

Complexity of the Middle East Region and Power Rivalry Among Actors

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Abstract

Sovereignty is the supreme authority in the world and each state in the world is on its own to provide safety and security to its nation. In this context, states in the Middle East region engage in a struggle to achieve their competitive advantage to achieve regional hegemony and make sure the safety and security of the nation. This paper aims to discuss regional power projections to have a competitive advantage over resources. This study uses a qualitative research methodology with a focus on the study of Middle East geopolitics based on seven actors, among them four are state actors (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Yemen) and the other is non-state actors (Kurds, Al Qaeda, and ISIS). The Middle East is now at the center of world politics and has defined the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia for nearly a century. The Arab world is witnessing a series of protests leading to the overthrow of powerful regimes in places like Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt. The conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a central component of the Middle East security scene, expanding into both the Gulf and Arab-Israeli theaters. Their reaction to regional events has become a major reason for the crisis in the Middle East.

Keywords: Nation Security, Middle East, Regional Conflict, Power Rivalry



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INTRODUCTION

Sovereignty is the supreme authority in international relations. In that terms, it is easily translated that the world lacks any supreme authority. In this system, there is no hierarchically superior, coercive power that can resolve disputes, or enforce law or order in the system of international politics. Considering the above facts each state in world politics is on its own to provide safety and security to its nation. In this context, states compete to achieve a competitive advantage over other nation-states to maintain the status of world supremacy and in turn ensure the safety and security of the nation over other states. They engage in alliances to protect the hegemony, by responding to the states who act against the hegemony and take advantage of regionalism.

One of the most instability regions of the world is the Middle East. With ongoing conflicts between Israeli military forces and militia groups supported by Iran in Gaza and along Israel's border with Syria, as well as civil conflict in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. The level of insecurity in the Middle East has never been higher. The instability brought on by the United States of America's pullout from the Iran nuclear deal and Iran's potentially dangerous naval activities in the Straits of Hormuz is just a few examples of this instability, which also includes civil unrest in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Iraq. There have been hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, over 20 million people have been displaced, and 35 million people still need daily humanitarian aid as a result of the Sunni-Shia political conflict in the Middle East, Israel's continuing tense relations with its neighbors, and the presence of Russian mercenary forces in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Iraq (Connor, 2016). These countries' ongoing civil conflicts, which have already caused instability in the region, have the potential to cause even more instability, particularly if they spread to other Middle Eastern nations.

Syria and Yemen are currently experiencing the Sunni-Shia political conflict, which pits Saudi Arabia's majority Sunni Muslim nations against Iran's Shia Muslim majority nations. While Houthi rebels in Yemen backed by Iran attempt to topple the Saudi-backed Sunni government in Yemen, the main forces and proxies of Saudi Arabia are desperately trying to topple the current Shia government in Syria (Kumar, 2017). These two countries are the world's largest oil producers, so any escalation of these conflicts would have a huge impact globally.

RESEARCH METHODS

The qualitative research methodology is used for this study. The writer surveys existing books and journals on this aspect to collect literature to conduct this study (Jaakola, 2020). As a key instrument, the writer analyses the extracted information based on theories of international relations. The Paper will focus only on the study of Middle East geopolitics based on the seven actors, among them four are state actors and the rest are non-state actors in Middle East Region. State actors are Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Yemen. Non-state actors are the result of the power rivalry between state actors and they have been used extensively. They are Kurds, Al Qaeda, and ISIS. The process and issues are discussed based on these actors and literally, the United States and its influence on the region is considered as the global power. The study is trying to describe the subject by using the main elements of international relations (Actors, Processes, and Interests) and power projection of the interest state and non-state actors in world politics.

RESULTS OF RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

RESEARCH RESULTS

Asia, Europe, and Africa are all connected by the Middle East. The region's member nations are found on the Saudi Arabian peninsula. Yemen, Oman, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iran, Bahrain, Kuwait, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq are the nations in the region. The phrase "Middle East" is used to refer to nations with a predominance of Islamic culture. This usage broadens the term to include all of the remaining North African states as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan. The region is very hot in nature in terms of geopolitics because the region brought much conflict to world politics. Several countries in the region are rich in natural resources and oil which are exported at a competitive price to the rest of the world. In another aspect, the Middle East provides shelter to many ethnic minorities. They are Arabs, Turks, Persian, Kurds, and Jews. The main courses behind the conflict can be bolded as in table 1 below.

Table 1. The main courses behind the Middle East conflict

No	Main Courses	Description
1	After the World Wars, foreign powers divided the Middle East	Arabs are persuaded to establish independent states in opposition to the Ottoman Empire by the British and French during World War I. The British and French later divided the Middle East under their interests following World War I. British and France had to leave the Middle East after World War II since they were incapable of continuing imperial strategies. The borders that the British and France had established remained the same. This leads to Living separately in the same country with different beliefs and ideologies and some ethnic groups like Kurds haven't had a homeland at all (Alsaied, 2021).
2	Spread of Wahabism in the region	From the 16th century onward House of Saudi was fighting to gain a separate state for themselves and have a better portion of Arabian Peninsula. They achieved their aim in 1932 creating a unified Saudi

		<p>Arabia with the monarchy. Rulers of Saudi Arabia follow the fundamental doctrine known as Wahhabism. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia became very rich within a shorter period after discovering the oil and Wahhabism has been promoted across the region with strong religious favor for other cultures (Ponizilova, 2016).</p>
3	Israel and Palestine conflict	<p>As highlighted in the above paragraphs, after World War II British controls over the region came into question. Throughout the 20th century, Jewish nationalism and Arab nationalism came to traction. Jainism is a movement that promotes the establishment of a Jewish homeland. The movement was inspired by the mass immigration of Jews into British Palestine. It causes tension with the existing Palatines living there. The British who had promised to establish a Jewish state couldn't reach a satisfactory plan between Jewish and palatines and brought it to the UN. In 1947 UN proposed a plan which would allow both the Jewish and Palestine to have two separate states and then Israel declared its independence. Later on, Israel managed to gain territory forcefully. With that Arab nations had to accept the existence of Israel. As a consequence of wider Israel, the Arab conflict became Israel's palatine conflict. Over the cause of multiple wars Palestinian displaced from their homes and Palestinian who do remain within their older areas are now effectively under Israeli control with no equal rights. With international facilitation, Israel and Palestine leaders tried to have a resolution but it is too far to reach (Yenigun, 2016).</p>
4	Saudi Arabia and Iran compete in the region	<p>The Iranian revolution formed a regime with a different ideology, which made connections between Saudi Arabia and Iran even more challenging afterward. Iran is governed by the clergy. As a result, nations started vying with one another for hegemony and power in the Middle East, and several proxy wars between Syria and Yemen started. Shia Muslims are more numerous in Iran than Sunni Muslims are in Saudi Arabia. In conflicts in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia typically backs Sunni groups while Iran backs Shia groups (Fatima, 2017).</p>
5	American Foreign policy	<p>After discovering oil in the region, the United States was interested in keeping the region stable by protecting the U.S. presence or creating actors who support the U.S. foreign policy since the U.S. needs oil. On the other hand, even though Israel is not popular in the region the United States has a strong relationship with Israel. Intern America has a strong relationship with Saudi Arabia due to its oil richness (Cook, 2021).</p>
6	Islamic representation of Iran in the Middle East	<p>State-based conflicts, particularly civil wars, are the most prevalent sorts of hostilities worldwide. There has been a rise in disputes between non-state entities during the last few decades. Hezbollah is considered Iran's first proxy movement in the Middle East. Hezbollah carried conducted many suicide assaults on US detachments in Lebanon. The Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Hezbollah will have at least 130,000 rockets and missiles by 2020, making it the most heavily armed non-state organization in the world. Ansar Allah is a Zaydi Shia organization that was created in the early 1990s and has been fighting the Yemeni government since 2000 (Hanna, et. al., 2021). Iran funds, trains, and arms the Al Ashtar Brigades, a terrorist group located in Bahrain. Hamas, also known as Harakat al Muqawama al Islamiyah, is a Gaza-based Sunni Islamist paramilitary and political group that has purportedly been funded, equipped and trained by Iran's Revolutionary Guards since the early 1990s. Hezbollah al Hejaz was a Shia militant organization founded in 1987 and affiliated with Iran. The United States sanctioned four leaders in 2001 in connection with the 1996 Khobar Towers attack, which killed 19 US Air Force members and injured 372.</p>

Inter-regional and global challenges can be used to categorize the problems facing the Middle East region. Threats to the Middle East's military and security come from neighboring nations that are at war with one another over political or religious extremism. International challenges are mainly due to the resourcefulness of the region. Power projection can be seen to have the stability of the region or on the other hand destabilize the region to have a competitive advantage over each other. In this context, the attacks carried out by the U.S.-led coalition on regional actors and the power projection of its actors to the region is the case study going to discuss here.

The actors involved in the region for stability and conflict will be described sequentially as follows. (1) Saudi Arabia is the largest oil supplier to the U.S. and also a Sunni-majority country. Saudi Arabia is highly concerned about the regional assertiveness of Iran and its influence on territories like Palestine, Lebanon, and some other parts of the Middle East. The United States and Saudi Arabia share a common interest in terms of Protecting the stability and security of the Middle East region and they work closely on regional and global issues. Saudi Arabian territories were used by the U.S. military as a base during the period of the Iraq Invasion; (2) Turkey is a Muslim-majority parliamentary democracy with a secular system of government. Turkey borders Iran, Syria, and Iraq and it is a crucial country in the region. The United States always tries to have good relations with Turkey, since Turkey is an important regional partner and key NATO member. Turkey is committed to defeating terrorism such as Kurdistan Workers Party, the Revolutionary People's Liberation Front (DHKP-C), and ISIS within and outside its borders. Further, Turkey has proven this commitment by being an important member to eradicate ISIS and opened its military bases to the United States in 2015; (3) The largest Shi'a-majority nation in the world, Iran, is headed by the Assembly of Experts, a clerical body that selected Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to hold office for the rest of his life. After the Iraq war and after elected president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran started to become assertive in the region and Iran continues to support terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah. Further, Iran's support of militias and its nuclear development program has become very serious issues in terms of global security concerns. Due to the above-mentioned facts, Iran became a serious adversary of the United States in the region. Iran has been accused by several countries of training, financing, and providing weapons and safe havens for non-state militant actors, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and other Palestinian groups; (4) Yemen's civil war began in 2014, when Houthi insurgents, Shiite rebels with ties to Iran and a history of rising against the Sunni government, gained control of the country's capital and largest city. With the engagement of regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states in Yemen's conflict, the country became a victim of the Sunni-Shia schism. The Saudi naval blockade of the Gulf of Aden stopped multiple Iranian weapon shipments to Houthi militants in 2015. In response, Iran has despatched a naval convoy, raising the prospect of further military escalation between the two countries (Hanna, 2021);

(5) One of the indigenous peoples of the Mesopotamian Plains and Highlands, which are now in southeast Turkey, northeastern Syria, northern Iraq, northwest Iran, and southwest Armenia, are the Kurds. About 30 million Kurds live in the Middle East, mostly in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, and Kurds make up almost a fifth of Turkey's 79 million population. Beyond Turkey, Syrian Kurdish fighters have fought Islamic State as part of the Self-Defense Forces, a US-backed alliance of mostly Arab and Kurdish fighters, creating a semi-autonomous region in northern Syria.; (6) Osama Bin Laden formed Al Qaeda in Pakistan in 1988. It believes that every Muslim must fight against those who reject Islam. In a 2002 letter to America, Bin Laden stated that Al-motivations Qaeda's for 9/11 was the presence of US

soldiers in Saudi Arabia, American support for Israel, and Western support for bombing and oppressing Muslims in Somalia. Experts believe the terror organization is considerably more divided and dispersed, owing partly to the US invasion of Afghanistan and the assassination of Bin Laden in Pakistan (Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, 2018); and (7) The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, is a global threat to stability. ISIS also has a spinoff called ISIS-K. Both organizations, however, are committed to purging the Middle East of Western influence. It arose from the ashes of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a local offshoot of al Qaeda created in 2004 by Abu Musab al Zarqawi. In June 2014, ISIS started an onslaught against Mosul and Tikrit. ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi declared the establishment of a caliphate ranging from Aleppo, Syria, to Diyala, Iraq, and dubbed the organization the Islamic State. With the start of airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq in 2014, the operation was expanded to Syria. The administration of former US President Barack Obama then conducted many airstrikes in Iraq and Syria. ISIS incurred significant losses. However, ISIS expanded into a network of affiliates in at least eight other countries in 2015. Its branches, followers, and affiliations were progressively carrying out attacks outside of the country. ISIS is suspected of carrying out some of the biggest attacks in recent years. ISIS bombed a women's school, murdering more than 75 people (Elkatawneh, 2016).

Power rivalry between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey and its influence on Yemen

Saudi Arabia as an influential power in the region with much of economic and military capabilities and allied to the US is struggling to be dominant in the region while Iran as a nuclear-capable country and stands against US supremacy and badly influence by US embargos tries to handle its political influence against Saudi Arabia and its ally. As previously mentioned, the conflict is primarily a political and economic one, but religious differences make it worse. Saudi Arabia is a Sunni Muslim country, whereas Iran has a majority of Shia Muslims. As part of a larger conflict, both countries take advantage of the geopolitical divisions in the region. This proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be mentioned as mainly for influence in the Middle East region and other Muslim countries for their Agendas It is important to note that both countries have provided varying degrees of support to opposing sides in the conflicts and civil wars recent examples are civil war in Syria and Yemen (Orkaby, 2017). This will never be an ending process due to the power projection of major powers to archive their policy objectives. American support for Saudi Arabia and its Allies as well as Russia and China's support for Iran. As previously discussed, external risks to Saudi Arabia mostly derive from its involvement in Yemen's civil conflict. Because of its involvement in the civil conflict, Saudi Arabia's essential infrastructure is vulnerable to attack by Iran-backed Houthi rebels This threat highlighted how exposed the nation's oil sector and political elite are to external dangers, as evidenced by Houthi rebel ballistic missile attacks on Riyadh and Jazan. The Yemeni civil war, which is essentially a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran for control of the Middle East, could bring these two religious foes together if it is allowed to continue (Brandt, 2017). Conflict will have serious repercussions for the Middle East and the entire world. When Saudi Arabia charged Iran with committing an act of war for providing missiles fired by Houthi rebels in the Saudi capital Riyadh, the likelihood of a direct conflict reached critical levels. (Kirkpatrick, 2017). It is vital to note that by studying the facts listed above, Iran would limit military operations in other parts of the Middle East to mitigate the cover assault threat posed by Saudi Arabia and Israel to nuclear arsenals. When examining Iran's proxies, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the PMF in Iraq, and other tiny Shiite militias in other Middle Eastern nations, Iran has well-established grounds to sustain its dominance over Saudi Arabia in the Middle East.

Turkey became involved in Yemen as a result of its foreign policy based on approaches similar to those of the Muslim Brotherhood. Another cause is the region's power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Efforts to achieve regional domination have put Turkey in more conflict with Saudi Arabia than with other countries. Saudis see Turkey's efforts to establish supremacy in the Muslim world as eroding the prestige of Wahhabism, which has been upheld in the Saudi royal court against the Muslim Brotherhood.

Power rivalry between Turkey, Kurd, Al Qaeda, and ISIS

With America's decision to defeat ISIS in three years in 2014, the US sought a trustworthy local partner to confront ISIS in Iraq and Syria. As the primary reason Kurds reject ISIS and battle each other, the US opted to ally with them. With the help of the United States, Kurdish soldiers from the Kurdish People's Protection Unit, or YPG, formed the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, in 2015. Weapons were supplied to the SDF by the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and other countries. Kurdish forces have led the coalition since then, which has been critical for ISIS.

ISIS was ultimately driven out of Syria by the SDF, and in March 2019, the SDF took control of the last pocket of ISIS territory in Syria, which was located around the village of Baghouz. Even though the US and SDF declared that the ISIS caliphate would be destroyed, ISIS ruminants are still very active all over the world. It is necessary to note that, the support of Kurds to US troops was much more beneficial to eradicate ISIS, but at present Kurds are in a very problematic situation in the region after withdrawing US troops from Syria, Because of their affiliation with the PKK militant group which seeks to establish an independent state within Turkey, Turkey views those Kurdish fighters in Syria as terrorists or as being in league with terrorists. After Turkey's president announced plans to create a 32 km deep "safe zone" devoid of YPG combatants and relocate up to 2 million Syrian refugees there, US troops withdrew from the country's border in October 2019. The SDF issued a warning that the offensive might undo the destruction of IS, which it claimed it could no longer give priority to, and claimed that the US had "stabbed it in the back" (Winter, 2019).

Discussions

To determine the instability in the Middle East with power dynamic relevance to state actors like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Yemen and further non-state actors like ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Kurds were considered, and then process and issues were analyzed by using above-mentioned literature and following facts was derived on its impact on the stability of the region in terms of security and economic.

When it comes to the Middle East, it is clear that Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran are battling for supremacy in the region. Although Saudi Arabia and Iran both consider themselves to be Islamic countries, there is a stark difference between the two countries' foreign policies. Saudi Arabia generally upholds the status quo in the region, whereas Iran frequently tries to enact revolutionary change in the Gulf region and the larger Middle East. Although Iran views the US as its most dangerous adversary, Saudi Arabia keeps close ties with Western nations. Iran works to improve its standing in the Gulf, a key area of competition between the two nations. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states frequently seek to restrict Iran's desire for supremacy. Saudi Arabia has historically maintained a far greater level of political clout with local governments than Iran in the quest for Gulf hegemony. Iran cannot now aspire to overshadow Saudi regional power in the Gulf, but it does strive to influence Gulf Arab governments, particularly by urging them to reduce or remove their military ties with the West.

Analyzing the above facts, one can predict how the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia will progress. It was important to note that Although they aren't at war with each other directly, Iran and Saudi Arabia are involved in several proxy wars (conflicts in which they back opposing sides and militias) in the region. Syria is an obvious example, and Saudi Arabia has accused Iran of giving the rebel Houthi movement in Yemen ballistic missiles to launch from Saudi soil. Iran is also accused of flexing its muscles in the strategic Persian Gulf waterways that transport oil from Saudi Arabia. The US claims that Iran is behind recent attacks on foreign oil tankers, but Iran has denied this. As long as Saudi Arabia and Iran are at war against proxies, it will never be ready for a direct war with other countries, but if there is a major Houthi attack on the Saudi capital or key economic targets, it will undermine Saudi Arabia's current position. If this Houthi attack on Saudi infrastructure brings a new front to the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. As in the Persian Gulf, where Iran and the Saudis face off across the sea border, rising tensions could threaten a much wider conflict. Especially in the Strait of Hormuz, Iran can threaten freedom of navigation and is a deterrent not only to Saudi Arabia but to the whole world. The United States and its allies have long viewed Iran as a destabilizing force in the Middle East, and freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf is vital to the United States and other Western countries. In this context, if a conflict leads to the blockade of a waterway, it is crucial for international shipping and oil transport. In this context, the United States will inevitably participate in the conflict with the help of American naval and air force power.

Turkish and Iranian interests in energy and trade overlap as a result of Iran being a major supplier of gas and oil to Turkey and Iran importing Turkish goods. The two nations are also united by their opposition to the Saudi dictatorship and to Kurdish separatism, both of which threaten Turkey's and Iran's territorial integrity. However, the firm may be restrained by US sanctions against Iran and Turkey. Turkey, on the other hand, remains a NATO member and an ally of the United States, Iran's main adversary. Over this, Turkey has adopted a defiant stance against the US on several matters, including purchasing Russian air defense systems and acting aggressively in Syria despite American objections. However, Iran will not continue to place its trust in Turkey since Turkey will not break its partnership with the US for the benefit of Iran. Iran, who is the main supporter of the regime, should be concerned about Turkey's reconciliatory moves toward Israel and Saudi Arabia as well as its opposition to Bashar al-Assad in Syria. To prevent a sharp escalation of tensions, the leaders of both nations must carefully manage the delicate balance between the two. Any change in the balance of power between these two major poles of power in the Middle East could make an already unstable region even more unstable.

When assessing the Middle East's power projection by various entities, Kurds become one of the most relevant aspects. Due to the autonomous state concept and the Kurds constituting 25% of Turkey's population, Turkey will not grant the Kurds any leeway, even though the SDF fought alongside the US and its allies against ISIS. In this context, it is vital to emphasize that Kurds developed a diversified representational democracy based on gender equality in northeastern Syria, despite very limited resources and a severe economic embargo by the Assad regime and Turkey, with the aid of the US. It is not a secret to world politics that the Kurdish fighters of the SDF did much of the hard fighting to defeat ISIS. But Turkey considers the biggest militia in the Kurdish Led alliance a terrorist organization. With this situation, if the Kurds are now completely engaged and busy in fighting the Turkish Army and avoiding air attacks, they will no longer be a viable force against ISIS. However, during a meeting between US officials and the SDF in October 2021, US President Joe Biden pledged that America will not forsake Kurds. Analyzing the US decision, it can be projected that the US

military support and security cover may have been a major element in the Kurds' triumph, but the Biden administration's decision is not motivated by preserving Kurdish victories. Several other elements are at work. To begin, despite the group's loss of territorial authority in Iraq and Syria, the threat posed by the Islamic State remains. Iraq's short and medium-term security and stability remain a top concern for the United States, and an abrupt withdrawal from Syria would facilitate the revival of the Islamic State in Iraq. Kurds will be employed extensively in this context by backing them militarily and economically in their battle against ISIS, but Turkey will keep Kurds in check without allowing them to realize their internal goals.

Al Qaeda was weakened, in part due to the deaths of its leaders. Ayman al Zawahiri remained the commander of Al Qaeda's global network, but several important leaders were assassinated in 2020. Previously, communications intercepts were used. When new leaders take over, the question is whether they will prioritize regional or local problems or redirect resources toward global activities. Al Qaeda has prioritized expanding its regional presence. It contains six primary branches that reach from the Sahel to the Indian Subcontinent as of early 2021.

While it was not completely defeated, ISIS lost the last parts of the Islamic State caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2019. At least 10,000 fighters are still present, according to the Pentagon. Attacks, including bombings and assassinations in both countries, were sustained in 2020. But the two battlegrounds had some significant distinctions. Operationally, ISIS was present all over Iraq. The eastern side of the Euphrates River Valley in Syria saw a greater concentration of ISIS attacks. ISIS could conduct operations outside of Iraq and Syria, as well as in other parts of the Middle East and the rest of the world.

CONCLUSION

The Middle East is now considered the center of world politics. He is one of the regions of the world where no country exists without rivals. It represents the dilemma that has characterized the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia for nearly a century. The Arab world is witnessing a series of protests leading to the overthrow of powerful regimes in places like Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt. The Arab Spring phase is critical and the future relationship between the two countries will depend on the outcome of recent developments. The Saudi-Iran stalemate is a central element of the Middle East security scene, tapping into both the Gulf and Arab-Israeli theaters of war. Due to geopolitical goals and sectarianism, strengthening ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia is no easy task. Their interactions are not influenced by geopolitical or sectarian differences, but by their reactions to regional events. This is the main cause of the Middle East crisis.

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