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**IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA: THE TWO ANTAGONISTS**

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**ABSTRACT**

***Objectives:*** The relations of the two Middle Eastern countries namely Saudi Arabia and Iran have mostly remained strained. Various upheavals stress the relations of the two on domestic, regional as well as international level. One of the driving forces of Saudi-Iranian enmity is the yearning to acquire power and to have a foothold in the region. For this reason, foreign policy of both the countries has aggravated by the need of becoming regional power and to have command over geopolitical events, as both countries closely equate regional dominance with regime sustainability. Currently there are obstacles that shape and determine their potential relations and it remains a matter of concern whether they will agree to negotiate.

***Methods:*** The essence of the work is to trace out the origins of the rivalry between them through descriptive and to scrutinize whether the two can make peace through evaluative research. The information provided below is comprehensive and tries to present an in-depth understanding regarding the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

***Findings:*** The major findings of the paper work reveal the rivalry has not only created barrier between them but their involvement in the region has turned the rivalry into a bigger quarrel.

***Recommendations:*** The present situation has made it difficult to reconcile yet keeping the historical background in mind, it is not quite unachievable.

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**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia, Iran, Realism, Rivalry, Relations, Influence, Peace, Middle East, Cold War, Regional Hegemony, USA

**INTRODUCTION**

Middle East is a region that one can probably see in the news day-to-day. It is a region full of conflicts. One of the most significant rivalries that lie in the region is the relationship of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The two regional powers were not always on the bad terms

nonetheless the ties started to loosen during the 1970s. There have been a lot of contributing factors that steered the roadway towards foe ship among the two. First, both Iran and Saudi Arabia are Muslim countries yet share different Islamic ideologies; Shiite Islam and Sunni Islam. Iran is a Shiite dominated state while on the other hand majority of Saudi Arabia's population is Sunni. Both the countries want hegemony in the region. In this power struggle, these two antagonists have built-up nothing but turbulences in the region. Out of few factors that fueled up the fire among the two one prominent influence can be seen in how the two parties held their relation with the United States of America (USA).

Realism is a body of literature that deals with a theoretical discussion on the position of structures and states. The analytical underpinning of regimes and states is what is called 'realism' in the philosophy of international relations, an approach that focuses on stability and power maximization. They believe in a power-grabbing system attained by the extreme traditional measures i.e. war and military forces. Realism considers states as unitary agents trying to utilize their advantages within a competitive or lawless structure, following power politics. Seeing conflict-ridden world realism emphasizes that states are obsessed notably with their stability and in seeking force as the way to guarantee their existence. Similarly, Iranian Saudi rivalry has everything to do with power.

#### **HISTORICAL BACKDROP OF SAUDI-IRANIAN RELATIONS**

Historically, Iran and Saudi Arabia have had little good relations with each other. It is necessary to trace the historical perspective of the Saudi-Iranian relationship back to the establishment of the Al-Saud government and the Pahlavi's. From 1925 to 1930, competition between the rulers of the two states to declare dominance remained intense (Fatima, Zehra, Malik, 2017). The diplomatic ties formally knotted in 1929, by signing a treaty of friendship. Despite the sectarian differences and political problems, the agreement established mutual recognition (Hadzikadunic). The signing of the Saudi-Iranian Friendship Treaty paved the way for official diplomatic ties to initiate.

Their formal relations remained smooth despite scant interest in each other in the 1930s and early 1940s. However, due to the clash over religious practices, especially during the Hajj, the relationship fluctuated. A single incident of 1943 led to the break-in relations when

Saudi executed an Iranian pilgrim. The relations resumed shortly due to their mutual interest in the 1950s (Grumet, 2015). Both Saudi Arabia and Iranian were grappling in the Middle East with antimonarchic nationalist revolutions. The two states were also involved in preventing President Nasser of Egypt and his Arab nationalist ideology. The British withdrawal from the Middle East in 1971 was another matter that demanded their shared attention (Weddington, 2017).

British presence began to wane in the Gulf in the 1950s, due to the increasing American involvement. When Britain agreed to vacate the Persian Gulf in the late 1960s, it was one of the decisive points in the history of Saudi-Iranian relations. A political vacuum in the region formed following Britain's withdrawal. Nevertheless, the United States was heavily embroiled in Vietnam and was unable to carry over the position left by Britain. As Britain would no longer defend Western interests in the Gulf, a power void as well, as fear of Soviet intervention arose. A Twin-Pillar Strategy was adapted to hedge against possible communist intervention in the region in which Saudi Arabia and Iran played a role being the local powers. The policy failed in 1979 when the Shah was overthrown (Weddington, 2017).

Iran and Saudi Arabia were competitors in the Persian Gulf region prior to the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, but they cooperated occasionally and were probably not adversaries. However, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was a major setback for the Saudi-Iranian Relationship. The Islamic Revolution laid Iran towards the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was an antithesis of Saudi Arabia's monarchy. The revolutionaries of Iran constituted its regime as opposed to Saudi Arabia. Their radical doctrine was contrary to the conservatism of Saudi Arabian empire, primarily an American coalition (Weddington, 2017).

Diplomatic relations were worsening and hit rock bottom in the 1980s. During the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, Saudi Arabia alongside Kuwait supported Iraq, enabling it to develop arms and intelligence on a far larger scale than Iran. Moreover, Saudi and Iran have engaged in a heated rivalry in the neighboring states. For instance, helping competing militant forces in the Lebanese Civil War, the Soviet-Afghan War, and other wars, aside from the Iran-Iraq War. There was no appropriate resolution to alleviate the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Weddington, 2017). The further already tense

relationship deteriorated due to the 1987 Hajj incident, when some 400 Iranian pilgrims, were killed during the annual Hajj by the Saudi security forces. Although diplomatic relations were partially restored, in the formative years of the 1990s, after Khomeini's death, and there was rapprochement, but still a mutual interpretation of regional foreign policy and security partnerships were not formed (Grumet, 2015).

At the end of the day, though peace appeared obvious, profound exchanges of enmity and hate persisted. The Cold War, which appeared to have ended in the 1990s resumed actively after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Middle East, however, found itself in the midst of intense turmoil between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which embodied a rivalry between competing doctrinal values of Islam and radically different political regimes (Grumet, 2015).

#### **THE REGIONAL IMPACT ON THE RIVALRY**

It is interesting that Iran and Saudi Arabia's tendency is to avoid direct conflict in order to protect their immediate border stability, even when Saudi Arabia and Iran disagree on policy matters. Instead, regardless of how evasive the purpose of pursuing diplomatic solutions by these means is, they depend on indirect, stealthy, or proxy maneuvers. (Keynoush, 2016)

In 2011, during the Arab Spring uprisings, Yemen's regime collapsed, leaving Iran and Saudi Arabia with a political vacuum to leverage (Tierce, 2020). As per a report of Pacific Council (2017), Yemen's undeclared civil war, primarily between the Yemeni government headed by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthi militant faction, abruptly erupted into a catastrophe that had far-reaching and global consequences throughout the region. Iran as a primary foreign sponsor of the Houthis has allegedly given them military assistance, which include weapons. Alarmed by it, the airstrike campaign by Saudi Arabia against Yemen to revive the Hadi government in 2015 indicated the origins of a proxy war against the indirect recognition by Iran of the non-state entity in the northern portion of Yemen (Tierce, 2020).

The reason for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen derives from religious beliefs and concerns for their own survival along their southern frontier. Iran also made common theological arguments for their patronage with the Houthi Rebels. In the region, Tehran attempts to counter Saudi and U.S. domination, and the Houthis reject the Saudi

and U.S.-backed government of Hadi. In September 2019, the eastern oil fields of Abqaiq and Khurais in Saudi Arabia were targeted by air, crippling almost half of the oil production of it. Even though the Houthis took the accountability, yet Saudi Arabia and the US accused Iran of carrying out the attacks (nytimes, 2019).

In addition, the participation of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Yemeni civil war is also focused on geostrategic and economic benefits. The motives of Iran and Saudi Arabia can be seen in the importance of the oil transport of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait that is of immense significance. If Saudi Arabia were to seize possession of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, Iran's transportation of oil from the Hormuz Strait would be under risk. In this situation, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait generates a security dilemma for both the economy of Iran and Saudi Arabia (Tierce, 2020).

Iran became embroiled in a prolonged war with Iraq soon after the revolution. In the eight years of the Iran-Iraq War, Saudi Arabia facilitated Iraq financially and politically, viewing it as a fortification against any possible Iranian provocation. The relation of Riyadh and Tehran further exacerbated by this support (McMillan 2015).

Before the 2003 invasion, Saudi Arabia and Iran had expressed a common perspective on Iraq. In seeking to gain influence in Iraq, Tehran has been considerably more active than Riyadh since 2003 particularly because it was concerned by the sudden increase of U.S. military force and influence in Baghdad's surrounding states. Tehran and Baghdad had shared enmity for a long time likewise the affability of Saudi-Iraqi relations ended when Baghdad attacked Riyadh during the Gulf War. American interference in the Persian Gulf altered the political structure. Once Iraq's predominantly Shi'ite community rose to power it converted from an Iranian adversary to a mainstay and started to get guidance from its Shi'ite brothers in Iran. Under a series of post Saddam Shi'ite led regimes, Iran has dramatically strengthened its ties with Iraq, whereas Saudi Arabia has kept somewhat tense relations with many Iraqi politicians, including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (Terrill, 2011).

The possible rise of a powerful anti-Saudi Shiite government in Iraq headed by pro-Iranian leaders was one of Saudi Arabia's biggest fears after Saddam's demise. Precisely, the Saudis were definitely worried that any founding of a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad may perhaps build the circumstances under which Iraq and

Iran could unite to mobilize against them in diplomatic propaganda. The announcement of an Iran-Iraq military agreement on July 2017 undeniably raised concern in Riyadh (Terrill, 2011).

The interests of Iran, Turkey, and Syria in the region and mainly the likelihood of their alliance with one another are of greater concern to the Saudis. Iran, evidently, is of critical apprehension, and the Saudis are clearly concerned about ongoing Iranian efforts to break through Iraqi society and create long-term power within the region through the Shia community.

For Riyadh, Bagdad was no more a bulwark against Tehran and Saudi started to see Iranian intervention in conflicts across the Mideast. With the emergence of the Arab Spring in 2011, this concern further escalated (Weddington, 2017). Based on deep domestic complaints against the oppressive Assad regime, Syria's destructive civil war started. The dispute, however, soon took on an international depth as well when the foreign patronage of local powers converted it into a larger proxy battlefield. The clash between Iran, which has strongly supported the government of Bashar al-Assad, and Saudi Arabia which has long been the mainstay of opposition, has been at the center of this external conflict (Sleiman-Haidar, 2018). The impact that Tehran accrued through its support for Syria and Iraq worried Riyadh, as it feared being pulled to the side. Because of the rise of Tehran, Riyadh saw its potency and influence waning (Weddington, 2017).

In the Middle East, Syria has traditionally remained Iran's principal ally. Backing up Assad's regime guarantees an ally against Israel and Saudi Arabia who are regional Iranian competitors. Syria is of great importance also because Iran wants it to transport weaponry to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The broader aim of Tehran is to establish a land corridor through Baghdad and Damascus stretching from Iran to Lebanon. In contexts of diplomatic assistance, in all international forums and in the midst of several crises, Iran has always stated its unwavering support for the Syrian regime. Syria was one of only two Arab states after the Iranian Revolution that supported Tehran with diplomatic and strategic assistance during the Iran-Iraq War (Awaad, 2019).

A decades-long urge to sever the coalition between Syria and Iran stimulated Saudi's aid for the Syrian rebels. The Saudi response to the Arab Spring was to suppress instability before it enters Saudi

territory and to ensure that Iran does not get any gain through it. The eruption of the Syrian rebellion came as a golden chance for the Saudis to target Iran's main Arab ally. Saudi Arabia's military power to interfere directly was not sufficient hence, it used its oil resources to arm Syrian rebels and guarantee that a supportive government replaces Assad's dictatorship (Manfreda, 2019)

One particular factor why Iran has centered its diplomatic endeavors on measures to deter violence against Syria is that Israel and the US do not take it as justification for declaring war against it. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has pursued all forums to offer logistical support to opposition movements and has worked to denounce the Syrian government. The war was never solely based on Syrian grievances in both nations, but rather a broader battle for regional control (Awaad, 2019).

On the other hand, Lebanon has also been a proxy battlefield for both Iran and Saudi Arabia for decades. Tehran demonstrates its influence via influential Shia political party and radical organization, Hezbollah, which formed in 1985 as a reaction to Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Likewise, for years, Saudi Arabia has upheld significant economic, historic and political ties with the family of Saad Hariri and has committed itself in curtailing the Iranian sway in Lebanon (TRTWORLD, 2019). Following 1989, Taif Deal, Saudi Arabia became profoundly involved in Lebanese politics. Saudi Arabia helped mediate the concord and designed the agreement to strategically accommodate the demographic transition to a Muslim majority and to reassert the Lebanese government in the South (Grumet, 2015).

After the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the Cedar Revolution followed the diplomatic instability of 2005. The latter and the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006 emerged as the key catalysts for intensified involvement on both sides (Wehrey, Karasik, Ghez, Hansell, Guffey, & Nader, 2009). Iran and its influential Shi'ite Ally, Hezbollah, were prominently accused of being behind the assassination of Hariri, and his death heightens the sectarian tensions of the region. The domestic political conflict in Lebanon since the assassination of Hariri in February 2005 has composed an opportunity for Iran and Saudi Arabia to test each other's intentions and objectives in that state. The murder ignited long-

dormant conflicts between two opposing coalitions and Tehran and Riyadh's respective allies (Grumet, 2015).

Saudi Arabia has indicted Iran for playing a subversive role in Lebanon through expansionism, supporting terrorism in the form of Hezbollah and for intensifying tensions in the region for regional dominance and control. The fight of numerous Iran-backed Shia militias against the Islamic State has also intensified the power of Teheran in the Levant, which would not be easy for Saudi Arabia to undo. Thus, as the rivalry, involving regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran has been extended to Lebanese politics as it holds a position in the contention. The backing of opposing forces by the two states as a way to expand their own power in the Levant has only worsened political, sectarian and security instability in Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia incorporates a vital interest in Bahrain, too, for both political and economic purposes. Politically, King Abdullah and other family members of Saudi ruling family count on the al-Khalifa family in Bahrain to take care of a friendly relationship with its Shia community (Wehrey, Karasik, Ghez, Hansell, Guffey, & Nader, 2009). In addition, the position of Bahrain within the gulf presents a defensive shield against the threat from the Iranian TBM (Rivera, 2015).

Iran is a mutual adversary of both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Bahrain accuses Iran of stirring up demonstrations against the ruling Sunni Al-Khalifa Dynasty by the Shiite Muslim community of the nation, which predominantly make up the bulk of its population. A quick glimpse into the background of the nation shows a record of social instability and political upheaval when the very future of the Al Khalifa regime was at stake as demonstrations erupted in the uprising of 2011. Iran was considered as the driving force of instability started as the demonstrations intensified. It was then the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council forces supported the regime's crackdown on resistance movements in an effort to deter expanded Iranian intervention in the island, and to prevent the expansion of political ambitions to the Kingdom's Eastern Province (Mabon, 2018).

The objectives of Iran in Bahrain are cultural, political, and economic in nature as well. The cultural priorities of Iran in Bahrain are largely drawn from the Shi'ite population of the island nation and a perceived chance to extend Iranian power in the Gulf. Strategically, Shia-led governance may denote opportunities for Iran to alleviate the nation from US military existence in lieu of Iranian military presence.



This would not only eliminate a proactive US base in the territory but would also enable Iranian military forces to be positioned in Saudi Arabia's direct proximity. Moreover, the increased Iranian influence in Bahrain may reap economic benefits, such as increased involvement in southern Persian Gulf oil ventures, participation in projects with other GCC countries, and increased regional investment in the production of Iranian resources (Rivera, 2015).

It is believed that religious disparities have stirred an international "cold war" between the two and both are competing for the Islamic world's hegemony. However, despite major disparities between Wahhabism and Shi'ism, in comparison to political and economic differences and rivalry for regional power, religious divisions are of limited significance to the Saudi and Iranian leaders. The unfriendliness of Riyadh and Tehran is due to a desire for national sovereignty, dominance and status in the region (Tavakol, 2020).

#### **US INFLUENCE ON IRAN-SAUDI RELATIONS**

The United States of America appears to be one of factors that mostly influence the affairs between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Undoubtedly, the US being a super power has had constantly influenced different periphery states. It also goes with the case scenario of these two Mideast nations. The only difference it holds is that US is a known friend to Saudi Arabia whereas it is probably among the toppers in the Iranian adversary's list. This contrast deepens the relationship gap of Tehran and Riyadh.

Saudi Arabia and Iran had a close ties with US during the cold war era and received the same amount of support from US against the spread of communism. Nevertheless, during the second phase a transition from friends to foes happened between Washington and Tehran. The Saudis remained the America's preferred partner and sole receiver of protection and weaponry. The wars in the Gulf and the effects of a new order in the Persian Gulf region have changed the region's political map and even the actions of both Saudi Arabia and Iran, speeding up their quest for hegemony. In order to keep up with the dramatic developments and to preserve the influence in the region, these two nations have experienced major changes both internally and externally (Fadaee, 2017).

The most significant US involvement in the Middle East is maintaining the free flow of oil. The main geopolitical priorities of

America in the area since at least the 1970s is in maintaining convenient access for itself and guaranteeing a free and secure market for it. Saudi Arabia embraces one of the largest oil reserves in the world surely giving the USA a permanent ground to hold tight onto the Kingdom.

Since the 1940s, good U.S.-Saudi diplomatic ties have overcome a number of obstacles and have maintained a special connection. They have been an ally on the premise of the need for the USA to protect its access to oil. As for Riyadh, it was the necessity of a strong ally and assurances against internal and external challenges to its stability (Fadaee, 2017).

After 1979, US-Iran relations have been fundamentally contentious. Antagonism is rooted in the US hostage dilemma, the banning of Iranian resources and divergent interpretations of the Middle East's security structure. Moreover, US support to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war also soured up the relations of these two. Despite numerous promising steps to normalize bilateral ties, these overtures remain hindered by many problems. The regional peace process, extremism and Iran's nuclear debate continue to create hurdles to the pathway of peaceful relations. The biggest obstacles to stress-free ties are internal politics and US regional partners that are Saudi Arabia and Israel (Hussain, 2015).

The 9/11 attacks drastically altered USA's policy in the Mideast. The US was willing to restructure both the region's international and national politics. Washington DC viewed Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Syria as a pariah states against which the use of coercive measures were legitimized as a necessity to make the world a safer place through the rhetoric of war on terror. The regional balance of power was reconfigured by this international intervention. USA and Saudi Arabia further improved their alliance, showing how essential the security for each capital was (Valz, 2016). In 2003, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq resulted in the Saudis being startled by Iranian aspirations. The fall of Saddam and his government enabled the Iraqi Shia to rise to power among which some had very close ties with Tehran (Aftandilian, 2018). A secure Iraq that could be used as a base of operations for an American incursion of Iran was Tehran's primary concern. Iran then backed the counterinsurgency in order to break the coalition (Valz, 2016).

Moreover, as Saudi Arabia was anxious about the risk of an Iranian-mandated Iraqi regime that would boost the political status of Tehran, it financed the "Awakening" Sunni militias, fiercely opposed to both Al-Qaeda and Iran. Riyadh was prone to work with the US to remain competitive in their race for regional power. It is hypothesized that the meddling of an external power will fuel regional rivalries. Claiming that the US-led invasion of Iraq offered grounds for Tehran and Riyadh to increase their regional control, the vital power balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which appeared to be the strongest long-term assurance of the stability of the Gulf, was broken (Valz, 2016).

#### **IS PEACE POSSIBLE BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA?**

Peace isn't a utopian concept. It is something that can be achieved if one really has a will to put aside all the differences. Similarly, Iran and Saudi Arabia may establish harmony through keeping few factors in mind. Firstly, the *ideological differences*, the distinction is more political than religious. Under the spotlight of the Era of Co-operation, both the nations' had enjoyed good ties proving the things can change for better once again. For instance, Saudi Arabia and USA has contrary ideologies yet has such strong relations with one and other. Similarly, Iran shares strong ties with nations that are complete opposite in faith. Therefore, it is plausible that the ideological factor can be kept aside. As far as USA is concern being a super power it can take an initiative through diplomacy. Since 1979 Iran and USA has not share any formal diplomatic relations. As USA has the leverage over the region, effects can be put into Saudi-Iranian re-approachment. The point is to remain objective and neutral in the process.

In an online interview Amin Saikal (Distinguished Professor of Political Science at The Australian National University), when asked whether peace is possible between Iran and Saudi Arabia Amin stated: "Yes, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been able to co-exist peacefully for long time and of course, there have been no direct contradiction between the two states since the Islamic Revolution and the rise of the Islamic regime in Iran. One must not need to forget that during the Shah, when the Shah was presiding over a pro-western regime and Saudi Arabia was a pro-western actor in the region. During the revolution, there have been difficulties between the two but during

President Khatami and President Rafsanjani, Iran and Saudi uphold steady relation beside their historical geo political differences. They had very good working relationship. Situation really changed on several extend during Ahmedinejad who exhibited a more assertive policy towards Arab kingdom. Yet, a potential for peace has always exist.”

He further added regarding the countries who can act as a mediator between the two: “European Union can play an important role in the whole process. France, Germany and Britain, which are the also signatories to the Iran Nuclear Deal have been very keen to do whatever they can to keep the agreement alive. Although the deal had lost, the support during the moment as Trump’s Administration has withdrawn from the it and Iranian has retaliated by reducing the number of their commitments to their agreement. Even so, the European signatories together with Russia and china are very keen to make this agreement work. My hunch is if the Biden’s administration decides to improve relations with Iran certainly, the America’s important European allies particularly France and Germany can play an effective role in the process. And if there is a degree of correspond between Washington and Iran that will also really benefit the relationship across the Atlantic” (Amin Saikal, Online Indebted Interview, 21<sup>st</sup>-Dec-2020).

However, as recent normalization process between Israel and the Gulf States and Saudi Arab’s indirect support to the deals appears that the Iran-Saudi relations will remain at odds in future.

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this research is to examine a historical background of the Saudi-Iranian relationship to trace out the origins of the rivalry between them through descriptive and to find out whether the relations between Tehran and Riyadh can get any better in near future through exploratory research. This research is Qualitative in nature. The secondary data presented is collected from a variety of sources including books, research journals, articles and online sites. Key information has been drawn from newspapers, videos and especially Middle Eastern news sources. Additionally, the subject that, can Iran and Saudi live in harmony is the part of my research work, so, to figure that out the work consist of primary data collection as well.

## CONCLUSIONS

Middle East is a region where there is hardly any nation without a rival. The deep-rooted contentions make it impractical for the countries to pull each other out of this mess mainly when each has their own fight. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is a similar case. As the above work displays, the struggle for power, sectarian differences, the involvement of U.S.A, proxy wars and the political maneuver has almost made peace currently unattainable. Reconsidering these factors may make a way to tranquility. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran has the potential to really marginalize or eliminate one another, but they are adequate to preserve this competition by diplomatic, strategic and even military means, even though each faces political and economic complexities. This ongoing struggle has kept the prospect of the Middle East hostage. However, considering that the conflict is entrenched in sectarian animosity would be a mistake as there is more to that. At this stage, it is vague how far they are from a détente or a peace deal, and yet, it appears further than ever before that these two major forces will form alliance.

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