

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Toward a New Chapter?

Benedetta Berti and Yoel Guzansky

*Benedetta Berti is a research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv. She specializes in terrorism and political violence in the Middle East, radical Islamic organizations, and Palestinian and Lebanese politics. She holds a PhD from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. Dr. Berti is the author of the recently published *Armed Political Organizations: From Conflict to Integration* and co-author (with Joshua L. Gleis) of *Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study*. Yoel Guzansky is a research fellow at the INSS, specializing in Iran, GCC states, and Gulf Security. Mr. Guzansky joined the INSS after coordinating work on the Iranian nuclear challenge at the National Security Council in the Prime Minister's Office. He is a graduate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University, and a doctoral candidate in international relations. Since joining the INSS, he has written and edited monographs and published policy papers, op-eds and peer-reviewed work in academic journals.*

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in recent years have been characterized by religious-ideological antagonism, competing political and geostrategic interests, and an ongoing competition for regional hegemony.¹ With the onset of the Arab Awakening, the hostility between the two states has intensified, especially as the regional revolutionary wave arrived in Bahrain and Syria, creating a direct clash between Saudi and Iranian interests and policies.

Moreover, the revolutionary potential of the Arab Awakening, along with what Riyadh perceived as Iranian attempts to consolidate regional achievements and influence, largely roused Saudi Arabia out of its relative passivity in foreign policy and led it to attempt to promote a new inter-Arab alignment as a potential counterweight to the perceived Iranian threat, which seemed to loom ever larger on the horizon.

Since the beginning of the 2011 Middle Eastern revolutionary wave, the Saudis—generally known for their role as a pro-status quo and reactionary regional power—have at times acted as a revolutionary force, while at others have played the role of a counter-revolutionary one, depending on their interests. For instance, Saudi Arabia was heavily involved in the crisis in Yemen and engineered the deal that led President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down (in exchange for immunity from prosecution). The Gulf Kingdom also played an important role in building regional political support for external intervention against Muammar Qadhafi's

regime in Libya. On the other hand, Saudi efforts as a counter-revolutionary force were no less substantial, with the country employing military force to crash protests and keep the al-Khalifa regime in place in Bahrain. The kingdom also played a reactionary role when it came to Egypt. At first, in the early days of the revolution, Riyadh supported Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Later, the Saudis allocated billions in aid to the military regime, both before and after the brief reign of Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi. This firm support for counter-revolutionary forces in Bahrain and Egypt can be contrasted with Saudi activism in the case of Syria, where the country has assumed a remarkably anti-status quo position and has focused on supporting the military and political opposition to President Bashar al-Assad and his regime.²

These interesting variations in Saudi foreign policy with respect to the Arab Awakening are best explained in terms of the deeply troubled relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has perceived Iran as the main security and political threat in the region for several reasons. The first relates to Tehran's desire to promote a security system in the Gulf, free of foreign involvement, and to contain the Iranian presence in the areas it perceives as being part of its natural sphere of influence. In this sense, Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons and the potential impact it could have on shaping the regional agenda also threatens Saudi Arabia. From the Saudi perspective, Iran's ambitions and its military capabilities might be used to further Iranian influence over the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and over the Shi'ite minority population in the Saudi kingdom.³

This current security and political conflict also builds on complex historical relations and deep ideological animosity between the two states. The ideological rivalry is centered on competing claims of Islamic authenticity and legitimacy, as well as on preexisting clashes between Iran's Shi'ite Islam and Saudi Arabia's Wahhabist Sunni Islam, with its historical reluctance to accept Shi'ite Islam.

The convergence of this deep ideological and historical rivalry with current competing geostrategic and political interests helps explain Saudi and Iranian strategy and interests in Syria and their role in fueling sectarianism in the region.

Saudi Foreign Policy on Syria: The Proxy War? (2011–13)

Saudi Arabia's relations with Syria, Iran's main Middle Eastern and Arab ally, quickly deteriorated following Assad's violent suppression of the initially peaceful political protests there, which began in March 2011, and with the subsequent civil conflict that followed. Saudi Arabia's current policy with respect to Syria constitutes a significant change in the kingdom's attitude toward the Assad regime.

Indeed, after the severe rift between the two states in the wake of the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister and Saudi national and protégé Rafik al-Hariri in 2005, the kingdom shifted from an initial strategy of isolation to one of relative openness with respect to Syria.⁴ After unsuccessfully attempting to isolate Syria between 2005 and late 2007, Riyadh decided to change its tune in 2008. This change of attitude was strengthened after the May 2008 Doha Agreement,⁵ which created a national unity government in Lebanon. Until then, that country had served as the main arena for the Saudi efforts to weaken and isolate Syria. After 2008, the Saudis went from isolation to engagement in an attempt to drive a wedge between Damascus and Tehran. The Syrian–Saudi reconciliation efforts became especially prominent following Israel’s Operation Cast Lead (December 2008–January 2009), and culminated in King Abdullah’s historic trip to Damascus in October 2009, during which the parties pressed Lebanon to break the political impasse and create a national unity cabinet to govern the country.⁶ In the following two years, Saudi–Syrian communication continued, such as on the issue of the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Yet relations between the two countries were never truly upgraded to a solid political alliance, partly because Riyadh’s attempts to break up the “Axis of Resistance” and downgrade the Syrian–Iranian alliance never materialized.

Since then, relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia have cooled off gradually, with the protests in Syria sparking a more severe rift between the two parties. Indeed, as the unrest in Syria grew and the regime’s brutality in handling the mobilizations became clearer, Saudi Arabia swiftly shifted from an initially cautious stance to one of outright condemnation, with the kingdom recalling its ambassador to Riyadh as early as August 2011.⁷

Riyadh’s anti-Assad stance, along with Saudi support and direct military intervention to quell Shi’ite social and political protests in Bahrain, was evidence that the kingdom had decided to stand up to what it perceived as growing Iranian influence in the Arab Middle East.⁸ By weakening the Assad regime, the Saudis hoped they would reduce the power of the “Shi’ite Axis.”⁹ Indeed, since the beginning of the Arab Awakening, the kingdom has acted consistently on this assumption. Together with Qatar, Saudi Arabia has taken action in order to further weaken the Iranian–Syrian axis. The two nations, for example, cooperated to suspend Syria’s membership in the Arab League and continue to provide financial and military support to various elements within the Syrian opposition.¹⁰

These measures are in keeping with the approach Saudi Arabia has adopted since the beginning of the Arab Spring, which is both more assertive than in the past and more forceful in its attempt to reshape the map of alliances in the region in accordance with its interests. Historically, Saudi Arabia has preferred a more

nuanced and largely reactionary approach to confrontation. Even on Syria, the Saudis would have preferred that their historical ally, the United States, support the anti-Assad opposition and deeply resent it for not having stepped up to the plate and led the efforts to weaken Assad and Iran.¹¹

Yet, when the much-awaited American “silver bullet” failed to materialize, Saudi Arabia, with its deep coffers and rich Sunni Islamic influence, decided to assume a more prominent regional role and lead the efforts to support the anti-Assad camp. Indeed, as noted, while Riyadh’s previous attempts at distancing Assad from the Iranian axis were unsuccessful, the rebellion against him gave the Saudis a new opportunity to attempt to weaken Iranian influence in the area by his ouster.

Saudi Arabia and its allies began to adopt a tough stance vis-à-vis Assad in the summer of 2011, when the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) called on Syria to stop its “deadly suppression of citizens.” This was followed by an unusually sharp statement by King Abdullah, who demanded that Syria “stop the killing machine.”¹² This new tone resulted from the Saudi king’s frustration with the refusal of the Alawite minority regime (which he more than likely considers heretical) to go along with Saudi attempts at mediating between the warring parties, as well as from the realization that Syrian opposition achievements could lead to a regime in Syria that would tip the regional balance of power against Iran.

Since then, Saudi Arabia, alongside the United Arab Emirates and Qatar (which has since cut back on its involvement), has been aiding all rebel forces it regards suitable for the anti-Iranian cause within the Syrian rebel camp. The strategic goal of overthrowing Assad (and weakening Iran and Hizbullah) has been indeed spearheading Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy. Its aim is to strengthen elements among the rebels, so that if and when Assad falls, those elements will gain control over what remains of the Syrian state. To that end, Saudi Arabia’s role has not just been focused on providing material and financial assistance, but also on offering to boost the status and capabilities of the political opposition to Assad, and especially the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. This is the case, though Saudi funding has by no means been directed exclusively toward the National Coalition and the Free Syrian Army; indeed, money from Saudi Arabia in particular and the Gulf in general has been channeled to virtually all the main opposition groups.

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia has been officially opposed to funding the more radical sectors of the opposition, and it has designated both Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, now Islamic States or IS) as terrorist entities since March 2014.¹³

Indeed, the kingdom is suspicious of groups such as ISIS. Although belonging to the same Islamic sect, ISIS views the Gulf's ruling families as illegitimate. A recent map released by the group indicates the GCC lands it intends to claim. This is worrisome for Saudi Arabia, which is also concerned about the growing sectarianism within its borders and the potential increased appeal of local jihadists. In the early summer of 2014, Saudi officials arrested sixty-two suspects, including thirty-five Saudi nationals, accused of being part of an ISIS cell that was planning to assassinate officials of the regime and to target government installations.

At the same time, this policy has not prevented private donations from the Gulf States, notably Kuwait and the UAE, to reach the more radical Sunni rebel groups. This has caused further radicalization and fragmentation within the rebel ranks in a rampant competition for funds and influence that has strengthened the more radical elements among the anti-Assad supporters.

In addition to directly assisting anti-Assad forces, Saudi Arabia has been calling for greater international pressure against Assad, while encouraging the US to take a more active role. For instance, when the Assad regime reportedly used chemical weapons in August 2013, the Arab Gulf countries—led by Saudi Arabia—tried to persuade Washington that the Assad regime had crossed the red line set by President Obama in August 2012 and again in March 2013, and that military intervention was the most appropriate response to such violation.

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Saudi Arabian intelligence presented the US with proof in February 2013 that the Syrian regime had already resorted to chemical weapons.¹⁴ However, American reluctance to get involved in Syria has caused the Gulf States in general and Saudi Arabia in particular to question the ability of the US—traditionally their main “defense provider”—to deliver. Indeed, numerous analysts in the Gulf have been relying on Washington's manifest interest in staying out of the Syrian conflict as a sign of its diminishing regional influence. It was even reported that the Saudi king, frustrated with US policy in the region and especially with the lack of intervention in Syria and the rapprochement with Iran, sent Obama a message saying that America's credibility was on the line if it let Assad prevail.¹⁵

The Saudis' more muscular regional influence also extends to the political situation in Lebanon, a country in which Saudi Arabia has historically been politically and economically invested. Recently, Riyadh reportedly offered to provide \$3 billion in aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces, as part of its effort to preserve influence in the country.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, Hizbullah has been rather critical of the increased Saudi investment in the Lebanese army, with the group asserting that Saudi Arabia has been orchestrating an unprecedented intelligence campaign, led by the Saudi

prince Bandar bin Sultan, to cripple Hizbullah's organizational infrastructure, target its assets, and weaken its political position within the Lebanese political arena.¹⁷

New Year, New Policy: Retreat or Rapprochement? (2014)

By the spring of 2014, an analysis regarding the chances of yet another dramatic shift in Saudi regional policy started to emerge. Simply put, the assessment was that Saudi Arabia had started to come to terms with the reality of the Syrian battlefield and with Assad's slow and steady tactical victories.¹⁸ In short, the Syrian regime managed to improve its position on the battlefield through a number of important victories: first the battle of Qusayr in the summer of 2013 and then the battles for the Qalamun area and Homs in the first months of 2014. These were all stepping stones to securing a safe corridor between Syria and Lebanon and establishing a link between the Syrian capital and the Alawite areas in the northwestern coastal areas of the country. Accordingly, with the regime improving its odds of survival and with the main groups within the opposition still deeply divided and cornered into simultaneously battling the rise of radical groups like ISIS as well as the regime, many observers predicted a reversal in Saudi policy. This could mean an attempt at a more conciliatory strategy aimed at bridging preexisting differences with Iran.

Signs of these strategic adjustments included a number of conciliatory statements toward Iran, beginning with the May 2014 declaration by Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal that his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif, could visit Riyadh "anytime he sees fit."¹⁹ In addition, the removal of key proponents of the aggressively anti-Assad Syria policy, such as former Intelligence Chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan and former Deputy Defense Minister Prince Salman bin Sultan, was also taken as a sign of policy recalibration.²⁰

The invitation to visit Saudi Arabia, and the generally more courteous tones of the exchanges between Saudi Arabia and Iran, are significant because they point to the attempt of the two main ideological and geostrategic rivals in the Middle East to maintain open channels of communication, if only for tactical reasons. In addition, the timing of the invitation seems to further point to a mutual interest in mitigating tensions and preventing an open confrontation.

Although Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in a struggle to shape the balance of power in the Middle East, they are both seeking to keep their struggle covert through the use of soft power, *inter alia*, through mutual incitement and psychological warfare by means of radio and television networks, and through the funding of domestic opponents and proxies. For example, Iran has some influence

among the kingdom's Shi'ites, while Saudi Arabia has ties with the Baluches and the Arab minority in Khuzestan. Meanwhile, economic and diplomatic channels remain open.

Increased communication between the parties is taking place against the backdrop of the possible deal between Iran and the West on the nuclear issue. Riyadh is less concerned by the technical details of the Iranian nuclear program than by the specter of strong US–Iranian relations resulting from a permanent agreement, which would strengthen Iran's posture in the Gulf region. In Riyadh's analysis, an American–Iranian rapprochement would also facilitate Washington's intended disengagement from the region, further complicating the Saudi position vis-à-vis the looming "Iranian threat" and representing an incentive to improve bilateral relations. From a GCC perspective, the growing unrest and chaos in Iraq may help Iran in its potential "grand bargain" with the US, by creating common ground between the parties and by providing Washington with yet another reason to deepen its dialogue with Tehran.

In this context, it does make sense for both sides to endeavor to manage the deep-seated rivalry and keep the channels for dialogue open. Yet, despite these minimalist policy objectives, it seems unlikely that either Iran or Saudi Arabia will manage to pursue more maximalist bargains or compromise. This is especially true when seeking a common strategy to solve the current Syrian impasse and plan for the "day after." Here, the chances of finding a formula that would satisfy both sides remain slim, because for both countries the events in Syria are to a large extent a zero-sum game. The civil war has reached the point at which Iran and Saudi Arabia will have a hard time retreating from the positions they have presented and the (contradictory) commitments they have made to the respective sides.

So, for the time being, the Iranian–Saudi conversation has not honed in on a common approach to Syria, nor has it led to a significant change in strategy by either party. Even though there are no Saudi illusions about a sweeping victory in Syria, support for the anti-Assad opposition has not been withdrawn. The kingdom is all too aware of the advantage in weaponry, organization, and external support enjoyed by Assad and his allies. However, the Saudis hope the support they provide will tip the scales in their favor, bleeding their adversaries financially and militarily, with no significant direct cost to the kingdom.²¹ To this end, while Saudi Arabia is worried about the long-term role and plans of ISIS, it would not object to seeing Iran bogged down fighting on two fronts: Syria and Iraq respectively (with Iranians painfully aware of this Saudi preference, heightening animosity between the parties).

Yet, the Saudi calculation may underestimate the dangerous potential and regional ramifications of the worrisome rise of radical elements operating in Syria and Iraq. The risk that some of these groups may plan to operate in the Gulf and could therefore upset stability between Shi'ite and Sunni communities in Iraq, Kuwait, and the Saudi kingdom itself cannot be discounted.²²

Tensions over the current policy are heightened by internal conflicts between parties favoring stability and anti-Iranian hardliners within different regimes in the Gulf. Along with many in the Arab world, hardliners believe that the overthrow of the Assad regime could restrain Tehran and "restore Iran to its natural size," hopefully without leading to a frontal confrontation between Iran and the Saudis. This confrontation has been avoided until now.

Yet not everybody in the Gulf believes that overthrowing Assad and weakening Iran should be done by aggressively investing in and funding the opposition. There is indeed a more cautious, pro-stability camp that has been increasingly alarmed at the possibility that by funding fighters abroad, they might be also fueling the growth of extremist and radical groups such as ISIS.²³ That group has become a concrete threat to the kingdom, with its ability to attract new recruits from the region and globally, along with its growing financial resources and experience on the battlefield. Moreover, the prospects of a new generation of *mujabideen* returning home and perpetrating terrorist attacks in the Saudi kingdom and across the Gulf is very worrisome to Riyadh.

Therefore, the rise of ISIS and the expected disintegration of Iraq add another layer to the already complex Saudi-Iranian relations. It is difficult to tell what Gulf leaders view as the bigger threat: the spread of ISIS or Iran's growing influence in the region. Meanwhile, it seems as if they are attempting to find a way of dealing with both issues.

With the Saudis testing Iranian resolve to the limit, despite the kingdom's inferior demographic and geopolitical position with respect to Iran and its allies, cornered as it is by a vast Sunni majority yet more than eager to fight,²⁴ it is unclear how and when this bloody deadlock will be resolved.

Looking forward, it is possible to see how tactical cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia—for example on the issue of Lebanese presidential elections and the current failure of the country to elect a successor to Michel Sleiman—may occur, whereas longer-term, substantial strategic cooperation may still prove elusive. Yet, as the cost of financing and keeping the Syrian war going continues to escalate, and as the shared hope of containing the conflict to Syria is shattered by the advance of ISIS in Iraq and by the growing regional instability, both parties

may indeed begin to weigh the expected long-term gains of vanquishing their foe in Syria against the substantial long-term costs of securing such an elusive victory. The translation of this realization into policy may be what is needed to move from minimalist communication to a more significant strategic shift.

Notes

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