

# Iranian Saudi rivalry over the regional role . . . Syria as a model

Iranian Saudi  
rivalry

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to highlight the dimensions of the rivalry over the regional role between two regional powers in the Middle East, and the impact of local, regional and international pressures of the Syrian crisis on the role performance of the competing forces.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study is based on using “the role approach” as an analytical frame to benefit by the application of the theory of role. This approach allows the possibility of linking various analytical levels, both in clarifying the relationship between internal and external factors and showing the interaction between elements of perception, abilities and behavior.

**Findings** – The international pressures shall remain governing the frame of competition among the roles of the regional powers, through determining the course of competition and its direct impact on its results.

**Originality/value** – This study examines the phenomenon of regional rivalry between two distinct and competing regional powers, in a turbulent environment in the wake of the Arab Spring crises, which created opportunities and challenges for regional powers, especially in Syria, where it intersected with the interests and policies of major and regional powers.

**Keywords** Conflict, Intervention, Rivalry, Role, Regional power, Regional role

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The Arab region is witnessing a state of turbulence and instability post 2011 Arab Spring crises, in particular with the regression of the role of the super powers worldwide, a matter that produced a strategic vacuum in the region. This results in a competition among the regional powers that aspire for a more influential regional role such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel as well as the accelerated efforts for the return of the Egyptian role. The absence of the state in many instances led to increased opportunities that pave the way for regional intervention in revolutions states to avoid risks and gain the opportunity.

This study consists of four parts: the first deals with the theoretical introduction; the second deals with the role conceptions of Iran and Saudi Arabia in Syria; the third deals with their role performance; and the fourth part deals with the role strains and their impact on performing the role.

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### *1.1 Main research question*

This study investigates the following main research question: Have Iran and Saudi Arabia achieved the goals of their regional roles in Syria?

### *1.2 Research assumptions*

The basic assumption of this study is, “the role strains (Independent Variable) exercise an effective impact on the role performance (Dependent Variable) of Iran and the Saudi Arabia in Syria.”

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### *1.3 Theoretical framework*

This study discusses the historical progress of role theory, its concepts, role issues and the most important criticisms of the theory. Role theory is rich in concepts as it provides a wide and productive frame for the prescription and explanation of states foreign policy conducts (Ovah, 2013, p. 2). Meanwhile, the change of roles motivates conducting internal discussions on the democratic systems until the issues of foreign policy become clearer before the citizens (Hrnisch *et al.*, 2011, pp. 26-33). “Role conceptions” could also play an important role through limiting foreign policy options that the leadership considers them available and in particular the roles that necessarily impact the proper type of conduct (Grossman, 2005, p. 337).

*1.3.1 Historical development of literature of the role theory.* The role theory started in sociology then moved through “Walkie” and his colleagues to the science of politics in 1962, when they compared the role conceptions of Congress legislators in four American states (Selim, 2008, pp. 3-4). Then came the leading study of Holsti (1970) in the literature of foreign policy, which consolidated the attempts of the methodological usage of the role approach and introduced a complete frame for its usage in the international relations. It also introduced a prescription of the various roles visualized in the foreign policies of the states. However, the study of “Holsti” was limited to the self-perception of the roles, as reflected in the speeches of the leaders of each state, justifying that the international context is governed by chaos and lack the regulation of the stable social systems. He also concluded the limited external prescriptions of the roles (Moawad, 2009, p. 7). Then several studies emerged that dealt with all the dimensions of the theory; the study by Backman (1970) dealt with role conflicts and introduced alternatives related to mechanisms of dealing with role strains.

The study by Wish (1980) introduced further consolidation to the role conception and introduced three new classifications for role conception: role prescription as per position, i.e. the volume, level or field of influence whether locally, regionally or globally; role prescription as per their driving motives, whether cooperative, competitive, conflicting or a mixture; and role prescription as per the content, whether political, economic or others. The study of “Stephen G. Walker” and others (1987) specified three integrated elements to analyze the role, role expectation, role requirements and role performance (Moawad, 2009, p. 14). The study by Barnett (1993) attempted to explore the relation between institutions and role conflict and the contradicting state among the roles of the institutions inside the system. The study by Le Prestre (1997) tested the extent of change in the roles of foreign policy through comparative analyses of super powers reaction toward the transformation in post-cold war international relations. The study by Selim (2008) introduced a proposed prescription for the regional roles of international units in accordance with two standards: the role content and the extent of the power of activity that the state conducts within this role. The studies by Al Mashat (1995) and Helal and Korani (2002) introduced a compound frame for role analysis that included the potential of the state; Al Mashat ensured the importance of the external prescription and its impact on the decision-making but Helal and

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Korany concentrated on internal environment, the foreign policy trend and the process of decision-making.

Though “Holsti” suspects the importance of “Role Prescriptions,” the study by [Elgström and Smith \(2006\)](#), pp. 11-12) confirmed that the “Role prescriptions” help provide a better understanding of the foreign policies of the actor and contribute in the formation of his identity as well as determining the impacts and the results of performing those roles. The study by [Hrnisch et al. \(2011\)](#) introduced a modern comprehensive survey for the scientific and theoretical slandering in the foreign policy roles and a comprehensive empirical analysis of the role behavior in a number of states in light of the regressive American dominating era. As for the study of [Moawad \(2009\)](#), it introduced an applied study on the roles of the mediator, deterrent and model by application on the regional role of Turkey. This set of selected role theory scholars introduced certain theoretical proposals on the analyses of foreign policy and international relations benefit by the role theory.

*1.3.2 Concepts of role theory.* The “Role Theory” consists of “Role conceptions”, “Role Prescriptions”, “Role Performance” and “Role Tensions/Strains”. “Holsti” defined the role as an external activity of the state of whatever nature whether with the aim of performing a certain job or fulfilling certain obligations imposed by conventions to which it is a party or with the aim of keeping the state uninvolved in the external environment ([Holsti, 1970](#), p. 254). So, the national role is defined as:

[. . .] the definitions of policy makers that are related to the general types of decisions, obligations, rules and procedures that are convenient to their States and functions and that are to be performed on continuous bases in the related international and regional systems ([Ovah, 2013](#), p. 2).

“Role conceptions” is defined as the vision of the actor himself to his role, i.e. how his behavior should be, what are the features and capabilities that must describe him or should be developed to perform the role and what are the functions and objectives that he must realize ([Moawad, 2009](#), p. 14).

As for the “Role Prescriptions,” they refer to how the role and other international parties see the roles of the actor subject of the analysis, their expectations and demands regarding the role in a way that cope with the position of this actor, his rank and the types of previous relations with that actor and the demands of the interactive situations. These expectations or demands might be directed into the acts and behaviors that describe the job or mission which the actor should perform or the characteristics, features and potentials that are supposed to be available in the actor ([Abdelaziz, 2001](#), pp. 15-16). “Role Performance” defines the acts, stands and decisions that the state takes and adopts in running its external policy ([Helal and Korani, 2002](#), p. 36). “Role Strains” are all the causes of sensation or feeling with the difficulties of the performance of the role or meeting the obligations. It allows introducing methodological explanations that govern the potential causes of the gap between expectations and performance because of the pressure of the role and its different conflicts. These strains include role ambiguity and burden of role or role conflicts, which refer to the discrepancy between the dimensions of the role itself, or the discrepancy between the expectations of the different parties.

“Backman” proposed a number of alternatives to treat role strains through trading off role expectations that is considering a system and overlooking another, through the partial response of the various systems or through avoiding conflict ([Backman, 1970](#), pp. 315-317).

*1.3.3 Role issues.*

- (1) *Identity and the role:* “Holsti” showed the importance of cultural role sources. Identity and the role are closely linked because individuals interpret the national identity in drafting the role, whereas the leaders focus on certain aspects of the national identity

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in envisaging the role or seek to change it. The concept of the national identity is one of the very few conceptual tools available for studying how the society and the culture work as a context for the state foreign policy (Below, 2015, p. 28).

The study by Harnisch (2012, p. 50) shows that, with regards what the national role should be, the societal expectations may differ from the expectations of the decision-makers. Accordingly, the confrontation between the cultures and the local policy would either create a joint understanding of the national roles or create a conflict. Therefore, culture bridges the conceptual gap between the public beliefs of the society and the beliefs of decision-makers (Below, 2015, p. 28).

(2) *Role change*: It arrives through a number of mechanisms:

- *Adaptation* indicates the changes in the strategies and tools in performing the role to approach the prudent role.
- *Learning* a causative process in which the role performer changes the structure and content of the role conception based on new information, i.e. the experience.
- *Standard persuasion* occurs when the actors are involved in linguistic interaction to evaluate the extent of roles suitability in case of uncertainty for acting bodies do not always seek to maximize the private gains, but rather seek the proper unanimity.
- *Social raising* describes the process conducted by an external person by acquiring the conduct rules previously determined by the society of illuminati in a setting of fixed standard structure that provides no big space for overlooking the identity (Hrnisch *et al.*, 2011, pp. 30-33).

Finally, the role theory still encounters some criticism. Most of the studies focus on the pivotal of role conceptions; however, this raises arguments between two trends. One stresses the unity of the state as a prudent actor, while the other believes that the state is a more complicated entity that includes many actors of various conceptions though some focus on the conceptions institutionally expressed as a mechanism to exit this issue (Moawad, 2009, p. 32). Meanwhile, the institutional roles lead to more internal conflicts among the roles when the institutions seek to achieve conflicting goals. The appearance of new actors – such as terrorist groups – greatly challenges the fixed role groups adopted by the theory (Hrnisch *et al.*, 2011, p. 33).

## 2. Role conceptions of Iran and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Syria

This study deals with the regional role of Iran and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the distinguished importance they are playing in the Middle East with their national, doctrinal and strategic conflict. They are ethnically (Arab against Persian) and doctrinally (Sunni against Shiite) contesting. They have conflicting political interests and different regional and international alliances. Each of them has multi and balanced strategic and economic privileges. The two states seek to play the role of the “regional leader” or the “religion protector” (Terrill, 2011).

As the “Role Conceptions” is the vision of the actor himself to his role, Iran is a Persian Islamic Shiite and revolutionary state. It considers itself the natural leader of Shiites and their defender. It seeks to realize the project of the “Global Government of Islam” by adopting the concept of exporting the Islamic revolution (Abdel Moamen, 2014). Iran sees itself as a superior regional power, so it seeks to enhance that position through the attempts of possessing nuclear weapons and leading the resistance axis (Malony, 2017). Iran considers Syria as a strategic alliance. This is because of its strategic location. It is the main

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bridge to provide support to its alliances in the resistance axis against Israel (Grumet, 2015, p. 126), as well as preserving Iran's ideological legitimacy as a defender of Shiite Islam and an enemy of what it regards as Sunni extremism (Arterbury, 2016). Therefore, Iran has been working on preventing the collapse of the Syrian regime after Arab spring crises to protect its strategic interests and maximize its gains by having a foot step on the Mediterranean or close to the Golan front (Abdel Fattah, 2015, p. 147).

On the other side, Saudi Arabia is an Arab Sunni state that has conservative political tendencies, and enjoys a highly spiritual stand in the Islamic World as being the sponsor of the Two Holy Mosques. Therefore, Saudi Arabia considers itself the defender of Sunni Muslims (Terrill, 2011). It opposes any Iranian intervention in the internal affairs of the Arab countries that threatens their stability (Ostovar, 2016). Saudi Arabia considers Syria as one of the most important allies of Iran. Therefore, it is working on toppling the Syrian regime, reducing the Iranian influence in Syria and Lebanon (Ibish, 2016). The Saudi intervention in Syria came at the request of the Syrian Free Army, to support and defend the Sunni Muslims who are suffering from the terrible acts of the Syrian regime and its allies and a response to the Salafist religious speech and its strong influence in the Gulf (Grumet, 2015, p. 126).

### 3. Role performance of Iran and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Syria

The role performance, as definite acts, stands and decisions, requires the use of a set of tools, i.e. political, economic, military and symbolic tools; Iran and Saudi Arabia are using a variety of these tools.

#### 3.1 Political tools

Political tools depend on using a set of diplomatic resources as well as other international communication tools as follows:

In terms of political support, Iran always confirmed its continuous support to the Syrian regime in all international forums and also in confrontation of many crises (Baqir, 2014, pp. 72-75). Iran has focused its diplomatic efforts on attempts to prevent aggression against Syria, so that Israel and the USA would not take it as a pretext to wage war against it (Helal, 2014, p. 99).

On the other side, Saudi Arabia has pursued to provide political support to opposition forces in all forums and tried to condemn the Syrian regime. The Saudi leadership preferred to deal with events wisely. On August 8, 2011, the former King "Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz" addressed the Syrian regime to activate comprehensive and quick reforms, announcing the recall of his ambassador from Syria for consultation (Marouf, 2019, p. 127), then the Kingdom followed more extremist ways to the extent of deporting Syrian ambassadors from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain in August 2011 (Grumet, 2015, p. 126). Political support continued through the mechanism of supporting allies in the settlement negotiations. In between the years 2012 and 2017, eight conferences had been held in Geneva. Iran rejected the resolutions of the Geneva 1 Conference, and worked to resist any political settlement that could lead to Assad's departure from the equation of government (Ibrahim, 2017). But Saudi Arabia supported the demands of the opposition, demanding the departure of Bashar Al-Assad (Alhayat, 2016). The opposition constantly relied on the outcomes of Geneva 1 Conference held on June 30, 2012 [1] (United Nations, 2015).

Russia has also taken a parallel path to Geneva in Astana and Sochi. Iran also joined both Russia and Turkey in this negotiation as being the states guaranteeing the agreement of reducing the escalation that the three states reached in May 2017 and was related to the establishment of four zones to reduce escalation. Meanwhile, the language of Istana

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Conference changed from negotiations targeting the permanent political solution into consultations focusing on consolidating the cease fire – i.e. only the military side – in order not to exclude the United Nations (UN) from the Syrian equation and avoid upsetting the US and European countries for their total exclusion from the reconciliation process ([Future Center for Advanced Research and Studies, 2019](#)).

The two states also exerted great efforts in employment alliance with regional and effective powers, Iran convinced Russia to interfere to save Syria from the fall and to support the Iranian position in Syria. They cooperated in providing a political exit for President Assad from the “American Red Line” stalemate that was represented in the threat of President Barak Obama to launch strikes should chemical weapon are used ([Engel, 2016](#)). When the Syrian regime violated such matter and used “sarin gas” that killed more than 1,400 people, Russia convinced Obama to retreat from punishing the Syrian regime in return that Syria gives up its inventory of chemical weapons ([Ward, 2018](#)).

On the other side, Saudi Arabia therefore strongly opposed the Russian intervention that threatened its role in Syria ([Lucas, 2015](#)), Later, Saudi Arabia tried to build a better relationship with Russia and serve as an alternative player through common interests to reduce Iranian influence, but Saudi Arabia had no means to convince the Russian to abandon their support to Bashar Al-Assad ([Stephens, 2016](#), p. 42). Saudi Arabia coordinated initially with Turkey and Qatar where the Syrian revolution was a strong motive for their convergence to topple “Bashar Al- Assad” regime ([Phillips, 2017](#)).

Iran and Saudi Arabia have also sought to recruit international organizations for their own interests. Iran has Security Council resolutions, the General Assembly resolutions and the UN Human Rights Council resolutions, condemning the Syrian regime ([Abu Salah, 2016](#), pp. 194-195). Saudi Arabia tried to besiege and condemn the Syrian regime at the level of the Arab League and UN. With Saudi Qatari efforts, the Arab League decided on November 12, 2011 to suspend the participation of the Syrian Government delegation in the conferences of the Arab League until the Syrian Government commits to stop violence and initiate talks with opposition powers ([Macfarquhar and Nada, 2011](#)). Then Saudi Arabia and Qatar sponsored a surveillance plan for the Arab League with the aim of mitigating the crises, but soon Saudi Arabia declared the failure of the mission as Assad was unwilling to cooperate ([Phillips, 2017](#)).

Then the Arab League introduced a “Peace Plan” offered by the UN on January 22, 2012. They promptly introduced a project to the UN General Assembly aiming at condemning Assad regime for resorting to violence ([BBC, 2012](#)). Saudi Arabia also relied on Security Council resolutions, such as Resolution No. 2254 (2015) [2] ([United Nations, 2015](#)). In the same context, Saudi Arabia refused to hold a non-permanent seat in the International Security Council because of the “double standards” and the failure of the International Security Council in resolving the Palestinian issue, the Syrian conflict and turning the Middle East into a zone free of weapons of mass destruction ([BBC, 2013](#)).

### *3.2 Economical tools*

Through aids, grants, sanctions, economic boycott and banning export of natural resources such as oil, Iran provided great financial support to the Syrian regime since 2011 ([IranNewsUpdate, 2017](#)).

Meanwhile, the Iranian Government also supported infrastructure in Syria (electricity network and mobile phone network). The volume of the annual trade between the two countries also doubled and exceeded the billion dollars where Iranian exports reached 95%, Iran also provided 10 % subsidized oil to Syria ([Majidiyar, 2017](#)). On the other side, Saudi Arabia provided a lot of grants through international agencies or donor conferences. It also

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incurred most of the expenses of opposition organizations (Alhayat, 2016). Saudi Arabia also provided humanitarian aids for around 2,400,000 Syrian citizens inside the Kingdom as well as providing the support of millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and the affected cities and areas (Al-Sharq Al-Aawsat, 2018).

### 3.3 Doctrinal tools

Iran sought allying with the Alawites Shiites in Syria, but the alliance turned into a complete Iranian domination after the outbreak of the Arab Spring crises. Iran also used “Soft Shiiteism” and replaced a part of Sunni communities with Shiites. Iran also sought to intensify religious tourism to Syria, especially the area of “Sayeda Zeinab Shrine” (Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies, 2016, pp. 51-54). Iran also used a strategy of “sectarian mobilization” which was a driving force for unprecedented sectarian mobilization for the objective of fighting in Syria (Horany, 2017). The doctrinal dimension was demonstrated clearly through “Jihad Fatwas” [3], such as the fatwa of the Grand Shiite Marja in Iraq Ayatollah Ali Sistani on June 10, 2014 based on which the “Public Mobilization” militia to fight “ISIS” in Iraq, its influence then spread to Syria (Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2017, p. 341).

Finally, the Shiite discourse called on the conspiracy theory to bring Bashar Al-Assad through the Shiite oppressor to become the victim of his opponents (Al Farouk, 2017, p. 198). As for Saudi Arabia, the Sunnis clerics called all the Sunnis around the world to support the Syrian opposition in every possible way. Such explicit call was propped up by the imams of Great Mosque in Holy City of Mecca. In this regard, Sheikh “Saud Al Shuraim,” called for helping the Syrian people who are attacked by the forces of “oppression and aggression” and urged for an Arabian stand against the “deluge” which is targeting them (Al-Anba, 2013).

### 3.4 Military tools

Military tools encompass the use or threatening to use military power to the formation of armed forces, training support and concluding military alliances as follows:

- *Consultant, technical and training support* where an advisory board had been formed by Iranians for the Syrian regime that supervised the restructuring of the military and security act which helped the non-collapse of Al-Assad regime (Baqir, 2014, p. 75).

But, Saudi Arabia participated in the Joint International Operations Room “Mock” with the participation of the USA, Britain, France and Emirates to provide support and advice to the Free Army factions through two rooms in Turkey and Jordan (Alkuds, 2014).

- *Military support*: Iran has been keen to strengthen the military capabilities of the Syrian regime through a wide network of fighters which consists of The Revolutionary Guard, Hezboall, Iraqi-Afghani Shiite Militias and Syrian paramilitaries “shabiha”. They worked together for securing the Syrian regime and protecting the Shiite Sacred Shrines in Syria (Fulton, Holiday and Wyer, 2013, pp. 24-26).

Iran’s support to the Syrian army by possessing heavy weapons such as the mortar, artillery, rockets, tanks, planes and ballistic missiles (Bakir, 2013). Iran established a naval base in Lattakia, missile factories near Tarots and military bases ranging from 5 to 13 (Oleiba, 2018).

- On the other side, Saudi Arabia, in cooperation with Qatar and Turkey, supplied the Free Syrian Army [4] with arms consignments including guns, grenades and anti-

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tank weapons (BBC, 2012), and the three states attempted to depend on Salafi Islamic groups that compete Al Qaeda Organization such as the “Islamic Army” (Gause, 2014). In response to external and internal pressures from Saudi Arabia and France, Obama’s Administration announced on June 14, 2013 its confirmation on the direct arming of the Syrian opposition (Arabic.mojahidin, 2015).

In 2013, Saudi Arabia supplied the opposition factions with more advanced weapons such as land-to-land missiles which stopped military victories of the Syrian regime in “Aleppo” countryside, and gave the opposition forces strategic progress against Al-Assad forces. But the USA refused to supply the Syrian opposition with surface-to-air missiles, for fear of repeating the American “Stinger” missiles experience in Afghanistan (Al Rashed, 2016).

- *Military intervention:* When Iran directly militarily intervened in Syria in 2012, it did not achieve significant progress. Iran, therefore, worked on convincing Russia to militarily intervene in Syria, which actually happened on September 2014 as part of a mutual military support deal.

Russia affirmed that it would not only fight “ISIS,” but also the other factions opposing (Abdel Fattah, 2015, pp. 152-153). The military support of Russia included supreme leadership for all allied forces, intensive bombing, deployment of troops as “advisers” (Lucas, 2015), supplying the Syrian regime with fighter aircraft and deploying Russian Marines in the city of “Latakia” (Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2016, p. 274). Meanwhile, Russia conducted big naval maneuvers at the Syrian coast and called the Russian military police to maintain security in low-escalation areas (Dhaher, 2018). Saudi Arabia bet on military intervention by the USA; however, a number of challenges impeded such intervention [5] (Schenker, 2012).

In the meantime, Obama Administration reduced its support to the Syrian opposition and gave priority to military action to confront “ISIS” despite the calls of the Gulf states and others to achieve both goals concurrently (Ibish, 2018). As a result, Saudi Arabia along with Turkey had to threaten military intervention in Syria to fight Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and might go beyond to support the factions opposing Al-Assad regime (Arabic.rt, 2015). The agreement between the American ally and Iran on the nuclear file on July 14, 2015 made Saudi Arabia think of adopting policies featured with initiation to face Iranian expansion in the region (Dorsey, 2016). USA was worried of Saudi Arabia’s intention against “ISIS” in Syria, fearing of the widening international confrontation in Syria while Russia feared that the use of military force by Saudi Arabia and Turkey would lead to change the Syrian regime by force (Idris, 2016).

In the same context, Saudi Arabia led the military Islamic alliance on December 14, 2015 (Fahmy, 2017). Although President Trump resumed cooperation with Saudi Arabia after the Arab Islamic American Summit on May 21, 2017, and took a hard line against Iran, he declared that he would continue to reduce the regional commitment of the USA (Shihabi, 2018). He was keen to completely coordinate with the Russians, keep Al-Assad regime, give priority to eliminate ISIS and suspend the American support program to the Syrian opposition (The New York Time, 2017).

However, President Trump launched several limited military operations against the Syrian regime, not for the sake of toppling the regime, but rather to prove the American existence (Hannah, 2018). Moreover, President Trump declared on December 19, 2018 the withdrawal of the American troops from Syria, except for around 1,000 US troops that remained in the North East of Syria to assist the Syrian



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Democratic Forces (SDF) in realizing stability and prevent the return of “ISIS.” However, the American withdrawal before the launch of the Turkish military campaign in October 2019 makes the American complete withdrawal from Syria inevitable. With the complete withdrawal, the USA gives up a great part of its influence in Syria without any concession on the part of the Syrian regime in return. The American withdrawal would lead to enhancing the influence of Iran, Russia and Turkey in Syria (Todman, 2019).

To sum up, we find that the role performance and tools resulted in the following:

- *Politically*: The Saudi role succeeded in condemning the Syrian regime and its Iranian allies regionally and internationally whereas the Iranian role gained the Russian and Chinese support in the Security Council. Each party supported its allies in the reconciliation negotiations which resulted in no positive outcomes – except for ensuring ceasefire.
- *Economically*: Each party was keen to support its allies with requirements of survival and continuity.
- *Doctrinally*: Each side continued to call for Jihad against the other relying on its doctrine while considering its doctrine as an effective tool for gathering and mobilization.
- *Militarily*: The response of Russia to the Iranian request for military intervention in Syria against the American letdown to the request of the Saudi Ally for intervention in Syria.

#### 4. Role strains/pressures

As we previously mentioned, role strains are represented in the difficulties of encountering the performance of the role. Both countries faced many local, regional or international pressures in Syria.

##### 4.1 Local pressures

Iran incurred human and financial losses in Syria (more than 2,500 dead and annual expenditure rate of US\$15bn) in light of the Iranian economic crises because of the sanctions newly imposed by the USA (Middle East Online, 2019). Iran also shared the Syrian regime, the responsibility of war crimes and the death of more than half a million Syrians up to March 2018 (BBC, 2018). Therefore, the reports prepared by the UN Facts Finding in Syria demanded submitting those in charge of these crimes to “accountability” (Fox, 2017).

The cost of the reconstruction of Syria shall be immense – between US\$200bn and US\$350bn. These sums are far beyond the capacity of Syria, or the willingness of the Iranian Russian allies to fund (Heller, 2017). The major countries limited their participation in the reconstruction to the occurrence of a positive progress in the stumble course of peaceful settlement (Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2019). Meanwhile, the USA declared that it would not finance reconstruction in Syria as long as the Iranian troops do not leave Syria (Sy-24, 2018).

As for the Saudi Arabia, it encountered multi local pressures, such as the division of the Sunni Islamic Front in Syria, between moderate power such as the Free Army and the more extremist powers such as Muslim Brotherhood Group, the Islamic State “ISIS” and El Nusra Front that reports to Al Qaeda (later “Ahrar El Sham”) (AbuKhalil, 2019). The dominant feature of these powers was competition and conflict among them. ISIS and El Nusra

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(supported by Qatar) attack the Free Army (supported by Saudi Arabia) and pillage its lands liberated from the regime (Al Rashed, 2016). Meanwhile, the opposition lost control over strategic cities such as Aleppo, Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor, a matter that led to the regression of the Saudi role in Syria (Baghishadbad, 2020).

#### *4.2 Regional pressures*

Iran encountered multi pressures of which Israel targeting its bases in Syria. The increasing Iranian influence was considered as great threat to Israel, a matter that pushed it to launch military operation against the Iranian military infrastructure, the most prominent of which was the air attack against the military (T-4 airbase) on April 8, 2018. Israel launched in August 2019, more daring, deeper and wider attacks by the remotely controlled planes "Drones" against the agents of Iran in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon (Al-Sharq Al-Aawsat, 2019a). Israel started to play a major role in the international equation aiming at besieging Iran economically, financially and militarily as well as limiting its regional role (Alrashed, 2019).

On the other side, Saudi Arabia failed to build up a united front from the Sunni Islamic countries because of differences, tensions and competition among them (Gause, 2014, p. 16), and the preserving visions of Pakistan and Egypt about the idea of military intervention in Syria (Arabic Sputniknews, 2016).

*Saudi Arabia also faced a shift in the position of the Turkish ally.*

This shift represents a model of "Role Change" according to the interests change. The Turkish shift was linked to a host of developments, among which, the change in the military power balance on the ground in favor of "Bashar" regime, the American regression to support the Syrian opposition, in addition to the Russian Turkish reconciliation over the crisis of shooting down a Russian plane by Turkey on November 24, 2015, (Al-Shark Al-Aawsat, 2016), the emergence of Kurdish danger and also the Turkish economic need for the Iranian gas which Iran has exploited to neutralize Turkey from its regional opponents (Helal, 2014, pp. 93-94).

The Saudi role in Syria was also impacted with the role of Qatar, the adversary, in Syria. Qatar wanted to play a role in the restricting of the Arab World after the turbulences it experienced (Stephens, 2012). Therefore, it worked with Saudi Arabia and Turkey to change the Syria regime, but they differed in many visions. While both Turkey and Qatar supported the Brotherhood to seize control in the Arab countries, Saudi Arabia rejected that trend. They also differed over supporting opposition groups in Syria (AbuKhalil, 2018). Then came the diplomatic boycott of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Emirates and Bahrain to Qatar because of its support to terrorist groups and its support to Iran (International Business Times, 2017).

On another level, with the appearance of "ISIS," the conflict in Syria was shifted from an internal conflict targeting toppling the Syrian regime to an international conflict targeting combating terrorism. Thus, there was an international unanimity to cooperate with the Syrian regime as a potential partner in the war against terrorism (Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2018, p. 269).

#### *4.3 International pressures*

Both states encountered multi international pressures in Syria, the most important of which was the Russian intervention in favor of Iran and the American non-intervention to support Saudi Arabia. Here we could resort to the regionally security complex theory of Buzan (2003) to interpret those pressures. The theory presumes that that are two cases that clarify the non-existence of a regional security complex; in one case, there are local units of poor potentials whose influence does not go beyond its boundaries, or when the direct presence of the external powers in a region is strong enough to frustrate the regular activity of the

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regional security dynamics in between the local units. This case is called the “Complex.” This case usually includes a wide concentration of armed troops of the interfered powers in the region. This may interpret the Russian intervention in Syria.

The theory also shows that there are two elements interpreting the relative emergence of the regional level of security, these are proliferation of the power in the whole regime and relative introversion of the super power post the cold war. However, the USA still plays a somehow leading role, but it lacks the motive to intervene and has an excessive sensitivity against military losses. This might interpret the American non-intervention stand in the Syrian conflict.

Although Iran benefitted by the non-intervention of “Obama” Administration in Syria, it started to suffer from “Trump” Administration targeting its role in Syria and region, where Trump declared the withdrawal from the nuclear agreement on May 8, 2018 and resumed imposing sanctions on Iran (August 7, 2018 and November 4, 2018) (Mossad, 2018). The American demands concern restricting the Iranian influence, ensuring the security of Israel and the non-intervention in the affairs of others (Al Labbad, 2015, p. 12). The American withdrawal from the nuclear agreement would have negative repercussions on the Iranian regional role, and might be subject of isolation where it would be deprived from the additional financial resources that it used to support its regional influence (Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2019, p. 268).

The two sides exchanged the escalation; the USA classified the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as a foreign terrorist organization. Meanwhile, it decided to redeploy its troops in the Gulf area. USA sanctions have also targeted entities supporting Iran’s missile program inside and outside Iran (Abu Alkassem, 2017). Then, the USA imposed on June 25, 2019 penalties against senior Iranian officials, on top of whom was the Supreme Leader of Iran. Iran responded the following day by executing the third step of reducing the nuclear agreement obligations (CNN, 2019).

The two parties rejected the French suggestion of supplying Iran with a financial credit line against Iran refraining from executing the third step and resume the complete compliance with the agreement (Al-Sharq Al-Aawsat, 2019b).

Iran shot down an American reconnaissance plane over the Strait of Hormuz, and also threatened the international navigation when its agents targeted some of the giant oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman or seizing the British tankers in the Strait of Hormuz, and also Saudi Arabia has accused Iran of targeting oil refineries of Saudi “Aramco” by which act it was targeting the world oil supplies and threatening the world economy. Then, the mutual escalation works appeared consecutively, which will lead to minimize or terminate the Iranian regional role. So, the USA established an international military alliance under its leadership to protect freedom of navigation in the Arabic Gulf (Helal, 2019).

In the meantime, the USA leads regional and international efforts to confront the Iranian role represented in the pursuit for a Middle East Strategy Alliance (MESA) to monitor all the activities of the Iranian regime that threaten the regional and global stability. It placed Iran as the “First Threat” on MESA list (Al Saadawy, 2018). The USA encourages an Arab Israel *rapprochement* by inviting for a “Warsaw Summit” for peace in the Middle East, which confirmed that there is a serious intention to place pressures on Iran to change its behavior through the formation of a global front (BBC, 2019).

On the other side, Saudi Arabia was shocked for the hesitant stand of the USA and the West toward supporting the Syrian revolution because of their fear of the establishment of an alternative regime to Al Assad that would be more hostile to Israel, a matter that granted the Syrian regime and its allies a great opportunity to violently confront the peaceful

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uprising and in the meantime it left the space open for the Iranian expansion without real resistance (Barnes-Dacey, 2018).

The Saudi found that the USA refused to acknowledge the threats they were encountering and did not act in any way to help them confront such threat, but rather left them confront those threats themselves when the USA preserved for the Saudi ground intervention in Syria (Pollack, 2016). Iran also encountered the challenge of differences with the Russian ally where such alliance between them was marked with high level of doubt, distrust and competition (Ansari and Tabrizi, 2016). They disagreed about the destiny of President Al-Assad. Iran believes that the survival of Al-Assad is a red line whereas Russia holds on the Syrian regime but does not mind the departure of President Al-Assad (Abdallah, 2017). Russia also suggested the departure of foreign troops from Syria after achieving their mission and activating the political process. However, the Syrian Government considered the Iranian presence as a legitimate presence (Middle East Online, 2018).

Iran violated the Russian Turkish agreement for “reducing the escalation” and rejected the evacuation of armed troops from “Aleppo” and its suburbs (Horany, 2017). Russia is also keen that the existing partnership with Iran shall not impact its growing relations with Saudi Arabia. The Russian President, Putin, supported the Saudi policy in handling both Bahrain and Yemen crises (Al Megally, 2017).

On the Saudi side, the Russian military intervention in Syria came to form a real challenge to its role in Syria. The Russian intervention significantly enabled Al-Assad regime to demolish all types of opposition (Dhaher, 2018) and liberate 87.4% of the Syrian lands from “ISIS.” The Syrian regime had controlled 22% by the end of 2015, but at the beginning of 2019, the regime could have control over 65.3% of the country’s area whereas the opposition factions have control over 10.3% of the Syrian area, while “ISIS” dominated 1.67% and the Kurds took control over 27.3% before the Turkish military’s intervention and occupation of a depth of 30 km from the Turkish border to Afrin width of 400 km (Saraya News, 2018).

This may completely change after the Turkish military intervention in October 2019 to confront the SDF in the North East of Syria as Turkey is pursuing to control a border line of 20 miles and establish a “Safe Zone” (Todman, 2019).

The Syrian regime also attempted to recover “Idlib” with the help of the Russian except for the Turkish rejection for fear that refugees would migrate to Turkey that already hosts 3.4 million refugees (Karaspan, 2018).

## 5. Conclusion

Iran and Saudi Arabia attempted to achieve their objectives of their regional role in Syria through their role performance, but role pressures had their impact in realizing or non-realizing those objectives. Iran and its allies could have control of the majority of land and population in Syria and succeeded in protecting the Syrian regime from collapsing and consequently gained great influence.

On the other side, Saudi Arabia wanted to achieve its role objectives in Syria. Intensive pressures that exceed the role capabilities were placed *and* restricted its role performance. Saudi Arabia could not topple the Syrian regime, but it could involve Iran militarily and financially in Syria, a matter that caused Iran great losses.

So, Saudi Arabia had to reconsider its role by working on other strategies to curb the Iranian influence in Syria with continuous coordination with the USA and the activation of its relation with Russia, as well as the coordination with Arab powers of close relations such as Egypt and the Gulf states. These pressures clarify the reasons behind the Iranian

progress as well as the Saudi regression and the extent such pressures impact restricting or terminating the Iranian influence in Syria.

Along the stages of conflict, the pressures formed suitable opportunities for Iran that helped it to progress. Internally, it depended on a network of strong allies through which it could stand and resist in light of the advancement of the opposition troops at the beginning of the conflict, then having victory over them through the Russian support. Iran could also neutralize some regional powers such as Pakistan and Turkey. Meanwhile, the danger of the Israeli targeting has not appeared under the Osama's Administration; however, it was clearly manifested when Trump's Administration supported such targeting.

Iran also had the Russian military intervention that resolved the conflict in favor of the Syrian regime. Iran also benefited from the American non-intervention where the Syrian stage became with no real power to confront the Iranian role.

As of the current and future pressures, internally, Iran is incapable of affording the costs of reconstruction in Syria. Therefore, Saudi Arabia and Gulf states would be most capable to afford that should a comprehensive settlement is reached. At this point, Saudi Arabia could take into consideration its interests in Syria. Iran might also be legally pursued internationally because of the violation of human rights and the war crimes committed in Syria, in addition to, the American economic sanctions. However, these pressures are of future type and Iran might find solutions as it has the time to deal with them.

Regionally, still the Israeli targeting represents a threat to Iran and could play a wider role in confronting Iran with the American support. However, the Israeli threat alone could be balanced through Hezbollah or the Russian existence in Syria and could be totally suspended in case of reconciliation with the USA. However, the pressures of the American targeting remain as the most dangerous threat for the full Iranian regional role in addition to the possibility of dismantling the Russian Iranian alliance.

On the other side, Saudi Arabia encountered various and intensive local, regional and international pressures along the stage of the Syrian conflict.

Internally, Saudi Arabia depended on a network of internal alliances, divided and conflicting, which caused an increase in its burdens; as a result, its role lost the perceived effectiveness. Moreover, Saudi Arabia lost a supporting Arab or Islamic regional front, in addition to the backward of the regional ally (Turkey), a matter that put a limit to the ambitious Saudi role and had an effect on its ability to achieve the objectives.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia lost the support of the international ally (USA) which abstained from giving support and imposed restrictions on Saudi Arabia preventing it from moving severally, which caused an obstruction of performing the Saudi role in Syria, at the same time, Saudi confronted an international tripartite alliance (Russia, Iran and Syrian regime).

As a result, the international pressures during the conflict provided proper opportunities to Iran to achieve its objectives; however, the current and future international pressures are placing their impact to downsize the Iranian role in Syria. Should such pressure not terminate, Iran would never obtain dominance and influence in Syria, and the same pressures strongly would restrict the role performance of Saudi Arabia which causes a decline in Syria.

We can refer to the following general consequences:

- The Iranian – Saudi rivalry in Syria was not related to their own capabilities as much as was associated with the progress of the conflict, the overlap of the policies and the interests of the regional and international powers in the Syrian crisis.
- The frequent dependence on the support of the regional or international allies may be inconsistent and incompatible with the objectives of the state's regional role. Thus, the self-dependency of the state in achieving its role is a must; however, this cannot be achieved in the light of the disparity of powers.

- In brief, there is always a gap between the self-conceptions and role performance. However, the fact indicates that the role pressures do an effective role, whether negative or positive, in restricting the effectiveness of the competing role performance or increasing its effectiveness, especially the international pressures.

## 6. Recommendations

The developments of this study require the objective reading of the developments of the Saudi – Iranian competition in Syria and in the region in general. One of the requirements of this reading is the necessity of working initially on including our role and strategic interests in the region in the negative repercussions of such competition, working on following the strategies that stops the regional clash as if such occurs, it will have disastrous consequences on the region in general and on the Egyptian interests especially while continuing in adapting the option of non-military involvement in the regional disputes.

Moreover, it is necessary to fulfill the due obligations with allies within the scope of the distinguished bilateral relations and within the framework of the organization of the National Arab Security, work on reviewing such organization and reforming the defect existing in it and work on strengthening and activating it in confrontation of the treats.

Meanwhile, in the light of the chaos witnessed by the Middle East, overlap of interests and intersection of the regional and international roles, the dangers increase and the circle of threat expands. Therefore, there is a priority to complete the organization of the national armament of what is new and sufficient to achieve security, deter threats and defend our limits and strategic resources.

## Notes

1. Which set down the principles of the transitional stage and included the establishment of a transitional ruling panel with full executive powers including members of the Syrian Government and opposition, commencing a constitutional review satisfactory to the people, preparing for free elections that are open to all parties.
2. That stipulates the initiation of peace talks in Syria, and form a reliable judgment panel that includes all, be non-sectarian, establishing a new constitution and conducting elections.
3. Which impose religious legitimacy for the militia to carry out operations of violence.
4. It was formed on July 29, 2011 from groups of military dissidents and volunteer civilians.
5. Among which, the financial cost, fear from turning Syria into a base for Jihadist and that the warehouses of the Syrian chemical weapons would not be secured and also for fear of exporting conflict to Lebanon and Jordan. Moreover, the USA did not desire to repeat the Afghani and Iraqi experiences, and the desire to withdraw from conflict hotbeds.

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