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Iran: A Regional Power on the Ascent

Abstract

The United States of America is militarily and diplomatically disengaging from the Middle East. Concurrently, Iran as a Regional Power is on the perceived ascent. This article rationalizes the effects of America's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Arab Spring, and the Nuclear settlement with the P5+ group of nations on the distribution of power in the region. By utilizing Balance of Power Theory with reference to the distribution of power in the region, an examination of Iran interests in the region after 2017 and strategy for approaching these aims will be sort after.

Keywords: Middle East, Iran, Balance of Power, Saudi Arabia, Hegemon, Arab Spring, Nuclear Agreement, War

This research paper focuses on the contemporary geopolitical challenges Iran faces in the Middle East, by utilizing Balance of Power Theory with specific reference to analyzing the distribution of power in the region. An examination of Iran's key interests and agendas in the Middle East after 2017 and a consideration of how Iran will face and approach those interests will be sort after. With this in mind, it elaborates on how the perception of an apparently ascendant Iran is concurrently happening while America disengages from the Middle East and re-orient its focus to the Asia-Pacific Region. In this context, the article rationalizes the effects of America's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Arab Spring, and the Nuclear settlement with the P5+ group of nations on Iran's distribution of power in the region. Essentially, the article will study the usefulness of applying the balance of power theoretical model to Iran's behavior in the Middle East and at the same time discusses the Saudi Arabian attempt to counterbalance her ascent. In order to arrive at the future regional distribution of power, it is necessary to elaborate on the factors that have led to the current competitive, geopolitical environment. The hypotheses posed here are: whether American actions and subsequent re-orientation away from the Middle East influenced a realignment of motives and alliances among regional actors; and whether the new distribution of power, which was previously described as a delicate balance of interests, leads now to the ascent of Iran as a regional Hegemon.

Theory: Balance of Power, Power distribution and Hegemony.

Before an analysis of the Middle East as a region, and Iran as an ascendent power can begin, it is important to enumerate

and describe the theoretical processes that will be used to measure and analyse the distribution of Power, Hegemony and an emergent Balance of Power. To this end, Kenneth Waltz describes the structure of states in the international system in the following way, *a structure is an arrangement of states. Only changes of arrangement are structural changes. A system is composed of a structure and of interacting states and, since a structure is an abstraction, it cannot be defined by enumerating material characteristics of the system. It must instead be defined by the arrangement of the system's parts and by the principle of that arrangement.*¹ Within the context of the Middle East, the structure is understood as the spread and levels of capacity exercised by states in the region that make up the system. Here, changes in the structure and power distribution levels are understood within the context of economic, military and geographic reach.

As the Middle Eastern system of states evolves, the distribution of power is seen to be oscillating between alliances and the ambition of individual states competing within the system as rivals. On this point, prestige as a states historical position and her perception is also an important aspect of understanding structural change. Prestige relates to *the perceptions of other states with respect to a state's capacities and its ability and willingness to exercise its power.*² So, prestige in the Middle East as a region relates to a historical perception of power that in the end lends to that regional powers legitimacy. In the Middle East, the perception of

¹ K. N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York: Random House, Google Scholar, pg.80.

² H J. Morgenthau, *Political Realism, Max Weber, and the ... - Jstor.*” <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24579568>, [accessed: 5 September 2018].

power relates specifically to; Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Turkey and more recently, Israel. Arguably, during the current era, Egypt's status as a regional power is questioned. As its prestige has devalued, while its legitimacy and effectiveness in regional calculus is questioned. In the current context, the fall of Mohammed Morsi and the rise of a new military regime financially beholden to its benefactor Saudi Arabia. For instance Egypt plays a supportive role to Saudi Arabian Interest, akin to a ward of a geographic region bending the knee to a monarch. What is more, Turkey's membership of NATO, and also its negotiations with Russia, sees its role in the Middle East buttressed by external Global Powers. Finally, Israeli-Saudi partnership against an ascendent Iran focuses the competition to balance power between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Another important factor in the Middle East's structure is Geography. Saudi Arabia geographically stretches from the strategic Red Sea and the Persian Peninsula. What is more, vast natural resource deposits within its territory also lend itself to the Geostrategic importance of the country. The same could be said of Iran with regards to natural resources, the Persian Peninsula and the geostrategic land corridor connecting Asia to Europe. Comparatively, while Iran has a population of *81 million*, a surface area of *1,745,150 km²*, an annual GDP of *440,000M.\$*, and a defence expenditure per capita of *167\$*.³ Saudi Arabia has a population of *32 million*, a surface area of *2,149,690 km²*, an annual GDP of *680,000M.\$*, and a defence expenditure

³ *CountrycomparisonIranvsSaudiArabia2018*, "countryeconomy.com" <https://countryeconomy.com/countries/compare/iran/saudi-arabia>, [accessed: 14 October 2018].

per capita of 2149\$.⁴ In the Middle East these factors define the regional distribution of Power dynamics between the two. In the end this environment and levels of analysis lends itself to the terms Hegemony and Balance of Power. A Hegemony is characterised as the presence of a state so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system. Whereas, a balance of power is *a state of affairs where no one power is in a position where it is preponderant and can lay down the law to others.*⁵ In the current state of Global Politics, the United States of America is defined as the Global Hegemon and is arguably the only recent example in History. With regards to Balance of Power theory, the environment is characterised through a collection of relatively equal powers competing with each other. A systemic analysis of a balance of power involves, *the acknowledgment by states of each other's equal standing in their systemic environment.*⁶ In this environment states compete, align and balance each others interests against the other - resulting in relatively stable distribution of power - until a balance is met.

Formal parameters of Iran as a regional power

The Iranian regime in 2017 clearly perceived the current regional environment in the Middle East to its benefit. Iranian

⁴ *Countrycomparison Iran vs Saudi Arabia 2018*, countryeconomy.com.<https://countryeconomy.com/countries/compare/iran/saudi-arabia>. [accessed: 14 October 2018].

⁵ R. Little, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths and Models*, pg 13.

⁶ *Realism in Foreign Policy Analysis - Oxford Research Encyclopedia of ...*, <http://politics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-475>. [accessed: 5 September 2018].

President Hassan Rouhani is quoted as saying, *the government., must create a change in foreign policy which is a national demand., by keeping the same goals but also securing the fundamental position of the Islamic Republic of Iran.*⁷ Prior to the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, the Islamic Iranian regime, which was previously confined within its borders, were constrained to its East by a hostile Sunni Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and to its West by a hostile Baathist regime in Iraq. In fact, since the Iranian revolution of 1979, the nascent Islamic regime would see it upend a critical regional balance of power between the Shar's Iran and Israel on one side and pan-Arabism on the other. Henceforth, the Iranian revolution would deny Israel her sole ally in the region, creating a new regional order in the process, that is characterized by tension and violence⁸ - leading to an awkward and at times a hot balance of power.

In response to the overthrow of the Shar and the subsequent changing geopolitical situation in the Middle East, the United States and Israel imposed exacting sanctions, that can be understood within the context of containing the Islamic Republic of Iran's perceived challenge to the regions already existing powers (Egypt, Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia). This containment was largely a success due to a number of factors, including through the control of maritime oil routes in the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea, but also through military bases in NATO member Turkey and the

⁷ *Iran endeavors for realization of national interests, says Rouhani ...* <https://en.isna.ir/news/92070804900/Iran-endeavors-for-realization-of-national-interests-says-Rouhani>. [accessed: 23 February 2018].

⁸ *A Complex Dynamic Between Israel and Iran*, "Geopolitical Futures", <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/complex-dynamic-israel-iran/>, [accessed: 14 October 2018].

Arab Sunni Gulf monarch states. Thus, Iran's challenge is to bypass these hindrances and open up and solidify trade routes to global markets in Asia for its Oil and Gas resources and to open up European trade routes via the Mediterranean Sea. Then, an Iran with unhindered passage through Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean Sea since the outbreak of civil war there, as well as bolstered relations with Russia and China in 2018, is Iran's main foreign policy challenge moving forward. With the theoretical assumption laid out above, Saudi Arabian actions today should be understood as a tense and violent balancing of power between it and Iran in the Middle East. As of 2011, Iranian oil-export revenue, stood at \$95 billion total generated in 2011. Oil exports make up 80% of Iran's total export earnings and 50% to 60% of its government revenue, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit. While in 2009 the latest available date for military expenditure in Iran totalled: \$9,809,000,000 in real terms.⁹ With that being said, Iranian; Economic, Resource, and Military statistics must be considered in light of its situation following the American led Invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 and the Pre 2012 outbreak of the Arab Spring. With that in mind, the 2001 US-led NATO invasion of Afghanistan should be understood as an independent variable affecting the previous regional balance in the region. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan was in direct confrontation with revolutionary Iran. This hostility with the Taliban in Afghanistan is highlighted by 1998, *killing of nine Iranian*

⁹ *TheIranNuclearAgreementandIranianEnergy...*, "AmazonAWS", https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150817_Impact_Agreement_Iran.pdf. [accessed: 14 October 2018].

*diplomats in an attack on its consulate in Mazar-e Shari.*¹⁰ Previously, Iranian revolutionary forces were engaged in the Afghani political theatre by militarily supporting the Shia minority militia, the *United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan*,¹¹ as well as Persian ethnolinguistic Tajiks - against a hyper ethnic and Sunni partisan Taliban. The emerging religious regime, saw it compelled to intervene under various premises; moral, humanitarian, economic and security. As a host country for millions of Afghan Shia and Persian-Tajik refugees,¹² it was an immediate and consuming challenge for its political elites, directly at her Eastern border.

Also, the 2003 American invasion of Iraq should be understood as another independent variable affecting the previous balance in the region. The overthrow of Baathist Iraq allowed for the establishment of a democratically elected Shia majority with major Iranian influencers gaining electoral dominance.¹³ This change in fortune, allows Iran to extend its influence and dominion over oil and gas deposits in Iraq, as well as allowed it unhindered road and airspace connectivity through Syria to the Mediterranean Sea. The US-led invasion of Iraq saw a flurry of deep intelligence cooperation and covert military coordination. It is hard to imagine that American foresight on the matter could be so shallow! One

¹⁰ *The Iran Factor in Afghanistan*, "Foreign Policy", <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/10/the-iran-factor-in-afghanistan/>, [accessed: 23 February 2018].

¹¹ "BBC News | SOUTH ASIA | Who are the Northern Alliance?." 13 Nov. 2001, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1652187.stm. Accessed 23 Feb. 2018.

¹² Class Reshuffling Among Afghan Refugees in Iran by zuzanna olszewska

¹³ "Iraq now an Iranian colony - Kurdistan 24." <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/opinion/cbb8a221-c407-4937-96de-eb4c6796e58d>. Accessed 6 Sep. 2018.

could conceivably mistaken America's intention in opposition, to conventional wisdom. Contrarily, for the sake of not insulting American intentions; let us assume, that at the time, the calculation and thought that Iran would still yet be constrained by another layer of hostile Sunni and Arab nationalist in the region. Thus, with the two above US-led wars considered, a new regional balance among Middle Eastern states emerged. Iran, previously constrained on her left and right flank, is now able to assert its own national security interests on the region's political architecture. The strategic imperative of the older regional actors is the adaption to Iran's ascent as a regional power and this new Balance of interests in the region.

Iran's ascent during the Arab Spring



Figure 1, The Arab Spring as it expressed itself across the Arab world¹⁴

¹⁴ *Arab Spring*, “Revues.org - OpenEdition”, <http://journals.openedition.org/poldev/1431> [accessed: 14 March 2018]

The Arab revolutionary uprising of 2012, known in the West as the Arab Spring, would become a catalyst for change in the Wider Middle Eastern Region. As a single event, the Arab Spring drew both Regional and Global powers into the Middle East's changing balances. In some countries, namely; Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Oman, Kuwait, Jordan, and Qatar some significant democratic reforms have been made. However, contrary to the hopes of democratic peace proponents, these significant protests led in some cases to violent coups and counter-coups, violent suppressions, and in two cases all out carnage - hence the urge to settle the newly emerging Balance of Power. Specifically, four independent variables during the Arab spring led to security and economic opportunities, which ultimately drew Iran into the Arab Spring. Firstly, the 2012 coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Freedom and Justice party in Egypt saw a three-decade-long freeze in diplomatic relations between the two countries come to an end. The region would see the first visit by an Egyptian head of state to Iran, during the Non-Aligned Movement Summit.¹⁵ Iran saw a huge opportunity for itself in supporting the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East. A friendly Egyptian regime served multiple purposes. For instance, through the 2012 election of Mohammed Morsi, Iran's maritime trade access to lucrative European markets via the Suez canal is presented to her as a major diplomatic and economic coup. In effect, achieving a massive shift in the Middle East's balance of power that taken together with the other three variables, ultimately favored Iran's ascent.

¹⁵ *Egypt president to visit Iran, a first in decades*, "The Times of Israel", <https://www.timesofisrael.com/official-morsi-to-attend-non-aligned-nations-summit-in-iran/>, [accessed: 6 September 2018].

Secondly, in terms of serving Iran's main strategic aims in the area, Saudi Arabia, incensed by Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, would attempt an economic embargo of its one-time ally. The rushing to aid by the International community led by Turkey and also Iran against the Saudi embargo, saw Qatar totally switch its allegiance to Iran, allowing the facilitation of Iranian military, humanitarian, and economic activities out of a formerly occupied Persian Gulf.¹⁶ Iran's loss of isolation there came in the form of Saudi overreach in Qatar and Yemen, creating the perception of a now totally unhindered and therefore ascendent Iran. It can be noted that, prior to the Arab Spring era, especially after the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, the Iranian regime was still significantly constrained in its actions in the Middle East, and thus the region can be characterized by a fragile balancing of actors namely; Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran. Now! with a passageway through the Persian Gulf and the Suez Canal Iran is perceived to be on the ascent.

Eventually, Iranian ascent in the region meets certain pushback; from Saudi Arabia in Yemen and a Saudi funded jihadist opposition in Syria. The balancing strategy took a more physical dimension by way of direct involvement in these two countries civil wars. The turning moment was the prospect of an actualized Iranian land corridor through Iraq and Syria and an unhindered maritime route to the Mediterranean Sea through Yemen and Egypt. The latter two being the last two indicated independent variables indicating Iranian ascent to regional Hegemony. In Yemen, the papered-over

¹⁶ *How Qatar Is Winning The Diplomatic War In Its Dispute With ...*, "Forbes", <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2018/01/31/qatar-winning-war-saudi-uae/> [accessed: 14 Mach. 2018].

hostility between the southern Yemeni Sunni dominated areas over the entirety of Yemen, saw the previously maligned Shia minority Houthis in the north try to secede. And in the Syrian theatre, the Sunni majority insurrection against the Alawite-Shia domination politically in Syria, are the main areas of active and hot competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

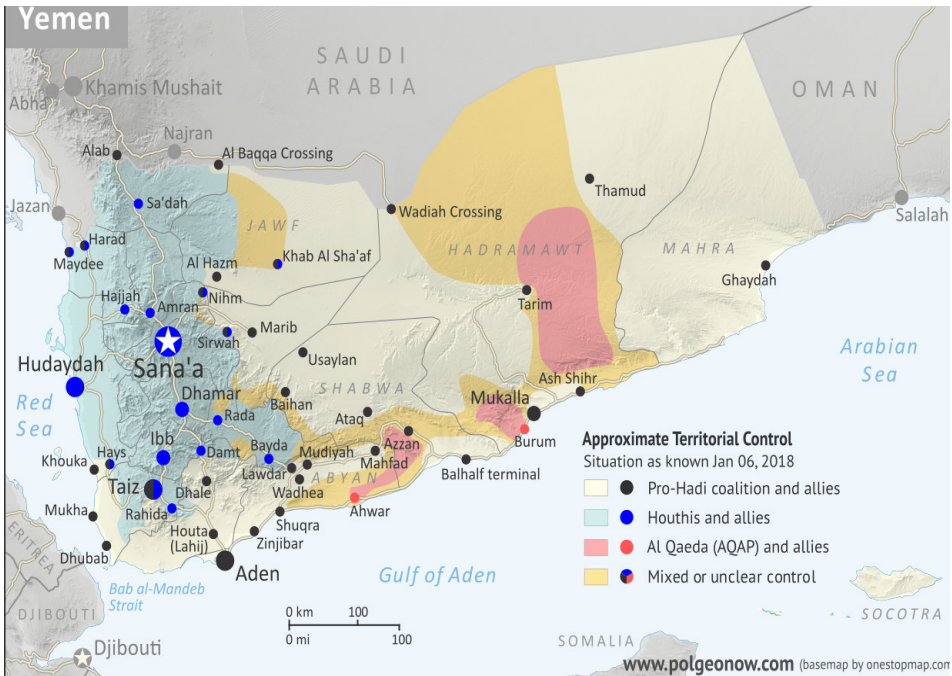


Figure 2, Yemeni Civil War: Map of Control 2015¹⁷

At a descriptive level, this current actualization of an emergent Iranian power can be observed through this quote by the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, *we need to send a very strong message to Iran that its behavior, and nefarious activities,*

¹⁷ *Yemen's Civil War: Map of Control in June 2015*, "Political Geography ...", <http://www.polgeonow.com/2015/06/yemens-civil-war-map-of-territorial.html>, [accessed: 10 April 2018]

*will have consequences.*¹⁸ This type of language is an obvious indicator of high levels of concern and therefore acknowledgment of a changing regional political structure. These regional shifts point further to a new dynamic where Iran's interest in the Middle East as articulated by the above map, is protected. Saudi Arabia's stated concern of an emerging Shia crescent, surrounding her, concerns strategic areas of Yemen controlled by the Iranian supported Houthis and their allies, (in Blue). Houthi controlled Yemen, stretches the southwestern corner of Saudi territory, and also further south at the entrance of the very narrow and strategically significant mouth of the Red Sea. Allied control of this territory protects Tehran's access to the wider global economy and imposes a hard-power element to the tendering of its interests in the global resource market. From the above map and Figure 3 below that. Thus, it could be argued that Iran has succeeded in its mission. Red represents Iran/Assad, while Green and yellow represents a presence by America. A large part of the security triangle has been established, however, Iran has on the in-between been able to control territory allowing it to move freely but not hindered or rather not hidden - Enter an Iranian hegemony in the Middle East and a diminished regional Balance of Power.

¹⁸ *Interview with Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir*, "CNBC Transcript", <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/01/05/cnbc-transcript-interview-with-saudi-foreign-minister-adel-al-jubeir.html>. [accessed: 6 September 2018]

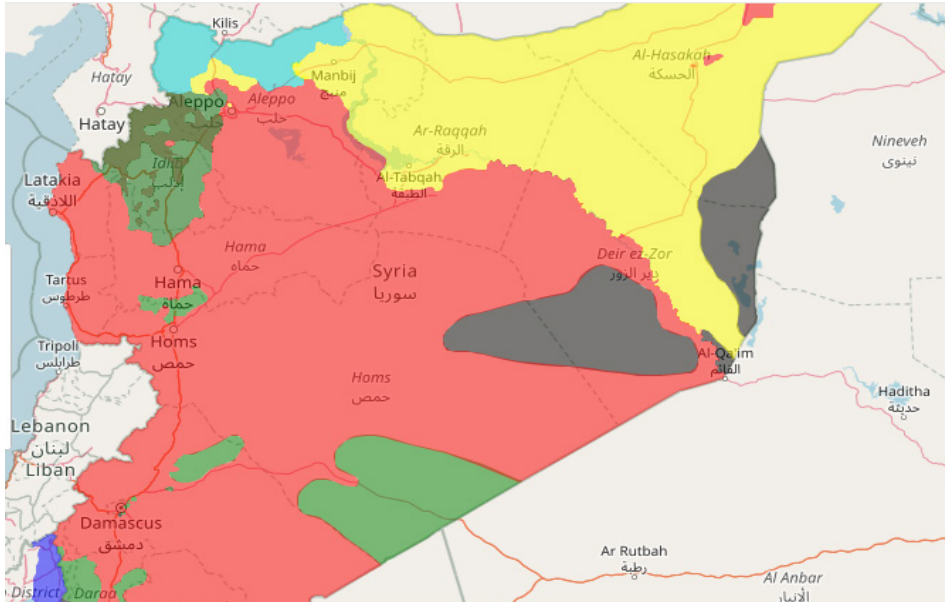


Figure 3, Syrian Civil-War Map, 2018¹⁹

A Hegemonic Iran forcing collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The geopolitical system level analysis can be used to understand the shift in Saudi and Israeli behavior from an indirect approach to a direct approach in countering Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the region. Their direct approach can be understood within the context of America's disengagement from the region during the Obama era;

- *Offshore balancing (2001-2012): Saudi Arabia and Israel rely on the Global Hegemon (USA) to deploy and enforce its power in the region when there are threats to their vital interests.*
- *Direct engagement (2012-2018): Saudi Arabia and Israel directly engage in regional conflicts in several*

¹⁹ *Syrian Civil War Map*, <https://syriancivilwarmap.com/>, [accessed: 11 April 2018].

*countries in the context of bilateral or multilateral alliances, for the purpose of securing their interests and security.*²⁰

There were vital reasons for Saudi Arabia to engage directly as the Arab Spring progressed; Firstly, revolutionary insurrection by the demos threatening Arab regimes is characterized by a static dictatorial political elite. And secondly, in reaction to the separatist tendency by the minority Shia populace in these countries. In this regard, Iran's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood is an important element of Iran's rising regional clout today. Its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood should be considered within the context of a perceived threat to the Arab Monarchic regimes. The Arab spring in 2011, saw Iran label the movement as *an Islamic awakening and considered them as a continuation of its own revolution in 1979.*²¹ One should understand Iran's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, specifically in Egypt as opportunistic despite publications by Iranian linked think tanks on the matter.

As previously discussed, a friendly Egyptian regime served multiple purposes. It distracted the Sunni Gulf monarchs now outflanked by hostile forces seeking Islamic democracy against the tutelage of absolute monarchism, and it saw a cooperative state controlling the Suez canal and the trade and access to European markets that this new environment allowed for. In the end, Iran's threat was too much for Saudi

²⁰ "Offshore Balancing - John J. Mearsheimer - University of Chicago." <http://johnmearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/Offshore%20Balancing.pdf>. [accessed: 5 September 2018].

²¹ *Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood: The best of enemies?*, "Middle East Eye", <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-and-muslim-brotherhood-best-enemies-2061107490>, [accessed: 14 March 2018].

Arabia to handle, With Saudi support, the Egyptian army would seize control in a military-led coup against Mohamed Morsi in 2013.²² In response, the deputy minister of Arab affairs in Iran protested against his overthrow, correctly recognizing the immediate loss of its geo-strategic gains there, and thus condemned the coup.²³ Saudi Arabia subsequently bailed out the newly installed Sisi led government who also gained the ascent of Israel. Saudi involvement in the military coup is undoubtful in its scope and undoubtedly further in its stated aim of checking Iran's advances in the region. Because of the overwhelming diplomatic cover and economic support that the newly installed Egyptian President Sisi received, the American and international reaction was characteristically muted. Iran's protestations boiled down to verbal assurances, *we do not consider the Muslim Brotherhood like a terrorist organization, we call on the Egyptian army to exercise restraint*,²⁴ also condemning albeit only verbally the violent nature of the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's stated concern of an emerging Shia crescent, surrounding her, concerns strategic areas of Yemen controlled by the Iranian supported Houthis. This capable posture against regional and or international aggressors faced a reaction led by a regional coalition of mainly

²² "Transcript: Egypt's army statement, "News | Al Jazeera", <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/07/201373203740167797.html>, [accessed: 14 October 2018]

²³ *Iran says Egypt army intervention 'unacceptable*, "Ahram Online", <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/76015.aspx>, [accessed: 14 October 2018].

²⁴ *Iran says overthrow of Egypt president improper*, "USA Today", <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/07/07/iran-egypt-improper/2497353/>, [accessed: 14 March 2018].

Saudi backed forces. With a two hundred million dollar a day campaign by Saudi Arabia, through a contributed 100 warplanes and 150,000 soldiers to its efforts, the Saudi Monarchy is seen to be pushing back hard.²⁵ The sectarian nature of Iran's role in Yemen threatens an insurrection of the minority Shia in Saudi Arabia. With this in mind, Saudi Arabia's newly ascendent Crown prince seems willing to militarily respond to Iran's advances. What is more, the already discussed strategic importance of Egypt, and Yemen - The populace uprising in Bahrain, as a Shia majority, Sunni ruled island in the Persian Gulf, offered Iranian a way out of its constraints. Realising the threat imposed and the possibility of spillover, Saudi Arabia would send in its forces to crush the uprising. In effect closing another window of opportunity for Iran. Altogether, Saudi Arabia's rallying of the Sunni Gulf states to intervene robustly in Yemen and even Syria saw it gain the opportunity to contain Iran to the Iraqi theatre momentarily, and solidify a sympathetic Sunni Islamist administration there. However, Saudi confidence would begin to wane in favor of Iran once again.

In the case of Israel, she has identified a strategic triangle it calls the Devil's triangle (see below. Israel confirms, holding Iran from this area will contain its expansion and threat to her.

²⁵ *Yemen war costs \$200 million a day for Saudi Arabia*, "Yemen Press", <https://www.yemenpress.org/economy/yemen-war-costs-200-million-a-day-for-saudi-arabia.html> [accessed: 11 March 2018].

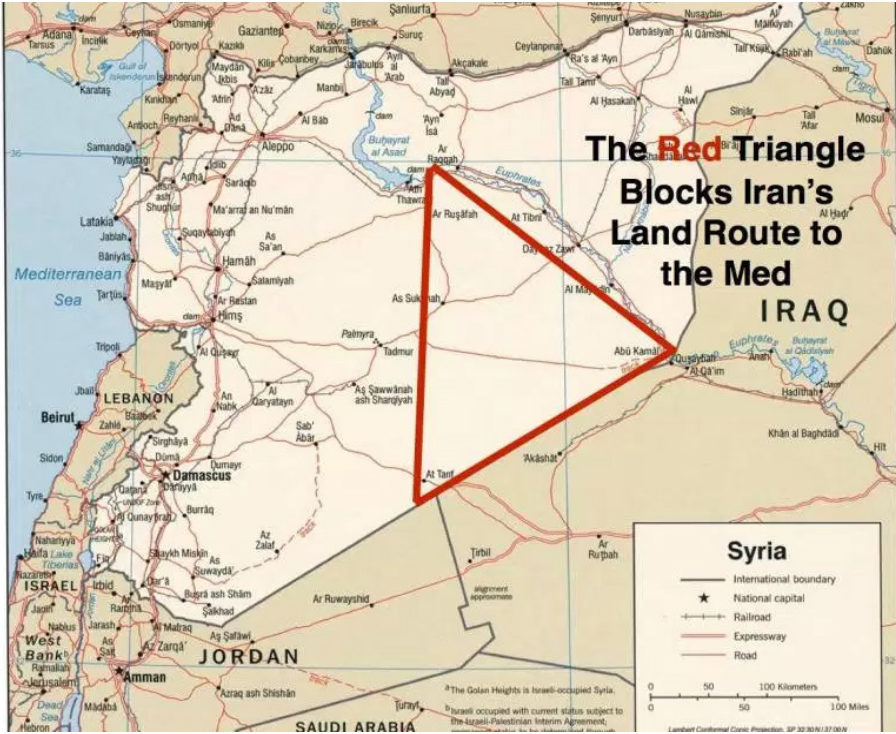


Figure 4, The Devil's Triangle, Syria: At-Tanf/Abu Kamal/Ar Rusafah²⁶

To this end, American and western forces, prodded by Israel were in a direct race with Assad's and Iran's forces for control over these regions from ISIS. Considering the above map, published in the New York Times in February 2018. It is immediately apparent, Iran has an extensive military presence today in Syria, especially if we measure its presence now, to its presence in Syria before the current Syrian Civil-War.²⁷

²⁶ *The Devil's Triangle: At-Tanf/Abu Kamal/Ar Rusafah*, "Israel National News", <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/20523>, [accessed: 5 September 2018].

²⁷ "amos." <http://www.weiboyixia.com/get.php?q=amos>, [accessed: 24 February 2018].

Iranian presence in Syria



Source: The New York Times

Figure: 5, Map of Israeli Strikes in Syria June 2018.²⁸

Observe, Iran's indicated assets on the above map (in red), stretch not only to Israel's border, but also form a strategic defense line from allied Hezbollah concentrated sites in Lebanon, to the Mediterranean port cities of Latakia and Tartus. Iranian backed groups move relatively unhindered through an Iranian friendly Shia regime in Iraq. This corridor gives Tehran access to Mediterranean Sea trade routes, allows for the easier flow of personnel and military aid to its proxy in Lebanon and allows for a larger aerial shield from any potential Israeli strike on Iran proper.

By March 1st, 2018, the Israeli government had conducted strikes on 3 significant Iranian military bases in Syria (in

²⁸ To push Iran back, Israel ramps up support for Syrian rebels, "Haaretz", <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/with-eye-on-iran-israel-increases-military-support-for-syrian-rebels-1.5826348>. [accessed: 10 April 2018].

yellow) and has eliminated many more Iranian military assets over the course of 5 years. With the wing of an Iranian spy drone in hand, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, warns Iran, *do not test Israel's resolve*.²⁹ The Iran of 2018, is undoubtedly an influencer of events in the wider Middle Eastern region. Iran's boutique-like deployment has aided the Syrian regime led by Bashar al-Assad in the civil war considerably and in the process effectively secured a heavily indebted ally in the Syrian regime.³⁰ By securing the route linking the capital Damascus with the President's religious base in Latakia, Iran along with Russia's Vladimir Putin has allowed for a type of victory by the regime over its moderate and extremist opponents. The success of Iran's involvement as strategically acknowledged,³¹ will continue to prompt retribution and reaction by regional powers, especially by the Israeli and Saudi Arabian governments. Israel's famously reactive military posture openly risked major escalation by striking but nevertheless is actively seeking to counter Iran's assertiveness.

Iran's Nuclear Agreement as an Instrument of Power Politics

The change in US strategic priorities in the Middle East brought about several complications at the regional level. The strategic retreat of the United States - especially

²⁹ *Benjamin Netanyahu Warns Iran to 'Not Test Israel's Resolve*, "Time", <http://time.com/5165186/benjamin-netanyahu-israel-iran-nuclear-deal/>, [accessed: 24 February 2018].

³⁰ *\$6-\$35 Billions Annually to Assad: Stronger Iran ...*, "Huffington Post" https://www.huffingtonpost.com/majid-rafizadeh/6-35-billions-annually-to_b_7890164.html. [accessed: 24 February 2018].

³¹ *Mattis: Iran Working to Destabilize Middle East*, "U.S. DEPARTMENT...", <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1398540/mattis-iran-working-to-destabilize-middle-east/>, [accessed: 24 Feb. 2018].

the scope of US military withdrawal from Iraq - suggested a major regional redistribution of capabilities and, as noted above, changes in the distribution of capabilities in a given region tend to transform the regional units' behavior. American disengagement created perceptions of a power vacuum in the greater region; real or imagined, the power vacuum transformed, or contributed to the transformation of, the behavior of several actors and triggered some interesting, albeit violent, regional developments. Clearly, some actors came to the conclusion that they could afford defying the United States, as Walt had thoroughly predicted.³²

The above-posed observation of how one may justify and understand the effects of America's withdrawal from the region can also be applied to the Obama era. Saudi Arabia's and Israel's aggressive response is a direct approach to regional balancing against an assertive Iranian involvement in the wider Middle Eastern region, described above. Taken together with a diplomatic Qatari pivot to Iran, we must also consider the far-reaching Iranian nuclear agreement to understand the geopolitical environment. The July 2015 deal by the 5+1 members of the UN security council (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States, plus Germany),³³ is key to understanding the current political environment in the region as of 2018 and beyond. The formal name of the agreement is *the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* as

³² Hegemony and Balance of Power in the Middle East, "Academia.edu" http://www.academia.edu/33292881/Hegemony_and_Balance_of_Power_in_the_Middle_East, [accessed: 5 September 2018].

³³ P5+1 Nations and Iran Reach Historic Nuclear Deal, "Arms Control", <https://www.armscontrol.org/pressroom/press-release/2015-07-14/P5-Plus-1-Nations-and-Iran-Rreach-Historic-Nuclear-Deal>, [accessed 21 March 2018].

*it's known by its formal name or JCPOA*³⁴ for short. Essentially, this agreement, signed off by the Obama administration freed Iran from international embargo imposed by the international community. The international community's suspicion of Iran's intention to pursue a nuclear program of its own stems from the previously mentioned eight-year war with Iraq, who at the time had its own nuclear ambitions.³⁵ However, it wasn't until the early 2000s that international concern would be united.

To counter Iran's perceived pursuit of nuclear weapons, the international community and its organs led by the US, EU and the UN, would place sanctions on the country, specifically related to *Iran's access to nuclear-related materials and put an economic vise on the Iranian government to compel it to end its uranium-enrichment program and other nuclear-weapons-related efforts.*³⁶ America's sanctions on the Iranian regime target a wide variety of its assets and certain individuals. These sanctions were also aimed at its financial and banking sector and in large part prevented Iran from accessing the international financial system. What is more, American and foreign firms, in general, were prevented from dealing *in the United States or with the U.S. dollar, which then-Treasury Undersecretary David Cohen*

³⁴ *The Iran Deal*, "Scholarly Commons - Northwestern University" <http://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1814&context=njilb>, [accessed: 21 March 2018].

³⁵ *International Sanctions on Iran*, "Council on Foreign Relations" <https://www.cfr.org/background/international-sanctions-iran>, [accessed: 20 March 2018].

³⁶ *6 Things You Should Know About The Iran Nuclear Deal*, "The Two...", <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/07/14/422920192/6-things-you-should-know-about-the-iran-nuclear-deal>, [accessed: 21 March 2018].

*called a death penalty for any international bank.*³⁷ Iranian Oil exports and trade, in general, were significantly curtailed by further American sanctions targeting the oil industry and trade in general.

Besides this, the United Nations via the security council also targeted certain activities and individuals of the Iranian regime. The premise of United Nations sanctions rested on an IAEA compliance reports issued in 2005, which found the regime did not act in accordance with the obligations it set forth. As such, the UN security council imposed sanctions targeting those materials and expertise that were directly related to those technologies *used in uranium production and enrichment, as well as in the development of ballistic missiles, and blocked financial transactions abetting the nuclear and ballistic-missile programs.*³⁸ These curtains would be followed up by further pressure and acts by the UN in 2007, 2008 and 2010, which entailed forbidding economic relations and then required states to inspect all trade with the regime. Also, it should be noted, The European Union, The Iranian regime's largest importer of Oil and Gas harmonized its sanctions regime with those extra sanctions that the American regime had imposed; including travel bans and asset freezes in the 2000s.

So, with considerate impact, the July 2015 deal by the 5+1 members of the UN security council would free Iran of considerate constraint. More than *\$100 billion in Iranian*

³⁷ *International Sanctions on Iran*, "Council on Foreign Relations", <https://www.cfr.org/background/international-sanctions-iran>, [accessed: 21 March 2018].

³⁸ *International Sanctions on Iran*, "Council on Foreign Relations", <https://www.cfr.org/background/international-sanctions-iran>, [accessed: 21 March 2018].

*assets*³⁹ is no longer held from it. Taken together with the alleviation of an oil and gas embargo holding back 15% to 20% of economic growth, it becomes immediately apparent - The nuclear agreement has allowed Iran considerable economic space to grow. With this in mind, it is important to reflect on Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's appeal to the voting population. By, running on a promise to negotiate with the United Nations and the Obama led Administration, Rouhani was able to convince the religious establishment as well as the international community of his sincerity. His active pursuit of the agreement led to an Iranian regime assuring the international community of its sincerity. In effect, the agreement has freed up Iranian assets, its ability to maneuver unhindered in the region, as well as its relations with global and regional powers. Especially, in light of the ongoing Arab revolutions in the Middle East - the nuclear agreement would embolden Iran's expansion and ability to affect change in its neighborhood and thus affect the distribution of regional power.

Conclusion.

The analysis up to now offers a systemic framework for understanding the emergence of Iran in the Middle East and the reaction of Saudi Arabia. It can be said that, since the Arab Spring, the power dynamics in the Middle East has shifted from a delicate balance of power to a potential Iranian hegemony in the region. It is observed that her rize is

³⁹ *No, Donald Trump, we are not giving Iran \$150 billion for 'nothing...*, "Polifact", <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2016/mar/17/donald-trump/no-donald-trump-we-are-not-giving-iran-150-billion/>, [accessed: 21 March 2018].

linked intrinsically with the Obama Eras disengagement and hands-off security *modus operandi*. The nuclear agreement between Iran and the P+5 group of nations has obviously had a significant role in empowering Iran's ascent and thus unbalancing the regional balance of power. What is more, and unlike previous attempts at regional hegemony, Iran geopolitical threat today seems present. There are a couple reasons for this; Iran's ascent is characterized by an obviously well-thought out geostrategic distribution of capabilities at important geographic points. And as a result, since the distribution of power is clearly defined and supported by Shia proxies and Muslim Brotherhood aspirants, her regional legitimacy seems with in hand.

With this being said, the Middle East as a given regional system, has two factors that are central to the distribution of power; *prestige and geography*. Geographically, Iran's alliance with a Muslim Brotherhood ruled Egypt, an Assad controlled Syria and a Houthi controlled Yemen along the Red Sea had provided her with this geographical dominance. This distribution of allies, power and capabilities has made her emergence felt by her main regional competitors. What is more, America's disengagement, and Russia's entry on behalf of the Assad regime suggests a decisive victory for her hegemonic potential. However, the election to power of Donald Trump in 2016 and the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt supported by Saudi Arabia and Israel - has thrown Iran's ascent into question. Currently, the regional instability in the Middle East and diplomatic pressure by Saudi Arabia and Israel on Donald Trump's America has led to a direct strategy of containing Iran. The advent of a renewed policy of Direct engagement (2016-2018): At the behest of Saudi Arabia and Israel, sees America directly

engaging in containing Iran. Recently, *The Trump administration announced its policy towards Iran in May 2018 after; reneging on the country's nuclear deal with the international community.* Mike Pompeo (Secretary of State, USA) demanded, *Iran must withdraw all its forces from Syria, stop supporting its allies Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis in Yemen. It must halt production of long-range missiles, stop uranium enrichment allowed under the nuclear agreement, and agree to inspection of a range of facilities at any time, anywhere in the country,*⁴⁰ and promptly re-imposed economic and security related sanctions. In effect, the hypothesis posed previously, whether American actions and subsequent re-orientation away from the Middle East influenced a realignment of motives and alliances among regional actors, correctly theorises the motives of regional countries to form unique alliances, detailed previously. On the other hand, Donald Trump's readiness to renege on previous agreements with Iran despite European misgivings has definitely prevented an Iranian Hegemony in the region. With this in mind a structure around the nuclear quartet for agreeing to new terms with Iran remains in place. Also, the Geneva process with regards to Yemen and the Astana process with regards to Syria points to the formation of mechanisms to enforce a new regional balance of power and the containment of Iran. What this indicates is the push back of Iran from a potentially regional hegemonic status and the emergence of a new delicate balance of power enforced by these mechanisms imposed by the international community. In the end, and despite the ongoing bloody wars in Syria and

⁴⁰ *After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy*, "The Heritage Foundation" <https://www.heritage.org/defense/event/after-the-deal-new-iran-strategy>, [accessed: 14 October 2018].

Yemen, the relevant parties in conflict will attempt to gain an advantageous position vis a vie the other as a new balance of power settles in to place.

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