



## ARTICLE

# Religion, power and chaos in the Middle East

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**Abstract** The relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been conditioned by many factors, from the religious divide between Shia and Sunni interpretations of Islam to the regional role played by external forces, such as the US. We are currently witnessing the collapse of the traditional Middle East order, most dramatically in Syria. This breakdown has been accompanied by a rapprochement between the US and Iran. But far from producing a more stable situation, it is nurturing a reaction by Sunni states, led by Saudi Arabia, that may lead to more regional rivalries and confrontation. There are two camps—the Shia led by Iran and the Sunni led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia—that are colliding in several places, from Syria to Yemen. It is a clash of divergent religious branches but above all of power and strategic interests. Thus far the tensions have, to some extent, been kept under control. But they may well escalate in the near future.

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## Introduction

Since the inception of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, bilateral relations with Iran have moved from attempts to cooperate to open mistrust, particularly since the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. Since the birth of the Islamist, revolutionary and Persian-rooted Islamic Republic of Iran, the default relationship has been one of regional rivalry. More recent factors have and will continue to accentuate the confrontational aspects of the Saudi–Iranian relationship. These include the ripple effects of the Arab Spring, the rapprochement between the US under President Obama’s administration and Iran, the ongoing killings in Syria, the civil war in Yemen and fluctuating oil prices.

The year 2016 started with a renewed clash between Saudi Arabia and Iran that threatened to spiral out of control. On 2 January, Saudi Arabia announced the execution of 47 convicted prisoners, one of them the Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr. Nimr, an outspoken critic of the royal family, had been arrested in 2012 and convicted on charges of sectarian strife and sedition. Immediately after his execution, Spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry Hossein Jaberri declared that ‘the execution of a personality such as Sheikh Nimr who had no other means than speech to pursue his political and religious objectives only shows the depth of imprudence and irresponsibility’ (Basil et al. 2016).

Needless to say, the Iranian statement prompted a Saudi reaction: the Iranian ambassador to the Kingdom was summoned to the Foreign Ministry and presented with an official protest and rejection of what the Saudi authorities considered to be an aggressive Iranian intervention in Saudi internal affairs. Demonstrators in Tehran congregated in front of the Saudi embassy, and some of them assaulted the building and set fire to it. Six countries from the Persian Gulf condemned the passivity of the Iranian security services in protecting the embassy, and on 4 January the Kingdom severed diplomatic ties with Iran (Brumfield et al. 2016).

Despite the many reasons for keeping the crisis under control, such as the uncertain outcome given the current balance of forces and the political and strategic support on each side (Omidi 2016), many fear an irrational escalation that could ultimately trigger an overt military confrontation between the two countries (see Stafford 2016; Fisher 2016). As a matter of fact, the Kingdom and Iran are already occupied in indirect military clashes all over the region, from Lebanon to Yemen, in an accelerated struggle for power and influence at a time when the old Middle Eastern order seems to be in meltdown.

The entire region is undergoing a deep and dramatic transformation that today is producing more chaos than stability, more violence than peace, more sectarianism than integration and more fears than assurances. Because of this, even if the cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran is kept within reasonable limits in terms of

confrontation, it will continue to exist for years to come as a product of purely geopolitical factors.

## Religion as geopolitics

It is obvious that the most apparent divide between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a religious one, the millennial split between the two contrasting Islamic faiths, Sunnis and Shi'ites. Rooted in an unsolvable dispute over who was the legitimate heir of Muhammad, the two branches of Islam today also have a clear geographical representation: after the Islamic revolution of 1979, Iran, led by the Shia cleric Khomeini, transformed itself into an Islamic Republic based on Shi'ite principles. Furthermore, the revolutionary vision of Ayatollah Khomeini put Iran on a footing to inspire and mobilise other Shi'ite communities beyond Iran's borders. In response, Saudi Arabia, with 90 % of its population being Sunni, defended the puritanical interpretation of Sunni Islam known as Wahhabism, and set itself up as the guardian of the holy places. After the call by the leaders of Iran for the elimination of the Saudi royal family, the Kingdom accelerated the global propagation of Wahhabism as the true interpretation of Islam (Council on Foreign Relations n.d.).

However, the religious divide has not been the determining factor in the relationship between the two countries for many years (Keynough 2016), despite the fact that in the last 10–15 years the Sunni–Shia divide has become more acute, more divisive and more openly violent. In fact, there is no single open conflict in the Middle East today that does not include an aspect of this religious split, from Syria to Yemen.

From the Saudi perspective, Shia groups controlled or supported directly by Iran have won important advances and victories within the Arab world. For instance, the overthrow in 2003 of Saddam Hussein, a traditional enemy of Iran, gave way to a Shia government in Baghdad, and to the alarming and growing influence of Tehran in Iraq. Also with the help of Iran, Hezbollah, the militant arm of Tehran in Lebanon, has become the most important player in that divided country, in political as well as military terms. Furthermore, without direct Iranian interventions, Bashar al-Assad, the leader of the Alawite minority, could not have survived the rebellion that erupted in 2011 in Syria, a country with a clear Sunni majority. And finally, in March 2015, the Houthis—a group of Yemeni Shias linked to and used by Iran—launched an offensive to overthrow the government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in favour of the deposed Ali Abdullah Saleh, reversing the political transition that had been painfully crafted by Riyadh since 2013.

The 'Shia revival', as described by analyst Vali Nasr, is not the only factor to have nurtured the perception among Saudi Arabian leaders that there has been a tilting of the balance of power in the region detrimental to the Kingdom's interests (Nasr 2006). After years of imposing international sanctions on Iran over its illegal nuclear programme, in November 2013 the P5 + 1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany), representing the international community, signed an interim agreement,

the so-called Joint Plan of Action, as the first phase and framework for a final and comprehensive agreement over the nuclear situation with Iran. The comprehensive deal was reached in July 2015, and despite all the controversies surrounding its contents and implications, the agreement was adopted by the parties and entered the implementation phase on 16 January 2016.

For the Saudis the deal means two things. On the one hand, from their perspective, the agreement does not solve the problem of Iran becoming a military nuclear power, it only postpones it for a few years, while in the short term, once the sanctions are lifted, the leaders in Tehran will start receiving billions of dollars, enabling them to more vigorously pursue their regional ambitions (see Berman 2015). On the other hand, regardless of the content of the agreement, the open-arms policy of the US administration towards Iran, plus the trade interest from European countries, will accelerate the diplomatic and trade normalisation of Shia Iran, shifting the regional balance of power away from Riyadh in favour of Tehran.

The more President Obama showed willing to make concessions to Iran in order to finalise the agreement, the more vocal the leaders of Saudi Arabia became against the deal, to the point that in May 2015 King Salman even missed a summit organised by the White House for the Gulf countries on this issue. While during an official visit to the US, King Salman declared his satisfaction concerning the deal given the security reassurances offered by President Obama to the Kingdom, the actual policies carried out by the King since then show that this was more diplomatic rhetoric than a real strategic convergence with Washington.

Finally, there is another issue unrelated to religion that is and will continue to negatively affect the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran: oil pricing. The Iranian oil minister has expressed Iran's support for the intention of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and Russia to freeze oil production at current levels in order to help the oil price recovery (Watts 2016). For their part, the Saudi authorities remain firmly committed to maintaining their current national production levels or even increasing them, as they did during 2015, rejecting a collective common position and a potential reduction of their output. Despite the diminishing oil revenues per barrel, Riyadh seems more preoccupied with market shares. Some analysts also think that the cheap oil policy is oriented towards two parallel goals: hurting the shale industry in the US and economically penalising Russia at a time when it is intervening decisively in favour of Bashar al-Assad in Syria (McEndree 2016).

## Geopolitics and strategy

There is no doubt that at the beginning of 2016, Saudi Arabia is a country that feels threatened. Actually, as a former British ambassador to the Kingdom has put it:

Saudi Arabia feels with good reason more threatened than at any time in its modern history, at least since the subversive Kulturkampf of the 1950s and 1960s from Nasser's Egypt. This stems from five sources: first, the challenge of Sunni and largely Salafi jihadism; second, the sustained ideological and material challenge of the Islamic Republic of Iran; third, the collapse of large parts of the Middle East state system following the Arab spring; fourth, a sharp fall in global energy prices; and fifth, a sense that historical alliances—notably but not only with the United States—are fraying. (Jenkins 2016)

In all probability, the views in Riyadh are even more extreme, when one hears, for example, Hassan Hassan, an Abu Dhabi analyst, making comments such as: 'The idea of a Shiite crescent in the region has become obsolete. Today, it is a full moon and the Gulf is surrounded' (*The Economist* 2015).

It would not come as a surprise if the Kingdom, which has traditionally been under the security umbrella of the US, was to embark on a process of flexing its muscles while embracing a new doctrine of 'do-it-yourself' security as necessary. This was basically the message sent by the Saudi ambassador to the UK in an op-ed published in *The New York Times* at the end of 2013. Among other things, he wrote (Bin Nawwaf bin Abdulaziz 2013):

- 'We believe that many of the West's policies on both Iran and Syria risk the stability and security of the Middle East. This is a dangerous gamble, about which we cannot remain silent, and will not stand idly by.'
- 'The foreign policy choices being made in some Western capitals risk the stability of the region and, potentially, the security of the whole Arab world. This means the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has no choice but to become more assertive in international affairs: more determined than ever to stand up for the genuine stability our region so desperately needs.'
- 'Saudi Arabia has enormous responsibilities within the region. . . . We will act to fulfil these responsibilities, with or without the support of our Western Partners.'

Since the publication of this striking column, Riyadh seems to have developed a strategic vision that will allow the Kingdom to face internal and external threats without politically depending on the US or any Western support. The culmination of this new policy, which moves away from its traditional over-reliance on the US, has been the creation of an Islamic Alliance, announced on 15 December 2015. Thirty-four states will join forces under a military alliance in order to fight terrorism, and as Deputy Crown Prince and Defence Minister Mohammed bin Salman said during the presentation press conference, the new coalition aims to coordinate efforts in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Afghanistan (Browning and Irish 2015). It is not a home front exercise; the alliance has a clear appetite for bringing Sunnis together against Iran and its proxies.

The most recent expression of Riyadh's new policy is the Northern Thunder military exercise. This was the largest ever multi-country war game to take place in the Middle East. It began on 27 February in Hafr al-Batin, near the Iraqi border, and continued until

10 March, involving over 150,000 troops from 20 Sunni Muslim countries, including Gulf Cooperation Council states, Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Jordan, Sudan and Senegal. Northern Thunder was intended to demonstrate that Saudi Arabia has the military capacity, the political will and the alliances necessary to defend itself and promote its strategic interests, even without the close backing of the US.

Saudi Arabia today seems to have clearly decided to be prepared for the scenario of a nuclear Iran, despite the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action; to put in place a roll-back strategy to thwart Iran's regional ambitions; to play the role of a more assertive regional leader to compensate for the US's lack of resoluteness and presence; to avoid a solution that will keep al-Assad in power in Syria; and to advance practical steps to fight terror groups that may destabilise the Kingdom and its Arab allies.

## Present and future chaos

The Middle East today is not in a state of flux, it is in a state of chaos. The task of bringing back some order, or creating a new one, is a daunting one. Whether Saudi Arabia and the Gulf allies are willing and capable of doing this is, for the time being, an open question as well as a race against the clock. To deal with and manage Iran's nuclear and non-nuclear ambitions and its Shia proxies, the disintegrated nation-states, the Salafi terrorist threat, the passivity of the US, the new Russian presence in the region, the economic crisis and popular discontent will require political and strategic skills not seen before in the region, particularly as the Kingdom is also going through an unfinished power transition at the moment.

On the international front it is not clear how Saudi Arabia will respond to the spectre of a nuclear Iran. There have been signs that Riyadh will flirt ambiguously with some military dimensions of its own civilian nuclear programme. Some analysts have discussed the potential for a Saudi nuclear path that would not violate its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty: that is, allowing Pakistan to deploy strategic nuclear forces on the Kingdom's soil as part of a retaliatory capability vis-à-vis India. Such an option would create a nuclear ambiguity towards Iran, increasing Saudi Arabia's deterring posture. This is only a theoretical possibility for the time being in any case.

In terms of creating 'no-go zones' for Iranian forces (which one Israeli analyst has dubbed a 'Saudi Monroe doctrine'; S. Bar, pers. comm.), there are two fronts that will require the full attention of the Saudi authorities: Yemen and Syria. In Yemen, intervention has avoided a swift victory being claimed by the Houthis, but has not yet produced a stable solution. The level of destruction keeps growing, and the chaos and lack of clear authority have given impetus to terrorist groups like Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

On Syria, the Kingdom has made it clear that saving al-Assad is a red line that will not be crossed. It is doubtful that the Islamic Alliance will send ground troops to fight

al-Assad and his allies, including Iranian and Russian forces, at any time soon, but it may well step up its direct military help for opposition groups. The restrictions on handing over portable man-pads<sup>1</sup> to rebels may be lifted, creating a new security scenario for Russian planes, as happened in Afghanistan in the mid-to-late 1980s.

On the home front, Riyadh must address the implications of a more assertive regional policy and the ongoing confrontation with Iran. The security apparatus will have to be reinforced as the military is strengthened. Saudi Arabia is not yet short of money, but money has often been the preferred soft power tool to ensure complicity and legitimacy both domestically and abroad—thus a fiscal squeeze due to a lack of oil revenue may make things more complicated for the royal family in the years to come (see Gause 2011). Equally, as we well know in the West, foreign military interventions are not cheap. Depleting Saudi's \$600 billion reserves may prove to be easier than it currently seems today.

The significant difficulties faced by one single country in dealing with such a diverse threat scenario have led to the conclusion in some quarters that the only way for Saudi Arabia to square the circle is to enter into a closer relationship, almost a strategic alliance, with the only country in the region that may be capable of solving some of the problems the Gulf is facing: Israel (Susser 2015). But this is a long shot that may require a lot of changes and a lot of time before it materialises.

## Conclusion

In the fast-moving situation we are currently witnessing in the Middle East, the risks of mistakes and unwanted frictions, or even undesired escalation, are high. Moreover, they are likely to grow if time passes without any of the existing crises being resolved. If there is a lesson to be learned from the many decades of Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union, it is how delicately—and at what financial cost—the balance of forces was maintained. With no de-escalation mechanism in place in today's Middle East, no scenario can be ignored, from cooperation to open warfare.

The victorious tone of Tehran at present will exacerbate Saudi fears and thus create more opportunities for confrontation than for peace. Unless Iran transforms into a peace-loving normal country—and there are no signs yet of that—it is very difficult to see stable and long-term collaboration arising between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The alternative to a future confrontation is the collapse of the Saudi regime, and that would be even worse.

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<sup>1</sup> A man-portable air-defence system.

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