

Crisis stability in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry

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Discussing the Saudi-Iran rivalry means that a few issues come to the fore: Iranian support of Hezbollah and the Houthis, the Iranian nuclear program, relations with Israel, the orientation of the Syrian, Iraqi, Jordanian and Lebanese governments, and much more. Thus, this analysis seeks to shed light on the Iranian nuclear program and its effects on the region's crisis stability utilizing theories such as Snyder's Stability-Instability Paradox (1965), Rauchhaus' statistical analysis of escalations when nuclearly armed States are involved, seeking to answer the question of: where is crisis stability in the region headed?

Peace in the Middle-East seems impossible, given the complexity of the region, and the years of conflict that marked it. Sørli and his team argued that there is nothing special in the Middle-East that makes it more prone to conflict. Economic development, ethnic or social fractionalization, etc. were general variables that influence the likelihood of war, making regions more unstable. Variables specific to the Middle-East were analyzed along with the general variables. The specific ones were shown to not make much of a difference, supporting the claim that the region is no more prone to conflict than others (SØRLI, GLEDITSCH, STRAND 2005). With that in mind, nuclear weapons can come into play investigating stability. Nuclear deterrence optimists, such as Kenneth Waltz (2013), view Iran achieving nuclear capabilities as stabilizing for the region. What is Iran capable of now? What will it be capable of in the future? What does that mean for the region? These questions demand answers, but first, we must understand concepts used in this analysis.

Securitization and crisis stability

Understanding patterns of conflict and cooperation in the Middle East requires using the idea of securitization, that is: the process by which things are turned into threats, meaning they are delivered into the realm of "security politics" instead of staying in the realm of "normal politics"

(BETTINA, STIVACHTIS, 2019). The crux of this argument is that nothing is automatically a threat, au contraire, things must be constructed into a threat by an agent, not without reason. Why is this important? Saudi Arabia and Iran, as States, seek to increase their security, minimizing threats. However, one must keep in mind that the coalition of forces in control of these governments are the ones making foreign policy decisions, which means that the State apparatus is used by elites to keep them in power.

With that, we learn that anything can be turned into a threat, even the existence of a different political regime, which can question foundational principles and ideologies of another State, placing the survival of the regime in check. For example, the Arab Spring called into question the legitimacy of autocratic regimes in the Middle-East. Therefore, Saudi Arabia, an autocratic regime, considered it a political threat, due to the question of founding political principles in Saudi political organization.

The other main concept used in this analysis is “crisis stability”, defined by Nye and Welch as “a measure of the pressure leaders feel to escalate to war during an international crisis” (2014). In other words, an astute observer should look for the incentives and costs States have to escalate into war, that is precisely what this analysis intends to do in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Middle-East’s regional powers, namely looking at nuclear capabilities.

Basis of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and military competition

Saudi Arabia is a status-quo power, defined by Daehnhardt as countries that ensure the health of the international system by supporting the existing distribution of power “through the institutionalized mechanisms” that underpin it (2018, p. 2). Thus, Saudi Arabia seeks to maintain relations as they are, externally and internally, even more so as a result of their eternal quest for survival of their regime and State, i.e., threat perception as their main driver (ALMOMANI, 2019). E. H. Carr (1981, p.51-3) said it best: peace, or even pacifism, aren’t values States care about ipso facto, these are values of countries satisfied by the status-quo. Saudi Arabia, therefore, seeks stability in the region. So the resolution of threats to that stability, like the Houthis in Yemen or the Iranian nuclear program, become primary goals.

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Iran is Saudi Arabia's regional rival, meaning the country opposes the status quo. Drivers for this tendency mainly include Iran's grand strategic ambitions of exporting the revolution (NAVAZENI, 2010), and dealing with perceived threats to Iranian sovereignty and its ambitions, with much pragmatism (PERTHES, 2010). Thus, Saudi Arabia and Israel are perceived as political threats to Iran. Since Saudi Arabia benefits from an established order that Iran opposes, and is backed by the US, which Iran perceives as a great threat, Saudi Arabia is perceived as a threat to Iran, creating a situation in which crises are more likely to arise.

One of the key areas that this rivalry manifests itself is in direct military competition, wherein the topic of the Iranian Nuclear Program is of utmost importance. Iran may be attempting to force major powers to negotiate by means of having nuclear weapons, or perhaps it's a way to guarantee Iranian security in an environment where hostile powers have access to nuclear arms (Israel). It might be something else, either way, Iran's Nuclear Program looks strategically appealing.

Likely Scenarios

In the case of the Iran nuclear program, we have a few realistic scenarios: Iran succeeds in getting the bomb, while Saudi Arabia doesn't; Iran succeeds in getting the bomb, and Saudi Arabia also has the bomb; Iran doesn't have the bomb, and Saudi Arabia also doesn't. It's not realistic to consider Saudi Arabia having the bomb while Iran doesn't, because there is little reason to create another nuclear power (that can go rogue, and the alliance is contingent on having a dangerous rival) in another region. Thus, we are left with the three scenarios. The first scenario would generate nuclear asymmetry between the Saudis and Iran; the second scenario leaves us with nuclear symmetry, with nuclearly armed States; finally, we have symmetry, but without nuclear arms involved. In the following paragraphs, I explore the ramifications of each of these scenarios.

In the first scenario, one country doesn't have the means to deliver a sufficiently crippling blow to the other's territory, thereby decreasing the costs of escalation for the nuclearly armed State. Major and minor military action can come to the table. Thus, it follows that crisis stability would decrease, and the region would be more prone to conflict, this is not to say who would have the upper hand in actually winning wars on the ground, but human life in the region can be made worse by more violence (RAUCHHAUS, 2009).

In the second scenario, both Saudi Arabia and Iran continue without nuclear arms. So things would tend to continue as they are: Iran utilizes intelligence, superior drones, and indirect warfare capabilities to exert influence in conflicts in the Middle-East, as well as maintaining financial and military support for allies such as Hezbollah and the Syrian government. Saudi Arabia, who, although struggles to translate that power into results (like in Yemen), has a superior army (CHIPMAN ET AL., 2022), would continue to have the upper hand in a direct conflict, but appears to prefer peace. This scenario hardly yields variations in crisis stability.

It would appear that the second scenario is less likely, as Iran presses forward with its uranium enrichment capabilities. Sanctions imposed in 2012 were enough to stop the program when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) came about in 2015 (ROBINSON, 2022). It seems that, as Josep Borrell claimed, the JCPOA, or the Iran Nuclear deal, is the only option available to stop Iran from getting the bomb (WALL..., 2023). Knowing that Biden declared the deal "dead" (IRAN..., 2023), but is still willing to use "all options available" to deter Iran from getting the bomb (AL..., 2023) leaves what US action will be open for interpretation. On the other hand, the Iranian economy isn't looking the best (REUTERS, 2023), so returning to the JCPOA could increase the government's income, alleviating their budget squeeze. Economic weapons make decisions more costly, but don't seem to have a dissuading effect. The stakes are high, and the US is militarily disengaging from the region (WHITE..., 2022), thus, a balancing act strengthening Israel and Saudi Arabia (US allies in the region) may occur, which leads us to the last scenario.

Similarly, in the third scenario, crisis stability remains unaltered, or may slightly increase. However, it would have a tendency to produce low-intensity, rather than high-intensity conflicts, not entirely unlikely, however extreme it may sound. In this scenario Iran's success in getting the bomb triggers the US to slightly revert their decision of disengagement from the Middle-East region, by the least costly manner to maintain balance in the region without more engagement, which is with nuclear arms (as seen in post-war Europe). There are reasons to believe that the US could do that, since Iran has been identified as a major threat to global security (WHITE..., 2022), therefore containing Iranian power and influence is a top priority, especially if there are no other means available.

Neorealism also provides an explanation for that course of action: it makes good strategic sense for the US, as a regional hegemon, to stop other States from becoming regional hegemons, meaning, to eliminate all other possible rivals in the region. Any bid to regional hegemony by what the US considers an enemy power demands a reaction (MEARSHEIMER, 2014, p.140-143).

The nuclearly armed rivals would engender a Stability-Instability paradox, as proposed by Snyder (1965). In other words: major conflicts risk nuclear catastrophe, so major conflicts are unlikely, both because they won't be directly started, and because minor conflicts won't escalate, rendering minor conflicts more common. This is corroborated by the statistical analysis in Rauchhaus (2009). Again, crisis stability would remain equal, according to this theory, but with a tendency of producing lower-intensity conflicts. Perhaps this is more desirable from a human rights perspective, though unlikely.

Out of the three possible scenarios, the first seems most likely, since Iran appears to be hellbent (and closer than ever) on developing nuclear weapons. This may be a case of brinkmanship, if being able to reinsert Iran into regular relations with the world is the goal, and not actually developing nuclear arms. However, this doesn't map onto reality. In the same way that Saudi Arabia wishes to maximize its security against perceived threats, Iran is on the same quest. Thus being able to deal with the US in the region as a nuclear power, at the same time that it strengthens Iran's position versus Israel and Saudi Arabia, makes achieving nuclear capabilities sound way too good to be discarded, especially when so much has been invested towards enriching uranium to arms-grade levels.

Conclusions

Easy solutions for instability don't exist, it seems that nuclear deterrence is too good to be true. More likely is that Iran succeeds in getting the bomb, bringing with that a nuclear imbalance to the rivalry, making the situation more unstable. On the other hand, the US may extend nuclear protection to Saudi Arabia, a move that is possible by the US, and is rooted in good strategic thinking. If Iran doesn't get the bomb, crisis stability doesn't vary. If Iran does get the bomb and Saudi Arabia doesn't have a nuclear deterrent, the situation becomes more crisis-unstable. If Iran and Saudi Arabia have nuclear backing, crisis stability decreases or may stay the same, this measurement is hard to give.

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