

MIDDLE EAST

- The GCC countries. Gulf Cooperation Council: Saudi, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait.
- Persian Gulf is also Middle East: countries which surround the Persian Gulf sea. GCC + Persian Gulf sea area.
- Persian Gulf region plus Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Egypt.

Saudi and Iran have been rivals of each other: Sectarian rivalry between both. Saudi is Sunni dominant with Shia minority, Iran is the opposite. How these policies became sectarian? 1979 onwards, 2 crucial events with huge negative implications happened.

- Revolution of Iran and its implications: - The revolution was very successful in Iran and was the end of monarchy and secular policies. The government of revolutionaries started supporting revolutionary tendencies across the middle east, especially Iraq, Oman, Bahrain, Jordan. Secondly, they promoted Shia Islam by making Supreme Ideological Council led by Imam Khomeini etc.
- Afghan Jihad and Saudi's leading role: - The 3 key players were US, Saudi and Pakistan. Saudi created Jihadist literature led by Wahabi school of thought, promoting Wahabi Islam. Saudi also sent fighters (Arabs) into Afghanistan, which later formed Al-Qaeda.

Both countries supported religious seminaries across the Muslim world with funds and the strategic ones were supported, especially in Pakistan. This gave rise to sectarian violence, also in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain.

Geostrategic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East is because KSA is the status quo power and Iran is the revivalist power.

The revival/penetration of Iran is not acceptable to Saudi Arabia because it hurts its interests.

→ Iraq and Saudi/Iran rivalry: - In 2003, US invaded Iraq and Saddam Hussein's government fell, who was anti-Iran. This gave rise to Shia dominant government in Iraq, which made Baghdad pro-Iran. This also gave rise to Mehdi Militia (non-state Shia force and a proxy of Iran, supported with weapons and money). Gen. Qasim Soleimani drove Middle East policy of Iran for 15 years. Also, Iran found ground access to Syria and Lebanon via Iraq. Iraq is the only country which provides Iran with ground access to middle east (Iran → Iraq → Syria → Lebanon). End of Saddam also meant that Iraq hosted more of Iran. Iraq is the only common neighbor of both Saudi Arabia and Iran. The more is the presence of Iran in Iraq, the more is the threat to Saudi Arabia, in all aspects but mostly in the fields of defense.

Syria and Saudi/Iran rivalry:- Syria is a Sunni dominant country with Shia minority but government is led by Alvi Shia. 22% Shia, 66% Sunnis, rest are Kurds*. The government in Syria is supported by Iran and the rebels are supported by Saudia. Iran was formally requested by Bashar al-Asad government to provide military support against the rebels. So Iran provided extensive support: revolutionary guards to fight against the rebels, a variety of weapons especially drones and artillery, finance to fund the war. Iran also declared rebels as terrorists. On the other hand, Saudia declared them freedom fighters. These are FSA (Free Syrian Army) and al-Nusra. Both are non-state actors, politically motivated, Sunni, tilted towards Syria, wanting end to Bashar regime. Saudia is providing weapons to both.

WHY???

Iran wants continuation of supply line (Iran Iraq Syria Lebanon) to Hezbollah to make it strong. Iran wants Bashar to stay in power (Shia dominant govt, sectarian affinity). Secondly, both support Hezbollah and are anti Israel. Saudia wants weak Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah is so strong that in 2008 it launched unsanctioned attacks on Israel. So strong that the government in Lebanon is secondary to Hezbollah.

Yemen:-

A Sunni dominant country with more than 30% Shia population. It is divided into northern and southern tribes. Northern tribes have always dominated and southern tribes have always been exploited. In 2001, southern tribes picked up arms against the government, which remained tribal till 2011. After that Iran started supporting Houthis and Saudi supported Southern Tribal Council (STC).

Iran is the key financier and weapon supplier to Houthis in Yemen, calls them freedom fighters. Saudi supports govt. of President Hadi through aerial strikes by GCC against Houthis since 2015. Saudi and UAE hired non-state actors from Sudan called RSF (rapid response force). led by General Hannon from Sudan.

Yemen has great geostrategic importance for both countries. It is the immediate neighbour of Saudi. Iran-supported Houthis have become an existential threat for Saudi. The more the presence of Iran in Yemen, the greater the influence of Iran would be on the Shia population of Saudi.

Strait of Aden (goes through a province of Yemen called Aden) accommodates 70% of Saudi's oil trade.

Negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Iran:-

Repeated efforts between Saudi Arabia and Iran carried out by Pakistan in 1997, 2015, 2020. Repeated efforts by Pakistan and Iraq e.g. 2020 table talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but such negotiations could not start the normalization of relations/reconciliation until China jumped into it and played a crucial role. Beijing hosted the first negotiations for a fruitful negotiations after 2010. This caused initiation of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both had called back their ambassadors in 2016. But in 2023 they not only resent ambassadors but also resumed full-fledged relations. The visits by foreign ministers to the capitals are due.

Iran/ UAE resumption of diplomatic relations

Same as Saudi Arabia - Iran.

Far-reaching implications on Middle East and Pakistan:-

- UAE and Iran
- Iran and Saudi Arabia announced to play a role in the peace process in Syria. Saudi Arabia agreed on continuation of Bashar regime. After 2011, for the first time, Bashar participated in Arab League on invitation of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia also announced not to provide any military support to FSA and al-Nusra. Iran also announced not to provide military support to Bashar. Moreover, a comprehensive strategy will be adopted: negotiations between govt. and rebels, socio-political reforms in Syria.

Saudi-Iran Reapproachina and Yemen:-

Iran will not support Houthis, Saudi will not support Hadi, both will pressurize parties to stop war and negotiate. Iran would address Saudi apprehensions regarding Houthi rebels.

Saudia-Iran and Pakistan:-

Saudi-Iran rivalry has been having negative impacts on Pakistan. Sectarian violence erupted across the country because of rise of sectarian militant groups like Lashkar-e-Tahqiq, Sipah-e-Sahaba, Sipah-e-Muhammad, Fatimoon, etc. These groups have been responsible for sectarian attacks and killings in Peshawar, Hangu, D.I Khan, Karachi, Sukkur, Hyderabad, Gilgit, D.G. Khan, Faisalabad and particularly Jhang. Religious seminaries responsible for sectarian hatred produced literature, received funding from Iran and Saudi. Sectarian terrorism has been a far greater threat than general terrorism because the nation is united against the latter but divided on the former.

Solution:- Normalization of relations between the two countries will significantly reduce negative impacts on Pakistan.

Confusion in Pakistan's Foreign Policy:-

Pakistan has been having a persistent tilt towards Saudi since 1979 because of Saudi's immense economic importance. 2.4 million Pakistani expats working there

\$8 billion dollars annually. Saudi also grants repeated bailout packages. Then there is the massive diplomatic importance, because antagonizing Saudi means antagonizing the whole Arab world. For example, UAE increased relations with India to teach us a lesson. Then there is the spiritual importance to the Muslims not just in Pakistan but all over the world.

Iran is an immediate neighbor, so smooth functioning relations are necessary. Ethnic Baloch live on both sides of the border. Spiritual importance as 28% of Pakistan is Shia.

Benefits:-

Since long, there have been no good relations with Iran. This is an opportunity to befriend Iran by completing the pending gas pipeline which could become the lifeline of energy sector of Pakistan by providing 775 million ft^3 of gas/day. Pakistan has already declared Saudi as partner in CPEC, now we can declare Iran an official partner too. Pakistan-Iran-Turkey railway track chances will increase. Track is already present, and all parties want to materialize it. This will be a major solution to whether we should go to Saudi or Iran.

Non-State Actors:-

Al-Qaeda: Presence in Sudan, Yemen, Iraq (2003). Al-Qaeda has wanted to establish caliphate, resistance against western imperialists, resisting against pro-west governments in Muslim world.

ISIS:- It was actually Al-Qaeda in Iraq (2003). It divided into Al-Qaeda and al-Nusra in 2006. In 2010, al-Nusra divided into al-Nusra and ISIS. First presence of ISIS was in Iraq in 2013. Then Syria in some areas. Then it expanded to middle east and renamed itself Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL). Afghanistan chapter is ISKP. It is anti-west-anti Shia.

Al-Nusra:- Originally the branch of Al-Qaeda (2006). In 2013 it delinked itself from al-Qaeda and declared itself a political organization.

Free Syrian Army:- It is a political, Sunni, Syria-based group and allied with al-Nusra, both supported by Saudi and allies.

Houthi Rebels:- They are in Yemen. In 2001, southern tribes in Yemen initiated an armed resistance against the capital Sana'a. This armed uprising was supported in Iran in 2011 onwards. They are Shia-Sunni mixed, but support of Iran and Saudi caused divide in southern tribes.

Southern Tribal council = Sunni = Saudi and UAE

Houthis = Shia = Iran.

Hezbollah:- It is the first non-state actor group in middle east. Founded by Hassan Nasrullah, it has 3 versions. ① Jihadist - fighting against Israel. ② Sectarian - fighting against FSA/al Nusra. ③ Political - it participates in elections and becomes part of parliament in Lebanon.

Political structure in Lebanon:- Parliamentary form of government. PM (always Sunni), President (normally Christian), Speaker of parliament (always Shia). Cabinet is a mixture but 2 portfolios out of finance/defence/foreign are always Shia. Historically, the government in Lebanon has always been supported by Saudia, even the power-sharing agreement was brokered by Saudia.

★ Kurd is an ethnic group comprised of Shia, Sunni and non-Muslims. It is a continuous territory divided into 5 countries:- Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Iran and Armenia. Kurds have been fighting for a separate homeland in Iraq, Turkey and Syria, but struggle is individual in every country. Kurds in Iraq have autonomy, and they have best relations with Turkey.