

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry

An ominous zero-sum game for supremacy

Patrick van der Heiden and Alex Krijger

The enmity between the Sunni Arab monarchy and the Shia Persian theocracy is often, in a rather narrow fashion, portrayed as a predominantly sectarian conflict. At heart, however, the rivalry constitutes a geopolitical struggle for political, economic and military supremacy and religious legitimacy. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the Islamic Republic of Iran are rivals in an unprecedentedly complex and volatile region where the two adversaries vie for dominance over the Middle East (ME) and the Muslim world. This article contemplates the ominous zero-sum game between Saudi Arabia and Iran through the prism of their respective strategic perspectives. A direct war between the two powers is not unthinkable.

Relations between Riyadh and Tehran have gradually deteriorated since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, and, despite intermediate periods of comparative quiescence, in recent years the cold war has transformed into proxy wars in various theaters such as Yemen, Syria and Iraq. The hegemonic aspirations of Iran, coinciding with the ascent and assertiveness of the Kingdom's Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS), Iran's regional entanglement, the deterioration of the relationship between the US and Iran and the role of Russia, further exacerbated an already highly combustible situation.

Iran's perspective and ambitions

Iran perceives itself as the nucleus of the Muslim world and the leader of resistance against Western influence in the ME. In the Iranian psyche, Iranians are the veritable heirs of an ancient and transcendent Persian civilization that once possessed exceptional political and cultural clout in large parts of the ME and across Pakistan, Afghanistan and large swaths of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The revisionist nation yearns for international, and specifically Western, recognition of Iran's role as the undisputed regional hegemon. Iran's disposition was predestined due to its invaluable geostrategic position, ancient history, affluent culture, abundant natural resources, the Sunni-Shia schism and revolutionary zeal.

The US presence and influence in the ME is an abomination to Tehran, and the Iranian regime sees it as its fundamental obligation to oppose and eventually replace the "Great Satan" (a derogatory byname for America first coined by Khomeini) in the region and Persian Gulf. The Arab Spring revolutions and social upheaval across the ME region provided Tehran with strategic challenges as well as opportunities to exert its influence. Tehran comes to the aid of Shia minorities in various Gulf Arab nations and seeks to erode the domestic powerbases of their Sunni rulers. These Arab states are typically US allies and rely substantially on the US security umbrella. In addition to the Iranian military doctrine of active defensive deterrence to discourage foreign aggression, Tehran perceives its regional engagement as an intrinsic part of its security.

Iran's preference for the utilization of proxies serves two purposes, retaliatory deterrence and passive deterrence. Retaliatory deterrence aims at dissuading those adversaries with military superiority like the US, KSA and Israel from taking direct military action against Tehran or its vital interests by raising the aggressors' potential risks and costs to an unacceptable level. Tehran's passive deterrence strategy is designed to prevent foreign involvement in states like Syria, Lebanon and Iraq that are in Iran's sphere of influence. The proxies or paramilitary partners Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) cultivates in these states, such as Syria's National Defense Forces (NDF) and factions within the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (MPF), are utilized for unconventional warfare and cementing Iranian influence in the security apparatus of these states with the aim of thwarting any political or military attempt to wrest these states from Tehran's orbit.¹

The containment of Iran's regional foe Israel (the "Little Satan", also courtesy of Khomeini) by asymmetric means through Tehran's close alliance with the Lebanese militant organization Hezbollah is an inalienable part of Iran's regional engagement doctrine. Apart from the ideological antipathy against what Tehran perceives to be a Zionist regime tormenting Palestinians and the proclaimed illegitimacy of the state of Israel, from a geopolitical perspective Israel is Iran's regional rival and a powerful obstacle to the projection of Iranian influence.

Iran endeavors to directly confront and challenge the projection of American power through vassal Arab states. The US Navy's military supremacy in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz aggravates the Iranian government as Iran traditionally controlled the Persian Gulf for most of its history. It is imperative for Iran to regain strategic control in the Gulf by opposing American maritime forces through the development of Iranian naval doctrines which emphasize avoiding a conventional war by confronting a technologically superior adversary through asymmetric and guerrilla-style warfare. Tehran also aspires to self-reliance in the development of weapon systems, including its ballistic missile program. Given the US role in Iran's contemporary history, the unwavering US support for Israel, America's alignment with the KSA and Trump's open hostility towards Iran and the Iran nuclear deal, it is understandable from Tehran's point of view that Iran is deeply suspicious of the US, and this invariably determines Tehran's political calculus.

Saudi Arabia's perspective and ambitions

The 32-year-old Crown Prince MBS, the incumbent King Salman's favourite son, appears to be the *de facto* monarch since his stellar rise from 2015 onwards. After King Salman's ascension to the throne in early 2015, MBS was appointed Minister of Defense, a position he used to mobilize a coalition of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations to launch strikes against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, a war Riyadh has been bogged down in ever since. The ailing King Salman, increasingly impaired by his deteriorating health, also entrusted MBS with leadership over the Kingdom's newly established Council for Economic and Development Affairs and control over Saudi Aramco, and he elevated MBS to the monarchical position of Deputy Crown Prince. Appropriating the vacuum left by his frail father, the cunning Deputy Crown Prince worked diligently to diminish other powerful princes within the Saudi royal family, such as the Faisal, Sultan and Abdullah factions, who could impair his power. In June 2017 MBS became heir apparent to the Saudi throne after

King Salman decided to depose Crown Prince Muhammed bin Nayef and strip him of all his positions.

MBS is widely seen as the driving force behind the Kingdom's sudden rush to sweeping social reforms (including lifting the ban on female drivers) and Vision 2030, designed to diversify the Saudi economy to produce a more pluralistic economic system while decreasing the dependence on the petrodollar. Dubai and the UAE are a source of inspiration for the ambitious MBS who has cultivated a warm personal relationship with Mohammed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. However, MBS's determination to shake up the traditional Saudi power structure in an alleged anti-corruption purge has rattled the Saudi political system of consensus-based family rule and is tantamount to a *coup de grâce* of the old order.

The archaic religious-political framework of power-sharing between the Saudi royal family and the Wahhabi clerical establishment² suffered a serious blow when MBS curbed the powers of the *Mutaween*, the religious police, leaving the clergy in a weakened position. MBS's recent explicit and unprecedented acknowledgement of the Jewish people's right to their own nation-state goes down well in Tel Aviv and Washington but has received strong criticism because of the timing: just days after the March 30th deadly Gaza border clash in which 17 Palestinians died.

The Saudi-Iranian clash: where do we go from here?

The Saudi monarchy perceives itself as the dominant Arab nation and the veritable custodians of Islam and its holy places Mecca and Medina. Historically, Saudi monarchs have tried to preserve an uneasy balance: a lavish and exorbitant lifestyle financed by petrodollars, which is widely perceived as immoral and un-Islamic, whilst being dependant on Islamic clerics' lending the monarchy much-needed legitimacy and endorsing the Saudi royal family's Wahhabi credentials. Iran abolished its monarchy in 1979 when the Islamic Revolution of Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini swept away the already rapidly decaying Pahlavi dynasty under Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi. Khomeini inaugurated a full-fledged theocracy in which religious leadership by clerics reigns supreme. The Iranian Islamic Republic proclaims to the Ummah (the global Islamic community comprising of all Muslims) that monarchs, by and large, are immoral and irreconcilable with Islam.

The Iranian rhetoric subverts the legitimacy of the House of Saud and calls the Saudis' claim to be the custodians of Islam into question. The Saudis, citing their ill-substantiated but clerically legitimized Wahhabi credentials, have denounced the Shia faith (and Iran as its main proponent) as a deviation and subversion of Islam and condemned its religious followers as apostates. Tehran observes MBS's unprecedented social reforms and rush to modernity in the staunchly conservative Kingdom and his side-lining of the Wahhabi clerical establishment with keen interest as clerical sanction for MBS may be increasingly in jeopardy. MBS risks alienating the clergy, which strengthens Tehran's efforts to chip away at the Saudi monarchy's legitimacy and emboldens the Islamic Republic's claim to pre-eminence in the Islamic world. Resentment among disparaged royals, clerics and Wahhabi charities and organizations within the Kingdom constitute a looming risk for MBS, which Tehran could exploit.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are competing all over the ME, from Iraq and Qatar to the wars in Syria and Yemen. Nowhere in the ME's proxy areas is the risk of serious escalation and a direct military confrontation between the Saudi and Persian rivals as serious as it currently is in Yemen. The Yemeni war's origins are related to the breakdown of the political transition after the Arab Spring. Yemen's authoritarian President Ali Abdullah Saleh was forced to relinquish power to the incumbent and Saudi-backed Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. The Houthi rebels, along with disgruntled Saleh loyalists and part of the Yemeni populace (including Sunni's), conquered the capital Sanaa while rival Islamic State (IS) affiliates and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) took advantage of the vacuum and chaos by controlling territory in southern and central parts of Yemen.

With the Saudis receiving logistical and intelligence support from the US, UK and France in their war against the Houthi rebels, the alliance between former President Saleh and the Houthis started to unravel in late 2017. Saleh was assassinated on December 4, 2017. The Yemen war has become a veritable quagmire, causing what the UN has labelled the world's worst man-made humanitarian disaster, with thousands of civilian deaths primarily precipitated by Saudi-led coalition air strikes. So far, only the military-industrial complexes supplying the KSA with advanced weapons to sustain its military campaign have benefited tremendously.

The repeated ballistic missile strikes launched by the Houthi rebels are potential trigger events and carry the risk of full-blown escalation between Riyadh and Tehran. The KSA and the US accuse Iran of supplying missile parts and weaponry to the Houthis through maritime smuggling routes controlled by Iranian and Hezbollah operatives. The accusations were partly backed last January by a leaked UN report that claimed that Iranian-made ballistic missiles have been supplied to the Houthi rebels, but it remains unclear if they were supplied by a third party or directly by Iranian state-entities.

Although it is certainly not in the interest of either the KSA or Iran to engage in a full-blown conventional war, the trigger event described above carries the inherent risk of spiraling out of control, compelling the US and Russia to reassess their respective courses of actions vis-à-vis the KSA and Iran. China, enjoying bilateral relations with both adversaries as Beijing imports massive amounts of crude which gives it exceptional soft economic power, may play a moderating role if the current cold war escalates into a direct conflict and could discourage both the US and Russia from taking direct military action. China has a strong interest in stability as the region is vital to China's 21st-Century Maritime Silk Route Economic Belt initiatives.

Russia and its augmented sphere of influence in the ME, along with Moscow's current alignment with Tehran, could, in theory, also act as a moderator in the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran. The Russian-Iranian bilateral relations have improved markedly, and Moscow and Tehran are closely aligned over Syria and Iraq. Russia and Iran, both passionately opposed to US hegemony, aspire to fill the strategic gap in the ME left by the perceived dwindling of the US role. Moscow and Tehran endeavor to preserve the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and have cultivated a symbiotic military relationship in the Syrian war theater with Russian air power and Iranian ground forces.³ The Russo-Persian alliance is not as stable as often portrayed: a historically deep-rooted Iranian suspicion (the Russian and Persian empires were bitter rivals between the 17th and 19th centuries) of Russian

motives, coupled with Moscow's close ties to Israel and the KSA, characterize a collaboration based upon pragmatism, short- to medium-term objectives and regional realities but beset with mutual mistrust and suspicion.

Tensions between Moscow and Tehran have arisen as both nations vie for the reconstruction of the Syrian economy, infrastructure, and oil and gas extraction. In the meantime, MBS attempts to woo Russia by purchasing advanced Russian weapons and co-opting Russia in the indigenous development of a Saudi arms industry, intending to somehow strain the Russo-Persian alliance. Despite Russia's substantial economic interests in the Iranian civilian nuclear power plant industry in Bushehr and the Iranian petroleum sector, Moscow may feel compelled to seek a regional equilibrium between Riyadh and Tehran. Russia has no strategic interest in allowing Iran to become the preeminent regional hegemon as Iran borders the Caucasus and Central Asia, both exposed to centuries of Persian influence, which are directly in Moscow's coveted sphere of influence. Also, increased Iranian gas exports to Europe pose a serious threat to Russia's geopolitical energy leverage over Europe.

The US foreign policy vis-à-vis Iran — there are clear indications that President Trump will abandon the Iran nuclear deal in May — and the ominous Saudi-Iranian zero-sum game for supremacy constitute the preeminent factors determining the geopolitical course of the ME region in 2018. New Palestinian uprisings against Israel and the unilateral campaigns by Turkey in Syria could further complicate and escalate the situation.

The world is witnessing the fast-evolving antagonism between the KSA and Iran. Both countries are exerting their geopolitical influence well beyond their own borders into the ME, throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Central Asia. It is in the interest of regional and global peace and stability that the Atlantic partners align their strategies and policies towards the ME and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in particular. If they don't, the anti-democratic global and regional forces will take advantage of this division and a direct war between the Saudi and Iranian adversaries will no longer be unthinkable.

Patrick van der Heiden is a business development consultant with a background in geopolitics and international relations, currently active in the Middle East and the Far East. Alex Krijger is Founder and Managing Partner of Krijger & Partners (Geopolitical Risk and Issue Management), he is also vice-chair of the Netherlands Atlantic Association.

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¹ Matthew J. McInnis, "Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies", Testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, December 6, 2016.

² Robert Lacey 2009, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia*, London: Arrow Books, 2009.

³ Sophia Kishkovsky, Thomas Erdbrink and Hwaida Saad, "Russia's Biggest Problem in Syria: Assad, Its Ally", *The New York Times*, March 9, 2018.