

The Open University's repository of research publications  
and other research outputs

## Chapter 9: Conclusion

### Book Section

#### How to cite:

Wastnidge, Edward and Mabon, Simon (2022). Chapter 9: Conclusion. In: Wastnidge, Edward and Mabon, Simon eds. Saudi Arabia and Iran: The struggle to shape the Middle East. Identities and Geopolitics in the Middle East. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 173–179.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2022 Manchester University Press; 2022 Edward Wastnidge; 2022 Simon Mabon



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.7765/9781526150844.00014>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's [data policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

## Conclusion

*Edward Wastnidge and Simon Mabon*

The combined contributions to this volume have presented a range of analyses into the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In exploring how the rivalry has played out in different areas – within the two countries themselves, in key states across the Middle East and in the contest for religious legitimacy – the preceding chapters have highlighted the complexities of a relationship that impacts on multiple levels. By considering the impact of this rivalry upon regional and domestic politics across the Middle East in the period since the Arab Uprisings, we have shown how the nature of relations between the two major regional powers is shaped in large part by the contingencies of time and space. Each case presented has drawn out different aspects of the rivalry which defy a ‘one-size-fits-all’ understanding and/or theoretical approach to the topic.

As such, the in-depth studies presented in this collection have drawn upon a number of different theoretical and analytical perspectives as a means of deepening understanding of the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia within the Middle East. For a volume that sits at the intersection of area studies and international relations, this is necessary and a much-needed intervention due to the complexities involved in sketching out how best to interpret and understand this rivalry. Providing space for such theoretical, methodological and analytical eclecticism enables the deeper, more context-specific cases to come to the fore, without conforming to the orthodox approaches of more Euro/Western-centric analysis of the politics and international relations of the Middle East.

In this closing set of remarks, we will offer some concluding thoughts based on the contributions, and also discuss what the different approaches employed here can offer for understanding the rivalry, and indeed other similarly fraught geopolitical relationships more broadly. We will also look to the present and future possible trends in a relationship that now appears to be moving slowly towards a cautious *détente*, and what this could mean for the region.

### Contestation across multiple cases

The first two chapters of this volume sought to offer perspectives on how the rivalry has been understood and constructed from Riyadh and Tehran. This helps set the scene for the individual country studies and religious contestation chapters that followed. In focusing on Iranian discourses about Saudi Arabia and its role in the region, Keynoush and Wastnidge shone light on an often under-explored area, particularly compared to much of the writing on Iran that comes from the West. Through the different examples covered, their chapter illustrated how the rivalry has been articulated through competing narratives as much as it has through material means. It also showcased an often ignored nuance and breadth of debate within the Islamic Republic itself on this matter. This evidences the critical scholarship that is needed in order to help recast relations away from their antagonistic past, though as ever for Iran, the question of the US role in the region continues to loom large over such calculus.

In terms of Saudi Arabia, Darwich has highlighted how developments in the post-2011 Middle East led to structural changes at the regional level as well as changing domestic conditions for the Saudi Kingdom. The view from Riyadh regarding an expansion of Iranian influence in the region not only threatened Saudi Arabia's position within the regional structure but also exposed the domestic vulnerabilities of the Kingdom. The response, largely under Mohammad bin Salman's (MbS) *de facto* leadership, saw a rising, muscular Saudi nationalism, which found a convenient 'other' in Iran. This shows how domestic issues and broader structural shifts in the geopolitical environment can combine to further impact on an already competitive and tense regional picture, characterised by competing agendas.

The individual countries that were subsequently explored provide rich insight into the different ways in which the rivalry manifests itself depending on different contexts. In the case of Bahrain, we are presented with societal divisions that have mapped on to a more sectarian understanding of the rivalry, drawing on al-Rasheed's unique access in the field. Reducing Iran–Saudi relations, and indeed Shia–Sunni relations, within the Bahraini case to purely sectarian explanations is an oversimplification, of course. However, this case shows how easily sectarian identities can become instrumentalised and thus tensions inflamed when combined with the geopolitical competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi support for continued minority rule in the archipelago will likely remain an enduring feature while Bahrain's Shia population continues to be securitised.

For Iraq, a different expression of the rivalry took root as both states sought to capitalise on the removal of Saddam Hussein from the regional security calculus. Iran's advantages in this arena, borne of its historic

connections to the new political elite in the country, were strengthened by its burgeoning alliance network across there in the form of certain factions of the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs), even in Sunni-majority provinces. Saudi efforts to use its financial resources to gain a foothold are at an early stage, and it has been consistently outmanoeuvred by Iran. However, Iraq is no longer a passive theatre on which regional geopolitics plays out and now provides an interesting example of a state with huge potential to influence the future direction of the rivalry. Iraq needs good relations with both states to secure its future, and has emerged as a natural mediator between the two sides, hosting successive rounds of talks between them throughout 2021.

Lebanon is a country that has historically suffered more than most due to the penetration of its political and social life by outside powers. This is perhaps the state where the tentacles of the rivalry have penetrated furthest, with both Saudi Arabia and Iran sponsoring rival political camps through which they hope to further their aims. Lebanon's political system has entrenched sect-based elites which have provided Iran and Saudi Arabia with considerable leverage. For Iran especially, Lebanon remains a vital piece of its strategic depth projection, particularly vis-à-vis Israel, with its ally Hezbollah evolving into one of the 'Axis of Resistance' vanguards and a regional power in its own right. Riyadh's efforts in countering Iran and its allies' power in the country has thus far proved unsuccessful as its foreign policy struggles to maintain a coherent strategy towards it.

The final two countries examined in this volume, Syria and Yemen, continue to suffer from brutal civil conflicts at the time of writing. These are 'hot' conflicts where the so-called cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia has come close to spilling out into the open. In Syria, Iran has largely succeeded in defending its long-standing ally Bashar al-Assad, despite Saudi Arabia having a stronger hand on paper initially. As Phillips noted, the shift in regional and international system made Saudi Arabia's alliances less formidable in Syria, whereas Iran leveraged its more limited capabilities better. Again, domestic factors in Saudi Arabia and the inability to adapt to a changing regional environment left it flat-footed in comparison to Iran. As the conflict slowly draws to a close, Iran's position in Syria has been strengthened, despite repeated Israeli raids on alleged-Iranian targets there.

Saudi misreading of regional dynamics has also been clear to see in the case of Yemen. Its efforts to support the Hadi government in light of Houthi advances led to a huge material cost in seeking to secure its southern border. By framing its involvement within the context of the wider Saudi-Iranian rivalry, Riyadh has incurred significant material and reputational damage, despite having major global powers such as the US and UK providing support to its campaign. For Iran, it has been a low-cost, low-effort means

of stretching Saudi capabilities, and it now finds itself in the position of gaining a strong ally on Saudi Arabia's border through very little material cost in comparison.

Looked at in the round, this may paint a picture of relative Iranian success vis-à-vis Saudi failures in regional foreign policy since 2011. With the exception of Bahrain, Tehran arguably finds itself in an improved position in all of the other states, utilising the shifting regional environment to its advantage, and enhancing its own strategic depth projection as a result. However, this only tells one side of the story. While Iran may have improved its position to a certain degree, it has also suffered some losses. The heightened popularity that Iran and the wider 'Axis of Resistance' gained following the Israel–Hezbollah conflict in 2006 was arguably stymied by its support of Assad. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's Persian Gulf allies have established diplomatic relations with Israel, with an unofficial Saudi–Israeli rapprochement continuing behind the scenes. This presents threats and opportunities for Tehran insofar as greater cooperation between these states and Israel could pose a significant challenge for the Islamic Republic. However, it has also allowed Tehran to assume the moral high ground in continuing its support for the Palestinian cause, with the 'Axis of Resistance' now acting as one of its key international supporters through its rekindled alliance with Hamas.

Beyond the regional dimension that sees the rivalry playing out in different ways across different states, there remains an ongoing competition for religious legitimacy between Iran and Saudi Arabia. As Ardozini highlighted, both states have historically depended on Islam as a state tool in influencing both domestic and foreign policies in each country and, in turn, their competition for regional authority. Iran and Saudi Arabia have constructed identities that are often based on the threat posed by a sectarian 'other', which have been routinely co-opted through the use of religion as a political tool and screen to achieve national interests. While Saudi Arabia and Iran have benefitted from the politicisation of sectarian differences, both have also had to contend with domestic insecurity which has subsequently been channelled away towards foreign policy and regional competition.

### **Different analytical frameworks**

As the different chapters document, a range of theoretical positions can shed light on the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, along with the broader implications of the rivalry across the region. These different theoretical, ontological and epistemological approaches reveal much of the complex interplay between a range of factors shaping the rivalry. The complexity of

the rivalry and its regional impact brings together historical antagonisms, political aspirations, identity politics, economic rivalry and security concerns, necessitating a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the importance of these particular issues, albeit contingent upon the peculiarities of time and space.

As the Introduction observed, much of the existing literature on the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran can be positioned within three broad camps: those who ground tensions in a quest for regional influence; those who reduce it to competition for Islamic legitimacy; and those who take a middle-ground position acknowledging both the importance of religion and power politics. Yet as this volume has shown, there is a need to focus on additional factors, perhaps most notably the impact of the rivalry on regional politics.

Here, where we situate this volume, different theoretical approaches allow for detailed analysis of the ways in which the rivalry plays out in particular spaces. While historical context is necessary to better understand the structural factors shaping the rivalry, detailed scholarly examination is necessary to understand how the rivalry differs from Lebanon to Yemen, Iraq to Bahrain.

A range of IR theories have been used to shed light on the ways in which the rivalry plays out across the region. Mainstream approaches such as the various branches of realism help reveal the different ways in which the quest for power takes place and the ways in which this resonates across the region. Structural realists argue that the nature of the rivalry is conditioned by the arrangement of actors in the anarchic international system, helping to understand the ways in which the quest for material power shapes regional politics and leaving security concerns positioned prominently within the rivalry. Yet it is perhaps the neoclassical realist which is the most useful of the various realist approaches, given its acknowledgement of the importance of domestic forces and ideational factors. The organisation of domestic politics, as several chapters acknowledge, is central in determining the nature of the rivalry and of regional politics more broadly.

Constructivist accounts – ranging from ‘thick’ to ‘thin’ – shed light on the importance of ideational factors, most saliently religion and identity. There is little doubt that religion plays a central role in shaping regional politics and the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as does ethnicity and national identity. As the case of Yemen reveals, tensions between Arab and Persian ethnicity posed a challenge to Iranian influence, albeit a challenge that was circumvented through the deployment of Hezbollah figures to work with the Houthis.

Although sectarian difference between the two states has been viewed as a source of much antagonism, there is nothing inherently antagonistic

about sect-based difference. When mapped onto other identity markers or contextualised within already existing tensions, however, sect-based tensions provide an additional source of friction. While this point has been made with regard to the emergence of sectarian tension within states, the same principle applies to the rivalry between states. Here, more work is required to trace the ways in which discourses of sectarianism play out – and resonate – across state borders and the factors that allow them to find traction at particular times and in particular places. Here, once again, more focussed exploration about the impact of the rivalry on particular states is necessary.

### Present and future

At the time of writing, newspaper reports carry stories of an improvement in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. After years of track II diplomatic processes – taking myriad forms – designed to improve relations, a shift to more formal dialogue has taken place, prompting a thaw in relations and nods to a burgeoning rapprochement between the two states. As a recent piece published in *The International Spectator* observes, in a pragmatic sense, a thaw in relations is desirable for both states and their aspirations for political, social and economic transformations.<sup>1</sup> In Iran, years of crippling sanctions from the Trump presidency's campaign of 'maximum pressure' hit the economy hard. Leaving aside the thorny question of the nuclear programme, Iran's energy infrastructure requires large-scale financial investment. Growing economic pressures have had a devastating impact on the Iranian public, with a currency crash and social pressures that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince MbS's ambitious plans to transform the country away from its reliance on oil – set out in Vision 2030 – require similarly large injections of finance from external donors. The continuation of war in Yemen has put a huge strain on the Saudi economy which cannot continue. Recognising these pressures, the UAE chose to withdraw from the conflict, leaving the Kingdom as the main backer of the Hadi government. While the Abraham Accords gave some Gulf states additional security cover, both in Washington and Israel, Saudi Arabia's delicate position with regard to the Palestinian cause – both as the advocate of an Arab peace plan and given its position of influence in the Islamic world – appears to prevent an overt recognition of Israel, leaving what Clive Jones and Yoel Guzansky have referred to as a 'tacit security regime'.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond this, Riyadh has come under growing international pressure due to its actions in Yemen – in particular, allegations of war crimes – which

dramatically increased after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. In light of these financial and normative pressures, the pragmatic need for a thaw in relations with Iran is obvious.

Diplomatic efforts led by Iraq, albeit with the involvement of a range of international organisations, appear to have made progress. Iranian diplomats have also returned to Saudi Arabia, though not at the bilateral level, but rather through taking up their positions at the OIC headquarters in Jeddah. The belligerent rhetoric deployed by Saudi Arabia's Crown prince – likening the Iranian leadership to Hitler<sup>3</sup> – has stopped, for now. Similarly, Iranian rhetoric towards Saudi Arabia also shows signs of de-escalation. Such steps are a necessary but not sufficient step for a lasting improvement in relations. There remain serious issues which need a resolution, including the role of the US in regional politics; the nuclear issue; war in Yemen; sponsorship of non-state actors; and maritime maleficence. Exacerbating such challenges is the presence of a range of local, national and regional actors, whose agendas may differ from the emerging consensus. As such, mitigating the threat posed by spoilers opposed to any burgeoning rapprochement is a key concern. Addressing these issues alone poses significant challenges, yet doing so simultaneously is integral to creating conditions in which Riyadh and Tehran can engage with one another in a mutually beneficial way.

### Notes

- 1 S. Mabon, E. Alrefai and S. Nasirzadeh, 'Desectarianisation and the Future of Saudi Iranian Relations', *The International Spectator*, 56:4 (2021), 66–83.
- 2 C. Jones and Y. Guzansky, 'Israel's Relations with the Gulf States: Toward the Emergence of a Tacit Security Regime?', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 38:3 (2017), 398–419.
- 3 J. Goldberg, 'Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader "Makes Hitler Look Good"', *The Atlantic*, 2 April 2018, <https://bit.ly/3INV0rD> (accessed 30 August 2021).