

# Roles and International Behaviour: Saudi–Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain’s and Yemen’s Arab Spring

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**Abstract:** Middle Eastern geopolitics are dynamic and complex. Ideological and religious matters interplay with domestic and international structures, generating several types of relations. This article aims to analyse the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, two powerhouses that compete for leadership in the Gulf. The objective is to understand this competition through the lens of Role Theory, focusing on the national role conceptions that both countries project outwards. This theoretical framework presupposes that Iran and Saudi Arabia project self-made images that represent cognitive constructions of what policymakers believe their respective nations stand for. As an example, Iran projects a role of bastion of revolutions, which is firmly set against Saudi Arabia’s anti-instability role. Regional instability periods, such as civil unrests, provide useful study cases for investigating the phenomenon of rivalry. Therefore, this article focuses on the Iranian and Saudi reactions to the events related to the so-called Arab Spring in Bahrain and Yemen, detecting when the rivalry is (somehow) present in their international behaviours. In conclusion, the article adds to a better understanding of Tehran’s and Riyadh’s ideological projection, and of how much of the region’s politics are constrained by the rivalry status.

**Keywords:** Iran; Saudi Arabia; Role Theory; Bahrain; Yemen.

## Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are two rival powerhouses in the Middle East, and their complicated relationship has been the subject of many academic debates. Research focus has ranged from realist assessments of the regional balance of power to diplomatic historiography on issues such as oil and civil society, complex foreign policy analysis targeting religious differences, and eclectic approaches to shared security dilemmas (Mabon 2016; Chubin and Tripp 1996; Altoraihi 2012; Gause 2014). Tehran, a revolutionary Shia Republic, and Riyadh, a conservative Sunni monarchy, are today the main actors competing in the Gulf region. To Simon Mabon (2016: 4), this rivalry is characterised by political and ideological struggles which have had effects on their

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foreign policy since 1979, the inception year of the present Iranian regime. Since then, both states project self-images of leadership to guarantee their security and outrun their rival, taking advantage of the multiple religious, political, and ideological divisions in the region to gain influence ahead of each another.

With that in mind, this article contributes to discussions regarding the ideological characterisation of that rivalry. To briefly conceptualise it, an ideological rivalry is driven by competing or even mirror-opposed identities that represent one state's values and normative prescriptions of what the regional order should be like. The state is perceived here as a social actor that engages in cognitive processes of differentiation in the international system to distinguish itself from the *other* and to manifest its values and prescriptions (Barnett 1998: 275-276). Such processes can occur via speech, roles, images, rhetoric, symbols, or any other strategy in which the aim is to project ideology while contesting the ideological influence of rivals (Rubin 2014: 35). In this sense, one would hope to find traits of the ideological rivalry so defined in the way Iran and Saudi Arabia behave in the regional system.

Therefore, the primary goal of this article is to examine the Saudi-Iranian rivalry through the national role conceptions that both countries projected during the events associated with the Arab Spring in Bahrain and Yemen.<sup>1</sup> The objective is, by analysing self-projected roles, to perceive if the narrative of the rivalry changed after the uprisings. To that end, the next section advances on the chosen theoretical approach, the subsequent section discusses the traditional role each country projects, and the third and fourth sections are the studies cases in which the Iranian and Saudi reactions to the demonstrations are framed through the lens of Role Theory.

## Theoretical framework

The concept of national role conceptions (NRCs) was developed by Kalevi Holsti (1970) to understand a country's identification markers, which are created by policymakers to portray national values, beliefs and ideologies. NRC is part of the Role Theory research agenda in International Relations (IR). Role Theory is responsible for bringing sociological and cognitive elements to IR in the wake of the discipline's movement towards examining the state beyond being a black box. As Glenn Chafetz, Hillel Abramson and Suzette Grillot (1996: 733) argue, Role Theory assumes that states behave according to specific national roles they attribute to themselves. Such roles constitute their respective state identities, which are not only individually performed, but also socialised at the level of the international system. To Holsti (1970: 245), there is a set of actions, rules, commitments and decisions that policymakers are instructed to follow when interacting with others. Therefore, NRC is one among other efforts in IR that aim at providing more accurate and sensitive theoretical understandings of systemic interstate relations and its complexities.

Role Theory is attractive to foreign policy analysis due to its significance as a descriptive, explanatory and organisational tool and because it pays significant attention to values and self-identification when analysing the decision-making process (Aggestan 2006). Specifically in Middle Eastern Studies, Michael Barnett (1998), in a landmark publication of

Constructivist foreign policy analysis, focused on narratives of Arabism and interactions between Arab countries on his understanding of the elaboration of roles and norms. More recently, Cameron Thies (2012) used concepts of Role Theory to comprehend Israel's process of socialisation in the international system. Role Theory offers a richer understanding of international politics in the Middle East, as it emphasises the ideological struggles that pervade security matters in the region. Some authors argue that religious, ethnic and cultural elements may have influenced or even determined international political decisions throughout Middle Eastern history (Hinnebusch 2003; Gause 2014). Moreover, there is a growing literature highlighting the importance of identities not only in shaping behaviours but also as pillars for competition in the region.

This article works with a concept of Role Theory, NRCs, conceived as a set of foreign policy responsibilities and obligations prescribed to a state by its policymakers (Aggestam 2006: 13). States are concerned, among other things, with their ontological presence. They seek to explain themselves in ways that are meaningful to their counterparts and that differentiate them from other state actors. Through self-projected roles, one can better grasp a state's ontological security, in other words, the creation of a state identity to reduce the threats to its regime that highlight its distinctiveness vis-à-vis the *other* (Darwich 2014: 6). As a result, one must see NRC as a projection of the identity a state intends to forecast to others, which means that this approach is informed by a co-conception of identity: the self cannot exist without the other. George H. Mead conceptualised this logic in his symbolic interactionism, which much fed Alexander Wendt's baselines for developing the Constructivist school of thought in IR.

States develop their roles according to a rich diversity of factors: NRC incorporates policymakers' experiences, historical background, values, material capacities and social norms (Hinnebusch 2003: 93). Once established, roles set patterns of performance and, in some level, restrict the political leadership (Hinnebusch 2003: 93). Adel Altorai (2012: 22) points out that a country's many NRCs should reflect the state identity that policymakers want to portray in the international system. In brief, roles reflect both a claim on the international system and a conception of state identity (Le Pestre 1997: 5). State identity matters, for it shapes discernments of state selfhood in relation to the *other* and the available policies. In light of NRC, states justify their view of world politics before their significant others, explaining many of their alliances, partnerships or enmities as normative corollaries of state identity (Altorai 2012: 22). However, as they rely on leaders' performativity, roles can adapt or change due to a modification in the conjuncture, that is to say when external factors, such as revolutions, regime changes and riots, take place within the domestic domain, or when a new set of threats is perceived.

On the next pages, I outline the traditional NRCs projected by Iran and Saudi Arabia. Methodologically, official discourses and statements of chief political leaders are analysed together with historical qualitative research (Holsti 1970; Aggestan 2006; Chafetz, Abramson and Grillot 1996). Further on, I also describe the reactions Iran and Saudi Arabia had in the matter of the so-called Arab Spring. The aim is to detect how much of the rivalry narrative pertaining to state roles affected Iranian and Saudi international

political behaviour in the selected cases, the uprisings in Bahrain and Yemen, and whether the rivalry rhetoric was intensified or lessened after 2011.

## **Iran, Saudi Arabia and the rivalry in the Gulf region**

The desire to be a regional power and have control over geopolitical events drives Iranian and Saudi foreign policy, as both countries heavily associate regional supremacy with regime survival. Both players consider the Gulf region a key area for their power projection and perceive that external settings can generate significant threats (inputs) to their respective domestic political systems (Gause 2014: 4). To them, it is imperative to influence neighbours' policies and the overall regional affairs (to create outputs), to generate alliances, recognition, and credibility. Being a major geopolitical player means guaranteeing a favourable regional political order that will not threaten their survival.

Rivalry, by definition, means 'feelings of enmity between countries, materialised in a relationship characterised by extreme competition, and usually psychological hostility, in which the issues and positions of contenders are governed primarily by their attitude towards each other' (Thompson 2001: 557). This type of competition involves power and ideological projections, counterreactions and ideological rebalancing. In the Gulf region, for instance, Iran and Saudi Arabia have often profited from animosities to attain or guarantee allies and to interfere in regional conflicts.

Nonetheless, Iran and Saudi Arabia were not always rivals. From the 1950s until 1979, both countries were partners in the USA's 'Twin Pillar Diplomacy.' At the time, both fought communism and sought to secure the oil supply to the West. In return, Washington would provide them with military, economic and diplomatic support (Altorai 2012: 33). The situation dramatically changed after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which overthrew the monarchy and installed a revolutionary theocratic regime in Iran. The events of 1979 have contributed to producing a new state identity for Iran, now a strongly religious republic that is critical of monarchies and western intervention. This new identity directly affected Saudi-Iranian relations, as both began to see each other as antagonists (Mabon 2015: 12). In the 1990s up until mid 2000s, the competition eased somewhat, as they looked for rapprochement and regional collaboration. However, the mistrust and animosity between Iran and Saudi Arabia were deeply enrooted in their state identities and policies. As a result, the rivalry rhetoric soon saw its way back into Iranian-Saudi relations in the context of the 2003 Iraq war, when Baghdad became a new stage for the competition.

Tehran and Riyadh compete in many issues related to the Gulf, encompassing disagreements over geopolitics, oil prices, engagement with non-state actors, and even the region's nomenclature, in an often-recurrent passionate discussion over the terms 'Arab' or 'Persian' Gulf (Gause 2014: 6). With that in mind, the investigation of both primary sources (pronouncements and speeches of policymakers) and related literature (Mabon 2016; Chubin and Tripp 1996; Gause 2014; Hinnebusch 2003; Kamrava 2011) allows us to talk about at least eight NCRs reflecting the rivalry, described on the following pages.

## Iranian NRCs

*Regional leader:* As a champion of pan-Islamic revolutionary ideals, Iran portrays itself as a revisionist leader that considers the regional order not favourable for Muslim societies. With the slogan 'neither East, nor West' during the Cold War, the regime consolidated itself as the voice of all those anti-monarchy, anti-western and anti-Israel. Furthermore, Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, took advantage of historical Persian nationalism and called for the emergence of Iran as the centre of a new Middle East (Takeyh 2009: 9). This self-perceived image is conspicuous in the following speech by the current Iranian president Hassan Rouhani: 'Iran, as a regional power, will act responsibly with regard to regional and international security, and is willing and prepared to cooperate in these fields, bilaterally as well as multilaterally, with other responsible actors' (Presidency 2013). Iran maintains that the international order must be more just to the regional actors of the Middle East. Filling their rhetoric with words such as 'resistance' and 'greatness,' Iran has gained the sympathy of many revolutionary actors in the region, especially non-state ones.

*Protector of the faith:* Iran is the first Shia Republic in history. Its legislation follows the Sharia, and a Supreme Leader along with a Guardian Council and a group of Islamic Experts guarantee the government's submission to the Islamic rule. Resorting to a political imaginary infused with strong religious rhetoric, Iran aims at projecting itself as a country that can guide and protect other Muslim forces in the region, regardless of their specific Islamic denominations. In Khomeini's words 'our Islamic scheme [is built] to create a kind of unanimity view among Muslims of the world, to unite the Islamic countries, to establish fraternity among different Muslims of the world, to make a pledge with all Islamic governments of the world' (Khomeini 1982). In another speech, the late Ayatollah wished to make clear that the 'government knows no difference of race whether between black and white, or between Turk, Persian, Kurd, and Baluch; nobility lies only in fear of God' (Khomeini 1979a). Considering the Iranian Shiite origins, it is not difficult to see the practical need for having its Islamic role detached from any sectarian rhetoric. Itself a minority within Islam, it would otherwise damage Iranian aspirations for regional leadership.

*Bastion of revolutions:* The revolution envisaged the exportation of its principles to other Muslim countries under supposedly unrepresentative regimes. Iran portrays itself as a beacon of revolutions to be held everywhere across the globe, positing itself as a successful model of 'Islamic awakening' to others. One can find evidence of such self-projection in the following speech by the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei: 'the Islamic Revolution, which was launched and pursued by the people of Iran, turned into an inspiration for other nations around the world' (Khamenei 2016a). The same logic is present in Iran's constitution, which states: '[Iran] provides the necessary basis for ensuring the continuation of the revolution at home and abroad', and that it 'will strive with other Islamic and popular movements to prepare the way for the formation of a single world community' (Islamic Republic of Iran 1989). Hence, this role revolves around the idea that Iran is the 'vessel for a revolutionary spirit,' that knows no boundaries, and whose plea should not be restricted by differences of any kind, be they of cultural, national or ethnic origin.

*Anti-imperialist agent:* For most of its scope, the revolution was anti-western and anti-imperialist, as those leading it considered the alliance between the deposed Shah Pahlavi and the USA to be wicked and exploitative. The Revolutionary Constitution declares, for instance, that ‘the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on the rejection of all forms of domination,’ overlapping its function with ‘the complete elimination of imperialism and the prevention of foreign influence’ (Islamic Republic of Iran 1989). Iran sees the presence of the USA in the Middle East as a fundamental threat to Muslim countries and their independence, as ‘Washington is more preoccupied with their imperialistic goals in the region than with the wellbeing of the people’ (Cook and Roshandel 2009: 42). For that reason, Iran condemns western military and political intervention and maintains that only regional actors should handle regional issues. In Khomeini’s (1979b) energetic words, ‘we have stood against foreigners with all of our powers and will not permit that others interfere in our country and other Muslims must not allow others to interfere in their countries.’ The anti-imperialist rhetoric is thus used to forge alliances or partnerships with those who share disagreements concerning western powers meddling in the region.

### *Saudi NRCs*

*Protector of the faith:* conservative Wahhabi norms and values profoundly permeate Saudi Arabia’s political system, as the monarchy was created under this religion’s auspices in 1932. Riyadh holds two out of three holy cities of Islam, Medina and Mecca, and hosts the Hajj, a vast Muslim pilgrimage, receiving people from all over the world. Furthermore, the king’s official title is that of the ‘Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,’ which gives him an ‘Islamic duty’ to fulfil towards all Muslims. On the Saudi’s official website, for example, it reads: ‘since the era of King Abdulaziz, Saudi Arabia gave the top priority to support and help the Muslims all over the world,’ and ‘this support [is given] through specialized agencies established for this reason, as International Islamic Aid Agency, International Islamic World Assembly and Saudi Agency for collecting the donations’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs n.d.). Accordingly, ‘the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represents the heart of the Muslim world, from whose soil the Islamic faith emerged; a faith which places peace at the forefront of its virtuous principles’ (UNGA 2011). In sum, Saudi Arabia projects itself as a natural spiritual leader among Muslims that, following its Islamic solidarity obligation, gives large donations to Islamic organisations. This role, however, tends to be conservative, a consequence of the puritanism of Wahhabism.

*Regional leader:* Saudi Arabia is among the wealthiest countries in the Middle East, having a paramount status as a top oil producer. Moreover, it is the first monarchy established in the Gulf, which bestows its projection as a model to smaller realms in the region. The country sees itself as the Gulf’s natural leader. One can perceive this sense of self-greatness on the Ministry of Affairs website, which reads that ‘Saudi Arabia traces its roots back to the earliest civilisations of the Arabian Peninsula. Since King Abdulaziz established the modern Kingdom in 1932, its transformation has been astonishing.’ The website goes on to stress that ‘the Kingdom has turned itself from a desert nation to a modern, sophisticated state and a major player on the international stage’ (Ministry of

Foreign Affairs n.d.). That adds to the perception that Riyadh wants to assume a crucial place in economic and strategic matters in the region. According to the late King Abdullah, 'we are part of the Arab, Islamic, and international world. Our role is based on defending their rights and making sacrifices for unity in their ranks. Any fair person cannot deny our role' (Abdullah 2010). Therefore, Saudis hold an image of a robust, stable actor, as well as that of a successful monarchical system, which should be emulated by others. For those who accept Saudi leadership, Riyadh is a very generous ally, willing to provide financial assistance and religious guidance.

*Stability guarantor:* guaranteeing the status quo is essential to securing not only Saudi's regional leadership but also its political and economic systems. A complex oil-based welfare system guarantees the legitimacy of the monarchy, and leaders firmly believe that any instability outside can affect its state-society relations domestically and be a threat to the continuance of its regime. An example of this role was the creation, under the Saudi umbrella, of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981, as a response to the instabilities in the region, namely the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). As the late King Faisal remarked at the time, 'the Council will be a positive factor for stability in the region' (UNGA 1981). In the same vein, former King Abdullah stressed that Riyadh has played an 'active role in the Gulf and Islamic arenas to solidify the bases of cooperation to preserve the identity of Arab and Muslim nations, to defend their issues, to maintain their interests, to confront the dangers of division and struggles to threaten their entities' (Abdullah 2007). In short, Riyadh projects a role that is opposed to whatever forces, state or non-state, that call for a revision of the status quo.

*Faithful ally:* Saudi Arabia's security has relied on the long-standing partnership it maintains with the USA. The two countries have shared geostrategic interests, and threats have driven their friendship since the 1960's (Bronson 2006: 4). On the one hand, the Saudis keep the oil market stable and attractive to the West; on the other, Americans provide due security and military support. For its part, Saudi Arabia performs this role by cooperating with the international community. That is evident in the following speech by the late King Faisal: 'the membership of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in OPEC, its useful work in international economic bodies and its effective role in international efforts are aimed at strengthening international economic cooperation and finding solutions for all the problems' (UNGA 1981). As another example, King Abdullah declared that: 'we are part of this world and a member of the international community. With moderate countries, we have common economic interests, and we cooperate at different levels' (Abdullah 2010). In sum, Riyadh projects itself as a trustworthy ally willing to guarantee a favourable regional order, not only to itself but also to its allies, international and regionally.

## *NRCs interactions*

There are two kinds of interactions between the NRCs of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The first one is that all the roles of a single country interact among themselves in a positive relation of reinforcement. There is a symbiotic relationship between the roles of each state, where

one role builds upon the others. For example, the Iranian role of bastion of revolutions benefits from the existence of those of the regional leader, the Islamic leader and the anti-imperialist. It seems to be in the country's best interest to interconnect all of its roles, as this showcases more reliable political behaviour. It is essential to stress, nevertheless, that the performance of each role can change in intensity over time, depending on the leadership in charge. Policymakers can be a sort of filter to NRCs, being more attentive to one role or another depending on context and preferences.

The other evident interaction is when one contrasts the Iranian with the Saudi roles. In doing so, it becomes clear that they clash with each other, as one expects in a rivalry scenario. One country sees itself as having no reasonable option but to conceive roles that will antagonise those of the other. In other words, the roles encompass the competition with its rival to rationalise its continuity. On the one hand, the Iranian role of regional leader, for instance, opposes the Saudi roles of regional leader, faithful ally, and protector of the faith, using precisely this opposition as proof of its need to exist in the first place. On the other hand, the Saudi's stability guarantor goes against Iranian self-images of bastion of the revolutions, protector of the faith, regional leader, and so forth. This strong opposition between roles further strengthens the idea that the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is deeply connected to their state identities. As presumed at the beginning of this article, NRC exposes the ontological characteristic of a co-constitutive ideological rivalry. The competitive roles are not only a consequence of internal factors in Iran or Saudi Arabia but also dependent on the existence of the *other* as an ontological threat.

## The Arab Spring in Bahrain

In the Kingdom of Bahrain, a favoured Sunni minority, the Al Khalifa, rules, while a Shia majority is underprivileged, thereby causing a sectarian rift that is a constant source of dispute between large sectors of the population and the government (Terrill 2011: 19). The Bahraini Arab Spring broke out in 2011, when frustration regarding social disparities, the arbitrary imprisonment of some of the opposition, and the police violence against Shia activists fuelled protests around the country (Joyce 2012: 115). The government response to the riots was violent, killing and injuring many (Joyce 2012: 116). Furthermore, the monarchy insisted that the demonstrations were a mere Shia scheme, orchestrated by nefarious Iran, to destabilise the regime and threaten the Al Khalifa's sovereignty (Terrill 2011: 20). After a month of unrest, Bahrain called on the GCC mutual defence pact, requesting assistance to stop the protests. They insisted that the demonstrations were being backed by Tehran, which would constitute a direct threat not only to Bahrain but all the other GCC countries (Joyce 2012: 117).

On 14 March, for the first time in the GCC's history, the organisation's military branch, the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), was activated. More than a thousand Saudi soldiers and another 600 Emiratis crossed the Bahraini borders (Ismail 2013). Quickly, such international forces deepened the repression: the regime went on to incarcerate Shias, to either kill or torture many opposition politicians and dissidents, burn Shia mosques, and boycott the already questionable free media (Joyce 2012: 118). Additionally, the govern-



ment started intense propaganda against Shias and named all the protesters 'national traitors.' After the GCC intervention, the monarchy quickly repressed dissent. Meanwhile, the Emir promised reforms, but has yet failed to deliver them (Ismail 2013).

### *Iran's reaction to Bahrain's Arab Spring*

In an effort to express support towards the Arab Spring, Ayatollah Khamenei affirmed that 'Today's events in North of Africa, Egypt, Tunisia and certain other countries have ... special meaning for the Iranian nation. This is the same as "Islamic awakening," which is the result of the victory of the big revolution of the Iranian nation' (Kurzman 2012: 162). The burst of protests in the Arab world was a critical moment for the politicisation of Islamic movements, by which Iran believed it could gain a relative advantage in regional hegemony. Iran was interested in presenting its revolution as a model that could guide the uprisings. This reaction meets with the NRCs of regional leader and bastion of revolutions. Iran, eager to create a link between itself and newly empowered Islamic groups, commended revolutions that bared the potential to change the regional status quo.

By recognising the existence of the bastion of revolutions NRC, Bahrain soon aimed to counter-frame Iran's perceived ideological projection. That happened even in the face of Iran's continuing denial of its involvement in any conspiracy against the monarchy, affirming that the demonstrations were independent movements of a 'population dissatisfied with its government' (Chubin 2012: 17). In Khamenei's words, 'the revolts of the people of Bahrain are primarily the same as those from the people of Egypt, Tunisia or Libya. They want free elections, is that asking for too much?' (Zarrabi-Khashani 2014). Ali Larijani, a parliament speaker, remarked that 'those people are looking for changes in their governments, they want to see their legit demands recognised and this is the main reason why the Islamic Republic is supporting them' (Mehr News 2011a). Moreover, Iran maintained that it would never accept the 'false allegations' of interference in the internal affairs of another country; Foreign Minister spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast declared that 'this has no place in our foreign policy' (Mehr News 2011c).

Also matching Iranian NRCs is the insistence that the protests were a consequence of widespread dissatisfaction rather than supposedly driven by Shia grievances. Khamenei said, for instance, that 'Iran supports any popular movement under the slogan of Islam and freedom' and 'we do not distinguish between Gaza, Palestine, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt or Bahrain' (Zarrabi-Khashani 2014). That discourse matches Tehran's role of protector of the faith. Khamenei does not distinguish between Shias and Sunnis when addressing the struggles for freedom faced by the Muslims. In another public pronouncement, Khamenei went on to declare that 'those that try to interpret the Bahraini people's uprisings against despotism as the conflict between Shia and Sunni are in fact doing the greatest service to the United States' (Tehran Times 2011a). It is important to note the strategic design of the protector of the faith role when attached to the anti-imperialist and regional leader ones. In doing so, it becomes clear that Iran wanted to portray itself not only as a praiser of Bahraini people's right to protest, but also to associate this support with something morally superior to sectarianism. It relates the power of Islamic unity with regional resistance.

When the PSF arrived in Bahrain, Iran rapidly condemned it. According to an Iranian official, the GCC 'invaded Bahrain' because they were 'scared that the true revolution was reaching its borders' (Fürting 2013: 13). A declaration issued by the *Majlis* committee (the parliament) condemned Riyadh and its partnership with Washington, stating that by sending troops to Bahrain 'it is pursuing the United States' interests in the region' and that the 'measure is like the occupation of Kuwait by Saddam, but with the difference that the occupation (of Bahrain) is done with the agreement of the United States' (*Mehr News* 2011b). The conformity with the leadership role and the anti-imperialist role is once again striking. Iran strongly reprimanded Riyadh, cautioning that 'Saudi Arabia is following the wrong path and its actions will have severe consequences' (Friedman 2012). In light of the rivalry orienting their relationship, such pronouncements show the Iranian determination to delegitimise any leadership role the Saudis might take in the region and resort to the narrative of Riyadh as a US puppet to do so.

Nonetheless, Iran's reaction to Bahrain's Arab Spring was mostly rhetorical. It opposed the violence and military intervention, but this was insufficient to lead to a direct and significant confrontation.<sup>2</sup> There was no official order from Tehran to intervene in Bahrain, or to penalise the GCC's activities, such as cutting off, or at least curtailing, diplomatic ties with the organisation and its members. To Shahram Chubin (2012: 15), Iran was unprepared for the Arab Spring and caught by surprise at how quickly the GCC launched the military operation in Bahrain. In sum, we can see Iranian roles at work in the Bahraini case, although they did not instigate direct engagement in the conflict. Tehran did not actively react to the military intervention, nor did it make an effort to counterpose the translucent influence exerted by the Saudis. Had the Al Khalifa regime fallen, then it would have been possible to talk about a better space for expanding Iranian influence.

### *Saudi Arabia's reaction*

According to Silvia Colombo (2012: 5), Saudi Arabia had a counter-revolutionary reaction to all possible signs of the Arab Spring in the Gulf. To Riyadh, protests indicated the eventual disruption of the status quo. Particularly in the Bahraini case, Saudi Arabia perceived the protests as a direct threat with possible spillover effects in the region. Not only could one single protest lead to a domino effect spreading to other minorities in the Gulf, but Riyadh also dreaded that Iran would acquire significant influence in Bahrain if Shias were empowered (Rieger 2013: 6). That being so, assisting in the collectively orchestrated repression of the Arab Spring in Bahrain matches the stability guarantor role.

Riyadh announced, for instance, that 'the brotherly people of Bahrain must rationally think when exposing their opinion and must accept what is given as an answer by the government' (Saudi Press Agency 2011). Statements from the Saudi government and other GCC countries insisted that the intervention was following a mutual defence agreement between the members of the organisation. Abdel al-Mowada, the deputy chairman of Bahraini parliament, said that Saudi deployment of troops was not a provocation to protesters but 'a showing of solidarity among the GCC' (*Al Jazeera* 2011). Riyadh did at-

tempt to portray itself as a loyal supporter of its allies, especially to those belonging to the GCC, and thus willing to assist in guaranteeing the established regional order. After 2011, Riyadh increased its economic aid to Bahrain, which is also an expected performance of the regional leader and stability guarantor roles. The extent of donations, financial assistance, and loans from Saudi Arabia to the government of Bahrain has escalated since then, surpassing US\$10m (Colombo 2012: 7; Rieger 2013: 6).

The protector of the faith role, in its turn, acquires a sectarian tone in the Bahraini case, as Riyadh framed the Shia population as the source of regional instability. To some authors, this has turned into a trend in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy since the fall of Saddam in Iraq, with Riyadh becoming more involved in Middle Eastern conflicts and seeking advantage from regional sectarianism to purchase influence (Al-Rasheed 2011; Terrill 2011; Colombo 2012). According to Al-Rasheed (2011), Saudis began to justify their international meddling in Bahrain, Syria, and Iraq through the sectarian discourse; they assisted Sunnis while arguing that it was necessary to oppose dissident Shias. Realising an opportunity for grasping a bigger audience, Riyadh rather quickly discarded the possibility of a pan-Islamic solution in Bahrain, choosing instead to energise religious divisions.

It is also interesting to observe Saudi Arabia's behaviour towards Washington after the Arab Spring. To the Saudis, the USA did not show any inclination to protect the continuity of the governments of some long-standing allies during the protests, such as Mubarak's Egypt, nor any readiness to take a firm stand against Syria's Assad (Terrill 2011: 21). Mistrusting Washington's willingness to guarantee its partner's security, Saudi Arabia has then been boosting its military capacity and looking for more independent ways of assuring the regional status quo (Chubin 2012: 25; Gause 2014; Jarzabek 2012). Since 2011, Saudi military spending rose exponentially, with Riyadh reaching the position of the world's third-largest weapons buyer in 2015. Thus, one can point to a strong causal correlation between these two facts: on the one hand, the suspicion regarding the USA's willingness to protect the region, and, on the other, the Saudis taking the perceived necessary steps to guarantee Gulf security themselves.

In view thereof, it appears that Saudi Arabia has been in the process of making a pragmatic shift in its faithful ally role. As argued by Gregory Gause (2014: 23), Washington and Riyadh will keep sharing a plethora of interests, but their relationship is altering in the way that one can no longer expect that both countries will automatically align in an international crisis. One observes that in the discussed case of Bahrain. The USA criticised Manama's violence, calling for a new political arrangement and a sectarian reconciliation in Bahrain (Gause 2014: 24; Terrill 2011: 25). Contrary to the US take on the crisis, Saudi Arabia strongly opposed any political reforms, as it could award power to the Shias (Terrill 2011: 25). Moreover, the USA suggested negotiations with Shias, which was also rejected by the Saudis (Cooper 2012: 8). For Saudis, the military operation was mandatory 'to save Bahrain from the Iranian influence' (Gause 2014: 27). Consequently, Riyadh only informed Washington about the PSF intervention after it began, indicating that Saudi Arabia did not require US approval to take action (Cooper 2012: 8).

Lastly, according to Kamrava (2011: 8), the uprisings gave a sense of urgency to Saudi diplomacy. It is interesting to note how fast Riyadh orchestrated the intervention in the

context of the typical slowness of the GCC's decision-making process (Kamrava 2011: 9). It appears that Riyadh chose to empower the GCC as a military organisation and to boost its image as the GCC's commander. Therefore, Bahrain was the first stage for projecting the renewed strength of the GCC beyond economic grounds. Moreover, in May 2011, Saudi Arabia invited Jordan and Morocco to join the GCC. One can read the invitation as an attempt to render a new identity to the council, based not on geographic proximity, but on political affinity, for those are the only Sunni monarchies that are outside the Gulf (Colombo 2012: 10). Likewise, Riyadh announced its wish to unite the reigns of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia as a first step for greater unification of the GCC (Chubin 2012: 25). Even though both proposals had no continuity, they exhibited Saudi's determination to give a new layer to its leadership role. It indicated that Riyadh wants to portray itself as a political and military leader in the Gulf, one that is properly able to guarantee the stability of monarchical regimes and the ultimate supremacy of Sunnism.

## The Arab Spring in Yemen

The Republic of Yemen is the poorest country in the Arab Peninsula. Divided into two countries until 1990, tribalism, contending political elites, corruption, and significant social inequality pervade the country's state-society relations (Brehony 2015: 232). In 2011, alarming levels of unemployment, illiteracy and malnutrition drove people to go on the streets and demand the fall of president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had been in power since unification (Clausen 2015: 22). Within less than five months of turmoil, the GCC started negotiating Saleh's ousting from the presidency. Pressured by the Saudis when in Riyadh for medical treatment, Saleh resigned in favour of his vice president Abd Mansour Hadi in February 2012 (Brehony 2015: 238). However, the deal did not forbid Saleh from going back to Yemen and joining the resistance, which just kept on growing. The new administration, on the other hand, was unable to tackle Yemeni problems or to live up to the society's political plurality, and soon lost its popular support (Clausen 2015: 20).

Hadi turned out to be an inefficient leader, incapable of providing the required physical and economic security (Milani 2015). In short, his administration did not stand a chance among the many groups that denied its legitimacy. Among these groups, there were the Houthis, a Zaydi group from Northern Yemen. Officially called *Ansar Allah*, the Houthis rose as a political faction in the 1990s under the leadership of Hussein Badr al-Houthi and in 2004, after his execution by Saudi forces, they morphed into an armed militia against the government (Brehony 2015: 233). Yemen has frequently accused Iran of being a strategic partner of the Houthis. Iran has not been shy about giving ideological support to the Houthis since the Pahlavi regime, chiefly because of the historical proximity between Zayds and Shias (Milani 2015). Since 2011, however, the Houthis have grown in power in Yemen, ironically after a pragmatic alliance with Saleh's resistance. In September 2014, the Houthis took over control in Sana'a, the national capital, arrested Hadi, and occupied the governmental institutions.

In January, after being forced to resign, Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia and requested a military intervention in Yemen to restore his government. By March 2015, Riyadh organ-

ised the coalition composed of ten African and Middle Eastern countries that sought to intervene in favour of president Hadi, called Operation Decisive Storm. The operation's primary goal was to check the power of the Houthis, who according to Hadi and the GCC countries, remain in control of the capital as a 'proxy actor supported by Iran' (Esfandiary and Tabatabai 2016: 169). Until the time this article was submitted, the military operation had no perspective of conclusion, even if it changed its name to Operation Restoring Hope. Hope is, however, far from being restored: Yemen is sinking in one of the biggest humanitarian crises in the world. The chaos is ever growing, while South separatists and Hadi loyalists compete for the control over the southern cities and Al'Qaeda spreads its operations over the most impoverished regions, where hundreds are dying of famine and disease (Riedel 2018).

### *Iran's reaction*

Analogously to the Bahraini case, Iran was sympathetic to the protests in Yemen, also seeking to frame those demonstrations as an 'Islamic awakening' in light of the Iranian Revolution (Chubin 2012: 21). Iran endorsed what it saw as the Yemeni people's right to stand against an oppressive regime (Salisbury 2015: 7), thus applauding the overthrow of Saleh and rejecting Hadi's government (Vatanka 2015). Iran went on to affirm that 'the sorrowful incidents which have occurred in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Morocco and merciless killing of people by the despotic rulers are reminiscent of the crimes perpetrated by all the dictators who tried to remain in power throughout the history' and that it condemns these crimes and 'strongly back the Islamic nations' campaigns' (Tehran Times 2011c). Likewise, Tehran stated that 'the current course of events show[s] that people's demands have not been responded to adequately and unfortunately (the Yemeni government) has taken violent actions against the people' (Tehran Times 2011b).

Advocating for the empowerment of the Yemeni people is in agreement with the bastion of revolutions role. After the ousting of Saleh, Tehran expressed support for the Houthis' cause and celebrated its progress (Brehony 2015: 235). An Iranian clergyman spoke favourably of the Houthis' rise as a 'political organisation,' championing that they should assume a 'similar role as the one Hezbollah has in Lebanon' (Foorohar and Naseri 2015). However, according to Peter Salisbury (2015: 8), Iran was careful to avoid any direct association with the group in the context of the conflict. If Tehran had sponsored the Houthis' operations since 2011, it was keen to deny it (Esfandiary and Tabatabai 2016: 160). Iranian leaders frequently went public to deny the country's alleged military engagement in Yemen (Milani 2015; Vatanka 2015). The Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Corps said that 'the aim of such claims by Saudi Arabia is to divert public opinion from the atrocities [they] are committing in Yemen,' while the Deputy Foreign Minister Abdollahian informed that Iranian planes were 'carrying medical aid and treated Yemenis injured' only (Tehran Times 2015; The Daily Start 2018). The only association with the Houthis made official by Iran was the provision of training assistance, since much before 2011, and humanitarian aid after the escalation of the conflict (Esfandiary and Tabatabai 2016: 165).

As in Bahrain, Iran advocated that one should not interpret the protests in Yemen as a sectarian issue (Chubin 2012: 21). As Khamenei (2015) tried to make clear, 'the war in Yemen is a political war, not a religious one. They falsely claim that the issue is about Shia and Sunni while this is not the case.' Again, it is possible to identify the merging of the bastion of revolutions role with those of the protector of the faith and the anti-imperialist. Iranian ambassador Seyed Ghoreishi affirmed that the Houthis 'did not need it [Iranian armaments],' and that Iran assisted the group 'politically and spiritually,' for 'helping the poor, the oppressed and the deprived was always a policy of Iran' (Faghihi 2015). This pronouncement summarises much of the image that Iran wants to project to the international system: a revisionist actor that supports independent movements against an allegedly oppressive status quo.

As expected, Tehran was vehemently against the Saudi military intervention, accusing Saudi Arabia of imperialism, thereby matching Iran's anti-imperialist role. Khamenei openly condemned Saudi intervention, calling it illegal and urging that 'they should stop their criminal actions in Yemen immediately' (Hashen 2015). In another speech, Khamenei (2016b) denounced that 'global imperialism is directly helping those who bomb the people of Yemen. America is openly and directly helping the bombardment of Yemen. Do they bomb the front lines? No, they bomb hospitals, markets, schools, and public squares. America is helping them.' To Tehran, the solution for Yemen demanded a cooperation of all local political forces. In 2015, President Rouhani called the intervention a 'grand mistake,' remarking that 'a great nation like Yemen will not submit to the bombing' (Evans 2015). Then he urged those involved in the intervention to 'come, let us all think about ending the war, a ceasefire' and to 'let us accept that the future of Yemen will be in the hands of the people of Yemen, not anyone else[s']' (Evans 2015).

As in the Bahraini case, the roles associated with the rivalry are present in the Iranian reaction. It is unlikely, however, that Iran would come to invest heavily in the Houthis as a strategic proxy agent in the Gulf (Esfandiary and Tabatabai 2016: 165; Milani 2015). Some ponder also, whether Iran could be the principal sponsor of the Houthis, as Tehran's capacities are limited and mainly orientated towards Syria and Iraq (Vatanka 2015). Indeed, even if Iran keeps sending humanitarian aid to Yemenis, or even strategic assistance, many analysts are sceptical about the idea that the Houthis depend heavily on Iran (Vatanka 2015; Milani 2015). The Houthis have their own agenda, and Iran cannot be considered the main reason for their yearning for power. Once more, it is possible to see that Iran took a limited stance in Yemen, probably due to the absence of more effective alternatives that would serve their revisionist goals.

### *Saudi reaction*

The Saudis took the lead in the negotiations that removed Saleh. They have been involved in Yemen since the beginning of the protests, mainly because they feared that a generalised insurgency would affect the stability of the Peninsula (Salisbury 2015: 6). At the beginning of Hadi's term, Saudi Arabia intensified its efforts to guarantee stability, boosting its payments of stipends for the Yemeni government, increasing charitable donations, and

organising international fundraising (Brehony 2015: 248). When the conflict intensified, Saudi Arabia promptly reaffirmed its alliance with the Hadi regime and sought to shelter him. The focus on the containment of the neighbouring crisis and the maintenance of loyalty to regional partners both speak to the interconnectedness of the roles of regional power and stability guarantor.

The Saudis believe the Houthis constituted a significant threat to the region's security due to their apparent connections with Iran. In Saudi logic, to take a military stance against the group was a way to check an undesirable Iranian expansion in the whole peninsula (Clausen 2015: 20). The Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated, for example, that the crisis was a 'direct result of Iran's blatant intrusion into internal Yemeni affairs. It seems that Tehran is aiming to undermine Yemen's security and stability, stoke sectarian divisions and thwart international efforts seeking to achieve a peaceful settlement of the Yemeni crisis' (Embassy of KSA 2016). Ambassador Al-Jubeir, in his turn, said that 'Iran remains the single main sponsor of terrorism in the world. It is determined to suspend the order in the Middle East,' and that 'Iran is the problem, not the solution, in Syria and Yemen' (Middle East Eye 2017). Therefore, as in Bahrain, Riyadh took the lead in guaranteeing order, taking command of an intervention designed to check what it perceived as 'Iranian puppets' (Clausen 2015: 21).

Saudi Arabia saw the war against the Houthis as an ideological struggle against Iran and announced that 'no other result besides total victory is acceptable' (Al-Rasheed 2015). Saudi Arabia, as in the Bahraini case, borrowed the sectarian discourse to justify the need for intervention. Inaccurately framing the Zayds as Shias, Riyadh projected itself as a protector of the Sunni religion that must fight a supposed source of regional instability. It is interesting to note that the Saudi narrative of framing Houthis as Shias allied to Iran has been effective. Many local and international media are, gradually, after two years of war, putting the differences between Zayds and Shias aside and employing the expression 'Shia Houthis.' As an example, in an interview with *Al Jazeera*, a leader for an anti-Houthi group called its opponents 'Persians' (Al-Muslimi 2015).

When it comes to US participation in the conflict, one can also trace some parallels with the Bahraini case. The Saudis did not wait for Washington's nod of approval for the Yemen operation: The USA received notice only three days before the missiles started flying into Yemeni sky (Pecquet 2015). Nevertheless, the mission did end up receiving US military and strategic support. Some analysts argue that King Salman bargained the country's approval of the Iranian Nuclear deal (JCPOA) in exchange for Washington's full support on the Yemen intervention (Pecquet 2015; Clausen 2015: 24). Barack Obama and Donald Trump made remarks questioning the operation and its effectiveness; however, both presidents kept public support for the conflict (Riedel 2018).

Furthermore, winning the Yemeni war is essential to the authority and power of Mohammad bin Salman (MBS), King Salman's son, and the next in line to be the king of Saudi Arabia. MBS is the commander-in-chief and the face of the war. All eyes are on the Kingdom as it heads towards the first generational change in its dynasty, as MBS will be the first grandson of Abdulaziz to assume the throne. The ambitious young Crown Prince is determined to make significant economic, industrial and institutional changes in Saudi

Arabia, and those reforms need domestic support and regional backing. Thus, losing the war could mean not only a blow to Salman's foreign policy but also a strike to MBS's image and long-term goals (Al-Rasheed 2015).

In April 2015, Operation Restoring Hope replaced Decisive Storm, but the attacks did not cease. In an interview, MBS insisted that Restoring Hope 'does not mean we will allow the militia to expand on the ground, they must realise that every day they do not get closer to the political solution, they lose on the ground' (The Economist 2016). The Prince's goal is to restore in Yemen an allied stable regime and to consolidate his country as the regional leader. To fulfil this objective, Riyadh is already deploying its military and economic capacities, raising military expenditures (Jarzabek 2016) and developing substantial economic reforms, such as the Saudi Vision 2030. Therefore, the Yemeni Arab Spring was to Saudi Arabia a decisive moment and a wake-up call to reinforce its goals as a regional leadership and avoid the expansion of its enemy.

## Final remarks

This article aimed to understand the importance of self-made roles that carry the rivalry status on Iranian and Saudi foreign policy. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia presents itself as a stable monarchy, wealthy and charitable, allied to the West, protector of the Gulf's status quo and moderate Islam. On the other, Iran portrays itself as a revisionist leader, opponent of the current regional order, against outside interference in the Middle East, and a defender of popular Islamic movements. I argue that Role Theory was an efficient tool to show the ideological characteristics of this rivalry and how they affect the regional geopolitics.

The uprisings in Bahrain and Yemen, the two main episodes associated with the Arab Spring and the Gulf region, were an open stage for Tehran and Riyadh to project their respective NRCs. It became clear that Saudi Arabia instrumentalised the uprisings to improve its competitive roles, acting in a pre-emptive way to guarantee the forefront in the rivalry and protect a favourable status quo. Iran, even though acting very much according to its roles, could not gain the upper hand in those cases. Tables 1 and 2 summarise my findings:

Table 1: Iranian NCRs' performance in Bahrain and Yemen

Role	Bahrain's case	Yemen's case
Regional leader	Attempted to present itself as a revolutionary model for revisionist forces against the status quo.	Supported the Houthis and praised the revolution, as they questioned the status quo.
Protector of the faith	Tried to dissociate the demonstrations from sectarian discourse. Accused Saudis of inciting sectarianism amid the conflict.	Tried to dissociate the demonstrations from sectarian discourse. Accused Saudis of inciting sectarianism amid the conflict.
Bastion of the revolutions	Associated the Arab Spring with its 1979 revolution, but did not engage directly.	Associated the Arab Spring with its 1979 revolution, but did not engage directly.
Anti-imperialist agent	Accused the GCC in its intervention of imperialism on the part of Saudis and its leading western ally, the USA.	Opposed to the GCC's deal and the military intervention, denouncing it as imperialistic and associated with the USA.

Source: created by the author.



Table 2: Saudi Arabian NCRs' performance in Bahrain and Yemen

<b>Role</b>	<b>Bahrain's case</b>	<b>Yemen's case</b>
<i>Protector of the faith</i>	Benefited from sectarian discourse. Framed the Shias as the primary instability force in the Middle East. Therefore, it would perhaps be more accurate to call it ' <i>protector of the Sunni faith.</i> '	Benefited from sectarian discourse. Framed the Houthis as Shias and as the primary instability force in the Middle East. Again, closer to a ' <i>protector of the Sunni faith.</i> '
Regional leader	Reacted militarily to check a possible Iranian engagement. Co-ordinated the military operation and consolidated its image as GCC's leader of the operation (through PSF).	Organised the ousting of Saleh, assisted Hadi, and commanded the military operation against the Houthis.
Stability guarantor	Framed the Shias (with Iran) as a source of instability. Gave economic and military assistance to Bahrain, and commanded the PSF operation.	Framed the Houthis (with Iran) as a source of instability. Organised the GCC's deal, assisted Hadi, and headed the military operation.
Faithfull ally	Co-ordinated the military action without Washington's approval: <i>more pragmatism.</i>	Co-ordinated the military action without Washington's approval: <i>more pragmatism.</i>

Source: created by the author.

The Middle East is an endless source of fruitful cases for IR studies, mainly due to the endurance of regional conflicts, transnational struggles and ideological states. One can only hope for the day this research agenda will live up to its potential, as theoretically driven IR studies about the Middle East are still relatively few. The present article aimed to contribute by bringing a known valuable tool from IR to assist on the understanding of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Both countries may be on the top of the list of relevant issues concerning foreign politics today, yet little is mentioned about how much of their international behaviour is interrelated with the intrinsically ideological rivalry they share. Through a more detailed description of their national roles and their correspondence with the regional competition, it is possible to grasp more fine-grained nuances of both Iranian and Saudi foreign policies.

Thus, this article concludes with the idea that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has reached a new peak. That is especially true regarding MBS, who seems to be capitalising on the rivalry with Iran to improve his regional leadership, domestic approval and international status. In light of this, perhaps two of the core questions for the future is whether Saudi Arabia will be able to get out of the imbroglio it has put itself into in Yemen and, if so, how willing it is to deal with minor GCC countries, such as Qatar, when challenging its leadership. Last but not least, studies that engage with Saudi and Iranian roles in other regions, or that consider the effects of the other on the construction of identity, should be welcomed to develop this type of research further and to contribute in bringing necessary new light to Middle Eastern Studies.

## Notes

1. Bahrain and Yemen were chosen for their proximity to both countries and their importance to the Gulf region. The use of Gulf region includes not only the countries bathed by the waters of the Persian Gulf but also those inserted in the Arabic Peninsula.
2. Because this article focuses on NRC and their possible application to the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, I analyse solely the public stances of political leaders. The point, as I hope is clear, is to consider self-perceived images a country wants to project to its international audience. Therefore, I am not oblivious to the possibility of covert action or of Iranian indirect engagement in the events discussed here. Unfortunately, this analytical pathway would be out of the scope of this analysis.

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## About the author

**Luíza Gimenez Cerioli** is a PhD Student at the Centre for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Marburg, Germany. She has an MA in International Relations from the University of Brasília, and a BA in IR at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, both in Brazil. Her Doctoral thesis under development constructs a strategic triangular framework for evaluating the relations between the USA, Iran and Saudi Arabia and how they affect the regional system of the Gulf. Her fields of interest are Gulf politics, mainly Iran and Saudi Arabia, the USA's role in the Middle East and how International Relations theories are useful to the understanding of the region.

# Papéis e Comportamento Internacional: a Rivalidade Saudita-Iraniana na Primavera Árabe do Bahrein e do Iêmen

**Resumo:** A geopolítica do Oriente Médio é dinâmica e complexa. Questões ideológicas e religiosas interagem com estruturas domésticas e internacionais, gerando vários tipos de relações. Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar a rivalidade entre a Arábia Saudita e o Irã, duas potências que disputam a liderança no Golfo. O objetivo é entender esta competição através das lentes da Role Theory, enfocando as concepções de papéis nacionais que ambos os países projetam para o exterior. Esse arcabouço teórico pressupõe que o Irã e a Arábia Saudita projetem imagens feitas por si mesmas que representem construções cognitivas do que os formuladores de políticas acreditam que suas respectivas nações representam. Como exemplo, o Irã projeta um papel de reduto de revoluções que é firmemente contra o papel anti-instabilidade da Arábia Saudita. Períodos regionais de instabilidade, como problemas civis, fornecem estudos úteis para investigar o fenômeno da rivalidade. Portanto, este artigo enfoca as reações iranianas e sauditas aos eventos relacionados à chamada Primavera Árabe no Bahrein e no Iêmen, detectando quando a rivalidade está [de alguma forma] presente em seus comportamentos internacionais. Em conclusão, o artigo contribui para uma melhor compreensão da projeção ideológica de Teerã e de Riad, e quanto da política da região é restringida pelo status de rivalidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Irã; Arábia Saudita; Role Theory; Bahrein; Iêmen.

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