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SNAPSHOT

Saudi Arabia and Iran's Uneasy Friendship

The Middle East's New Balance of Power

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This might be the year that changes everything in the Middle East. The reason: a possible thaw in Saudi Arabian–Iranian relations.

Several factors led to this moment. First is the election of Hassan Rouhani as president of Iran in August 2013. Since elected, Rouhani has initiated a charm offensive aimed at reducing tensions between Tehran and several of its Arab Gulf neighbors. Iran's foreign minister even arrived in the kingdom for a rare visit to the regional rival, bringing condolences after the death of King Abdullah.

Then there this the interim nuclear agreement, which undermined the kingdom's standing as the region's de facto powerhouse and raised Iran's stature as a rising international power. Next came the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) tromping through Iraq and Syria, a threat to both Iran and Saudi Arabia and its conservative Wahhabi clerical establishment. Meanwhile, apparent U.S. fatigue with the Middle East left the Gulf countries without much U.S. support. And, recognizing Iran's superior position, they had no choice but to start making nice with Iran.

And, finally, there is the successsion of a new Saudi King to the throne.

However, despite the emergence of shared interests, including defeating ISIS, it is unrealistic to expect that all this will translate into an immediate thaw in Saudi-Iranian relations, given the hostility that has accumulated since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the strategic considerations that will still guide the two countries.

BAD HISTORY

For a long time, Saudi-Iranian relations had been worsening by the year. For the Sunni Arab monarchies, the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran was galling; with his poisonous rhetoric, he constantly reminded his neighbors of Iran's hegemonic goals. The Arab Spring, which seemed to undermine the old Middle Eastern political and sectarian balance, heightened tensions. Not helping matters was Tehran's support for Syria's embattled Bashar al-Assad regime and for the former

Nouri al-Maliki regime in Iraq. By late last year, Iran and its allies seemed to have the upper hand in both countries, as well as in Lebanon and Yemen.

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