



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Saudi–Iranian Tension: Roots and Implications of the Crisis

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Jan 2016

Saudi-Iranian Tension: Roots and Implications of the Crisis

Series: Assessment Report

Policy Analysis Unit – ACRPS | Jan 2016

Copyright © 2015 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

---

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

### **Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies**

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

[www.dohainstitute.org](http://www.dohainstitute.org)

# Table of Contents

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Introduction                                   | 1 |
| The Roots of the Current Crisis                | 1 |
| The Arab Spring and the Card of the Shia Arabs | 2 |
| The Saudi Response and the American Position   | 4 |
| Conclusion                                     | 5 |



## Introduction

Saudi-Iranian tensions reached a new peak recently, when Riyadh decided to sever relations with Iran on January 3, 2016, in response to the storming and setting on fire of its embassy in Tehran and consulate in Mashhad. Differences between the two countries have grown over recent years because of what Saudi Arabia sees as Iran's hostile policies, attempts to intervene in the internal affairs of the Arab Gulf states, action to undermine its security and stability, and on-going efforts to exert its influence in the Arab Mashriq or Yemen.

## The Roots of the Current Crisis

Current Saudi-Iranian relations are radically different from the pattern that prevailed for decades. During the period of the Shah, relations between the two countries were stable and cooperative, primarily because both parties belonged to the same US-led international camp during the Cold War, and both felt threatened by the USSR and its regional allies. This situation prevailed despite Iranian ambitions with regards to the eastern shore of the Arabian Gulf, especially once the UK announced its desire to withdraw from the region at the end of the 1960s. Iran lost no time in occupying the three Emirati islands in 1971 and also tried, and failed, to annex Bahrain.

Relations became very tense, however, following the overthrow of the Shah and the declaration of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. Iran removed itself from the polarization of the Cold War, and tried to export its revolution abroad and overthrow conservative regimes in the Gulf region, whom they accused of being subordinate to the West, and the US in particular. Hence it was only to be expected that Saudi Arabia would stand with, and back, Iraq during its eight-year war with Iran (1980-1988). After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait at the beginning of the 1990s, some warmth returned to Saudi-Iranian relations, including the exchange of ambassadors. Reformist Mohammed Khatami's accession to the Iranian presidency and his efforts to open up to Iran's neighbors and the world also helped improve relations. However, tensions soon returned after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and only got worse with the coming to power of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in summer 2005.

Ahmadinejad, who represented a trend of fundamentalism mixed with oppressive nationalism, led the change in Iran's regional policies, taking advantage of the major changes caused by US military intervention and attacks on Iraq and Afghanistan. He started promoting the idea of exporting the Islamic revolution beyond just neighboring states, as the case had been under Ayatollah Khomeini, and developed an Iranian project stretching as far as the Mediterranean Sea by way of sectarian politicization and support for sectarian militias and parties.

The Iranian regime exploited the Arab regimes' evasion of responsibility for the Palestinian issue, and their reneging on it through peace initiatives and other means, and used this national issue in an attempt to gain legitimacy among Arab Shia. The ongoing problem of citizenship as the basis of the relationship between the individual and the state in Arab countries has also been exploited by Iran to give feelings of injustice a sectarian dimension.

In parallel with the launch of efforts to build an arc of Iranian influence from the north of the Arabian Peninsula incorporating all the Fertile Crescent, Ahmadinejad, as soon as he took power, announced the resumption of uranium enrichment, which Khatami had stopped in 2003 after the Iranian opposition's disclosure of a secret nuclear program in 2002. This added another area of dispute with Saudi Arabia.

## The Arab Spring and the Card of the Shia Arabs

Before the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolutions in 2011, Iraq was the main point of tension in Saudi-Iranian relations. Riyadh accused Tehran of trying to impose its influence in Iraq, taking advantage of the US-wrought destruction of state institutions, with the army at the top of the list, and through the handing of power to Iranian-allied militias and parties. Admittedly, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states had taken no action to prevent the US' unjustified aggression towards, and occupation of, an Iraq that was under siege and posed no threat.

The outbreak of the Arab Spring revolutions created other new reasons for differences. While Saudi Arabia took a "principled" position against the revolutions, Tehran's position varied according to its interests. Initially, Iran supported the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt (on the basis that "they expressed an Islamic awakening," in Khamenei's words), and also backed the popular protests that broke out in Bahrain, which it similarly saw as an extension of the Islamic awakening that had begun with the 1979 revolution. Later, however, Iran saw these revolutions against dictatorship and corruption as turning into

an American and Israeli “conspiracy” at the point they reached Syria. Now the issue was one of targeting the resistance and its axis. This assessment was soon retrospectively projected onto all the revolutions. Equally, Iran only admitted the presence of a revolution in Yemen when the Houthis had taken power, and tried to monopolize their rule over the country in the second half of 2014.

The positions of both parties towards events in the region have been determined by clear geopolitical considerations with little direct relation to the issues and demands of the peoples in revolt. The position of Saudi Arabia, which seeks to maintain the regional status quo, is in essence the opposite of that of Iran, which never misses an opportunity to change that status quo in its favor, on the basis that as a state it is not convinced by the regional order and the orientations of its major players. After many failed attempts since the victory of the 1979 revolution, Iran, following the US war on Iraq, has a better chance of realizing its regional hegemonic ambitions over the Arab Mashriq as far as the Mediterranean Sea.

Post-revolution, Iran resumed policies of building centers of influence for itself in the societies of neighboring states by forming links with their Shia communities, as well as by claiming to represent these communities and their problems, even when there were no direct links. The sectarian religious regime that had taken power in Tehran turned the state into an instrument to propagate its ideas and to politicize the religious affiliation of Shia around the world, by linking them to a state other than their own. Iran assumed for itself a role as representative of Shia around the world; only Israel is similar in that it declares itself to be representative of all world Jewry (with the difference that Iran is a state that belongs culturally and historically to the region, while Israel is a settler-colonial state). Nevertheless, the Shia have never historically claimed to be a people or ‘nation’. Only rarely have they even coalesced into organized denominations within the societies to which they belong. Valiyet-i-faqih, on the other hand, is the religious means to impose such subordination, despite it having been a minority position among Shia religious scholars, even in Iran itself, and no one had heard of it in the Arab countries until it was adopted by Hezbollah in Lebanon.

A process of building forces, parties, and militias began that created tools and men for Iran to use to influence the societies of these states and to affect regional power relations as well. Hezbollah in Lebanon was created by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in the early 1980s, and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and its military wing, the Badr Brigades, were founded in 1982. They helped weaken the regime of Saddam Hussain ahead of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 before they

were able, along with other parties and militia aligned with Tehran, to seize the levers of power after the US withdrawal in 2011. The latest Iranian efforts in this context have included support for the Houthi militia in Yemen, who Iran urged to act as a “blocking third”, before “bolting” towards taking control over the country in early 2015. There has also been the continued penetration of popular mobilization called for by Shia religious leaders in Iraq, who, however, are no longer in control of the mobilization.

## The Saudi Response and the American Position

After the fall of Sanaa to the Houthis in September 2014, it seemed that Iran had completed its encirclement of Saudi Arabia. To the north, Iran was boasting of its control over the decision-making process in Damascus, Baghdad, and Beirut, and to the south it was in control of Yemen and continuing its efforts to destabilize the other Gulf states (from Bahrain to Kuwait). All of this was happening while the United States had begun talking candidly of the need for the Arab Gulf states, headed by Saudi Arabia, to start assuming the larger portion of the burden in defense of their security and interests, because the US ally no longer wanted to do this unless its own interests were directly threatened. As a consequence, Saudi Arabia intervened militarily in Yemen, in the largest such operation in its history, once the Houthis had taken control of the capital Sanaa and Iran was threatening Riyadh to its south.

Following the signing of the Iranian nuclear agreement, it became clear that the US was acting on the basis of creating a balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as an alternative to the Iran-Iraqi balance that had held sway before it was wrecked by the George W. Bush administration in 2003. The US administration, however, has taken another step towards adopting the Iranian viewpoint: at a time when all the regional balances of power around the world exist in a framework of collective regional security based upon the nation state, the US views this balance in the Gulf region within the context of a sectarian conflict between a Sunni camp led by Saudi Arabia and a Shiite camp led by Iran. This was referenced by President Barak Obama in his last State of the Union speech when he spoke of a thousand-year-old struggle within Islam as part of his attempt to evade taking a stance regarding Syria and other issues. Obama adopted a sectarian narrative of political conflicts in the region that bastions of sectarianism of all sorts in our region have failed to promote.



The Saudi execution of 47 individuals accused of “terrorism” on January 2, 2016, among them the Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, revealed the extent of tensions latent in Saudi-American relations, especially regarding the new American approach towards Iran. Saudi Arabia went ahead with the executions in disregard of previous American warnings that putting al-Nimr to death would escalate sectarian tensions in the region to an extent that might complicate many hot issues in the Middle East, including the fight against the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL), and the chances of imposing a political solution in Syria and Yemen. While not many were interested in the execution of 47 people in one go, not even their names, Iran behaved as though it was the representative of the executed Saudi Shiite cleric.

The new American approach towards Iran has increased Saudi fears and deepened doubts about US intentions, leading to an escalation with Tehran and the decision to cut relations when protesters attacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran and consulate in Mashhad. The extent of the embarrassment and confusion this has caused to the reform current in Iran is clear. The reformists rejected the attacks on the Saudi diplomatic missions on the grounds that they harmed Iran’s efforts to end its isolation, particularly following the nuclear agreement. They also feared that it would confirm the image of Iran as a country that does not respect international norms, especially those connected to the protection of diplomatic missions, a failure not without precedent; see, for example, the attack on the British embassy in Tehran in 2011. Even though the reform current in Iran is closer to the concept of the state and deals with the Shia Arabs as citizens of their own countries, the reformists were initially prepared to keep up with the extremists on the issue of Nimr al-Nimr in the context of electoral competition—Iran is on the verge of crucial elections for the Shura Council (parliament) and the Guidance Council, which is charged with selecting the Supreme Guide of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

## Conclusion

Despite the recent deterioration in Saudi-Iranian relations, there are limits imposed by international and regional factors. Neither Riyadh nor Tehran want to enter a confrontation or bear its burdens. Most likely, the confrontation between them will continue in regional arenas like Yemen. Syria, however, remains the most important arena; Riyadh cannot accept Syria falling into Iranian hands following Iraq, as such a development would mean Saudi Arabia itself falling into the clutches of Iranian influence.