Saudi Arabia and Iran
Identities and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Series editors: Simon Mabon, Edward Wastnidge and May Darwich

After the Arab Uprisings and the ensuing fragmentation of regime-society relations across the Middle East, identities and geopolitics have become increasingly contested, with serious implications for the ordering of political life at domestic, regional and international levels, best seen in conflicts in Syria and Yemen. The Middle East is the most militarised region in the world where geopolitical factors remain predominant factors in shaping political dynamics. Another common feature of the regional landscape is the continued degeneration of communal relations as societal actors retreat into sub-state identities, whilst difference becomes increasingly violent, spilling out beyond state borders. The power of religion – and trans-state nature of religious views and linkages – thus provides the means for regional actors (such as Saudi Arabia and Iran) to exert influence over a number of groups across the region and beyond. This series provides space for the engagement with these ideas and the broader political, legal and theological factors to create space for an intellectual re-imagining of socio-political life in the Middle East.

Originating from the SEPAD project (www.sepad.org.uk), this series facilitates the re-imagining of political ideas, identities and organisation across the Middle East, moving beyond the exclusionary and binary forms of identity to reveal the contingent factors that shape and order life across the region.

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Contents

List of contributors \hspace{1cm} page vi
Acknowledgements \hspace{1cm} ix

Introduction – Simon Mabon and Edward Wastnidge \hspace{1cm} 1

1 The view from Riyadh: A neoclassical realist perspective of Saudi foreign policy towards Iran in the post-2011 Middle East – May Darwich \hspace{1cm} 14

2 Narratives of power politics in the Iran–Saudi relationship: The view from Tehran – Banafsheh Keynoush and Edward Wastnidge \hspace{1cm} 33

3 Competing Islams: Religious legitimacy and the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and Iran – Lucia Ardovini \hspace{1cm} 55

4 The Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry: Rekindling of Shia loyalty and Sunni fears in Bahrain – Rashed al-Rasheed \hspace{1cm} 74

5 Iraq and the evolution of Saudi–Iranian relations – Stephen Royle and Simon Mabon \hspace{1cm} 96

6 The irreplaceable piece: Lebanon’s strategic value in the Saudi–Iranian foreign policy chessboard – Hussein Kalout \hspace{1cm} 118

7 Capability and culpability: Iranian and Saudi rivalry in the Syrian conflict – Christopher Phillips \hspace{1cm} 141

8 Delegation or intervention: Yemen as a theatre for the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia – Maria-Louise Clausen \hspace{1cm} 156

9 Conclusion – Edward Wastnidge and Simon Mabon \hspace{1cm} 173

Index \hspace{1cm} 180
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Introduction

Simon Mabon and Edward Wastnidge

In the years after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, few rivalries have had as important an impact on global politics as the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Following the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the removal of the Ba’ath regime, tensions between Riyadh and Tehran have shaped conflict in three states, resulting in a catastrophic loss of life and devastation. Engaging with the rivalry has shaped US foreign policy and fed into a broader realignment of regional security, best seen in the anti-Iranian alliance that helped forge the Abraham Accords. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has also shaped political, social and economic life in Lebanon and Bahrain, along with manifesting in a broader competition in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the world’s second largest intergovernmental organisation. The rivalry has also begun to resonate beyond the Middle East, manifesting in sectarian tensions across the world’s Muslim population. Political in nature, yet couched in Islamic rhetoric, it reflects a desire to ensure regime security and legitimacy, whilst also increasing influence across the Middle East and wider Muslim world. Yet while taking on increasingly fractious characteristics since 2003, the roots of the rivalry are much deeper. Although by no means the sole factor shaping regional politics, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has played an increasingly influential role in recent decades, prompting the publication of a growing body of literature on the topic.

As further elucidated below, the efforts to understand the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran have produced a body of literature that can be separated into three camps. The first suggests that the rivalry is best understood through a balance of power in the Gulf. The second camp suggests that religion plays a prominent role in shaping the nature of the rivalry and that so-called proxy conflicts have been drawn along sectarian lines. The third camp suggests that a more nuanced approach is needed, drawing upon concerns about regime power and legitimacy – externally and internally – with instrumentalised use of religious difference.
This book aims to offer further nuance to understanding and explaining the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia by considering the implications of the rivalry upon regional politics. Although both religion and geopolitics are important for understanding the nature of the rivalry, reducing analysis to either approach is deeply problematic. After the onset of the Arab Uprisings and the fragmentation of regime–society relations, communal relations have continued to degenerate, as societal actors retreat into sub-state identities, whilst difference becomes increasingly violent, spilling out beyond state borders. The power of religion – and trans-state nature of religious views and linkages – thus provides the means for external actors (such as Saudi Arabia and Iran) to exert influence over a number of groups across the region. Given these issues, the contributions to this volume, and the collection as a whole, have two main aims: firstly, to explore the nature of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran within the contemporary Middle East; and secondly, to consider the impact of this rivalry upon regional and domestic politics across the Middle East. To this end the book is structured around the core regional states in which the Iran–Saudi rivalry has been most apparent in recent years, these being Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, with further contextualising chapters on Iran, Saudi Arabia and religious contestation completing the picture.

Existing debates

In recent years, a burgeoning literature on the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has emerged. Much of this looks explicitly at the reasons for the rivalry and the ways in which tensions play out across the Middle East and beyond. Yet the proliferation of work on the post-Arab Uprisings Middle East has meant that a great deal of work has been produced that looks at the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran within the context of other lines of enquiry. In what follows, we seek to locate the rivalry in the context of broader intellectual discussions about the Middle East. For reasons of brevity, this is not comprehensive, but provides a steer into the types of questions and areas in which analysis of the rivalry between the two major Gulf powers occurs.

Within this literature on the rivalry, three main camps have emerged. The first seeks to understand the rivalry as a consequence of sectarian difference, the second reduces the rivalry to power politics, while the third argues that both religion and power politics are important, arguing that more critical approaches are needed that help to understand the ways in which religion and power politics interact, along with the repercussions across time and space.
Introduction

Religion and the quest for legitimacy

After the events of the Arab Uprisings and the increased focus on sectarian difference in both zeitgeist and academic scholarship, it was hardly surprising to see work focussing on the impact of religious difference on the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran. Here, competition over leadership of the Islamic world and claims to legitimacy lead to tensions between the two, exacerbated by the incompatibility of Saudi Arabia’s vociferously anti-Shia Wahhabist identity and the Shia identity enshrined within the Islamic Republic of Iran. Indeed, after revolutionary events in Iran that led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, relations between Riyadh and Tehran dramatically deteriorated. Here, parallels with the ‘ancient hatreds’ thesis found in the study of sectarianism are quickly apparent, which argue that tensions in the formative stages of Islam, manifesting at the Battle of Karbala in AD 680, are responsible for contemporary instability. Applied to the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, this argument would suggest that the two states are the political embodiments of their respective sects. Such a view is often reproduced in policy debates and journalistic articles, yet rarely finds traction in academia.

In spite of this, after the Arab Uprisings, the actions of Riyadh and Tehran in providing a degree of support to co-sectarian kin across the region helped to reinforce a narrative of a region becoming consumed by a sectarian struggle. Underpinning such fears were comments from King Abdullah of Jordan about a ‘Shia Crescent’ under the tutelage of Iran, stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. Yet much like the primordialist account of sectarian difference which seeks to reduce divisions to intractable, immutable factors – a position that has been largely discredited in academic parlance – such an account of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran rarely finds traction.

If one critically reflects on the role of religion in the Kingdom and Islamic Republic, it is easy to see that while Islam is integral to both, there is an instrumental dimension to its deployment, both in terms of its domestic and foreign policy. This is particularly evident when examining foreign policy behaviour, as sectarian identities provide scope for the cultivation of relationships with sectarian kin across state borders. Yet such an approach struggles to explain Iranian support for Hamas as part of a broader resistance axis and other foreign policy priorities. As Edward Wastnidge argues, while Iran’s foreign policy is constructed in accordance with religious values, this is just one aspect of a multidimensional foreign policy that utilises a range of different identities. Additionally, Kim Ghattas’s book *Black Wave* looks at the impact of 1979 on regional politics, with claims to Islamic legitimacy – in myriad
forms – central to the exposition.\textsuperscript{3} Dilip Hiro’s book \textit{Cold War in the Islamic World} also places Islam at the heart of regional developments yet fails to critically reflect on the ways in which religion resonates in regional politics.\textsuperscript{4} This point is made powerfully by Lawrence Rubin in \textit{Islam in the Balance} acknowledging that competing claims to Islamic legitimacy can impact on relations between states.\textsuperscript{5}

\textbf{Power and regional security}

Early efforts to comprehend the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran often adhered to realist analysis about power politics, threat perception and state survival. Such accounts sought to reduce the rivalry to a balance of power for regional hegemony across the Persian Gulf, pitting two powers against one another.\textsuperscript{6} Accordingly, state survival and the projection of power is deemed central in understanding the actions of Riyadh and Tehran. Here, work by scholars including Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, Robert Mason, Henner Furtig and others explores a range of factors within the rivalry, from the rivalry between the Gulf Wars, to economic factors and the role of oil.

It is easy to see how this approach is appealing, with security often viewed in zero-sum ways by many, with devastating repercussions for the region. As scholars such as May Darwich, Bassel Salloukh, Chris Phillips, Thomas Juneau, Maria Clausen and others have acknowledged, competition between two powerful and influential states means that tensions can resonate across the region, shaping both the nature of regional politics and the specificities of particular arenas in the process.\textsuperscript{7} Take, for example, events in Syria where Saudi Arabia began funding rebel groups after the uprisings of 2011 in an effort to topple Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president, with backing from Iran.\textsuperscript{8}

These points were reinforced by erstwhile US President Barack Obama who, in a 2015 interview, stressed that

The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians – which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen – requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace.\textsuperscript{9}

Although questions remain about the nature of ‘proxy wars’ and ‘chaos’, the focus on power politics and regional security is clear. This view of a rivalry spilling out across the Middle East is prevalent across policy discussions, journalistic accounts and also the broader literature that reflects on the rivalry.

Similar claims are made by Gregory Gause, who also argues that the ‘best framework for understanding the regional politics of the Middle East
is a cold war in which Iran and Saudi Arabia play the leading roles'. This approach, for Gause, shares similarities with Malcolm Kerr’s idea of the ‘Arab Cold War’ during the 1950s and 1960s. Here, the game is about a balance of power and while religion plays a role, it is not the key driving force. Building on this, Gause argues that it is the ‘weakening of Arab states, more than sectarianism or the rise of Islamist ideologies, that has created the battlefields of the new Middle East cold war’.11

The realist approach also helps account for the contrasting views of the US in the Gulf. For Saudi Arabia, a US presence was integral as a guarantor of regional security, yet Washington’s actions were viewed in a diametrically opposed way by Iran, which was a staunch advocate of Gulf states alone being responsible for regional security. Following this logic, some have sought to explore the ways in which the rivalry evolved during the Trump presidency as Washington took on an openly hostile stance against the Islamic Republic.13

A critical turn

A third camp seeks to bring together power politics and religion, exploring the ways in which religious identities can be used as a means of projecting power and influence; it also allows for an examination of the ways in which developments across the Kingdom and Islamic Republic contribute to actions across the region. Here, more critical understandings of security are routinely deployed, such as those posited by the Copenhagen school, in an effort to understand the construction of security and the ways in which religion features in these calculations.

One common approach found within the Copenhagen school has been to reflect on securitisation processes within the context of the rivalry, such as those proposed by Simon Mabon and Helle Malmvig. Here, a critical approach to the rivalry allows for analysis of the discursive practices used to frame the ‘other’, perhaps best seen in King Abdullah’s demands for the US to ‘cut off the head of the snake’.14

This approach takes analysis beyond examination of the structural factors shaping the rivalry to an exploration of the ways in which hostility and tensions are (re)produced, directly and indirectly. Once again, this has regularly been applied to particular arenas where the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran has played out, yet more detailed study is required of the analysis itself using these approaches. There is certainly a great deal of work that needs to be done on the nature of the rivalry itself, reflecting on a number of areas including: foreign policy decision-making; critical geopolitics; critical discourse analysis; political economy; the role of oil; and the ways in which the rivalry evolves.
Beyond the ways in which the rivalry is constructed and plays out, greater exploration is needed of the interaction and tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran and local politics in what is termed ‘the second image reversed’, which argues that regional politics can have a dramatic impact on local politics, and vice versa. Reflecting on events in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain and Iraq, it is easy to see how local politics have been conditioned by tensions between Riyadh and Tehran, although the extent of this conditioning is contingent upon the peculiarities of time and space. It is here where this volume seeks to build on existing debates, reflecting on the ways in which the rivalry plays out temporally and spatially through its detailed examinations of how it is perceived in both Riyadh and Tehran, how it is experienced in the politics of the five states chosen as case studies and what this means with regards to contestation within the realm of religious legitimacy.

Iran–Saudi relations in historical context

While current debates on the Iran–Saudi relationship are, by some necessity, centred on the contemporary manifestations of competition between the two sides, the sense of rivalry between them has a longer history. Iran’s revolution in 1979, so often heralded as a game changer in the region and Islamic world, certainly played a significant role in shaping the relationship as we see it now. However, the broader Cold War context, along with both states’ regional ambitions and roles as major oil producers prior to the revolution, are also key. In a past echo of the West’s current placing of trust in an authoritarian, ambitious leader, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was entrusted with securing Western interests in the region during the Cold War. As with Mohammad bin Salman, the shah was furnished with the most advanced weaponry and a blind eye was turned to the domestic repression that went hand in hand with modernisation efforts and vanity projects.

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia were seen has ‘twin pillars’ of Persian Gulf security following the UK withdrawal from the region, with Iran in particular playing a key role as a bulwark against the perceived Soviet threat to the region. The two monarchies were untied by a common desire to maintain the regional status quo and push back against the tide of Arab nationalism that both saw as a major threat. As Saudi Arabia began to assert its position as a key oil producer, it was also able undermine Iran’s regional clout – as seen through its role in the Arab oil embargo following the Yom Kippur War, and in its rapidly swelling coffers. Thus, in the lead up to the events of 1979, both states ramped up their military spending to reinforce their regional standing and domestic control.
Unsurprisingly, the events of 1979 across both states had a dramatic impact on regional relations. The establishment of the Islamic Republic under the tutelage of Ruhollah Khomeini added a theological dimension to geopolitical tensions across the Gulf that had become increasingly fraught. In Saudi Arabia, the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca demonstrated the precariousness of claims to Islamic leadership, which was further exacerbated by revolutionary activity across the Gulf. What quickly followed was a spiral of rhetoric as rulers in both states sought to demonstrate Islamic credentials along with demonising the other. The onset of war between Iran and Iraq exemplified the level of fear that many states across the Gulf felt at events in Iran and, although concerned about Saddam Hussein, Saudi support for Iraq was hardly surprising. A key component of the nascent Islamic Republic’s foreign policy was to provide support to the ‘downtrodden’ of the Muslim world as enshrined in Article 3.16 of the Iranian Constitution. This was quickly put into practice with support for groups across the Middle East, notably Hezbollah, and the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain. These organisations sought to challenge the status quo and while the latter was ultimately unsuccessful in its efforts to topple the Al Khalifa ruling family in Bahrain, its legacy remains in how Shia groups have been treated across the island.

As the winds of change blew across global politics with the end of the Cold War, Iran was also transitioning to a new phase in its post-revolutionary political development following the end of the Iran–Iraq War and the death of Khomeini in 1989. Iran’s need for post-war reconstruction and the ascension of a comparatively more pragmatic trend in Iranian politics in the form of the Rafsanjani–Khamenei axis had implications for its relationship with regional states. In Saudi Arabia, the emergence of Crown Prince Abdullah also heralded a new direction in the Kingdom’s regional approach. As a result, the 1990s saw a burgeoning rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia which reached a high watermark under Iran’s reform-minded president Mohammad Khatami. This period saw reciprocal visits by Khatami and Abdullah to each other’s capitals, cooperative participation in international fora (both in terms of Islamic affairs in the OIC and oil affairs within OPEC) and increasing trade and security links being fostered between the two states.

Although the previous years had hinted at a thawing in diplomatic relations, the onset of the ‘War on Terror’ re-shaped the order of global politics. While Iran had provided support to the US in Operation Enduring Freedom, the State of the Union speech given in early 2002, which articulated the existence of an ‘axis of evil’, had a seismic impact on this burgeoning rapprochement. The ensuing invasion of Iraq – with a close eye on Iran – opened up space for a new arena of competition between Iran
and the US, supported by Saudi Arabia. With the return of a number of erstwhile Iraqi political figures from exile in Iran, the Islamic Republic quickly began to exert a great deal of influence upon the post-2003 state, much to the concern of Saudi Arabia, who urged the US to ‘cut off the head of the snake’. What followed was a discursive process of framing Iran as an existential threat to regional security, led by Saudi Arabia and Israel.  In Lebanon, the assassination of Rafic Hariri positioned the two rivals against each other in the formal political arena with the establishment of the ‘March 8’ and ‘March 14’ alliances, bringing together local allies with their external sponsors. In spite of the burgeoning violence and hostility, Riyadh and Tehran were able to work together to prevent a descent into civil war. At the same time, however, Saudi Arabia sought to woo the new Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, reducing Iranian influence across the Levant.

The events of the Arab Uprisings opened up schisms between rulers and ruled, which quickly became arenas for geopolitical competition in a region underpinned by a range of shared norms, creating what Paul Noble termed a ‘regional echo chamber’. In societies divided along sect-based lines – most notably Bahrain and Syria – schisms provided opportunities for Saudi Arabia and Iran to operate in pursuit of improved regional standing, often at the expense of the other. As protests gained momentum and it appeared that regimes could have been toppled, events took on additional geopolitical meaning. In Syria, elite Iranian troops assumed a central role in devising Assad’s strategy to defeat the protesters and the Islamist groups that quickly emerged; unsurprisingly, the conflict had devastating repercussions for Syrians. In Bahrain, a Saudi-led Peninsula Shield Force crossed the King Fahd Causeway to ensure the survival of the Al Khalifa ruling family amidst widespread claims of perfidious Iranian activity.

What this brief historical overview shows is that the nature of relations between the two major Gulf and Islamic powers is shaped by the contingencies of time and space. While structural factors are certainly prevalent across these periods, notably concerns about regional order and claims to Islamic legitimacy, these structural forces are acted upon and shaped by agency operating in a range of different ways. As a consequence, while temporality is important, so too is spatiality.

Chapter overview

As noted above, this volume seeks to explore how the Iran–Saudi rivalry plays out across time and space. The following chapters do this by firstly focusing on how the two key actors, Iran and Saudi Arabia, understand
relations with each other, both bilaterally and through their regional poli-
cies in the post-Arab Uprisings geopolitical space. This sets the scene for
understanding how Riyadh and Tehran comprehend the Iran–Saudi rela-
tionship and the extent to which it can be thought of as a rivalry. It then
goes on to explore how the rivalry plays out in terms of wider contention
within political Islam, before moving on to an exploration of the five case
study countries of Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen.

In Chapter 1, May Darwich adopts a neoclassical realist framework to
explain Saudi foreign policy towards Iran since 2011. Darwich highlights
how Saudi foreign policy is at the intersection of international, regional
and domestic conditions, with rising Saudi–Iran tension being the result
of structural conditions. Following an explanation of the neoclassical
approach and Saudi foreign policy, the chapter then looks at how the
changing regional order has impacted on relations, and the influence of a
confrontational nationalism from Saudi Arabia. The author shows how the
Saudi portrayal of Iran as the enemy in the region is the result of the interac-
tion between the regional structure in the post-2011 regional order and the
nascent top-down nationalism in the Kingdom.

In the second chapter in this volume, Banafsheh Keynoush and Edward
Wastnidge present the ‘view from Tehran’ regarding Iran–Saudi relations.
The focus in this chapter is very much on the official, academic and policy
discourses emanating from Iran about the relationship between the two
regional powers. In doing so it presents a range of under-explored Iranian
narratives and debates around Saudi Arabia’s regional polices and its stance
towards the Islamic Republic, showing how the battle for regional influ-
ence is articulated through competing narratives as much as it is through
material means. This covers Iranian elite views and discourses from Iran on
Saudi–Iran relations, the role of religion in the relationship, Iranian perspec-
tives on Saudi Arabia’s regional security policies and Tehran’s own security
outlook for the region.

Chapter 3 explores how competition in the religious domain impacts on
the foreign policies of Iran and Saudi Arabia. In this chapter, Lucia Ardovini
unpacks the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran from the perspective of
claims to religious legitimacy, showing how both countries have historically
relied on their own understandings of Islam to legitimise state authority,
frame nationalist projects and as a foreign policy tool. The chapter high-
lights how the struggle for religious competition between the two states
goes beyond the Sunni–Shia schism, and translates into both geopolitical
and domestic disorder. By using a comparative analysis Ardovini traces
the ways in which the dependence on Islam as a state tool has influenced
both domestic and foreign policies in each country and, in turn, the wider
Saudi–Iranian competition for regional authority.
Chapter 4 is the first of the country-specific case studies exploring the temporal and spatial aspects of the rivalry. Drawing on the unique insight provided by fieldwork undertaken in Bahrain, Rashed al-Rasheed offers a deep investigation into how relations between Sunnis and Shia in Bahrain are influenced by the Saudi Arabia–Iran rivalry. This chapter shows how sectarian tensions have been exacerbated by competing regional agendas and a quest for hegemony. Through his interviews with a range of opposition and pro-government figures, as well as academics and analysts from across the different communities, al-Rasheed shines much needed light on how the wider regional dynamic impacts on inter-communal relations in Bahrain. Carrying out fieldwork in Bahrain on such a sensitive topic naturally raises important and challenging methodological questions regarding the positionality of the researcher. The chapter’s resultant emphasis on hitherto under-explored Bahraini Sunni concerns regarding the Saudi–Iran rivalry’s impact on the archipelago is both novel and a reflection of the challenges of conducting such research.

In Chapter 5, Stephen Royle and Simon Mabon use rich data from fieldwork carried out in Iraq to evidence how competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia is experienced on the ground in that country. The chapter starts with an important contextualisation of the importance of Iraq to regional security, along with the efforts of Iran to capitalise on the favourable conditions created for it by the fall of Saddam, and subsequent Saudi fears of Iran’s growing role there. The chapter homes in on the largely Sunni province of Anbar, and highlights the role of the Iran-aligned factions of the Popular Mobilisation Units in economic and political life there, as well as Saudi efforts to enhance its relations with sympathetic actors in the country.

The sixth chapter in this volume is authored by Hussein Kalout and explores the ever-complex roles of Iran and Saudi Arabia in Lebanon. In this chapter, Kalout presents Lebanon as the ‘irreplaceable piece’ in the foreign policy chessboard of competing Saudi–Iranian geostrategic ambitions in the Middle East. In a regional country where sectarian politics is arguably at its most overt, the author details how the Sunni and Shiite political landscapes have been cultivated by Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively. This is shown as contributing to the continued political paralysis with the tutelary model of competition exercised by Iran and Saudi Arabia leading to a pronounced diminution of sovereignty.

Chapter 7 focuses on Syria as a space where one of the region’s longest-running and most brutal civil conflicts has been subject to the penetration of external powers, including Iran and Saudi Arabia. In this chapter, Christopher Phillips assess the utility of different theoretical perspectives from international relations in explaining Iran’s comparative success
vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia in Syria. Phillips shows that while structural factors clearly were important, the significance of domestic and ideational factors alongside them suggests that purely systemic answers are insufficient alone to explain the conflict’s outcome. Like Darwich, Phillips concludes that a neoclassical realist interpretation offers the best explanation for Saudi Arabia’s inability to adapt to the changing external context and make the most of its advantages, due in part to the influence of domestic factors.

In the final country study of this volume, Maria-Louise Clausen looks at the case of Yemen as a theatre for the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In Chapter 8, Clausen explains how the notion of ‘sunk cost effect’ helps to explain Saudi Arabia’s inability to extricate itself from the conflict in Yemen, due to the material and reputational resources that it has expended there. In doing so, the chapter highlights the ways in which the linkage of the Houthis to Iran by Riyadh helped frame the conflict as part of the broader rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The subsequent result of this framing has, ultimately, increased the reputational and material cost related to any possible Saudi withdrawal, whereas for Iran the involvement has had comparatively low cost materially.

The final chapter offers some reflections and conclusions as to how the rivalry between the two regional powers of Iran and Saudi Arabia is realised differently through time and space. Though competition and rivalry appear to predominate in the calculus of both states, shown starkly by how this has manifested in the cases explored in this volume, the authors seek to offer a less pessimistic outlook for the future of relations between the states. As key powers in a contested region, Iran and Saudi Arabia need to move towards greater accommodation and understanding of one another’s interests to secure the future peace and prosperity of the Middle East.

Notes


5 Rubin, Islam in the Balance.
7 On Lebanon, see the work of Bassel Salloukh, Amal Saad and Adham Saouli. On Yemen, see the work of Thomas Juneau, Maria Louise Clausen, Nadwa Dawsari and Peter Salisbury amongst others. On Bahrain, see the work of Toby Matthiesen, Simon Mabon, Rashed al-Rasheed and Jane Kinninmont. On Iraq, see the work of Toby Dodge, Charles Tripp, Renad Mansour and many others. On Syria, see the work of Christopher Phillips and Rahaf Aldoughli in particular.
11 Ibid., p. 1.
13 In particular, the work of Hassan Ahmadian, notably, ‘Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Age of Trump’, Survival, 60:2 (2018), 133–150.


Chubin and Tripp, *Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations*.


Mabon, ‘Muting the Trumpets of Sabotage’.


S. Mabon (ed.), *Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle to Shape the Middle East* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2018).

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The view from Riyadh: A neoclassical realist perspective of Saudi foreign policy towards Iran in the post-2011 Middle East

May Darwich

Introduction

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran has moved from mere competition and rivalry, where Saudi Arabia perceived Iran as a rival with its legitimate right to a regional agenda, into enmity, where the Saudi Kingdom perceived Iran as the ultimate enemy and an existential threat. Since 1979, Saudi relations with Iran have been characterised with intervals of tensions and short-lived periods of detente. The 2011 uprisings and their aftermath have turned this ‘controlled enmity’ between Saudi Arabia and Iran into a fierce regional struggle with unprecedented levels of tension and escalation. Regional confrontations originally confined to Iraq and Lebanon extended either rhetorically or militarily (or both) to several other theatres, including Bahrain, Syria and Yemen, which led several scholars to characterise Saudi–Iranian tensions as the ‘New Arab Cold War’.

Furthermore, these confrontations were accompanied with fierce sectarian wars, where Iran was portrayed in Saudi media as an enemy holding extremist ideology and constituting an existential threat to the Kingdom and the Muslim world. In Bahrain, the Saudi Kingdom perceived Iran to be stirring domestic protests to overthrow a fellow monarchy and, henceforth, chose to intervene militarily to support its allies in Manama against a perceived ‘Iranian’ plot. In Syria, the Saudi Kingdom saw an opportunity to curb the traditional Iran–Syria axis, and limit Iranian influence in the region, which brought the two powers into an indirect military confrontation. In Yemen, and despite doubts around Iranian involvement in the conflict, the Saudi Kingdom perceived any link between the Houthis and Iran in Yemen to be an ultimate threat to its security and decided to launch a full-scale military intervention since 2015. In addition, a rhetorical confrontation intensified with the advent of King Salman to power and the rise of his son Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) as Crown prince. This escalation reached high points, especially following the attack on the Saudi embassy in
The view from Riyadh

Tehran after the execution of Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr in January 2016, a figurehead Shia cleric from the Eastern Province who took part in the demonstrations prompted by the 2011 uprisings. Regional tensions also reached a higher peak with the intensification of the long-standing conflict with neighbouring Qatar and the Iranian attack on Aramco facilities in Saudi Arabia in September 2019.

Scholars have attributed this rising Saudi assertiveness in confronting Iran in the post-2011 Middle East to strategic competition for power and influence, sectarian differences, change in Saudi leadership and perception of change in the US role in the region. This chapter examines Saudi perceptions of Iran in the post-2011 Middle East. It employs a neoclassical realist approach to unravel the dynamics of Saudi-heightened tensions with Iran. It argues that Saudi foreign policy is at the intersection of international, regional and domestic conditions. Rising Saudi tensions with Iran is the result of structural conditions, exemplified in the multipolarity of the regional structure and the decline of US hegemonic control of the region. These structural conditions were compounded with the rise of a nascent top-down Saudi nationalism presenting the Kingdom as destined to play a leading role in rolling back Iranian expansion in the Arab world. The chapter is structured as follows. First, I present the tenets of neoclassical realism. Then, I present the structural conditions that Saudi elites were facing during the decade following the 2011 uprisings. Third, I examine the rise of Saudi nationalism at the domestic level, which shaped Saudi elites’ responses to the structural conditions leading to tensions and escalation in its rivalry with Iran.

A neoclassical realist approach to Saudi foreign policy

International and regional environments alone cannot explain the nuances of Saudi foreign policy towards Iran. Instead, Riyadh’s view and perception of Iran has been characterised by tensions and rivalry since the 1979 Revolution. Yet, Saudi escalation of tensions with Iran in the post-2011 era reached unprecedented levels, and this escalation defies explanations relying on either systemic or domestic factors. Saudi foreign policy towards Iran following the 2011 uprisings spreading into wider tensions and proxy wars across the region resulted from a veritable mix of systemic and domestic variables. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of Saudi perception of Iran and the ensuing foreign policy, I rely on a neoclassical realist approach of threat perception combining insights from IR theory and foreign policy analysis to explain how states assess threats and employ policies to increase their security in facing them. While international and
regional dynamics may be the independent variable in shaping Saudi foreign policy towards Iran, domestic variables are crucial intervening variables in explaining how Saudi elites chose particular policies as a response to structural conditions. From this neoclassical realist perspective, Saudi foreign policy towards Iran is at the intersection of international dynamics, regional factors and domestic spheres.

Neoclassical realism, as Rose defines it, ‘incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist thought … [T]he scope and ambition of a country’s foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities … [Nevertheless] the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level.' In other words, international systemic conditions are filtered through state structure and affect how leaders and decision-makers assess threats and identify strategies in response to those threats and ultimately mobilise societal resources to implement and sustain those strategies. Domestic conditions – such as state–society relations, interest groups, societal cohesion, identity dynamics – intervene between leaders’ assessment of international threats (and opportunities) and the actual policies that those leaders pursue. To examine Saudi foreign policy towards Iran from a neoclassical perspective, this framework combines three steps in a causal chain: the relative power distribution at the regional level (independent variable), domestic level structures (intervening variable) and policy choice (escalation of conflict with Iran, i.e. dependent variable).

I contend that Saudi behaviour and its escalation of conflict with Iran is primarily shaped by the regional structure. Yet, Saudi reactions and policies are not objectively efficient or based on a pure response to the regional structure. The rise of a confrontational nationalism in the Saudi Kingdom in the post-2011 era acted as an ‘imperfect transmission belt’ between systemic constraints and the chosen policies against Iran.

The first stage in the causal chain is the relative power position of the state in the regional structure, which determines its interests and responsiveness to external pressures. While neoclassical realists often focus on the international system and great power competition, regional sub-systems are often ignored. Regions, such as the Middle East, have their own dynamics, which may be semi-autonomous without being entirely independent from the global great power system. Regional power distribution is often characterised by competition between regional powers over leadership and hegemony. In the meantime, these competitions can be induced and affected by changes at the global level. In addition, regimes in the Middle East are driven by particular motives pertaining to regime security against threats
within and without. Regime survival can be driven by geopolitical interests, such as maintaining the security of the state against external threats and preventing spillovers threatening domestic stability. Their capabilities and their position in the relative power distribution shape their threat assessment. Yet, these systemic conditions are not entirely objective. Domestic conditions often intervene in shaping leaders’ perception of systemic conditions and their chosen policies to counter threats.

The second element in this causal chain is the domestic intervening variable, which specifies how systemic conditions are translated into different policy choices. State responses to international threats are not purely objective or efficient in countering external threats. Instead, domestic conditions often intervene between international systemic threats and state policies. Although states may share converging interests at the regional level, they can undertake various foreign policy choices depending on domestic structures, which might generate threats and vulnerabilities. The consideration of domestic processes as filters between systemic pressures and policy choices goes a long way towards explaining threat assessment and conflict escalation in non-Western regions, where the state overlaps with a group of people who do not necessarily share the same identity and allegiance. Instead, the population may be divided around several loyalties, where groups hold their own allegiances based on religion, ethnicities and regional groupings. In this instance, the dynamics of ‘regime security’, the ruling elite is concerned most about their survival and shield their control from both internal and external threats. Regimes often rely on ideational factors, such as ideology, nationalism and/or sectarianism, to strengthen and bind themselves to the population. As the Saudi case will show below, states’ threat assessment and their reactions are the result of interaction between the regional structure, which might pose several external threats, and the domestic structure, which is an indicator of the regime’s vulnerability. From this perspective, the assessment and response to regional threats is inextricably tied to the regime’s structure and its bind with its population.

Based on this framework, the following empirical analysis of the Saudi view of Iran in the post-2011 regional order reveals a regional power facing the rise of Iranian influence in the region magnified by the US retreat as a hegemonic power from the regional system. Saudi perceptions of these structural threats coincided with the Kingdom’s need to forge a strong nationalism binding the population to the ruling elite that transcends traditional elements of loyalty, that is, Islam and the monarchy, thereby ensuring regime survival amid the fall of oil prices and the rise of a new generation of Saudi leaders, namely, Crown Prince MbS. Saudi foreign policy and its portrayal of Iran as the enemy in the region is the result of this interaction
Saudi Arabia and Iran between the regional structure in the post-2011 regional order and the nascent top-down nationalism in the Kingdom.

Saudi foreign policy towards Iran in the post-2011 regional order

In the pre-2011 regional order, Saudi–Iranian relations fluctuated between rivalry and cooperation. Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), Saudi Arabia and Iran have emerged as rivals embroiled in a regional competition over influence in the Persian Gulf and leadership over the Middle East and the Muslim world. Throughout the 1980s, Iran’s attempt to export the Islamic Revolution to the Arab world and Khomeini’s criticism of Arab leaders, including Al Saud, contributed to heightening Saudi fear from Iran. Throughout that decade, this enmity led to several tensions resulting in a war of narratives between Riyadh and Tehran, each attempting to demonise and discredit the other. These tensions were further compounded with a struggle to shape the material regional structure, where Saudi Arabia supported Iraq in its eight-year war against Iran. The tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran relaxed throughout the 1990s. During both the Rafsanjani and Khatami presidencies, Iran embraced a diplomatic outreach aimed at easing the regional tensions with the Arab world. During this period, Saudi–Iranian relations moved to a ‘rapprochement’, which resulted in two key agreements: the Cooperation Agreement of 1998 and the Security Accord of 2001. Both agreements provided the framework for improving bilateral relations in several fields with the purpose of building trust and cooperation between the two rivals.

Since 1979 until 2003, the regional structure was characterised by some level of bipolarity, where Iraq and Iran competed for regional hegemony. Following the 2003 Iraq War, a multipolar regional system emerged following the continued decline of classical centres of power in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq. The post-2003 multipolarity was, however, regulated by the presence of a global hegemon, that is, the US. The 2003 Iraq War marked a turning point, and tensions in Saudi–Iranian relations heightened again as the fall of Saddam Hussein increased Iran’s regional influence. Tehran used Iraq in order to escape its international isolation, prevent future US attack and also marginalise Saudi’s role in Iraq. In the post-2003 period, the Saudi Kingdom aligned itself with the US to counter Iran’s regional influence. The Saudi Kingdom even urged the US to launch military strikes on Iran to halt its nuclear ambitions. Adel al-Jubeir, then Saudi ambassador to the US, stated that King Abdullah called on Washington to ‘cut off the head of the snake’, highlighting that rolling back Iranian influence in Iraq is a priority for the Kingdom.
With the outbreak of the 2011 uprisings this regulated rivalry altered, posing several systemic threats and opportunities to the Saudi Kingdom that contributed to Riyadh’s view and foreign policy towards Iran. Since 2003, the competition played out in Lebanon, Gaza, and post-war Iraq. The 2011 uprisings created further theatres for ‘geopolitical contestations’ in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. The Saudi Kingdom perceived that any potential regime changes in neighbouring countries to be either a threat from Iran’s quest for a larger role in the region or an opportunity to curb Iran’s influence there.

In Bahrain, when the uprisings broke out in 2011, the monarchy insisted that the demonstrations were a Shia scheme orchestrated by Iran to destabilise the regime and threaten the rule of Al Khalifa. Riyadh accused Tehran of intervening in Bahrain and igniting ‘Shia’ protests. To express support towards the uprisings, 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 big revolution of the Iranian nation.’ Iran’s reaction to Bahrain’s uprisings was mostly rhetorical, and there were considerable doubts that Iran can influence the majority of Bahrain’s Shia citizens. As Mabon argues, ‘while the actual level of Iranian involvement within Bahrain is uncertain, both Manama and Riyadh have acted on the assumption that Tehran has offered support to opposition groups’. To Riyadh, any change in the ruling regime in Bahrain could lead to eventual disruption in the status quo, and Iran could acquire significant influence in Bahrain if the Shia were empowered. For the Saudis, the military operation was necessary to ‘save Bahrain from Iranian influence’.

When the uprisings started in Syria, Riyadh saw an opportunity to curtail Iran’s regional influence. The Saudi Kingdom adopted several strategies and tactics over time to overthrow Assad, including supporting the Syrian National Council (SNC), playing a dominant role in the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), arming the Free Syrian Army (FSA), supporting the Islamic Front, pledging to send troops to Syria and hosting various Syrian armed groups in 2015. Despite the evolution of the conflict and the rise of extremist groups – particularly Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State (IS) – the Saudis remained determined to depose Assad. Amid international talks intended to unite efforts in fighting the rise of extremism, Saudi Foreign Minister al-Jubeir insisted that ‘Bashar al-Assad must go or face [the] military option’. Despite changes in Saudi leadership in 2015 following the death of King Abdullah, Saudi foreign policy towards the Syrian crisis remained largely unchanged. Saudi’s position in Syria was largely anti-Iranian; it aimed at altering the regional structure in its favour by destroying the Iran–Syria axis and bringing Syria
back to the fold of its allies. While media and political confrontation dominated the Saudi–Iranian rivalry, Syria was the theatre that brought both into indirect military confrontation. The Saudi Kingdom called upon the international community for greater pressure against Assad, while encouraging the US to take an active role and calling for military intervention. When the Assad regime reportedly used chemical weapons in August 2013, the Saudi Kingdom tried to persuade Washington that Assad had crossed the line set by President Obama and that military intervention deposing him was the most appropriate response. Saudi intelligence even presented the US with what it claimed was proof in February 2013 that the Syrian regime had deployed chemical weapons. That said, the US under Obama remained reluctant to adopt direct military action aimed at toppling Assad.

Compelled to pursue its own strategy, the Saudi Kingdom invested considerable financial means in supporting several opposition groups militarily in their struggle against Assad.

Yemen is the last theatre where potential change constituted a threat to the Saudi Kingdom. The story of the uprisings in Yemen was not different from that in Tunisia or Egypt. The diffusion of protests against authoritarian regimes across the Arab world reinvigorated Yemen’s marginalised social movements and united different geographical and political factions in Yemen, such as the northern Houthi movement and the southern secessionist movement Hiraak. The Saudis negotiated the ousting of Ali Abdullah Saleh and supported his vice president, Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi, in a one-man election. Following this flawed political transition, Yemen has descended into a conflict between different groups, pushing the country to the edge of a civil war. Four years after the uprisings, in September 2014, the Houthis took military control of the capital Sana’a and the state collapsed into power centres. On 25 March 2015, Saudi Arabia launched an attack on Yemen under the name ‘Operation Decisive Storm’, with the announced aim to restore the legitimate government of Hadi and prevent the Houthis and their allies from taking control of the country. While Iran’s involvement in Yemen was marginal and mostly rhetorical, the Saudi Kingdom framed the war in Yemen as a war with Iran’s allies in Yemen. The Saudi Kingdom constantly presented the war as necessary to prevent Iranian expansion in the Arabian Peninsula. Furthermore, the Saudi Kingdom activated the rhetoric of a sectarian Sunni–Shiite divide by applying a variety of derogative terms for Shiites to the Houthis and by framing its intervention as an act against ‘Iranian-Shiite expansionism’, thereby contributing to the sectarianisation of the Yemen conflict.

Saudi fear of a change in the regional structure that would further Iran’s influence was further aggravated by a US ‘retreat’ from regional affairs. Since the end of the Cold War, the US role in the Middle East has been
that of a ‘hegemon’ in a region that has been constantly characterised as a multipolar system with no regional power capable of asserting supremacy. US hegemony defined the regional structure for nearly two decades through US ties to Israel, management of the Arab–Israeli peace process, militarised containment of Iran and Iraq and support for economic restructuring aligned with neoliberal globalisation.39 Furthermore, the US acted as a ‘protector’ of middle and small powers in the Gulf. Pollack described the US role in the Middle East until 2004 as follows: ‘The United States became the ultimate guardian of the region’s oil flows, the mediator of many of its disputes, the deterrent to its worst threats. The true hegemon of the Middle East.’40 What has changed since 2011, however, is that US influence over regional geopolitics has declined. Under the Obama administration, a new role for the US in the Middle East evolved.41 The Saudi Kingdom’s perception of the US decline has been defined by US selected policies in response to the uprisings.42 US acquiescence to the fall of Hosni Mubarak followed by recognition of the Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi led regional actors, including the Saudis, to adjust their expectations about the US role in the region. These shifts were encouraged by the declining US dependence on Middle East oil, the decision not to intervene against Assad’s regime in Syria and the negotiation of the Iran nuclear deal in the face of opposition from Saudi Arabia and Israel.43 In material terms, the US remains the most powerful actor in the region, but the US no longer acts and/or is no longer perceived as a hegemonic manager of regional politics.44 Henceforth, the US maintained other indirect involvement, including supporting regional allies through arms sales. Yet, this change from direct to indirect involvement in the US role was perceived by the Saudi Kingdom as a key shift. In the face of Iran’s increasing role in the region, the US retreat from the region signalled to Saudi leaders that they must not rely on the US to stop Iran’s expansion in the region. Obama explicitly stated, ‘The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians – which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen – requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighbourhood and institute some sort of cold peace.’45

The retreat of the US from regional involvement led to the emergence of an uncontrolled multipolarity which intensified regional instability.46 Russia and China, as well as rising regional powers, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Turkey, have come to play a larger role in shaping an increasingly multipolar regional system. For decades, the Saudi Kingdom have played the role of ‘stability guarantor’ in regional conflicts and preferred diplomacy and financial assistance over military and aggressive means. Furthermore, the Saudis played the role of ‘faithful allies’ with
a long-standing partnership with the US, willing to guarantee a favourable, stable regional order. Following the perceived US disengagement from the region, Saudi elites viewed the US as ‘abandoning’ its responsibilities in the Middle East in general and the Gulf in particular, which ignited two parallel reactions from the Kingdom. On the one hand, Saudi leaders employed unprecedented efforts to securitise Iran to US decision-makers and public opinion and portray it as an existential threat to security and stability in the Middle East in an effort to derail the diplomatic efforts to resolve the nuclear crisis with Iran and ensure the continuation of support of the US to Gulf states, and mainly the Saudi Kingdom. Saudi Arabia funded think tanks across Washington as an attempt to cultivate a positive image and curtail criticism against the Kingdom in Western media. Several Saudi leaders and decision-makers gave interviews and wrote opinion pieces in Western media outlets. Adel al-Jubeir, Saudi foreign minister, in a piece published in the *New York Times*, stressed that Iran is ‘the single-most-belligerent-actor in the region, and its actions display both a commitment to regional hegemony and a deeply held view that conciliatory gestures signal weakness either on Iran’s part or on the part of its adversaries’. On the other hand, the Kingdom adopted aggressive reactions in the Gulf to rely on their own resources for survival against domestic and external threats. Saudi elites have developed a suspicion regarding US willingness to protect the region. Mistrusting Washington’s willingness to guarantee its regional partners’ security, the Saudi Kingdom has been boosting its military capacity and looking for independent means of assuring the regional status quo. Since 2011, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries’ military spending rose significantly. The Saudi Kingdom became the largest military spender in the region and the third largest in the world in 2017. Saudi military spending increased by 74 per cent between 2008 and 2015. It fell by 26 per cent in 2016 but increased again by 9.2 per cent in 2017. Despite the efforts under Trump to revive the US hegemonic role in the region, it is not clear if the US has been able to reclaim its former role as a regional architect.

Finally, from 2013 onwards Iran was attempting to escape international isolation, and deployed efforts to expand in Africa by building economic ties with several countries in the Horn of Afria, East Africa and West Africa, which was soon perceived by Saudi Arabia as a threat to its wider region of influence. In the post-2011 era, the Saudi Kingdom deployed financial inducements to African states to halt Iranian influence in Africa, and especially in the Red Sea region. Similarly, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran intensified in Central Asia, particularly in Tajikistan, where both powers are vying for influence through cultural diplomacy and financial incentives.
Rising confrontational nationalism

Understanding Saudi escalations with Iran in the post-2011 Middle East cannot be solely based on regional and international systemic factors. The domestic situation in the Saudi Kingdom provided this imperfect transmission belt, which shaped how the Saudi ruling elite perceived the opportunities and constraints of the regional structure and reacted to these by amplifying Iran’s role as an existential threat. Saudi perception of expanding Iranian influence in the region was infused with the rise of a ‘new’ Saudi nationalism, invoking a larger, aggressive role for the Saudi Kingdom in the region, especially under King Salman. Rising nationalism in the Kingdom, a top-down style, I argue, has acted as an intervening variable between systemic conditions generated by the 2011 uprisings and Saudi responses. This rise of nationalism does not operate independently of the regional structure in shaping the Saudi Kingdom’s foreign policy towards Iran. Instead, the regional structure intermingled with the rise of nationalism in the Kingdom leading to escalated tensions with Iran.

In the post-2011 era, with the decrease in the oil prices, the advent of King Salman to power and the rise of his son MbS with a plan to reshape a new social contract between the state and society, as illustrated in the Kingdom’s Vision 2030. These changes came with a top-down nationalism, what has been termed ‘hyper-nationalism’.59 The state has nurtured and mobilised a new nationalism aimed at legitimising the rise to power of younger leadership and bolstering a programme of reforms away from the traditional sources of legitimation in the Kingdom. This top-down nascent Saudi nationalism, stripping away religion, aims to establish new forms of binding between the regime and the Saudi population. This effort at promoting this new nationalism mobilised and indoctrinated the society that its leadership is destined to play a leading role in the region. Embracing this rising nationalism led to changes in how Saudi ruling elites perceive the regional structure surrounding the Kingdom and how they conduct foreign policy, especially towards Iran.

Since the Kingdom’s establishment in 1932 and throughout the twentieth century, Saudis refused nationalism and relied on other sources for national cohesion and legitimacy. As opposed to Arab states, where nationalism was based on ethnic elements, such as Arabism, combined with territorial affinities related to the struggle against colonialism, the Saudi Kingdom was not formed on the basis of a ‘national’ identity.60 Modern Saudi Arabia came into existence as a result of the Al Saud family’s attempt to establish an Islamic monarchy on the Arabian Peninsula. Two elements constituted the identity of the newly established regime: religion and the loyalty to the royal family. These two basic tenets were identified by King Abdul Aziz
Saudi Arabia and Iran

(Ibn Saud): ‘Two things are essential to our State and our people ... religion and the rights inherited from our fathers.’ As Ahn Nga Longva puts it, a Saudi notion of belonging ‘to a land or an “imagined community” is unthinkable because the country itself is appropriated to the ruling family whose name it bears’. The Kingdom, as other Gulf states, used oil wealth to establish states that find their legitimacy among various societal groups. Nevertheless, these new states, the Saudi Kingdom including, lacked a distinct identity that could stand in contrast to the patriotism developing in the neighbouring Arab states. Since the Kingdom contains within its borders two of the three holy cities in Islam – Mecca and Medina – its identity thus came to be based on an appropriation of Islamic symbols; ‘our constitution is the Quran and the application of shari’a’. As Nevo states, ‘religion has played a prominent role not only in moulding the individual’s private and collective identities but also in consolidating [Saudi’s] national values’. According to a survey conducted in 2003, Saudis consider religion the most important element of their identity; territorial nationalism comes second.

In other words, ‘there is a Saudi royal family and a Saudi monarchy. There is a Saudi nationality in a legal sense, but not a Saudi nation in the moral sense. Sovereignty has not rested with the people, but with God, delegated to an alliance of the religious establishment and the Saudi house.’

In the wake of the Arab Uprisings, the Saudi Kingdom was forced to re-examine its social contract system and the narratives sustaining it. As the prices of oil began to fall, the new leadership with King Salman and his son MbS introduced new economic measures, including Vision 2030, designed to end the draining rentier social contract system. In parallel, the new leadership promoted an overt form of nationalism demanding adherence to the Saudi state over any religious affiliation, in continuity with previous efforts by kings Fahd (1982–2005) and Abdullah (2005–2015). This top-down mobilisation of nationalism has the core purpose of corralling support around MbS and his new economic policies. MbS aspires for a new narrative, where the royal family and Islam will not serve as the primary references. Instead, Saudi leadership is promoting a nationalist rhetoric through two dimensions. First, rewriting a national narrative based on secularism and a long pre-Islamic history. This trend is illustrated in the promotion of archeological sites and festivities, while instilling a sense of pride in the young Saudis, where Islamic identity still plays a role but it is not the sole reference in identifying with the state. The state-controlled media are promoting this ‘new’ Saudi nationalism with slogans emphasising Saudi greatness and national rejuvenation. Slogans such as ‘Make Saudi Arabia Great’ and ‘Saudi Arabia First’ trended in Twitter hashtags endorsed by state communication, and these slogans have also been present in the writings of state-owned press and media.
In re-examining the sources of Saudi identity towards asserting a nationalist perspective, Saudi leadership accelerated the crackdown on Sunni Islamist movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, the Sahwa movement, and the arrest of prominent Sunni clerics and intellectuals since 2017. In a hope to shift away from the Sunni orthodoxy that used to inform Saudi identity, Crown Prince MbS has reduced the authority of the Saudi religious establishment. In parallel, there are signs of an opening towards further inclusion of Saudi Arabia’s Shiite minority in this nationalist discourse. The Shia have been disadvantaged in the Kingdom and often viewed as not equal citizens due to religion. Since 2011, their position has been made even more precarious due to the increasing sectarian tone against the protests by Saudi Shia in the Eastern Province and the mounting escalation in the security discourse against Iran. In an interview, MbS described Saudi Arabia as a country of ‘Sunnis and Shias’, a statement that was perceived by several Shia figures in the Eastern Province as a sign of opening. This emerging nationalism has been used to lure Saudi Shiites away from Iran.

The second dimension is related to confrontational nationalism driving a forceful foreign policy in the region and beyond, where the Kingdom is attempting to spread its dominance at the regional level, and aggressively responding to any criticism, even from long-term allies. This ‘new’ Saudi nationalism emerged with a narrative that the Kingdom is destined to play a leading role not only in the region but globally. With the ‘Saudi First’ narrative, the Kingdom has strengthened its military capabilities and presented a rhetoric of the region from Iranian expansion and the spread of Shiism in the Arab world. MbS adopted an intense anti-Iranian rhetoric with the Kingdom as the regional leader in rolling back Iranian influence in Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. He has consistently demonised Iran by blaming the Iranians for global terrorism and the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. He also held Iran responsible for sectarian militias and referred to Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as the ‘new Hitler’. The Saudi Kingdom, under King Salman, has replaced the old glue of Wahhabism and the monarchy with a populist, militarised nationalism, which has fed off the threat of Iran and its expansion in the region. Saudi nationalism alone cannot explain the escalating tensions with Iran. Furthermore, the Saudi Kingdom relied on this nationalism to undermine Iran’s role in other countries in the wider Middle East and the wider Muslim world. It is rather an intervening factor that shaped Saudi perceptions and reactions to a changing, challenging regional structure in the post-2011 Middle East.

This rise in Saudi nationalism associated with a militarisation process shaped Saudi responses to the regional structure. The Saudi Kingdom aimed
at asserting a larger role in the region and establishing itself as a ‘natural’ leader. This bid for leadership was illustrated in the Kingdom’s endeavour in initiating several regional coalitions in the region under its leadership, such as the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition and the military coalition in Yemen. Rising tensions with Iran in the post-2011 Middle East can be understood as a result of a changing regional structure shaped by US retreat from the Middle East, and Saudi rising nationalism is shaping the Kingdom’s quest to play a more assertive role in regional affairs.

Conclusion

Competition and rivalry have been a feature of Saudi–Iranian relations in the Middle East, two regional powers vying for influence and leadership. Under King Salman, the rivalry has reached unprecedented levels of tension and escalation. The post-2011 Middle East led to structural changes at the regional level as well as in domestic conditions for the Saudi Kingdom. The 2011 uprisings led to several regime changes and instability around the region, and the Saudi Kingdom assessed these changes as either opportunities or constraints in containing Iranian expansion there. Saudi Arabia’s assessment of Iran’s increased influence in the region gained further urgency with US retreat from direct intervention under the Obama administration. From Riyadh’s point of view, Iranian expansion in the region not only threatened Saudi’s regional position at the regional structure but also exposed the domestic vulnerabilities and questioned the national identity, what the Saudi Kingdom has been grappling with for decades. The Saudi Kingdom has been facing domestic threats from the fall of oil prices and the need to alter the rentier social contract, which prompted a nascent nationalism associated with the rise of King Salman to power and the emergence of his son MBS as Crown prince. This nationalism was directly associated with a confrontational foreign policy against Iran, where the Saudi Kingdom is set to play a leading role in the Middle East and beyond.

Notes

1 This distinction between ‘rivalry’ and ‘enmity’ follows Wendt’s ‘culture of anarchy’. A. Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chapter 6.
Power Rivalry in the Middle East (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013); F. Wehrey et al., Saudi-Iranian Relations since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009).


33 Darwich, ‘Saudi Policies in the Syrian Crisis’.


41 Some scholars argued that the US role in the Middle East has declined long before the 2011 uprisings. Cf. F. A. Gerges, Obama and the Middle East: The End of America’s Moment?, reprint ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2013).


60 The nature of Saudi society – composed of diverse clans, tribes and Bedouins – did not allow the emergence of a state around a collective national identity. The Arabian Peninsula was rarely unified until the forces of Al Saud succeeded in unifying the country in the early twentieth century J. Kostiner, ‘Transforming Dualities: Tribes and State Formation in Saudi Arabia’, in P. S. Khoury and J. Kostiner (eds), Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East (California: University Press, 1990), pp. 226–251.


73 Al-Rasheed, ‘Sectarianism as Counter-revolution’.


77 Al-Jubeir, ‘Mr. Obama’.


Narratives of power politics in the Iran–Saudi relationship: The view from Tehran

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There are two important sides to understanding relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia: the view from Tehran, and the view from Riyadh. The present chapter explores narratives that shape Tehran’s understanding of the role that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia plays in shaping ties with Iran. The chapter is divided into four thematic topics, to review narratives of key issues and concerns that partly shape Iran’s policies towards Saudi Arabia. The thematic topics that are selected here are not inclusive of the entire spectrum of debates inside Iran about Saudi Arabia. But they represent major ongoing debates on the following key themes: (i) current elite views and discourses in Iran about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy choices; (ii) the role of religion in shaping the Iranian–Saudi partnership; (iii) Tehran’s understanding of Riyadh’s role in building regional security; (iv) Iran’s views about collective regional security arrangements.

This thematic approach to understanding Iran’s views about Saudi Arabia is unique in several aspects. It builds on the findings of critical research published by major authors in the field who examine in detail the history of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, map out alterations in the balance of power between the two countries and reject sectarian politics as a key driver of the ties but reaffirm its role as only a motivator of foreign policy behaviour. But it parts ways with previous research to offer a glimpse at the narrative of power politics in Iran’s ties with Saudi Arabia. To justify this approach, the authors make several key arguments. Firstly, the Iranian discourse about Saudi Arabia has hardly been explored in research and academia. Part of the reason could be the daily coverage of news on the issue of the Iranian–Saudi relationship, which is rarely nuanced. Secondly, there are language and cultural barriers involved in understanding what Tehran says or means about Saudi Arabia. As a result, present analyses of Iranian–Saudi relations err on offering generalised statements or summarising the stakes involved in soundbites.

From a theoretical standpoint, however, it is crucial to analyse local viewpoints of the Saudi–Iranian relationship, by exploring narratives not
purely from a polemic standpoint but to shed light on how power is exercised through narratives of this relationship in the thematic areas under interrogation here. The narratives of one country towards another carry power in international politics, and in the wielding of actual power, as they influence or directly impact state-level decision-making. As a result, it is imperative as detached scholars observing interstate elite discussions to understand how these narratives influence the exercise of power in one state towards another. While in realist or neo-realist international relations theory a so-called master narrative often shapes our understanding of how states interact, critical constructivist and post-structuralist research tends to focus on the exercise of power itself. The realist account of power must at times go hand in hand with the narratives told about it, which is the goal of this chapter. As important as narratives are in the shaping of the understanding of one country towards another, to date there is only one published book on the role of media narratives in the Iranian–Saudi relationship in the 1980s. Since then, new literature has emerged that focuses on the role of narratives in shaping conflicts, threat perceptions and conceptions of order in the Middle East.

By shifting the centre of debate in this chapter to scholarly observations of power narratives, the authors avoid emphasising the agency of narrators by offering international relations concepts or theories to better understand how narratology influences the exercise of power between two states. Supplementary to this analysis is the framing of strategic narratives that shape the Iranian perspectives on Saudi Arabia, and through which states, in this case Iran, seek to articulate a worldview through systemic, identity and issue-led narratives. Strategic narratives can also be seen as tools which states use to extend their influence. They are ‘about both states and the system itself’, cutting to the core of how a country like Iran wants to be perceived when it comes to its ties with Saudi Arabia, and the kind of order the Iranians seek in this critical relationship with an Arab neighbour. It goes without saying that Iran thus expounds a particular narrative which provides subsequent justification for its foreign policy course with regards Saudi Arabia.

The ability to wield power through narratives is divided here among the four different thematic topics outlined above to explore how it constructs a reality about Iran’s understanding of Saudi Arabia. However imperfect the endeavour might be, it represents a uniquely contextual framework to better understand the spectrum of issues that define the contentious relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The chapter aims to specifically highlight how the rivalry with Saudi Arabia has been articulated through examining public policy debates emanating from Tehran on this topic. We argue that the rivalry as understood from the Islamic Republic of Iran’s perspective
defies the now clichéd explanations of immutable sectarian conflict often found in policy-oriented works, although in much of the policy world sectarianism is described as a driver of the Saudi–Iranian relationship. While identity considerations, ranging from religious to national and indeed revolutionary issues, can be observed in Tehran’s broader foreign policy including in its relations with Riyadh, it is our contention that *realpolitik*, with its attendant focus on practical, national interests, and its considerations including the role of external powers, namely, the US, predominates in Iran’s strategic calculus towards its regional neighbour.

While our contention does not dismiss the role of identities, including ideology, in shaping the Iranian–Saudi relationship, it is argued here that pragmatism dominates the influence of ideology in foreign policy-making. As a result, the question of Iran’s relations with Saudi Arabia is intimately tied to both states’ relations with the US, given that there is no other external power in the Persian Gulf capable of exerting power as the US. The restraints that this places on Iran’s and Saudi Arabia’s ability to act independently, and the impact this has on regional security, is overwhelming, and is manifested through frequent tensions between Iran and the US, and Iran and Saudi Arabia. The ultimate goal of the Islamic Republic, to see an end to the US military presence in and security influence over Middle Eastern affairs, while quite one-sided in its vision and currently far from achievable, is viewed by Tehran as the best guarantee to ensure security. It is by letting the regional states develop modalities to re-balance the distribution of power in the Middle East that peace can be restored.

This chapter primarily focuses on developments in Iranian–Saudi relations after the Arab Uprisings in 2011. This is a period in which relations between the two states have arguably reached their lowest ebb since the Iranian Revolution and so provides us with a critical time period in which to analyse the relationship. It is also a period that marks a revival of revolutionary Iran’s aspirations to influence the Arab world by exploring opportunities presented through the uprisings. The uprisings led to the overthrow of several Arab leaders, and to demands by the public for reforms in the Arab world. In much of the Western analyses of Iranian foreign policy, limited consideration is given to the varied and lively debates that take place within the Iranian academic, policy and media circles on this topic. This chapter’s broader aim is to examine how Iran’s perspective on the issue of relations with Saudi Arabia since the uprisings, and whether a relationship that is often couched by analysts in terms of a hostile and intractable regional rivalry, is viewed at all times as such by key figures in Iran.

In the following sections, firstly, elite views and discourses in Iran about Saudi Arabia are explored. Next, religion is addressed through a focus on Iran’s role in global Shiism, and contentious issues that have destabilised
the relationship as a result, as well as prospects that the religious sphere provides for potential rapprochement. Thirdly, Iran’s perspective on Saudi Arabia’s regional security role is explored including its regional military operations and coalition-building efforts. Finally, Iran’s own multilateral outlook and proposals for building a regional security system that includes Saudi Arabia is examined.

**Elite views and discourses in Iran about how regional power shifts impact ties with Saudi Arabia**

Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia emerge at different junctures of their mutual history and often ease out, with the exception being in recent years when they have persisted. As a result, Iran is divided over the issue of how to view the challenge from Saudi Arabia. Following the uprisings in the Arab world in 2011, the Islamic Republic opted to see them as opportunities to promote an ‘Islamic awakening’ that would expedite the withdrawal of US military presence in the Middle East, and allow Tehran to position itself as a model for revolutionary emulation in the rest of the Arab world. Regardless of the fact that the narrative ignored Iran’s own Green Movement in 2009, which led to calls for re-elections, it built on the revolution’s early worldview of expanding its influence in the Arab world. Boldly, led by its conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during the Green Movement, Tehran even coined the phrase the ‘Persian Spring’ – in contrast to the labelling of the uprisings as an ‘Arab Spring’ – to emphasise that Iran’s power was on the rise because of the uprisings in the Arab world.

However, much to Iran’s disappointment, very few Arabs participating in the uprisings wanted an Iranian-style revolution, although they wanted more independent governments, and many were opposed to Iran’s support of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria in the wake of the uprisings. Iranian pundits justified Tehran’s support for President al-Assad by claiming that it was needed to defuse US regional plots, aided by the American media, aiming to divide not just Syria but also Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries into smaller states that were more easily controlled and dominated over for resource extraction purposes. Furthermore, they asserted that the US never backed its allies in the Middle East, except for Israel, which implied that Iran was a better partner than the US for regional states given Iran’s refusal to back away from protecting its allies. Saudi Arabia along with Iran, according to these pundits, were anxious to prevent the region’s disintegration but in different ways. Iran backed Damascus against all odds, while the Kingdom proposed to enlarge the Riyadh-based Gulf Cooperation
Council (GCC) to build a stronger union of Gulf Arab states, and to include Jordan and Morocco, although this never happened.13

After the uprisings, a threatening front eventually emerged in countries in the Arab world that were prone to conflict and suffered from weak governments, including in Syria and Iraq, in the form of Daesh in 2014–2018. Iran immediately saw an existential threat in this emerging regional trend, including being encircled by armed Arab terrorists, and conspiratorially, conservative Iranian media suggested that the US may have backed the Islamic State (IS) with the knowledge of GCC countries in order to weaken Tehran’s grip on power.14 In response, Iran’s rivalry with Saudi Arabia entered a new stage which raised the security stakes between the two countries especially in regional countries facing conflicts.15 Still, some pundits in Iran lament the lack of interest among the Iranian elite towards Saudi Arabia after the uprisings, and criticise Iran’s foreign ministry for not having enough good diplomats who speak Arabic or are sympathetic to Arab concerns. In general, Iranian diplomats are apathetic towards Saudi Arabia specifically, and generally towards the Arab world, which reflects historic attitudes held by Iranians towards their Arab neighbours and a lack of desire to learn Arabic. They even blame this lack for the escalation of tensions with Riyadh in recent years.16 More specifically, Iran’s political elite recognises that living with Saudi Arabia as a neighbour is unavoidable, regardless of the outcome of the Arab Uprisings. Whether Iran likes it or not, it remains a close neighbour in the Arab world. Iran’s elite also frequently expresses concern over US policies that potentially divide Tehran and Riyadh, given Washington’s enmity with Tehran and treatment of Riyadh as an ally. Additionally, Tehran is a steadfast believer that this US policy inevitably weakens not just Iran, but also Saudi Arabia, by over-stretching the two regional states’ resources in efforts to combat rather than work with each other.

These concerns by Iran are expressed through anti-colonial grievances directed at the US. Driven by its revolutionary visions, and in lieu of normal US–Iranian relations in the past forty years, Tehran sees undeniable evidence that Washington aims to keep Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia co-dependent on the US. This trend is observed in Tehran when the US demands, for example, that Saudi Arabia drop the price of oil despite knowing that the measure robs Riyadh of needed oil revenues. Meanwhile, Tehran is possibly observing that if the US is moving in the direction of energy independence, and pushing a global drive to reduce oil prices, it serves to hurt Saudi Arabia which remains largely dependent on oil.17 In this process, demonising Iran, irrespective of the fact that Tehran’s actions are perceived by some regional states to be threatening, serves to increase this co-dependency on Washington, and leads to a vicious cycle that weakens
both Tehran and Riyadh. For example, among Iran’s elite, the common view is that Washington extracts the Kingdom’s rich energy and financial resources by insisting on an anti-Iran strategy.\(^\text{18}\) The same common view holds that talks of war with Iran in policy circles in Washington are structured primarily to increase Iranophobic views in the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia. It could also explain why the US does not engage in any actual war with Iran because the gain is not as big as pursuing the current policy, nor do the Saudis readily wish to engage in such a war.\(^\text{19}\)

The way Iran sees it, in recent years, President Donald J. Trump’s calling on Gulf Arab countries to “pay the bill” for their security, and US persistency across both Republican and Democratic administrations to sell arms to Saudi Arabia, is what Washington needs most rather than a war with Iran. The evidence is in the frequent large-sum contracts of arms sales to Saudi Arabia. This is money that could otherwise go to improving the Saudi economy as well as Iran’s economy, if Riyadh and Tehran were to work together rather than against each other. Meanwhile, promoting Iranophobia increases revenues for the US, and simultaneously reduces costs for the US military, while still serving the purpose of containing Iran.\(^\text{20}\) Additionally, in Iran’s view, the frequent calls by US-based policy pundits about the need to redraw the map of the Middle East specifically since 9/11 and the Arab Uprisings only point to grander American designs to divide and conquer the Middle East specifically by over-emphasising and exacerbating the region’s ethnic, tribal and sectarian divides that perpetuate the religious and political rifts among the regional states. Even if arguments for redrawing the Middle East map are not seriously taken in the US, Iran tends to see it as a conspiracy in the making.\(^\text{21}\)

In contrast to the American view of keeping Saudi Arabia close to itself to protect the Kingdom from Iran, Tehran-based pundits worry that the Kingdom faces a precipitous decline in years ahead if it continues to devote all its energy to investing in its ties with the US at the cost of ignoring Iran. Saudi oil wealth could work against it in this regard, the way Iran sees it, if the Kingdom continued to invest in a partnership with Washington and believed that by so doing, it could take on a leadership role in the Middle East when, in truth, America’s only real ally in the Middle East is Israel. Quite the contrary, investing in relations with Washington could only serve to divide Iran and Saudi Arabia, accentuate Iran’s so-called pariah status and engage the Kingdom in conflict or potential war against its neighbour.\(^\text{22}\) Subsequently, and for the most part, Iran’s elite tend to dismiss Saudi Arabia as an equal power. They argue that Iran is far more powerful than Saudi Arabia, given that it does not depend on the US for its protection. From a military standpoint, Tehran likes to point out its superior missile and cyber capabilities, and naval and deterrent power, and Saudi
vulnerabilities to outside attacks. The Kingdom, despite being equipped with advanced Western arms, lacks real capacity to confront Iran’s better organised military, according to the Iranian narrative.\textsuperscript{23} This dismissive view of the Kingdom has led Tehran to go as far as to suggest that the US needs Iran’s help, not Saudi Arabia’s, in order to contain terrorism in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{24}

**The role of religion in the Iranian discourse about Saudi Arabia**

Tehran has long promoted the notion that Wahhabism, the unitarian faith that helped build the Saudi state, is a threat. This is despite Saudi efforts in recent years – notably under the direction of Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud – to present itself as a modernising and tolerant religious state. Simultaneously, Tehran builds a narrative of Iran as a defender of the Shiite faith, and of all oppressed Muslims worldwide despite the fact that a large majority of Sunni Muslims do not follow Iran’s ideational influence, posing problems in relations with Saudi Arabia given the Kingdom’s relatively large Shiite minority. The fear of a potential Shiite ‘fifth column’ at Tehran’s beck and call has arguably helped drive the securitisation of Saudi Shiites\textsuperscript{25} – and Shiite minorities across the region – particularly since the Arab Uprisings. This chafes with Iran’s desire to support what it sees as oppressed communities, such as minority Arab Shia, which in turn can significantly affect political ties with Riyadh, as seen in the case of the execution of the prominent Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr in early 2016.

Commenting on the execution at the time, Iran’s president Hassan Rouhani claimed that such an act was in line with a Saudi ‘policy of sectarianism … which has led to instability in the region’.\textsuperscript{26} Still, Rouhani toned down his statement when the execution led to protests outside the Saudi embassy in Tehran and its consulate in Mashhad, with the embassy compound being attacked and set ablaze, a move described by Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as ‘a very bad and wrong measure’,\textsuperscript{27} and by Rouhani as ‘by no means justifiable and, above all, [it] is considered as an insult to the system and mars the image of the Islamic Republic of Iran’.\textsuperscript{28} However, like any politician, Rouhani also sought to widen the issue by shifting the blame on Saudi policies in the region, accusing Riyadh of attempting to ‘fan Shi’i-Sunni strife and create an Iranophobic atmosphere in the world’s public opinion’.\textsuperscript{29}

Saudi Arabia, which itself has charged Iran of promoting sectarianism and terrorism in its efforts to spread influence in the Middle East, subsequently severed its diplomatic ties, and at the time of writing they are yet to be restored. This development compounded an already fragile relationship
that had been eroded by the deaths of several hundred Iranian pilgrims in an accident during the hajj in 2015. Ayatollah Khamenei unequivocally placed responsibility for the incident on the shoulders of the Saudi rulers, while Rouhani emphasised the wider picture noting: ‘if the only problem with the Saudi government was the Mina (hajj) incident, we may have been able to find a solution for that and put it on the right track.’ The statement suggested that Iran remained open to talks with Saudi Arabia, more so because it had always resumed its ties with the Kingdom after they broke up three times throughout history over hajj issues.

However, there were few venues for real engagement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. As the pre-eminent international organisation dealing with world Muslim affairs, the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (formerly ‘Conference’) (OIC) has also been an arena in which the vicissitudes of the Iranian–Saudi relationship have been laid bare. Based in Jeddah and largely funded by Saudi Arabia, the OIC does not present itself as an obvious place for cooperative endeavours involving Tehran and Riyadh. Indeed, it has been a site of disagreement and sectarian alignments, with the 1980s especially a time of particular challenge due to competing leadership ambitions within the organisation, Saudi support for Iraq during the war with Iran (1980–1988) and a hajj stampede that led to the death of hundreds of Iranian pilgrims in 1987. Conversely, the OIC has also been a site of cooperation, seen in Saudi Arabia’s support for Iran’s hosting of the organisation’s chairmanship which coincided with the start of the presidency of Mohammad Khatami in 1997. The reformist Khatami was able to assert Iran’s regional position in a way that put his country at the forefront of a notable public relations success by rotationally hosting the OIC, while making no references to an Iranian desire for leadership in the organisation.

Generally, to advance its foreign policy goals, Tehran values its participation in Islamic organisations as venues to also promote constructive engagement and receive public endorsement as an important Islamic country. But repeatedly, Iran perceives Saudi intransigence, seen in the denial of visas for Iranian representatives attending the Mecca OIC summit in 2019, and again in Jeddah in 2020, as barring Tehran’s access to religious-based regional platforms. At other times, Saudi officials delayed issuing visas to Iranian officials, which Iran took as a step designed to prevent its participation in regional events.

Since the Arab Uprisings, Iran has increasingly supported communities across the Arab world that oppose Saudi Arabia’s regional role, with one Iranian lawmaker going so far as to say that Tehran controlled four Arab capitals in 2014. Iran has supported the aims of the Houthis in Yemen, in a ‘low-cost’ move to counter Saudi Arabia in the southern Arabian
Tehran’s support for Iraqi Shia has frequently led to divided regional loyalties among Iraqi Shiite and Sunni communities. Moreover, Tehran has backed Islamic groups regardless of sect that have emerged across the Middle East since the Arab Uprisings, including in North Africa and Egypt, not to mention Bahraini and Kuwaiti Shia. In these efforts, Iran’s policies are driven by ideological undertones, but they seek to expand security for the Iranian state, by preventing the Arab Sunni governments that surround it from forming one front against the Islamic Republic. Iran likes to frame its intentions through adopting religious rhetoric that insists on protecting the oppressed masses regardless of sect, and to build a utopian Muslim umma. It also frequently uses the narrative of Islamic unity by pitting Muslims against the West, and against Israel, as it knows that this language has currency across the Middle East among many communities. Along the way, it calls terrorist groups led mostly by Arab citizens, such as al-Qaeda or Daesh, ‘takfiris’, while refuting Saudi narratives around Iran’s financial and armed support for sub-state actors in the region.

The place of religion in the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia is viewed by some as a domain in which their rivalry is particularly acute. Following Iran’s revolution, both states were destined to compete in their offering of rival visions for the role of Islam in political life and in the affairs of the Muslim umma. For Tehran, religion should serve to unite the Islamic umma regardless of sect. But strategically, it is critically important to empower the Shiite communities, in line with the core ideal of building a powerful Iranian Shiite-led Islamic state capable of exporting its worldview through a clearly defined, regional and system-level strategic narrative. In the 1980s, Iran actively exported the Islamic Revolution. It also expanded its religious outreach activities across the Shia and Sunni worlds, drawing on its position as something of a Shiite metropole in a demonstration of its growing soft power. Along the way, it sought to build local loyalties through charitable activities as well as the funding of schools, Islamic and cultural centres, hospitals, roads and other infrastructure in Muslim-populated countries. This, in combination with the repression of the Iraqi Shia until the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003, meant that Iranian centres of religious learning, most notably Qom, came to rival and in some cases overtake the traditional Shiite centre of Najaf in Iraq, though the balance has been redressed somewhat in recent years.

Still, Iran’s transnational religious linkages provide legitimacy for its activities in the region seen in its application of a religious overlay through active military engagements in Iraq and Syria, or the channelling of Shiite shrine defenders to these conflict zones from other Shiite communities in the region and beyond. This gives Iran a significant role among Shiite communities that it can utilise to enhance its standing among its co-religionists.
It does not, however, mean that religion alone drives Iranian foreign policy, but that it only serves an instrumental purpose to exercise the sort of power that becomes of more acute relevance when Tehran’s ties are strained with Saudi Arabia. This reality frequently reflects in the nuanced discussions about sectarianism in Iran. As a general rule of thumb, Tehran rejects that its policies are sectarian, and prefers the world to think that it is the Saudi state that fuels sectarianism. At a more nuanced level, however, many in Iran recognise the futility of name calling. Instead of fixing the problems between Tehran and Riyadh, it also builds unneeded tensions between Arab Shia with largely Sunni communities, and defeats the goal of building a unified Muslim umma. This also leads to retribution attacks that have increased since the Arab Uprisings against Iranians working in the Arab world, including in recent years, the assassination of Iranian diplomats and cultural attachés in Yemen and Lebanon, the killing of Iranian border guards and the murder of Iranian technicians working in Iraq, not to mention the murder of Arab politicians or reporters who are critical of Iran’s regional policies. In addition, it builds resentment among some Arabs, including both Shiite and Sunni, towards Iran’s religious and regional agenda.

As a result of these trends, some Iranian pundits and policymakers lamented the fact that Tehran’s diplomatic stance towards Saudi Arabia was increasingly more ideological in the second term of the Rouhani presidency, and specifically criticised Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif’s lack of sufficient understanding about the Arab world, which they also blamed for the poor relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as the rest of the Arab world. Part of the ideological polemic on Saudi Arabia is designed to counter international pressures on Iran. This can be achieved through redirecting criticism at the Kingdom instead of at Tehran. This policy allows Iran to build up its ‘resistance diplomacy’ designed to counter pressures, but regardless they have ideological undertones. More importantly, Tehran has had difficulties in restoring ties with the Arab world at large, despite its calls for building an Islamic umma through Iranian and Arab cooperation. In a similar vein, it has failed to convince Saudi Arabia that the ‘resistance’ foreign policy, trying to defend oppressed Muslims against the US, is non-reactionary and non-ideological. Reacting to this failure, Iranian commentators frequently fall back on old arguments, blaming only ‘Arab reactionary’ leaders for the region’s problems including the lack of Muslim unity.

**Iran’s views about the Saudi security build-up in the Middle East**

For many in Iran, Saudi Arabia pursues a regional security policy of coalition-building in part to contain the Iranian influence in the Gulf and
the Middle East. It does so by maximising Saudi military and financial capacities to convert them into influence and the exercise of power over other Arab and Muslim countries willing to join the Saudi-led collective security arrangements. As a result, Tehran fears that by breaking away from its traditionally reserved foreign policy, Riyadh will make the Iranian threat look larger than what it actually might be, in order to allow Saudi Arabia to build stronger coalitions in the region.51

To date, Saudi Arabia has embarked on the building of several major coalitions. In December 2015, the Kingdom built a military coalition to lead the war in Yemen, and it also set up the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition. In March 2016, Saudi Arabia conducted drills dubbed ‘Northern Thunder’ which was considered the second-largest military operation since Desert Storm that repelled the Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991. In 2017, the Kingdom supported US measures to create an ‘Arab NATO’ – using the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a model – to create a similar body in the Gulf. Riyadh also backed a surge in US military forces in the Persian Gulf in 2019, and expanded naval drills with the US in Gulf waters in 2020. Iran appears dismissive of these coalitions, and refuses to recognise the Saudi-led narrative that it is engaged in proactive diplomacy to build collective security. Perceiving threat, Tehran prefers to point out that Saudi Arabia is unable to enter into a war with it despite these coalitions. However, there is concern that Saudi Arabia might harbour ambitions beyond its own border in response to alleged Iranian regional provocations, despite the fact that the Kingdom is not historically considered a hegemonic power.52

Yet, from Tehran’s perspective, the securitisation of the Persian Gulf by Saudi Arabia, justified by Riyadh in part to uphold freedom of navigation in the waterway, aims to demonise Iran.53 Tehran naturally refutes this demonisation, and does not accept the narrative that some of its actions, including halting vessels, are potentially destabilising the region. This is despite Iran’s assertions that it does so to ensure its own security and ability to export oil under a punitive international sanctions regime led by the US. Furthermore, it believed that US military goals in the Gulf aimed to advance then president Trump’s plans to emerge as a powerful world leader. In the process, the US aims to legitimise punitive measures against Iran on a regional and global scale.54

As a result, Tehran may think that it cannot allow Saudi coalition-building measures to go unanswered, especially if they threaten to militarise the Persian Gulf and cause fears of impending war. Some voices in Tehran urge firmer diplomatic steps to weaken the resolve of regional countries to join the Saudi-led coalitions, citing the refusal of states such as Oman, Kuwait and Qatar in following the Saudi lead.55 Iran’s vows to leverage its
power over the Strait of Hormuz are also partly designed as pre-emptive measures to discourage war, by pointing out its disruptive consequences and its own capability to respond to threats. The notion of Iran’s closing of the strait, so often reported in the media, is actually more nuanced than outright blocking; rather, it is dependent on the acts of other powers. As such, in April 2019, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, the chief of the general staff of Iran’s armed forces, noted that the security of the waterway was the responsibility of Iran’s armed forces, and that ‘This does not mean closing the Strait of Hormuz. We do not intend to close the Strait of Hormuz unless the enmity of the enemies reaches a point where there is no other choice ... we are able to do so, and the enemies know this.’

In addition, Tehran is concerned that these Saudi measures could lead to the referral of Iran, over its support for the Houthis and disruption of Gulf navigation, to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Furthermore, the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen could trigger a new arms race in the Gulf, unify Arabs more forcefully against Iran, revive the GCC and invite more external military actors into the region, tightening the rope around Iran’s neck and potentially increasing the chances of war breaking out. Under these scenarios, there are voices in Iran that caution against reaching out to Saudi Arabia, insisting that it is best to work with the international community to contain the Kingdom. Yet, another view is that Saudi Arabia does not wish to run a military campaign against Iran through these coalitions, and that Tehran must work out ways to resolve tensions with the Kingdom. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has repeatedly dismissed Saudi ability to attack Iran, while Iranian politicians declare readiness to protect the Kingdom in case of an attack.

Iran’s views on multilateral regional security arrangements

There are two interlinked strands to Iran’s views on regional security which have important implications for its relations with Saudi Arabia. These centre firstly around Iran as a hub in the ‘Axis of Resistance’, and, secondly, in the emphasis Iran places on multilateral ‘region-first’ solutions to security in the Middle East. Both allow Tehran to enjoy a level of independence in the conduct of its foreign policy. The former gives Iran significant reach in the Middle East through its long-standing alliances and networks, and has a strong ideational slant. The latter primarily serves to build an aspirational agenda for the conduct of Iran’s foreign diplomacy in the form of a more traditionally understood regional security architecture.

The ‘Axis of Resistance’, originally centred on the alliance between Hezbollah, Iran and Syria, focused on containing Israeli, and by extension
The view from Tehran

US, aims in the region. While it only crystallised in the global public consciousness in the years following the Arab Uprisings, it is an intrinsic part of a wider counter-hegemonic narrative against the West and its allies that has characterised Tehran’s regional security outlook since the revolution. As Saad notes, the fact that Iran acts as the lynchpin of this axis is ‘not only due to its regional power status, but also to its identity as a specific kind of regional power, which derives its sense of ontological security from this political identity’. The Islamic Republic acts as something of a middle-ranking power globally, while seeking to maintain its position as a major power within the Middle East, drawing on its religious and ideational power to sustain its alliance network. While much debate centres around groups within the axis serving as so-called proxies due in part to the well-known provision of Iranian funding, a fact that is not denied by Iran nor such groups, the reality is a more complex alliance network that affords considerable agency to its constituent parts. Where this has important corollaries for the Iranian–Saudi relationship is in the developments in regional politics since the Arab Uprisings. What semblance there was of regional order was supplanted with widespread regional instability and subsequent interventions in a number of theatres as a result of the uprisings. The Iranian narrative of the ‘Axis of Resistance’ as an alliance that draws on strong ideational and religious ties is one that is intrinsically tied to its own national security concerns, helping the Islamic Republic maintain a defensive posture in the region ever since the uprisings.

Iranian–Saudi relations were tested throughout the summer of 2019, when a series of attacks against oil tankers, including Saudi and Emirati vessels, took place in the Gulf of Oman. As noted previously, Iran has highlighted its control over the Strait of Hormuz as a key bargaining chip if it were unable to export its oil, stressing that the Persian Gulf had to be a secure waterway for all or for no country at all. This led pundits in Iran to openly speculate that the attacks were indeed Iran’s doing. Saudi accusations of Iranian complicity in the attacks, as well as in the response to the September 2019 Houthi-claimed drone attacks on the Saudi Aramco oil facility, were met with short shrift from Tehran. For Iran, the resultant increase in extra-regional interest in securing the supply of Middle Eastern oil, seen in the form of increased Western military support for Saudi Arabia, provided an opportunity to again emphasise a region-first alternative. This found its articulation in President Rouhani’s proposal for securing the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz under the banner of a ‘Hormuz Peace Endeavor’ (HOPE), or ‘Coalition for Hope’. Utilising the UN General Assembly to broadcast this initiative to a global audience, Rouhani’s vision for HOPE was aimed squarely at regional states and sought to ensure energy security, freedom of navigation and free transfer of oil and

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other resources through the Strait of Hormuz. Noting that such a coalition would require UN supervision, Rouhani expressed Tehran’s desire to have the US excluded from such an initiative, remarking that ‘stability in the Middle East should be sought inside the region rather than outside of it’. Pundits in Iran have also insisted on expanding bilateral talks with Saudi Arabia through HOPE, to build a regional security forum, a non-aggression pact and Gulf naval force convergence, while also expanding ties with the smaller Gulf states to ensure they do not fully back Saudi Arabia in future regional arrangements.

Tehran sees space for Saudi Arabia in such initiatives, provided that external (i.e. US) powers are excluded, but such potential for cooperation remains a hypothetical ideal not least because there is no guarantee that including Iran in multilateral security arrangements will alter its position vis-à-vis the Arab world. From Tehran’s standpoint, this hypothetical ideal would be viable if the region moves towards an era with a less overt US presence, something that despite US troop drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan is still far from reality given continued American military presence in bases across the region.

To date, several proposals for collective regional security in the Persian Gulf have failed, including those put forward after the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), and the Gulf War (1990–1991), in part because the US was unwilling to grant Iran a major regional role, and also because of fears that such proposals would empower Iran to expand its regional influence further. Since 2014, with the escalation of regional conflicts, other ideas for regional collaboration have been explored based on models such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which was the precursor of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Created with the 1975 Helsinki Accords, the CSCE allowed NATO members and the signatories of the Warsaw Pact to engage in talks about their security concerns.

Instead, the region is dividing over the issue of regional security. In Iraq, the notion of the country being explicitly part of the ‘Axis of Resistance’ has been problematic, due to the continued US presence in Iraq and influence over Iraqi leaders. From Iran’s standpoint, however, its Iraqi allies, particularly the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs), are part of the resistance axis and play a key role in Iran’s continued engagement with political and military groups in both Iraq and Syria. Here we see a re-purposing of the axis to contain the wider extremist or ‘takfiri’ threat to Iran and its allies, thus forming part of Tehran’s very own ‘War on Terror’ narrative. Hence, this network of alliances forms part of Tehran’s own strategic depth projection in the region, something that it sees as vital for its security.
Iran is keen to utilise the potentialities of more traditional forms of international organisation such as the UN to promote its own visions for peace and dialogue, as seen first with Khatami’s promotion of ‘Dialogue among Civilizations’, and Rouhani’s early attempts to combat extremism through his ‘World Against Violence and Extremism’ (WAVE) initiative in 2013, which also aimed to deescalate tensions in the Persian Gulf. In recent years, Tehran has emphasised its preference for an inclusive, regional security architecture. Foreign Minister Zarif was particularly clear in calling for regional solutions to common security problems. Writing in the *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* in 2016, he highlighted the necessity for a regional dialogue forum under UN supervision, citing the success of UN Security Council Resolution 598 that helped draw an end to the Iran–Iraq War, and argued that such a forum could form the basis for ‘more formal nonaggression and security cooperation arrangements’. However, it should be noted that while the resolution did lead to advisory meetings among regional states, it did not materialise into any collective steps.

In general, the Iranian foreign minister’s calls were met with mistrust across the Persian Gulf due to the suspicion and mistrust that has fed into Saudi narratives about Iran’s regional intentions, and Iran’s regional behaviour including attempts to export a revolutionary agenda abroad. Ayatollah Khamenei insists that demonising Iran has marginalised its efforts to build regional security. Iranian pundits also argue that it is necessary to establish that security cannot be achieved through the US, as any association with US policies is costly for all regional actors. Furthermore, Tehran insists that it must be allowed to use its exceptional capacities as a powerful regional state to share its values with neighbouring Arab countries. On the other end of the spectrum, some voices in Iran argue that joint regional security must account for Gulf geopolitical realities that help rid Tehran of its conspiratorial worldview especially towards Saudi Arabia and the US. Encouragingly, this narrative goes to show that in Tehran, some debates aim to de-link ideology from the pursuit of national security interests.

**Conclusion**

The Iranian–Saudi relationship, presented in this chapter largely from the perspective of Tehran, provides a unique insight into one of the most significant geopolitical rivalries of modern times. The vicissitudes of this relationship have a major impact on the domestic and international politics of the Middle East and beyond. Studying the nature of this rivalry since the Arab Uprisings sheds important light on the worldview of the Islamic Republic as it faces a number of perceived and real hostile threats in the regional and
international environment. In response to changes in the regional environment, Tehran and Riyadh concluded that they must each separately consolidate their spheres of influence in the region, which was frequently achieved by undermining each other in an effort to shift the blame for regional instability. The battle for regional influence was thus articulated through competing narratives as much as it was through material means.

What the presentation of elite-level narratives from Iranian political and academic figures in this chapter reflects is broadly in line with the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy outlook, emphasising the pernicious motives of the US and its allies, but it also showcases an often ignored nuance and breadth of debate. This sense of malign intent on the part of the US is channelled through policies that, in Tehran’s eyes, aim to divide Muslims and wreak havoc on its ability to have mutually beneficial relations with the Kingdom. There are, however, numerous critics of Tehran’s stance vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia, particularly in terms of both a lack of interest and sufficient diplomatic nous when dealing with Riyadh. Other voices frame relations in terms of the damaging effect the US–Saudi relationship has on Riyadh’s ability to act independently, and many of these discourses feed into a general picture of viewing Saudi Arabia as an unequal partner in the region.

The religious sphere has also been a site of contention, particularly when certain, religiously informed identity narratives are deployed. Arguably a geopoliticisation of identity has taken place within the rivalry, often expressed through instrumentalisation of religion to provide additional depth and justification for certain policy stances. Tehran utilises well-established, religiously grounded themes of fighting oppression and standing up to the Saudi-led, extremist or ‘takfiri’ threat. The narrative expounded by Tehran is deployed to provide a deterrent against perceived Saudi hegemonic desires, but is also lamented by some who seek to emphasise a less ideologically driven stance towards Saudi Arabia.

The overarching perception of Saudi–US ties, the opposing views on various Middle East conflicts and perceived sectarianising discourses against Iran and regional Shiite communities have important corollaries for Iran’s view towards the Saudi security build-up in the region. The Saudi security posture is perceived in hostile terms by Iran. Saudi Arabia’s increasingly assertive foreign policy in the region is based around coalitions with allied states and Western partners, such as proposals to form a so-called Arab NATO. Tehran refutes the Saudi narrative around their utility and instead emphasises Saudi Arabia’s comparative weakness, starkly illustrated by its dependence on the US. Though there is a sense of Iran being subject to containment through such measures, there are voices in Iran that cite the very nature of these coalitions as justifying the need for greater dialogue with
Saudi Arabia to avoid miscalculations in an increasingly fraught regional environment.

Iran challenges the hostile forces arranged against it through its cultivation of alliances across the Middle East and in its predilection for suggesting multilateral security solutions. The ‘Axis of Resistance’ provides a different kind of multilateral alliance network that has a strong ideational slant that at its core is concerned with defending Iran and its allies. Its re-purposing in recent years to focus largely on containing the ‘takfiri’ threat is built on a narrative that sees Iran and the Shiite communities it supports as being victims of sectarianism. In a different way, Iran’s proclivity for promoting multilateral, region-first security arrangements for the Middle East is also reflective of its wish to see a region rid of US military presence, which would allow space for rapprochement with Saudi Arabia.

This chapter has focused on the view from Tehran regarding its relationship with Saudi Arabia. Focusing on the Iranian perspective has highlighted some core themes regarding the nature of discourse about the rivalry, the narration of religious identity and the vexed question of regional security. While the US continues to loom large over the relationship, the view from the Islamic Republic, while not homogenous, is broadly sceptical of the chances for rapprochement with Saudi Arabia while the status quo remains.

Notes

1. There are several side debates that are not discussed in the present chapter, for purposes of brevity, which include the historical contours of the relationship, rival media operations, soft power rivalry and the Saudi–Israeli rapprochement, among others.


8 Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*.


11 For a theoretical argument of how obtaining security overrides the ideological undertones of the Iranian–Saudi partnership, see Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*.


Rouhani, ‘President’s Message’.


Rouhani, ‘President in a Regular Cabinet Session’.

In the early and mid-twentieth century, as well as in the 1980s, Iran and Saudi Arabia broke off ties three times over the hajj, but resumed relations later on. For details, see Keynoush, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

34 Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, p. 52.


36 Iran’s hosting of the OIC summit in 1997 was seen as a public relations success by many regional leaders; see E. Wastnidge, *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), p. 133.


40 See Chapter 8, on Yemen, in this volume.


45 For an example of how this has translated into positive views of Iran’s regional role among some Iraqi Shia, see F. Christia, E. Dekeyser and D. Knox, ‘To Karbala: Surveying Religious Shi’a from Iran and Iraq’, MIT Political Science Department Research Paper, no. 39, 2016.


Mabon, ‘Muting the Trumpets of Sabotage’.


Palestinian groups such as Hamas have also at varying times come under the resistance banner.


Saad, ‘Challenging the Sponsor-Proxy Model’. 
63 Interview with Ali Bighdeli.
65 Ibid.
67 Wastnidge, ‘Iran’s Own “War on Terror”’.
Competing Islams: Religious legitimacy and the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and Iran

Lucia Ardovini

Introduction

The troubled relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been at the centre of several debates in the scholarship of the contemporary Middle East. The two powers are old rivals, but the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran that followed the 1979 Revolution added an existential component to their rivalry. The existential importance of Islam for both Riyadh and Tehran meant that, as well as competing for regional supremacy, religious legitimacy also became a key part of this struggle. Wahhabism and Twelver Shiism are both deeply embedded into the politics and society of the two powers and directly linked to statecraft and political projects, meaning that after 1979 religion took a central role in the political, security and foreign policies of both states.

Following the spread of the 2011 Arab Uprisings the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has become increasingly important in shaping the politics of the region, as both Riyadh and Tehran attempt to shape the Middle East in their image. There are numerous lenses used to unpack the ongoing struggle for competing legitimacies, ranging from sectarian discourses, soft power, geopolitical concerns and proxy warfare. Yet, the role that Islam plays in shaping the domestic and international competition between these two powers, beyond a sectarian rhetoric, remains largely understudied. This is partially due to the competing branches of Islam embedded in the social and political fabric of these countries, but its relevance goes way beyond the Sunni vs Shia schism. In fact, Saudi Arabia and Iran are similar in the sense that they both historically rely on a very specific, state-sanctioned form of Islamism to legitimate regime authority, frame nationalist projects and inform foreign policy decisions. Wahhabism and Twelver Shiism, the belief systems dominant within these two states, have over time evolved into a state tool that influence both domestic and foreign policy, as well as enforcing societal control and consequently sparking internal discontent. Therefore, to analyse the role that Islam plays
within this rivalry it is necessary to consider first the key role that religion plays within the fabric of each state, then further unpack the extent to which it influences their foreign policy. Through a comparative analysis of the evolution of Islam as a political tool this chapter offers an examination of how this plays out in shaping the competition for regional authority between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

This chapter begins by providing an overview of the role of Wahhabism and Twelver Shiism within the sociopolitical fabric of these states, tracking its evolution into a political and legitimacy tool. It then turns to the analysis of how religion is used as a smokescreen for geopolitical interests and how it influences foreign policy, concluding with an overview of how this shapes specific aspects of the ongoing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran has often been reduced to the religious dimension, mostly focusing on the struggle for regional and religious legitimacy between the most powerful Shia state and the Sunni state par excellence. Yet, while Islam has been increasingly politicised and framed to portray each power as an existential threat to the other, one needs to be careful to not understand religion as the main driver of this rivalry. Overall, the chapter demonstrates that while religion does play a significant part in the rivalry between the two powers its role is often overstated, and argues that reducing the competition to a struggle for religious legitimacy fails to capture the centrality of geopolitical dynamics and foreign policy goals.

**Islam and state power**

There are different, established approaches within the literature examining the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, seeking to understand its sources and unpack its impact on regional order and geopolitics, which broadly fall into three traditional camps. There are those who frame these tensions within a broader framework of competing national interests and understand them as a manifestation of shifting balances of power in the Persian Gulf, with religious security playing a significant role in shaping the rivalry.¹ Another approach focuses on the role of theological tensions, arguing that Islam is a key factor in understanding how this competition is influenced by the emergence and construction of religious and sectarian identities.² The third camp applies a more intersectional view and argues that in order to make sense of the rivalry one needs to combine issues of power distribution across the region with a careful consideration of how the spread of religious identities and sectarian divisions affects geopolitical tensions.³ This chapter, in line with the other contributions to this volume, falls within this camp and recognises the importance of acknowledging the
role of national interests and domestic politics as well as the primacy of religious concerns in order to further understand the nature of this rivalry. This allows us to move away from largely monolithic categories enshrined in the literature and to take a fresher, more comprehensive look at the different dynamics that are at play.

A key consideration is that the political role played by religion cannot be separated from the domestic and foreign policies of states across the region, as it not only serves as an historical tool of legitimisation for particular regimes and ruling elites, but also shapes domestic manifestations of dissent as well as providing scope for interfering in the politics of other powers. More importantly, the way in which states incorporate religion – in this case Islam – into their foreign policies and international behaviour is often shaped by domestic considerations of how ideology relates to political authority. As an example, when the influence of religion and faith on foreign policy is in question, looking at geopolitical shifts across the region one can see that sectarian narratives are often mobilised to address specific security threats that have little to do with religion, but more to do with fear of domestic insurgency. The transnational projection of religion is therefore usually more indicative of the status of the balance of power between competing social and political forces within the country it stems from, rather than of deliberate expression of foreign policy goals.4

Much of the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran is often reduced to a competition between the two main branches of Islam, Sunnism vs Shiism, but the ways in which Islam is embedded into political power and governance within the two countries is diametrically different. In the case of both Saudi Arabia and Iran, ongoing domestic struggles between the role of Islam and Islamism cannot be contained, and religious legitimacy becomes a space for expressing broader geopolitical rivalries – as shown by the sectarian use of religion in Saudi Arabia’s portrayal of Shia Islam as an avatar of Iran. Therefore the phenomenon of ‘religious soft power’, indicating a state’s incorporation of religious promotion into their broader foreign policy conduct, often masks broader geopolitical goals as well as reflecting concerns over the status of domestic politics.5

When looking at the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, two seminal events in 1979 shed a light on the centrality of Islam in shaping and maintaining political power. In Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned after years of exile, acclaimed by millions of followers, and the Iranian Islamic Republic was born. Despite being remembered as an ‘Islamic’ revolution, the events of 1979 were much more complex and social unrest was fuelled by both secular and religious grievances, mostly centred around the perception of the shah’s regime as corrupt, brutal and as a pawn of the West. Nevertheless, after Khomeini’s takeover of the post-revolutionary
process, the forced modernisation that Iran had undergone under the shah swiftly morphed into *velayat-e faqih*, governance of the jurists, which gives the religious clergy custodianship over the people. Later on that year the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, the most sacred shrine of Islam, was seized by a group of Saudi religious insurgents in an open condemnation against the House of Al Saud’s policies, which they perceived as being increasingly pro-Western and largely un-Islamic. Both of these events brought questions of Islamic legitimacy back to the fore and deeply shook the foundations of established systems of rule in both countries, and had a profound and ongoing impact on their sociopolitical landscapes. Globally, they led to the emergence of urgent questions about the separation of religion and politics, the relationship between Islam and democratization and to widespread preoccupations with how such resurgence could be contained. Most of all, they added a religious dimension to the already ongoing rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran, bringing a fundamental existential component to the struggle. While many Western interpretations of the events were mostly driven by security concerns, the events of 1979 clearly revealed that religion played a key political role, and that its influence could not be undermined. Without overstating the role of Islam in the current manifestations of this rivalry, it is still necessary to acknowledge that religion and faith have huge resonance both within and outside states and, just like in this instance, they should not be reduced to an instrumental understanding of just how seminal the events of 1979 were for both powers.

From this, Islam and its manifestations through different forms of Islamism should always be understood within the specific contexts and circumstances it operates under. This goes beyond the theological differences between Sunni and Shia traditions, as domestic conditions such as shared history and different intersections of culture, ethnicity and faith also drastically shape its political connotations. The intersection of religion and politics is notoriously hard to navigate and in the case of Islam this realm is further complicated by its comprehensive nature, better explained by the maxim *al-islam din wa-dawla* ‘Islam is [both] religion and state’. Yet, there is a notable lack of clear prescriptions of what constitutes an Islamic state and different movements, states and organisations across the region have historically developed their own ideological projects to merge together religious and political institutions. This has allowed different groups, regimes and traditions to develop their own models of Islamic governance, which adds to its variety of manifestations and also emphasises its adaptability to a wide range of national contexts. It is nevertheless worth noting that, until relatively recently, there was no formal distinction drawn between the religious and secular spheres across most of the region and, to this day, states implement different structures to formally separate or merge
their political and religious institutions. This overlapping is due to the fact that rulers in the region historically draw legitimacy and power from religion and, even in the aftermath of European colonialism and the establishment of nation-states, the legal systems of most Middle Eastern countries continue to incorporate both secular and religious legislative elements.

It is also worth noting that the intersection between religion and politics, and the various manifestations of Islamism associated to it, are deeply influenced by domestic and regional events and therefore part of an ongoing transformation process, which needs to be reflected in the scholarship on this topic. Before the 2011 Arab Uprisings we, as scholars and researchers, had become accustomed to approach the study of political Islam through focusing on the civil society activities, electoral strategies and political behaviour of semi-tolerated Islamist opposition parties and movements.

This landscape has vastly changed in the aftermath of the region-wide popular protests, and while a decade ago Islamist movements were mostly constrained by domestic policies and highly organised – with the notable exceptions of groups such as al-Qaeda – nowadays their functions and circumstances have considerably diversified. In turn, this makes it noticeably harder to analyse the ever-evolving relationship between Islamists and the state, and the ongoing reliance of some regimes on Islam as a political and legitimacy tool. In particular, the long-standing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran can benefit from being analysed through the lens of Islam as a form of statecraft and foreign policy.11 The geopolitical competition between these two powers is often talked about in terms of a battle for survival, and the overt sectarian narrative associated to it also reveals that the role of religion cannot be excluded from the analysis.

**Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism**

When seeking to understand the role that Islam plays in the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran one must first analyse the relationship between statecraft and religion in both states. The modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 under the leadership of Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, who united the four providences that previously constituted its territory under a single authority. In order to better understand just how much of a pivotal political role Islam played in the foundation and running of the Kingdom from the very beginning, it is useful to think about its formation and development as of three distinct phases. First, the 1902–1932 period, when territorial conquests were consolidated and a Saudi-Wahhabi ideology was imposed on them; second, 1932–1945, during which the task of creating a national Saudi-Wahhabi identity was undertaken; and finally, the 1943–1945
period, which saw the development of strategic foreign policy decisions in line with the Kingdom’s Wahhabi mission, as well as the inception of the Al Saud’s ongoing relationship with the US. From the very beginning a certain interpretation of Wahhabi Islam developed along with the institutions of the modern nation-state, acting as a main source of legitimacy and becoming a key component of statecraft, meaning that the two forces cannot be separated.

In the Saudi context, Wahhabi Islam largely precedes the creation of the nation-state and goes back to the teachings of Muhammad Ibn al-Wahhab in the 1740s. He preached an orthodox version of Sunni Islam centred around the concept of *tawhid*, the oneness of God, with the Wahhabi doctrine calling for the reinstatement of the same religious, social and political customs that had been practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and his followers. It was not long before Muhammad bin Saud, founder of the Al Saud dynasty, joined forces with the scholar marking the inception of the use of religion as a political instrument to both consolidate a collective identity and legitimise a ruling family. The cooperation between *umara* and *ulema* (statesmen and religious clergy) only developed further from there, culminating in the complete embeddedness of state and religion institutions that is characteristic of Saudi Arabia today.

The role placed upon Wahhabism as a state religion means that Islam is not only applied to defend the state’s interests and those of the ruling dynasty, but is part of a mutual reinforcement process that sees the ideology as one of the core pillars – and identity markers – of the Kingdom. Saudi constitutional law and its judicial system rest on traditional Islamic legal principles, whereby the Quran and the Sunna form its constitution and Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence) supports the law of the state. Indeed, Article 1 of the Saudi Constitution declares that ‘The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion; God’s Book and the Sunnah of His Prophet, God’s prayers and peace be upon him, are its constitution.’ In practice, this means that there is very little separation between religion and politics in the Saudi context, with Islam being a core component of statecraft and of sociopolitical life. In addition, the historical and institutional link between religion and politics also means that adherence to Wahhabi Islam is a key component of Saudi nationalism, with religious faith and loyalty to the ruling family also being main markers of a national collective identity. It follows that the power that the House of Al Saud has enjoyed for the past two and a half centuries is largely due to its bond with the *ulema*, and to its use of religion as both a unifying instrument and a source of political legitimacy. As far as a separation of powers can be drawn, the Wahabbi *ulema* perform the role of guardians of the social order, while relinquishing political authority to the ruling family and the
state apparatus, even though there is emerging evidence to suggest that this balance of power has begun to shift in recent years.16

Statecraft and authority in Saudi Arabia therefore rely on the mutual relationship between ulema and umara, where the former decide on the sharia and the latter implement it. The clergy began being incorporated into the state apparatus by the second half of the twentieth century with the creation of the Dar al-Ifta’ wa-l-Ishraf ‘ala al-Shu’un al-Diniyya (the Institution for the Issuance of Religio-Legal Opinion and the Supervision of Religious Affairs), under the chairmanship of the Grand Mufti.17 The institution was then split into the Board of Senior Ulema and the Council of Religio-Legal Opinion, and combined with the creation of several other religious ministries and endowments. It is therefore clear that Islam is both a source of political authority and legitimacy within Saudi Arabia, yet, state institutions are progressively taking over areas that were once the sole competence of religious bodies. The bureaucratisation of government activities means that the clergy does not hold the same amount of power it once did in terms of being able to actively influence policy decisions, but it nevertheless remains represented in ministries and religious agencies such as the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, Calls and Guidance, and so on.18 Thus, while its political power has decreased over time, the Wahhabi clergy still plays a significant role in influencing social and internal policies.

Nevertheless, the largely exclusionary policies and practice that derive from such a strict theocratic system have not been left unchallenged, with grievances also being rooted in the subjugation of Wahhabism into a state religion at the expense of its militant character.19 Internal discontent takes different forms in Saudi Arabia, but dissidents and reformers all share a dissatisfaction with the exclusionary power structures that come from such an embedded relation between religion and politics.20 Broadly speaking, domestic tensions in the Kingdom originate from political and religious differences as well as regional ones and have historically formed four different camps, often in competition with each other. These are Sunni political activism, liberal criticism, the Shiite minority and tensions generated by tribal and regional politics.21 The ruling family has been challenged by several global Islamist opposition groups, most notably al-Qaeda, labelling the Al Saud as profane and infidels and challenging the legitimacy of the existing order. Nevertheless, an older and more structured manifestation of Sunni political activism in the Kingdom is represented by the al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya (Islamic Awakening) movement, influenced by both traditional Salafi doctrine and the political narrative of the Muslim Brotherhood, which calls for the stricter implementation of Islamic norms in the public sphere and argues for a greater role of religious scholars in politics, challenging
the hegemony of the ruling family. In the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Uprisings several of Sahwa’s key figures used the regional momentum to ask for domestic reforms and have since been detained and sentenced to death, as a part of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman’s (MbS) crackdown on dissent.

The Islamic opposition represented by the Sahwa movement is arguably one of the greatest threats to the Saudi government’s monopoly over the domestic political and religious spheres, as Islam is the main language in which social and political rivalries are expressed. Similarly, the Shiite minority also represent another strong voice of dissent and embodies the decades-long struggle with Iran, especially when it comes to religion shaping the foreign policy of these two states, as I will discuss later. Mostly located in the oil-rich eastern province, since the establishment of the Kingdom the Shiites have been subjected to discrimination and sectarian incitement and have been locked into the ongoing struggle for regional hegemony between Saudi and Iran. Shiite activism has taken many forms over the decades, ranging from militancy and revolution to demands for pluralism, democracy and equal rights, but to this day Shiites remain highly disenfranchised within Saudi society. They are banned from holding key posts within the Ministry of Defence and Interior, and face severe restrictions on religious worship. The anti-Shia rhetoric in Saudi is further reinforced by their perception as an Iranian fifth column and steadily intensified after the Shiites’ calls for full equality and basic rights in the wake of 2011. Since coming to power, MbS implemented some reforms aimed at addressing Shiites’ key grievances, such as the removal of openly anti-Shia material in school curricula, but heavy restrictions on freedom of worship remain in place.

These two cases illustrate some of the main domestic challenges against the Islamic authority of the Saudi Kingdom, which are then reflected into its geopolitical behaviour. Developments within the Saudi state do not take place in a vacuum and are therefore also shaped by regional phenomena, specifically when it comes to Iran and its reach on Shia-minority communities across the region. It is at this nexus that the regime’s domestic concerns intersect with its foreign policy agenda, as it will be shown later. Nevertheless, despite the failure to accommodate meaningful change and reforms, the Saudi Kingdom remains one of the most durable regimes in the Middle East. MbS’s efforts to portray himself as a religious reformer is therefore aimed at appeasing both domestic and international discontent, especially in regard to the emergence of its ‘1979’ narrative about ‘moderating’ Islam. Yet, despite a wave of arrests against prominent clerics in 2017, MbS’s actions are far from challenging the established partnership between the House of Al Saud and Wahhabism. Rather, these reforms aim
at improving the Kingdom’s international reputation without altering the structures that maintain the power of Al Saud, meaning that Islam remains a powerful tool of political control in the country.

Iran, Twelver Shiism and *velayat-e faqih*

The Islamic Republic of Iran was founded in 1979, after the Iranian Revolution overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty and forced Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi into exile. The events of 1979 are seminal in the history of the region, as the establishment of the Islamic Republic was perceived as a prominent example of the instrumental use of Islam for political ends and added another layer of competition – religion – to the already ongoing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While this is only one of the many factors that shape the struggle, the extent to which Islam is embedded in the political and social fabric of both countries makes it inseparable from their foreign policies and adds religious legitimacy to what is at stake.

Much of the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran is often reduced to a competition between the two main branches of Islam, Sunnism vs Shiism, but the ways in which Islam is embedded into political power and governance within the two countries are diametrically different. The 1979 Revolution and rise to power of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini fundamentally changed the relationship between state and religion in Iran, as it expanded the *ulema*’s role beyond just sacred affairs and into the political realm, laying the bases for religious authoritarianism. To this day, the Islamic Republic functions as a political system that brings together elements of a presidential democracy and an Islamic theocracy, with secular governmental bodies working in parallel with religious ones such as an Assembly of Experts whose members must be clerics, and a Council of Guardians half of whom must be clerics. Standing before the Iranian people a few months after the revolution had deposed the country’s shah, then supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini stated: ‘I have said time and time again that to build a society on the basic of the principles of Islam is an ideological choice, not just a religious one. Islam in fact is an ideology, in which religion represents one aspect,’ essentially setting the basis for faith to become an integral part of statecraft. Yet, the revolution that overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty was not a religious one, but rather brought together Islamists, Communists and liberals before being hijacked by Khomeini and his followers, creating long-standing domestic discontent that still threatens the regime’s legitimacy today, inevitably affecting its foreign policy choices.
The preamble to the Iranian Constitution of 1979 reads:

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran advances the cultural, social, political, and economic institutions of Iranian society based on Islamic principles and norms, which represent an honest aspiration of the Islamic Ummah. This aspiration was exemplified by the nature of the great Islamic Revolution of Iran, and by the course of the Muslim people’s struggle, from its beginning until victory, as reflected in the decisive and forceful calls raised by all segments of the populations. Now, at the threshold of this great victory, our nation, with all its beings, seeks its fulfillment.29

Building on this Ayatollah Khomeini developed and instituted a doctrine of supreme clerical rule to replace the monarchy, shaping the Islamic Republic to be ruled by the principles of Twelver Shiism and *velayat-e faqih*, or governance of the jurists, putting himself at the top of the combined supreme religious and political authorities. *Velayat-e faqih* is based on the belief that clerical guardianship of the state is required until the return of the Twelfth Shia Imam, who Shia Muslims believe was withdrawn into occultation in 874. Islamic governance is therefore made possible by transferring political and religious power to the *ulema*, while the Supreme Leader has the ultimate say on the Republic’s key decisions.30

From this, a system based on the governance of Islamic jurists gives the *ulema* (clergy) custodianship over people, which in the Iranian case calls for a *faqih* to serve as the Supreme Leader of the Republic, therefore combining political and religious authority. The Pahlavi dynasty set the institutional bases for parallel political and religious authorities and further reinforced this balance of power, although admittedly through a complex system of institutions: the monarchy’s legitimacy stemmed from Shiism and the constitutional framework it operated under defined the government as Shiite, while giving clerics the exclusive authority to oversee the legislative process to ensure it conformed to the sharia.31 In post-revolutionary Iran the Supreme Leader is head of state and holds the highest political and religious authority, while the president is responsible for the day-to-day running of the country. The ultimate power to decide on issues of domestic policies, foreign policy, judicial matters and to command the armed forces still largely lays with the Supreme Leader, who is appointed and supervised by the Assembly of Experts.32 The Republic therefore combines elements of theocracy and presidential democracy, with regular parliamentary and presidential elections taking place and a system of checks and balances and religious bodies that are meant to hold both the Supreme Leader and the government accountable. Still, Shia Islam remains at the core of political legitimacy and authority, as all candidates must be approved by the Guardian Council and elected officials are tasked with ‘protecting the state’s Islamic character’.33
Shiism had political value in Iran long before the founding on the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini, with religion being an intrinsic and fundamental part of the political system. Nevertheless, such a mutually reinforcing relationship between religion and political authority results in largely exclusionary theocratic policies and practices which, similar to the case of Saudi Arabia, feed into popular grievances and political unrest. Some of these tensions are internal to the system of *velayat-e faqih* and refer directly to the perceived unbalance of political and religious powers, with a considerable part of the *ulema* lamenting that the Islamic Revolution in fact limited the traditional autonomy of the clergy, imposing a political hierarchy on religious bodies and gravely censoring their intellectual freedom.\(^{34}\) External challenges instead have their roots in the deeply exclusionary practice characteristic of the theocracy, with the main issues driving domestic discontent in contemporary Iran centring around the denunciation of human rights abuses, socio-economic inequalities, discrimination against religious minorities, women and LGBTQ+ groups.\(^{35}\) These are the reflection of deep structural issues dating back to the founding of the Islamic Republic and to the reliance on its theocratic elements for legitimacy and power, resulting in the politicisation of the political, social and cultural spheres, which in turn alienated wide sections of society and gave rise to different forms of resistance and dissent.

**Islam as a ‘smokescreen’**

Building on the analysis of the historical co-optation of Islam as a state tool within the Saudi Arabia and Iran, it can be seen that despite their obvious differences the two powers are similar in that they both derive political purpose and legitimacy from their own denomination of Islam. The desire to be a regional power as well as representatives of Sunni and Shia Islam undoubtedly plays a role in shaping the rivalry between the two theocracies; however, reducing their competition to a purely sectarian Sunni vs Shia antagonism fails to capture the complex geopolitical dynamics that are also at play here, such as territorial and economic concerns as well as shifting alliances with both regional and international powers. In line with the other contributions to this volume, to fully understand the role that religion plays within this rivalry one needs to move away from the monolithic categories enshrined in the literature and take a fresher look at these issues.

Islam plays a crucial role within the political and social fabrics of both Riyadh and Tehran and consequently also affects foreign policy decisions, yet, in both cases faith is used in an instrumental way to secure legitimacy in front of both domestic and international audiences. Because of this,
domestic factors and their influence on geopolitical interests are a necessary starting point for this analysis. The Saudi Kingdom relies on a system that integrates politics with religion, meaning that, aside from oil security and its ongoing relationship with the US, the export of Wahhabi Islam has historically been perceived as a cornerstone of Saudi foreign policy. Yet, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, this needs to be understood in a context of great power politics when Saudi ideology and its Islamic identity were crucial in opposing the threat of Nasser’s secular pan-Arabism.  
Saudi’s role as a defender of Islamism across the region served more than one purpose, as it reinforced its Islamic legitimacy while the influx of Islamist political refugees proved to be crucial for Saudi’s economic and structural development. Since then Saudi’s export of Wahhabism has continued through various manifestations of religious soft power, such as the creation of international bodies like the Muslim World League.

In the case of Iran, Shia history plays a prominent role in the construction of its foreign policy. The Battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Hussein – the Prophet’s grandson – located the idea of sacrifice and of standing up against oppressors within Iranian consciousness. This ‘resistance culture’ also lies in Khomeini’s concepts of mustakberin (the oppressors and arrogant powers) and the mustazefin (the oppressed and downtrodden), where the oppressed are Muslim people and Islam is painted as the solution. From this, after the 1979 Revolution the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy initially put a strong emphasis on the export of the revolution and on the support of repressed Muslims worldwide, which posed a clear territorial as well as ideological threat to Riyadh and other regimes. Since then, however, his predecessors promote a much more pragmatic and rhetorical interpretation of this message, with Khamenei saying that ‘This is what exporting the revolution means: to enable all nations in the world to see that they are capable of standing on their own feet, resisting submission with all of their strength by relying on their own will and determination and by replacing their trust in God.’

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran associate regional supremacy with regime survival, meaning that their rivalry has long assumed an existential character, but the two powers were not always such harsh rivals. From the 1950s to 1979 they were both part of the US ‘Twin Pillars Diplomacy’, fighting the Communist threat and providing oil to the West in exchange for military, diplomatic and economic support. Therefore, while they were not allies, their relationship was characterised by mutual tolerance rather than overt enmity but the successful outcome of the 1979 Iranian Revolution drastically subverted that fragile equilibrium. That is to say, the deposition of the shah and his replacement with a revolutionary theocratic regime contributed to the creation of a new state identity for Iran, which turned into a strongly
religion. This new identity and the revolution combined therefore added a religious dimension to a rivalry that had previously been shaped by geopolitical concerns rooted in regional security struggles. The emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in conjunction with the rise of Islamist opposition in Saudi Arabia also highlight the key role that ideology plays both domestically and regionally in shaping other geopolitical factors, even though religious competition is long past being the main driver of the antagonism between the two countries. Rather, the Sunni–Shia divide between Saudi Arabia and Iran is better understood as being inherently political with a religious front.

Nevertheless, a key component of the religious dimension of this rivalry derives from the fact that both countries see themselves as ‘protector’ of the Islamic faith, being regional superpowers with a strong theocratic connotation. Saudi Arabian political institutions are shaped by Wahhabi principles and the monarchy’s authority directly derives from its original link with the ideology. The fact that the Kingdom hosts two out of the holiest cities in Islam within its borders, Mecca and Medina, makes the king the ‘custodian of the faith’ and gives him an ‘Islamic duty’ to fulfil towards all Muslims, meaning that Saudi Arabia portrays itself as a transnational spiritual leader. While the prestige that comes with such claims is hard to challenge, the same could also be said of Iran, as it is the first Shia republic in history and holds within its territory several of the holiest sites in Shia Islam. Being a minority when compared to the global reach of Sunnism, from the very foundation of the Republic Iran emphasised the transnational and non-sectarian nature of its rhetoric, which rests on the core aims of the 1979 Revolution such as ‘justice’ and ‘resistance’. Therefore, even though Iran abandoned the active export of the Islamic Revolution in the 1980s, its commitment to transnationalism is evident in its support for actors and militias belonging to different denominations, such Hezbollah and Hamas. From this, it is easy to see why a sectarian lens has been applied to the study of the rivalry for such a long time; however, the exclusive use of religion as a category of analysis is more convenient than it is accurate, and fails to capture the other geopolitical dynamics that also drive this ongoing struggle.

Looking past the religious influence on both countries’ foreign policy, one can see that their rivalry is therefore driven by traditional security concerns that range from territorial integrity to economic competition and international alliances. Dupont notes that both powers share an inherent fear of political upheaval that is rooted in the ideology from the other nation, which highlights the political connotation of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran despite its veil of religious allusion. Hence, in addition to religious competition, the two states have also become increasingly involved
in geopolitical competition both in the Gulf and in the region, which is arguably a reflection of these security concerns rather than a battle over religious legitimacy. If Iran had indeed succeeded in exporting the revolution to Shia minorities in Saudi Arabia this would have posed a very traditional geopolitical concern to the Kingdom, combined with a more ideational threat. As Rubin argues, states respond to ideational threats with ideational balancing, intended to boost one’s own ideological legitimacy and undermine the ideological legitimacy of one’s adversary.46

This is the case as revolutionary Iran has been perceived as a threat by Sunni states and regimes since the 1980s, as countries with large Shia minorities, such as Saudi Arabia, and majorities, such as Bahrain, feared their mobilisation through the success of the Iranian Revolution, and started perceiving these groups as fifth columns.47 This hostility became a key part of both countries’ foreign policy, which also reflects the contrasting nature of their geopolitical goals: while Saudi Arabia aims to dominate and maintain the regional status quo, Iran has often sought or supported revolutionary change across the region. Iran’s transnational support for militias and Shiite parties and governments is matched by Riyadh’s alliances with other Sunni governments, militias and parties, which in turn translates into a political back and forth that divides the region through proxy conflicts and international coalitions, such as the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981. This mutual distrust is evident in the rhetoric and discourses of both powers, as Saudi Arabia and its allies routinely accuse Iran of supporting terrorist groups and militias across the region, from Hezbollah in Lebanon, political unrest in Bahrain, to Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Houthi rebels in Yemen.48 On the other hand, Iranian officials openly accuse Saudi Arabia of sponsoring terrorism across the region and of being a US pawn. Such accusations highlight a key component of the geopolitical struggle between these two powers, which is their contrasting vision of the organisation of security in the Gulf and the region more broadly, as Saudi Arabia historically maintains strong ties with the US and other Western powers, while Iran puts its focus on its own state sovereignty.49

Once again, while geopolitical aspirations are at the core of this ongoing rivalry, its often sectarian component shapes its perception as a struggle over claims for Islamic legitimacy, furthering views of religion as an instrumental political tool. Another element that complicates the process of looking beyond the ‘religious veil’ attached to the tensions between the two countries is the fact that both powers rely on the promotion of certain religious interpretation for regime survival, both regionally and domestically. Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid propose to look at such efforts in terms of ‘Islam as statecraft’, meaning that religion is incorporated into foreign policy as a form of ‘religious soft power’.50 When analysing the
sources and manifestation of this rivalry, it becomes clear that both Saudi Arabia and Iran rely on the harnessing of the power of religious symbols and authority to fulfil greater geopolitical objectives, meaning that religion becomes both an instrument and a space for expressing conventional geopolitical rivalries. This aspect becomes even more important when considering that both Saudi Arabia and Iran, as autocratic theocracies, see regime survival as inherently linked to religious legitimacy. Considering the long history of internal dissent and the renewed waves of popular uprisings that both powers are facing, one can argue that the international projection of religion has little to do with foreign policy itself, but rather is a manifestation of the shifting balance of power between competing social and political forces on the domestic level. In short, it is traditional geopolitical and domestic concerns that mostly drive the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia and Iran, not the other way around – hence the incorporation of religion to further frame and disguise broader geopolitical goals. To conclude, while the long-standing Saudi–Iranian rivalry is partially based on sectarian competition, it is first and foremost a conventional geopolitical and existential struggle that should not be reduced to a simplistic understanding of the historical antagonism between Sunni and Shia Islam.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the role that Islam plays within the long-standing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, aiming to demonstrate that its sources and manifestations go beyond the sectarian narrative that is usually employed to make sense of the tensions. Rather, while religion is undoubtedly a key component of both powers’ identity, foreign policy and survival, its role in shaping their geopolitical competition is often overstated. Ideology and religious legitimacy matter, without a doubt, but what mostly drives the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran is competition over regional leadership and security concerns.

What makes it hard to look beyond this religious ‘smokescreen’ is the fact that Wahhabism and Twelver Shiism are deeply embedded in the political and social fabrics of each state, with regimes and ruling elites in both Saudi Arabia and Iran relying on the perpetuation of a very specific form of state-sanctioned Islam to legitimise their authority, frame nationalist projects and inform foreign policy decisions. These ideologies also play a key part in constructing 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. This has been specifically the case from 1979 onwards, when the Iranian Revolution
and the subsequent foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran added a theological dimension to an already ongoing geopolitical rivalry.

Since then the two powers have been involved in an escalating geopolitical struggle that is shaped by foreign policy concerns, but is often read through a sectarian lens and portrayed as a competition over Islamic legitimacy. Yet, the argument that there is more to the rivalry than religious competition does not aim to diminish the existential importance of this struggle for both theocracies, as the ideological threat that either country poses to the other is key, but the internal political dynamics of each state and the way in which they influence foreign policy also need to be part of the analysis. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia present itself as a stable monarchy, a Western ally and as a protector of the Gulf’s status quo and, more recently, of moderate Islam. On the other, Iran plays the role of a revisionist power opposed to Western interference, an opponent of the current regional order and a supporter of popular Islamic movements. It follows that both countries pursue competing foreign policy goals as they battle for regional authority, and that their regime survival is directly threatened by the expansion of the other’s power and religious beliefs. Nevertheless, both powers are struggling with domestic discontent fuelled by decades of exclusionary policies meaning that the survival of their theocratic regimes is under direct threat from within the state, with domestic insecurity being translated into foreign policy and regional competition rather than the other way around.

To conclude, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have benefitted from the politicisation of sectarian differences and religious discourses to mask political agendas, and to better advance geopolitical interests that are overarchingly aimed at maintaining national identities and ensuring regime survival. However, the instrumentalisation of religious competition risks becoming a self-perpetuating narrative for academics and policymakers, which once again highlights the need to look beyond the struggle for Islamic legitimacy when analysing the long-standing rivalry between the two powers. As both Saudi Arabia and Iran struggle with rising popular discontent and challenges to the relations between rulers and ruled, their domestic insecurity will undoubtedly reflect their competition for regional hegemony, as what is at stake here is ultimately regime survival rather than regional leadership.

Notes

1 See, for example, H. Furtig, *Iran’s Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2006); S. Chubin and C. Tripp, *Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order* (London: International Institute for


9 For the purpose of this chapter, ‘Islamism’ is understood as the wide manifestation of different forms of social and political activism advocating that public and political life should be guided by Islamic principles, be it through the Islamisation of society through the exercise of state power, or through grassroots social and political activism.


11 Mandaville and Hamid, ‘Islam as a Statecraft’.


13 Ibid., p. 36.


18 Ibid., p. 68.


For more details about the Saudi Shiites, see F. Ibrahim, *The Shi’is of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi Books, 2006).


Ibid., p. 140.


Ibid.


Ibid., p. 118.

43 Ibid., p. 300.
49 Dupont, ‘Religion or Politics?’, p. 6.
50 For more detailed analysis, see Mandaville and Hamid, ‘Islam as a Statecraft’.
51 Ibid., p. 2.
The Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry: Rekindling of Shia loyalty and Sunni fears in Bahrain

Rashed al-Rasheed

After the intervention of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) forces in Bahrain, led by Saudi Arabia, the Bahraini government used force against the demonstrators in 2011. Regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia have sought to strengthen their influence in Bahrain during the 2011 uprising, due to the island’s geostrategic location, 200 kilometres off the coast of Iran and 25 kilometres from the Saudi coast. In order to contain the 2011 crisis, the Bahraini authorities accused Iran of fomenting chaos and violence in Bahrain by supporting Shia opposition groups during this period. Moreover, Iranian intervention was viewed by the Bahraini authorities as a challenge to state sovereignty.

Amidst complex religious ties across the MENA region, it is perhaps trans-state identity that should be taken as the main tool for unpacking the complexity of regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the local conflicts between the Sunnis and Shia. This is because social structures shape dynamic relationships at different levels through ideological, religious, ethnic and historical links. What is known about the ideological competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the MENA region is largely based on empirical studies, which have investigated the impact of religion on the rivalry. According to these studies, following the Islamic Revolution, Iran became a proponent of the Shia minority in the MENA region, while Saudi Arabia supported Sunni groups in the region to strengthen its influence, but this led to instability, due to the increase in so-called proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran in a number of Arab countries.

However, in 2011, although some opposition groups called for political reforms and the promotion of democracy, most Sunni groups did not support these demands, due to long-standing communal tensions which possessed a geopolitical element. In the same context, sectarian tensions in Gulf societies have increased significantly, especially during the 2011 crisis in Bahrain. In the Bahraini case, this is due to a perception that any change in the political system in favour of the majority in Bahrain is seen to favour the Shia (and by extension, Iranian aims), thus threatening Saudi
The Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry

The Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry has shaped local political life and raised concerns over domestic security in several Middle Eastern countries, including Bahrain. Some scholars have shown that regional interaction between Saudi Arabia and Iran influences domestic politics in Bahrain. Because of the religious, social and political ties between Iran and local actors in Bahrain, the ideological competition between the two
nations enhances the external intervention of these actors in the internal political life in Bahrain. This is achieved through support for social groups and the political authority, especially with Iran historically supporting Shia revolutionary trends in Bahrain.9

Post-revolutionary Iran sought to maintain Islamic solidarity with other Muslim countries, in order to unite the Islamic umma. It therefore attempted to use religion as the main element to influence its neighbours by supporting Shia actors in the region, as well as reinforcing solidarity between Shiite communities. This intensified sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shia in many Gulf societies, including Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.10 Aside from this, Iran has used Shia groups in Iraq and Lebanon, such as Hezbollah, to enhance its power in the region. Therefore, it is widely perceived that the increasing power of Iran and some Shia actors in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Syria impacted on the political interactions between ruling families, Sunni movements and Shia groups in the Gulf, as well as between Iran and Saudi Arabia, because the so-called Shia revival increased the fears of Sunni actors.11

After Ruhollah Khomeini came to power in Iran in 1979, the ideology of velayat-e faqih12 posed a threat to political authority in Bahrain, with a consequent impact on the state’s political structure and sovereignty in Bahrain. Khomeini in his treatise Islamic Government states:

We believe in the mandate … We also believe in the need to form a government, and we seek to implement God’s command and governance, and to manage people, and take care of them. Fight for the formation of an Islamic government, write and spread the laws of Islam and do not conceal them, and take yourselves to apply Islamic rule, and rely on yourselves, and trust victory.13 … On the other hand, we believe that jihad and defending Muslims to guarantee the independence and dignity of the nation indicate the necessity of forming an Islamic government.14

It is clear from this quote that the mission of the Islamic government is to apply Islamic rules and manage the affairs of Muslims in the umma, in order to unite the Muslim world.15 Therefore, the Supreme Leader, under velayat-e faqih, does not represent himself, but rather God and so anyone who contradicts the Supreme Leader is in fact contradicting the Imams, the Prophet and God Himself. However, Khomeini argued in favour of a separation between the roles of the marjiya16 and velayat-e faqih, whereby the marjiya are multiple and distributed across states, to be followed by anyone in marjiya worship and other religious matters; while velayat-e faqih leads all Shia in the umma, thus avoiding chaos and uniting them within the framework of the state to which they belong.17 Within this context, according to Article 3.16 of the Iranian Constitution:
The organization of the nation’s foreign policy is based on Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unrestrained support for the impoverished people of the world.\textsuperscript{18}

One interpretation of this article is that the influence of the Supreme Leader extends beyond the geographical limits of Iran to all Muslims. This has strained relations between Iran and its neighbours, such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, because many Shia believe that the Supreme Leader is their spiritual leader, who must be followed. After the fall of the shah in 1979, Khomeini declared:

\begin{quotation}
We would export the Islamic Revolution to all Islam-majority countries in order to help Islamic countries gain their independence from the so-called Great Powers, as well as to ‘awaken’ all peoples and governments.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quotation}

This statement indicates that the political regime in Iran had actively tried to export its revolution, especially with Ayatollah Khomeini stating that the goals of the revolution included liberating Jerusalem and the Arab territories.\textsuperscript{20} As a result, one of the most important Arab countries to be liberated would be Bahrain, because its political authority was illegitimate; running contrary to the values of Iran’s Islamic Revolution and the principles of \textit{velayat-e faqih}.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, Khomeini’s speech about exporting the revolution to neighbouring countries formed a challenge to political authority in Bahrain.

In term of Khomeini’s speech, it has been noted that \textit{velayat-e faqih} has given the Supreme Leader political roles in the \textit{umma} (nation), not just in Iran, but also in other Arab countries like Bahrain; promoting the relationship between Shia in the \textit{dawla} (state) or nation-state and religious leaders in the \textit{umma}. One implication of this is the possibility that interaction has strained the political ties between the political authority and Shia elites. \textit{Velayat-e faqih} has thus been identified as a negative element in terms of state sovereignty by connecting some Shia groups in the MENA region with Iran.

It should be noted here, however, that the Shiite revival in important Arab countries, such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, could be due to ideological and political reasons. Thus, Shia are becoming more organised in these countries, which has subsequently affected the local political equation in Bahrain. This is also based on political, moral and ideological ties between opposition groups in Bahrain and Shiite movements in the MENA. Conversely, this political interaction is seen to threaten national security across the GCC states, as well as their political and social stability, and the stability of their political institutions, because many Sunni groups believe that increasing Iranian influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen has
encouraged Shiite actors in Gulf countries to become more active in the face of the corresponding Sunni regimes, because of religious ties between Iran’s Supreme Leader and Shiite movements in the Gulf. The outcome has been felt in domestic politics and Bahrain has subsequently encountered several challenges to its stability.

Members of some Shia groups in Bahrain, such as the Islamic Dawa Party, al-Wefaq, the Bahraini Hezbollah, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain and the Haq Movement, have seen Iran and the doctrine of velayat-e faqih as a model Shia state. In contrast, Sunnis reject the Iranian model, because they believe Saudi Arabia to be the model for the Islamic Renaissance, because it represents 90 per cent of all Muslims. Velayat-e faqih forms the context of the relationship between the Supreme Leader in Iran, Shia clerics such as Grand Ayatollah Sheikh Isa Qassim and the political authority in Bahrain. Velayat-e faqih provides a description of the existing system in the form of a cosmic vision. Likewise, it presents a model for the desired future; the vision of a sound society and explains how political change should take place. Furthermore, this ideology has been seen as a considerable source of opposition to the Bahraini government, whereby several Shia clerics such as Isa Qassim, who is considered the spiritual leader of the Islamic Dawa Party and al-Wefaq, have acted against the authorities and formed political ties with Iran’s Supreme Leader.

According to Khomeini, the structure of state-building is allegedly incompatible with the Shia faith. According to velayat-e faqih, this was because the tribal Sunni authority was not acceptable on religious grounds. However, velayat-e faqih is considered by the political leadership and Sunnis to be a fundamental threat to tribal identity and the survival of Bahrain’s political authority, given that few Shia groups, such as Bahraini Hezbollah and the Islamic Dawa Party, have involved themselves in numerous political conflicts, protests and acts of political violence from the 1980s and 1990s, based on their religious convictions and political interests. In 1994, the government claimed that Bahraini Hezbollah and Iran were behind the violence and demonstrations of the 1990s uprising, as they sought a reason to change Bahrain’s political system. Major General Daij bin Salman Al Khalifa, chief of staff of Bahrain, stated:

King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa announced the failure of an external plan for more than thirty years. The Bahraini minister of the interior confirmed during the parliament session on 29 March [2011] that what happened recently is the completion of the rings of plans of intervention and external link that began in the 1980s. The coup d’état, which was backed by Iran, according to confessions, continued in the case of the so-called Bahraini Hezbollah and the Iranian conspiracy in the events of the nineties, and was repeated in the case of uncovering the military training of groups in the area of al-Hajira, 2008.
In this speech, Daij bin Salman claims that although the terrorist network of leaders and heads of subversive groups aimed to destabilise Bahrain’s security and stability, this plan was not for Bahrain alone, but also for the other GCC states. In the 1990s, most of the uprisings and revolutions in Bahrain took place under the leadership of Shia groups such as Bahraini Hezbollah and the Islamic Dawa Party, and many of its political and constitutional reforms in 2002 were a consequence of Shia pressure on the political authority in Bahrain. In the midst of these tensions and fears, according to some of the interviewees, Sunni groups such as the Salafists and Muslim Brotherhood sought to contain the activities of the Shia opposition by supporting the Bahraini political authority. Moreover, since King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa announced the reform project in 2001, many Sunni groups in Bahrain such as Salafists have built relationships with Saudi Arabia, which the Sunni community and political authority stands to benefit from in terms of their survival.

**Sunni fears in light of the dynamic of geopolitics**

The removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003 helped to increase Tehran’s influence in the Gulf region, posing a threat to the security of the Gulf states. However, Iran attempted to dismiss the conventional diagnosis of Iraq as an adversary of Tehran and made Iraqi national security an integral part of its own. In light of the above, one Sunni interviewee expressed the view that the removal of Saddam had paved the way for certain Shia actors in Bahrain, such as al-Wefaq, to establish cross-border solidarity with prominent Shia parties in Iraq, including the Islamic Dawa Party, which governed Iraq after the US invasion.

Fanar Haddad argues that following the rise of the Shia in Iraq, they have paid less attention to claiming Arab identity and consequently expressed anti-Arab feelings, due to their suffering under Ba’ath rule and Arab sympathies for Saddam, who killed and imprisoned their children. Such a view has led to further hatred and distrust between Sunnis and Shia in the Arab world, and strained political relations between Iraq and the Arab states. Reflecting this view, another Sunni interviewee alluded to the notion of Shia seeking to dominate Bahrain, in the same way that they rule Iraq. This has inevitable implications for their potential to govern Bahrain in the same way; bearing in mind that some Shia groups in Iraq and Bahrain have suffered under the same social and economic conditions.

According to three of the Sunnis interviewed, Shia actors in Iraq have always acted against the Bahraini authorities, because of their antipathy to the Al Khalifa. This is based on the political orientation of the Bahraini
government towards the former Iraqi regime and the naturalisation of Ba’athist Iraqis in Bahrain. It has also contributed to the tension between Shia in Iraq and the Al Khalifa regime, especially when Bahrain’s King Hamad bin Isa stated that his country was prepared to host the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in 2003, with a view to preventing the US invasion of Iraq. In addition, the Al Khalifa awarded Bahraini nationality to many Ba’athists who fled Iraq due to the policy of discrimination against them. However, the Shia–Sunni struggle for power in Iraq has emerged as the main element affecting stability, post-Saddam, particularly Shia empowerment expanding beyond Baghdad. According to Jordan’s King Abdullah II in 2004:

If pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government … a new ‘crescent’ of dominant Shiite movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon could emerge, altering the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects.

It would appear from King Abdullah’s speech, warning Arabs and Sunnis of the expansion of Iranian influence into the MENA region, that the Iraqi and Syrian governments had the potential to help extend Shia influence from the Gulf and Caspian Sea to Lebanon. This ‘Crescent’ had the potential to disrupt the equilibrium of the region and reduce the influence of Saudi Arabia in the Islamic world. However, there are many local, regional and international factors that have helped designate the threat of the ‘Crescent’ and promote Sunni fears. Mabon claims that as Iranian influence has grown in Iraq through Shia groups, Saudi Arabia has sought to securitise the Iranian threat, as a means of convincing US actors that Iran represents a threat to regional security and US interests. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has attempted to convince the international audience of its role in maintaining regional security and containing this perceived threat from Iran. At the Council on Foreign Relations in 2005, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud claimed that the increasing influence of Iran, pro-Iranian parties and Shia in Iraq, following the US invasion in 2003, had heightened sectarian and political tensions, not only in Baghdad, but also in the communities of the Gulf.

It is clear from Faisal bin Farhan’s claim that the Shia revival has had unprecedented implications for the Gulf states, as it is seen as a threat to the stability of communities and state security. Especially, in the midst of the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War, Iran raised the slogan of a protector of Palestine and ‘Axis of Resistance’ in order to enhance its popularity and sphere of power across Arab societies. This was achieved through an alliance with Shia groups in the corresponding populations. In the same context, a few Shiite participants mentioned that most of today’s Shia
groups, as well as Iran, had adopted the Palestinian–Israeli struggle as a means of influencing the emotions of the masses. For instance, Shia scholars argue that Hezbollah managed to defeat Israel in 2006 and this caused Sunnis and Shia across the MENA region to support Hassan Nasrallah. A former researcher at the Bahrain Centre for Studies and Research suggested that Bahraini Sunnis and Shia ultimately support Iran in the fight against Israel, with Palestine representing a sacred cause for Muslims; whereas the Gulf authorities do nothing to combat Israel or support the Palestinian cause.

In order to contain the growing popularity of the ‘Axis of Resistance’ in the MENA after the war with Israel in 2006, Saudi Arabia has sought to securitise the Iranian threat, as a means of persuading the international audience and US decision-makers of the seriousness of those Iranian activities that challenge regional security. This has fuelled Sunni and Arab government fears about the threat of Shia and Iranian expansion. Taking into account the fact that Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Israel have common interests in framing Iran as a threat, with the growing influence of Shia groups backed by Iran in the region, this has led to the development of political relations between Israel, Bahrain, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, aimed at maintaining regional security. On 15 September 2020, Bahrain normalised its relations with Israel within the Abraham Accords in order to build diplomatic relations and achieve ‘peace in the Middle East’. The Abraham Agreement emerged from an alliance led by the US against Iran. In his article ‘The Middle East Accords: An Arab Perspective’, Imad Harb argues that the dispute between the Gulf states and Iran is merely a means of promoting normalisation between the Gulf states and Israel. King Hamad said in 2006:

Bahrain should have real peace with Israel. ‘We’re serious, pushing, meeting with Israelis,’ he asserted. While the meetings were not conducted openly, Bahrain would do so when the right time comes. The region needs peace with Israel ‘and then we can all face Iran’.

Consequently, in the main, there are common concerns over Iran. The Iranian revival has impacted on the region’s political stability; leading to the security, social and economic interests of some MENA countries coming under threat. The ‘Shia Crescent’ has in fact been seen by Arab societies as a dimension of the Cold War between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It seems from this perspective that this regional rivalry has in turn led to increased social and political tension in those societies.

Alongside geopolitical and social interactions, Shia groups are commonly seen to have gained political strength in their societies, due to the expansion of Iranian and Shia influence in the region. Islamist opposition
and liberal loyalists claimed that the Shia revival in the MENA had facilitated the rise of al-Wefaq in Bahrain, because of the political and religious affiliation between al-Wefaq and Iran’s Supreme Leader. Moreover, a handful of interviewees generally believed that al-Wefaq operated within the framework of an integrated and interconnected Shia network across Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, as well as it deriving its political strength from the Iranian ascendancy. This revealed the perception that Tehran challenges the survival of Sunni groups and authorities in the region by mobilising Shia groups locally. As a consequence, the Bahraini authorities have routinely viewed Shia actors as deriving their political power from an external source – ignoring national agendas – and attempting to affect the internal political equation by cooperating with regional players. Moreover, one member of al-Wefaq who participated in the present study indicated that the rise of Iran had reflected negatively on Bahrain’s Shia groups, because the Bahraini government accused al-Wefaq of loyalty to Iran, given its ideological association with Iran’s Supreme Leader. This regional equation had consequently been used as a tool to pressurise al-Wefaq.

As the result of these fears, some Sunni interviewees believe that Shia actors in Arab countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Lebanon have worked together to serve the Iranian agenda and the empowerment of Shia. Moreover, two Sunni participants interviewed for this study were of the opinion that the political orientation of some Shia groups in Iraq and Lebanon were compatible with those of Iran, and these groups consequently sought to intensify sectarian tensions in Bahraini society during the 2011 crisis, as well as threatening state sovereignty by interfering in local political life.

Re-framing regional sectarianism

The Arab Uprisings in 2011 were of great significance for Tehran in terms of maintaining its regional leverage and ideological goals. In 2015, Khamenei stated that he would support the oppressed people of Yemen and Bahrain by whatever means he could. Rulers and clerics in Tehran also argued that the Bahraini uprising of 2011 shared core principles with the Iranian Revolution of 1979, as well as reflecting the values of velayat-e faqih, with its rejection of oppression and refusal to submit. The nature of this response heightened the concerns of Sunni Arab leaders, especially when combined with the rise of Iranian influence in the region.

In fact, some commentators and interviewees are of the view that Tehran took advantage of popular demands in Arab societies during the Arab
Uprisings, as a means of asserting domination, particularly in Bahrain. For instance, it was suggested by one Sunni interviewee that Iran was still supporting Shia opposition groups in Bahrain during the Arab Uprisings, thus exerting further political pressure on Saudi Arabia to contain the influence of Shia parties in Bahrain. Some scholars venture that Tehran has supported other Shia actors in the region, beyond Bahrain, especially in the east of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria and Iraq to expand their political influence in the MENA region.

The 2011 uprising looked likely to increase Shia leverage in the Gulf states and Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, with any political change taking place in Bahrain ultimately posing a threat to Saudi security. What happened in Bahrain during the Arab Uprisings therefore had immediate regional consequences, with the demands of the opposition in Bahrain also threatening to motivate Saudi Shia to clash with the political authority in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, it would give Saudi Shia groups in Hasa and Qatif an opportunity to satisfy their own political interests and assert their rights by pressuring the government to make political reforms, organising sit-ins and demonstrations. In the midst of the social, religious and political convergence between the Shia of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, it could be argued that the popular uprising in 2011 had clear political implications for the situation in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province. However, the political authority in Bahrain did not collapse during the Arab Uprisings, mainly because of Saudi Arabia’s intervention through sending its Shield Forces on the island, in order to reinforce the existing political system.

In the present study, several Sunni interviewees expressed the belief that the political demands made by Shia groups to develop democracy and political participation in society already served the interests of Iran to the detriment of Saudi Arabia. The fall of the Bahraini authority would thus empower Saudi Shia in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The overthrow of the political authority in Bahrain would also pose a strategic threat to Saudi Arabia and reinforces Sunni fears in the Gulf region, considering that most Saudi oil is located in the Eastern Province, where many Shia live. In addition, thirteen of the Sunni interviewees claimed that Iran had mobilised several Shia groups for expansion into Eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and these had adopted *velayat-e faqih*, which had consequently introduced instability and therefore, a favourable political situation for Iran and its allies. On the contrary, during an occasion attended by King Hamad, Mohammed Sharif Bassiouni, head of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), said: ‘There was no evidence of Iran’s involvement in the 2011 events and no Iranian role in Bahrain’s political crisis.’
However, at the same occasion, King Hamad claimed through media channels, Iran had incited citizens in Bahrain to use violence and terrorism and these Iranian interventions had threatened the security and stability of the Kingdom of Bahrain and the Gulf region. In 2011, Abdullatif Al-Mahmood, head of the National Unity Gathering, said that al-Wefaq will ask for support from Iran if peninsula Shield Forces entered Bahrain in 2011:

Besides the obvious, important here is that Abdelatif Mahmoud is openly talking shit about Salman being an Iranian agent in a press conference … Sheikh Abdul Latif Al Mahmoud said that he has witnesses [who] heard what he said literally at the meeting including Sheikh Nagy Al Arabi and a large number of members of the National Unity Gathering.

It seems from this perception that Iran has sought to strengthen its influence in Bahrain by providing financial, logistical and political support to Shia groups, including al-Wefaq. The intention behind this was allegedly to weaken Saudi influence, using media coverage of al-Wefaq’s demands in 2011. Meanwhile, the political authorities launched a media campaign against the opposition through Bahrain TV and pro-government newspapers, where some Shia groups were accused of being traitors and loyal to Iran.

In addition, two Shiite interviewees declared that the authorities in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia framed Shia actors as a fifth column that remained loyal to Iran and this was considered to be a threat to both Bahraini and Saudi national security. On 19 February 2013, the head of Bahrain’s public security, Major General Tariq Hassan Al Hassan, disclosed details of the arrest of eight personnel, trained on sites belonging to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in Iran, as well as at sites belonging to the Iraqi Hezbollah in both Karbala and Baghdad. Tariq Hassan stated:

This group had sought to form a terrorist cell targeting sensitive sites (both civilian and military) and public figures, in order to destabilise the state’s security and economy. The purpose of this cell was to form armed groups to resist and attack the police in 2012. The person managing this operation was an Iranian, Abu Mazen, from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

It is clear from the above statement that the opinion among the Bahraini elite security apparatus was that the Arab Uprisings impacted on the stability of the region and reinforced the capability of non-state actors to advance Iran’s geopolitical influence and vice versa. In the same context, the Bahraini Ministry of Interior announced:

Within the framework of efforts to combat terrorism, preserve homeland security and address Iranian interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom
of Bahrain, the security services, in coordination with security, thwarted a number of terrorist acts and arrested 116 terrorist elements. Their roles varied in the planning, preparation and execution of terrorist acts, explosive devices and a field outlet, as well as a number of them were responsible for the manufacture, transport and storage of explosive materials. Investigations have shown that these elements belong to the IRGC, which was formed by unifying and assembling several terrorist organisations in a single framework, following the success of the Bahraini security services in striking at these terrorist organisations.91

To analyse the language used in this statement, from the point of view of securitisation,92 it includes concepts that enhance awareness in the Sunni community of the seriousness of the situation involving Iranian and Shia actors. It also clearly conveys the idea that Shia groups were attempting to overthrow the political authorities in Bahrain and establish a new political system. However, many of the Sunni interviewees were of the view that Iran had extended its leverage over Bahrain’s Shia groups during the Arab Uprisings by offering several of them financial, military and media support.93 These views also reveal concerns among Sunni groups about Iranian ambitions in the region during the Arab Uprisings, whether in Bahrain, Syria, Yemen or Iraq, based on religious differences, the normative environment and historical conflicts between Sunnis and Shia.94

As an example, a Sunni researcher accused al-Wefaq of loyalty to Iran, principally after the Iranian Revolution.95 Nevertheless, despite the religious and political relationship between the Shia of Bahrain and the Supreme Leader of Iran, some leaders in the ruling family have not accused Bahrain’s Shia of disloyalty. For example, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa declared in 2011:

Is it reasonable to accuse the Shia of disloyalty? First, [they follow] one of the main doctrines of Islam, the Ja’fari doctrine. We disagree with them just in the provisions. We are accusing them of being non-Arab! We accuse the Shia of wearing Iranian dress only because we disagree with them. There are people on all sides, whether Sunnis or Shia, who follow regional actors in the region, such as Iran, Iraq, China, Russia and the United States of America. We do not associate a certain political thought with a doctrine, because that is wrong. Politics is changing and doctrines are permanent. I ask all media officials and elites in the region to stay away from these things, because if we begin to classify people in this way, individuals will do terrible things to defend their religion and this will have no meaning. Because in the end, we disagree on politics, not religion.96

It is clear from the Crown prince’s speech that he distinguishes between political loyalty, religious affiliation, religious differences and political variations. The Crown prince also points out that accusing Shia of disloyalty
will lead to tension, violence and sectarian divisions in society, because each side will defend his religion. Salman bin Hamad stressed that a sect could not be accused of disloyalty, even if there were groups in this sect that had a political affiliation with regional powers.

Although there are many declarations issued by Shia groups such as al-Wefaq that emphasise their loyalty to Bahrain, Shia beliefs such as *taqiya* increase Sunni fears. Some Sunni participants supposed that *taqiya* reinforced the political and social divide between Sunnis and Shia in Bahrain because Shia groups like al-Wefaq cooperate with the Sunni rulers and demonstrate disloyalty with Shia actors like Iran by using *taqiya*. Even though al-Wefaq has cooperated with Salafi party Al-Asalah in parliament against the government from 2006 to 2010, a Sunni cleric interviewee believes that Sunni actors should not trust the loyalty of Shia because they use *taqiya* to obtain political positions in order to establish a Shiite state in Bahrain. Such a view privileges perception and securitisation at the expense of recent history, reflecting the severity of fears amongst the Sunni community.

These participants imagined that anti-Shia actors framed their religious links as a political affiliation, in order to fulfil their own interests and agenda. This means that pro-government actors in Bahrain attempt to portray differences between the opposition and the government over political issues as a religious conflict between Sunnis and Shia, relating to, for example, corruption. This then leads to the promotion of sectarian conflict in the state.

However, one Shiite cleric did not believe that Shia allegiance was to Iran, because of the gap between Arab and Persian nationalism, whereby the Shia in Bahrain do not consider Iran to be their native country, because of the difficulties that they face with Persian identity. Another Shiite cleric also stated that Bahrain’s Shia do not favour Iran over Bahrain, as a result of disharmony between Arab and Persian identity.

An academic from the University of Bahrain explained that the religious link between al-Wefaq and Khamenei had led the political authorities in Bahrain to accuse al-Wefaq of serving the Iranian agenda. Moreover, members of al-Wefaq and a Shia journalist revealed how the Bahraini government had accused al-Wefaq of being primarily loyal to Iran, in order to render al-Wefaq’s demands non-national. However, a journalist from the *al-Wasat* newspaper considered that these accusations from the Bahraini government were due its inability to resolve its social and economic problems arising from the political crisis involving opposition groups. Therefore, at the occurrence of any local problems, the government would immediately link al-Wefaq with Iran. However, this government strategy had given rise to sectarian conflict in society, as well as
linking the political dispute in Bahrain with the Saudi–Iranian rivalry, whether in Yemen, Iraq or Syria.\textsuperscript{105}

Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of \textit{Kayhan}, a conservative Iranian newspaper, even stated in 2009 that Bahrain was an Iranian province, but al-Wefaq refuted this statement through the MP Hamad Yousef Mazal, who claimed that Bahrain could not be Iranian, and the Tehran government needed to apologise to Bahrain for suggesting as such.\textsuperscript{106} One former Shiite deputy argued that this Iranian statement made prior to 2011 had a negative effect on al-Wefaq, because it put the party under pressure, especially as the Bahraini government demanded that it respond to the Iranian statements.\textsuperscript{107} In addition, post-2011, the Bahraini government claimed that al-Wefaq’s allegiance was not to Bahrain. For instance, one member of al-Wefaq explained that whenever Iran issued a statement against Bahrain, the regime would pressurise al-Wefaq into denouncing it. However, one leftist leader claimed that al-Wefaq had consistently sought to remain neutral in the relationship between Iran and Bahrain by attempting to convince the public that it had nothing to do with Iran. Conversely, Iran was using Shia opposition forces as a political card in the conflict with Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{108}

\section*{Conclusion}

This chapter has articulated the complexity of Sunni Bahraini political views following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 until the Arab Uprisings. According to the fieldwork data, many Sunni participants believed Iran attempts to strengthen its influence in the region by providing political, media and logistical support to Shia groups, such as al-Wefaq, in Bahrain. The regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Syria and the 2011 uprising in Bahrain increased Sunni fears of a Shia revival in the MENA region. The crisis in 2011 led to Shia gaining ground in the Gulf, especially in Saudi Arabia, because any political change in Bahrain would have also encouraged the Saudi Shia to claim political rights, thus threatening Saudi national security in the Eastern Province.

The regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the MENA region will increase the political instability, sectarian separation and challenges to sovereignty in Bahrain because the state political structure contains various religious social groups who cooperate and ally with other regional players. The respect for sovereign borders and political stability in society, governments, parliaments and other political institutions in Bahrain will be affected by political and religious interactions in the wider MENA region.

With regard to Bahrain’s political future, the management of political conflict is also conditioned by sectarian disputes in other Arab societies,
such as Iraq. In this case, resolution will not be purely Bahraini and deep cracks may be opened up in its national identity. This will in turn pave the way for further extremism and sectarian revenge from various parties, as well as encouraging regional powers. Conversely, it would seem from the reaction that the Bahraini political arena has become an integral part of the regional equation in the Middle East, whereby each external power is solely concerned with serving its own interests. This has raised the importance of resolving outstanding political issues between opposing political groups and the Bahraini authorities, particularly complex regional tensions, growing sectarian conflicts in the region and rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with negative implications for state sovereignty. In order to find political solutions in Bahrain, however, local groups and the political authorities would need to prevent regional actors from interfering in their internal affairs. The government and local communities need to focus on economic relations between Bahrain as a state, and Iran and Saudi Arabia, instead of forming fragmented ties based on identity, ideology and religion; although these may well promote the survival of some local political actors, they will not lead to political settlement in Bahrain.

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Notes

3 Ibid.
The Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry


12 Velayat-e faqih refers to the role of clerics in the leadership of the nation, through the administration of its affairs, management of Islamic government and the establishment of the rule of God until the absent Imam appears.


14 Ibid., p. 31.


16 Marjiya – the title given to a religious leader who is responsible for the political, religious, social and economic affairs of his followers.


Chubin and Tripp, *Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations*.  
21 ‘Imam Khomenei and Exporting the Islamic Revolution’.  
22 Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, pp. 112–140.  
24 Khomenei, *Islamic Government*.  
26 Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE*.  

Most of the leaders of the Islamic Dawa Party joined al-Wefaq, which was established in 2001.  
31 Participant 9, Manama, 15 February 2017; Participant 49, Muharraq, 3 May 2017.  
32 Participant 9, Manama, 15 February 2017; Participant 49, Muharraq, 3 May 2017.  
35 Participant 46, Manama, 26 April 2017.  

39 Participant 9, Manama, 17 February 2017.  
40 Participant 52, Hamad Town, 17 March 2017; Participant 56, Manama, 21 May 2017; Participant 59, Manama, 24 May 2017.  

The Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry


47 Ibid.


51 Participant 19, Manama, 6 March 2017; Participant 35, Aker, 27 March 2017.

52 Participant 46, Manama, 26 April 2017.


55 Ibid.


62 A member of al-Wefaq supposed that the Iranian influence in Bahrain was acceptable for two reasons; firstly, a number of Bahraini Shiites follow the Supreme Leader in Tehran; secondly, the regime has made the state an open market for all regional players and Iran has the right to participate in this.

63 Participant 19, Manama, 6 March 2017; Participant 21, Muharraq, 7 March 2017.

64 Participant 14, Manama, 22 February 2017; Participant 4, Zaid Town, 9 February 2017; Participant 3, Manama, 8 February 2017.


66 Participant 40, Manama, 6 April 2017.


71 R. Yalouh, Iran and the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2011).


73 Participant 14, Manama, 22 February 2017.

74 F. Wehrey, Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009).
The Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry

77 Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran.*
79 Participant 1, Riffa, 7 February 2017; Participant 10, Riffa, 17 February 2017; Participant 16, Muharraq, 27 February 2017; Participant 27, Manama, 15 March 2017; Participant 33, A’ali Town, 23 March 2017. See also Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran,* pp. 84–90.
82 In June 2011, King Hamad of Bahrain announced the establishment of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) to investigate the 2011 uprising.
83 M. Bassiouni, ‘Bassiouni Admits That Iran Has No Involvement in the Events of Bahrain’ [in Arabic], 31 January 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=lTK05WBcg0 (accessed 4 April 2022).
88 Participant 19, Manama, 6 March 2017; Participant 11, Manama, 20 March 2017.


92 Securitisation is an unconventional analysis of a security threat, which regards issues such as migration, the environment and community security as a threat, whereby security represents a speech act to influence the public. Here, the central issue is not whether the threats are real, but how a threat can be constructed in the context of the environment. See R. van Munster, Securitization (Oxford Bibliographies, 2012), https://bit.ly/3tNCAmL (accessed 10 May 2018).

93 Participant 4, Zaid Town, 9 February 2017; Participant 9, Manama, 15 February 2017; Participant 10, Riffa, 17 February 2017; Participant 11, Manama, 20 March 2017; Participant 18, Manama, 5 March 2017; Participant 20, Muharraq, 7 March 2017; Participant 21, Muharraq, 7 March 2017; Participant 45, Riffa, 23 April 2017; Participant 59, Manama, 24 May 2017; Participant 27, Manama, 15 March 2017; Participant 32, Manama, 21 March 2017; Participant 33, A‘ali Town, 23 March 2017.


95 Participant 1, Riffa, 7 February 2017.


97 Taqiya is a value of acting, concealment or denial in the face of persecution or an enemy to gain a specific interest or protect personal safety. See A. Prior, ‘Learning Taqiya’, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 27 November 2017, https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/learning-taqiya (accessed 4 December 2021). Shia clerics such as Mohammad al-Majlisi and Mohammad al-Kalini define taqiya as doing or saying something not of your belief in order to protect yourself, money and/or maintain your dignity; it is part of faith and it is like prayer, such that a person who does not believe in taqiya is ‘not Muslim’. Al-Majlisi and al-Kalini urged people to use taqiya against opponents even if they were Sunni Muslims in order to achieve the interests of the Shiite community. See M. al-Majlisi, Bihar al-anwar, vol. 10 (Iran: Reviving Islamic Books, 1699); and M. al-Kalini, al-Kafi (Tehran: Islamic Book House, 1363 AH).

99 Participant 18, Manama, 5 March 2017; Participant 27, Manama, 15 March 2017; Participant 34, Manama, 7 March 2017.
100 Participant 23, Manama, 8 March 2017.
101 Participant 41, Satra, 5 April 2017.
103 Participant 48, Manama, 3 May 2017; Participant 58, Manama, 24 May 2017.
106 Participant 42, Manama, 6 April 2017.
107 Participant 40, Manama, 6 April 2017.
On 3 January 2020, a US drone strike killed Qasem Soleimani, the leader of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Quds Force, the elite branch of the Iranian military, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the founder of Kata’ib Hezbollah. Described by Stanley McChrystal as a ‘ ghostly puppet master, relying on quiet cleverness and grit … singularly dangerous’, ¹ Soleimani was viewed by many to be responsible for coordinating Iranian activity across the region. Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iranian influence across Iraq grew dramatically, facilitated in no small way by the actions of Soleimani, whose ability to cultivate relationships with a range of prominent political and societal leaders helped to secure Tehran’s ability to shape Iraqi politics.

According to some, Soleimani was in Baghdad to discuss efforts to reduce tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, whose fraught rivalry has played out – in a range of forms – across the Middle East with devastating repercussions in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Lebanon and Yemen.

An official statement from Riyadh about Soleimani’s assassination called for ‘ self-restraint to ward off all acts that may lead to aggravating the situation, with unbearable consequences’. ² The tone of the statement – which caught many by surprise – echoed those from earlier in the year after attacks on a Saudi refinery and an oil tanker, where prominent officials also called for de-escalation in spite of brash rhetoric from US President Donald Trump.

Later that year, the main border crossing between Saudi Arabia and Iraq at Arar was opened after a thirty-year closure, dating back to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The opening of the border reflected a round of diplomatic engagement that has taken place since 2015, reflecting a broader changing stance of the Kingdom’s policy towards its northern neighbour.

After the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, regional security across the Gulf has been defined by bipolarity, shaped by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, albeit a form of bipolarity underpinned by US support for Saudi Arabia and allies. This bipolar competition plays out in a range
of different arenas across the Middle East – and beyond – which provide opportunities for Saudi Arabia and Iran to exert influence and shape regional politics according to their visions of order.

A regional security triangle

Understanding modern Iraq and the role of Saudi Arabia and Iran within its politics requires reflecting on the development of the state and its efforts to establish a form of political organisation amidst a broad coterie of identities and ideologies. The Iraqi state is often viewed as a post-colonial state, referred to as the product of the Sykes–Picot Agreement, made between the British diplomat Sir Mark Sykes and his French counterpart, Francois-Georges Picot. Whilst the agreement called for the distribution of territory to London and Paris, it was never formally implemented. At a time of revolution in Russia and the increasing bloodshed of the First World War, Sykes suggested that protectorates, spheres of influence and annexations must be consigned to the ‘diplomatic lumber room’. Instead, the establishment of the Iraqi state is a produce of the interaction of myriad forces across both time and space. Across roughly a 100-year period, the Iraqi state has been forged by a range of geopolitical forces, from the palatial halls of Versailles to the emergence of Daesh in the summer of 2014.

Whilst Sykes was quick to dismiss the agreement he reached with Picot, its legacy remains, emblematic of the perfidious interference of colonial powers. Consideration of Iraqi history supports such a position. Indeed, in the following decades after the Treaty of Versailles, British involvement in Iraq was central in governing the state, helping to bring together the disparate ethnic, tribal and religious groups. In the formative years of the Iraqi state, regulating the demands of competing identity groups proved to be one of the key challenges for policymakers in both Baghdad and London.

The challenge facing Faisal, the inaugural king of Iraq, was outlined as such:

There is still – and I say this with a heart full of sorrow – no Iraqi people but unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities, connected by no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatsoever.4

Reflecting these challenges facing Faisal, Charles Tripp noted that the king was ‘sovereign of a state that was not itself sovereign’.5 Iraq at this time was, as Hana Batatu pertinently argues, ‘a congeries of distinct, discordant, self-involved societies’, replete with class divisions and broader tensions
between urban and rural societies.6 Shia groups were hardest hit. As Adeeda Dawisha observes,

> no Shi’ite was accepted in the military college or in the bureaucracy, except on very rare occasions. There were all kinds of hurdles preventing Shi’ites from even entering high schools. The state did not think of the Shi’ite community as part of it, and the Shi’ites did not consider themselves to be part of the state.7

Sectarian divisions were thus bound up in the very nature of the state and continued to reverberate across the following decades as consecutive rulers sought to ensure their survival through management of division. While sectarian affinity was by no means the most important identity marker in defining social relations in the Iraqi state – with tribal, ethnic and geographic locations playing a prominent role – an undercurrent of sectarian identity remained latent, manifesting across time as regimes sought to consolidate power. The salience of sectarian identity in Iraq is perhaps best described by Fanar Haddad, as the ‘mutually antagonistic other of national identity’.8

Adding to this complexity were broader fears about links between local groups and neighbouring states and, as a consequence, the influence of these actors on domestic politics. Although these were commonly expressed during the time of Saddam Hussein, the concerns had their roots far earlier. As one British official in the 1920s observed,

> The proximity of Persia and the existence in Mesopotamia of Karbala and Najaf, two of the most holy shrines of the Shiah sect, to which the Persians belong, with the resulting influx of Persian pilgrims, have brought the country much under Persian influences. Nomad Arabia belongs wholly to the Sunni half of Islam, yet the tribes settled in Mesopotamia have embraced, almost without exception, the Shiah faith. Those, however, who maintain purely nomadic habits, ‘people of the Camel’ as they proudly call themselves, have kept as a rule to the desert doctrine and are almost invariably Sunni.9

Over the decades that followed, regime-led processes of state-building sought to regulate the actions of Shia groups, resulting in widespread persecution, repression and the cultivation of what Giorgio Agamben later termed ‘bare life’.10 Prominent members of Shia political groups such as Dawa sought refuge in Iran where the Islamic Republic tried to cultivate influence amongst this nascent Iraqi diaspora.

The establishment of the modern states of Iraq and Saudi Arabia are intertwined within broader British foreign policy objectives in the Middle East at the turn of the twentieth century. While the exploits of Lawrence, Bell and others had a dramatic impact on politics in both states, it was the ‘revolutionary year’ of 1958 that brought Baghdad, Riyadh and Tehran together,
facilitated this time by the US. The presidency of Dwight Eisenhower was driven by a strong desire to combat the spread of Communism, cultivating relations with states across the world to counter the proliferation of Communist ideas, including with states in the Middle East. The toppling of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958 which brought Abd al-Karim Qasim to power during the 14 July Revolution prompted Iraq’s withdrawal from the pact. Any lingering hopes of wooing Iraq back to a tripolar alliance of Gulf powers was ended with revolutionary events in Iran. The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 had a seismic impact on regional politics, ‘laying waste’ to the old order of relations. The outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq in the summer of 1980 was a consequence of growing fears about Tehran’s expansionist agenda and Saddam’s long-standing concerns about Iraq’s Shia population. The war also resonated across the Persian Gulf, inciting existential fears amongst many, including Saudi Arabia who viewed both states with suspicion. Despite these concerns, Saudi Arabia sided with Iraq against Iran. As May Darwich articulates, the Saudi decision to support Iraq in its war with Iran appears at odds with conventional approaches to alliance-building, instead, revealing a broader concern about ‘ontological security’, directly linked to the challenge posed by the Islamic Republic to the Kingdom’s claims to Islamic legitimacy.

These security concerns prompted Saudi Arabia’s King Fahd to negotiate an agreement with the US that solidified Washington’s presence as a security guarantor, achieved through the AWACS Agreement of 1980–1981. In a quintessential example of a security dilemma in operation, officials in Tehran were quickly concerned at increased Saudi military spending, which outstripped both Iran and Iraq, fuelling an environment of distrust between the three major Gulf powers.

Despite supporting Iraq in the fight against Iran, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in the summer of 1990 posed a different kind of threat to Saudi Arabia. The vast might of the Iraqi army – around 100,000 men and 700 tanks – in neighbouring Kuwait prompted Riyadh to turn to the US in search of security. Relations between the two can be traced back to an agreement reached in 1943 between Ibn Saud and President Franklin D. Roosevelt on board the USS Murphy in the Suez Canal which positioned oil and security as the two central tenets shaping relations. Following this agreement, the Iraqi invasion prompted the deployment of around 500,000 US troops to the Kingdom for Operation Desert Shield, designed to protect Saudi Arabia from any future Iraqi invasion, much to the chagrin of many. At this time, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran were entering a more positive period, brought about by the death of Ruhollah Khomeini. Ultimately, however, the firm positioning of the US military in the Persian
Gulf would prove central in shaping tensions between Riyadh and Tehran, with strategic calculations about Iraq driving much of what followed.

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which removed Saddam and the Ba’ath Party from power, dramatically altered the political ordering of life across the state. According to Banafsheh Keynoush, Saddam made overtures to Iran in the immediate aftermath of the US invasion in an attempt to create a united front against the US, but the Islamic Republic was quietly happy to see the end of the Ba’ath regime. In contrast, Saudi Arabia was concerned that the establishment of a Shia-led government was all but inevitable which would, in turn, dramatically increase Iranian influence across the state. Such a move was a source of concern for many in Saudi Arabia who feared a ‘Shia-led’ Iraq falling into the sphere of Iranian influence. Exacerbating such concerns were fears amongst some elite figures about a US–Iranian deal over Iraq. One of the most pressing concerns for elites in Riyadh was the removal of Iraq from regional security calculations, with Iraq previously having served a key balancing role against the Islamic Republic.

In the years that followed, Iranian officials cultivated relations with a range of organisations in pursuit of their goals, ranging from the elite discussions of ‘high politics’ to the provision of financial and ideational support to militias across the state. Unsurprisingly, such developments helped consolidate relations between regional powers and their co-sectarian kin across Iraq. While relations between Iraqi actors and their regional allies – in the form of Saudi Arabia and Iran – initially remained largely static, in the years that followed these relations became increasingly complex as frustrations grew, underpinned by theological, political and economic factors, as once again, geopolitical currents resonated across Iraqi politics.

Following the toppling of Saddam by US forces in 2003, the Iraqi state fragmented and descended into conflict between various groups whose (geopolitically charged) identity markers pitted them vitriolically against one another. The return of Iraqi political figures who had sought refuge in Iran during Saddam’s rule exacerbated such fears and when violence took on sectarian characteristics, Saudi Arabia and Iran – to varying degrees – found themselves on opposing sides of a conflict that also involved the US-led coalition and an al-Qaeda franchise.

The de-Ba’athification process quickly deployed by coalition forces sought to remove all traces of the ancien regime and facilitate a new form of democratic politics. The establishment of the muhasasa system of ethno-sectarian power sharing solidified the divisions that had emerged in the aftermath of the invasion. It also created conditions whereby external actors could involve themselves in the formal political landscape of Iraq through cultivating relations with political figures.
Ultimately, however, the decision created a vacuum filled by violent Sunni Islamist groups, Shia militias, competing tribal groups and, in the political realm, figures returning from Iran. This period of instability also brought about the involvement of regional powers who sought to shape the future of Iraq according to their wishes. With Iran providing support to political elites and Shia militias such as the Sadrists and SCIRI, Saudi Arabia turned to tribal groups in an effort to counter Iranian gains, anecdotally providing bags of money to support this goal.\textsuperscript{17} Reports in some Iranian news outlets allege that the provision of financial aid was not limited to tribal groups but also included al-Qaeda affiliates operating in Iraq, revealing the extent to which Saudi Arabia was concerned about Iranian actions.

The instability in Iraq provoked much consternation amongst regional actors fearing a dramatic increase in Iranian involvement in the state. This is perhaps best seen in comments by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, who called on the US not to ‘leave Iraq until its sovereignty has been restored, otherwise it will be vulnerable to the Iranians’. In remarks noted in a diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks, Abdullah stressed that ‘the Saudis will not support one Iraqi group over the others and that the Kingdom is working for a united Iraq. However, he warned that, if the U.S. leaves precipitously, the Saudis will stand with the Sunnis.’\textsuperscript{18}

Abdullah’s concerns about the manipulation of Iraqi sovereignty were exacerbated by the actions of Nouri al-Maliki, who served as prime minister between 20 May 2006 and 9 September 2014. During this time, Abdullah and other prominent Saudi officials viewed Maliki with suspicion. In conversation with US officials, Abdullah’s views on Maliki were clearly stated:

The King said he had ‘no confidence whatsoever in (Iraqi PM) Maliki, and the Ambassador (Fraker) is well aware of my views.’ The King affirmed that he had refused former President Bush’s entreaties that he meet with Maliki. The King said he had met Maliki early in Maliki’s term of office, and the Iraqi had given him a written list of commitments for reconciliation in Iraq, but had failed to follow through on any of them. For this reason, the King said, Maliki had no credibility. ‘I don’t trust this man,’ the King stated, ‘He’s an Iranian agent.’ The King said he had told both Bush and former Vice president Cheney ‘how can I meet with someone I don’t trust?’ Maliki has ‘opened the door for Iranian influence in Iraq’ since taking power, the King said, and he was ‘not hopeful at all’ for Maliki, ‘or I would have met with him’.\textsuperscript{19}

Central to these concerns were fears that Iran was gaining a foothold in Iraqi politics through the (in)action of prominent officials who had been exiled in Iran. Abdullah’s fears were not entirely unfounded. An International Crisis Group report documenting the actions of Maliki during his prime ministership observed that
Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has implemented a divide-and-conquer strategy that has neutered any credible Sunni Arab leadership. The authorities also have taken steps that reinforce perceptions of a sectarian agenda. Prominent officials – predominantly Sunni – have been cast aside pursuant to the Justice and Accountability Law on the basis of alleged senior-level affiliation to the former Baath party. Federal security forces have disproportionately deployed in Baghdad’s Sunni neighbourhoods as well as Sunni-populated governorates (Anbar, Salah al-Din, Ninew, Kirkuk and Diyala). Al-Iraqiya, the political movement to which Sunni Arabs most readily related, slowly came apart due to internal rivalries even as Maliki resorted to both legal and extra-judicial means to consolidate power.20

In the years that followed Maliki’s rule, Iranian influence in Iraqi politics continued, yet anger at Tehran’s actions began to resonate across the state, resulting in widespread protests from 2019.

At the same time, the emergence of Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) as Crown prince of Saudi Arabia in 2017 ushered in a more proactive form of engagement from the Kingdom in an effort to counter Iranian gains. Speaking to The Atlantic’s Jeffrey Goldberg, MbS stressed a commitment to pushing back on these Iranian moves. We’ve done this in Africa, Asia, in Malaysia, in Sudan, in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon. We believe that after push back, the problems will move inside Iran. We don’t know if the regime will collapse or not – it’s not the target, but if it collapses, great, it’s their problem. We have a war scenario in the Middle East right now. This is very dangerous for the world. We cannot take the risk here. We have to take serious painful decisions now to avoid painful decisions later.21

These efforts included reaching out to prominent Iraqi figures in an effort to cultivate and privilege a nationalist sentiment that would override sectarian identity and an affinity to the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the years that followed, this would occur organically, as Iraqis took to the streets demanding an end to corruption and Iranian interference in Iraqi politics amidst the reassertion of an Iraqi identity. This struggle over the nature of political life and the complex relationship between the state, the militias and their external sponsors has long played out across Iraq. In what follows, we explore developments across Anbar, which allow us to critically reflect on the penetration of Iraqi politics by Saudi Arabia and Iran, and also observe the complex interplay between sects, space and the state.

The case of Anbar

The penetration of Iraqi politics by Saudi Arabia and Iran plays out in a range of forms, but also across different spaces. From the cultivation of
relations with political, religious or tribal elites to helping establish and support Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs), known locally as Hashd al-Shaabi, which were formed in 2014 following Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani’s fatwa calling on all Iraqis who were able to aid the fight against the (then) Islamic State of Iraq and Levant. It is likely that the PMUs formed some months earlier and were legitimised by the fatwa. Of the forty (approximately) PMU groups established at the time, half were already established militias operating in Iraq. Between 80 and 90 per cent of the PMUs are thought to be Shia (including Shia Turkmen in the north), with most of the enlisted fighters from the southern provinces in Iraq.

Of interest for what follows is the province of Anbar, the largest governorate of Iraq, situated on the western border. A Sunni-majority area, Anbar was largely captured by ISIS in the summer of 2014, with the help of local militias. In the years that followed, Iraqi government forces (army and police) supported by Sunni tribesmen and members of the Hashd al-Shaabi engaged in a series of battles with ISIS, culminating in recapturing the province in late 2017.

The capture of Anbar’s western border towns from ISIS prompted former prime minister Haider al-Abadi to announce victory over the militant group on 9 December 2017. Following the liberation, various Shia PMUs (several of which are aligned with Iran and loyal to Ayatollah Khamenei) took little time to assert their presence on the western border of Anbar province. The deployment was championed by the various PMU leaders as being in the interest of Iraq’s national security; after all a depleted national security force had insufficient resources to secure the border with Syria. However, in the years after 2017 different parts of the pro-Iran alignment have used this vacuum to increase their influence over border areas, serving their own agenda as well as that of Iran.

**Iran and the PMUs: An alliance of convenience?**

The positioning of the various Shia PMUs was endorsed by Iran who saw it as an opportunity to cement their regional influence, particularly in its support of Syria’s premier Bashar al-Assad. However, some of the more experienced pro-Iran PMUs such as Kata’ib Hezbollah have made themselves extremely wealthy through the controlling of border routes and the establishing of an informal border crossing south of Qa’im in west Anbar. Access routes offer the Shia PMUs the opportunity to tax imports and smuggle goods across the Iraqi–Syrian border, and their desire to maintain this source of revenue has led to rising tensions with locals as well as augmenting rivalries between the various Shia PMUs operating in the area.
The PMUs are officially under a command structure, but the various units have different loyalties and ultimately objectives. The Iran-aligned PMUs operate with a considerable degree of autonomy, from Iran and state, and invariably from one another depending on resource allocation as well as leadership matters. The structure of the PMUs and the various relations spawning from them therefore form part of a complex process that incorporates both loose hierarchical structures and a network of dynamic interaction that ensures the flow of information and resources between the various focal points. As prescribed by Renad Mansour, it is better to view the PMUs as ‘fluid and adaptive networks that vary in horizontal (leadership coherence) and vertical (ties to a social base) structure’, although as Mansour highlights ‘some of these networks are closely related to Iran’.

Understanding the fluidity of the PMU network helps us assess its actual permeability to Iranian influence. For Iran, having proxies enables it to expand an aggressive posture particularly when placed under pressure from the US per se. However, while Iran has proved in Syria and Iraq it can expand when national security interests are involved, it can also contract its network by reducing its support for proxies. Iran’s contractibility can, for example, be guided by the importance of a particular cause, its domestic finances, and the removal of a direct threat to it. In the case of Iraq, then, Iran does not wish to relinquish its influence, but instead can go through phases of emphasising political, economic and business matters over a security posture. Iraq’s Iran-aligned PMUs have therefore become accustomed to generating their own revenue to ensure their sustainability, which as a result also grants them significant autonomy and, through periods, reduces the actual influence Iran has over the aligned network. This has the potential to create tensions within the alignment, especially if Iran changes its posture towards the US and the various aligned PMUs such as Kata’ib Hezbollah and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) continue to gain politically and economically. Such schisms have already emerged, and according to members of an Iran-aligned unit in Iraq, an Iranian general in the IRGC, Haider al-Afghani, asked to be transferred from his position from working with the various aligned PMUs due to their increasing disobedience. Such disharmony could evidence Iran contracting its network, especially with a nuclear and economic agreement on the table. However, if the agreement falters, Iran could equally use its proxies to create a threatening posture.

The PMUs in operation

Not only does each PMU have its own agenda, some members within each PMU also have their own schemes and ways of generating revenue separate
from their command structure, government and Iran. This can range from theft, burglary and kidnapping to the trafficking of humans between Syria and Iraq. For example, families of Iraqi ISIS members seeking to return home after fleeing heavy fighting in the north and west of Iraq have used the smuggling networks operated by PMU members to return. After 2017 the price for one person wanting to be smuggled across the border was US$2,000, although as competition for this business increased, the price has more recently dropped to anything between US$200 and US$500.25

Initial concerns shared by locals about the presence and objectives of the Shia PMUs in Anbar, or what they call the ‘Iranians’ in the majority Sunni Arab province, were pacified by a combination of tribal outreach and promises of mutual spoils through political channels if Anbar’s key stakeholders supported PMU efforts. For many of the senior Anbari sheikhs and politicians, their options were limited and the need for stability post-ISIS and some form of economic growth for their respective communities outweighed any desire to resist the latest incursion. From early 2018, relations between the various PMUs and the locals were good. Occasional disagreements did occur, but mutual respect for the tribal system of negotiation helped render any escalation. Senior tribal figures from Qa‘im district, notably Sheikh Rabbah Karbouli (of the Karbala tribe), played an integral role in navigating the complexities and ensuring a peace existed, and in a meeting with the sheikh in 2019 he revealed a large part of this stability was achieved through personal relations and the ‘respect’ held between the various senior figures from all sides. One such person was the leader of Kata‘ib Imam Ali, Shible al-Zaydi. Kata‘ib Imam Ali was one of the first pro-Iran units to establish itself in western Anbar, and through Zaydi, who is more commonly referred to as Hajji Shible, it set about fostering good relations with the local community while simultaneously creating its own revenue streams through unofficial border taxation and smuggling.

Shible’s authority was bolstered by his relationship with Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. Soleimani visited Anbar on several occasions in 2018 and after a meeting with senior Sunni tribesmen, one source recounted a willingness by Soleimani to establish direct channels of communication with the local tribes. Soleimani, an Arabic speaker, was all too aware of Anbar’s volatility and its propensity for militancy against perceived occupying forces, so he was keen to offer immediate support to the tribal leaders if any issues arose from the Shia PMU side. According to one sheikh26 who was having problems with some elements of the Shia PMUs near the border (thought to be Kata‘ib Hezbollah), Soleimani offered him is mobile phone number so he could call the general if he needed help. However, Soleimani’s support came with a caveat.
Iran’s strategy in Anbar provides a microcosm of its broader regional goal, but for it to sustain its leverage Iraq should be stable but not strong enough to override its influence. Iran aided Iraq in the fighting of ISIS, but also used the opportunity to develop a pathway from Iran through to Syria while simultaneously restricting US influence. Soleimani was at the forefront of this plan. However, by the beginning of 2019 tensions between the Shia PMUs and tribes in west Anbar begun to emerge. Part of this was because of the redeployment of Kata’ib Imam Ali to the Sinjar border crossing in Nineveh province, and the growing influence of Kata’ib Hezbollah on Anbar’s western border. An unofficial PMU border crossing point known to locals as Imam Ali crossing near Akashat, south of Qa’im district, was already generating significant income through smuggling and taxation, while also being a portal for the transferring of logistics between Iraq and Syria in support of Assad and the various Iranian-sponsored groups operating in Syria. Imam Ali crossing was and remains a prized asset for the PMUs and gaining control of it was a priority for Kata’ib Hezbollah.

Kata’ib Hezbollah spawned from Iranian operations in Iraq during the 1980s but gained global notoriety as part of the Iranian-sponsored resistance to the US-led occupation of Iraq. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was integral throughout Kata’ib Hezbollah’s evolution and maintained close relations with the IRGC, particularly Soleimani. In the face of anti-Iranian pressure led by the US administration under President Donald Trump, this pro-Iran alignment in Iraq was to be galvanised. The US administration under Trump, aptly supported by Israel and Saudi Arabia, vilified Iran and by withdrawing from the nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – JCPOA) elevated the mistrust of an already suspicious Iran and its proxies. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo even blamed Iran for its sponsoring of ‘Shia militia groups and terrorists to infiltrate and undermine the Iraqi security forces and jeopardise Iraq’s sovereignty’.

A series of tit-for-tat exchanges between the US military and the pro-Iran PMUs ensued, with rocket attacks launched at US bases in Iraq and the US responding with military strikes against pro-Iran interests. The situation reached its peak towards the end of 2019 when hundreds of protesters supporting the pro-Iran PMUs attempted to gain access to the US embassy in Baghdad’s International Zone following the killing of PMU members in one of the US airstrikes. For the US administration, this incident crossed the line, and on 3 January 2020 a precision drone strike killed Soleimani and deputy PMU leader (and figurehead of Kata’ib Hezbollah) Muhandis as they travelled in a convoy from Baghdad International Airport to central Baghdad. The situation in Iraq destabilised as US–Iran tensions intensified. In response to the killing of Soleimani, Iran launched...
Iraq and evolution of Saudi–Iranian relations

ballistic missiles towards two bases hosting US forces in Iraq, Anbar and Erbil, on 8 January 2020. There were no casualties and the Iranian response appeared to be calibrated, which with US acquiescence allowed the situation to de-escalate. Nevertheless, the ripple effects continued throughout 2020 and 2021, with numerous resistance factions emerging from Kata’ib Hezbollah and other aligned groups, who effected a low-level but sustained campaign of rocket and IED (improvised explosive device) attacks on establishments and convoys associated with US military operations. The main goal of these resistance factions is to force the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

Even prior to the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis, the US targeting of Shia PMUs and associated militias on the border between Syria and Iraq was exasperating tensions in west Anbar. According to a security force member in Anbar, Shia PMUs such as Kata’ib Hezbollah and its affiliates were accusing locals of supplying intelligence to the Americans. Whether locals were providing information or not, the US–Iran situation influenced the dynamics in west Anbar, and in this case the pro-Iran elements responded by doubling down on their security mechanisms and their control of the border area. One tribal senior noted, ‘there were daily problems from the stopping of our trucks (carrying foodstuffs on routes in west Anbar) and heavy taxes, to entering towns and villages in search for people or goods.’ An Anbari truck owner who transports fruit and vegetables from Syria to Iraq said the border PMUs would charge him US$500 per truck to pass their checkpoint.

Qa’im town itself was being used as a stopover by militias operating in Syria, and according to a shop owner regular visits from ‘Lebanese and Chinese’ militias was all too frequent and not without problems. These militias view Anbar as part of the ISIS problem, a territory synonymous with Sunni Arab militancy, and with the newfound power and influence amongst the various Shia armed groups, individuals have sought to use this leverage to take what they wanted from shops and markets.

Over an extended period, then, the direct line between Iran and the local tribes dissipated as pro-Iran PMUs and Iranian officials sought assurances from the local community. For one Anbari sheikh this bartering tactic with the tribal leaders was born out of fear and in case ‘the Americans launched an attack’. However, the senior tribal committee in Qa’im, involving the Albu Mahal and Karbala tribes, preferred not to take sides and have sought to maintain a balancing act, often to the detriment of their own businesses. Some local elements have, however, benefitted from siding with certain Shia PMU elements, developing their own tribal militias for payment and acting on behalf of the Shia PMUs in local situations.
Anbar in general has benefited from a sustained period of stability and despite the obvious tensions and occasional bouts of violence, it is witnessing something of a rebuilding process. In west Anbar, the stability has afforded some of the Shia PMUs, such as Kata’ib Hezbollah, further opportunity to expand their business that has focused them on the border areas rather than communities in the surrounding area. In Qa’im district itself, the insufficiently resourced Iraq army works closely with the tribes, police and PMU Liwa al-Tafuf led by Qasim Muslih. Muslih is also the head of PMU operations in west Anbar, and while known to use anti-US rhetoric he has proved particularly adept in working with the local community. As noted by one local police officer, little can be achieved without the ‘approval of Muslih’, once again highlighting the PMUs’ growing authority in peripheral areas of Iraq.

Perhaps most importantly for Anbaris and the government of Iraq, at least economically, is Akkas gas field, which is in the south of Qa’im district. Once secured from ISIS in November 2017, the army set about clearing the area of explosive devices and preparing it for a return to service. The Korean Gas Corporation (KOGAS) had assumed 100 per cent ownership of the gas field prior to ISIS’s advances in 2014 but by 2016 had shown an unwillingness to return. Rumours began to circulate in 2020 that the security situation, and concern regarding the location of Shia PMUs in the vicinity of the gas field, had convinced KOGAS its investments are better lying elsewhere. Numerous oil industry candidates emerged, some of whom tentatively assessed Akkas’s environs and decided the risk was too great. The Ministry of Oil entered negotiations with French-founded oil services provider Schlumberger in late 2020, while simultaneously seeking to end the KOGAS contract. The proposed deal would see Schlumberger lead a consortium of investors in the field’s development, one of whom according to Iraqi oil minister Ihsan Abdul Jabbar could be Saudi Aramco, a potential issue itself considering the anti-Saudi rhetoric emanating from the Iran-aligned PMUs and associated armed factions.

The Shia PMUs operating in Anbar (and other areas of Iraq of course) continue to benefit from close ties to Iran, but this does not directly translate into Iranian control as previously highlighted, nor is the situation permanent. Currently, the situation is balanced. If a nuclear and subsequent economic agreement with Iran is made it will soften Iran’s security posture, and therefore remove its immediate need for a proxy network in Iraq. This could allow Saudi Arabia to offer financial incentives to Iraq as part of its investment, which will undoubtedly benefit the Shia PMUs. Failure to reach an agreement could of course have the opposite effect.
Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy under MbS could be described as both chaotic and pragmatic, some of which can be dismissed as naivety and at other times opportunistic band-wagoning – particularly where the US is concerned. However, considering its domestic vulnerabilities as well as the regional actors around it, Saudi Arabia’s defensive and often changeable foreign policy reflects its insecurity as a monarchy operating within a volatile regional landscape that produces constant challenges to authority and sovereignty. Acts of aggression as well as cajoling are integral parts of Saudi Arabia’s attempts to adapt to these challenges, but it is Saudi’s inert defensiveness that has limited its ability to generate more positive networks and place itself as a much larger regional hub for business and trade. Saudi’s relations with Iraq typify the region’s volatility, but also since 2003 a failure to build positive networks. Of course, the Iran factor was and still is instrumental in limiting Saudi influence, but with new horizons opening, Saudi now has an opportunity to develop relations with both Iran and Iraq.

While serving as defence minister and since 2017 the Crown prince, MbS oversaw Saudi Arabia straining its capability and damaging its reputation in Yemen. A lesson seemingly not learned from attempts to counter Iranian support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria, despite one Saudi diplomat declaring, ‘We had a little dive into supporting groups in Syria … Iran outmanoeuvred us everywhere … We realised we have to play another game.’\textsuperscript{38} Instead, bolstered by the Trump administration’s aggressive policy towards Iran, Saudi doubled down on its hard-power approach in joining the axis. For economic and reputational reasons, this approach proved unsustainable. With the new Biden administration seemingly preferring rapprochement with Iran, MbS and Saudi Arabia have taken the opportunity to alleviate the stresses of its involvement in Yemen and through diplomatic channels embark on a process of dialogue with Iran, supported by the Iraqi government.\textsuperscript{39}

Saudi has also augmented its outreach to Iraq, offering investment and support for the development of the country.\textsuperscript{40} This strategy predicates soft power as a means to building positive relations, but in recognising its own limitations, Saudi is also attempting to secure a geopolitical buffer within an ever fluctuating region. This, of course, is not a new phenomenon in Saudi–Iraq relations, with the former even in recent years attempting to court political and religious figures, exemplified by Muqtada al-Sadr’s visit to Saudi Arabia in July 2017, where he met with MbS.\textsuperscript{41} During 2020, Saudi presented plans to invest in Iraq’s agricultural sector, a proposal that would have seen the growing of foodstuffs in Iraq and their export to Saudi Arabia on a larger scale. However, the offer was complicated by historical tensions.
and mistrust, reinforced by an aggressive posture by pro-Iran PMUs who used local and social media to augment anti-Saudi sentiment within Iraq. On 30 October 2020, the Secretary General of AAH, Qais al-Khazali, formally rejected the idea of Saudi Arabia seizing land in the provinces of Najaf, Anbar, Muthanna and Basra ‘on the pretext of investment’. Shortly after this statement, on 7 November and again on 18 November, locals and tribal leaders referring to themselves as the People’s Revolution Movement (Harakat al-Intifada al-Sha’baniyya) conducted sit-in protests in Muthanna’s provincial capital Samawa, to denounce the Saudi agricultural investment project in Badia (Muthanna) on the grounds that Saudi Arabia ‘supports terrorism’.

Hard-line Shia activist group Rab’ Allah, made up from a myriad of pro-Iran elements including those affiliated with Kata’ib Hezbollah, took this a step further by pledging its willingness to target Saudi investment, in a social media post on 13 November 2020. Rab’ Allah declared there is ‘no way for Saudi investment before compensating the families of the martyrs’ who they cite were killed by car bombs that came from Saudi Arabia, in a reference to Sunni militant-led terrorism in Iraq. In a statement via the Ministry of Agriculture on 22 November, Saudi companies responded by apologising for any offense caused by the investment plans.

Iraq’s precarious economic situation means the government is open to international investment, including Saudi Arabia’s, but the government also realises it must tread carefully considering the physical capacity of Iraq’s Iran alignment through its armed groups and the political leverage it holds in parliament and across the many ministries. As previously noted, while there is a degree of fluidity in the Iranian–Iraqi network, during periods of tension the networks can expand to protect Iranian interests. In truth, Iraq’s ministries are more akin to powerful fiefdoms designed to benefit the interests of individuals and parties that have worked to establish themselves within the elitist status quo. The pro-Iran Fatah bloc, led by Badr’s Hadi al-Amiri, secured 48 seats out of the 329 available in the 2018 elections, placing it second to Muqtada al-Sadr’s Sairoon, meaning it was able to negotiate its allocation of prized ministerial positions at all levels. According to an independent official, it is the squabbling over these spoils following elections that causes the delays in forming the government, and while the position of minister may appear to carry gravitas, it is control of ministerial finances that most parties seek and ‘this is the position they barter for’. For example, the current minister of interior is Othman al-Ghanimi, a former senior officer in the army with no clear political allegiances, but the ministry itself has long been under the influence of Badr. Badr also controls the Ministry of Transport, a useful information source and revenue generator considering its authority over airports and other terminals.
Al-Sadiqoun, the political wing of AAH and member of Fatah, has controlling interests in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs as well as the Ministry of Culture. When prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi announced his cabinet in June 2020, Fares Harram, an activist and poet, was slated to be the new minister of culture, but his nomination was disputed, reportedly because he would not bow to AAH’s demands to serve their requirements. Other political stakeholders also take a share in the spoils. Ammar Hakim (al-Hikma) influences the Ministry of Oil, while those loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr have gained control over the ministries of health and electricity, as well as an increasing influence within the Prime Minister’s Office. Former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki from the State of Law (Dawa linked), who is also part of the broader al-Bina parliamentary bloc that contains Fatah, continues to benefit from his connections to various ministries and even the Prime Minister’s Office.

As for the Ministry of Agriculture, it is headed by Muhammad Karim al-Khafaji, but is largely considered to be influenced by different Sunni Arab parties, it of course being their share of the political spoils. The stakeholders in the Ministry of Agriculture want to generate revenue for their own cause, and in Qa’im, for example, a local businessman reported a scheme through Saudi investment, which was reportedly boosting the agricultural sector on the Euphrates River. Saudi has a more sympathetic ear with the Sunni Arab parties, and while shared faith or a history of interaction across the borders certainly plays a part in this, there is an economic and political convenience that suits both sides. However, this arrangement is heavily scrutinised by those from the Fatah bloc. Dalal Hassan al-Gharawi, a Fatah parliament representative and member of the parliamentary committee for agriculture, has even accused the ministry itself of allowing ‘former regime’ men to do as they want within the ministry, stating ‘the Ba’athist influence has returned to the ministry stronger than before’.

Al-Gharawi’s comments reflect Fatah’s pro-Iran positioning and a history of domestic mistrust, but they should also be understood within the context of a domestic political-economic struggle. Fatah, like other political parties and blocs, wants its share of the financial spoils and is not averse to using sectarian slogans to discredit its political opponents. In the case of Saudi Arabia, such comments by those aligned with Iran fit the narrative of there being a terrorist-supporting ‘other’, which can be used not only when tensions involving Iran are elevated, but when political or economic tensions within Iraq arise. However, with a new era of dialogue emerging between the key geopolitical players, a degree of pragmatism towards Saudi Arabia may also arise as it broadens its investment portfolio in Iraq. The removal of sanctions, for example, could allow Iran to diversify its economic planning and reduce its reliance on Iraq as one of its only legitimate sources.
of revenue, generated through trade and energy sales. The opening up of Iran’s economy could therefore remove the protection barrier against Saudi investment and give it greater access to Iraq’s market.

The full reopening of Arar border crossing to Saudi Arabia in south-east Anbar in November 2020 symbolises a recent upturn in Iraqi–Saudi relations. Efforts to reopen the terminal began in 2017 for the first time since 1990, but impetus only grew as relations between Kadhimi and Saudi developed. From a Saudi perspective, it would ideally like to compete with Iran’s and Turkey’s trade in Iraq and following two years of negotiations a bilateral trade agreement was signed on 31 March 2021. Along with mutually beneficial taxation rules, the agreement incorporates a three-billion-dollar fund that aims to enhance Saudi investment opportunities in Iraq’s private sector, while establishing greater cooperation in energy and renewable energy projects in support of OPEC and the stabilisation of the global oil market. The agreement also commits both countries to the completion of the Gulf Cooperation Council International Authority (GCCIA) electrical project, which is designed by US company General Electric to connect the power grids of Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE as a way of improving electrical efficiency for all member states.

Conclusion

Iraq’s position of influence within Gulf politics and in the context of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has oscillated dramatically in the decades after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. From an initial period of tri-polar competition between Baghdad, Tehran and Riyadh to a period of external actors penetrating Iraqi politics in an effort to shape it in their image, the Iraqi state continues to be an arena of key strategic and religious significance for both Saudi Arabia and Iran, oscillating between periods of overt hostility, political rivalries, the cultivation of identity politics and economic competition.

There is little doubt that since 2003 Iran has exerted far greater influence over Iraqi politics than Saudi Arabia. In part, this stems from shared sectarian affinity but perhaps is better understood in terms of long-standing relationships with elites who fled Iraq during the rule of Saddam, which immediately gave Iran access to key officials in the post-2005 governments. Given the rising sectarian tensions playing out across Iraq, Saudi Arabia’s inability to cultivate relations with Sunni groups – in part a consequence of the presence of violent Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda then Daesh – left Iran well placed to capitalise and cement its position within the political, social and economic spheres of the state.
In recent years, however, under the tutelage of Crown Prince MbS, Saudi Arabia is making strides to develop its relations with Iraq. They have plans to expand its embassy in Baghdad and investment portfolio through Saudi businesses. A local lawyer who has represented Saudi interests related to compliance issues in Iraq told of the numerous meetings being held with Iraqi officials regarding millions of dollars of available finance. However, the lawyer also stated there is a lack of trust, and Saudi Arabia remains very cautious.

In an ideal scenario, Iraq would also benefit from such mutual agreements and in doing so remove its dependency on Iran as a primary energy source. However, Iran and Saudi relations are only one part of Iraq’s problems. Corruption is endemic in Iraq and its sovereignty is not only challenged by security incursions, but by the fragmented state of its political system. Ministries are fiefdoms for generating income, which undermines the authority of the prime minister and executive branch. While power is invested in such a system, there is little incentive to change. This means Iraq will remain susceptible to outside influence as long as it serves the individual interests of those in key positions.

This does not necessarily translate into public support for pro-Iran factions or Iran for that matter, and instead an anti-government protest movement that aimed much of its ire at the Iranian connection and peaked towards the end of 2019 dissipated under the lack of executive action and the targeting of activists by armed groups with links to prominent Shia PMUs. Anti-Iranian sentiment manifests at the sub-political level, and while figures such as Muqtada al-Sadr have previously denounced Iranian intervention, they have proved more willing to maintain the political status quo rather than support the more chaotic grass-roots movement.

There remains a public mistrust of Iran in Iraq in general, including Sunni Arabs, Kurds and Shia Arabs. The Iran-linked political parties are not particularly liked across Iraq either, but their geographical positioning and strategic alignments, with tribes and villages for example, have enabled them to fix and cajole electoral constituencies to their benefit. An approach that uses both carrot and stick is not enjoyed by the majority, however, and tensions with Sunni Arab areas in the north and west of Iraq have the potential to develop once more. For now, while there is a degree of economic prosperity, stability will remain, but any fluctuation in the situation caused by a collapse in oil prices, for example, could heighten the struggle for finances and stimulate hostile dynamics at the local level, which in turn could draw Iran closer to the issue once more.

Seeking to position itself as a mediator between the two sides, Baghdad facilitated four rounds of talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2021. This included wider discussions on regional security with a number of
other Middle Eastern powers also in attendance. The impact of these diplomatic efforts led by Iraq on regional security remains to be seen, yet such efforts have positioned Iraq more prominently within broader mediatory efforts, albeit at a time when divisions appear to cut across Iraqi politics and society.

Notes

15 Ibid.
17 Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, p. 176.


20 Ibid.


22 In a broader sense, Iran-aligned units such as the more established Kata’ib Hezbollah, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Saraya al-Khorasani and Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada pose a considerable question to Iraq’s long-term sovereign goal. Shia cleric and former Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) leader Muqtada al-Sadr presents a nationalist picture through his unit Saraya Salam, although much of the tension between Sadr and the pro-Iran groups tends to revolve around political and economic spoils rather than ideology. In contrast to both of the aforementioned elements, there are the national PMUs galvanised by revered Shia cleric Ali al-Sistani’s fatwa to counter ISIS. Units such as Liwa al-Tafuf, which operates in western Anbar, form part of this more moderate strand of PMUs, although through its leader, Qasim Muslih, it too has been drawn into an alliance with the pro-Iran units.


25 This information was collected from two different sources in Anbar.

26 A member of one of the local tribes passed this message via telephone in October 2018. He agreed to the use of this information under conditions of anonymity.


28 The name Kata’ib Hezbollah became synonymous with the targeting of US-led occupation forces in Iraq after 2007, but its roots stem from pro-Iranian operations against Saddam’s regime in the 1980s. Its modern-day mantra is fixated on resistance to the so-called American project in Iraq and remains at the forefront of efforts to remove US forces from Iraq presently. It is aligned with Iran and pays homage to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. For a brief but useful history of Kata’ib Hezbollah, see Rikar Hussein, Mehdi Jedinia and Michael Lipin, ‘Iran’s Iraqi Militia Proxy Kataeb Hezbollah Explained’, VOA News, 31 December 2019, https://bit.ly/3K00YY4 (accessed 12 August 2021).

30 The security official heralded from and works in Anbar. The authors spoke with him in November 2019 and agreed to keep anonymity.
31 The authors spoke with the trader in November 2019.
32 The shop owner is an embedded community member and has managed to keep his business going despite the various ISIS- and PMU-related incursions. He was spoken with twice, once in the summer of 2019 and again in February 2020.
33 The authors could not verify if the Lebanese group were Hezbollah related. The reference to Chinese was also difficult to verify but could be related to Hazara or Central Asian militias operating in Syria.
34 This quote was obtained during a telephone interview with a senior tribal member in Qa‘im district in October 2019 who gave us approval on the proviso we did not release his identity.
35 Associated with the Imam Hussein shrine in Karbala. The leader is Qasim Muslih, thought to be anti-US but associated with Najaf-based cleric Ali al-Sistani officially. He was arrested by Iraqi security forces in May 2021 for his apparent role in the killing of activists in Iraq, but later released.
36 This was shared with the authors through a telephone interview with a local police force member in December 2020.
This information was obtained during an interview with a Baghdad lawyer in February 2021.


This information was obtained while speaking to a local trader in Qa’im. His claim, although difficult to substantiate through financial evidence, appears to be a general consensus amongst the local populace.


This interview was conducted in Baghdad in April 2021. The lawyer was happy to share his experience but did not wish to be named.
The irreplaceable piece: Lebanon’s strategic value in the Saudi–Iranian foreign policy chessboard

Hussein Kalout

In the history of the Middle East, Lebanon may appear as a neutral landscape where regional and international rivalries have played out – between the US and USSR during the Cold War, or between Iran and Saudi Arabia today. As a small state with a multifaceted social fabric, Lebanon has been treated as a passive player that becomes entangled in larger international machinations and geopolitical struggles. Lebanon itself does not matter in these narratives.

However, it is important to understand the development and consequences of social and political actors within Lebanon that have become regional actors and have reshaped the regional balance of power beyond the country’s borders. Rather than being a passive landscape with internal divisions, this approach looks at how domestic politics and domestic actors in Lebanon have strengthened over time and moved to impact the regional picture and shape the regional dynamics vis-à-vis the Lebanese state. Hezbollah, for example, has grown and morphed from an organisation concerned only with the Lebanese landscape and the Israeli–Lebanese conflict into perhaps one of the strongest actors in the region. But as Hezbollah and, by extension, Iran’s power grows, so too do Saudi fears that they will lose their hegemony in the Gulf region. Tehran, on the other hand, values Hezbollah’s increasing power as a deterrent to Israel that allows Iran to project force in the Levant.

In this context, Lebanon became an irreplaceable piece for Saudi Arabia’s and Iran’s competing geostrategic ambitions in the Middle East. This chapter highlights how the clash to dominate the Lebanese arena has emerged as a national security matter for both Tehran and Riyadh. Thus, a refined foreign policy has been meticulously tailored by both sides after the Second Lebanon War in 2006. On the one hand, the Saudi Kingdom was determined to constrain Hezbollah’s domestic power as well as to obliterate its military capabilities while dominating the Lebanese political decision-making process enough to prevent Hezbollah from attaining political predominance. On the other hand, the ‘Party of God’, as Hezbollah
literally means in Arabic, has become a precious asset and an invaluable deterrent power in the eyes of the Islamic Republic to counter Israeli influence in the Levant and to politically amalgamate the connection of the ‘Axis of Resistance’ from Tehran to Beirut. Over the last two decades, internal political divisions within Lebanon have become even more inextricably tied to two distinct political poles: one that revolves around a Saudi–Western alliance and another which promotes ties with Iran and Russia.

Since the 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafic Hariri and the subsequent 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel, the country has seen increased political and religious antagonism erode its tenuous sectarian balance. Two main political blocs have emerged in opposition to one another. The March 14 Coalition believes that aligning with Saudi Arabia, Europe and the US is necessary to extricate the country from the orbit of Iran and Syria. The March 8 Coalition, on the other hand, believes that an alliance with Iran’s ‘Axis of Resistance’ is vital to countering Israeli–Western dominance in the region.

The contrast between these two visions has hurled the country into consecutive constitutional impasses since 2006. The parliament’s 2014 decision to extend its mandate by an additional two years and seven months was, ultimately, a tactical manoeuvre to maintain the status quo, using the argument that new elections would constitute a major security risk given the fragile situation of the country. However, the social consequences of this decision have been considerable – it has undermined the legitimacy of the constitution and weakened Lebanese institutions and the democratic process.

Although the domestic conflict in Lebanon seems to primarily involve a clash of influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is important to remember that the situation is inextricably connected to the framework of competition between the Euro–American–Saudi and Russian–Syrian–Iranian axes. Thus, political turmoil in Lebanon will have consequences that reach far past its borders. Remnants of ISIS and ‘takfiri’-inspired ideology still exist in the interior of the country, and sectarian polarisation remains intense. Even though Lebanon has been able to successfully avoid an all-out civil war in the years since 2014, the nation’s internal and external tensions still pose a threat to stability.

This chapter explores how, in the last two decades, the regional security architecture has been largely influenced by Iranian and Saudi interests. Old rivalries succumbed and new alliances pivoted. Lebanon’s strategic value in the Saudi–Iranian foreign policy dimension increased year after year. The successive Israeli–Lebanese wars in 2000 and 2006, the downfall of several Arab regimes in the region and the worsening of the Syrian civil war in 2012 transformed Lebanon into an irreplaceable strategic piece for both sides.
The Sunni political landscape in Lebanon

In an historical perspective, the involvement of Saudi Arabia within Lebanon has shifted frequently, relying less on long-standing alliances with any single entity and more on strategic alignments with groups and individuals that could be incentivised to oppose pro-Iranian interests. The Saudis generally failed to organise a unified social base or direct all of their resources towards building up one local Sunni political party. Nor have they ever successfully brought together a diverse, broad-based coalition within Lebanon’s variegated Sunni Muslim community.

Perhaps the main exception to this trend of shifting, singular alignments for the Saudis is the Hariri clan, whom they have supported as their allies in the country’s politics since the Taif Agreement in 1989.¹ The Saudis believed that they could pursue their main objectives in Lebanon by building up the Hariri clan’s sizable political base within the country’s parliament and aligning Saudi interests with those of the prime minister’s cabinet members.² Using these sources of internal, institutional power, the Saudis sought to obstruct Iran’s efforts to extend the control of Shia political groups, such as Hezbollah, over Lebanese politics.

However, the Saudis’ efforts here focused solely on the Hariri clan, which, despite holding the single largest share of Sunni representation, does not represent the interests of all of the various parts of Lebanon’s Sunni Muslim community. By doing so, the Saudis alienated other Sunni groups, such as the Karami and Solh clans, and inadvertently fragmented the Sunni community into several political parties. Furthermore, the political landscape was already treacherous for any sort of efforts aimed at unifying Lebanon’s Sunni population under one banner. During the 1960s and 1970s, multiple secular pan-Arab parties played a vital role in Lebanese politics – and although they were not characterised by religious identity, they did capture much of the Sunni population’s support. The turmoil of the civil war served only to fragment these interests, deepening resentments and weakening most groups. After the Taif Agreement, the Saudis seemed to believe that the Hariri clan’s political clout could unite these competing groups with some help from the Kingdom’s vast financial resources. The political parties claiming to represent the interests of Lebanon’s Sunni population, however, have remained deeply divided.

Four main groups exist within this landscape of Sunni-dominated parties. Some of them are ostensibly secular, while others more openly espouse a sectarian bent. Only one, the Future Party of Hariri, aligns consistently with Saudi interests, while some of the other factions often consider the Kingdom a strategic rival. The four groups are as follows:
1. Nasserist pan-Arab parties, which include a fairly diverse range of groups:
   a. The Popular Nasserist Organization of Osama Saad, an historical pan-Arab movement based in the southern Lebanese city of Sidon;
   b. The Lebanese Syrian Social Nationalist Party, another pan-Arab party;
   c. Tayar al-Karama, formerly known as the Arab Liberation Party, a group dominated by the Karami clan and opposed to the Hariri clan, albeit with a balanced relationship with Saudi Arabia;
   d. The Union Party, led by former minister Abdul Rahim Mourad, a traditional Sunni pan-Arab group espousing an ideology of secular Nasserism;
   e. The Lebanese wing of the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party;
   f. The Independent Nasserite Movement, also known as Al-Mourabitoun;
2. The pro-Saudi Future Party, dominated by the Hariri clan;
3. Secular independent parties such as the Azm Movement of former prime minister Najib Mikati;
4. Pan-Islamist anti-Salafist groups such as Al-Ahbash and al-Jama’a al-Islamiya.

All of the pan-Arab parties have long since been rejected by Riyadh as potential allies, as Saudi Arabia viewed pan-Arab movements as a threat to its own political legitimacy and thus worked to undermine them. Instead, former prime minister Rafic Hariri built a strong relationship with the Saudi royal family over the course of many years, gaining their support for his party’s claim to act on behalf of the Sunni sect in Lebanon since 1990. An endorsement as the ‘legitimate’ political representative of the Kingdom’s interests in Lebanon carries with it a great deal of weight for those who believe in Saudi Arabia’s special status as a protector of the Islamic faith – without Saudi endorsement, it would be nearly impossible for a Sunni religious-political leader to gain widespread support in Lebanon – but it clearly does not mean that all Sunni political groups will fall in line.

In fact, in the years since 2006, Riyadh has had to shift its diplomatic modus operandi in order to counterbalance the increasing dominance of Hezbollah. Saudi support now flows in various forms to a variety of other parties – particularly those aligned with Lebanon’s Christian population, such as the Maronite militia-turned-political party known as the Lebanese Forces. Now, just as in the past, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and its allies is generally not characterised by ideological alignment, but rather Riyadh will work with groups of any sectarian or ideological grouping so long as they have a possibility of counterbalancing Iranian and Syrian
influences. For the House of Al Saud, an increase in the power of a Sunni party in Lebanon only benefits their interests if its strategic objectives align with this overarching goal – preventing Iran from influencing the Lebanese political decision-making process will curtail Tehran’s force-projection capabilities in the region and build up Saudi hegemony, whether that involves extending Saudi control in Lebanese politics or simply disrupting Iran’s dominance. The evolution of Saudi foreign policy towards Lebanon from 1990 to the present reflects this key consideration at each step of the way.

The Saudi model for Lebanon

In order to gain a comprehensive perspective on the evolution of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy towards Lebanon, we must first note one of the key principles of the Kingdom’s model of diplomacy that has now persisted for forty years. Saudi Arabia and Iran have a paradoxical foreign policy doctrine and different methodological models of diplomatic implementation. Whilst the Saudi model is verticalised and relies on financial sources to achieve the country’s objectives in something resembling a mercantilist formula, the Iranian one is horizontal and based on transversal cooperation without trade-off machination and incorporating a strong component of ideological linkage. In order to better understand the different methodologies and variables at play in the case of Lebanon, we can look at the two competing models which, in this case, are exemplified by the strategic approaches of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In Lebanon, Saudi Arabia has never organised a bloc of support based on ideology. Instead, Saudi Arabia’s methodological approach centres on the power of petro-dollar coercive diplomacy, seeking to use forms of economic incentivisation to counterbalance Iran’s presence in the country. The Saudis have vast economic resources at their disposal, and the main way that they incentivise Lebanese actors to align themselves with their own political interests is by supporting these groups financially. The relation among Riyadh and certain political groups in Lebanon tends to be transactional rather than based on an ideological framework.

The Saudis view their role in the region as something of a guardian of Sunni Muslim empowerment, increasing their regional influence throughout the Middle East and establishing a tutelary model that will provide them with long-term control over the internal functioning of Lebanon’s political system even in the face of unfavourable demographic changes in that country. In the specific case of Lebanon, the Saudis began employing their strategy of economic incentivisation mostly in the 1990s, moving to
fill the relative power vacuum that the Iranians were simultaneously seeking to exploit. Since then, the Saudis have endeavoured to maintain friendly Sunni groups in power and make sure that they are perceived as legitimate by the wider population. Geopolitically, this strategic architecture has been oriented – at least since the 2006 Lebanese–Israeli War – towards preventing the establishment and consolidation of a Shia axis of power reaching from Iran’s western border to the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Saudis’ strategy primarily aims to control internal aspects of Lebanon’s power structures, and they expect to use this internal control to limit the ability of pro-Iranian groups to engage in externally focused operations. Riyadh hopes that by controlling the internal structure of the country it can curtail the expansion of Iranian power both within Lebanon and within the region as a whole. From the Saudi point of view, the Kingdom plays a diplomatic role as the protector of Sunni Muslims in the Middle East and beyond. In the perspective of Saudi foreign policy, ‘Iran was responsible for regional upheaval and sought to obscure its dangerous sectarian and expansionist policies, as well as its support for terrorism, by leveling unsubstantiated charges against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.’ Adel al-Jubeir, Saudi foreign minister, also argued that Iran is ‘the single-most-belligerent-actor in the region, and its actions display both a commitment to regional hegemony and a deeply held view that conciliatory gestures signal weakness either on Iran’s part or on the part of its adversaries’.

The three phases of Saudi foreign policy towards Lebanon

Saudi foreign policy has maintained the same overarching goals throughout all three of these phases – countering the expansion of Iranian power in the Levant and using petro-dollar diplomacy to extend its control over Lebanese internal politics – but the areas of focus and the methods by which they seek to achieve them have changed over time. Some of this is in response to the manoeuvres of Iran and Hezbollah, while other changes result from shifting geopolitical calculations – for instance, the exogenous shock of the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War. The three main phases in the evolution of Saudi foreign policy towards Lebanon from the end of the Lebanese Civil War to the present are described below.

Following from the Taif Agreement (1990–2005)

When the Taif Agreement brought an end to the Lebanese Civil War, it coincided with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold
War. In the 1990s, the regional powers of the Middle East replaced the influence of the Cold War superpowers and their European allies by playing an assertive ‘tutelary’ role over the Lebanese political system. Saudi Arabia and Syria emerged as the first main stakeholders within the Lebanese political arena followed closely by Iran due to its influence over Hezbollah and the south of the country.6

Saudi Arabia and Syria adopted a tacit division of roles within this tutelary system, with Damascus building up the country’s security and defence apparatus while Riyadh guided the process of economic reconstruction. It was during this time that Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and his allies from a variety of sectarian backgrounds worked closely with Saudi officials to organise the reconstruction process,7 becoming something of a kingmaker in the economic arena.8 However, despite this considerable influence, most of the Saudis’ power only extended as far as their economic patronage, which primarily flowed to Hariri’s Future Party and was then distributed to other party leaders such as Fouad Siniora and Marwan Hamadeh. Unlike with Iran’s Hezbollah, there was no political party functioning as a full-on ideological proxy for Saudi interests and no cohesive Sunni base that shared their goals. In this period Saudi Arabia has had a very moderate and constructive diplomatic role within the Lebanese political landscape.

The rupture with Syria and the Israel–Hezbollah War (2005–2016)

In 2004, Hariri stepped down as prime minister after a series of disagreements with Damascus over the continued presence of Syrian military forces in Lebanon. His subsequent assassination in 2005 led to the Cedar Revolution, a popular outpouring against Syrian involvement in Lebanese affairs which, with the support of Western powers, led to the end of Syria’s tutelary role. Bolstered by this, the Hariri clan’s Future Party won the 2005 parliamentary elections at the head of the March 14 Coalition. After defeating the March 8 Coalition by a margin of 69–57 seats, Fouad Siniora, one of Hariri’s main allies, became prime minister. Saad Hariri, Rafic’s son, then became the new leader of the Hariri clan and acted as a power-player in the internal dynamics of the Future Party, further consolidating their leadership.

Bassel Salloukh argues that ‘long before the popular uprisings snaked their way to Syria, Lebanon had emerged as a site for two overlapping political struggles. At the domestic level, Hariri’s Saudi-sponsored Future Movement sought to re-establish its control over the state’s political, judicial and bureaucratic institutions immediately following the withdrawal of Syrian troops on April 26, 2005.’9 On the regional stage, the Saudis and Iranians continued their manoeuvring for primacy and influence in
Lebanese politics – a struggle reflected in the positioning of the March 8 and March 14 blocs.

But in 2006 came another shock to domestic politics and the regional order alike. Cross-border fighting between Hezbollah and Israel culminated in an air, sea and land invasion by the Israel Defense Forces into Lebanese territory. In an effort to restore the balance and improve their strategic position, Saudi Arabia put pressure on its allies within the country to force the demilitarisation of Hezbollah and limit Iran’s ability to wage a proxy war against Israel. In order to accomplish this, the Saudis rallied an international coalition of Western powers to make similar demands and began using their economic leverage to increase Hariri’s base of popular support. Sectarian cleavages were exacerbated, and Lebanon’s domestic politics were immobilised by a lack of cooperation between pro- and anti-Iranian groups. The main representative of Iran’s agenda was, of course, Hezbollah, but the pro-Saudi groups came from a variety of backgrounds and did not constitute any sort of united front. Michel Aoun, a prominent Maronite politician, sealed a crucial deal with Hezbollah in 2006, and their coalition went on to win the 2009 parliamentary elections; Saudi pressure had failed to demilitarise Hezbollah and deprive Iran of its main avenue of force projection in the Levant. The installation of Saad Hariri as prime minister that same year was simply a concession designed to prevent further sectarian conflict. This status quo would effectively be maintained until large-scale uprisings against the Assad regime emerged in 2011, a development that piqued the interest of all major powers in the region.

With the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2012, Saudi Arabia readjusted its foreign policy strategy yet again. Sectarian tensions in Lebanon heightened, and the Kingdom sought to support groups advocating for regime change in Syria. Their modus operandi involved bankrolling media campaigns, asking Western powers to implement sanctions against the Assad regime, blocking the exploration of gas resources in the region and tightening their control over Lebanon’s legal and economic institutions.  

Joseph Bahout argues that ‘Syria’s crisis is intensifying Sunni-Shia tensions in Lebanon on two levels, symbolic and identity-based on the one hand, and geopolitical or interest based, on the other hand.’ In parallel, Salloukh explains that besides the multi-sectarian coalitions’ disagreements over mixed visions of Lebanon, its security priorities and its alliance choices, these components nevertheless exemplified a political struggle among the mainly Sunni and Shia political elite and their external patrons over who should control the post-Syria Lebanese state. If the Assad regime fell, the Saudis could cut off any remaining avenues of resource provision for Iran’s allies and strangle their opponents in the domestic political arena. But Assad’s regime, with the support of
the Russian Federation, did survive. The 2015 negotiation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 further strengthened the position of the Saudis’ opponents, forcing Riyadh to reconsider its strategy.

Moving on from Acephaly (from 2016)

The year 2016 saw the re-election of Michel Aoun as president, ending a two-year period of political deadlock and acephaly that had paralysed Lebanese domestic politics. Aoun had positioned himself as a candidate friendly to Hezbollah in order to secure his victory and made concessions to Sunni families in the appointment of cabinet positions to broaden his appeal. Saad Hariri accompanied him as prime minister, signifying the agreement between pro-Saudi and pro-Iranian blocs.

After the above election outcomes, the Saudis, under pressure from France,\(^\text{13}\) adopted a less involved but more confrontational policy towards Lebanon. They encouraged Western powers and the Gulf states to level sanctions on the country while curtailing their own economic investments, hastening the collapse of the Lebanese economy. They cooperated with US President Donald Trump to enact a campaign of ‘maximum pressure’ on Iran and its allies. Trump’s administration even withdrew the US from the JCPOA, making the future of the agreement precarious, to say the least. But despite these efforts, Hariri lost ground in the parliament,\(^\text{14}\) and the position of Saudi Arabia’s transaction-based internal alliances weakened. Iran’s ideologically aligned allies triumphed in the 2018 elections and allowed Hariri to keep his position as prime minister. This move would help legitimise the government in the eyes of the Sunni population and de-sectarianise the domestic political situation somewhat, staving off an outbreak of violence. Despite ideological divergences, the pro-Iranian bloc’s recognition that Hariri is the major Sunni representative leader was beyond a mere diplomatic move intended to preserve the socio-religious and political stability of the country. It was, in fact, a strategic sign that Iran’s allies were ready to keep working with the pro-Saudi alliance and also to preserve the peaceful détente in the elite political landscape that was created in 2016 with the installation of Aoun as head of state and Hariri as head of government.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia realised that it committed a deadly mistake in 2017 when it arrested Hariri on Saudi territory and forced him to step down as prime minister and to decry Iran and Hezbollah, damaging his legitimacy and revealing more clearly the transactional nature of their relationship. French President Emmanuel Macron intervened in the situation and negotiated Hariri’s release, but the damage was already done. In 2018, Hariri and his allies lost the parliamentary elections, strengthening
The irreplaceable piece

the electoral position of Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian parties. Macron’s intervention was crucial to re-establish the 2016 national pact among the three major sects of the country, but the Saudis now found themselves in a state of flux, seeking to realign their circumstantial, instrumental relationships in order to counterbalance Iran’s strong ideological ties.

The 2019–2020 popular demonstrations in the country, later dubbed the October Revolution, attacked the government’s inability to provide sufficient services for the civilian population as well as its issues with corruption. The protests led Hariri to tender his resignation, setting the stage for Hassan Diab, with the support of Hezbollah and its allies, to replace him as prime minister. Although the October Revolution did not fundamentally alter the chessboard of Saudi and Iranian manoeuvres, it did provide the Saudis with a chance to undermine a Hezbollah-dominated government, in part by mobilising popular dissent and dissatisfaction.

In the last two years, Saudi Arabia has determined that neutralising Lebanon – in effect, preventing it from becoming an Iranian ally – would be a victory as far as it is concerned. Its new strategic approach involves endorsing and sponsoring, both directly and indirectly, the continuation of the October Revolution of 2019 against the existing political system – this strategic approach has been discussed by the Lebanese political analyst Salem Zahran. Instead of relying on groups like Hariri’s, the Saudis are now working to support popular movements against state corruption and foreign influence. Riyadh knows that its allies within the system have failed to counter Hezbollah during the first and second phases of their foreign policy evolution, but its statesmen may be able to achieve the Kingdom’s goals by empowering popular dissent against all establishment political actors – especially representatives of foreign interference such as Hezbollah.

The Iranian model: Ideological alignment

According to Shahram Akbarzadeh, ‘Iran’s foreign policy could appear chaotic and contradictory. The consolidation of Iran’s reorientation towards Russia under Ahmadinejad’s presidency presented a marked departure from the revolutionary rhetoric of the Islamic regime in its early years.’ In the Iranian press, Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy reorientation and his outreach to the member nations of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization became known as the ‘Look to the East’. Such efforts marked a strong current of Iranian diplomacy towards Russia, China and India in order to find potential allies who could counterbalance the threat posed to Tehran by Western nations who were already heavily involved in the Middle East. Iran’s allies in Lebanon started to reproduce the same discourse by looking to the East
in order to offset the power of the West. In Hezbollah’s view, keeping an eye on the East clearly means seeking out an alignment with the interests of Iran, Russia and China – the main rivals to Saudi Arabia, France and the US in the region.

Iran’s individual strategy in the region involves emphasising points of ideological alignment that will encourage actors within Lebanon to cooperate with Iran regardless of resource provision. Undoubtedly Iran provides resources (often in the form of armaments) to those groups that it cooperates with in this scenario, but due to the underlying ideological alignment of interests, the activities of these groups will continue benefiting Iran’s general strategy in the region even if resources are not provided.

Mabon and Wastnidge emphasise that religion plays a prominent role in domestic and foreign politics across the region. It serves as a source of legitimacy and a means of uniting people. However, it also can play a divisive role for social, political and economic relations. During the Lebanese Civil War, local actors involved in the fighting sought external patrons to support their cause, while external actors sought local patrons in pursuit of their own agendas. The nature of these relationships differed across time and space, reflecting myriad, often competing agendas at play. Shared sectarian identities have provided increased opportunities for the cultivation of trans-state networks and relationships – the ongoing trend towards sectarianisation of political life has increased this possibility as well.17

This approach is possible in large part because of Iran’s strong historical connections to the region as well as the relationships and credibility that they have built up over many years of involvement. It is overall much less concerned with the internal activities of actors within Lebanon and more focused on their external, regional action – take, for instance, Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria. The ultimate goal for this strategy is to expand Iranian power and influence in not only Lebanon, but the region as a whole. Amal Saad argues that Hezbollah’s leadership believes that Lebanese self-determination and sovereignty will only be granted by acquiring deterrence power vis-à-vis Israel. To Hezbollah, this path involves acting in several chessboards, such as the Syrian one, under Iran’s tutelage.18 It is easy to see how this dovetails quite effectively with the Iranian geopolitical objective of constructing its ‘Axis of Resistance’ from its western border to the Mediterranean Sea.

Hezbollah’s opponents in Lebanon, such as the Lebanese Forces Party, the Falange Party and the Future Party, view Iranian influence over Lebanon as an obstacle to national unity and to the progress of the Lebanese state, particularly vis-à-vis the Western countries and the Gulf monarchies. Leaders within the pro-Saudi bloc such as Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces Party, argue that Lebanon is a hostage of what he calls the
‘double occupation model’. In his view, Israel occupies the country through its southern borders while Hezbollah does so through its role in government, implementing the Iranian security agenda in Lebanon.19

From the Saudi allies’ perspective, the asymmetric power of Hezbollah within the country has two impacts. The first involves the breakdown of the existing governmental rules that had underlaid the Saudi strategy of gaining domestic political control, and the second is the creation of a ‘parallel state within the state’ beyond the reach of Riyadh’s influence. The fragmentation between those aligned with the western bloc and those aligned with Iran has a significant effect on Lebanese national defence strategy and to the country’s foreign policy. Moreover, the confrontation also takes place in matters such as the revision of electoral regulations as well as in the spectrum of structural economic reforms. The pro-Iranian coalition has made a trade-off deal by agreeing with an electoral law that preserves the pro-Saudi bloc’s preferred electoral landscape in exchange for that bloc’s not raising the question of demilitarising Hezbollah.20 This compromise, in addition to ensuring internal peace, also aligns with Iran’s preference for regional force-projection capability over internal power dynamics.

This dynamic could also shed light on the processes by which Hezbollah has turned into a regional actor and the consequences this has for regional politics and Lebanese domestic politics alike. It produces new knowledge on how to think about and approach the subject of Lebanon in Middle East geopolitics – from a passive actor or neutral landscape that always becomes entangled and pulled into regional conflicts to an active actor and an active landscape. Furthermore, Iran’s strategy in this theatre can shed light on similar processes that are occurring throughout the Middle East, from the rise of Ansar Allah as a domestic Yemeni party to a regional actor able to deter and strike Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and possibly the rise of other non-state actors such as the Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq. The operational-level manoeuvres in each of these examples vary depending on the local context, but all of them point to a shared strategic framework that the Iranians are employing. Since 2006, Tehran’s regional security doctrine has centred on empowering allied non-state actors to help them become more influential and powerful than state actors in regional geopolitics.21

Iran, with its majority Shia population, has been viewed as a threat by Arab rulers whose rivalry with the country has long dominated the security calculations of Middle Eastern states.22 This perception has played out in Lebanese society in the form of a narrative holding that Hezbollah will dominate Lebanese politics in order to shift the Lebanese sectarian power-sharing system to one mainly dominated by Shia groups. In this narrative, Hezbollah seeks to accomplish this by positioning pro-Iranian allies into top-ranked positions in the state apparatus. This perception has further
deepened pre-existing sectarian cleavages and led the country towards religious tension that erupted into armed clashes in the streets of Beirut in 2008 between pro-Iranian and pro-Saudi groups. Furthermore, this narrative heightened the paralysis of domestic institutions by contributing to a serious vacuum of power – approximately two years without a president in office. Mutual concessions made by both blocs were necessary in order to bring an end to this state of political deadlock. Hariri and his supporters agreed to accept Aoun as president, and Aoun and his supporters agreed to accept Hariri as prime minister. Neither side was able to achieve their most desired outcome, but the division of power in parliament and the pressure of public opinion necessitated such a compromise.23

Lebanese politics and Hezbollah’s emergence

When looking at the analysis of the foundation, trajectory and structure of an organisation like Hezbollah, it is necessary to preliminarily observe the historical situation and the idiosyncrasies that guided the formation of Lebanon’s social, religious and political framework.

The impacts of the Cold War on the geopolitical framework of the Middle East and, in particular, its reflections on the fifteen years of the Lebanese Civil War comprise, in the end, a set of ordinations that make it possible to search the foundations of the group beyond its militaristic apparatus and of their nationalist cause.

Such instruments, however, do not in themselves explain the consolidation of Hezbollah as one of the most influential political forces in the Middle East. One of the most important things to keep in mind when decoding the evolution of the group is to understand that Hezbollah passed through four antagonistic phases linked to regional developments from its foundation to the present day. Some of the defining periods in the evolution of Hezbollah’s regional force projection include the Second Israeli–Lebanese War in 2006 and Hezbollah’s engagement in the Syrian war, starting in 2012, alongside the forces of President Bashar al-Assad’s regime.

However, the historical root and the catalysing elements that drove the emergence of Hezbollah fundamentally derive from the combination of four essential factors: (1) marginalisation of the Shiite population in the Lebanese sociopolitical context; (2) the abandonment of the south of the country by the Lebanese state apparatus, including with regard to the protection of the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity; (3) the Iran–Iraq War between 1980 and 1988; (4) Israeli invasions of Lebanon in 1978 and 1982 known, respectively, as ‘Operation Litani’ and ‘Operation Peace for Galilee’.24
The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the vacuum left by the Lebanese armed forces in defence of the country’s territorial integrity fuelled the emergence of a conglomerate of paramilitary forces called the ‘Lebanese nationalist resistance’ that had been erected to repel Israel’s military incursion. In the midst of this scenario, the seed that led to the constitution of Hezbollah that same year and its consequent official proclamation in 1985 would germinate.\textsuperscript{25}

Since its formation, Hezbollah has gone through four antagonistic political phases marked by profound distinctions. Depending on the analytical perspective, it is possible to say that the group oscillated through intermittent phases of ideological inflections and political inconsistencies. In this sense, the appropriate format that allows a description of the group’s trajectory consists of stratifying its evolution in temporal periods and the indicative classification of the nature of each phase as follows: Structuralist (1982–1984), Fundamentalist (1985–1991), Constructivist (1992–2005) and Regionalist (2006–2016).

\textit{Structuralist phase (1982–1984)}

The first phase, which we will refer to as ‘Structuralist’, marks the foundation of the group as an indigenous movement of nationalist resistance against foreign occupation. The group presented itself as an armed movement of a nationalist nature willing to defend the national territory, particularly the southern region of Lebanon, from repeated Israeli invasions.

In this first phase, Hezbollah’s objective was detached from greater political or hegemonic aspirations both at the national and regional levels. From an armed perspective, it was a relatively rudimentary, ill-equipped organisation that lacked a long-term strategy. Despite this, the movement was recognised, albeit to a limited extent, as a popular and legitimate organisation.

\textit{Fundamentalist phase (1985–1991)}

The second phase is classified as ‘Fundamentalist’. The political topology of the group during this period turned to an extreme bias from the religious perspective and a refractory compass from the sociopolitical perspective. The group oscillated between oblique nationalist court speeches and constant flirtations with separatism, often referring to the possibility of southern Lebanon becoming independent from the rest of the country, establishing an Islamic republic along the lines of Iran.\textsuperscript{26}

The impact of the Iranian Revolution and the course of the Iran–Iraq War influenced the organisation’s political narrative significantly. Particularly at
this stage, the rate of rejection of Hezbollah was high among the Lebanese public and, above all, among secular Shiite Muslims.

The eagerness to gain legitimacy and the desire to expand its power over the predominantly Shiite pockets resulted in two wars between Hezbollah and the main Shiite political party at the time, the Amal Movement, which took place in 1988 and 1989.27 The Amal, established in 1974, was the alma mater of the top leaders who laid the foundation of Hezbollah in the 1980s.

It is important to note that during the 1980s, the relationship between Syria and Iran in the Lebanese political landscape had been affected by scepticism and diverging views about the role of Hezbollah in the country. According to Edward Wastnidge, ‘There were some tensions between Iran and Syria during the 1980s due to Hezbollah’s rise, checking the power of the Syrian-backed Shia faction Amal.’28 Damascus, for its part, was concerned about the Amal faction’s loss of hegemony within the Shia base, but eventually came to a political armistice with Tehran.

In 1989, when peace negotiations between the various Lebanese political factions were initiated with the aim of imposing an end to the civil war that devastated the country, Hezbollah was one of the only national forces that rejected the Taif Agreement,29 adopted in October 1989 in Saudi Arabia. The Taif Agreement, in essence, has been operating since 1990 as a new ‘social contract’ and a legal-political framework tailored to address the asymmetries that outlined the moulds of sectarian democracy in Lebanon.30 According to Salloukh,31 the Taif Agreement could be read in many different ways. It could be framed as a ceasefire agreement among the Lebanese militias after the civil war, as a document reorganising the sharing of power and governance in Lebanon through an equal redistribution of offices among the major sects – but it also elevates sectarianism as the only mode of political organisation and the only meaningful one – where independent movements are not seen as legitimate outside their sects’ ruling leaders. The preservation of this status quo allows Tehran and Riyadh to interfere constantly in the domestic politics through their mutual allies and sectarian linkages.


The ‘Constructivist’ phase, however, represents a shift in Hezbollah’s structure, approach and modus operandi. In practice, a revolution was underway that intended for a re-foundation of the organisation’s structural pillars. Part of these reforms led to the removal of the party’s general secretary, Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli, considered the main actor responsible for the intra-Shiite conflict with the Amal Movement and an obstacle to the Taif Agreement.
In addition, al-Tufayli and his political nucleus were responsible for the installation of the ‘Fundamentalist’ phase and the divisionism implanted in the country’s sociopolitical sphere, especially in the Shiite Bantustans in the south of the territory, in the Beqaa Valley region and in the southern periphery of Beirut known as Dahieh. The decision to expel al-Tufayli was formulated by the young party leadership, captained by Sayyed Abbas al-Musawi and Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah in concert with Tehran and Damascus – who also saw in the separatist narrative brought up by al-Tufayli and his supporters a dangerous and anachronistic risk. As a result of Syrian and Iranian influence on Hezbollah (and Lebanon in general), al-Tufayli was left with no option but to resign from his position.

This period was decisive for Hezbollah to direct its strategic priorities, particularly vis-à-vis its political aspiration to brand itself on the national political scene as a political party, as a nationalist resistance movement and as a social assistance entity. Therefore, at this stage, Hezbollah was compelled to carry out a profound reform to survive within Lebanese politics, recognising the legitimacy of the Taif Agreement and adopting a more pragmatic stance on the domestic political scene.

Since rising to the post of Secretary General of the party in 1992, Nasrallah has emerged as a skilled articulator and expert speaker, captivating the masses and reinvigorating Hezbollah’s identity. Political pragmatism and the change in the group’s approach within Lebanese society were determining factors in the party’s rapprochement with the country’s various Christian and Muslim political segments. At this stage, Hezbollah crossed the bridge from sectarian political culture to nationalist political culture.

Additionally, Nasrallah’s prudence and coolness in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, as well as its geostrategic implications for the country and the region, placed him among the most influential political leaders in the Arab world. Indeed, Nasrallah emerged as an Aristotelian political actor in every way: a strategist capable of deciphering in detail the rules of the regional political game. Nevertheless, despite Nasrallah’s adroit political manoeuvring, there was also a great deal of dissatisfaction among members of the political elite who aligned themselves with the March 14 Coalition. Some of these political elites, particularly among the Sunni and Maronite segments of the population, were afraid that Nasrallah’s rapid accumulation of power on the national stage would weaken their own leadership positions within their sects. With his increasing power, Nasrallah’s ability to potentially oppose the economic interests of certain major groups grew significantly, compounding these concerns.
Hezbollah’s ‘Regionalist’ phase began in the period following the Second Israeli–Lebanese War in 2006. In practically all senses, this new phase has become emblematic for Hezbollah, Lebanon and the Middle East. It was during this phase that Hezbollah cemented its status as one of the most militarily powerful groups in the region, even though it was technically a non-state actor.

The results of the July War, as the group calls it, sparked a series of internal and external disputes, deepening the political–sectarian divide in Lebanon and also triggering a series of schisms between Hezbollah and some Arab countries in the Persian Gulf. The group’s military power came to be seen as an artefact of ‘regional deterrence’ vis-à-vis the parameters that determine the distribution of regional power.

One of the striking features of this phase is the degree of power and influence that Hezbollah came to hold over the framework of collective security in the Middle East. In addition, the group’s subsequent engagement in the Syrian civil war alongside the armed forces of the regime – their combined forces fighting against the interests of Daesh and its supporters such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey according to Bashar al-Assad himself – increased Hezbollah’s relevance at the regional level.39 The combination of these two theorems shows that the group is no longer a political appendage constrained by local politics or an actor with a restricted role in Lebanese territory. Hezbollah came to be seen as a key player in the gear of the pro-Iranian bloc called the ‘Axis of Resistance’ and a geostrategic danger to regional powers antagonistic to the Russian–Syrian–Iranian strategic alignment in particular.

The group’s rise to the level of regional actor changed the strategic framework of the Middle-Eastern geopolitical playing field, especially as a non-state actor began to impact the rules of the game among the main power holders in the region such as Israel, Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, further intensifying the asymmetries between the group and the Arab countries that oppose Iran.

In Amal Saad’s theoretical framework of the structure of Hezbollah within Lebanon, she states that ‘Hizbullah’s deployment of both “hard” military power and “soft” normative power throughout the region represents a new paradigm in international relations; it is a non-state actor which performs some of the central functions of the state, effectively making it a state within a non-state in the Lebanese context, while also fulfilling some of the strategic imperatives of a regional power.’40 These strategic imperatives involve not only operations within Lebanon, but also the projection of force beyond its borders, such as in the Syrian civil war.
However, it is important to underline that the military and political cost of Hezbollah’s participation in the Syrian conflict is substantial. From the group’s perspective, engagement in the Syrian conflict would be not only a strategic involvement to assist an historic ally like the Bashar al-Assad regime, but a matter of survival for Lebanon’s organisation and socio-religious cohesion.

On the other hand, in the post-2006 period, the party constantly emphasised that its military arsenal would not be used against Arabs and Muslims, but rather in the defence of Lebanon’s territorial integrity against eventual confrontation with the Israel Defense Forces. In this case, its intervention in Syria overturns this premise and casts a shadow over what the group’s strategy and narrative will look like in the post-Syrian conflict process.

The conversion of Hezbollah into a regional player and one of the strongholds of strategic influence in the region reveals that the organisation has reached the threshold of influence capable of impacting not only the pillars of the collective security order, but also the outlines of the geostrategic architecture of the processes of peace and war in the Middle East, especially in the Levant. Saad explains some of the implications of this new position of power for Hezbollah, which, while proving costly in human and material terms, has increased its influence exponentially and given added credence to its threats. Its interoperability with other actors in the ‘Axis of Resistance’ and the interlinking of all battlefield arenas has transformed its ‘Resistance Army’ into the backbone of a much larger armed body which is ready and willing to deploy ‘hundreds of thousands of resistance fighters from all around the Arab and Islamic world’ to Hezbollah’s defence in case of an Israeli attack, to borrow Nasrallah’s words.

Finally, it is easy to see that since the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, Beirut has become a key player in the intricate political landscape that mires the Arab and Muslim world. Furthermore, it occupies a position on the central stage of the geopolitical clash playing out between some of the main regional powers in the Middle East, especially the Iranians and the Saudis. The country’s geostrategic location makes it into a region of vital importance for any power seeking to extend its control over the Levant.

Conclusion

The clash between Saudi Arabia and Iran manifests in a range of different ways across the region as a consequence of the interaction of regional forces with local politics. Across the Middle East, religious, ethnic, social, communal, tribal and economic issues have provided opportunities for Saudi Arabia and Iran to exert influence across the region, albeit in myriad
ways across different spaces. For example, the way the rivalry between the two states manifests in Yemen is dramatically different to Lebanon as a consequence of the interaction of geopolitical issues with local politics and identities.

One of the main effects of this tutelary model competition exercised by Iran and Saudi Arabia over the past years within Lebanon is a pronounced diminution of sovereignty. The long-term establishment of tutelary models of this type has effects that reach far and deep in sociopolitical power dynamics both inside and outside of the country. Practically all of Lebanon’s political and state structures have been affected, and the longer that the tutelary models stay in place, the greater their penetration will be.

In recent years, the emergence of the March 8 and March 14 political coalitions and the complete state of impasse that existed between them from 2014 to 2016 has demonstrated the immense degree of polarisation within Lebanon. But although the country has long experienced serious (and often violent) sectarian-based political divides, these recent developments have indicated the extent to which these divides have become inextricably linked to the regional power struggle playing out between Tehran and Riyadh. Lebanon remains a heated geopolitical battleground, with its internal political struggles becoming increasingly subsumed within the strategic chessboard that pits the interests of the Saudi–Europe–US axis against their Russia–Syria–Iran-aligned counterparts.

This leaves us with some important questions to ask about Lebanon’s situation, both in terms of the nation’s future and our conceptual understanding of its political reality: does national self-determination still matter as a concept for our understanding of Lebanon’s government? And can we still consider Lebanon a sovereign state?

Hence, we must analyse Hezbollah’s domestic and regional involvements. Hezbollah has become the source of state power of Lebanon. Tactical pragmatism allowed the organisation to become more than one important actor in the Lebanese political scene and willing for other groups to share power or control. Hezbollah became the stakeholder in matters regarding Lebanese security and regional foreign policy.

While the Iranians are aiming to expand their power so that they can play a strong role in determining the rules of the game and the power-based hierarchy in the region, the Saudis are aiming primarily to stop them from expanding their power. While the Iranians aim to empower Shia factions in Lebanon and other countries, the Saudis aim to empower Sunnis with the goal of offsetting the Shia ‘Axis of Resistance’ and increasing the relative power of the US–Europe–Saudi axis instead.

Furthermore, the Saudi strategy has not been working effectively in recent years. Even when they make progress in controlling the internal
power structures of the Lebanese state, they have been unable to counteract the activities of Iran-aligned groups conducting external, regionally focused operations. The Saudis have often found that as soon as the flow of resources stops, those who have aligned themselves with the Saudis in the recent past will generally pivot in order to best serve their own interests. During the years of the Obama administration, the Saudi government also became increasingly concerned that the US would reach some sort of ‘separate peace’ with Iran through a compromise such as the JCPOA nuclear deal. Since the election of the more hard-line Trump to the US presidency in 2016, this has been less of a concern, but Mohammad bin Salman and other members of Saudi leadership will still need to continue adjusting their strategy if they wish to effectively counterbalance the increasing expansion of Iranian power in the region.

Lastly, the geostrategic value of Lebanon is anchored in two vital factors. The first pillar is based on Hezbollah’s ability to acquire more robust deterrence power vis-à-vis Israel. The second consists essentially of the Assad regime’s future prospects and the protection of the Syrian territorial unity. Iran’s strategy for the consolidation of the ‘Axis of Resistance’ depends ultimately on these two factors. Saudi diplomatic efforts will be directed towards constantly opposing the Iranian expansion by pressuring and sanctioning Tehran in association with their traditional Western allies. One fundamental question will remain about the future of the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh: will Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy doctrine be effective this time, or will it fail as it has since the 1980s? While the puzzle remains unsolved for now, Lebanon endures as an irreplaceable arena for Tehran’s and Riyadh’s foreign policy strategies to play out against one another.

Notes

2 This made intuitive sense as a strategic path for the Saudis to follow due to the nature of the consociational power-sharing arrangement provided for in the post-civil war Lebanese agreement. Under this arrangement, the prime minister is always a Sunni Muslim, and their cabinet appointments often fall along sectarian lines.
9 Ibid.
12 Salloukh, ‘The Syrian War’.
18 Saad, ‘Challenging the Sponsor-Proxy Model’.
22 Mabon, ‘Muting the Trumpets of Sabotage’.
Mohseni and Kalout, ‘Iran’s Axis of Resistance Rises’.


The Amal Movement is the acronym of Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniyya (Lebanese Resistance Regiments). Additionally, the word ‘amal’ means ‘hope’ in Arabic. Amal was founded in 1974 by a religious and political leader, Imam Musa al-Sadr, who was seen as an important emerging voice of the Shiite Muslim population in the 1960s and 1970s.


The Taif Agreement was mediated by the Saudis in the city of Taif, forging a new governmental arrangement between the political factions in Lebanon. The accords are celebrated as a new act of national reconciliation.


The Secretary General of Hezbollah from 1991 to 1992, al-Musawi was killed by Israeli forces in February 1992.

The current Secretary General of Hezbollah since 1992, Nasrallah is considered one of the most influential figures in Middle Eastern politics and the transformation of Hezbollah into social, political, and military camps is attributed largely to him.

In this period, a large part of the Lebanese political spectrum recognised the group as a legitimate movement, and its legality in the regional playing field was not contested. This dynamic was altered somewhat by the 2006 conflict with Israel and the 2011 beginning of Hezbollah’s participation in the Syrian civil war.


Ibid.


Exclusive interview conducted with the President of the Syrian Arab Republic Bashar al-Assad with the American TV network NBC, 13 July 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=45odEv_1DAY (accessed 20 May 2021).
40 Saad, ‘Challenging the Sponsor-Proxy Model’.
42 Ibid.
Capability and culpability: Iranian and Saudi rivalry in the Syrian conflict

Christopher Phillips

The Syrian conflict is a useful case study to explore Iranian and Saudi Arabian rivalry.¹ Both states took an active interest in the civil war from the beginning, each seeking an outcome that would benefit its wider regional ambitions. Iran, allied with the Ba’ath regime in Damascus since 1979, resolved early on to aid President Bashar al-Assad in the face of first demonstrations and then an armed insurgency. This initially consisted of an ‘advisory mission’ in early 2011 but, within a few years, had ballooned into vital economic and military support that allowed the embattled Assad to survive. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, was slower to oppose its rival’s ally. Before the uprising ties between Damascus and Riyadh, never especially friendly, had warmed and King Abdullah was cautious to condemn a fellow autocrat for crushing protestors. However, by late 2011 Saudi Arabia had decisively turned on Assad, calling for his departure and urging sanctions. A year later it was sponsoring the opposition movement, sending weapons to armed rebels and urging its ally, the US, to intervene.

However, after a decade of war, Assad has clung on to power. Though it has been costly, Iran is now deeply embedded in Syria, while Saudi Arabia has effectively given up on ousting Assad, ending support for the opposition. This chapter asks how we can explain this comparative strategic defeat for Riyadh and victory for Tehran. It draws on debates within international relations scholarship to ask whether either had a structural advantage going in the conflict, or whether the outcomes were more the result of the decision-making of the ruling elites. Can Iran’s success in Syria be explained primarily by structural factors as systemic realists would argue, with a focus on the international and regional system, material capabilities and international alliances? Alternatively, were ideational tools, such as utilising Shia identity and anti-Western ideology the key to its success, as constructivists would emphasise? Or is Saudi incompetence the better explanation, placing more focus on the domestic factors limiting Riyadh’s foreign policy effectiveness, in contrast to more domestic security from Tehran, as neoclassical realists might argue? This chapter will suggest that all played a role. While
the structural factors clearly were important, the significance of domestic and ideational factors alongside them suggests that systemic answers are insufficient alone to explain the conflict’s outcome. Neoclassical realist (NCR) theories help to better explain both Saudi failure and Iranian success by showing how domestic factors interacted with systemic forces after 2011, with ideational sometimes playing a role too. The Iranian leadership proved more adept at taking advantage of the changing regional environment, maximising their material, ideological and international capabilities. In contrast, Saudi Arabia made errors, often due to the limitations of the personnel in charge, failing to utilise the advantages they did have.

Systemic change on the eve of Syria’s war

The 2011 Arab Uprisings heightened the fierceness in the Saudi–Iranian rivalry, providing new arenas of competition like Syria and Yemen, but the contextual systemic change was caused by structural shifts a decade earlier. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Saudi Arabia had successfully found ways of preventing this emerging rival from expanding its power considerably in the Middle East. Systemic realists such as Gregory Gause have argued that it did this primarily by building successful international anti-Iran coalitions, first with Iraq, then the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the US. In this it used its material capabilities, primarily vast oil wealth, to build alliances that ‘balanced’ and therefore contained the Iranian threat. However, the regional system within which Saudi strategy had thrived shifted as a result of the 2003 Iraq War. This created space and opportunity for Iran that had not hitherto existed. In contrast to before, according to Gause, Saudi Arabia subsequently ‘under-balanced’ its rival and failed to build a coalition to halt Iran’s advance.

Systemic realists believe the balance of power in an international system, measured by a state’s relative capabilities such as the size of its economy, population, level of development and willingness to convert these into military power, influences a government’s behaviour. Though this structure does not determine their actions it ‘shapes and shoves’, presenting constraints and creating incentives. According to this analysis, the 2010s witnessed a shift from a global unipolar balance of power dominated by an unrestrained US, to one that is increasingly multipolar, with a rising China, a militarily resurgent Russia and a more cautious US ‘shaped and shoved’ by how their rivals might react to certain events. Though the Middle East interacts with and is impacted by this global shift in power balance, it witnessed a shift to multipolarity earlier, in the wake of the 2003 Iraq War. While the unipolar ‘Pax Americana’ of the 1990s in the Middle East was
never as extensive as some have claimed, to an extent the sizeable American presence in the region from the late 1980s did ‘shape and shove’ the US friends’ and enemies’ actions, with concern over how Washington would react to events influencing the decision-making process.7

Iran and Saudi Arabia’s rivalry existed before this regional (and later global) shift, but the systemic changes greatly influenced how their enmity played out in the 2000s. The removal of Saddam Hussein in Iraq empowered Iran. It not only allowed it to influence Iraqi politics, building clients and allies in a former enemy state, but it also removed a physical obstacle to easier penetration of the wider Middle East. This in turn prompted a change in behaviour from Saudi Arabia, worried by its rival’s expansion. While Riyadh proved unable to rival Tehran for influence in Iraq, it sought to enhance its footprint in Lebanon and Yemen in the face of what it saw as Iranian expansion. The rivalry was asymmetric. Saudi Arabia treated Iran as its primary threat, while Iran saw Saudi Arabia as part of a wider Western threat, led by the US and Israel. From a systemic realist perspective each has different advantages and limitations in terms of material capabilities and international alliances. But the shifts after 2003 were more to Iran’s favour, especially compared to before the Iraq War.

In terms of material capabilities, each had different advantages and limitations. Iran has a larger population, while Saudi Arabia has more disposable wealth. Iran has a bigger conventional military, but Saudi Arabia had more up-to-date equipment, especially its air force.8 Importantly, though, neither state showed an interest or willingness to engage in direct interstate conflict, which gave Iran an advantage as it had superior non-conventional military forces in arenas such as Iraq and, later, Syria. One huge advantage Saudi Arabia had over Iran was its international alliances which, according to systemic realism, could tip the balance to restrain Iran – as was the case until 2003. On paper, Saudi Arabia had more powerful allies than Iran: the US, plus most European and Arab states. In contrast Iran had close economic ties to China, though no more so than Saudi Arabia, and a growing security relationship with Russia. Compared to Saudi Arabia, Iran had for a long time been internationally isolated.9 Yet, as Gregory Gause notes, after 2003, and especially 2011, Riyadh was not able to translate its nominal alliances into successful restraints on Tehran.10 This made the 2003–2011 shift all the more significant as Saudi Arabia was at a structural disadvantage given that the pillar of its previous Iran containment strategy – the US – was becoming more withdrawn after the election of Barack Obama in 2008.

Before either became involved in the Syrian war, therefore, the global and regional systemic environment was already shifting to Iran’s favour. The remainder of this chapter will outline further how this had an impact on how both states engaged with the crisis and why Iran ended up on top.
However, it is important to note that these pre-2011 shifts were not entirely the result of systemic factors and the systemic realist analysis underplays the role of ideational and domestic factors. Ideological appeal was an important asset utilised by both sides, especially given the sectarian element often present in arenas such as Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. Before 2011 both Iran and Saudi Arabia had successfully deployed ideology to mobilise: Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan in the 1980s and Lebanon in the 2000s, and Iran in Lebanon and Iraq in the 1980s and 2000s. More immediately in the wake of 2003, domestic factors interacted with the structural shifts to facilitate the change in Iranian and Saudi polices. In Iran hard-liners rose to power, culminating in the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, who were more willing than their predecessors to be expansionist in the Middle East. This was also greatly aided by economic growth that enabled a more activist foreign policy. Domestically in Saudi Arabia, the leadership was thrown by the emergence of Barack Obama, whom they experienced as unfriendly compared to George W. Bush. Throughout his term, the Saudis appeared to prefer to hold a grudge than adapt to the new leader in the White House. This would set the scene for Riyadh’s failures in the Syrian war.

Arms, funds and fighters

Once Iran and Saudi Arabia decided to intervene in Syria, both made use of their varying material advantages. For Iran, that meant its superiority at utilising non-conventional military forces. The 2011 ‘Advisory Mission’ to Syria was dominated by members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) Quds Force, and it was this group that expanded its presence and role in the conflict. By 2013 planes were regularly flying from Iran to Damascus carrying money, weapons and personnel, while the Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani was playing a leading role in the war effort. Importantly, though, Iran did not commit many of its own troops, primarily just a few thousand Quds Force officers. Instead, Soleimani’s role was threefold. Firstly, he recruited foreign Shia fighters, neither Iranian nor Syrian, to fight on Assad’s behalf. Initially the lead was taken by Iraqi fighters that Soleimani had worked with against the US in Iraq in the 2000s, and the Lebanese militia Hezbollah. As the war went on, he created new brigades of Afghani and Pakistani Shia fighters, the Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainebiyoun, respectively, to supplement his depleted forces. Secondly, he reorganised the Syrian military. This included the creating of a new National Defence Force that channelled various pro-Assad irregular militia into an effective military body that took on local guard duties,
Capability and culpability

freeing Assad’s regular military to fight on the front line. Finally, Soleimani took a leading role in strategic military decisions, such as withdrawing Assad’s forces from the less defensible peripheral east and focusing attention on certain key battlegrounds.

Even though Saudi Arabia had some superior military assets, notably its air force, it was not willing to deploy these in Syria. Instead it used its previously reliable asset of money to fund and support a range of opposition fighting forces. Riyadh was slower than Turkey and Qatar to support the armed rebels, but by 2012 it was using Syrian tribal contacts, its Lebanese contact Okab Sakr and other personal ties to funnel money to various fighting groups, mostly aligned with the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA). By late 2012 it arranged for a large shipment of Croatian weaponry to be sent to rebels in southern Syria via Jordan. Ties with this group eventually became the foundation for Saudi Arabia’s support, alongside the US, France and Jordan of ‘the Southern Front’, a group of FSA fighters who largely rejected the growing Islamism present among most rebels. That said, Riyadh simultaneously arranged to finance Jaysh al-Islam, a Salafist group it backed as a rival to more radical jihadists emerging within the opposition such as the al-Qaeda affiliate Jubhat al-Nusra.  

Yet the deployment of Iranian and Saudi capabilities yielded different results. Iran, after much fighting, secured Assad’s survival. In contrast, Saudi Arabia had pulled its funding for all the rebel groups it backed by 2017 and both the Southern Front and Jaysh al-Islam were militarily defeated a year later.

This fits the systemic realist analysis. Iran’s superior capabilities – its access to more effective non-conventional military forces – contributed to its success. This was aided by the regional system. The multipolar regional environment ensured that Saudi Arabia was not the only regional sponsor of opposition fighters, with Qatar and Turkey also playing a prominent role. While Ankara and Doha shared Riyadh’s goal of regime change, they were not aligned and favoured a Muslim Brotherhood government after Assad – anathema to Saudi Arabia. As a result the three powers backed different rebel militia, contributing to splits in the opposition movement, lessening their effectiveness. In contrast, Iran was the only regional power backing Assad, and the only power to send him direct military support for the first four years of the war prior to Russia’s intervention in 2015. The regional system, therefore, contributed to the disunity of the rebels and the unity of Assad’s forces.

However, these systemic explanations give only a partial picture and ideational and domestic factors also contributed to Saudi Arabia’s and Iran’s relative failures and successes in Syria. It is important, for example, to consider why Iran was more effective than Saudi Arabia at mobilising foreign fighters. The systemic realist emphasis on deploying resources such...
as material reward, that is, paying a salary, was not insignificant. Many of the Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun fighters, for example, were poor refugees living in Iran, often promised full Iranian citizenship as well as a salary in exchange for service. But ideational appeal was also significant. Shiism was an important identity that Iran emphasised to bring fighters to Syria. For example, along with the Afghan and Pakistani Shia in the Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun, Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Iraqi militia such as the al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade mobilised along religious/sect lines. The al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade had initially formed specifically to defend the Sayyida Zaynab Shia shrine in south Damascus from rebel attacks. By mid-2013 up to 10,000 Syrian and foreign Shia, especially Iraqi, had joined the brigade, which took its name from a son of Imam Ali, a Shia icon. Similarly, Hezbollah had been present in Syria since at least 2012, and its Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah used sectarian language in televised speeches to justify its presence. However, it is important to note that sect was not the only ideational lever Iran successfully pulled. Since the 2000s Iran also posed as a leader of the anti-Western ‘Axis of Resistance’, appealing to non-Shia such as Hamas in Palestine. This was not lost on Nasrallah, who in his speeches blamed the US and Israel for the war in Syria as much as ‘takfiris’ (a term meaning radical jihadists but often directed only at Sunnis). In contrast to al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade, Nasrallah was speaking to his supporters beyond the Shia. Similarly, the Syrian militia within the National Defence Forces that Iran helped to build included both religion-based Shia, Christian, Druze and Alawi groups as well as more ideological entities focussed on being anti-Western, pro-Ba’athist and Syrian nationalist. The ideological levers Iran utilised were diverse and situational – with different ties emphasised according to the groups it was trying to mobilise.

Saudi Arabia arguably had the potential for more ideational appeal, but did not reap the same reward. It also attempted to utilise different ties: pitching itself as a leader of Sunni Muslims against Shia Iran, and of Arabs against Persians, yet with limited success. Having spent decades challenging the legitimacy of Arab nationalism, its appeals to Arabs unsurprisingly received little enthusiasm. Moreover, Arab nationalism was a cornerstone of Ba’athism, so Riyadh likely correctly realised it would not attract much support within the opposition. Its Sunni Islamic credentials were stronger, and its relationship with Jaysh al-Islam had a religious element. The father of Jaysh’s founder, Zahran Alloush, was a Saudi Salafist preacher, and the group’s creation was brokered by Saudi intelligence utilising transnational Salafist networks. Indeed, Alloush made some explicitly sectarian statements, saying he would ‘cleanse the Levant of the filth of Rafidis and Rafidism [Shia]’, and that ‘the Shi’a are still despicable and pitiful through history’. Yet unlike Iran, Saudi Arabia’s utilisation of this ideational tool.
was limited at best. Again, structural factors were a hindrance. Religiously motivated Sunni fighters had rival international patrons in Syria: Qatar and Turkey. While Iran was largely alone in its pitch as the voice of religiously motivated Shia fighters, Saudi Arabia could not unite religious Sunnis behind itself alone. Domestic factors also came into play. Compared to Iran, Saudi Arabia felt far more threatened by Islamists at home and so was reluctant to sponsor them. Indeed, it only turned to Jaysh once it became clear that Riyadh’s preferred rebel grouping, the more secular former army officers of the FSA, were losing ground in the intra-opposition rivalries to Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Islamists and al-Qaeda-inspired jihadists. Yet even once it sponsored Jaysh it actively encouraged them to moderate their sectarian impulses. Under Saudi tutelage Jaysh watered down its sectarian slogans, first under Zahran and then under his cousin, Mohammed Alloush, who replace Zahran after his death in 2015.

Saudi Arabia’s reluctance to back either rebels aligned to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) or al-Qaeda, despite sometimes being effective fighters, shows not only the importance of ideational factors in explaining Riyadh’s relative failures in Syria, but also of domestic concerns. Saudi views of both Islamist actors came primarily from the threat they posed at home, with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) having launched several attacks within Saudi Arabia in the 2000s, and the MB having helped form the Sahwa Saudi opposition movement. Yet this concern was not the only way that Saudi engagement with the Syrian opposition was conditioned by domestic factors as neoclassical realists would assert. The limitations of the Saudi personnel involved in liaising with and arming the Syrian opposition played a part in their failures. ‘The Syria file’ was initially handled by King Abdullah’s son, Abdulaziz, but, with Riyadh’s clients not making the headway expected, he was replaced by veteran Prince Bandar bin Sultan in July 2012. Bandar had played a prominent role in arming the Mujahideen in Afghanistan in the 1980s and so was presumed to be an expert in non-conventional warfare. However, he proved to be of limited talents. He enjoyed some personal contacts among Syria’s tribes and Salafists and leveraged these to forge the alliance with Jaysh al-Islam. However, despite his confidence Bandar proved incapable and was unable to marshal rebel forces into a united front. He exaggerated the influence of Jaysh, for example, who in reality rarely stretched beyond the Ghouta region of Damascus. A sign of his limited success was his removal from the Syrian file in April 2014, to be replaced by Muhammad bin Nayef – a more modest character who seemed to recognise the limited scope for Saudi success by this stage and focussed his attention primarily on the Southern Front.

In contrast the personnel behind Iran’s Syrian policy were more competent and effective. Much has been written about Soleimani, who evidently
played a key role in engineering Assad’s survival, as outlined above. However, Iran’s Syrian policy was not simply down to the whims of one man, as it appeared to be in Saudi Arabia, but rather something that was institutionalised in the IRGC. Soleimani was not the only IRGC officer dispatched to Syria. The former commander of the IRGC’s Greater Tehran unit, Hossein Hamadani, who had dealt with the Iranian regime’s crushing of the 2009 Green Movement unrest, was also dispatched in the 2011 advisory group and played a key role in plotting early counter-insurgency strategy. Moreover, when Hamadani, and later Soleimani, was killed, this did not cause a major shift in Iranian policy towards Syria. While individuals were important, and certainly Soleimani’s expertise was missed, they were cogs in a well-run pro-Assad operation, rather than the sole driver as individuals were in Saudi Arabia. Again, the importance of leading elites and domestic power structures playing a role in the effectiveness of Syrian policy.

**International and regional alliances**

Alongside material capabilities, systemic realists also make much of international alliances as assets for foreign policy that are tied to the international and regional system. That Saudi Arabia was unable to leverage its alliances to get its preferred outcome in Syria, but Iran maximised its far weaker alliance hand, seems to support the systemic realist explanation. As discussed above, Riyadh had a much longer list of more powerful allies than Iran. Yet Saudi Arabia was unable to form a united front with regional allies despite sharing the same goal of toppling Assad and was not able to persuade its major international ally, the US, to intervene. In contrast Iran did persuade Russia, a state with which it enjoyed far less closeness than Riyadh did with Washington, to intervene in 2015. A systemic realist would argue that the shift towards multipolarity at both the regional and international levels meant that Saudi Arabia’s formerly formidable alliances were of less value. Similarly, this change opened space not only for Iran but also for Russia that had not existed before, shifting the advantage to Iran.

At the regional level, at first Saudi Arabia did present a united front with key allies against Assad. Cooperation was especially close with Qatar, with the two co-sponsoring actions against Assad at the Arab League in late 2011, including sanctions and freezing Syria’s membership. Similarly, Saudi Arabia endorsed and helped finance a Qatar-led Arab League Peace Plan in December 2011 that sent neutral monitors to Syria but was designed to pave the way for Assad’s departure. The extent of Qatari–Saudi cooperation was displayed by the events that followed this plan’s failure. On
19 January 2012 Riyadh announced the plan had failed due to Assad’s repeated violations, and that it was withdrawing funding and its monitors. The very same day a new Arab League plan was announced by Qatar, then holding the revolving presidency, that explicitly called for Assad to stand down. When Assad rejected this both states called for the Arab League to refer the matter to the UN, which it did. A month later, at a ‘Friends of Syria’ meeting aimed at coordinating the international opposition to Assad, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar called for the anti-Assad rebels to be armed.22

Yet this was the high point of Saudi cooperation with regional allies. As discussed above, Qatar and Turkey favoured Muslim Brotherhood-aligned rebels, whom Saudi Arabia loathed, leading to different militia being sponsored. The same story played out with the opposition in exile. As Saudi Arabia increasingly fell out with Turkey and Qatar, not just over Syria but also Egypt where the Brotherhood had been elected to power, each sponsored different factions in the exiled Syrian opposition groups: the Syrian National Council (SNC) and then the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC). This reached a climax in summer 2013 when Riyadh actively wrestled the SOC from Qatari influence, demanding more power be given to its allies at the expense of Doha’s. Such was the extent of Saudi and Qatari infighting that Moaz al-Khatib, the SOC president, resigned in 2013 in protest.23

While this struggle ultimately ended in Riyadh’s favour it came at a cost: the SOC was increasingly seen as a foreign puppet beset by divisions and not a viable government in exile. This deterred both armed rebels on the ground from aligning themselves with the SOC and any potential plotters from within the Assad regime to throw in their lot – all benefitting Assad and Iran. In keeping with the systemic realist analysis, had the regional system been bipolar or unipolar, as in the 1990s, Qatar and Turkey would have been less likely to pursue such varying agendas. Alternatively, Saudi Arabia would have been under more pressure to put aside its anti-MB reservations and align in a united anti-Iran front. However, multipolarity brought with it the emergence of a new Turkey–Qatar–MB power bloc in addition to the Saudi-led and Iranian-led groupings, which contributed to ineffective support for the Syrian opposition.

Multipolarity at the international level similarly played a role in Riyadh’s inability to persuade the US to intervene decisively in Syria. The Obama administration was reluctant to get dragged in, despite calling for Assad’s departure in August 2011 and militarily aiding a select group of rebels from 2012. Saudi Arabia, like Turkey and Qatar, had always favoured direct US military action as the route out of the crisis, urging a Libya-style intervention on several occasions in 2012–2013. In summer 2013, one appeared imminent after Assad had crossed Obama’s self-declared ‘red line’ of using chemical weapons. Obama’s team drew up a plan for a retaliatory strike
and Saudi Arabia was heavily supportive. Saudi Arabia and Qatar even reportedly offered to underwrite the full cost of the military operation. Riyadh also proposed putting a motion to the UN General Assembly to give the US legal cover and volunteered its air force to counter any potential Iranian retaliation in the Gulf. However, not only did Obama then call off the strike, opting instead for a deal with Russia to get Assad to disarm his chemical arsenal peacefully, but Washington did not inform Riyadh of its U-turn. Instead the Saudi leadership discovered the news from CNN, illustrating Obama’s disregard for its Saudi ally, infuriating King Abdullah. Again, systemic realism offers some explanation for this. Obama was incredibly reluctant to get sucked into what he saw as another Middle Eastern quagmire after the traumas of Iraq and the relative weakness of the US economy after the 2008 crash. The fact he negotiated with Russia to disarm Assad rather than impose a settlement with the threat of American force illustrated how the unipolar era was coming to an end.

However, while this structural analysis is useful in explaining Saudi Arabia’s inability to effectively utilise its alliances in Syria, it once again offers only a limited picture. Domestic factors and ideology were not insignificant. Regarding the US, a combination of personality clashes and diplomatic incompetence hampered Saudi efforts. Obama and Abdullah didn’t get on personally. While Bush’s amiable character had fitted well with the Saudi personal approach to politics, including numerous invitations to his ranch in Crawford, Texas, Obama’s more detached professionalism left Abdullah cold. This was all made much worse by Obama’s decision to abandon Egyptian president and Saudi ally Hosni Mubarak at the beginning of the Arab Uprisings, which enraged Abdullah further. Yet Riyadh was also naive and stubborn. Commentators have noted that Saudi diplomats, especially the DC team, were too slow to adapt to the new administration and simply presumed all would continue as it did under Bush. Rather than adapt around the new administration, Saudi leaders tried in vain to change it. For example, at their first meeting, in Riyadh in 2009, Abdullah delivered Obama an hour-long lecture on the dangers of Iran, much to the president’s frustration. The significance of strong personal ties was seen after Obama’s departure from office, when the new Crown prince, Mohammad bin Salman, won support for his foreign policy schemes in Yemen and Qatar from Obama’s successor, Donald Trump, with whom he enjoyed close ties. However, despite this endorsement, neither scheme proved successful, perhaps suggesting that closer ties with the US could not overcome structural factors alone.

The role of leading figures was also significant in Saudi Arabia’s decision to step back and ultimately end its role in Syria. The replacement of Bandar by Muhammad bin Nayef was the first step in this: Nayef being
more cautious and less convinced by Bandar’s ambitious plans. More significant was the death of Abdullah in 2015 and his replacement by his brother, Salman, who soon delegated key foreign policy decisions to his own son, Mohammad bin Salman (MbS). While Abdullah had a personal connection to Syria, being married to a Syrian and having a personal stake in the war, Salman and MbS were less sentimental. Moreover, MbS soon became distracted by conflicts of his own: the invasion of Yemen in 2015 and the blockade of Qatar in 2017. As Riyadh’s resources were increasingly taken up with these crises, and involvement in Syria going nowhere, Saudi Arabia cut its losses and pulled most of its support to Syria’s rebels by 2018. However, both the Yemen and Qatari policies were highly personalised around MbS and more resources might well continue to have been spent on Syria had MbS not risen to power. That said, Saudi loss of interest coincided with Russia’s intervention in Syria – six months after its invasion of Yemen – a structural shift in Syria’s conflict that further deterred Riyadh’s involvement. Here we see the domestic (change of leadership) and structural (Russia’s involvement) both impacting Riyadh’s decision to step back.

Regional alliances were less vital to Iran in Syria, although they were valuable. Most significantly Iran’s allies in Iraq and Lebanon rejected Arab League sanctions on Damascus. This ensured that, even though Syria’s trade declined considerably as a result of the war, vital lifelines were still available to Beirut and the overland links with Iran through Iraq. Neither of these states would be considered exclusively Iranian allies, as both enjoyed close ties with the US and, in Lebanon’s case, Saudi Arabia. Their defiance of both Washington and Riyadh on the question of sanctions, therefore, points to the significance of the region’s multipolarity: that both were unconcerned about the consequences of stepping out of line, knowing this would not make them pariahs. That said, domestic politics was also important. At the beginning of the conflict, Syria was a vital trading partner for both Iraq and Lebanon and both governments saw the potential risks in cutting ties. Personal ties with Iran also played a role. Hezbollah were a keystone in Lebanon’s coalition government and would have steadfastly rejected sanctioning Syria. In Iraq many key leaders had ties to Iran, including the prime minister in 2011, Nouri al-Maliki. The minister of transport, Hadi al-Amiri, who was responsible for overseeing many of the flights that passed through Iraqi airspace from Tehran to Damascus carrying weapons, ammunition and Quds Force officers, was head of the Badr Corps (a pro-Iranian Shia militia) and a close ally of Soleimani.26

Far more important was Iran’s successful courting of Russia to intervene directly in the conflict in 2015. Before then Russia and Iran enjoyed a degree of cordiality, but certainly not an alliance and nothing on the scale of Riyadh and Washington. Iran was a customer for Russian weaponry,
like much of the Middle East, and Moscow acted as a defender of Iran at the UN. Yet even that was far from steadfast and Russia endorsed the sanctions on Iran’s nuclear programme in 2006. Yet Moscow did have an interest in Assad’s survival and had, independently of Tehran, vetoed multiple resolutions condemning Damascus at the UN Security Council, as well as supplying a generous line of arms and credit. Russia’s entry into the war in 2015, when it sent its air force and special forces in an intervention that would guarantee Assad’s rule, was far from inevitable. As discussed, the multipolar structure of the international and regional system made Russian action more inviting, given Moscow feared less the response of the no-longer-hegemonic US, something seemingly confirmed by Obama’s decision not to strike militarily in 2013. Yet domestic factors again, particularly the significance of leading personnel, should not be overlooked. Russian President Vladimir Putin did not decide to act independently, but rather was subject to Iranian lobbying. Despite Iranian support and reorganisation, by spring 2015 Assad was still losing ground and a new rebel coalition (primary backed by Turkey), the Jaysh al-Fateh, was threatening his coastal heartlands. Alarmed, Iran invited Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov to Tehran to urge further Russian involvement in the conflict. That August, Soleimani was dispatched to Moscow to flesh out plans of Russian intervention. In further evidence of the importance of personnel, the Quds Force general proved highly persuasive of Putin. It likely helped that he was an effective commander and Putin could be confident that his forces could work effectively on the ground when supported by the Russian air force. This was seen when, prior to the Moscow meeting, Putin reportedly emphasised the importance of the Iranian general when he told Tehran, ‘Okay we will intervene. Send Qassem Soleimani.’

We therefore see a contrasting picture of Saudi and Iranian leveraging of their international alliances. Saudi Arabia had a stronger hand on paper, but in reality, the shift in regional and international system made its alliances less formidable, which it then made worse through poor management and personal and ideological differences. In contrast, Iran leveraged its more limited alliances well. It was structurally aided by the shifting international climate, but individuals such as Soleimani still showed their diplomatic skill to gain the desired results.

Conclusion

Saudi and Iranian competition in the Syrian conflict points to interesting conclusions about the interaction of international systemic, domestic and ideational factors. The conflict broke out in an international and regional
systemic environment that was more favourable to Iran than to Saudi Arabia: one in which Riyadh’s long-term ally and the lynchpin of its Iran containment strategy was retreating. That said, Riyadh still possessed strategic advantage over Iran in some areas, it just proved unable to utilise them well. It had a superior air force that it was unwilling to deploy in Syria. It had access to greater wealth to pay local fighters but fears of Islamists and jihadists among Syria’s opposition deterred it from matching or exceeding Iran’s spending in Syria. While its ideological appeal, including Sunni sect identity, theoretically had a wider audience than Iran’s, it was unable to translate this into effective unconventional warfare. It likewise had a closer relationship to more powerful international allies than Iran yet, again, was unable to translate this into meaningful intervention.

This brief analysis has suggested that Saudi Arabia’s inability to adapt to the changing external context and make the most of its advantages had much to do with domestic factors, including the personalities involved, underlining the value of the NCR approach. Confidence in Bandar bin Sultan’s abilities at asymmetric warfare in Syria proved unfounded, for example, and he was evidently no Soleimani. Rivalry with other potential allies against Iran, like Turkey and Qatar, limited both Saudi Arabia’s ideological appeal in Syria and the effectiveness of the forces it was sponsoring. Domestic fears of the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadists likewise led to only a limited engagement with these proxies. The poor personal relationships with Barack Obama and the inability to adapt to the new president contributed to a weak relationship with the US at a time when Riyadh needed as much goodwill and support from its retreating ally as it could get.

Iran did make errors along the way, and Saudi Arabia did land some successful blows. In one example of sectarianisation, it successfully characterised Iran as a ‘Shia’ power, challenging Iran’s earlier claims to regional leadership across the Muslim world.28 Whereas in the 2000s Iran’s leaders, alongside Assad and Hassan Nasrallah, were popular among non-Shia Muslims, the Syrian war shattered that support. Similarly, Saudi Arabia helped nudge Trump to abandon the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and reapply sanctions, with Iran’s meddling in Syria cited as one of the main reasons. However, this may deter Iran from expanding further, but a retreat from the strategic gains it has made in Syria since 2011 seems unlikely. In this it has played its hand far better: taking advantage of the international context better than its rival. It more effectively deployed its allies, maximised its more limited financial clout and made the most of a limited relationship with Russia to bring about joint intervention in Syria. Moreover, it deployed a range of ideological weapons to develop an effective network of fighters – only some of which were mobilised by sect, others by being part of the anti-Western ‘Axis of Resistance’. In short, both Iran
and Saudi Arabia had capabilities and assets that they could deploy in Syria, but only the former utilised them to maximum advantage. While structural constraints brought on by international and regional systemic change did not aid Riyadh, its leadership is still ultimately culpable for the errors and misjudgements made.

Notes

1 This chapter builds on ideas and concepts first published as ‘Rivalry Amid Systemic Change: Iranian and Saudi Competition in the Post-American Middle East’, in POMEPS Studies 38: Sectarianism and International Relations, 2020, pp. 7–12.
7 Phillips, Battle for Syria, p. 17.


Interview with former Saudi official, Riyadh, March 2015.


Delegation or intervention: Yemen as a theatre for the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia

Maria-Louise Clausen

The Saudi-led military intervention into Yemen called ‘Operation Decisive Storm’ was announced on 26 March 2015 (renamed to ‘Operation Restoring Hope’ in April 2015). It came after a tumultuous period in Yemen following widespread protest in 2011/2012 that succeeded in forcing the long-time president Ali Abdullah Saleh to hand over the presidency to his vice president, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. The subsequent transition process was initially accentuated by the United Nations (UN) as a positive example of a negotiated transfer and an inclusive political process, but gradually it became clear that it had failed to achieve buy-in from key elite actors. In September 2014, an armed group, commonly referred to as the Houthi movement, took control over the capital, Sana’a, and after a brief intermezzo where the UN sought to (re)commit the warring parties to political negotiations, the political process collapsed. The situation quickly escalated as Hadi and his government were placed under house arrest. In mid-February 2015, Hadi escaped from house arrest and travelled to Aden, the former capital of South Yemen, which he announced as his interim capital. However, within a month Aden was under attack from the Houthis and Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia. At this point, Hadi requested the UN and the Arab League for support by all available means including military intervention with reference to the UN Charter Article 51 and the right to self-defence, as well as the Charter of the Arab League and the Treaty on Joint Defence, in March 2015 just before the commencement of the Saudi-led military intervention.¹

In the announcement of the Saudi-led military intervention by the Saudi ambassador to the US, Adel al-Jubeir, the objective of the intervention was ‘to defend the legitimate government of President Hadi from the takeover attempts by the Houthi militia in Yemen’.² Although Saudi Arabia has a long history of interfering in Yemeni politics, the 2015 military intervention stands out for its intensity. Hence, researchers and analysts have discussed the reasons for this shift in Saudi foreign policy, pointing to a combination of internal Saudi politics and structural shifts following the Arab Uprisings
including the deepening regional conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran and American retrenchment from the region. This chapter will briefly outline the main arguments for the onset of the intervention as a starting point for an analysis of why Saudi Arabia at the time of writing has still not managed to terminate a military intervention that was intended to be short and limited. The literature on third-party involvement in intra-state conflicts has established that generally the duration and lethality of civil war increases with the involvement of third parties. The chapter then uses the notion of sunk cost effect which is manifested in a greater tendency to continue an endeavour once an investment in money, effort or reputation has been made, to argue that Saudi Arabia’s inability to extricate itself from the conflict in Yemen is a consequence of the material and reputational resources that Saudi Arabia has already spent in Yemen. The chapter proposes that the Saudi linkage of the Houthis to Iran framed the conflict as part of the broader rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia and that, as the conflict in Yemen has become increasingly complex, this has increased Saudi reputational and material cost related to withdrawal.

The Yemeni state formation process and regional interactions

There is a widespread misconception of Yemen as being exceptionally isolated. However, Yemen has a long history of being placed at the centre of regional rivalries as a result of the country’s geostrategic placement on the Arabian Peninsula. This section briefly shows how regional and international involvement in Yemen’s domestic affairs is not new. These examples also illustrate how, more than any other factor, it is Yemen’s proximity to Saudi Arabia that has defined how Yemen has been affected by regional trends, whereas Iran has historically had limited ties to Yemen. Moreover, whereas Saudi Arabia has sought to garner American support for its policies concerning Yemen, the US interest and thus influence on domestic Yemeni affairs has historically been limited.

Historically, northern Yemen was an Imamate where, although tribes held considerable independent power, there was a process following Ottoman withdrawal from Yemen to centralise power with the Imam. The Imamate was a Zaydi theocracy, characterised by autocratic rule, widespread poverty and inequalities. On 26 September 1962, a group of army officers, urban merchants and tribal leaders overthrew Imam Muhammad al-Badr, who had just taken power from his father, Imam Ahmad. Muhammad al-Badr managed to flee Sana’a and was able to rally tribal and Saudi support spurred by Nasser’s Egypt support to the republicans. Although the Egyptians had initially envisioned a limited short-term
intervention, their engagement in Yemen quickly grew which resulted in around 70,000 Egyptian soldiers stationed in Yemen. The involvement of Saudi Arabia in the 1960s civil war was spurred on by a fear that if Egypt was victorious North Yemen would become a republican state hostile to Saudi Arabia and allow a regional enemy, Egypt, to gain a foothold on the Arabian Peninsula. According to Gregory Gause, the guiding principle of Saudi policy during this period was to seek the removal of Egyptian military presence in Yemen as it was perceived as a direct threat by the Saudi regime. The issue of the Imam being Zaydi was considered less important than the need to counter Egypt and maintain a royalist regime. This led Saudi Arabia to support the Zaydi monarchy to retain the status quo but at the same time, the Saudi focus on the Egyptian presence in Yemen and not the restoration of the Imamate complicated relations with the royalists. This way, the civil war in Yemen became part of the cold war between Saudi-led Arab monarchies and Egypt-led Arab nationalists of the 1960s. The Saudi preference for stability was shared by key global powers at the time such as the British as well as the Iranian shah who saw the coup in Yemen as an element in growing Soviet influence in the region. However, as noted by Banafsheh Keynoush, the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia was already at this point characterised by a certain Saudi apprehension about Iranian Shia influence due to Shia clerical efforts to politicise religion across the Gulf region and suspicions by Saudi Arabia of Iranian interference in the Eastern Province. The Saudis primarily supported the royalists with funds and smaller weapons, but not sophisticated military equipment or direct military intervention. In the end, the republicans prevailed in Yemen, but Egypt did not. Instead, Yemen drained Egyptian resources and weakened Nasser, but Egypt did not withdraw until 1967 following the defeat in the Six-Day War. In 1970 a national reconciliation formally ended the conflict and the Saudis recognised the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). The YAR was weak and dependent on Saudi aid. The weakness of the state was further accentuated by the increased political and military role of the tribes who had benefitted from both Egyptian and Saudi weapons and patronage during the civil war. Saudi Arabia sustained direct payments to tribal actors following the end of the civil war and was thus able to extend considerable influence over the YAR.

Saudi Arabia and Yemen share a long and fluid border. The fluidity has been formally integrated into the Treaty of Taif from 1934. The Treaty of Taif came about after a Saudi attack on the Imamate had made some headway, especially by capturing Hodeida, which had led the Imam to call for aid from European powers. The subsequent treaty saw Saudi Arabia withdraw from Yemen in exchange for the Imam’s recognition of Saudi sovereignty over Asir, Najran and Jizan, three border areas. In 2000, the Treaty
of Jedda formally demarcated the current border. Key to these border agreements was that they recognised that the border would transect tribal territory and thus granted residents of the Yemeni–Saudi borderland on both sides the right to cross the border with limited restrictions. However, the Saudis have long seen the border as an Achilles heel that allowed illegal immigrants, al-Qaeda operatives as well as drug smugglers and gun runners access to Saudi Arabia. Consequently, Saudi Arabia began a process of demarcating the border which included building a physical barrier for fortification. The process has been slow due to tribal resistance, but in 2013 the Saudi government renewed its efforts as a consequence of the Houthis posing a growing threat in the area. This gradual militarising of the border was underlined in 2009 when Saudi Arabia intervened in the sixth Sa’ada war on the side of the Saleh regime. The Sa’ada wars, fought between 2004 and 2010, were the result of a gradual escalation of a conflict between Zaydi revivalists in northern Yemen and the Saleh regime. Increasingly, the conflict evolved to full-scale warfare as the Houthis, named after Hussein al-Houthi, who was killed by government forces during the first round of fighting in 2004, gained supporters, spurred on by undifferentiated repression of the entire northern Yemen by the Saleh regime. In 2009, the conflict was internationalised as Saudi Arabia allowed the Yemeni army to attack the Houthis from Saudi territory and itself carried out airstrikes in Yemen. At this point, there was also an effort, spearheaded by Saleh, to frame the Houthis as an Iranian-backed group who sought to return the country to ‘the dark ages of the imamate’. However, at this time the Saudi involvement in Yemen was limited, and the narrative of the Houthis as being directed from Tehran failed to gain substantial traction internationally. Most notably, the US largely rejected the claim as the Yemeni regime was unable to back up its accusations with evidence. The Saudi military intervention was of much smaller scale than the current intervention and was quickly ended when it became clear that it did not have a deterring effect on the Houthis.

Explanations for Saudi-led military intervention into Yemen in 2015

Saudi Arabia has had a long history of intervening in Yemen, but the military intensity of the current intervention is historically unique. Indeed, as highlighted in the previous section, although Saudi Arabia has intervened militarily in Yemen before, the general pattern has been that Saudi Arabia has preferred to influence Yemen through support to domestic actors. Scholars and academics seeking to explain this break have tended to focus either on internal Saudi politics or the regional and international shifts
following the perceived disengagement of the US from the region and the growing influence of Iran.²³

Domestically, Saudi Arabia was in a process of transition at the time of the commencement of the intervention in 2015. Although Saudi Arabia was not rocked by massive popular protests during the Arab Uprisings, the regime witnessed physical and virtual protests among both the Shia minority and the Sunni majority.²⁴ The largest protests were by Shia Muslims in the Eastern Province. These protests were met by a campaign of demonizing the Shia as criminals seeking to undermine national security on behalf of Iran and a violent crackdown by the regime.²⁵ However, there was growing bottom-up pressure for political reform and public sector improvements. In January 2015, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz died and was replaced by King Salman. King Salman quickly began a process of positioning his son, Mohammad bin Salman (MbS), as his successor. In 2015, MbS was named defense minister, and later deputy Crown prince. In 2017, he officially became Crown prince and thus first in line to take power when the ailing King Salman dies.²⁶ Domestically, Saudi Arabia has seen an unprecedented centralisation of power in his hands.²⁷ At the same time, the ascent of MbS has resulted in a more assertive Saudi foreign policy of which the intervention in Yemen is the pre-eminent example. MbS is generally seen as the architect of the Saudi intervention in Yemen as he has sought to establish himself as a powerful leader both domestically and regionally.

Regional and international shifts, particularly the perceived disengagement of the US from the region, created concerns in Saudi Arabia that the US would no longer commit itself to upholding stability in the region. This shift facilitated a move towards a more aggressive foreign policy by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Thus, the US retrenchment has led to a greater sense of ownership of their own security among the Gulf states.²⁸ Additionally, the signing of the nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in 2015 further exacerbated Saudi concerns that the US was no longer willing to invest in upholding regional order or countering Iran. Since President Donald Trump took office in 2017, the relationship between the US and Iran has gradually deteriorated as exemplified by the US decision to withdraw from the JCPOA in 2018. These tensions between Iran and the US have had effects on the war in Yemen. Most notably, the framing of the Houthis as an Iranian proxy has gained traction and negatively impacted the potential for political solutions and compromise.

The Saudi-led intervention in Yemen has the hallmarks of a ‘status-altering’ event.²⁹ These types of events are, according to Jonathan Renshon, public and dramatic enough to capture the attention of the international community. But the intervention should not be reduced to MbS’s desire to consolidate himself as the centre of power in Saudi Arabia, and Saudi
Arabia as the central power in the region. Renshon goes on to argue that during Egypt’s intervention in Yemen’s civil war in the 1960s, Nasser was unable to withdraw because ‘once his [Nasser’s] prestige was engaged, the costs of backing down and abandoning his Yemeni allies only grew’. However, the notion that the intervention increases Saudi prestige does not alone provide a convincing argument for a continued Saudi intervention. The intervention has led to the world’s current worst humanitarian disaster and although Saudi Arabia seeks to underscore its position as the largest contributor of aid to Yemen, the humanitarian consequences of the intervention, including numerous alleged unlawful airstrikes, have led to growing critique from the international community that strains Saudi Arabia’s international reputation.

More importantly, Saudi Arabia has long considered Yemen a real and existential security threat. This threat became more imminent with the security vacuum created by the uprising in 2011–2012 as it was feared that the conflict would spread across the border and destabilise Saudi Arabia or lead to an uptick in terrorist attacks. Previously, Saudi Arabia had been able to extend some control over Yemeni politics through its extensive patronage network. However, by 2011 the network had been weakened which was further accelerated by the political vacuum following the uprising and subsequent transitional process. This left Saudi Arabia lacking means of influencing Yemeni elite actors. Saudi Arabia sought to use the vacuum created by the uprising and moved to control the transition in Yemen under a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) umbrella. The negotiated transfer of power from Ali Abdullah Saleh to his vice president, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, prevented a short-term collapse of Yemen and secured Saudi Arabia substantial influence in domestic Yemeni politics. Hadi was from the onset dependent on external actors and thus amenable to Saudi influence. However, Hadi was not able to build internal legitimacy in Yemen and gradually frustrations grew with the lack of economic and public service improvements. Yemen became more and more unstable and as the Houthis’ military and political power grew, they increasingly posed a direct security threat to Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi-owned media and statements from Saudi officials rushed to identify the Houthis as Shia, and as a threat to not only Yemen but the entire region. This way the regionalisation of the conflict in Yemen became part of a broader trend in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings to use sectarian narratives couched in anti-Iranian terms. The Houthis were framed as a proxy of Iran which served as a key factor in legitimising and garnering international support for the intervention. Saudi Arabia has especially sought to link the Houthis to a broader securitisation of an Iranian threat to the US which continues to attach strategic importance to the Gulf region.
However, there is limited evidence pointing to substantial Iranian involvement in Yemen before 2015. The Iranian leadership has denied having strong material ties with the Houthis. Yet, the feeling that Iran was gradually gaining a foothold on the Arabian Peninsula was troubling for Saudi Arabia at a time of rising Iranian power. There seems to have been a genuine fear in Saudi Arabia that Iran was seeking to transform the Houthis into a Hezbollah-like fighting force. This would pose a substantial challenge for Saudi Arabia, especially in the border region. The intervention thus aimed at defeating the Houthis with a proven willingness to attack Saudi Arabia, while showing Iran that it would not accept a strong Iranian presence in Yemen. More generally, the intervention in Yemen demonstrated that Saudi Arabia is willing to take political risks and commit to substantial military intervention. The Saudi intervention in Yemen, framed as an intervention to save Yemen from Iran, was initially popular in Saudi Arabia and endorsed by Saudi Islamist forces across the spectrum. This way, the intervention in Yemen initially did boost the domestic and regional profile of MbS but this effect has since waned.

Saudi Arabia’s inability to extricate from Yemen: Sectarianisation and regionalisation

Most existing literature on the Saudi-led military intervention has focused on the onset of the intervention, whereas fewer accounts have explored why Saudi Arabia has not been able to disengage from Yemen despite clear signs that Saudi Arabia would like to see an end to the conflict. The short answer to the question of why Saudi Arabia has not ended the military intervention in Yemen is that the objectives of the campaign have not been achieved. Despite more than seven years of warfare, the military intervention has at the time of writing not been able to either restore Hadi or limit Iranian influence in Yemen. In fact, the opposite can be said to have happened. The ties between the Houthis and Iran have grown, and the fragmentation of Yemen left Hadi devoid of real decision-making power, culminating in his removal in 2022. The conflict in Yemen is part of a general trend where an unprecedented number of conflicts experience external involvement. As already mentioned, external involvement has been shown to generally increase both conflict duration and lethality. This has been the case in Yemen where fatality numbers have increased as more external actors became involved and the complexity of the conflict increased. This section discusses how the increased complexity of the conflict has impacted the Saudi ability to withdraw from Yemen. First, the involvement of third parties changed the dynamics of the conflict. It went from being a containable civil war to a
complex and multifaceted conflict with a total fragmentation of the Yemeni state. Second, the rhetorical framing of the Houthis as an Iranian proxy had the unintended side effect of leading to a strengthened relationship between the Houthis and Iran.

The involvement of the Saudi-led coalition increased the complexity of the conflict in Yemen in multiple ways. First, the ability of Saudi Arabia to extricate itself from the conflict has been affected by the gradual undermining of Hadi. This has, arguably, been brought to the fore by the actions of the Saudi-led coalition’s second largest actor, the UAE. The Saudi-led coalition initially consisted of ten countries but several of these have been contributors more on paper than reality and several others such as Qatar and Morocco are no longer part of the coalition. The UAE has contributed substantially to the intervention but has opted to develop capabilities on the ground in southern Yemen. Although the UAE has scaled back its contribution in Yemen, it remains a major player in the south of Yemen where it pursues its own geopolitical and economic interests. The UAE has focused on gaining control of energy infrastructure and commercial ports in concordance with a broader strategy for control over the important sea passage, Bab al-Mandeb, that separates Yemen and the Horn of Africa. As part of this strategy, the UAE has supported secessionist forces that allows it substantial influence in southern Yemen but this has also, on occasion, put the UAE in a direct collision course with Saudi Arabia, particularly when it viewed Hadi as the legitimate president. There were direct confrontations between the Saudi-backed Hadi government and UAE-backed secessionists, most notably the Southern Transitional Council (STC). The STC continued to challenge the Hadi government’s hold over southern Yemen, which during the spring of 2020 escalated when the STC declared a state of emergency and self-administration across southern Yemen. The increasingly independent and occasionally directly confrontational policy of the UAE introduced a level of uncertainty into the conflict. It complicated mediation efforts as the unstable position of Hadi had been accentuated while raising questions about the relative balance of power in the coalition in Yemen. Thus, the fragmentation of the coalition detracts from the overall conflict with the Houthis and has given the Houthis an incentive to prolong the conflict in the hopes that the coalition will gradually fall apart.

Second, the linkage of the Yemen conflict to the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has exacerbated cleavages and provides incentives for parties in the conflict to escalate instead of seeking domestically anchored settlements. The Saudi military intervention in Yemen was legitimised through the reference to the call for assistance by all means necessary under Article 51 by the internationally recognised president Hadi as well
as the Saudi right to self-defence. In the process, there was a securitisation of the Houthis as presenting a threat to the Yemeni people, Saudi Arabia and regional as well as international security. Contrary to during the Sa’ada wars in 2004–2010, Saudi Arabia has been successful in framing the conflict in Yemen as part of a wider confrontation between Sunnis and Shia and the Houthis as an Iranian proxy. First, although the religious divide between Sunni and Shia Islam has traditionally not been important in Yemen, the conflict lends itself to a sectarian framing because the Houthis mainly adhere to the Zaydi religious tradition. The Zaydis make up approximately 35 per cent of Yemen’s population and are centred in the northern highlands, hence whereas not all Houthis are Zaydi, there is substantial overlap. However, Zaydism is distinct from the Twelver Shiism that is practised in Iran and the Houthis have not previously been strongly associated with Twelver Shiism. Yet, as argued by Rola El-Husseini, with the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East, the Houthis along with the Alawis of Syria became part of the Shia camp, a conceptual category referred to as ‘new Shi’a’. Consequently, there has been a sectarianisation of the conflict. Gradually, Yemeni actors including the Houthis have begun framing the conflict in sectarian terms instead of as a political battle. Hence, as argued by Morten Valbjørn, whereas the real drivers of the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia have more to do with geopolitics than sectarianism, the Shia/Sunni schism was used rhetorically and in how actors have linked local proxies and regional allies.

There are strong indications that the Houthis have been developing a stronger relationship to Iran since the commencement of the Saudi-led military intervention into Yemen in 2015 as demonstrated by the reception of a senior Houthi official in Tehran by Iran’s Ayatollah Khamenei in July 2019. Yet, the relationship between the Houthis and Iran is better explained by a broader focus on ideological commonality than a narrow fixation on doctrinal belief. Iran and the Houthis share opposition to the US and its allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as a general focus on anti-imperialism. The complex drone attack on the Saudi Arabian oil-processing facilities Abqaiq and Khurais on 14 September 2019 that impacted global oil prices serves as an example of how the same event can be interpreted differently. The Houthis took responsibility for the attack, but strong doubts have been raised about Yemen as the place of origin for the drones. Regardless of the geographical origin of the attacks, Iran is widely believed to be the mastermind of the attacks, a position that has been officially furthered by the US. In this narrative, the Houthi willingness to accept responsibility for the attack is interpreted as proof of a strong Houthi–Iran proxy relationship. However, a more compelling explanation is that the Houthis’ involvement in the Aramco attacks stemmed from
a calculation that it would serve their organisational goals. The Houthis have little fear of retribution from Saudi Arabia. On the contrary, when the Houthis argue that the strikes were in retaliation to the air strikes carried out in Yemen, it appeals to their core audiences in Yemen. The Houthis want to be seen as able to strike back and threaten the security of Saudi Arabia. In addition to appealing to core audiences internally, another advantage could be to strike fear in domestic enemies as well as Saudi Arabia which could strengthen their bargaining position in future peace negotiations. Overall, the Saudi focus on the link between the Houthis and Iran seems to have had the unintended effect of pushing the Houthis closer to Iran.

Consequences for the Saudi ability to withdraw:

The notion of sunk cost

Whereas the sectarianisation and regionalisation of the conflict helped Saudi Arabia garner international support or at least acquiescence for its intervention into Yemen, the lack of a strategy for how to de-securitise the Houthis has subsequently challenged Saudi Arabia’s ability to terminate the intervention. The sunk cost effect refers to a tendency to continue an endeavour once an initial investment has been made, in part because the estimation of likelihood of success becomes inflated. Thus, once an actor has invested in a course of action, the actor is more likely to continue that course even if it will lead to further costs because of an aversion against accepting the initial investment as a loss.

The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen has led to a complete fragmentation of Yemen and although Iran has historically had limited interest in Yemen, the relationship between the Houthis and Iran has grown since the commencement of the Saudi-led military intervention. Iran has become the principal backer of the Houthis and although the direct support is likely marginal for the Houthis’ domestic endeavours, documentation of Iranian support has increased. However, Iran’s interest in Yemen remains limited and primarily bound to the importance attached to Yemen by Saudi Arabia. While the Houthis are unlikely to take direction from Iran that does not benefit their interests or align with existing priorities, the fact Iran is their only viable patron has led to a situation where the help Iran is able to provide goes a long way in assuring leverage. According to the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, the trend has been for the Houthis to deploy their most sophisticated, longer-range uncrewed aerial vehicles and land attack cruise for attacks on Saudi Arabia. It is suggested that the missiles provided by Iran are smuggled into Yemen in pieces that are then welded together inside Yemen, and that Iran has provided the Houthis with
training and technical assistance. Overall, Iran seems to view the relationship to the Houthis as a low-cost opportunity to antagonise Saudi Arabia, while accepting limited ability to control domestic Yemeni politics. It is the shared animosity against Saudi Arabia that has facilitated and shaped the relationship. This is most clearly demonstrated by the fact that the Houthis have been able to not only sustain but to expand their campaign of military operations against Saudi Arabia. Consequently, the Saudis cannot convincingly claim that the intervention has successfully weakened the Houthis or limited Iranian influence in Yemen. According to the psychology of sunk cost this would lead Saudi Arabia to struggle to withdraw from its intervention. The sunk cost effect is manifested in a greater tendency to continue an endeavour once an investment in money, effort or time has been made. The idea is that the sacrifices already made will be rendered void if the military intervention is not completed. The psychological barrier to withdrawal and compromise thus increases with the resources allocated to the intervention in the first place. In the Saudi case, a withdrawal now, after more than seven years of intervention, when the impact of Iran is arguably greater than at any other time in Yemeni history and the internationally recognised President Hadi is no longer relevant, would certainly be hard to frame as a victory or military success that could justify the intervention to begin with. Hence, as demonstrated by the notion of sunk cost, Saudi Arabia struggles to withdraw from Yemen. The regionalisation of the conflict that helped Saudi Arabia gain international support for the commencement of the conflict is now making termination of the conflict more complicated. Iran, on the other hand, was linked to the Houthis before there was any substantial relationship and has thus been able, with limited investments, to project an image of Yemen as being part of its extensive network of allies. Iran has seized the opportunity to make political gains from the ability of the Houthis to withstand the Saudi-led military onslaught while it has avoided becoming so closely aligned with the Houthis that it had to substantially invest either material or reputational resources to the conflict.

The US tendency to defer Yemen-related questions to Saudi Arabia combined with the linkage of the Houthis to Iran meant that Saudi Arabia saw tacit support from the international community in the form of key a UN resolution, Resolution 2216, enacted in April 2015 to the intervention. It demands that the Houthis unconditionally withdraw from all seized areas, relinquish all arms seized from military and security institutions and refrain from provoking neighbouring states. Additionally, the US has augmented the Saudi-led campaign with logistical and intelligence support. Saudi Arabia has continuously referred to Resolution 2216 as the starting point for peace negotiations, whereas the Houthis unsurprisingly have rejected the terms for negotiations stipulated in the resolution. This has been one
of the factors that has hindered the UN’s ability to effectively negotiate a peace deal. There have been indications that the Saudis were becoming more willing to compromise and had sought to bilaterally negotiate with the Houthis. In 2017, emails were leaked that indicated that MbS had told US officials that he wanted to leave Yemen. However, the UN-led peace negotiations have struggled to gain traction and bilateral negotiations between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia have so far not yielded substantial results. Saudi Arabia’s main priority is to keep itself safe. However, since 2015 the frequency and sophistication of the Houthis’ attacks on Saudi Arabia have increased. The uptick in attacks has been described as a warning from the Houthis to Saudi Arabia of their abilities and willingness to retribution if Saudi Arabia does not adopt a more conciliatory approach towards the Houthis. Saudi Arabia has in principle shown willingness to engage with the Houthis but demanded that they distance themselves from Iran. The Saudi rhetoric that framed the Houthis as an Iranian-backed militia has been so effective that it is making it difficult for the Saudis to normalise political relations and engage in bilateral negotiations with the Houthis. This underlines how the Saudis were successful in the sectarianisation and securitisation of the Houthis, but have not had a strategy for the subsequent de-sectarianisation or de-securitisation of the conflict that would facilitate a move from military intervention to a normalisation of political processes.

Conclusion

Whereas the conflict in Yemen began as a detainable domestic political conflict, it has increasingly become regionalised while Yemen has fragmented. Hence, whereas it would be an oversimplification to call the conflict in Yemen a proxy war, the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has complicated and exacerbated matters. Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen with the stated objective to reinstate the internationally recognised President Hadi and contain the growing Iranian influence. However, after more than seven years of military campaign, Saudi Arabia has failed to achieve its objectives. This chapter has discussed why Saudi Arabia has not been able to extricate itself from the military campaign in Yemen. It has argued that the effective rhetorical sectarianisation and securitisation of the Houthis have unintendedly increased the capacity of the Houthis by strengthening their ties to Iran, and left Saudi Arabia with a dilemma in terms of how to de-escalate and normalise relations with the Houthis while claiming the campaign as a victory. The war in Yemen has demonstrated Saudi Arabia’s capacity and willingness to sustain a years-long military
campaign, but also its inability to use that campaign to achieve its political objectives. Saudi Arabia harbours a genuine fear of Iranian encirclement, which, in combination with the Houthis’ proven willingness and ability to target sites in Saudi Arabia, has left the Saudi leadership fearing the Houthis as an existential threat. The importance attached to Yemen by Iran is much more limited. Events in Yemen are not considered an existential threat to Iran, and consequently fewer resources have been delegated to Yemen. However, with the strong rhetorical linkage of the Houthis and Iran, Iran has been able to project a hand in Yemen despite not having diverted significant resources to the Houthis.67

It has been argued that Iran has deliberately talked up its position in Yemen to be able to offer to withdraw from Yemen as a sign of compromise towards Saudi Arabia or even the US. This has led to the suggestion that the conflict in Yemen could prove an opportunity for Iranian–Saudi dialogue.68 Despite persistent reports of bilateral talks, announcements of ceasefires and a Saudi desire to retract itself from the Yemen conflict, the war has not been terminated at the time of writing. Instead, Yemen remains caught in a conflict that has completely fragmented the country. The regionalisation of the conflict has not only impacted the severity and duration of the conflict, but also allowed the Houthis to frame it as one between them and Saudi Arabia. Consequently, peace negotiations have focused on a halt in the Saudi-led military campaign and the blockade while paying much less attention to the Yemeni resistance to the Houthis. It may be that a withdrawal of Saudi Arabia could throw Yemen into a full-blown civil war which could become even more bloody and contracted than the Saudi-led military intervention.

Notes

1 See UN document S/2015/217 referring to the Charter of the League of Arab States, 22 March 1945, Article 6, and Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.
11 Gregory Gause argues that the events in Yemen had domestic repercussions in Saudi Arabia as parts of the military and even segments of the royal family openly supported the republicans. The Saudi king was old and shortly after the republican coup in Yemen, control of government affairs was handed over to Crown Prince Faisal. Gregory Gause III, *Saudi-Yemeni Relations*, pp. 60–61.
14 Orkaby, *Beyond the Arab Cold War*.
16 Ibid.
18 See *ibid.* for a detailed account of the six Sa’ada wars.
22 WikiLeaks provides documentation for the limited traction among US officials in Yemen to the narrative of the Houthis as supported by Iran (see e.g. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09SANA1662_a.html or https://wikileaks.o
that points to the black market or the Yemeni military as more likely providers of weapons to the Houthis than Iran) (accessed 12 May 2020).

23 Clausen, ‘Saudi Arabian Military Activism in Yemen’.


31 Ibid., p. 249.


35 Clausen, ‘Saudi Arabia’s Rhetorical Construction of the Houthis’.


44 Historically, there was reportedly friendly relations between the regime in South Yemen and Iran due to shared opposition to Western domination (Salisbury, *Yemen and the Saudi–Iranian ‘Cold War’*). However, although details are scarce there is nothing to suggest that Iran holds any substantial influence in southern Yemen.


53 Secretary Pompeo was, for example, quick to point the finger at Iran. See e.g. https://twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1172963090746548225 (accessed 25 April 2020).
67 Kendall, ‘Iran’s Fingerprints in Yemen’.
68 Esfandiary and Tabatabai, ‘Yemen’.
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, Keynouš 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 Ardovini 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. 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’.

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\(^3\) – 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

Index

al-Abadi, Haidar 103
Abdullah II (King of Jordan) 3, 80
Abraham Accords 1, 81, 178
Afghanistan 46, 144, 147
Ahmadinejad, Mahmoud 36, 144
Anbar Province (Iraq) 102–103, 105–108, 110, 112
Aoun, Michel 123, 126, 130
al-Qaeda 41, 59, 61, 100–101, 112, 145, 147, 159
Arab League 148–149, 151, 156
Arab Uprisings (Arab Spring) 2, 3, 8, 9, 24, 35, 37–39, 40–42, 45, 46, 47, 55, 59, 62, 82–85, 87, 142, 150, 156, 160, 173
Aramco 15, 45, 198, 164
Ba’ath Party
Iraq 1, 79–80, 100, 111
Syria 141, 146
Bahrain
and Arab Uprisings 19, 41, 74, 82–85, 87
Bahraini Hezbollah 78–79
Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain 7, 78
relations with Iran 19, 25, 41, 68, 74, 75–88
relations with Saudi Arabia 19, 74, 75, 80–81, 83–84, 87
al-Wefaq 75, 78–79, 82, 84–87
Biden, Joe 109
Bush, George W. 101, 144, 150
Central Asia 22
China 21, 85, 127–128, 142–143
Daesh (Islamic State, IS, ISIL, ISIS) 19, 25, 37, 41, 97, 103, 105–108, 112, 119, 134
democracy 62–64, 74, 83, 132
Egypt 18–20, 41, 134, 149–150, 157–158, 161
Faisal I (King of Iraq) 97
Gulf Cooperation Council 22, 36–37, 44, 68, 74, 77, 79, 112, 142, 161
Gulf of Oman 45
Gulf War (1990–1991) 4, 46
Hadi, Abdalbubah Mansur 20, 156, 161–163, 166–167, 175, 178
Hajj 40
Hamas 3, 67, 146, 176
Hariri, Rafic 8, 119–121, 124
Hariri, Saad 8, 119–120, 124–127, 130
Hashd al Shaabi see Iraq, Popular Mobilisation Forces/Units

Hezbollah 7, 44, 67–68, 76, 80–81, 84, 118, 120–121, 123–136, 144, 146, 151, 162, 175–177

Hormuz, Strait of 44–46

Horn of Africa 22, 163

Hussein, Saddam 1, 7, 18, 41, 79, 87, 98, 143, 174

Iran
and Arab Uprisings 3, 8–9, 14, 19, 35–42, 45, 47, 82–85, 142
constitution of 7, 64, 76–77
domestic politics in 3, 7, 36, 63–65, 148
Iran–Iraq War 7, 46–47, 99, 130–131

Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) 44, 84–85, 96, 104, 106, 144, 148
military of 38–39, 41, 78, 85, 96, 143–145
nuclear programme see Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
relations with Bahrain 7–8, 19, 68, 74, 75–88
relations with Iraq 7–8, 18, 41–42, 46–47, 76, 79–80, 96, 98–114, 142–144, 146, 151, 174–175, 179
relations with Lebanon 1, 8, 14, 19, 42, 68, 118, 125, 127–129, 131–137, 151, 175
relations with Syria 8, 19–20, 36, 41, 44, 103, 106–107, 132, 141–154, 175
relations with United States 1, 4–5, 7–8, 21–22, 35–39, 43, 45–49, 81, 96, 100, 104, 106–107, 126, 137, 143, 160
relations with Yemen 14, 20, 40, 42, 82, 156–158, 162–168, 175–177

revolution of 1979 3, 6–7, 14–15, 18, 35–37, 41, 45, 47, 55, 57, 63–69, 74, 76–77, 82, 85, 99, 131, 142

Iraq
Iran–Iraq War 7, 46–47, 99, 130–131

Popular Mobilisation Forces/Units (PMF/PMUs) 46, 103–108, 110, 113, 129, 175
relations with Iran 7–8, 18, 41–42, 46–47, 76, 79–80, 96, 98–114, 142–144, 146, 151, 174–175, 179
relations with Saudi Arabia 7, 18, 21, 40, 96, 98–102, 108–113
US-led invasion of see United States

Islam 3–4, 6–8, 40–42, 55–70, 76–77, 80, 85, 98, 121, 164, 176–177

Islamism 5, 8, 25, 55, 57–59, 61, 66–67, 81, 101, 112, 121, 145, 147, 162
and religious legitimacy 3–4, 55–58, 63, 66, 68–70, 99, 173, 176–177


ulema 60–61, 64–65

umma 41–42, 64, 76–77

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIS, ISIL see Daesh

Israel 8, 21, 36, 38, 41, 44, 80–81, 106, 118–119, 123–125, 128, 129–131, 134–135, 137, 143, 146, 164, 175–176, 178

Index

Jordan 3, 37, 80, 145
al-Jubeir, Adel 18–19, 22, 123, 156

Karbala 84, 98, 105, 107
Karbala (Battle of) 3, 66
al Khalifa dynasty 7, 8, 19, 75, 79–80
al Khalifa, Dajj bin Salman 78
al Khalifa, Hamad bin Isa 79
al Khalifa, Salman bin Hamad 85
Khamenei, Ayatollah Ali 7, 19, 25, 39–40, 47, 66, 82, 86, 103, 164
Khatami, Mohammad 7, 18, 40, 47
Khomeini, Ayatollah Ruhollah 7, 18, 57, 63–66, 76–78, 99
Kuwait 41, 43, 82, 96, 99, 112

Lebanon
civil war 120, 123, 128, 130, 132
March 8 movement 8, 119, 124–125, 136
March 14 movement 8, 119, 124–125, 133, 136
relations with Iran 1, 8, 14, 19, 42, 68, 118, 125, 127–129, 131–137, 151, 175
relations with Israel 118–119, 123–125, 128–131, 134–135
relations with Saudi Arabia 118–130, 136–137
relations with Syria 124–125, 132, 135, 151

al-Maliki, Nouri 101–102, 111, 151
Mecca 7, 24, 40, 58, 67
Medina 24, 67
al-Muhandis, Abu Mahdi 96, 106–107
Muslim Brotherhood 21, 25, 61, 79, 145, 147, 149, 153

Najaf 41, 98, 110
Nasrallah, Hassan 81, 133, 135, 146, 153,
neoclassical realism 14–16, 141–142, 147, 177
al-Nimr, Nimr Baqir 15, 39

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) 43, 46, 48

Obama, Barack 4, 20–21, 26, 137, 143–144, 149–150, 152–153
Oman 43, 112
Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) 1, 7, 40, 179
Organisation of Petroleum Exporting countries (OPEC) 7, 112

Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza 6, 63–64
Palestine 80–81, 146, 176, 178
Peninsula Shield Force 8, 84
Persian Gulf 3–4, 6, 18, 35, 38, 43, 45–47, 56, 99, 134, 158, 176
Pompeo, Mike 106
Putin, Vladimir 152

Qassim, Isa 78
Qatar 15, 21, 43, 112, 134, 145, 147–151, 153, 163
Qom 41
Quran 24, 60

Rafsanjani, Ali Akbar Hashemi 7, 18
realism 4–5, 16, 34, 141–145, 148–149, 177
Red Sea 22
Resistance Axis see Axis of Resistance
Roosevelt, Franklin D. 99
Rouhani, Hassan 39–40, 42, 45–47

al Sadr, Muqtada 111, 113
Saleh, Ali Abdullah 20, 156, 159, 161
sanctions 43, 111, 126, 141, 148, 151–153, 178
al Saud family 23–24, 60–63, 121–122
al Saud, Abdullah bin Abdulaziz 5, 7, 18–20, 24, 101, 141, 147, 150–151, 160
al Saud, Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman (Ibn Saud) 23–24, 59, 99
al Saud, Fahd bin Abdulaziz 18, 24, 99
al Saud, Faisal bin Farhan 80
al Saud, Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) 6, 14, 17, 23–26, 39, 62, 102, 109, 113, 137, 150–151, 160, 162, 167, 174, 178
al Saud, Salman bin Abdulaziz 14, 23–26, 151, 160

Saudi Arabia

and Arab Uprisings 3, 8–9, 24, 39–40, 62, 83, 150, 156, 160
constitution of 24, 60
domestic politics in 3, 6, 15–17, 23, 26, 61–62, 66, 70, 147, 151, 153, 160, 174–175
Eastern Province of 15, 25, 62, 83, 87, 158, 160
nationalism in 15–18, 23–26, 55, 60, 174
relations with Bahrain 19, 74, 75, 80–81, 83–84, 87
relations with Iraq 7, 18, 21, 40, 96, 98–102, 108–113
relations with Lebanon 118–130, 136–137
relations with Syria 4, 14, 19–21, 109, 124–125, 141, 144–153, 175
relations with Yemen 14, 20–21, 25–26, 40, 43–44, 102, 109, 150–151, 156–168
royal family of see al Saud family
Sahwa movement 25, 61–62, 147
Shia population of 15, 25, 39, 62, 68, 83, 158, 160
in Bahrain 74, 76, 80, 82, 86–88, 174
in Iraq 98, 100, 102, 111
in Lebanon 119–121, 123–125, 128–130, 132–134
in Syria 146–147
in Yemen 164
al Sistani, Ayatollah Ali 103
Soleimani, Qassem 96, 105–107, 144–145, 147–148, 151–153
Sykes-Picot Agreement 97

Syria
civil war 19, 119, 125, 130, 134–135, 141–146, 151–153, 175
Free Syrian Army (FSA) 19, 145, 147
Jaysh al Islam 145–147
Liwa Fatemiyoun 144
Liwa Zainebyoun 144
National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) 19, 149
relations with Iran 8, 19–20, 36, 41, 44, 103, 106–107, 132, 141–154, 175
relations with Qatar 134, 145, 147–150,
relations with Saudi Arabia 4, 14, 19–21, 109, 124–125, 141, 144–153, 175
Syrian National Council 19, 149
### Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Page Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taif Agreement</td>
<td>120, 123, 132–133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump, Donald</td>
<td>5, 22, 38, 43, 96, 106, 109, 126, 137, 150, 153, 160, 178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>19–20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>21, 112, 134, 145, 147, 149, 152–153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>21, 45, 81, 112, 129, 160, 163, 178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Nations</td>
<td>47, 149, 152, 156, 165, 167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Assembly</td>
<td>45, 150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security Council</td>
<td>44, 47, 152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>invasion and occupation of Iraq</td>
<td>1, 7–8, 96, 80, 100, 106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relations with Iran</td>
<td>1, 4–5, 7–8, 21–22, 35–39, 43, 45–49, 81, 96, 100, 104–107, 126, 137, 143, 160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>velayat-e faqih</td>
<td>58, 63–65, 76–78, 82–83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War on Terror</td>
<td>7, 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ansarullah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civil war</td>
<td>20, 156, 163, 168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civil war (North Yemen, 1962–1970)</td>
<td>157–158, 161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houthi movement</td>
<td>20, 45, 68, 129, 156, 159, 164, 175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relations with Iran</td>
<td>14, 20, 40, 42, 82, 156–158, 162–168, 175–177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relations with Saudi Arabia/Saudi intervention in</td>
<td>14, 20–21, 25–26, 40, 43–44, 102, 109, 150–151, 156–168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Transitional Council</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Yemen</td>
<td>156, 163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zaydism</td>
<td>157–159, 164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zarif, Mohammad Javad</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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