment for Iran."[473] It was therefore a blessing in disguise for Iran that the outcome of Moqtada al-Sadr's uprising was that he was forced to enter a ceasefire with the United States in late 2004, and that he subsequently decided to give up his military resistance to the occupation and focus instead on political opposition.[474] This was in line with Iran's political goal of having all the major Shi'a movements involved in the electoral process. But Moqtada al-Sadr's entry into politics also had the added benefit of leading to divisions within the Sadrists movement and the Mahdi Army, as many were decidedly against that move. This created ideal conditions for the IRGC to organize some of those elements into smaller groups under more direct Iranian control. According to one member of the Mahdi Army,

> Iranian policy was to offer aid in the shape of financial support, modern weapons, and good communications systems. Once lured into accepting them, the recipient cannot do without them. (…) Iranian intelligence secretly recruited young people to train in Iran. They give volunteers $300-400 dollars a month, train them to use weapons and to fight the Americans. (…) It is easy enough for Iranian intelligence to persuade a man to join the group it controls through money and good weapons if he is unemployed and the Mahdi Army pays no wages.[475]

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[470] On the Sadrists movement and the appeal Moqtada al-Sadr, see Patrick Cockburn: Moqtada al-Sadr and the Shia Insurgency in Iraq, Chapters 5-9.

[471] Ibid, pp. 168-169. The announcement came shortly after Moqtada al-Sadr had spent a week in Iran, where he met with all the senior leadership, including Ayatollah Khamenei and Qassem Soleimani.

[472] Asharq al-Awsat: Iranian Figure Says Revolutionary Guard Trains Moqtada al Sadr's Supporters in Fighting Techniques, (April 9, 2004).

[473] Felter & Fishman: Iranian Strategy in Iraq, p. 45.

[474] On the Najaf crisis in August 2004 that led Moqtada al-Sadr to turn to politics, see Allawi: The Occupation of Iraq, pp. 316-333; & Cockburn: Muqtada al-Sadr and the Shia Insurgency in Iraq, Chapters 7 and 8.

[475] Quoted in Cockburn: Muqtada al-Sadr and the Shia Insurgency in Iraq, pp. 209-210.

Thus, from around 2005, Iran would begin a more coordinated effort to train and arm Shi'a militias – most with a background in the Mahdi Army, but also some outside of it – that refused to enter the political process. In these various groups involved in the chaos in Iraq, Iran saw the potential to create entities in the image of Hezbollah in Lebanon; that is, well-equipped paramilitary organizations with local roots that could act with some independence, but would ultimately answer to Iran. Indeed, the IRGC would work closely with operatives from Hezbollah in Lebanon to set up and recruit to these groups, provide them with arms and training, and develop a network to facilitate the flow of weapons and people from Iran and into Iraq.[476] According to a 2010 report from the U.S. military, the IRGC and Hezbollah coordinated to "[train] Iraqi insurgents in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon, providing them with the training, tactics and technology to conduct kidnappings, small unit tactical operations and employ sophisticated improvised explosive devices (IEDs), incorporating lessons learned in Southern Lebanon."[477]

One of the primary recipients of this kind of aid was Asaib Ahl al-Haq, the largest and most powerful splinter group to emerge from the Mahdi Army. Its fighters received extensive training in Iran, and the IRGC funded its operations with sums ranging between $750,000 to $3 million per month. Between its creation in 2006 and the American withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, Asaib Ahl al-Haq would claim more than 6000 attacks on U.S. and coalition forces.[478] Kataib Hezbollah was the other major Shi'a militia that was fiercely loyal to and entirely dependent on Iran. It was formed in 2007 out of elements that splintered from the Badr Organization, and its leadership had close relations with the IRGC dating back to the 1980s. Because of that longtime familiarity, Kataib Hezbollah was entrusted with the most advanced weaponry from Iran to be deployed exclusively against the United States.[479] Through these groups, Iran refined its ability to project power into Iraq and developed the capacity to much more effectively influence the fighting on the ground and direct attacks against the U.S. forces. According to James Jeffrey, the U.S. Ambassador in Iraq, a quarter of all U.S. casualties in Iraq could be traced directly to groups backed by Iran.[480] After the American withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, a comprehensive review report of the Iraq War reached the following conclusion about the extent of the influence Iran was able to build in Iraq after 2003, which is worth quoting at length:

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[476] Felter & Fishman: Iranian Strategy in Iraq, pp. 55-70. They write, "The estimate of the total number of Iraqi militants trained in Iran varies widely with reports of camps closer to the border with Iraq providing very basic military training allegedly to thousands of militants while advanced training conducted at camps deep into Iranian territory is provided to smaller numbers of militants." See also, Levitt: Hezbollah, pp. 296-304.

[477] U.S. Department of Defense: Annual Unclassified Report on the Military Power of Iran, (April 2010), p. 3. Available at https://www.dia.mil/FOIA/FOIA-Electronic-Reading-Room/FOIA-Reading-Room-Iran/FileId/199471/

[478] For a good primer on Asaib Ahl al-Haq, see Sam Wyer: The Resurgence of Asaib Ahl al-Haq, (Institute for the Study of War, Middle East Report No. 7, 2012).

[479] Ostovar: Vanguard of the Imam, p. 173.

[480] Reuters: Quarter of All US Iraq Deaths Due to Iran Groups, (August 26, 2010).

> As U.S. forces prepared to depart Iraq, Iranian influence permeated the political, economic, and internal security aspects of the country (…). In essence, the IRGC-QF [was] able to stage operations from Iran with impunity [as] neither the Bush administration nor the Obama administration desired to risk expanding the war. (…) Prime Minister Maliki [and] most of the senior ministry leaders became increasingly less interested in conducting any action that would alienate Tehran as the deadline for the departure of U.S. forces approached. While the government of Iraq was happy to accept U.S. assistance, it was rarely willing to take actions that would jeopardize its relations with Tehran. In this area, perhaps more than any other, U.S. and Iraqi interests diverged.[481]

In sharp contrast to Iran's extensive and multifaceted influence, Saudi Arabia increasingly came to view Iraq as a lost cause. Indeed, by the time the United States withdrew its military forces in 2011, Saudi Arabia had "more or less [given up] any serious attempts to shape Iraq's domestic direction."[482] The basic problem for Saudi Arabia was that whereas Iran could work through both official and unofficial channels to advance its interests in Iraq, the Saudis really could do neither. Saudi Arabia was profoundly unenthusiastic about the political process in Iraq for the same reason that it was supported by Iran, namely that democratic elections would empower the Shi'a majority at the expense of the Sunni minority. The Saudis supported Ayad Allawi and his cross-sectarian Iraqiyya coalition as an alternative to the Shi'a bloc backed by Iran in the 2005 and 2010 elections, but in both instances to no avail. The Saudi leadership was very reluctant to engage with the Maliki governments that emerged from those elections because it viewed them as overtly Shi'a sectarian and too close to Iran.[483] In a 2009 meeting with American officials, King Abdullah asserted that he had "no confidence whatsoever in Maliki" and described him as "an Iranian agent" that had "opened the door for Iranian influence in Iraq" since coming to power.[484] At the same time as Saudi Arabia found it more than difficult to support the political process in Iraq, it was also impossible for the Saudis to back the armed Sunni resistance to the official process. Doing so would place Saudi Arabia on the side of groups that were ferociously fighting the Americans and thus bring it into direct confrontation with the United States. The fact that the most hardcore of the Sunni resistance revolved around al-Qaeda, which the Saudis were actively fighting at home, further discouraged Saudi support for the Sunni insurgency.[485] Thus, in

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[481] Richard Brennan et al.: Ending the U.S. War in Iraq: The Final Transition, Operational Maneuver and Disestablishment of United States Forces-Iraq, (RAND Corporation, 2013), pp. 131-132.

[482] Neil Partrick: Saudi Arabia and Iraq, in Neil Partrick (ed): Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation, (I.B. Tauris, 2016), pp. 131-150. Quote on p. 140.

[483] Gause: The International Relations from the Persian Gulf, p. 179.

[484] Cable from the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh titled "Counterterrorism Advisor Brennan's Meeting With Saudi King Abdullah" and dated March 22, 2009.
Available at https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09RIYADH447_a.html

[485] Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, pp. 179-180.

Iraq, Saudi Arabia's long-established preference for using its financial wealth to advance its interests abroad was hamstrung by the simple fact that it was extremely difficult for the Saudis to identify actors they could direct money to that could provide them with effective influence in return. It was bad enough for Saudi Arabia that the Iraq War created major instability on its northern border, but it was particularly vexing for the Saudis that they were unable to do much to reverse or counter the gains Iran made in terms of filling the political and security vacuum in Iraq. From the Saudi perspective, it was simply unacceptable to have increasingly capable and well-armed Shi'a militias acting at the behest of Iran on the ground in Iraq, and that the Iranians were working to create a permanent forward presence in Iraq that would solidify Iran's position there and enhance its ability to project power in the wider region. The growing sense of external pressure that this created in the Kingdom was directly reflected in the marked change in the kinds of policies it advocated to deal with the Iranian role in Iraq. Up until 2005, when the extent of Iranian involvement in Iraq remained somewhat elusive, Saudi leaders would express concern, but also stress that it was through dialogue that any disputes should be settled.[486] That position changed as the evidence of Iran's clandestine activities in Iraq began to pile up. In late 2006, Nawaf Obaid, an advisor to the Saudi government, suggested in an oped in the Washington Post that if or when the United States withdrew from Iraq, Saudi Arabia would turn to "massive" military intervention to preserve its interests and counter Iranian-backed Shi'a militias.[487] Though Obaid was subsequently fired for issuing an unauthorized and probably empty threat, the column very likely did reflect an emerging consensus in the Saudi leadership that firmer action against Iran was needed.[488] This was particularly clear from late 2007, when the most senior Saudi leaders in their private consultations with American officials began to call on the United States to launch military attacks against Iran, specifically citing the need to "stop Iran's expansionist policies", and most importantly to counter its presence in Iraq.[489] In April 2008, the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh sent the following report to Washington after a meeting with the Saudi leadership:

> The King, Foreign Minister, Prince Muqrin, and Prince Nayif all agreed that the Kingdom needs to cooperate with the US on resisting and rolling back Iranian influence and subversion in Iraq. The King was particularly adamant on this point, and it was echoed by the senior princes as well. Al-Jubeir [Saudi Ambassador to the United States] recalled the King's frequent exhortations to the US to attack Iran (…). 'He told you to

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[486] For one example, see cable from the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh titled "Codel Hagel Meetings in KSA Focus on Iraq, Iran and Israel/PA" and dated December 18, 2005.
Available at https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05RIYADH9342_a.html.

[487] Nawaf Obaid: Stepping into Iraq: Saudi Arabia Will Protect Sunnis if the U.S. Leaves, (Washington Post, November 29, 2006).

[488] The New York Times: Saudis Say They Might Back Sunnis if U.S. Leaves Iraq, (December 13, 2006)

[489] Cable from the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh titled "Saudi Ambassador to the U.S. on Iran, Sanctions" and dated November 20, 2007.
Available at https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07RIYADH2322_a.html.

> cut off the head of the snake' he recalled to the Charge', adding that working with the US to roll back Iranian influence in Iraq is a strategic priority for the King and his government.[490]

Thus, to summarize and emphasize the overall analytical point made in the pages above, it was the fallout over Iraq that created intense geopolitical dissonance between Saudi Arabia and Iran and caused a decisive change in Saudi threat perception. More specifically, I have demonstrated how we see projections of Iranian power into Iraq and a growing disenchantment and sense of enhanced pressure in Saudi Arabia precisely for that reason. In other words, we see the expansionist mechanism at work and in full effect. Not only did Iran work politically to align the new order in Iraq as much as possible with its own preferences, but it also engaged in a concerted effort to create levers of coercive influence in Iraq. With the extensive arming, funding, and training of Shi'a militias, Iran could project coercive power into Iraq, thus complimenting its political influence with a more tangible and physical presence on the ground that could also advance Iranian interests. In doing so, however, the Iranians crossed a red line – figuratively and literally – for Saudi Arabia. For the Saudis, the fear was always Iranian dominance in Iraq. Iran's proactivity in Iraq represented to the Saudis incontrovertible evidence of Iran's desire to facilitate and consolidate such an arrangement. But even short of a full integration of Iraq into the Iranian orbit, the Saudis patently did not want to see Iran and the IRGC exploit the volatile situation in Iraq to create paramilitary groups cut in the mold of Hezbollah and have them operate just north of the Saudi border. These were the most important reasons why the Saudi threat perception changed.

7.3.2 The Extension of Iranian Influence Elsewhere in the Middle East

The fallout over Iraq was the major game-changer in Saudi-Iranian relations after 2003. However, as I demonstrate in the final sections of this chapter, Saudi Arabia also grew increasingly exasperated with Iran's extraterritorial activities and rising influence elsewhere in the region. With assistance from Tehran, Iran's clients in Palestine and Lebanon, Hamas and Hezbollah, were decisively outmaneuvering their domestic opponents backed by Saudi Arabia, thus strengthening Iran's position in these arenas from the mid-2000s onwards. Closer to home, Saudi Arabia also became more and more adamant in its assertions that Iran was funneling support to the Houthi movement in Yemen, which was engaged in an ongoing struggle with the central government from its stronghold near the Saudi-Yemeni border. For Saudi Arabia, then, this was all further evidence of nefarious Iranian interference that directly undercut Saudi interests and influence, and it only added to and reinforced the perception of Iran as an expansionist threat.

In Palestine, Iran deepened its relations with Hamas over the course of the 2000s. This was particularly true after Hamas won the 2006 legislative elections in

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[490] Cable from the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh titled "Saudi King Abdullah and Senior Saudi Princes on Saudi Policy Towards Iraq" and dated April 20, 2008.
Available at https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH649_a.html

which it soundly defeated the Fatah movement that was strongly backed by Saudi Arabia. Hamas' electoral success led the Bush administration to initiate a political and economic boycott of the new government and also put pressure on the GCC countries to scale back their support for the Palestinians. Iran was more than willing to step in and keep the Hamas-led government afloat, and in 2006 became its main outside sponsor.[491] To prevent Iran from capitalizing on inter-Palestinian divisions, Saudi Arabia tried to bring Hamas and Fatah together in a unity government in early 2007. Within a few months, however, that effort broke down definitively as Hamas expelled Fatah officials to the West Bank and took control of Gaza. Saudi Arabia subsequently supported Fatah in the West Bank as the legitimate representatives of Palestine and further distanced itself from Hamas in Gaza. Hamas, in turn, became even more reliant on Iranian support. According to some estimates, Iran would provide financial assistance and military aid to Hamas in the range of $250-300 million per year between 2006 and 2011.[492] For Iran, the benefit of that patronage was not so much that it added to its own military currency. Although this was not absent from the equation, Hamas was more independent and also more difficult to reach with supplies than other of Iran's clients.[493] The more important value of supporting Hamas was that it provided Iran with much more direct political influence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Because Iran had stronger ties to Hamas and more leverage in Gaza than any other outsider, it made Iran a player that others with vested interest in the issue could not simply disregard. As one Egyptian official put it, "The Iranians used to come to us and talk about Palestine and we would say, 'who (…) are you to tell us about Palestine?' Now when they come, we *have* to listen."[494]

Iranian influence in Lebanon also increased steadily after 2003 as Hezbollah – Iran's most important non-state ally – positioned itself as the most powerful political and military actor. In 2005, Hezbollah was very likely involved in the assassination of Rafik Hariri, the former Prime Minister, who was also Saudi Arabia's longtime political ally in Lebanon.[495] After Hariri's assassination, Saudi Arabia threw its weight behind the March 14 coalition, a movement of political parties led by Hariri's son, Saad Hariri, which united to bring Hezbollah under the control of the Lebanese state and limit the influence of its outside supporters, Syria and Iran. Though the coalition dominated the 2005 elections in Lebanon, the new government could not change Hezbollah's status as a state within the state. The strength and autonomy of Hezbollah was clearly demonstrated in the war it fought with Israel in the summer of 2006. In response to Hezbollah's kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers, Israel

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[491] The Guardian: Iran Replaces EU as Top Palestinian Donor, (January 15, 2007).

[492] Reuters: Cornered Hamas Looks Back at Iran, Hezbollah, (August 20, 2013).

[493] Ostovar: The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients, pp. 9-10. See also, Karim Sadjapour: Iran Supports Hamas, but Hamas is no Iranian 'Puppet', (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 8, 2009). Available at https://carnegieendowment.org/2009/01/08/iran-supports-hamas-but-hamas-is-no-iranian-puppet-pub-22599.

[494] Quoted in Wehrey et al: Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam, p. 23. See also, Gause: Beyond Sectarianism.

[495] The New York Times: The Hezbollah Connection, (February 15, 2015).

launched an extensive military campaign that specifically aimed to destroy Hezbollah. Despite Israel's overwhelming military superiority, Hezbollah proved well-prepared and more than capable of putting up a fight. In the 34 days that the war lasted, more than 140 Israeli soldiers were killed in urban warfare, while Hezbollah also launched some 4000 rockets into Israel, killing scores of civilians. The Lebanese government was completely sidelined, neither able to prevent Israel from crippling Lebanon's infrastructure nor in a position to support or influence Hezbollah. Israel did inflict losses on Hezbollah, but far from breaking the organization, the 2006 war elevated both Hezbollah's political stock and its credibility as a fighting force. In the aftermath of the war, Iran worked with Syria to bolster Hezbollah by substantially increasing the flow of money and weapons to it. In less than a year, Hezbollah had replaced the material it had used and lost against Israel. By 2010, Hezbollah's arsenal was estimated to include 50,000 rockets and missiles, four times the number it had before 2006 and of an even higher quality.[496] Hezbollah used that added muscle and the popularity it gained after the 2006 war to challenge the Lebanese government and the March 14 coalition for more direct political influence. In 2008, after months of building tensions, Hezbollah again demonstrated its strength as it clashed with pro-government forces and rather easily took control of large parts of Beirut. In return for reigning in its fighters, Hezbollah was subsequently extended the ultimate concession from the Lebanese government in the form of veto power over all its actions and decisions. This further solidified Hezbollah's position in Lebanon and by extension gave Iran a much stronger foothold in the Levant.[497]

Iran's success in working with clients elsewhere helps explain Saudi Arabia's determined – if not overdetermined – position on Yemen. Following years of growing discontent with the central government in Yemen, the Houthis – a Zaidi Shi'a political movement with roots in the Sa'ada Province along the Saudi border – began an armed insurrection in 2004 that would gradually increase in scope and intensity over the course of the mid- to late 2000s. As the challenge from the Houthis persisted, both Saudi and Yemeni authorities insisted that it was actively supported by Iran. Those claims were widely disputed elsewhere, including by the U.S. Embassy in Yemen, which reported back to Washington in 2007 that it "did not find any evidence to support allegations of links between the insurrectionists and Iran."[498] In November 2009, the situation escalated as Houthi fighters attacked a Saudi border patrol, killing two Saudi soldiers, and seized control of small area inside Saudi territory. Saudi leaders told American officials that they believed the raid was carried out on

[496] The New York Times: US Strains to Stop Arms Flow, (December 7, 2010).

[497] Ostovar: Vanguard of the Imam, pp. 169-170; & Gause: The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, pp. 173-174.

[498] Cable from the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a titled "Yemenis Ask Codel for Help in Sadaa; Present Weak Evidence of Iranian Links" and dated February 26, 2007. In the same cable, the Yemeni government suggested to the American officials that "the al-Houthi problem comes directly from Iran" as they depended on the Iranians as their "main funding source". Available at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07SANAA297_a.html.

orders from Iran, an allegation that was almost certainly false.[499] In response to the Houthi incursion, Saudi Arabia began a military campaign in northern Yemen that lasted until February 2010, when a tentative ceasefire agreement was reached between the Yemeni government and the Houthis. An offer from Iran to mediate those talks did not so much alleviate Saudi concerns about the Iranian role in Yemen as confirm the suspicion that it had ties to and influence with the Houthis.[500] There is no question that the Saudis exaggerated the nature of those ties, and it is entirely possible, even likely, that they claimed Iranian involvement in Yemen before it actually existed. At the same time, however, Saudi Arabia's worries about the potential for Iranian interference in Yemen were not unfounded either. There is evidence that Iran sometime in the late 2000s did begin to offer material support to the Houthis, even if only on a limited scale. A 2015 report from the United Nations presented to the Security Council identified a "pattern of arms shipments to Yemen by sea that can be traced back to at least 2009." The report described several separate incidents of such arms transfers between 2009 and 2011, including one shipment of "900 Iranian-made anti-tank and anti-helicopter rockets." In each of these instances, the report concluded, "Iran was the origin of these shipments [and] the intended recipients were the Houthis in Yemen."[501] The important aspect of that Iranian assistance to the Houthis was not that it changed the short-term dynamics on the ground in Yemen. Whatever specific levels it reached early on, it was miniscule compared the support Saudi Arabia extended to its allies in Yemen, and also much less than Iran provided to its non-state partners elsewhere. The limited support for the Houthis did not make Iran much of a player in Yemen. What it did do, however, was provide a foundation that at least made it possible for that to change. As Juneau has noted, the building of ties to the Houthis reflected an intention in Iran "to open channels of communications and to build trust, creating the opportunity to upgrade relations further in the future."[502] This was of course precisely the worry in Saudi Arabia. The problem for the Saudis was that they were increasingly caught in the ultimate catch-22: On the one hand, it was necessary to defeat the Houthis to promote the kind of order in Yemen that Saudi Arabia was comfortable with and to deny Iran the opportunity to play in Yemeni politics. On the other hand, the more assertive and involved

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[499] Cable from the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh titled "Sitrep on Saudi Military Intervention Operations Against the Houthis" and dated December 23, 2009. According to the cable, "senior Saudi military and civilian officials seem to uniformly share the conviction that Iran's machinations are the only plausible explanation for why the Houthis would have engaged in a fight with the Saudis that they were bound to lose. Saudi military officials also point to the improved training and battle tactics of the Houthi, their deep reserves of weaponry, and several large stores of money discovered in Houthi areas as further compelling evidence of Iran's active support."
Available at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09RIYADH1667_a.html.

[500] May Yamani: Saudi Arabia Goes to War, (The Guardian, November 23rd 2009).

[501] United Nations: Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1929, (S/20154013/43, 2015), pp. 14 & 32-34.

[502] Juneau: Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen, p. 657.

the Saudis became in the fight against the Houthis, the more it also helped push the Houthis in the direction of Iran in search of assistance, thus exacerbating the very problem it was trying to avoid.

For Saudi Arabia, then, the political trajectory in Palestine, Lebanon, and Yemen in the late 2000s only served to strengthen the perception of Iran as an expansionist threat. The common theme in all these arenas was that Saudi Arabia's allies were steadily losing ground to their domestic opponents with some sort of connection to Iran. To be sure, Iran's role in facilitating that success differed – substantial with Hezbollah in Lebanon, much smaller with the Houthis in Yemen – but in all places, it was Iran that could see opportunities and benefits emerging while Saudi Arabia mostly saw troubles mounting. In the shadow of the extension of Iranian influence into Iraq, it added further to the sense in Saudi Arabia that an Iranian sphere of influence was steadily forming around it.

7.4 Competing Theoretical Explanations

The analysis on the previous pages has explained the deterioration of Saudi-Iranian relations after 2003 through the lens of my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception. I have made the case that the primary causal driver was the divergence of their regime security interests in the form of extensive geopolitical dissonance that began with the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It was Iran's ability to navigate much more effectively in the post-2003 regional landscape that caused a change in Saudi Arabia's threat perception in the direction of an expansionist Iranian threat. There are certainly overlaps in the points of emphasis in my analysis and other explanations in the scholarly literature, but there are also differences on some key points. What are those differences and why do I believe that the argument advanced here is ultimately the more compelling one?

7.4.1 Balance of Power Perspectives: Yes, But …

In my view, a balance of power reading of Saudi-Iranian relations after 2003 does fairly well. The destruction of Iraq as a pole of power in the regional system upset the regional balance and began a contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran in which "each state sees the expansion of regional influence by the other as a net loss for itself, whether in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, or the Gulf littoral."[503] According to Bassel Salloukh, "this was a very realist balance of power contest over regional supremacy."[504] More than any other factor, then, it was the rise of Iranian power after 2003 that increasingly unnerved Saudi Arabia.[505]

This is somewhat similar to the account I have offered in this chapter. The key distinction is subtle, but important: From the balance of power perspective the causal chain begins with power imbalances, whereas I emphasize the divergence and

[503] Wehrey et al.: Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam, p. xii

[504] Salloukh: The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East, p. 35.

[505] In addition to the studies cited above, see also Keynoush: Saudi Arabia and Iran, Chapters 10 and 11; & Gause: Beyond Sectarianism.

incompatibility of interests between Saudi Arabia and Iran after 2003. Though we end up in more or less the same place – Saudi Arabia's increasing concern with Iran's strengthened regional position – that difference in starting point matters for how and why we get there. From my perspective, there are three analytical flaws that balance of power analyses are prone to make. First, there is a tendency to emphasize Iran's *opportunity* to take advantage of the vacuum in Iraq to increase its power position more than the *need* to play an active role to counter the threat posed by the United States.[506] I agree that the opportunistic element also provided incentives for Iran to involve itself in Iraq. In my reading, however, it was the threat-based element that made it imperative for Iran to do so, and in a way that was highly resistant to compromise. I think we miss something crucial about the drivers of Iranian policy after 2003 – towards Iraq as well as its regional activities more broadly – when the perceived need to deter and diffuse a credible threat from the United States is not taken adequately into account. Second, balance of power analyses too often miss the opportunity to define more specifically how and why Iranian power was a challenge to Saudi Arabia. The suggestion that Saudi Arabia was concerned with rising Iranian power is not necessarily wrong, but it is not entirely accurate either. Indeed, on the standard realist indicators of power – the size of the economy and the military budget – Saudi Arabia was far outperforming Iran. Thus, the theoretical assertion that Saudi Arabia was actually balancing rising Iranian power is accurate only to the extent that the assumptions that underlie balance of power theory are modified, and rarely are those adjustments made explicit.[507] From my perspective, it was not Iranian power per se that was the problem for Saudi Arabia, but the ends to which and the means with which it was put to use. More than anything, it was Iran's ability to *project* power through its ties to client groups in the region that was the major problem for Saudi Arabia. This seems to me to be different from a "very realist balance of power contest". Third and finally, I think balance of power perspectives are inclined to underestimate the importance Saudi Arabia and Iran ascribe to their adjacent environment. To put it pointedly, there is an underlying assumption that decision-makers in Saudi Arabia and Iran look at the region as some sort of checkerboard and think along the lines of "If we lose one contest for influence here, we can make up for it by winning another contest for influence there." I think this miss how Saudi Arabia and Iran have red lines in their proximate surroundings and that there are outcomes in the areas on their borders that they simply cannot tolerate or acquiesce to. This was why Iraq became such a conflict of mutually exclusive interests. As I have stressed in my analysis, it was entirely necessary for Iran to create a forward presence in Iraq, and it was profoundly unsettling and unacceptable to Saudi Arabia that the Iranians did so. Not only could those positions not be compromised, but for Saudi

[506] For examples, see Keynoush: Saudi Arabia and Iran, Chapter 10; and Wehrey et al: Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam, pp. 60-67.

[507] The primary exception to this rule is Gause's Beyond Sectarianism, in which he does exactly that and in a quite compelling way. Nevertheless, I still believe his analysis is subject to the other criticisms of the balance of power perspective I develop here.

Arabia the "loss" of Iraq could also not simply be mitigated or checked elsewhere, as the balance of power position, at least in principle, assumes it could be.

7.4.2 Ideational Perspectives: Iran's Resistance Discourse

For constructivists, it was changes in the normative order of regional politics and the redefinition of state identities in Saudi Arabia and Iran that put them on a collision course after 2003. In particular, according to al-Toraifi, it was the emphasis on *Muqawama* – or resistance – in Iran's foreign policy discourse after Ahmadinejad won the 2005 presidential election that caused the breakdown of Saudi-Iranian relations.[508] From this perspective, the specific message of the *Muqawama* discourse may have been active resistance against Israel and the United States, but it also implicitly framed Saudi Arabia as being in violation of core Arab and Islamic interests because of its inability or unwillingness to support that agenda. Along similar lines, Darwich argues that the resistance narrative "constituted a source of identity instability for the Saudi Kingdom and, hence, endangered its ontological security."[509] From these perspectives, then, it was Iran's interference in the ideational realm of the Arab world and hijacking of symbols and causes with popular resonance in regional politics that was the primary threat to Saudi Arabia.[510]

There is definitely something to these arguments. There is no question that the standing of the "resistance axis" (Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas) improved in the 2000s, particularly after the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel. I buy completely that it exposed a divide between the "moderate" regimes of the Arab world and regional public opinion that was potentially unsettling. I also agree that it was under Ahmadinejad's tenure that Saudi-Iranian relations worsened and that the threat from Iran began to materialize for the Saudis. However, to make the analytical leap and suggest that it was therefore the discourse and symbolism of Iranian foreign policy in the Ahmadinejad era that *caused* that change, in my opinion, misses the forest for the trees. More specifically, I think there are two problems with that assertion. First, I think it is underspecified. For al-Toraifi, the core issue was Iran's efforts to revive its revolutionary ethos. In doing so, he asserts,

> Ahmadinejad's government sought to build a regional census centred on the idea of a regional security framework that kept outside powers such as the United States out of the region's affairs. Accordingly, the Iranian aim was not to challenge states like Saudi Arabia, but rather to persuade them to share Iran's view of how the regional order should look.[511]

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[508] Al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making, pp. 258-262.

[509] Darwich: Threats and Alliances in the Middle East, p. 92. Though Darwich's empirical focus is on Hezbollah and Hamas, she does see the resistance narrative as the main driver in Saudi Arabia's threat perception.

[510] See also, Rubin: Islam in the Balance, pp. 106-115.

[511] Al-Toraifi: Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making, p. 258.

The problem is that this was hardly something new. To the contrary, the promotion of a regional order free from foreign influences has been a constant in Iranian foreign policy since the days of the Shah. The major development that happened under Rafsanjani and Khatami in the 1990s was not that Iran gave up its opposition to the United States, but that it stopped using intimidation as an instrument to influence the Saudis. As I stressed in my analysis and as al-Toraifi also hints at, Iran under Ahmadinejad did not break with that basic code of conduct. From my perspective, there was very little *revolutionary* about Iran's return to its revolutionary roots that al-Toraifi and others see as so important. Second, and perhaps more importantly, I think the focus on the excesses of Ahmadinejad misses the crucial point that Iranian policy on a range of issues – including those that were most important to Saudi Arabia – was informed by strong lines of consensus and continuity that were not simply artifacts of an internalized resistance discourse that emerged under Ahmadinejad. Take Iraq as a case in point. If it was, as al-Toraifi asserts, a shift in Iran's state identity after the election of Ahmadinejad that was the problem for Saudi Arabia, it necessarily assumes that there was a scenario around 2005 in which the two sides could have come to some sort of agreement over Iraq. For the reasons I have spelled out in this chapter, I just don't think that was the case. There is strong evidence that Iran began to prepare for how to secure its interests and build influence in Iraq long before the 2003 invasion began. It was Khatami who headed Iran's Supreme National Security Council when it concluded in September 2002 that "it is necessary to adopt an active policy [on Iraq] to prevent long-term and short-term dangers to Iran."[512] For Saudi Arabia, the problem was the premise of that position, not the kind of rhetoric that supported it. The Saudis were always going to have a problem with an expanded Iranian role in Iraq, no matter whether it was carved out under the watch of Khatami or Ahmadinejad. It just so happens that it was around 2005 – and more specifically after the first elections in Iraq – that the extent to which Iran was involved in Iraq began to become clear. That this also coincided with the shift from Khatami to Ahmadinejad explains the *correlational linkages* between the Ahmadinejad presidency and the increasing sense of alarm in Saudi Arabia. But I think we get the *causal linkages* wrong when we focus on a particular discourse that emerged under Ahmadinejad and assume that the change in Saudi threat perception would not or could not have occurred without it.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the unravelling of Saudi-Iranian relations that took place after 2003. Three analytical points deserve particular emphasis as we summarize the analysis of the previous pages. First, I have argued that the single most important reason for that unravelling was that the consonance of regime security interests that existed between Saudi Arabia and Iran up until 2003 was shattered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq. More specifically, the war on Iraq became the catalyst for extensive ge-

[512] Time Magazine: Inside Iran's Secret War for Iraq, (August 15, 2005).

opolitical dissonance revolving around two fundamentally different and incompatible sets of priorities in the post-2003 regional landscape. For the Iranian leadership, the invasion of Iraq elevated the threat from the United States to unprecedented levels and facilitated the understanding that Iran was required to adopt a far more assertive policy abroad to protect itself from that threat. Quite simply, Iranian leaders reasoned that the best defense was a good offense, and that it was by working with client groups outside its own territory – first and foremost in Iraq – that Iran could most effectively keep the United States at bay. For the Saudi leadership, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein brought to life the very basic and longstanding concern over a regional political setting that did not feature an Iraqi counterweight to Iran. By contrast, then, the major political priorities for Saudi Arabia were to prevent Iran from gaining undue influence in Iraq and prevent further digressions from the pre-2003 order, which the Saudis had been quite comfortable with. The inability of these positions to co-exist was the root cause of the deterioration of Saudi-Iranian relations after 2003. Second, in line with the point raised above, this chapter has demonstrated how Saudi Arabia over the course of the 2000s came to see Iran as an Expansionist Threat. That perception was formed in Iraq, and especially by Iran's success in backing its political influence with a more tangible involvement on the ground by supporting a wide array of Shi'a militias and bringing elements among them under its own control. It is possible that Saudi Arabia could learn to live with a new Iraqi polity with closer ties to Iran, but under no circumstances could the Saudis accept that Iran was working to create a permanent forward presence in Iraq that could be deployed to advance Iranian interests and acquire the capacity to harass Saudi Arabia or threaten to strike against it, should Iran find it necessary to do so. The mantra that developed in Saudi Arabia of "rolling back Iranian influence from Iraq" was first and foremost aimed at neutralizing that particular facet of its policy. Though the extension of Iranian influence into Iraq was sufficient to explain the change in Saudi threat perception, I have also argued that developments in Palestine, Lebanon, and Yemen further reinforced the sense of an expansionist Iranian threat for Saudi Arabia. The nature and extent of Iranian involvement in these cases was certainly different, but in all three places, those with ties to Iran were by 2011 much more entrenched domestically than they had been in 2003, whereas the opposite was true for Saudi Arabia's allies. Third and finally, this chapter has provided further evidence for the centrality of *projections* of power in shaping perceptions of external threat. It has generated more empirical support for the basic point that Saudi Arabia and Iran place a premium on their adjacent environment and that they have a particular aversion to extensions of influence that restrict or interfere with their ability to control events around them. At the same time, the post-2003 era also serves as a useful illustration of how projections of power can materialize in different ways. What Iran did after 2003 was a very different kind of power projection than those that occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s, when it was the Iranian and Iraqi militaries that tried to facilitate cross-border change and also caused a great deal of anxiety for Saudi Arabia. Because the main instrument for the extension of Iranian influence after 2003 was its client relationships, the challenge for Saudi Arabia did not involve the

threat of military invasion that was part of the equation during the Iran-Iraq War and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. However, the other side of that coin for Saudi Arabia was that the kind of power projection Iran engaged in after 2003 could not simply be defeated on the battlefield. Rather, it required a more fundamental change in the conditions that supported it: either through a dramatic shift in Iran's incentive structure or by a marked increase in state capacity in places such as Iraq that could limit Iranian interferences. The fact that there seemed to be no clear path to reverse the trends that were set in motion after 2003 only aggravated the situation for Saudi Arabia.

Chapter 8:
Conclusion

I noted at the outset of this study that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is one of the most important interstate relationships in international politics. It has been a factor in – and at times, at the center of – some of the most dramatic and consequential moments in world history in the latter half of the 20th century and the early parts of the 21st century. In this thesis I have presented a theoretical framework to understand this crucial relationship and provided an empirical analysis of the evolution of Saudi-Iranian relations over more than three decades. The focus in this final chapter is on three overall tasks, and I devote a section to each of these on the following pages. The first is to summarize the main conclusions of the thesis and thus to provide a clear and concise answer to the research question. Hence, the initial emphasis in this chapter is on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and my particular take on it, and as I spell out my key findings I also point to future research avenues on Saudi Arabia and Iran. The second and third sections aim to elevate the perspective further. In the second section, I specify how this study informs and contributes to wider theoretical debates within the field of Middle East IR. Finally, in the third section, I close out this thesis by providing some reflections on the scope conditions of the theoretical framework and thus specify the conditions under which it could potentially fly to other "strategic rivalries".

8.1 The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Politics of Regime Security

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I asked the following research question:

> *What are the drivers of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and how have perceptions of threat between the two sides evolved in the period from 1979 to 2011?*

Before I address the research question in detail, let me just briefly remind why it was phrased in this particular way in the first place and recap the theoretical argument I have advanced to answer it. In Chapter 2, I raised the point that for all the quality and diversity of the scholarly literature on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, it is also marked by the peculiar phenomenon that the very concept of rivalry itself is rarely – in fact, never – devoted any analytical attention. To address this paradox and provide some clarity, I turned to the literature on interstate rivalries and made the case that the perceptual approach to rivalry analysis known as "strategic rivalries" and its emphasis on decision-makers perception of threat gets to the core of what ultimately creates and sustains a rivalry relationship. There is no need to rehash that particular part of the argument again here, but only to stress that it provides a strong and coherent foundation for the regime security perspective I have developed here. I argued further that regime security as a theoretical lens, in turn, allows us to no not only integrate realist and constructivist insights but also to qualify them better. In other words, by opening up for what I referred to as "The Absent Debate", we are pointed in a direction that allow us to synthesize and add specificity to competing approaches

and positions in the scholarly debates on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry – and we can do so in way that is that is theoretically consistent and can be well-substantiated empirically.

The case I have made in this thesis is that to explain the driving forces of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and account for patterns of change and continuity over time, we need to focus on the politics of regime security. The framework I presented in Chapter 3 and subsequently applied in the empirical analysis suggests that it is regime security interests that gives substance to and form the context around which the ideological and geopolitical competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran since 1979 has evolved. At the core of my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception is thus the assertion that each of these contests must be tied to and understood in light of how they affect the ongoing concern in Saudi Arabia and Iran for the internal stability and external security of their regimes. The central argument is that it is changes in the direction of consonance or dissonance in the ideological and/or geopolitical sphere that cause the formation of particular perceptual prisms of threat for Saudi Arabia and Iran at particular moments in time. As I have shown in the empirical analysis, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry from 1979 to 2011 has gone through three stages where changes in the extent of ideological and geopolitical dissonance led to corresponding changes in perceptions of threat between them that were subsequently sustained for long periods of time:

Figure 8.1: Threat Perceptions in Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1979-2011

Time Period	**Saudi Arabia's Perception of Iran**	**Iran's Perception of Saudi Arabia**
1979-1989	Omnipresent Threat	Expansionist Threat
1990-2002	Latent Threat	Latent Threat
2003-2011	Expansionist Threat	Latent Threat

Chapter 5 focused on the period from 1979 to 1989 and the major changes in Saudi-Iranian relations which followed in the wake of the revolution in Iran and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War. The perception that eventually materialized for Saudi Arabia was that of an Omnipresent Threat from Iran. There is no question that the fall of the Shah and the return of Khomeini to Iran was nothing short of a political earthquake that created a great deal of uncertainty and concern among all the regional regimes, including Saudi Arabia. The analytical point I made an effort to demonstrate was that the key for an accurate understanding of why and when that general apprehension in Saudi Arabia was replaced by a much more specific understanding that revolutionary Iran posed a threat to it was the unfolding of events that took place over the course of 1979. It was the concentration of political power by the more radical Islamist elements among the Iranian revolutionaries, the emphasis

they came to place on the export of the revolution, and the turn towards active subversion of the domestic political order in the Kingdom that caused the initial change in Saudi Arabia's threat perception. That shift in the direction of ideological dissonance was why Saudi Arabia's orientation towards revolutionary Iran was markedly different in early 1980 than it was in early 1979. The basic contours of that ideological challenge on religious grounds to the legitimacy of the Al Saud and Iranian support for Saudi dissidents and opposition activities would remain in place throughout most of the 1980s, thus re-affirming and sustaining the perception in Saudi Arabia of Iran as a threat to its internal stability. As important as that ideological challenge was, the chapter also demonstrated that the Iran-Iraq War added an additional and distinct layer to Saudi Arabia's threat perception. The war presented the Saudis with an ongoing potential for spill-over effects that could draw it into open military confrontation. But more than that, the course of the war itself was profoundly disturbing to the Saudis. Not only was Iran able to fend off the Iraqi invasion in 1980, but the Iranian decision to launch a series of counter-offensives from 1982 raised the highly disquieting prospect that Iran could actually win the war. The potential collapse of the Iraqi war effort threatened to irreversibly change the political geography of the Persian Gulf and also eliminate what for Saudi Arabia marked its first line of defense against Iranian aggression. Though Saudi Arabia supported Iraq from the outset of the war, it was the added concern over the Iranian expansion of the war into Iraqi territory that explains why the Saudis doubled down on its support for Saddam Hussein from 1982 onwards. Of all the challenges that confronted Saudi Arabia over the course of the 1980s, that of preventing an Iranian victory in the Iran-Iraq War was the single most important one. As the chapter further demonstrated, it is also in the context of that fundamental divide that Iran's threat perception must be understood. For Iran, Saudi Arabia was an Expansionist Threat, though that perception obviously did not emerge because Saudi Arabia engaged in the same kinds of very direct projections of military power across borders as the Iraqis and the Iranians. Rather, it was the indirect projection of Saudi power through its extensive support for Saddam Hussein and its role as the main outside contributor to the Iraqi war effort that made the Saudis a very tangible security threat for Iran. Saudi Arabia may not have been a belligerent in the war, but it was for all practical purposes a very active participant in it, and certainly not the neutral party it officially claimed to be.

The theoretical assertion that it was these changes in the direction of ideological and geopolitical dissonance after 1979 that explain the escalation of Saudi-Iranian rivalry makes good analytical sense when weighed against the empirical evidence from the 1980s. But it is given further credence when it is also contrasted to the vastly different trajectory of Saudi-Iranian relations from 1990 to 2002 that was covered in Chapter 6. The 1990s are important and instructive for a range of reasons, but perhaps especially so from a theoretical and analytical perspective. Precisely because the 1990s were so substantively different, it provides a basic litmus test that different theoretical arguments about the underlying drivers of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry need to pass. Simply put, a persuasive explanation of why Saudi-Iranian relations turned

so incredibly conflictual in the 1980s is one that can also account for the rapprochement of the 1990s in an internally consistent manner. The case I made was that Saudi-Iranian relations changed in the 1990s for the very simple reason that the conditions that elevated and sustained their mutual threat perceptions from the early 1980s onwards ceased to be operative. Instead, new priorities emerged for Saudi Arabia and Iran with the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in which each side had their own reasons for working towards easing tensions. They succeeded in doing so and came to view each other as Latent Threats for two primary reasons. First and foremost was the basic change to Iran's ideological profile. Iran was no less the Islamic Republic, but what did change was that Iranian leaders stepped away from their hostile rhetoric and the open interventions in Saudi domestic politics. From working far beyond Saudi Arabia's domestic red lines in the 1980s, Iran in the 1990s – and in particular after the election of Khatami in 1997 – adopted a posture that not only did not challenge the legitimacy of the Saudi leadership but very actively signaled Iran's support for it. It is in that basic contrast between what Iranian leaders did in the 1980s and what they did not do in the 1990s that we find the coherent explanation as to why the Saudi leadership came to see an ideological challenge from Iran in the first decade after 1979 and why it was much more comfortable with Iran's ideological profile in the second decade after the revolution. The second factor that facilitated the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement of the 1990s was the convergence of interests on Gulf affairs which began with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The Gulf crisis of 1990-91 changed the dynamics of the triangular Saudi-Iranian-Iraqi relationship entirely and created a much stronger element of geopolitical consonance between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the process. In part because Saudi Arabia came to share Iran's antipathy towards Saddam Hussein, but also because Iran through its actions made it very clear that continuity and stability in regional affairs was more important than short-term opportunism. That very basic and shared status quo-orientation was further reinforced by the continued consolidation of the Persian Gulf regional system over the course of the 1990s. Because the regional regimes were relatively content with their situations – or in the case of Iraq could do little to change it – and because they all were in firm control within their borders, there were not the same kinds of incentives or opportunities for extensions of power abroad in the 1990s as there were in the 1980s. The simple fact that the Persian Gulf region was a much more calm place where Saudi Arabia and Iran each had a vested interest in maintaining that stability was a key underlying reason for the accommodation of the 1990s. As I also stressed in my analysis, they did take very different positions when it came to the expansion of American military power in the region. But even if it that build-up was formidable in its scope, it remained limited in terms of its ambitions and aimed at preserving the status quo order, not force changes to it. And because the focus of American policy was the containment of Iraq and Iran rather than an active effort to replace the regimes, there was a space available for Saudi Arabia and Iran to disagree on the issue of the United States and still have rather compatible regional outlooks.

It was the decision by the United States to so decisively change its approach to the Persian Gulf and use its military dominance to force a new political order in the region, which set in motion the dynamics that would alter the course of Saudi-Iranian relations after 2003. As chapter 7 demonstrated, it was the erosion of the geopolitical consonance after the U.S. invasion of Iraq that was the single most important reason for the progressive deterioration of Saudi-Iranian relations over the course 2000s. The ouster of Saddam Hussein not only removed a unifying element between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but it also created a much more basic divide in their respective concerns and priorities in the new regional setting. For Iran, the major change was in the understanding that it was required to adopt a much more proactive role outside its own borders to sustain itself in that new environment. Because Iran saw – for reasons that were hardly unfounded – an elevated and very severe threat from the United States, and because of its military inferiority, the primary Iranian preoccupations after 2003 were tied to a general need for increasing its capacity to deter outside aggression and a particular need for building levers of influence in Iraq. Given those strategic constraints and demands, Iran came to rely much more extensively on a facet of its regional policy where it did have a comparative advantage and historical experiences to draw upon, namely the ability to work in conflict zones and build relationships with armed groups outside its own territory. Iraq after 2003 provided ideal conditions for Iran to expand and refine its client relationships and elevated it in the process into a much more cohesive and foundational element in Iran's dealings with its surroundings. Of all the extraordinary changes in the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf over the course of the 2000s, the most pronounced contrast was the extent to which Iran could project power through its non-state allies and build influence away from home in the late 2000s compared to what it could do in the early 2000s. And this was of course precisely the problem for Saudi Arabia. Indeed, if Iran had its reasons for turning to a more assertive regional foreign policy, the trepidation it created for Saudi Arabia was also not difficult to understand. The most important reason for the change in Saudi threat perception after 2003 was the fundamental divergence over Iraq, and in particular Iran's success in creating a quite extensive and military capable network of Shia militias largely under its own control. While the short-term objective for Iran was to counter the United States, these groups were also a vehicle for facilitating and consolidating a long-term forward Iranian presence in Iraq, which was profoundly unsettling for Saudi Arabia. Not least because Iran with that infrastructure only increased its ability to deter and pressure its adversaries as conditions demanded down the line. And with the benefit of hindsight, we know that this was precisely what happened in the late 2010s when Iran's militia allies in Iraq did begin to launch attacks against Saudi territory. This was a development that Saudi Arabia saw coming from a mile away. The extension of Iranian influence in Iraq was important in its own right, but it was also a part of a larger accumulation of worrisome trends for Saudi Arabia that it struggled to reverse. As demonstrated in the analysis, Iran's foothold in the Levant grew progressively stronger over the course of the 2000s and that enhanced position to no small extent came at Saudi

Arabia's expense. The Saudis also came to view the situation in Yemen as increasingly untenable and as having an Iranian facet to it, even if its charges of Iranian interference were overstated and more likely reflected a concern with what could be rather than what had been. Again, the dynamics across all these arenas differed, but they all added to and reinforced the perception in Saudi Arabia of Iran as an Expansionist Threat.

So what drives the Saudi-Iranian rivalry? The most accurate answer to that question is that divergences of their regime security interests – in the manifestation of ideological and/or geopolitical dissonance – do. Those divergences are not written in stone. Rather, the condition of regime security works primarily so as to shape priorities and prescribe boundaries for acceptable behavior for Saudi Arabia and Iran. When other and more pressing challenges provides incentives for cooperation – as they did in the 1990s – Saudi Arabia and Iran can also mend fences, if for no other reason than their own self-interest. But it is the ever-present potential for circumstances to change and for one side to engage in courses of actions that disregards the red lines of the other side, which is the key underlying element that sustains the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The theoretical framework I have presented here is one that first and foremost allow us to account for these broader patterns in Saudi-Iranian relations and provides a template for understanding change and continuity over time at the macro-level. I think it leaves us with some quite compelling answers when it comes to explaining the different trajectories and trends that emerged in the 1980s, the 1990s and the 2000s. That being said, there are certainly ways in which my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception can be further refined, and there are questions that it does not immediately address which merit further consideration in future research. I do believe it gets the basic causal connections right. I do think and I hope to have demonstrated that Saudi Arabia and Iran worry about their internal stability and external security and that it is with reference to these two dimensions that their threat perceptions must be understood. At the same time, I also think it is entirely legitimate to ask whether we can be more precise about the causal mechanisms I have sketched out. As noted in the methodology chapter, there is an analytical trade-off that comes with working with causal mechanisms at various levels of abstraction, and I have tried to strike the right balance based on the nature of the research question. But a further disaggregation of the subversion and expansionist mechanisms and more fine-grained process tracing could yield valuable insights on these processes and allow us to be more specific about how they can play out in different ways. A more fundamental question that my study does not provide a definitive answer to – and I also don't think that we find it in the wider scholarly literature – are the specific ways in which the past informs the present in Saudi-Iranian relations. That is, how does particular historical experiences or simply the accumulation of grievances over time influence their contemporary perceptions and inform the policies they adopt towards each other? I certainly think that we appreciate that the weight of history is important. But beyond that intuitive awareness, I am not so sure that we have a sufficient conceptual or theoretical understanding of how "lessons of the past" are formed and precisely how they are relevant for decision-makers in the

present in the context of Saudi-Iranian relations. The perspective I have advanced is that Saudi Arabia and Iran think and act first and foremost on the basis of their short-term regime security, and I think the empirical record provides overwhelming support for that proposition. At the same time, I also think that we need a more comprehensive understanding of the role historical memories play in forming their short-term interests and threat perceptions. Certainly, it is not difficult to imagine that threat perceptions are somehow more "easily" triggered as the record of bad blood and conflict builds up over time. How those temporal and cumulative dimensions of threat perception work in practice is a question we need to know more about. My own intuition is that it will be answered best through a wider engagement with the kind of scholarship that is situated at the intersection of International Relations and Political Psychology. Robert Jervis and Yuen Foong Khong are among those that have produced seminal work on the formation of cognitive schemas and the use of historical analogies in foreign policy decision-making, and I think similar kinds of systematic inquiries into the role of heuristics should be a focus for future research on Saudi-Iranian relations.[513] In other words, and at the risk of stating the obvious, this thesis hardly provides the definitive or final account of the perplexities of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Rather, what I hope to have offered is a coherent theoretical foundation from which we can make more qualified and more consistent assertions on how and why perceptions of threat between them form and change. And given that the argument has proven to be quite resilient when weighed against alternative explanations in the scholarly literature, I think we are allowed to claim some success in that regard.

8.2 The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and Middle East International Relations

The theoretical perspective I have presented in this thesis also contributes to broader debates in the study of Middle East International Relations and the field of IR more generally. First and most obviously, it provides further evidence for the centrality of considerations of regime security as a driver of state behavior in the regional politics of the Middle East. As I noted at the outset of this thesis, we have some excellent studies on what security is for these regimes and how they perceive threats to it. While my neoclassical realist theory of threat perception very much builds on insights from these works, it also adds further analytical precision and nuance to the regime security perspective. Let me just illustrate with a few examples how the case I have made differ from other arguments about regimes and their threat perceptions, and why I think it matters. I focus here on the works of Gregory Gause and May Darwich who have arguably provided the most rigorous and innovative theoretical treatments of these issues. The central theme that runs through Gause' work is the centrality of transnational identities and political interferences by outsiders in regimes' domestic politics in shaping perceptions of threat for the states in the Middle

[513] Jervis: Perception and Misperception in International Politics; & Yuen Foong Khong: Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965, (Princeton University Press, 1992).

East. "The threat trip-wire for these leaders", according to Gause, has been "direct assaults on the legitimacy and stability of their ruling regimes."[514] Yet, as important as that dynamic is, we can point to a number of instances where it was not the threat from domestic destabilization by outsiders that led to changes in threat perception for regional regimes. This was certainly the case for Iran in the 1980s and for Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in 1990. Even if we view these as outlier or extreme cases, the change in Saudi threat perception after 2003 also suggests that there is something else going on. Incidentally, on that latter point, Gause seems to agree. As he has recently noted, "The threat posed by Iran, as viewed from Riyadh, is less about Tehran's ability to stir up opposition among Saudi Shia (…) and more about Tehran's geopolitical reach into Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and, prospectively, the smaller Gulf monarchies (particularly Bahrain)."[515] I think this is precisely true. But it also underscores the more fundamental point that internal subversion is not *the* "threat trip-wire" for regimes in the Middle East. In other words, what I think is omitted in Gause's work on threat perception is an account of how and why regimes worry so intensely about their proximate environment. Whereas he is exceptionally clear on the conditions under which regimes perceive threats to their domestic stability, Gause does not provide similar specific guidance when it comes to that external and spatial element, even if it is implicitly acknowledged to be there. Another theoretical distinction we can draw is to May Darwich's work on threat perception. While Darwich differentiates her position from the regime security perspective, she also begins from the premise that the regional regimes "are first and foremost concerned with their survival."[516] And she also takes on the basic question of how regimes identify threats and the role that material and ideational factors play in that process. While we both stress the importance of different kinds of threat, we differ on the question of what distinguishes those threats. For Darwich, the answer is that regimes worry about threats to their physical security and to their identity or ontological security. She specifies that, "whereas physical security is associated with military threats to the state, ontological security is associated with those dynamics and processes that centre around the reproduction of identity narratives and the maintenance of a system of certitude."[517] The problem, from my perspective, is precisely that demarcation of the material and ideational sphere, and the assertion that physical security threats for regimes only emerge in the form of external military threats. Because it presupposes that the ideational realm belongs to an entirely different kind of security, the ontological security perspective misses the very tangible link between ideas and threat perception and the crucial point that the spread of subversive ideas within their own societies is very much viewed as a physical security threat for authoritarian

[514] Gause: Balancing What?, p. 303.
[515] Gregory Gause: Saudi Arabia and Sectarianism in Middle East International Relations, in POMEPS: Sectarianism and International Relations, (POMEPS Studies, No. 38, 2020), pp. 12-17.
[516] Darwich: Treats and Alliances in the Middle East, p. 8.
[517] Ibid, p. 39.

regimes. Where I do agree with Darwich is that we should also be careful not to assume a priori that political leaders in the Middle East are nothing but manipulators of identities. While I certainly do think they also have that more cynical disposition, I do not subscribe to the view that they never believe a word they are saying nor does the case I have made require that assumption. I think they also engage in courses of action that are supported by sincere beliefs and certain ideational convictions. Saudi Arabia's King Faisal turned to "the oil weapon" in 1973 in no small part because of his disdain for Israel and because the Palestinian cause was important to him. Ayatollah Khomeini's contempt for the Saudi royal family was not one that he invented, but one that he felt strongly and passionate about. But the case I have made is that ideas do not exist in a vacuum. Even Khomeini was willing to dial back some of his vitriol against the Al Saud when the Iranians worked to end Saudi support for Saddam Hussein in the mid-1980s. The point here is that even if political leaders have convictions and values that are rooted in their identities, it does not change the fact that their worldviews ultimately begin from a premise; namely, that the regimes they represent – and not some other political configuration – should rule. And thus, precisely because conclusions are derived from premises, there is also a certain logic as to why certain ideas win out over others at particular moments in time. When it comes to the specific question of the relationship between ideas and perceptions of threat, the most important dynamic is the challenge posed to that premise, not to any other value.

Beyond the analytical inputs it provides to these broader theoretical debates on threat perception in Middle East IR, this thesis also makes two more specific contributions. The first is that whereas most of the existing studies are ultimately interested in explaining alliance choices, I have focused on the threat perceptions as the outcome to be explained. The path I have taken is thus a different one in that I have presented an argument that is grounded in image theory and which allow us to explain how and why particular prisms of threat emerge at particular moments in time. Rather than a threat simply being "there" or not, the more fine-grained four-fold typology I have presented provides us with a more comprehensive and complete understanding of regimes' perceptions of threat. The second very distinct way in which this study departs from other treatments of the issue of threat perception is that I have based my study on a bilateral relationship. Whereas other scholars focus on general trends in threat perceptions and alliance choices for one or more states, the framework I have presented is one that specifically concerns the evolution of threat perceptions between two adversaries. And that dyadic frame and theoretical focus brings us to the concept of rivalry and the question of whether the argument advanced here provides explanatory leverage in other contexts. As I briefly suggested in Chapter 4, I think we can make a pretty good case that it does, though with some caveats and qualifications. In the following and final section of this thesis, I define what I think the scope conditions of the theoretical argument are and thus provide some tentative guidelines for how and where it could potentially fly.

8.3 The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and Interstate Rivalries

At the outset of this study, I made the case that Middle East IR and the field of rivalry analysis have a lot to offer to each other. Scholars that work on the Middle East have an extremely specialized knowledge on the complexities of the region and the patterns of crises and conflict in it. My intuition is that there would be something close to universal consensus on the basic proposition that the region has been and continues to be fraught with interstate rivalries. I think there are two important points to be derived from this. First, that there is an underlying appreciation that the concept of rivalry is a useful category to describe a particular kind of interstate relationships that are somehow distinct from others. Second, that there is a lot of untapped potential or progress to be made – depending on one's perspective – because the default position has been to refrain from taking on the more difficult questions of what the distinctive features of rivalries are. But if we implicitly recognize the value of rivalry as an analytical category, we should also be able to articulate what it is. And even if the term is frequently applied, we cannot say that we know much about rivalries in the Middle East as a collective phenomenon, precisely because it is used as a loose description rather than a specified analytical concept. A better understanding of regional rivalries requires some foundational groundwork to be laid around a more rigorous thinking of their attributes. And it is precisely in developing a more systematic approach to the study of rivalries that Middle East IR could gain from a closer engagement with the ways in which scholars of interstate rivalries have specified their research agenda. According to Thompson,

> Instead of allowing "rivalry" to be a throwaway noun that can be applied equally easy to states and football teams, taking rivalry seriously means defining what constitutes rivalry, developing an information base on when and where rivalries have been prominent, and creating theories about how rivalries begin, sustain themselves, and end. Most of all, it means comparing rivalries as rivalries – as opposed to falling back on the proper places names of hostile states in making sense of what appears to be going on.[518]

While I agree with Thompson that we should indeed take rivalry seriously, I also think we should keep an open mind when it comes to the different ways to do this. Even the very basic question of how to define rivalry relationships is likely to be a contested one for scholars of the Middle East. I happen to think that the strategic rivalry approach offers the best starting point for thinking about rivalries. Others will disagree and propose alternatives. Others again may well see different rivalries as entirely distinct phenomena (though this of course begs the question of whether the designation makes sense at all, which involves its own problems). But that plurality of viewpoints is a virtue as more self-aware positions would stimulate kinds of debates that we don't currently have in Middle East IR. And ultimately, it is through those debates where theoretical and conceptual reflexivity are required that new

[518] William R. Thompson: Humpty Dumpty Had a Great Fall? Making Sense of Longer-Term Ups and Downs in Middle Eastern and North African Rivalries in Mansour & Thompson: Shocks and Rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa, pp. 39-58. Quote on p. 42.

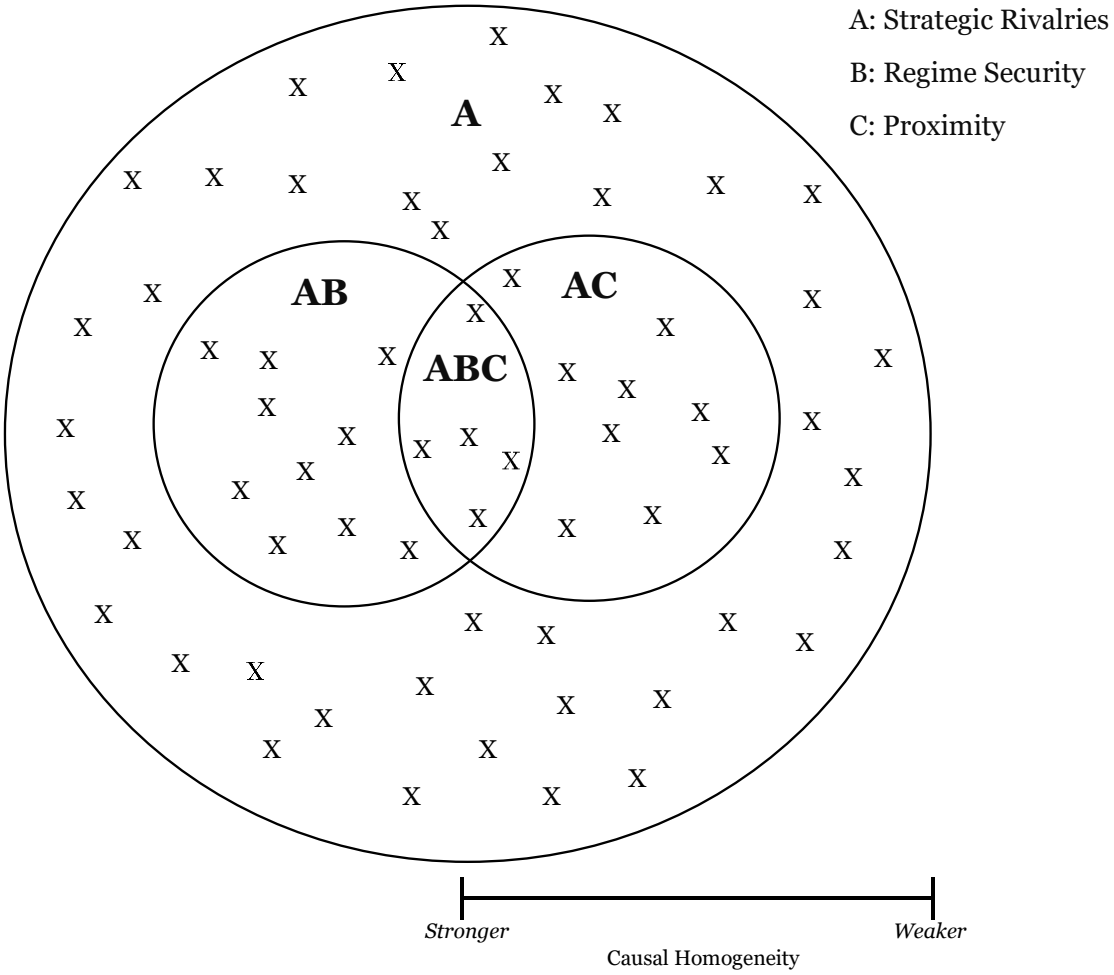
ideas will emerge, and we become more advanced and refined in our understanding of important issues. From my perspective, this is the primary reason why we should take rivalry seriously, not for granted. I also see no reason why we should restrict ourselves to focus on finding commonalities among rivalries. Indeed, the suggestion that rivalries at the most basic level share some common traits obviously does not mean that they are similar. And it is in making those nuances where the more specialized regional expertise becomes indispensable. For instance, the question of how the inter-Arab rivalries of the 1950s and 1960s differed from Arab rivalries with Iran after 1979 in terms of dimensions and causal relationships is a very good one. Answers will differ depending on theoretical perspectives. But to entertain the question at all, one will need to have some underlying sentiments about the nature of rivalries. And the more explicit and transparent one can be about those sentiments, the better and more refined our theoretical debates will be.

In the interest of stimulating further discussion along these lines, let me end this study with some brief thoughts on the how the framework presented in this study might be extended to other cases of interstate rivalry. As I explained in Chapter 4, it is by establishing a population of causally homogenous population of cases that allow us to make claims to generalization from a single studied case to a larger population of unstudied cases. As Beach & Pedersen have noted, "a causally homogenous population of cases is one in which a given cause can be expected to have the same causal relationship with the outcome across cases in a population."[519] And let me quote the point they emphasize when it comes to generalizing causal claims from single case studies once again: "Basically, we need to be able to claim that what we found in the studied case (…) should also be found in the rest of the population based on the logic 'we found mechanistic evidence of the relationship in case 1. Cases 2 and 3 are similar on a range causally relevant factors, ergo we should expect the relationship to also be present in Cases 2 and 3."[520] To establish such a causally homogenous population of cases, we can begin by specifying that the case universe is bounded by membership in the dataset of strategic rivalries as determined by Colaresi et al. The reason is of course the simple one that the definition of strategic rivalries emphasizes decision-makers perception of threat between the dyads in question, which makes it possible – at least in principle – that my framework can be extended to these cases. The causal homogeneity of the case universe is further strengthened by adding two further conditions. The first is that the states in question make their decisions based on more narrow considerations of regime security. This is the cog-wheel that make my analytical framework go round and thus it needs to be demonstrated that this applies to both of the involved states. The second condition is that of proximity, which has two related facets. It refers in part to physical proximity because we have good reasons to believe that states that are territorially proximate are more likely to contest each other's spheres of influence and worry over the expansionist activities from those in their immediate surroundings. But it also refers to "ideational" proximity in the

[519] Beach & Brun Pedersen: Causal Case Study Methods, p. 50.
[520] Ibid, p. 51.

sense that the states in question also must have cultural and identity-linkages that make them potential and somewhat credible players in the domestic politics of each other. Proximity, as defined here, thus refers to those rivalry dyads that have both elements. When we apply those conditions – a classification as strategic rivalries (A), the primacy of regime security for the states involved (B), and the factor of proximity (C) – we are left with a smaller population of cases (ABC), but one that should exhibit sufficient causal homogeneity to allow us to expect that the causal connections my framework points to will provide explanatory leverage. The figure below provides an illustration of these final points made in thesis.

Figure 8.2: Scope Conditions and Potential for Generalizability



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English Abstract

What are the guiding principles of political decision-making in Saudi Arabia and Iran? Why have relations between them been incredibly conflictual at some points in time and rather stable at others? In other words, what drives the Saudi-Iranian rivalry? Whereas most answers to these questions in the existing scholarly literature have been grounded in either balance of power theory or a constructivist emphasis on ideas and identities, I make the case in this thesis that the single most important element in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is the politics of regime security. Rather than changes in the power balance or the normative environment, it is more specifically the extent to which Saudi Arabia and Iran find their respective regime security interests compatible or in conflict, which provides the best explanation of the ups and downs of Saudi-Iranian relations.

The theoretical framework I introduce suggests that perceptions of threat in Saudi-Iranian relations form and change according to the presence or absence of what I refer to as ideological and geopolitical dissonance. At any particular moment, Saudi Arabia and Iran can be more or less comfortable with each other's ideological profiles, and they can view their geopolitical interests as more or less aligned. What matters are particular courses of action and how they are viewed by the political leaderships in Saudi Arabia and Iran as affecting their ongoing concern for the internal stability and external security of their regimes. It is these changes in the direction of consonance or dissonance in the ideological and geopolitical spheres that serve as the key regulators of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and add specificity to why relations between deteriorate when they do and why they are able to move closer together at other times.

I show in the empirical analysis how different configurations of ideological and geopolitical dissonance have caused shifts in Saudi Arabia and Iran's respective threat perceptions three times in the period from the 1979 Revolution in Iran to the 2011 Arab Uprisings. I devote a chapter to explain why particular perceptions of threat emerged for Saudi Arabia and Iran and how they were subsequently maintained in the periods from 1979-1989, 1990-2002, and 2003-2011. Each chapter accounts for major changes in the trajectory of Saudi-Iranian relations, and they demonstrate collectively the centrality of the politics of regime security in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

This study will be of value to all with an interest in Middle East politics, interstate rivalries, and international relations theory.

Danish Abstract

Hvorfor handler Saudi-Arabien og Iran, som de gør? Hvorfor har forholdet imellem dem været så utroligt konfliktpræget på nogle tidspunkter og relativt stabilt på andre? Hvad er de centrale drivkræfter i rivaliseringen imellem Saudi-Arabien og Iran? I den eksisterende forskning er svarene på disse spørgsmål teoretisk forankret i enten et magtbalance-perspektiv eller et konstruktivistisk fokus på ideer og identiteter. I denne afhandling fremhæver jeg i stedet den centrale betydning af regimesikkerhedspolitiske hensyn. Kort sagt argumenterer jeg for, at det ikke er ændringer i magtbalancen eller i det normative miljø, der bedst forklarer, hvorfor kvalitative skift i forholdet imellem Saudi-Arabien og Iran finder sted, men derimod, hvorvidt og i hvilken grad de ser deres respektive regimesikkerhedsinteresser som værende kompatible eller i konflikt med hinanden.

Den teoretiske argument i dette studie er, at det er graden af ideologisk og geopolitisk dissonans, der fører til dannelsen af bestemte trusselsopfattelser imellem Saudi-Arabien og Iran. De kan være mere eller mindre komfortable med hinandens ideologiske profiler, og de kan se deres geopolitiske interesser som værende mere eller mindre i overensstemmelse. Det afgørende element er specifikke handlinger og prioriteter, og hvordan de politiske lederskaber i Saudi-Arabien og Iran vurderer, at det påvirker den interne stabilitet og eksterne sikkerhed for deres regimer. Det er disse forskydninger i retning af konsonans eller dissonans i de ideologiske og geopolitiske sfærer, der regulerer rivaliseringen imellem Saudi-Arabien og Iran, og gør det muligt at specificere, hvorfor forholdet forværres på bestemte tidspunkter, og hvorfor de kan nærme sig hinanden på andre.

Jeg viser i den empiriske analyse, hvordan skiftende grader af ideologisk og geopolitisk dissonans har ført til ændringer i Saudi-Arabien og Irans respektive trusselsopfattelser tre gange fra revolutionen i Iran i 1979 til de arabiske oprørs udbrud i 2011. Jeg forklarer således i tre kapitler, hvordan og hvorfor bestemte trusselsopfattelser materialiserede sig for Saudi-Arabien og Iran i perioderne fra 1979-1989, 1990-2002 og 2003-2011. Hvert kapitel forklarer afgørende ændringer i det saudiske-iranske forhold, og i sammenhæng viser de den afgørende indflydelse regimesikkerhedspolitik spiller i rivaliseringen imellem dem.

Denne afhandling vil være relevant for alle med interesse for politik i Mellemøsten, interstatslige rivaliseringer og international politik-teori.