

FPC Briefing: The Middle Eastern 'Great Game'

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When the UK withdraws from Afghanistan in 2014 it will once more locate itself within the Arabian/Persian Gulf.¹ This move increases the strategic importance of Bahrain, with the Royal Navy possessing the largest naval base outside of the UK in the archipelago. Moreover, it locates the UK in the middle of a rivalry that is playing itself out in several proxy arenas across the Middle East, between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Events in these proxy arenas have become increasingly violent, with fractured societies turning upon one another, drawing in external actors offering support for ethnic, tribal or religious kin. This competition has manifested itself in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, and Syria, resulting in increasingly violent conflict. Understanding the rivalry that is in operation behind these conflicts helps facilitate an awareness of the driving factors of conflict.

This article unpacks the nature of this competition, which although partially driven by sectarian issues, is far more nuanced, being rooted in history and possessing a strong geopolitical dimension. This geopolitical element has resulted in regional neighbours being drawn into the conflict, notably Qatar, which complicates matters further given the emergence of tensions between Doha and Riyadh.

Identity Issues

While *prima facie* analyses of the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran hold sectarian issues to be the driving force of the rivalry, there exists an identity conflict that pre-dates Islam. Indeed, the roots of the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be traced back to a legacy of conflict between Arabs and Persians, which remains to this day.² On a recent trip to Bahrain, suspicion of Iranian activity on the archipelago resulted in several prominent Bahrainis referring to Iran as Persia, reflecting this long standing suspicion.

Arab – Persian tensions stem from a legacy of military conquest by both Arab and Persian armies. Cyrus the Great, the Persian emperor who retains a strong place in contemporary Iranian psyches,³ is a key figure in this legacy, bringing glory upon Persia through military conquest and the level of toleration during his rule. As Michael Axworthy suggests, Cyrus' empire "was perhaps the greatest empire the world had seen up to that time".⁴ In contrast, Arab military successes came around 1100 years later, defeating Persian armies in Mesopotamia in 637 and controlling most of Persia by 654. The lasting legacy of the Arab conquest was the coming of Islam to Persia.

Despite the importance of Arab – Persian tensions, the sectarian issue is paramount when considering the nature of competition between Riyadh and Tehran, with tensions between Sunni and Shi'a shaping the nature of competition. While many hold Wahhabism, the official Islamic belief system of Saudi Arabia, to be Sunni, it is so in a very broad sense, in that it is literally not Shi'a. Moreover, Wahhabis do not accept Shi'i Muslims as true believers.⁵

¹ The contested name of the body of water separating the Arabian Peninsula from Iran highlights the extent of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

² Matters are further complicated when considering that there are a number of Arabs living in the South West of Iran.

³ In terms of identity, Iranian identity is *janus faced*, with Iranians held to be the children of both Muhammad and Cyrus the Great, fusing nationalist and religious identities. See the work of Farideh Farhi, namely: Farideh Farhi, 'Creating a national identity amidst contentious politics

in contemporary Iran', in Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi (eds.), *Iran in the 21st Century, Politics, Economics and Conflict* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008),

⁴ Michael Axworthy, *Iran, Empire of the Mind: A History from Zoroaster to the present day* (London: Penguin, 2008), p12

⁵ Thus explaining tensions within Saudi Arabia between the regime and Shi'a in the Eastern Province.

Religion is increasingly important for both states as it bestows legitimacy upon regimes in Riyadh and Tehran. This legitimacy is necessary for internal and external audiences, as Saudi Arabia and Iran both face strong domestic challenges from increasingly divided populations.⁶ However, given the importance of Islam for both states, competition for leadership of the *umma*, which secures legitimacy, is seen in zero-sum terms.⁷

Although Iran was a Shi'a state under the Shah, the revolution of 1979 changed the role of religion within the state and complicated relations across the Gulf. Indeed, the revolution brought religion to the fore in Saudi – Iranian competition, especially when it appeared that Ruhollah Khomeini, the architect of the revolution sought to export the Shi'a values across the region. This was in conjunction with offering support to the 'downtrodden' of the Muslim world and criticising Saudi Arabia's ruling family the House of Saud, referring to them as "traitors to the two holy shrines".⁸

While the increasingly prominent role of religion resulted in augmented suspicion between the two states and across the region, in recent years this suspicion has evolved into overt hostility. Rhetoric such as King Abdullah of Jordan's famous "Shi'a crescent"⁹ has demonstrated this suspicion and can to some extent explain the outbreak of conflict within proxy arenas.

Geopolitics

Coupled with and stemming from the importance of identity issues, the other driving factor within this rivalry is a geopolitical factor. Aside from possessing different views on the nature of regional security, with Iran favouring a Gulf centred approach and Saudi Arabia looking to external actors to ensure security,¹⁰ the two have become embroiled in proxy conflicts across the region. Moreover, Iranian involvement in what were typically viewed as 'Arab portfolios' has led to an increase in tensions. Furthermore, charges have been levied at Riyadh that Saudi Arabian actors have been attempting to manipulate Iran's ethnic minorities, which were appropriately referred to by John Bradley as a tinderbox.¹¹ This competition appeared to reach a worrying zenith in November 2011, with the attempted assassination of the Saudi ambassador to the United States. In a somewhat bungled attempt, a member of a Mexican drug cartel was hired by a used car salesman whose brother was a member of the Revolutionary Guard.¹² The assassins ultimately proved to be undercover members of the Drug Enforcement Agency, who were able to foil the operation. While this competition is shaped by sectarian agendas, the geopolitical dimension is equally important and has ramifications for regional security.

⁶ Iran's population is 50 % Persian, with the remaining 35 million comprising Arabs, Azeris, Baluchis, Kurds, Lors, Turkmen. Saudi Arabia possesses a large Shi'a population in its Eastern Province along with an increasing number of expatriate workers.

⁷ Where gains by one result in losses for the other.

⁸ 'Excerpts from Khomeini's Speeches', (*The New York Times*, 4 August 1987).

Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/04/world/excerpts-fromkhomeini-speeches.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

⁹ Where King Abdullah spoke of how "a new 'crescent' of dominant Shia movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon could emerge". Robin Wright and Peter Baker, 'Iraq, Jordan see threat to election from Iran: Leaders warn against forming religious state' (*The Washington Post*, 8 December 2004), Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43980-2004Dec7.html>

¹⁰ Saudi Arabia views the US as essential to ensuring regional security.

¹¹ John R. Bradley, 'Iran's Ethnic Tinderbox', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2006–7)

¹² Charlie Savage and Scott Shane, 'Iranians Accused of a Plot to Kill Saudis' US Envoy' (*New York Times*, 11 October 2011). Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/12/us/us-accuses-iranians-of-plotting-to-kill-saudi-envoy.html?pagewanted=all>

With the demise of Iraq as a regional power in 2003 both Riyadh and Tehran sensed an opportunity to acquire hegemony over the Gulf. Previously, Saddam Hussein's regime had driven the dynamics of the region but with his removal of power a vacuum emerged that would shape regional dynamics for the coming decade. Saudi Arabia and Iran both attempted to fill this vacuum, operating beyond their own borders; however, this action increased suspicion of the other. In Iraq post 2003,¹³ Iran offered support to Shi'a kinsmen, with members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp also active in the state. In contrast, Saudi Arabian action within Iraq was less easily discerned, although it is widely held that money flowed from Saudi Arabia to Sunni groups.

The increasing prominence of Hizballah within Lebanese politics posed a serious challenge to Saudi Arabia. Whilst Iran provided support to Hizballah, facilitating their emergence in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia was reluctant to offer support for the group, stemming from their Shi'a beliefs and close ties with Iran. As a consequence, Iran and Saudi Arabia operated on different sides of a political battle, supporting opposing alliances, respectively the March 8th and March 14th alliances.¹⁴ In addition, in the aftermath of the 2006 war with Israel, for which Hizballah (and thus Iran) gained a large amount of political capital, Saudi Arabia was faced with a dilemma: "to do nothing and risk looking weak while Iranian power grew, or to support Hizballah".¹⁵ As such, in the aftermath of the Israeli destruction of the Dahiya suburb of Beirut, in response to Tehran's offer of \$100 million for post-war reconstruction, Riyadh donated \$1.5 billion.¹⁶ Tensions between Hizballah and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have also increased with the spiral of violence in Syria and Hizballah's involvement within the conflict, fighting alongside the Syrian army.

The events of the Arab Spring in Bahrain provided Iran with the opportunity to increase their influence in the archipelago. While Bahrain is a member of the GCC and possesses strong ties to the Al Saud,¹⁷ there is a legacy of suspicion directed at Iran. In the aftermath of uprisings in the Bahraini capital Manama in early 2011, members of the Al Khalifa ruling family alleged that Iran was offering support to the protesters,¹⁸ which reflects long standing suspicions, stemming in part from Arab-Persian tensions, sectarian concerns, and claims from Iran that Bahrain is the state's 14th province.¹⁹ For several reasons²⁰ GCC troops under the guise of the Peninsula Shield Force crossed the King Fahd Causeway and entered Bahrain, releasing members of the Bahraini Defence Force (BDF) from guarding strategic sites across the state, allowing the BDF to quash the uprisings. In the aftermath of the uprisings, Saudi-Bahraini ties remain strong, while fears of increased Iranian influence and support for opposition groups is growing.

¹³ The removal of Saddam Hussein from power resulted in a weakening of state infrastructure and the increasing fragility of the state.

¹⁴ The March 8th alliance is comprised of Hizballah, Iran and Syria while the March 14th alliance is supported by Saudi Arabia. This reflects the sides that have been drawn in Syria.

¹⁵ Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), pp64-5.

¹⁶ Frederick Wehrey, Karasik, T. W., et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009) pp81-2.

¹⁷ See: Simon Mabon, 'The Battle for Bahrain: Saudi-Iranian Rivalry', *Middle East Policy*, Vol.XIX, No.2, 2012. Al Saud is the Arabic for the House of Saud.

¹⁸ This again stems from a legacy of suspicion and the failed *coup d'etat* in 1981, undertaken by the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB). See: Hasan T. Alhasan, 'The Role of Iran in the failed coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (2011), pp603-617 This suspicion was never verified but it is widely accepted that Iran is currently providing support to opposition groups.

¹⁹ See: <http://cms.arabnews.com/node/321740> Mehdi Khalaji, *Iran's Policy Confusion about Bahrain* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 27 June 2011). Available from: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateCO5.php?CID=3376>

²⁰ Including fears about empowering the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province and increased Iranian influence in the region.

The most violent of the proxy conflicts is occurring in Syria, with Iran supporting the forces loyal to Bashar Al Assad and Saudi Arabia supporting factions in the opposition.²¹ Syria is an important ally of Iran, in part presenting Tehran with influence in the Levant and the Arab world, and providing passage into Lebanon. Given this, Iran has offered military and technical support to the regime; furthermore, members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps elite Qods force²² have been operating in Syria. In contrast, for Saudi Arabia, isolating Syria from Iran provides scope to “reduce Iranian influence in Lebanon, the Israel-Palestine sphere and close an Iranian door to the Arab world”.²³ Riyadh has sought to achieve this by providing arms to various factions in the Syrian opposition. However, Saudi Arabia is not the only Gulf state to have been arming rebel forces, with Qatar also sending arms to Syria.

The provision of support to different groups within the Syrian opposition highlights tensions between Gulf States. Indeed, while there are strong divisions within the Syrian opposition, divisions also exist over the nature of support, and to whom it should go. As Marc Lynch’s recent *Foreign Policy* article²⁴ suggests, divisions within the ‘Sunni-world’ are strong, with one particular example of this being between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Despite both supporting Syrian opposition groups, with the express aim of the removal of Bashar Al Assad from power and thus facilitating the loss of a key strategic ally for Tehran, Riyadh and Doha differ with regard to all foreign policy objectives. This difference appeared to be driven by the question “whose man will be left on the stage once President Bashar al-Assad goes”?²⁵

Qatar has offered support to the more fundamentalist groups within the opposition, while Saudi Arabia has offered support to more moderate groups. This has increased tensions between Riyadh and Doha, which had the capacity to further fracture an already incoherent Syrian opposition, although senior sources within the region suggests that Saudi Arabia has achieved control over the Syrian issue.²⁶ It is expected that this Saudi control will facilitate greater cohesion amongst opposition groups, in terms of military strategy and also political engagement. Furthermore, it is hoped that Saudi dominance will ensure that arms do not fall into the wrong hands.

Conclusions

In understanding the onset of conflict across much of the region it is imperative to be aware of the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Conflict taking place in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, and Syria, whilst in different forms, is moulded by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While shaped by sectarian factors, geopolitical considerations are hugely important in defining the nature of the rivalry. Moreover, the increasing involvement of other regional actors in proxy conflicts has further complicated a rivalry beset by sectarian and geopolitical concerns.

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²¹ This follows on from the assumption that opposition forces are not a coherent group.

²² Responsible for undertaking actions abroad.

²³ Mabon, Op. Cit., p67.

²⁴ Marc Lynch, *The War for the Arab World*, (Foreign Policy, 23.05.13), Available from: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/05/23/war_for_the_arab_world_sunni_shia_hatred?page=0,0

²⁵ Fehim Tastekin, *Saudi Arabia and Qatar Vie For Influence in Syria* (Al Monitor, 17.04.13) Available from: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/04/saudi-arabia-qatar-vie-influence-syria.html>

²⁶ Mariam Karouny, *Saudi edges Qatar to control Syrian rebel support* (Reuters, 31.05.13) Available from: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/31/us-syria-crisis-saudi-insight-idUSBRE94U0ZV20130531>