

# The Sunni and Shiite Axes in the Middle East

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One of the defining characteristics of the Middle East of recent years has been the worsening crisis between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the efforts on both sides to consolidate regional coalitions in order to increase their regional influence. Over the last decade, the region witnessed a series of dramatic developments, caused by both endogenous and exogenous factors, while in the background the Saudi-led Sunni axis and the Iran-led Shiite axis took shape. On the one hand, the region saw the collapse of some Arab states as a result of their populations' pent-up disappointment with the oppressive regimes that were unable to meet civilian needs. This development, along with the failure of secular pan-Arabism, paved the way for the rise of political Islam and the return of religion – in itself fertile ground for factionalism and sectarianism – to the region's political arena. The strengthening of the Sunni sector, which lacked a universally recognized spiritual-religious center, enabled the development of a range of Sunni groups, who are now fighting each other while exploiting the disintegration of some state frameworks, and nurturing the Sunni-Shiite conflict. On the other hand, the American invasion of Iraq, the removal of Saddam Hussein's Sunni regime, and the rise of the Shiite majority led to the first-ever Shiite regime in an Arab country and paved the way for Iran's massive entry to the arena. This is how the "Shiite crescent," comprising Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, was formed. The war in Yemen, in which Iran is aiding the Shiite-allied Houthis, strengthened the image of the spread of Iranian influence from the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz to the Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea.

At the heart of the rising tension and rivalry is the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which has known many ups and downs in the almost four decades since the Islamic Revolution in Iran and Ayatollah Khomeini's blunt statement that the House of Saud must be overthrown. Strong ideological rivalry marks the bilateral relationship, along with the struggle for influence in the Middle East. These struggles began in the early days of the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, and were exacerbated by Saudi Arabia's support for Iran's two main enemies: Saddam Hussein, in his long war against Iran; and the Taliban in Afghanistan, beginning with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. At the same time, Iran saw the American presence in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states as a direct threat to its national security, through third parties (Shiites in Saudi Arabia, especially Hezbollah al-Hejaz, an extremist Shiite organization operating there) acted against the American presence and, according to Saudi accusations, launched the 1996 terrorist attacks against the American forces in the Khobar Towers.

### **The Regional Conflict**

Tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia has grown in recent years, as the use of proxies in a series of developments placed them in indirect confrontations on a number of regional stages. The Saudis saw the Shiite uprising in Bahrain in 2011 as an Iranian attempt to exploit the events in the Arab world to attack the Bahraini royal house of Khalifa. The uprising prompted an unusually strong response in the first widespread launch of the Saudi military in Bahrain, whereupon the Saudis were joined by American and other special forces under the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) flag.

During this operation Saudi Arabia drew a clear, binding red line for Iran, intended to emphasize that in all matters connected to the GCC states, the Saudis were prepared to use force against any perceived attack on its national security. This Saudi move, which helped the Bahraini regime violently suppress the Shiite civilian uprising while clearly violating basic civil rights, posed a difficult dilemma for the United States. On the one hand Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are important American allies – the American fleet in the Gulf has been based in Bahrain since 1946, and Bahrain has a security pact with the United States and is a non-NATO ally. The Saudi-Bahraini resolve underscored that their action should be categorized as “homeland”

defense against Iranian attempts to exploit the turmoil in the Arab world to advance the standing of Shiite communities and therefore its own standing in the region. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's actions conflicted with basic American values and interests. These events have already illustrated the gap, which will only continue to widen, between American interests in resolving the Iranian nuclear issue with willingness to lift the sanctions, and what is perceived by countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, as American disregard of Iran's aggressive regional policy.

Likewise in March 2015, Saudi Arabia chose to respond severely to the uprising of the Houthis, a Zaidi Shiite minority in Yemen that established a militia similar to Hezbollah that threatened to take control of the country. Yemen shares a border of some 1800 kilometers with Saudi Arabia and overlooks the Mandeb Strait; Saudi Arabia launched a round of airstrikes to prevent an Iranian-backed Houthi takeover of Yemen. This move was accompanied by the establishment of a coalition of 34 Sunni countries, headquartered in Riyadh, nominally to fight terrorism, but in essence intended to block Iranian attempts to strengthen its hold in the region. The United States had no choice but to support these moves, and even provided intelligence and logistical assistance, while also attempting to separate the conflict in Yemen from nuclear talks with Iran, which were a few months from their July 2015 completion. The United States subsequently aided in the blockade of Iranian ships that in violation of Security Council resolutions were transporting military equipment to the Houthis.

Another example of Saudi intervention is in the ongoing war in Syria, with Saudi Arabia supplying weapons and money to Sunni groups fighting for the ouster of Bashar al-Assad, an Iranian ally. The source of the difficult relations between Saudi Arabia and Syria lies in the years before the Syrian civil war, in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, allegedly at the hands of the Syria-Hezbollah-Iran triangle. Saudi aid to the various Sunni groups fighting in Syria has succeeded in causing heavy losses to Iranian Revolutionary Guard units and other Shiite forces recruited by the Iranians, and has also prevented the regime from conquering the city of Aleppo.

Hezbollah's deep involvement in the fighting in Syria and its political moves in Lebanon place Saudi Arabia in direct conflict with the Shiite

organization, which acts in concert with Iran and the Assad regime. Therefore, in March 2016, the Saudis had the GCC adopt a resolution defining Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, and accused it of actions designed to harm the sovereignty, security, and stability of GCC member states. Immediately afterwards, the Arab League also adopted a resolution labeling Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Furthermore, at a summit meeting attended by 30 heads of state, including Iranian President Rouhani, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation passed a resolution – much to Rouhani’s distress – condemning Hezbollah for terrorist activity in the region. It later passed another resolution condemning Iran for its support of terrorism and its interference in Bahraini, Somalian, Syrian, and Yemeni internal affairs. Lebanon’s refusal to support this resolution in the Arab League prompted Saudi Arabia to renege on its \$4 billion commitment to arm the Lebanese military and security forces, clarifying unequivocally that the reason for the withdrawal of funds was Iranian and Hezbollah influence on the country. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states issued travel warnings to their citizens to prevent them from traveling to Lebanon in order to undermine tourism, Lebanon’s main source of income.

### **The Bilateral Conflict**

While the main struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia is waged between third parties, in the past year direct tension between the two countries has increased. One example is the August 2015 precedent-setting arrest by Saudi intelligence of the individual who planned the attack on American soldiers at the Khobar compound. The accused is a Shiite Saudi citizen with deep ties to Iran and Hezbollah who was captured by the Saudis in Beirut. Another example is the execution of Shiite Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a move that caused a stir in Iran and led to an arson attack on the Saudi embassies in Iran, and later to the severance of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In the economic sphere, in April 2016 the Saudis blocked an OPEC resolution to lower oil export quotas by demanding that the resolution also apply to Iran, which is currently attempting to raise its oil exports following the lifting of sanctions. Had it passed, the resolution would have raised the price of oil, which would have assisted Iran. While the September meetings showed some sign among OPEC members of willingness to compromise,

the outcome became clear two months later. On November 30, 2016, OPEC ministers succeeded in reaching an agreement regarding the overall cutback while allowing Iran to export oil at the same level of export as before the sanctions were imposed.

In addition, the Saudis acted strongly toward Iran regarding the Hajj. Following the Hajj of 2015, which led to the deaths of hundreds of Iranian pilgrims, the Iranian government issued a list of demands, which in turn were rejected by the Saudis. In May 2016 Iran took the unusual step of cancelling this year's Hajj permits, a move that also affected Lebanese Shiite pilgrims. For its part, Bahrain arrested senior Shiite religious figure Sheikh Isa Qassim, revoked his citizenship, and threatened to prosecute him for terrorism and money laundering, after banning the Shiite political group al-Wefaq. These developments prompted strong responses and threats from Iranian officials. The commander of the Quds force, Soleimani, called the move a red line and even published a threat against the royal family, warning that they will "pay the price for their actions, and the price will be no less than the annihilation of the regime." He also hinted at the sponsors of the move, the Saudi royal house, saying that continuing pressure will lead to a "bloody uprising."

However, it seems that Saudi Arabia has not been deterred by these threats, and has even escalated its campaign against Iran. The Saudis have taken a number of steps that taken together, indicate willingness to attack Iran's internal stability. In July 2016, Saudi former intelligence chief Turki al-Faisal, in an unprecedented move, participated in a conference in Paris convened by the Iranian opposition party, Mojahedin-e-Khalq, and expressed support for the organization's agenda, including its call for the overthrow of the Iranian regime. This is not an insignificant act by a non-sitting official, because it is doubtful that he would dare to take such an unusual step without permission from the kingdom, and the event's widespread coverage in Saudi media indicates quiet support for the move. Moreover, a few weeks later, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir publicly accused Iran of responsibility for the Khobar Towers attacks and providing refuge to al-Qaeda leaders in Iran in 2003, when they ordered terrorist attacks on Riyadh residential neighborhoods. Saudi officials even expressed concerns that Iran, in partnership with Hezbollah al-Hejaz, recruited and trained separatist elements in Saudi

Arabia. For their part, the Iranians blame the Saudis for supporting separatist elements in Iran, mostly from the Arab minority – the Ahvaz who live in an oil-rich region in the Khuzestan province. The Iranians have accused the Saudis of involvement in Kurdish terrorist activity against the Revolutionary Guards and the Iranian military, the first of which took place two decades ago, as well as activity by the Baloch people against the Iranian regime.

These confrontations have religious elements, which play into the Sunni-Shiite conflict and expand its consequences beyond those directly involved. For example, the Saudi Arabian Grand Mufti, Abdul-Aziz ash-Sheikh, declared in September 2016 that Iranians are not even Muslims. He claimed that they are descended from Zoroastrians and that their “hostility toward Muslims, especially Sunnis, is ancient.” The Iranians in turn accuse the Saudis of deviation from Islam, and denounce them in extremely strong language.

In addition, suspicions have been raised by senior Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Khamenei, concerning what they define as increased cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel against Iran. Significantly, on August 1, 2016, Khamenei announced publicly that “Saudi Arabian attempts at normalizing relations with the Zionist regime are a knife in the back of the Muslim people, an enormous crime, and a betrayal.” These statements directly from the Supreme Leader are unusual and reflect a real Iranian fear of Israeli ingenuity joining forces with Saudi resources and Saudi Arabia’s geographic proximity to Iran.

From the Saudi perspective, the nuclear agreement between Iran and world powers signed in July 2015 represented a game-changing development. For years, Saudi Arabia benefited from the rocky Iranian-American relationship; Iran faced military threats, and the sanctions eroded its economy and its standing on the global stage. Suddenly the picture changed, and the agreement is seen by Riyadh as an extremely significant achievement for Iran. Not only did it lift economic sanctions and international isolation, but it testified to another facet of improved Iran-US relations. As Riyadh saw it, the US favored Iran over its allies in the region, which include Saudi Arabia. From the Saudi perspective, the main message of the American nuclear agreement with Iran was American betrayal of its historic commitment to the security of the Gulf. Moreover, American officials including President Obama stated that America is interested in establishing a balance between Saudi Arabia and

Iran in the Gulf, a statement that places an American ally on equal footing with Iran, which until recently was an enemy of the United States, while Iran is strengthened by the nuclear agreement and America continues to withdraw from the Middle East. Riyadh is concerned that any vacuum will be filled by Iranian subversion and instability, which in Saudi eyes are planted in the region with the clear intention of destabilizing the Saudi kingdom.

### **The Strategic Balance Sheet**

Iranian-Saudi relations have reached an unprecedented low, with each side attempting to advance its own interests and influence in the Middle East and the Gulf. It currently seems that the strategic balance is somewhat weighted toward Iran and the Shiite axis, which is more united than the Sunni axis, both among its various elements, as well as around the goals it has defined for itself, mostly in Iraq and Syria. It has managed to connect to Russia, the only global power willing to apply military force in the region. At the same time, Iran, even if only partially, has managed to connect to the American and Western agenda against the Islamic State, while being perceived as an island of stability among the chaos of the Middle East – in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen.

Saudi Arabia may have succeeded in preserving stability during the current Middle East upheaval. Since the beginning of the war in Syria, Riyadh has been in close cooperation with the United States and has even benefited from extensive sophisticated arms deals, but the coalition it is trying to lead is not sufficiently coherent. For example, Egypt and Turkey, two important Saudi allies, have conflicting interests and views regarding Syria, Yemen, and positions on Iran. Egypt is only partially willing to be involved in fighting in Yemen, and a crisis arose regarding Cairo's support for Russia's proposed Security Council resolution. Turkey and Iran are engaged in complex relations despite the ongoing disagreement over the solution for Syria and the proximity of Turkey's position on this issue to the Saudi position. Pakistan, too, whose special relationship with Saudi Arabia is of great importance, prefers not to belong to the Sunni coalition in Yemen led by Riyadh.

In conclusion, the Saudi-Iranian conflict, which reflects many aspects of the Sunni-Shiite conflict, is highly intense. Each side recruits partners and

grooms local actors to be dependent on them and follow their orders. They thereby widen and deepen existing rifts, endow the continuing fighting in conflict regions, and make it difficult to formulate agreements in the near future. The Iranians and the Saudis are both fighting for interests essential to their security and their status, and at this stage neither side has shown willingness to compromise. Only in the future, after the administration changes in Washington, and should international players, primarily the United States and Russia, reach agreements and manage to impose them on all the regional players, can calm be restored between the two axes and the countries that lead them.