

Investigating the Geopolitical Competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Southwest Asia based on the Theory of Thompson and Claremont (2010-2022)

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Abstract

Iran and Saudi Arabia, as two key players in Southwest Asia, along with Turkey and the Israeli regime, are trying to increase their power and shape their desired geopolitical model in this geographical area. In this regard, this research, using the theory of “Thompson and Claremont”, seeks to investigate the dimensions of the geopolitical competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Southwest Asia.

Method: The method used in this research is “descriptive-analytical” and the method of collecting library and documentary information.

Results: The results of the research according to the theory of Thompson and Claremont show that the geopolitical competition of two countries in Southwest Asia is in three dimensions “spatial competition, situational competition and ideological competition”. In the space dimension, the competition between the two countries has been going on in important space centers in Southwest Asia such as Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and Lebanon. In the situational dimension of the competition between the two countries, in the geostrategic dimension and trying to achieve their goals in the South West Asia region, there has been an effort to equip more military and economic competition in the form of selling energy resources and dominating the energy resources transmission corridors. In the ideological dimension, the main competition between the two countries has been in the field of religious competition in the form of Shiism and Wahhabism, and efforts to form alliances with other countries.

Conclusion: In this regard, Iran’s foreign policy approach is to support the axis of resistance and try to expand its dimensions, and Saudi Arabia’s effort is to support Takfiri groups and use skillful diplomacy to form a coalition against Iran with American support. It should be said that due to the peace agreement of the Israeli regime with the Arab countries and the creeping movement of Saudi Arabia in this direction, in the future we will witness the expansion of the competitive dimensions of the two countries in the geopolitical field of Southwest Asia.

Key Words: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Geopolitical Competition, Southwest Asia, Thompson and Claremont.

Article Type: Research

* Received on 18 December, 2023 Accepted on 4 March, 2024

Cite this article: Mousavi Shahidi, Nasirpour & Zarei (2025) Investigating the Geopolitical Competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Southwest Asia based on the Theory of Thompson and Claremont (2010-2022), winter 2025, Vol.13, NO.4, 99-127.

DOI: 10.30479/psiw.2025.19720.3296



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Publisher: Imam Khomeini International University.

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Introduction

A significant turning point in the evolution of Iran-Saudi Arabia relations was marked by the Islamic Awakening. The widespread unrest across Arab nations in 2012 catalyzed a notable increase in the geopolitical rivalry between these two pivotal countries in the Southwest Asia region. Consequently, the nature of their bilateral relations became a subject of extensive debate and examination, particularly from a geopolitical standpoint, as competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia unfolded in various dimensions from 2012 to 2022. The central inquiry of this research focuses on identifying the factors and contexts that have contributed to the geopolitical competition in Southwest Asia during this period.

Materials and Methods

This research is designed with an applied methodology, acknowledging the significance of the topic, and employs a descriptive-analytical approach while utilizing the “Thompson and Claremont” theory as a framework for interpretation. The information collection was conducted through library and documentary sources, incorporating reputable international data and relevant academic texts in the field of geopolitics to analyze the underlying factors of competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, ArcGIS software was utilized for map visualization to enhance the analysis.

Results and Discussion

The concept of geopolitical competition emerges as a crucial aspect of inter-state relations, underscoring the importance of geographical contexts and elements that influence these relationships. Notable scholars, including Frederick Ratzel, Thomas Homer Dixon, Richard Ashley, Louis Richardson, Jeffrey Kemp, Robert Harkavy, Samuel Huntington, and the proponents of the Thompson and Claremont theory, have made substantial contributions to the understanding of geopolitical dynamics. In the context of the Iran-Saudi Arabia relationship from 2010 to 2022, especially following the Islamic Awakening, the application of Thompson and Claremont’s theory proves relevant as it highlights three pivotal dimensions of geopolitical competition: spatial competition, situational competition, and ideological competition. Analyzing the geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia during this timeframe reveals the presence of all three dimensions.

Spatial Competition

Spatial competition encapsulates the contest over geographical influence among nations, prominently observed within the geopolitical landscape of Southwest Asia. This region serves as a complex network where various actors seek to establish control and exert influence. Key players, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar, are all engaged in energy production, while regional dynamics are further complicated by the involvement

of smaller actors such as Yemen, Syria, Oman, and Egypt. In addition to Iran and Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel also play significant roles within this geopolitical framework. The Islamic sub-network comprises countries in the region, excluding Israel, and is further divided into Sunni and Shiite sub-networks. Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon constitute the Shiite sub-network where Iran is a principal influence, while Saudi Arabia and Turkey are central players within the Sunni sub-network alongside many other regional nations.

Positional Competition

Positional competition pertains to the economic, military, and strategic contestations aimed at securing geopolitical influence in Southwest Asia. The competing interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia have resulted in increased defense expenditures for both nations. As reported by Bloomberg in 2015, Saudi Arabia's heightened arms acquisitions contributed to a significant surge of over 10% in global arms sales that year. The consulting firm HIS reported that the defense market reached an impressive \$65 billion, signifying the largest annual uptick in a decade. Notably, Saudi imports surged by approximately 50% to \$9.3 billion, reflecting a regional trend of escalating arms purchases across several countries in Southwest Asia. The shifting dynamics of relationships, including recent developments between Israel and Arab nations, have ushered in new geopolitical considerations and alliances.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted geopolitical dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Southwest Asia region from 2010 to 2022, particularly in the context of the Arab revolutions. This competition has manifested along three significant dimensions: "spatial competition," "competitive dynamics," and "ideological competition."

In terms of spatial competition, both nations have engaged prominently in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Bahrain, each seeking to influence the geopolitical landscape according to their respective visions. The competitive dynamics further reflect their involvement in both geostrategic and economic arenas. This includes Iran's military support for various Shiite groups, alongside Saudi Arabia's backing of its regional forces and monarchies, as well as the complex interplay with emerging terrorist organizations. The broader context of U.S. support for Saudi Arabia and its alignment with Israel has added layers of complexity, contributing to regional instability.

Additionally, the ideological rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is deeply rooted in historical and civilizational narratives, primarily framed through Shia and Wahhabi perspectives. This ideological competition not only shapes their respective geopolitical territories but also influences their efforts to forge new alliances and respond to rival influences. For instance, Iran has sought to expand its geopolitical reach into regions such as Yemen and Gaza, while Saudi Arabia has actively pursued influence in Iraq.

It is essential to recognize that these ideological distinctions lead Saudi leaders to identify themselves as the custodians of the Two Holy Mosques, whereas the Islamic Republic of Iran positions itself as a champion of political Islam and a leader within the Islamic world. This ongoing rivalry, characterized by its complexities and historical contexts, necessitates a nuanced understanding of regional relations and the imperative for constructive dialogue going forward.

Conflict of interest

Author declared no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their gratitude to the journal officials and referees

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