



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

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SEVERED TIES BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA: A COLD WAR OR A PROXY WAR OF NARRATIVES, INFLUENCE AND POWER

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In the most recent diplomatic development in the Middle Eastern region, Saudi Arabia has severed all diplomatic ties with Iran. This was in response to the attack on its embassy in Tehran in response to the execution of 47 people including the members of the terrorist group al-Qaeda and a Shia religious leader. Following the execution of the Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr-al Nimr, Saudi Arabia diplomats were given 48 hours by the Iranian leaders to leave the Iranian soil. This can be easily marked as the swift escalation in the strategic and sectarian rivalry that underpins conflicts in the region. Many analysts in the US and outside US believe that this severing of the ties came at a time when the western world had hoped that even limited cooperation between the two powers could help end crushing the civil wars in Syria and Yemen and at the same time easing the tensions in Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon and elsewhere. Instead the analysts are now

contemplating the escalation in the sectarian divide and the increase in the investments for the proxy wars in the region involving both Iran and Saudi Arabia.¹

The elimination of Saddam Hussein in the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the U.S. has become quite a turning point in the geo-political situation of the Middle Eastern region. The Arab world itself was going through the transformations after 2010. This, in turn led to the fading away of the regional order and structure, thereby making “security” the most precious commodity amongst the countries of the region. In fact, U.S. invasion of Iraq opened a new chapter in the regional affairs shifting the balance of power towards the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. To a certain extent it can be said that the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the recent years have been characterised specifically by the religious-ideological antagonism and competing

political and geostrategic interests and an ongoing competition for religious hegemony in the Middle East.²

Historically, despite numerous efforts by each party to improve bilateral relations and develop cooperation, Iran-Saudi relations have been uneasy with the recurrent rhetorical war and the grim strategic competition.³ The overthrow of the Shah in 1979 led to a turn around situation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Since the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Saudi Arabia relations have continued to deteriorate with the diplomatic relations between the two countries nearly coming to an end after 1988. Apparently, Saudi Arabia views Iran as a destabilizing force in the region thereby making the situation even grimmer. This viewpoint had emerged due to Iran's reported attempts⁴ to export revolution in the region.⁵

The main impact of the Iranian revolution on Iran-Saudi Arabia relations was a heightened mistrust between two nations which has eroded their cooperative diplomatic relations and created a bitter rivalry and strategic competition in the region. The mistrust between Iran and Saudi Arabia has come to an extent where Saudi Arabia has had an increased alliance with the U.S. in order to curb the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The relations between the two nations have become much colder after 2005 when Ahmadinejad came to power in Iran. This was due to a series of wrong policies and the appointment of unsuitable ambassadors to Saudi

Arabia.⁶ During the presidency of Ahmadinejad in Iran the points of difference have mostly been related to the ideological and geo-political nature of tensions in the region related mostly to the war in Syria, conflict in Bahrain, Egyptian revolution, the issue of Palestine and of course Iran.⁷ It is difficult to think of a particular occasion in the time line of the two nations where the two countries have worked together constructively in order to resolve a problem since 2005.

The main bone of contention between Iran and Saudi Arabia is that Iran's ruling clerics see Saudi's royals as "corrupt custodians of Islam's holiest shrines."⁸ In turn, Saudi Arabia stringently believes in the viewpoint that Iran harbours unchecked ambitions to dominate the region. The probable linking of this fear can be manifested in an uncertain assessment that Iran is developing nuclear weapons.

The possible reason for this distrust could be attributed to the fact that both the countries are viewing power and influence in the region as the zero sum game; if Iranians gain, Saudi Arabia loses—and vice-versa. Saudi Arabia, in a way is sceptical about Iran becoming a dominant power in the region, thus controlling the region. Saudi Arabia often seems to view the region through sectarian lenses and wants to unite people under the sectarian umbrella of Sunnis. Riyadh therefore views the ascendancy of Shias and the war in the region in zero-sum terms.⁹

Many analysts believed that Iran's regional power is a reality after the U.S.-Iran rapprochement. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand has been apprehensive of Iran's re-integration into the race for the regional and geo-political supremacy in the region which can tip the regional balance of power in Tehran's favour. In Saudi Arabia'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.¹⁰ This has also deepened the threat perception amongst the nations in the region thereby making it the main concern of the states in the region.

According to US, both the countries should identify their differences and their undeniable rivalry and discuss them through negotiations. Iran and Saudi Arabia are two powerful regional nations that have enough potential and capabilities to do so. However, many still believe that the escalation probably will undermine the already stumbling efforts to end the war in Syria, where Saudi Arabia backs largely Sunni militants in the region and Iran supports the regime of Bashar-al-Assad in Syria. Ian Bremmer believes that there are more domestic reasons for both the countries to refuse to pull punches against each other. According to him, Saudi Arabia is currently dealing with the plummeting oil prices and an internal succession battle over who will

take the throne next. Iran, he said, needs a way to block the reformists and the western advances in light of the recent nuclear deal. It seems, according to him, nationalist behaviour can score points at home for both sides. That actually makes this an incredibly dangerous conflict.¹¹ "The breaking of diplomatic relations is not the issue, that's just the latest shoe to drop," said Aaron David Miller, a vice president at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars in Washington. "So this is going to make a chaotic and dysfunctional situation even worse," Miller added.¹²

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹Ben Hubbard. "Saudi Arabia cuts ties with Iran amid fallout from Cleric Executions" dated January 3, 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/04/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-arabia-execution-sheikh-nimr.html?_r=0 accessed on January 4, 2016.

²Benedetta Berti & Yoel Guzansky. "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Towards the New Chapter" <http://www.israelcfr.com/documents/8-3/benedetta-berti-and-yoel-guzansky.pdf> accessed on December 20, 2015.

³Richard Javad Heydarian. "Iran-Saudi Relations: Rising Tensions and Growing Rivalry" dated August 6, 2010 http://fpif.org/iran-saudi_relations_rising_tensions_and_growing_rivalry/ accessed on December 21, 2015.

⁴Farideh Farhi, Sarah Birke, Matthew Levitt, Hussein Ibish, Chuck Freilich & Zachary Laub. "The Middle East after the Iran Nuclear Deal" *Expert Roundup* <http://www.cfr.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east-after-iran-nuclear-deal/p36963> accessed on December 22, 2015.

⁵Alireza Nader. "Iran after the Bomb: How would the Nuclear Armed Tehran Behave?" http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_

reports/RR300/RR310/RAND_RR310.pdf accessed on December 26, 2015.

⁶ HosseinSalavatian, Abbas Salehi Najaf Abadi&JahanBakhshMoradi. "Iran and Saudi Arabia: The Dilemma of Security, the Balance of Threat" <http://jsrad.org/wp-content/2015/Issue%202,%202015/26%202015-2-2-141-149.pdf> accessed on January 3, 2016.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Craig Whitlock & Liz Sly. "For Iran and Saudi Arabia Simmering Feud is Rooted in History" dated October 11, 2011 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/for-iran-and-saudi-arabia-simmering-feud-is-rooted-in-history/2011/10/11/gIQAhYugdL_story.html accessed on December 22, 2015.

⁹Christopher Boucek&KarimSajadpour. "Rivals—Iran v/s Saudi Arabia" dated September 20, 2011 <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/09/20/rivals-iran-vs.-saudi-arabia> accessed on December 22, 2015.

¹⁰BenedettaBerti&YoelGuzansky. "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Towards the New Chapter" <http://www.israelcfr.com/documents/8-3/benedetta-berti-and-yoel-guzansky.pdf> accessed on December 20, 2015.

¹¹Catherine E. Shoichet. "As Saudi Arabia Severs with Iran, Questions Looms in Volatile Region" dated January 4, 2016 <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/03/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-severing-ties-whats-next/> accessed on January 4, 2016.

¹²Zaid Sabah &KambizFeroohar. "Saudi Arabia Cuts Ties with Iran after Tehran Embassy Attacks" dated January 4, 2016 <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-01-03/saudis-cut-diplomatic-ties-with-iran-foreign-minister-says-iiyzvsw5> accessed on January 4, 2016.