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The Kingdom's Quandary: Saudi Arabia's "Iran Complex"

Yaniv Voller

Last month, Iran was accused of planning to [assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador](#) to the United States, [Adel Al-Jubeir](#), who is also one of King Abdullah's closest advisors. As the startling details of the plot have grabbed the world's attention, this is an opportune time to take a step back and reflect on the dynamics of the bilateral relationship and the reasons as to why Riyadh has long harboured a deep distrust towards Iran.

First, taking a look at the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has had concerns that an Iraq controlled by a Shi'a-dominated government may veer too far towards Tehran. The surprise announcement made last week by the Obama administration that all American military personnel will be withdrawn from Iraq in December of this year has further magnified such fears on the part of the Al-Saud and is just one manifestation of what can be called Iran's "Northern Tier" strategy. By forming a loose alliance with Iraq, Syria and Turkey, the Iranians are seeking to diminish Saudi Arabia's regional standing. Closer to home in the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi officials hold Iran responsible for the Shi'a-led protests that have shaken the Bahraini monarchy during the "Arab Spring". This is also the case in the Yemen, where [demonstrations against the pro-Saudi Saleh government](#) are considered to be a product of Iranian meddling, not to mention the Shi'a Houthis insurgency that has unfolded since 2004 in the northern part of that country. On the world stage, to truly appreciate the full depth of Saudi Arabia's sense of frustration over the international community's inability to confront Tehran's nuclear programme, one needs to look no further than to reports stating that Riyadh will allow Israeli jet fighters to fly over Saudi airspace on their way to raid Iran's nuclear installations. Although Saudi Arabian officials quickly denied these reports, most military analysts believe that the Saudi-Israeli agreement is already a *fait accompli*.

For now, though, the furtive contest in which the two countries are engaged has at this point not translated into direct armed confrontation. From a conventional military standpoint, Saudi Arabia's ability to confront Iran remains uncertain. Although Saudi Arabia's modern armed forces, boosted by a 60 billion dollar arms deal with the United States struck in 2010, are superior to Iran's outmoded Russian and Chinese-built weaponry, Riyadh cannot rest easy knowing that the Iranian army – a truly battle-tested army no less – dwarfs the size of the Saudi military. This disparity creates an unenviable political situation for the Saudi leadership, meaning that they will have to continue to rely on the United States as their military subcontractor of choice.

As Iranian influence continues to make political inroads in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia's sense of unease is further compounded by the knowledge that the aging King Abdullah, or any future Saudi ruler for that matter, is unwilling to match President Ahmadinejad's "man of the people" rhetoric. Although unpopular with diplomats in pinstriped suits, Iranian recalcitrance in the face of Western hegemony is more of a political winner in the Middle East than Saudi Arabia's pro-western tilt. The most noteworthy example of Iranian bombast working favourably on a regional level can be found in the Arab-Israeli peace process as part of which King Abdullah's Arab Peace Initiative has been consistently overshadowed by Iran's headline-grabbing support for Hizbollah and Hamas.

In an effort to sharpen their analysis on Saudi Arabia's "Iran Complex", media commentators routinely trot out predictable tropes that have been heard ad infinitum. The tensions between the two nations, they argue, is a result of a deeply engrained sectarian fault-line pitting Sunnis against Shi'as and Arabs against Persians as the two powers wage a battle for hegemonic domination of the Middle East region. To a certain degree, this explanation makes a series of valid points, but it also comes across as being somewhat patronizing; the notion that Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran can be boiled down to just another irrational "Oriental" feud. It must be remembered that less than two generations ago, Sunni Saudi Arabia considered Shi'a Iran to be a close ally. In the 1960s and 1970s, both states were aligned to the conservative grouping of countries in the Middle East, who defended the political status-quo and were roughly bound together by their anti-communist, pro-royalist and pro-western outlook. Bilateral disputes over territorial claims in the Persian Gulf, the fight for influence in the Gulf States and Yemen, rancorous issues that still exist today, took a back seat to the greater concern of preserving regional security against revolutionary enemies.

Under the leadership of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and the Shah of Iran, Saudi-Iranian cooperation was not only possible, but it flourished, becoming a powerful force in international affairs. The two "rivals" co-existed peacefully, greatly shaping the tone of Middle Eastern politics in their promotion of pan-Islamism and commonly spoke with a single voice at OPEC. During this period, as the Nixon Doctrine reined in American military commitments around the world and Britain withdrew from East of Suez, Iran and Saudi Arabia were left to fill their former role as regional policemen. This set-up, however, all changed in 1979 when the 2500-year-old Pahlavi monarchy in Iran was deposed and replaced by the revolutionary Islamic Republic of Iran. From this point forward, Iran was on the *other* side of the political spectrum, a *revisionist* power whose brand of theocracy not only threatened regional stability, but more importantly posed a direct challenge to the Al-Saud's monarchical rule. This

"conservative" and "revisionist" divide still lingers and in an indirect, yet profound way, underlies the fractured foundations of Saudi-Iranian relations to this day.

Looking ahead, Saudi Arabia will be forced to make tough choices about its security and will in this context have to think laterally in its dealings with Iran. Could there ever be a return to that comparable golden age of the 1960s and 1970s when Saudi Arabia and Iran worked together as regional partners? In the short-term, Riyadh would be much more willing to recognize Iran's rightful place in Middle East politics if Tehran was to moderate its tone and act like a responsible status quo power rather than posturing as a revolutionary provocateur. However, there are significant limits as to what King Abdullah and Saudi Arabia can do, for it is the siege mentality of the Iranian leadership, which is the cornerstone that ultimately keeps the Islamic Republic standing.

Matthew Hinds is a PhD candidate at the LSE in the International History Department. His Phd research focuses on Anglo-American Relations and Saudi Arabia. In the department he taught a class on Anglo-American Relations in the Middle East, 1952-1970.

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