

Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Changing Geopolitics of the Middle East

On 11th May 2015 news broke that King Salman of Saudi Arabia would not be attending a much lauded summit with US President Barack Obama and other leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The summit had been organised to discuss the Iranian nuclear deal and was comprised of a meeting at the White House and then a day at the Presidential retreat, Camp David.¹ The need for such a high profile meeting reflects the burgeoning tensions between Washington and Riyadh, primarily driven by concerns about any nuclear deal reached with Iran. Yet the nuclear crisis was not the only item on the agenda, on which Iraq, Syria and Saudi-led attacks on Houthi rebels in Yemen also featured. Across these agenda items, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry looms large, with this rivalry seen to be shaping events. While the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has oscillated between periods of hostility and potential rapprochement, in the past decade, relations between the two have soured. Under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) there was a return to the revolutionary, resistance focussed - yet ultimately belligerent - rhetoric of Ruhollah Khomeini, which characterised the years following the revolution. Following Hassan Rouhani's election to the office of President in 2013, there was hope that the pendulum would swing towards rapprochement, but given the emergence of opportunities fostered by the fragmentation of the Middle Eastern states' system, the possibility of weakening the other – and strengthening the self – appears attractive.

Roots, Revolutions and Battles for Legitimacy

In understanding the contemporary rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is necessary to consider the historical roots of this enmity, driven by a legacy of conquest and interactions. During the empires of Cyrus the Great and Darius, where the Persian Empire stretched from the Eastern coast of Greece to the banks of the Indus,² this was the largest empire that the world had seen at that time. Arab military successes came much later, conquering much of Persia some 1100 years after Cyrus. These Arab military successes also brought Islam to Persia, ultimately leading many to convert to the Sunni strand of Islam. In the early 16th century, the 14 year old leader Ismail changed the religion of the territories from Sunni to Shi'a, ultimately culminating in sectarian difference manifesting at a state level, notably between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Despite this difference, the period after the formation of the Saudi Arabian state and before the Iranian revolution in 1979 was characterised by a degree of suspicion, but was not overtly hostile. The events of 1979 dramatically altered the dynamics of the Persian Gulf region, with the revolution in Iran bringing Islam to the forefront of the rivalry. The establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran would challenge a main source of Saudi Arabia's

¹ Ian Black and Dan Roberts, *King Salman of Saudi Arabia pulls out of US talks on Iran* (The Guardian, 11.05.15) Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/11/king-salman-saudi-arabia-pulls-out-us-talks-iran>

² Michael Axworthy, *Iran, Empire of the Mind: A History from Zoroaster to the present day* (London: Penguin, 2008), p12.

legitimacy, with the Al Saud historically securing legitimacy through Islam, being the protectors of the two holy places of Islam. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Riyadh and Tehran both sought legitimacy from the Islamic world and in doing so, embarked on a cycle of rhetoric, which sought to increase the Islamic legitimacy of one and reduce it for the other. For instance, Khomeini referred to the House of Saud as corrupt, unworthy to be the guardians of the two holy mosques, and “traitors to the two holy shrines”,³ while the Al Saud referred to the regime in Tehran as Nazis.⁴ This competition escalated in 1987, when 400 Iranians were killed whilst making *hajj* in Saudi Arabia, although some that these events were provoked by Iranian agents.

Inherent within the new Islamic Republic’s foreign policy goals was the notion of providing support to the *mustazefin* – or downtrodden - of the Muslim world. The idea of providing support to the downtrodden world is found within the history of Shi’ism, with notions of guilt and martyrdom, stemming from the murder of Hossein in the Battle of Karbala⁵ manifesting in policy calculations. This became enshrined within Article 3.16 of the constitution, seemingly cementing ideas of revolutionary zeal within the minds of other actors in the region. As a result, fearing the expansionist aspirations of Khomeini, Saudi Arabia provided financial support to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, furthering tensions between Riyadh and Tehran.

Seemingly inspired by events in Iran, Shi’a groups in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, having experienced decades of discrimination and persecution, rose up against the state. This began a sustained campaign of resistance against the state,⁶ along with suggestions of Iranian manipulation within Saudi Arabia’s domestic affairs. Similarly, in Bahrain in 1981, the International Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, a Shi’a organisation operating with the support of Iran, launched a *coup d’etat* against the Sunni Al Khalifa ruling family. While ultimately unsuccessful, these events would prove integral in understanding future dynamics of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Indeed, this event, coupled with the legacy of the Battle of Karbala, created the perception that Iran was behind unrest across the region, particularly within Shi’a communities.

Arab Uprisings

What has become clear in the previous decade is that neither Riyadh nor Tehran can resist an opportunity to strengthen the self and weaken the other. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran thus intensified with the opportunities that emerged after the onset of the Arab Uprisings. The series of protests that have become known as the Arab Uprisings began in December 2010 when Mohammad Bouazzizi self-immolated. Bouazzizi’s actions reflected

³ New York Times., *Excerpts from Khomeini’s Speeches*, (New York Times, 04.08.87) Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/04/world/excerpts-from-khomeini-speeches.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> [Accessed 10.06.09].

⁴ Jacob Goldberg, ‘The Saudi Arabian Kingdom’, In Rabinovich, Itovar., and Shaked, Haim., (eds.) *Middle East Contemporary Survey Volume XI: 1987* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), p602.

⁵ Rola El-Husseini, ‘Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria’, In *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 5, (2010)

⁶ See: Toby Matthiessen, *The Other Saudis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

a growing dissatisfaction at socio-economic conditions in Tunisia, which were also felt by many across the wider Middle East and North African region. Authoritarian regimes across the region faced discontent from their populations, which often began to manifest in large scale protests that were then met with force by regimes across the region. The intensity of the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran increases when states begin to fragment and actors have to look for alternatives to the state to secure their identities. Indeed, the fragmentation of state-society relations provided scope for external interference within states, but also, it created opportunities for the perception of Iranian interference. Ultimately though, the challenges to regime-society stability across the region created opportunities for the escalation of a zero-sum proxy conflict, often at the expense of populations of the state.

Cultivating Sectarianism

In light of the fragmentation of regime-society relations and the disintegration of state sovereignty, sectarian identities have become an increasingly important point of reference and security. It is important to note, however, that these sectarian divisions are often created in pursuit of the strategic ends of various actors.

In the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Saudi Arabia and Iran increased their influence across Iraq, offering support to actors typically along sectarian lines. In Lebanon the nature of competition is somewhat different, with Riyadh and Tehran providing financial and political support to the March 14th and March 8th alliances respectively.⁷

Since the Arab Uprisings, however, sectarian identities have increasingly been used as a means of framing conflicts in different ways whilst also locating them within broader geopolitical narratives. This can be seen in Bahrain, where the Al Khalifa regime sought to frame an initially pro-democracy, non-sectarian protest as sectarian motivated. In doing so, the Al Khalifa secured the loyalty of those Sunnis who had previously taken to the streets by inciting fears about Iranian influence across the archipelago, but also locating the protests within the broader geopolitical rivalry that is shaping the region. In the immediate aftermath of the #Feb14 protests, a Saudi-led GCC military force entered Bahrain and helped to secure the Al Khalifa regime. While there is little evidence to suggest that Iran is behind the unrest, anecdotally, the perception that Tehran is manipulating events across the archipelago is paramount.

Bahrain is clearly not the only example of a sectarian master-narrative being constructed for political or geopolitical purposes. Events in Syria since the emergence of protests in early 2011 have increasingly taken on a sectarian nature, again, in an effort to both secure the Assad regime within his ostensibly Shi'a support base, but also locating the conflict within the broader rivalry. For Iran, ensuring the survival of the Assad regime is imperative, for both influence across Syria but also to facilitate support for Hizballah, in Lebanon. For Saudi

⁷ Frederick Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy J Ghez, Lydia Hansell, Robert A. Guffey, *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009) p79.

Arabia, the protesters provided an opportunity to win Syria back “to the Arab fold”⁸ and to reduce Iranian influence, both in Syria and Lebanon.

It can also be seen in Yemen, where the Saudi-led bombing campaign against Houthi rebels - who are believed to be supported by Iran - has resulted in the deaths of over 1600 people.⁹ Houthis subscribe to the Zaidi strand of Shi’a Islam and as such, many believe them to be a proxy actor of Tehran,¹⁰ with perception once more shaping responses.

Complicating this sectarian framing, of course, is the emergence of *daesh*¹¹ in Syria and Iraq, whose vociferously anti-Shi’a posturing sets them against Iran, but their violently fundamentalist, Salafist ideology is of paramount concern to Saudi Arabia. If the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran was purely driven by sectarian concerns then *daesh* would provide an additional opportunity to weaken Iranian influence.

Regional Security and Strategic Ends

Underpinning this discussion are questions about the nature of regional security, both within the Persian Gulf and wider Middle East. Riyadh and Tehran have different perceptions of how best to achieve regional security and what that might look like. Given its perceived history as a ‘natural state’, free from colonial interference, Iran sees itself as uniquely qualified¹² to ensure the security of the Gulf region, free from external interference. In contrast, however, Saudi Arabia and other GCC states have been reliant upon the United States to ensure their security since Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. However, changing views of the US could be complicating the nature of regional security, with Riyadh increasingly concerned at an apparently burgeoning rapprochement between Washington and Tehran.

Of course, underpinning all of these questions are strategic calculations, within which the rivalry is viewed in zero-sum terms, wherein a win for one is seen as a loss for the other and vice versa. Domestic concerns are increasingly important in light of the construction of a growing sectarian conflict, coupled with perceptions of the other’s involvement within these issues. While a change in political leadership in both Riyadh and Tehran seemingly provided

⁸ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *The Saudi response to the ‘Arab Spring’: containment and co-option* (Open Democracy, 10.01.12), Available from: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/madawi-al-rasheed/saudi-response-to-%E2%80%98arab-spring%E2%80%99-containment-and-co-option>

⁹ Ali al-Mujahed and Erin Cunningham, *Bombing and clashes resume as Yemen heads for ‘catastrophe’* (Washington Post, 18.05.15) Available from: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/bombing-and-clashes-resume-as-yemen-heads-for-catastrophe/2015/05/18/e0ef06dc-fd81-11e4-8c77-bf274685e1df_story.html

¹⁰ This belief does not factor in the notion that Iran adheres to Twelver Shi’ism, a different doctrinal and theological strand of Shi’a thought

¹¹ The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, is referred to here by the derogatory Arabic acronym.

¹² Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013)

scope for a thawing in relations, ultimately, opportunity seems to be trumping consolidation.