

Revisiting the Saudi Position During the Iran-Iraq War through the Lens of Balance of Threat Theory

Abstract

The Iran-Iraq war was a high intensity conflict between two major powers of the Gulf region that lasted almost nine years, when both countries experienced significant losses including manpower, national economic indicators and intrinsic prestige. Earlier debates on the Iran-Iraq war expressed it as an indicator of longer-term fluctuations in the geopolitics of the Gulf region. In fact, this study presents the position of Saudi Arabia during Iraq-Iran war in the light of Stephen Walt's Balance of Threat theory. This study is followed by the argument that Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) successfully balanced its perceived threat from Iran during The Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s through supporting Iraq. Saudi tendency for supporting Iraq sought its concerns behind hostile revolutionary (1979) regime in Iran. Therefore, Iraq was realized as a credible defense shield for other Gulf States for posing a momentous dent to Iranian military power in the ongoing war. So, the authors have harnessed the concept of Balance of Threat theory for estimating the pro-Iraqi stand of Saudi Arabia for its desire to balance the threat coming from Iran.

Key Words: Saudi Arabia, Iraq- Iran war, Balance of threat, Stephen Walt.

Mehmet Rakipođlu

PhD. Candidate Middle East
Institute, Sakarya University,
Turkey, Mehmet.rakipoglu@
ogr.sakarya.edu.tr

İran-İrak Savaşı Sırasında Suudi Konumunu Tehdit Dengesi Teorisi Merceğiyle Yeniden Ele Almak

Öz

İran-İrak savaşı, her iki ülkenin de insan gücü, ulusal ekonomik göstergeler ve gerçek prestij gibi önemli kayıplar yaşadığı, yaklaşık dokuz yıl süren ve Körfez bölgesinin iki büyük gücü arasında yüksek yoğunlukla gerçekleşen bir çatışmaydı. İran-İrak savaşıyla ilgili daha önceki tartışmalar söz konusu savaşı, Körfez bölgesinin jeopolitiğinde uzun vadeli dalgalanmaların bir göstergesi olarak değerlendirdiler. Aslında bu çalışma, Stephen-Walt'un Tehdit Dengesi teorisi ışığında Suudi Arabistan'ın Irak-İran savaşı esnasında aldığı konumunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çalışmayı, Suudi Arabistan Krallığı'nın 1980'lerde İran-İrak savaşı sırasında İran'dan algıladığı tehdidi Irak'ı destekleyerek başarılı bir şekilde dengelediği argümanı izlemektedir. Suudi Arabistan'ın Irak'ı destekleme eğiliminde, İran'daki düşman devrimci (1979) rejimin rolü büyük olmuştur. Bu nedenle Irak, devam eden savaşta İran askeri gücüne önemli kayıplar yaşattığı için diğer Körfez Ülkeleri tarafından güvenilir bir savunma kalkanı olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Bu nedenle, yazarlar, İran'dan gelen tehdidi dengeleme arzusuyla Suudi Arabistan'ın Irak yanlısı tutumunu incelemek için Tehdit Dengesi teorisi kavramından yararlanmışlardır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suudi Arabistan, Irak-İran savaşı, Tehdit dengesi, Stephen Walt.

Mehmet Rakipoğlu

Doktora öğrencisi,
Sakarya Üniversitesi
Ortadoğu Enstitüsü,
Türkiye, Mehmet.
rakipoglu@ogr.sakarya.
edu.tr

بيدعتدا نزلوة تيرظنق فو تيقارعدا تميزاريلإا برعدا لالاخ ي دوعسدلا ف قومدا ل واندت قداعإ

ةصلاخلا

الحرب الإيرانية العراقية كانت صراعًا مكثفًا بين القوتين الكبيرتين في منطقة الخليج استمرت لنحو تسع سنوات، وشهدت خسائر مهمة لكلا البلدين مثل القوة البشرية والمؤثرات الاقتصادية الوطنية والاعتبارات الحقيقية. واعتبرت النقاشات السابقة بشأن الحرب الإيرانية العراقية أن هذه الحرب هي مؤشر للتقلبات طويلة المدى التي شهدتها التطورات الجيوسياسية في منطقة الخليج. في الواقع هذه الدراسة تكشف موقف المملكة العربية السعودية التي اتخذته خلال الحرب العراقية الإيرانية في ضوء نظرية توازن التهديد لستيفن والت. ويعقب هذه الدراسة جدل التوازن الناجح الذي حققته المملكة العربية السعودية من خلال دعمها للعراق في الحرب الإيرانية العراقية في الثمانينات ضد الخطر الإيراني الذي شعرت به. وكان للنظام الثوري المعادي في إيران (1979) دور كبير في توجيه المملكة العربية السعودية لدعم العراق. ولهذا السبب تم اعتبار العراق درعًا دفاعيًا موثوقًا من قبل دول الخليج لأنها أوقعت خسائر كبيرة في القوة العسكرية الإيرانية خلال الحرب الخليجية. ولهذا السبب استفاد الكتاب من مفهوم نظرية توازن التهديد من أجل تحليل موقف المملكة العربية السعودية المؤيد للعراق والتي كانت ترغب في موازنة الخطر القادم من إيران.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المملكة العربية السعودية، الحرب العراقية الإيرانية، توازن التهديد، ستيفن والت

محمد رقيب أوغلو

ليكو، ايراقص، قمعاج طسولأا قريشدا لبعهم، هاروة كدب لاط

Mehmet.rakipoglu@ogr.sakarya.edu.tr

1. Introduction

Interpretation of historical facts is a greater part of academic exercise of the vibrant scholarship. Among those several exercises and debates, Iran-Iraq War is given a privileged status by the analysts and scholarship on the Middle Eastern affairs. Although, Iran- Iraq war was an interstate high intensity and prolonged conventional conflict, actually it was more than its scope.¹ It has two distinctions from other conventional wars. First, it was inordinately protracted, which surprisingly lasted longer than two world wars. Second, it was an asymmetrical conflict in which the springs of each side differ from each other and it was a significant hybrid war, which observed use of missiles, chemical weapons, attack on oil tankers etc.

In the contemporary international system, the conflicts and engagements for peace in the world has become complex. Now, we see multiple immediate and extended stakeholders and shareholders of such developments. Among those events in the history, the Saudi position during Iran-Iraq war played its key role for determining some outcomes through supporting Iraq by economic, military or diplomatic means. This study aims to analyze the Saudi position during the Iran-Iraq war in the light of Balance of Threat Theory (BTT).

According to this aim, the first chapter of the study is devoted to probe the significance of Iran- Iraq war for Saudi Arabia. The second chapter is based on a brief account on Balance of Threat Theory. The third chapter is about the Saudi position during Iran-Iraq war. This study is followed by the argument that Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) successfully balanced its perceived threat from Iran during Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

2. The Significance of Iran-Iraq War for Saudi Arabia

Regional actors of Middle East have been playing major role for distributing their power for vested interests. In this context, Iran and Iraq can be considered two prominent players. Their relations remained in transformation while depending on local, regional and international conjunctures. Further, multiple bilateral disputes between Iran and Iraq such as border dispute on Shatt-al-Arab, antagonistic evolutionary domestic and foreign orientations, ethnic disturbance (in minority Persian, Kurds and Arab population of respective countries) and sectarian difference (Sunni and Shiites) started challenging national cohesion and social harmony of both countries. These rea-

¹ David Segal, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Military Analysis", *Foreign Affairs*, 66 (5) (1998), p. 943.

sons of protracted antagonism also contributed in the final nodes of conflict between both countries in 1980.

In 1979, The Islamic Revolution in Iran and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan adjusted the alliances of regional countries. During February 1980, Saddam Husain proposed a territorial and ideological development called "The National Charter for the Arab States" for having peaceful relations, cooperation for mutual defense of Arab states, and integration of regional economics. He was assuming himself as new Gamal Abdel Nasser in Iraq. This opportunity not only acquainted new capabilities for Iraq, but also made Iran and KSA as rival states at the Gulf region through highlighting security oriented irritating stance of Arab Gulf on three islands and question of Kuwait.

The revolution of Iran (1979) and commitment for exporting its ideology to other countries posed a threat to monarchs in the Arab Gulf region. Therefore, the establishment of those countries perceived it a direct threat to social harmony, national cohesion, national security and regional stability. Further, the hostile statements of Iranian officials and senior clerics warned about potential actions of Iran for revising the regional order. Among all Arab Gulf states, Saudi establishment was much worry about this event, because it has more stakes (religious, economic, security) than any other Gulf state in the region. Furthermore, it had good relations with the pre-revolution establishment (Shah of Iran) since 1928.² Actually, those relations were strengthened especially in 1960s when King Faisal and Shah Raza Pehlevi were in power.³ Therefore, the revolution started a new chapter of bilateral relations with such Arab states which were highly antagonistic than cooperation.⁴ Consequently, Saudi Arabia backed Iraq during Iran-Iraq war and cut its diplomatic ties with Iran.⁵ Besides of exporting revolution in the region, Saudis alleged Iran for seizing the Grand Mosque (Kaaba) and strained its bilateral relations with Iran. In fact, it remained mystery, because no any evidence was uncovered by Saudis at any forum for clue about Iran's involvement in the target event.

² Richard Javad Heydarian, "Iran-Saudi Relations: Rising Tensions and Growing Rivalry", *Foreign Policy in Focus* (6 August 2010): Accessed 29 April 2017. https://fpif.org/iran-saudi_relations_rising_tensions_and_growing_rivalry/

³ Henner Furtig, "Conflict and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf: The Interregional Order and US Policy", *Middle East Journal*, 61 (4) (2007), p.628.

⁴ Reza Ekhtiyari Amiri and Fakhreddin Soltani, "Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as Turning Point in Iran-Saudi Relationship", *Journal of Politics and Law*, (1) (2011), p.188.

⁵ Gwenn Okruhlik, "Saudi Arabian-Iranian Relations: External Rapprochement and Internal Consolidation", *Middle East Policy*, 10 (2) (2003), p.116.

Moreover, Iranian revolution and Iran-Iraq war triggered the formation of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for securing the interests of Arabian Gulf countries in 1981, but the expected vast difference of opinion on several foreign policy issues led less coordination and suspicion about loyalty of member countries further deterioration with in the GCC. Being a bigger country in Arab states, KSA wants to project itself as a dominant power on the other Gulf countries. Therefore, it was happy on the status quo, but the revolutionary leadership wanted to revise this political order of the region in accordance with its own designs. Furthermore, Iranian expansionist policies, the idea of exporting revolution and crisis in the Lebanon and Syria caused another node of bilateral tension. Resultantly, Saudi establishment did hurt the Iranian economy through controlling the oil prices, checking the Iranian pilgrimages and organizing an alliance of regional countries against Iran. Although, Saudi establishment remained much successful for controlling oil prices, but it could not hurt Iran on pilgrimage issue and at the forum of GCC.

In result of war, both countries directly suffered with a huge human, material, and financial losses. Neither of them won the war nor the border dispute was resolved. In addition, Israel destroyed Iraqi nuclear power plant; therefore, Iraq relatively equalized its power through hitting the Iranian nuclear installations. Economically, both countries caused dropping the oil prices and increased their foreign debt. Iraq took most of its debt from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. It requested both countries for relative relief, but those countries refused to do so. Despite losses, Iraqi military remained more battle handed than Iran. It had Scud missiles and chemical weapons. Very soon, Iraq started behaving like a regional power in the Gulf region. Although, KSA took a temporary benefit from this conflict, but it seriously calculated the futuristic challenges with both countries, where Iran became a declared enemy state for KSA, but Iraq was potentially seeking an extra role in the region more than KSA. Therefore, the strategy for balancing the threat could not stop here, but continued till first Gulf war, when KSA supported Kuwait against Iraq. Following paragraphs have been organized to understand the main tenets of Balance of Threat Theory, which successfully describe the interstate alliance (Saudi-Iraq) of two Arab countries against Iran.

3. Balance of Threat Theory

The reason why the states make alliances has always remained a very complex question. Among various explanations, Balance of Threat Theory (BTT) explains this foreign policy behavior of certain states during certain circumstances. Stephen Walt wrote his famous book titled "The Origin of Alliances" in 1987, which started a debate through explaining a number of reasons for making particular alliances. This theory actually competes with Balance of Power Theory (BPT) which describes that states build their power and define their threats with reference to the powers of other states. This behavior leads the concept of mutual security rather than accumulation of power in the few states. It was the period of the Cold War, where power was not fairly distributed or not an ideal or mature concept of mutual security was evolved unless organizing some collective security arrangements. Walt negated these concepts and presented the Balance of Threat Theory (BTT), which describes that states behave in accordance with their perceived security threat from other states. This makes international relations fruitful.⁶

How to estimate this perceived threat? Walt mentioned four indicators for calculating that particular threat. First indicator is Aggregate Power of the opponent state. It describes how much powerful that state is. Second indicator is Geographical Proximity of the opponent state. It describes how much closer the threat of that state is. Third indicator is about Offensive Capabilities of the opponent state. It describes how much military power is capable for posing a credible threat of that state. Fourth indicator is Offensive Intentions of the opponent state. It indicates how much aggressively acting that state is. Stephen Walt believes that these four indicators are enough to calculate that perceived threat form an opponent state.

This theory works best when certain assumptions are fulfilled. For this reason, the definition of security and threat is very important. During the Cold War, states were in search for acquiring extended nuclear deterrence for deterring aggression of a nuclear state, but now the role of non-state actors and acts of terrorism define the security and threats to the states. Despite these challenges, BTT⁷ relatively works better between inter-states.

⁶ David Priess, "Balance of Threat Theory and the Genesis of the Gulf Cooperation Council: An Interpretative Case Study", *Security Studies*, 5 (4) (1996), p. 143-171.

⁷ Are there some limitations of BTT? It has two very basic limitations. First, its indicators for calculating the threat perception are highly correlated. Second, it does not guide states for setting their priorities of indicators for perceiving threats.

Are there some examples of this kind of inter-states relationships? The French-Britain alliance was based on the basis of threat perception from Nazi Germany. Therefore, these states balanced their threat through posing a collective threat to their common enemy.⁸ Similarly, China and Pakistan made alliance against India which shares hostility with both countries.⁹ Likewise, US-NATO defense cooperation was organized against Soviet Union, is another classical example of BTT.¹⁰ In this academic exercise, the case of Saudi Arabia has been taken which balanced the perceived threat of Iran through strategically positioning itself during Iran-Iraq war.¹¹ We argue that states do not align unless it is in the face of a common threat, and that states (Saudi Arabia-Iraq) align in order to help them counter threats from other states.

During the period of Shah of Iran, the aggregate military power of Iranian forces was far competent than Arab Gulf states. Its defense expenditures were more than Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia altogether. Later, the radical revolutionary Iranian leadership not only continued the Shah's defense activism in the region, but also criticized the position of monarchs particularly the Saudi family. This led Saudi Arabia to look revolutionary Iran having aggressive designs. Very soon, riots occurred in the Shia population of KSA and Iranian pilgrims protested against Saudi family within KSA. Further, strict Saudi reaction to the protestors; checking the cassettes of Khomeini's speeches, revolutionary leaflets and broadcasts of Iranian radio; reaction of Iran-based so-called Islamic Revolutionary Organization; Iranian call for Conference of World Liberation Movements; and perceiving Iran as full-fledged national security threat led Saudis for deciding to help Iraq during Iran-Iraq war. Therefore Revolution in Iran changed the discourse of history in the Gulf region, where new republic in Iran posed relative threat to KSA. The significance of this threat can be understood from the direct hostility between two countries when Royal Air Force of KSA shot down an Iranian aircraft in its territory in 1984. This led more attacks of Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Iranian air force (1984-88) on oil tankers doing business with KSA. Resultantly, KSA supported Iraq more than earlier during Iran-Iraq war. It also contributed to Iraqi efforts for entering war again in Iranian territory in

⁸ "Balance of Threat Theory: Assumptions & Example", Study.com, (Accessed 12 April 2018), <https://study.com/academy/lesson/balance-of-threat-theory-assumptions-example.html>

⁹ Micheal Watson, "Balance of Power vs Balance of Threat: The Case of China and Pakistan", (Master's Thesis, Marine Corps University, 2002), p.1-35.

¹⁰ Tom Dyson, "Balancing Threat, not Capabilities: European Defence Cooperation as Reformed Bandwagoning", *Contemporary Security Policy*, 34 (2) (2013), p.387-391.

¹¹ Scoot Cooper, "State-Centric Balance of Threat Theory", *Security Studies*, 13 (2) (2003), p.306-349.

the early 1988.¹² Despite mentioning a brief account, following paragraphs are conversant about salient Saudi position during the Iran-Iraq war in the light of the assumptions and tenets of Balance of Threat Theory.

4. Saudi Position during Iran-Iraq War

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is one of the powerful regional actors in the Middle East in general and in the Gulf region in particular. It found Iran as challenging states for KSA's target position after the 1979 revolution. Therefore, its position in the Iran-Iraq war was based on that perspective. Iran-Iraq war has been examined through the point of view of Balance of Threat Theory. It describes that states behave rationally while making alliances with other powers to offset threats.¹³ During Iran-Iraq war Saudi Arabia and Iraq found each other as allies for offsetting the threat from revolutionary Iran.

Walt argues that states generally accept the rise of non-aggressive countries. On the other hand states try to balance their threat with less powerful but more aggressive countries.¹⁴ In this case, Saudi Arabia accepted Iraq as an ally for counterbalancing Iranian aggression. In fact, Iraq was not as aggressive as Iran was challenging the Saudi status quo at the Kingdom in terms of legitimacy¹⁵ and stability¹⁶. So, it is obvious that states ally against prevailing threat to their security rather than against a nation's superior power alone.¹⁷

As it is mentioned before according to Walt, there are four elements which help to estimate the threat. Those elements are aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions of a state.¹⁸ Essentially, those elements are about the power of the threat, its closeness, the capability of the military, proportion of aggressiveness. Walt further ar-

¹² Gregory Gause, "Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf", *Security Studies*, 13 (2) (2003), p.273-305.

¹³ Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), p.19.

¹⁴ Stephen Walt, "The progressive power of realism", *American Political Science Review*, 91 (4) (1997), p.933.

¹⁵ Saudi regime exploits its services to the Two Grand Mosques and an opposition to Israel, but the revolutionary leadership of Iran challenged this stance and tried to present itself as hero of Muslim world through showing itself real opponent of Israel instead KSA.

¹⁶ Prince Turki al-Faisal bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud declared that Iran poses threat to KSA. T. Al Saud, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy", *Middle East Policy*, 20 (4) (2013), p. 38; One can check: L. Rubin, *Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics* (California: Stanford University Press, 2014)

¹⁷ Watson, "Balance of Power", p.9.

¹⁸ Walt, *Origins of Alliances*, p.21-28.

gued that these four elements are not obligatory to be affective simultaneously.¹⁹ The more aggressive or expansionist a neighboring state appears, the more likely it is to trigger an opposing coalition.²⁰ In this case, Iran had these four elements for fulfilling its aggression against Saudi Arabia and Iraq. The revolutionary, Shiite rhetoric and ideology was a common ideological enemy state for Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

It is easy to say that balance of threat strategies are formed by the level of threat.²¹ Generally, efforts to balance the threat are intensified, when the level of threat increases.²² This balancing needs little encouragement. It is divided into two parts. The positive balancing strategy that has the higher threat perception; the negative balancing strategy that has the lower threat perception. But what does "balancing" mean? Very expectedly, most of the scholars define balancing in military terms only. As, Randall Schweller defines "balancing" as the creation or aggregation of military power through internal mobilization or the foreign alliances to prevent or deter the territorial occupation or the political and military domination of a state or a coalition.²³ Indeed, balancing is about efforts of states to achieve their security. But Walt has two different definitions for balancing. First is domestic military build-up and second is external balancing through forming alliances. Both of the definitions have some common points regarding military and security.²⁴

The position of Saudi Arabia during Iran-Iraq war was based on external threat i.e. Iran. According to balance of threat theory, states' alliance behavior is determined by the threat they perceive from other states. Walt contends that states will generally balance by allying against a perceived threat, although very weak states are more likely to bandwagon with the rising threat in order to protect their own security. Saudi Arabia supported Iraq because she considered that Iran was an internal and external threat. It perceived that Iran would struggle against the status quo which would directly threaten

¹⁹ Stephen Walt, "Keeping the world "off balance": Self- Self-restraint and U.S. foreign policy", in *America unrivaled: The future of the balance of power*, ed. G. J. Ikenberry (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), p.133.

²⁰ Walt, *Origins of Alliances*, p.23.

²¹ Walt, *Origins of Alliances*, p.5.

²² Thomas Gangale, "Alliance Theory: Balancing, Bandwagoning, and Détente", OPS-Alaska and San Francisco State University International Relations 720, (accessed 12.01.2018), https://ops-alaska.com/publications/2003/2003_AllianceTheory.pdf, p.4.

²³ Randall Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing", *International Security*, (2) (2004), p.166.

²⁴ See P. Schroeder, Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius, "Correspondence: History vs. Neo-realism: A Second Look", *International Security*, 20 (1) (1995), p.187, 193-95.

the national security of KSA. Hence, Saudi decision for supporting Iraq was based on the Saudi's fear of Iran. It must be noted that Iran's propaganda against the legitimacy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the so-called religious authority of Riyadh administration compelled KSA for assisting Iraq diplomatically, politically and financially during the war.²⁵

Kenneth Waltz indicated that the security and survival are the highest point. Only if survival is assured, states can safely seek other goals as tranquility, profit, and power. The first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their position in the system.²⁶ Many realists, like Waltz, say that survival for states is significant.²⁷ Here, KSA made alliance with Iraq for making sure its own survival. It is not strange that states identify their own security concerns on the basis of their own values. Therefore, this situation can be seen in Saudi Arabia's perception regarding Iran before and after 1979. It did not perceive Iran as a security threat before 1979, but to the revolutionary government in 1979.²⁸ This threat perception was a construct of Saudi's own values (Wahhabi interpretation against Shiite government in Iran).²⁹ It must be noted that states define their actions with security based targets. This policy can be defined balancing regarding the threat. Balancing must be in favor of supporter states too which harness their influence to persuade other states to do what is necessary for balancing the threat.³⁰

Saudi Arabia was uncomfortable upon power struggle between Iran and Iraq, because it was seeing them as revisionist countries in the region which could change the balance of power and the status-quo. Walt believes that states which possess clearly aggressive posture, those tend to provoke more opposition than those which seek primarily to uphold the status quo.³¹ KSA was in favor of status-quo. Similarly, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq were also considered as revisionist countries before 1979. Therefore, KSA perceived threat from these states. Then, Saudis tried to balance the threat by making alli-

²⁵ Reza Amiri, Ku Samsu and Hassan Fereidouni, "The Hajj and Iran's Foreign Policy towards Saudi Arabia", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 46 (6) (2011), p. 680.

²⁶ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (California: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), p.126.

²⁷ Gangale, "Alliance Theory: Balancing, Bandwagoning, and Détente", p.2.

²⁸ May Darwich, "Identical Material Forces in Threat Perception: Divergent Cases of Syria and Saudi Arabia During the Iran- Iraq War (1980-1988)", *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 1 (2) (2016), p. 147.

²⁹ Joseph Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 34 (3) (1998), p.41.

³⁰ Kai He, "Undermining Adversaries: Unipolarity, Threat Perception, and Negative Balancing Strategies after the Cold War", *Security Studies*, 21 (2) (2012), p. 163.

³¹ Stephen Walt, "Balancing Threat: The United States and The Middle East", *Yale University of International Affairs*, 5 (2) (2010), p.10.

ances with regional powers like Iran. Why Saudi's did an ally with Iran? It is easy to say that Iran was not perceived as a threat by Saudis at that time. So, Saudi Arabia and Iran tried to establish regional status-quo or stability against anti-status-quo countries. This policy was called "two pillars policy". Later, the Iranian revolution changed the domestic and foreign policy of Iran. Therefore, KSA also changed its policy towards Iran.³² This created a new atmosphere and changed Saudi Arabian foreign policy priorities.

Before 1979, both KSA and Iran were nearest friends of each other, but the revolutionary regime made them nearest foes of each other. Resultantly, "Twin Pillar Policy" collapsed. Now, Iran was perceived as a nearest threat for challenging the monarchist regional order through exporting revolution.³³ KSA perceived that Iran is challenging its so-called religious credentials.³⁴ Therefore, it approached to Iraq in order to offset the threat of Iran.³⁵ The foreign policy of Saudi Arabia regarding the ME has been based on the understanding of *raison de'tat*. Iranian regime became a real threat for the region (especially for the Arabian Gulf) that led the Saudi leadership to react assertively by extending strong support to Iraq. All Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, feared the impacts of the revolution.

In spite of declaring neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war, KSA clearly supported and backed Iraq. It also encouraged other Gulf countries to do the same. Later, former Saudi Minister of Interior, Prince Naif stated that Saudi Arabia underpinned Iraq and as he stated this support will sustain. He concluded an agreement with Iraq on security cooperation.³⁶ He also called other Gulf countries to support Iraq against Iran in the same way.³⁷ Very significantly, the Shiites Islamic regime and its possibility to spread over the region after the 1979 revolution in Iran changed Saudi Arabia's national security sense. The possibility of spreading the revolution unveiled the Saudi Arabia's biggest threat i.e. Shiites in Iran.³⁸

³² A. Jahner, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle for Power and Influence in the Gulf", *International Affairs Review*, XX (3) (2012), p.39.

³³ Darwich, "Identical Material Forces", p.147.

³⁴ Darwich, "Identical Material Forces", p.149.

³⁵ Darwich, "Identical Material Forces", p.142.

³⁶ Ruhollah Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p.73.

³⁷ Gerd Nonneman, *The Gulf states and the Iran-Iraq War: Pattern shift and continuities in Iran, Iraq and the legacies of war* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.167-192.

³⁸ James Wynbrandt, *A brief history of Saudi Arabia*, (New York, Infobas Publishing, 2004), Second Edition, p. 244.

All Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia supported Iraqi Baath regime by militarily, financially, logistically and diplomatically in order to eliminate the nature of Iranian revolution and to restrain the potential power of Khomeini's regime by presenting Iraq "temporary good". Besides the strong and indispensable support by Gulf countries, Arabs considered Iraq as a buffer country which can stop Iranian expansionist policy. If Iraq has been defeated this would mean that the biggest and direct obstacle in front of Iran would not exist anymore. Therefore, Iran will be able to attack easily on other Gulf countries. In the first phase of Iran- Iraq war, Iraq was seemingly winning the war. Till 1982, the conditions were in favor of Iraq. Hence, Saudi Arabia assessed that Iraq would easily win the war. Therefore, Saudi Arabia did not give much support to Iraq unless or until Iran gave a befitting response to Iraq.

In this context, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait took a decision about opening the oil field at Hafji (in a neutral zone). By taking this decision, Iraq would have a chance to have economic support. Iraq was in bad economic condition. Its oil exports dropped from \$26 billion to \$10.7 billion in 1982. In addition, the two countries offered loans to Iraq up to \$50 billion. The Gulf countries made a total of \$24 billion aid in 1982. It was combined with \$12 billion of Saudi Arabia, \$6 billion from Kuwait, \$4 billion from United Arab Emirates and \$2 billion from Qatar.³⁹ Walt stated that "*Aid does not necessarily assure alignment; client states may serve their patron's interest, but only when such programs serve their interest as well.*"⁴⁰ So, these aids served Saudi Arabia's interest also. Walt expressed more as:

*"The provision of economic or military assistance can create effective allies, because it communicates favorable intentions, because it evokes a sense of gratitude, or because the recipient becomes dependent on the donor. Stated simply, the hypothesis is: the more aid, the tighter the resulting alliance. Regardless of the context, the argument is the same: the provision of military or economic assistance is believed to give suppliers significant leverage over recipients."*⁴¹

Similarly, the General Secretary of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Abdullah Bishara stated that the real threat to the stability of Gulf countries is Iran's wish for dominance over the Gulf and the Middle East. The level of

³⁹ Ismail Akdoğan, "The relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (1979-2011, in Turkish)" (Master's Thesis, Abant İzzet Baysal University, 2013), p.95.

⁴⁰ Walt, *Origins of Alliances*, p.241.

⁴¹ Walt, *Origins of Alliances*, p.41.

cohesion between allied Arab countries can be seen when Kuwait and Saudi Arabia started selling oil on behalf of Iraq. Saudi Arabia and Iraq signed a treaty for constructing an oil pipeline for opening a route to Iraqi oil to international market from Red Sea, because it could not pass from straits at Gulf due to Iranian naval blockade.

Further, Saudi Arabia signed a border treaty with Iraq in order to guarantee peace with Iraq. Initially, it remained a diplomatic move, but very soon KSA and Kuwait made it a defense line for Iraq through supporting it against Iranian dominance over Iraq. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait decided to forward goods including military equipment from their lands in order to rescue Iraq from this strait. One step more, Saudi Arabia allocated her three ports to Iraq in Red Sea.⁴² That strictly shows that Saudi Arabia was in favor of Iraq in military way too.

Besides of Arabs, US also supported Iraq through giving it AWACS airplanes for making sure early warnings and surveillance at sea front. Furthermore, KSA was playing its role as a shuttle for giving strategic intelligence of Iranian movement to Iraq taken from USA.⁴³ Moreover, USSR was also supporting Iraq because of antagonistic stance of revolutionary leadership against USSR's invasion of Afghanistan. It also gave a huge military supply to Iraq.

KSA supplied a large quantity of oil in the international market and reduced the prices of oil. This gave a continuous set back to Iranian economy. Consequently, the war ended on Iranian acceptance of United Nations Security Council's resolution 598.⁴⁴ On the other side, Iraqi economy was also down. It took almost \$160 billion loan from its allies.⁴⁵ Among these conflict states, neither Iran won nor Iraq, but relatively KSA. It managed the crisis through balance of threat and weakened the energy of both closer threats to its national security. Despite end of the war, Riyadh administration continued perceiving Iran as a threat because of its Persian nationalism, Shiites political ideology, and relative republicanism.

⁴² Amiri and Soltani, "Iraqi invasion of Kuwait", p.188.

⁴³ "Responding to Escalation in the Iran- Iraq War", National Security Decision Directive: The White House, Washington, 25 May 1984. System II, 90635 No. accessed April 29 2018, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-141.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Kaiyan Kaikobad, *The Shatt al-Arab Boundary Question: A Legal Reappraisal*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.143.

⁴⁵ Akdoğan, "The relations between", p.95.

5. Conclusion

This paper was a brief attempt to bring a theoretical account to a practical foreign policy decision. Saudi Arabia's decision to support Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War was explained through the balance of threat theory. It focused on how Riyadh perceived Tehran as a regional threat and supported Baghdad in order to counter the threat originating from Iran. So, the establishing an alliance with Iraq was a crucial tool for Saudi administration to prevent possible rise of Iran in the case of a win during the war.

Limited academic exercise concludes that Saudi Arabia supported Iraq in its prolonged high intensity hybrid conflict with newly established a revolutionary government in Iran. This Saudi-Iraq relationship was extended to military, financial, logistics and diplomatic for countering and weakening Iran and its theocratic ideology at external front more than Iraq could do alone. The nature, scope and consequences of the war were horrible that victory of both countries against each other was causing destructive regionally and odious internally more than satisfaction and stability. It ended without resolving border disputes of both countries. None of the indicators of multilateral decline of each country led for regime change, but both autocrats who contained internal support remained in power and received support from their population for economic revival in their respective countries.

It was significant for both countries, which built capacity for protracted conventional warfare that no other regional country experienced ever in the region. Iran was perceived as a nearest and the most potential threat to the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia, which supported Iraq very smartly during the war for balancing the threat without involving in it openly. Although, KSA successfully balanced the Iranian threat temporarily, but it found a battle hardened Iraq and a declared enemy Iran as an outcome of the Iran-Iraq war.

Bibliography

- Abdulghani, Jasim M. *Iraq and Iran: The Years of Crisis*, First Edition, London and New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Akdoğan, İsmail. "The relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (1979-2011, in Turkish)" (Master's Thesis, Abant İzzet Baysal University, 2013).
- Al Saud, Turki Al Faisal bin Abdul Aziz. "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy", *Middle East Policy* 20, no. 4 (2013)
- Amiri, Reza Ekhtari and Soltani, Fakhreddin. "Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as Turning Point in Iran- Saudi Relationship", *Journal of Politics and Law* 4, no.1: 2011.
- Amiri Reza, Samsu Ku, and Fereidouni Hassan. "The Hajj and Iran's Foreign Policy towards Saudi Arabia," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 46, No. 6: (2011)
- Cooper, Scott. "State-Centric Balance of Threat Theory, *Security Studies* 13, no.2 (2003): 306-349.
- Darwich, May. "Identical Material Forces in Threat Perception: The Divergent Cases of Syria and Saudi Arabia During the Iran- Iraq War (1980-1988)", *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1, no.2 (2016)
- Dyson, Tom. "Balancing Threat, not Capabilities: European Defence Cooperation as Reformed Bandwagoning.", *Contemporary Security Policy* 34, no.2 (2013): 387-391.
- Furtig, Henner. "Conflict and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf: The Interregional Order and US Policy," *Middle East Journal* 61, no.4 (2007)
- Gause III, F. Gregory. "Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf", *Security Studies* 13, no:2 (2003): 273-305.
- Gangale, Thomas. "Alliance Theory: Balancing, Bandwagoning, and Détente," *OPS- Alaska and San Francisco State University International Relations* 720, 2003, web address: https://ops-alaska.com/publications/2003/2003_AllianceTheory.pdf
- He, Kai. *Undermining Adversaries: Unipolarity, Threat Perception, and Negative Balancing Strategies after the Cold War*, Routledge, *Security Studies* 21, no.2 (2012).
- Heydarian, Richard Javad. "Iran-Saudi Relations: Rising Tensions and Growing Rivalry," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, August 2010, https://fpif.org/iran-saudi_relations_rising_tensions_and_growing_rivalry/
- Jahner, Ariel. "Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle for Power and Influence in the Gulf", *International Affairs Review* XX, No.3 (2012)
- Kaikobad, Kaiyan. *The Shatt al-Arab Boundary Question: A Legal Reappraisal*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998

- Nevo, Joseph , "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia", *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no:3. 1998.
- Nonneman, Gerd. *The Gulf states and the Iran-Iraq War: Pattern shift and continuities*, (in) L. Potter ve G. Sick (eds.), *Iran, Iraq and the legacies of war*, US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Okruhlik, Gwenn. "Saudi Arabian-Iranian Relations: External Rapprochement and Internal Consolidation," *Middle East Policy* 10, No. 2 (2003)
- Priess, David. "Balance -of-Threat Theory and the Genesis of the Gulf Cooperation Council: An Interpretative Case Study", *Security Studies* 5, no.4 (1996): 143-17
- Schweller, Randal. "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security* 29, No.2 (2004)
- Segal, David. "The Iran-Iraq War: A Military Analysis," *Foreign Affairs* 66, no.5 (1998)
- Venter, Al J. *Iran's Nuclear Option: Tehran's Quest for the Atom Bomb*, Philadelphia: Casemate, 2005.
- Walt, Stephen. *The origins of alliances*, Ithaca: New York, 1987.
- . The progressive power of realism, *American Political Science Review* 91, no.4 (1997)
- . "Keeping the world "off balance": Self- Self-restraint and U.S. foreign policy". In *America unrivaled: The future of the balance of power*, ed. J. G. Ikenberry, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.
- "Balancing Threat: The United States and The Middle East", *Yale University of International Affairs* 5, no.2 (2010)
- Waltz, Kenneth. *Theory of International Politics*, Addison – Wesley Publishing Company: California, 1979.
- Watson, Micheal P. *Balance of Power vs. Balance of Threat: The Case of China and Pakistan*, United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College Master of Military Studies, 2002.
- Wehrey, Frederic and others. *Saudi Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for US Policy*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009.
- Wynbrandt, James. *A brief history of Saudi Arabia*, Second Edition, New York, NY: Infobas Publishing, 2004.
- "Responding to Escalation in the Iran- Iraq War", *National Security Decision Directive: The White House*, Washington, 25 May 1984. System II, 90635 No. (<https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-141.pdf>)
- Study.com. 2018. *Balance of Threat Theory: Assumptions & Example*. Study.com. Accessed April 12, 2018. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/balance-of-threat-theory-assumptions-example.html>.