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**RIVALRY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE HISTORY OF SAUDI-IRANIAN
RELATIONS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Defense and Strategic Studies

By

Derika Weddington

August 2017

RIVALARY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE HISTORY OF SAUDI-IRANIAN RELATIONS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

Defense and Strategic Studies

Missouri State University, August 2017

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ABSTRACT

The history of Saudi-Iranian relations has been fraught. This relationship has impacted the United States' role in the Persian Gulf. Prior to the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran could be characterized in terms of mutual understanding which allowed them to become integral parts of the American foreign policy in the 1970s. This policy was intended to safeguard Western interests in the Persian Gulf after the British left. Saudi-Iranian cooperation during this time was in stark contrast to the hostile relationship that developed between them following the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The United States also was enveloped in its own hostile relationship with Iran after the revolution. The United States, thus, turned toward Saudi Arabia as a bulwark against Iranian aggression in the Gulf. After the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia underwent a rapprochement. Saudi Arabia sought rapprochement despite the United States' attempt to continue to isolate Iran. At present, the relationship between Tehran and Riyadh is fraught as the two wrestle once again for influence, ideologically, logistically, and territorially. During the Obama administration, Iran was slowly welcomed back as a participant on the world stage as a result of the Iran Nuclear Deal. This development has the Saudis worried about their relationship with the United States. The Saudis fear that the deal will thaw the turbulent relationship between Washington and Tehran and in turn, Washington will abandon Riyadh for a new partner in the Gulf, Tehran.

KEYWORDS: Iran, Saudi Arabia, United States, rivalry, foreign policy

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

From the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 until present day, the relationship between the Kingdom and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has been mercurial, which has impacted American foreign policy in the Middle East. By reviewing literature from a wide-range of experts who have written in English on the subject, this thesis will use historical analysis to look first at the early relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the way it coalesced over various stages prior to the Iranian Revolution to the present day and its implications on American foreign policy in the region.

According to Toby Craig Jones the allure of the Middle East for the US is because of its abundant oil supply and oil has turned the area into an American obsession, as indirect military involvement through arm sales to the Gulf States gave way to direct military intervention.¹ He continued to state, “Over the course of the twentieth century, preserving the security not just of Saudi Arabia but of the entire Persian Gulf region and the flow of Middle Eastern oil were among the United States’ chief political-economic concerns.”² These concerns have played out differently over the course of several American presidents.

Before the official establishment of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Saudi Arabia had only limited contact. However, after the leader of Iran, sided with the Axis powers during World War II, the British and Russians insisted that he abdicate. It was not until Reza

1. Toby Craig Jones, “America, Oil, and War in the Middle East,” *The Journal of American History*,” (2012): 208. doi:10.1093/jahist/jas045.

2. Ibid.

Shah's abdication in 1941 did the nature of the Saudi-Iranian relationship change. The two conservative monarchies became Western-aligned and, although both were Islamic states, Iran chose not to compete with Saudi Arabia's important place within Islam.

One of the defining moments in the history of their relationship was the British decision to vacate the Persian Gulf in the late 1960s. The British influence in the region was undeniable. It was as Jones stated, "a perch from which they projected power for several decades."³ Since 1820, Great Britain had established a presence in the Gulf to protect its shipping routes and communication lines to and from the jewel of its empire, India, from rampant piracy in the Persian Gulf. After India received its independence from Britain in 1947, the Gulf continued to be important to Britain because securing Western access to oil was of the utmost importance.

Britain's departure created a power vacuum in the region. America was dismayed by Britain's decision to leave, having relied on Britain to safeguard Western interests in the Gulf.⁴ However, given its overextension at that time in Vietnam, the US was not able to take on the role vacated by Britain. The British departure made the US anxious about the future of the region. Neither the British nor the Americans were eager to see a power vacuum emerge in the region, as they feared Soviet interference. Upon conducting several studies on the future of a Persian Gulf without British protection, the Nixon administration decided to use the two preeminent countries in the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran, as the guardians of the Gulf to foster stability and hedge against potential communist influence in the area. British decolonization of the Gulf led to the forging of a

3. Ibid., 209.

4. Gregory F. Gause, III, "British and American Policies in the Persian Gulf, 1968-1973." *Review of International Studies* 11, no. 04 (1985): 259, doi:10.1017/s0260210500114172.

new power structure in the Gulf under American tutelage.⁵ Jones pointed out, “Unlike its predecessors [the British], the United States did not wage war out of old-fashioned imperial calculation or ambition.”⁶ He continued by saying, “Keeping prices [of oil] stable (not low) and keeping pro-American regimes in power were central to U.S. strategic policy.”⁷ The US was not trying to create an empire; instead it wanted to foster a region that was sensibly conducive to its needs and concerns.

This era of cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia came to a crashing halt with the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Iran’s revolutionaries defined their regime against Saudi Arabia. Their radical ideology was opposed to Saudi conservatism and the Kingdom’s Western, mainly American alliance. The friction between the two states intensified as they fought in numerous spheres in the years that followed.

Shortly after the revolution, Iran became mired in a protracted conflict with Iraq. Riyadh supported Baghdad in the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, both financially and logistically, seeing Baghdad as a bulwark against any potential Iranian aggression. This support of Iran’s enemy further soured the relationship between Riyadh and Tehran. When the war ended and the architect of the revolution, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, died, Iran’s demeanor changed. It no longer wished to be isolated from the world because of its revolutionary politics, and wanted to reintegrate into the international system. With this change in outlook and a tempering of its revolutionary ideology, Iran slowly approached Saudi Arabia. As relations between the countries normalized, they entered a period of rapprochement that lasted over a decade.

5. Fred Halliday, "The Gulf between Two Revolutions: 1958-1979," *MERIP Reports*, 85 (1980): 10, doi:10.2307/3010801.

6. Jones, "America, Oil, and War in the Middle East," 209-210.

7. Ibid., 210.

This state of affairs remained in place until the American intervention in Iraq in 2003. Saudi Arabia and Iran had shared a similar outlook toward Iraq prior to the intervention. Iran and Iraq had a long history of enmity, and the cordiality between Saudi Arabia and Iraq disappeared after the 1990-1991 Gulf War, when Iraq attacked Saudi Arabia. The American intervention reshaped the political order in the Persian Gulf. Iraq turned from Iranian foe to friend because once Iraq's majority Shi'ite population came to power it began to elicit advice from its Shi'ite brethren in Iran. Tehran was eager to assist Baghdad because Iran saw a close relationship with Iraq as necessary to prevent a possible American incursion into Iran through Iraq. The incursion became a viable likelihood in the eyes of the Iranians, who saw themselves as America's next target after overthrowing Saddam.

With Iraq no longer a bulwark against Iran, Saudi Arabia began to see Iranian involvement in conflicts across the Middle East, rightly or wrongly. This fear was further realized with the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011. When the Arab Spring erupted in Syria and threatened Iran's only Arab ally, Iran moved to defend the Syrian regime. Riyadh is now defining itself against Iran and is assisting Syrian opposition forces against the Syrian regime. This action is preventing any possible reconciliation with Iran that might once have been possible. Riyadh is worried about the influence Tehran has accumulated through its support of Syria and Iraq. Because of this influence, Riyadh believes it is being pushed to the side and its role in the Gulf is being minimized. Saudi Arabia sees its power and influence waning because of the rise of Iran.

This belief has been reinforced by the Iran Nuclear Deal. Saudi Arabia believes that Iran's attempts to develop nuclear capabilities constitute a prelude to the

development of nuclear weapons. With these weapons, regional power would permanently shift in Iran's favor, as Tehran would use the weapons to bully other states to submit to its demands. Saudi Arabia also sees negotiations between the United States and Iran regarding Iranian nuclear capabilities as an opportunity to repair the fraught relationship between Washington and Tehran. Saudi Arabia felt abandoned by its old ally, the US. Despite the Nuclear Deal being a multipronged effort involving five other countries besides the US, Saudi Arabia sees America's involvement as thawing the tension between Tehran and Washington.

However, Riyadh and Washington's relationship is entering a new phase because there is a new administration in the White House. The new American president, Donald Trump, has only been in office for a few months and has not voiced nor enacted an Iran policy. Although as a candidate he voiced strong disapproval for the Nuclear Deal. He would "tear up" the deal because he believed it was too weak and was favorable toward Iran.⁸ Although American participation is important, it is not the sole determiner of the vitality of the agreement. The multilateral nature of the deal appears to prevent Trump from walking away from it. Although candidate Trump's remarks regarding the Nuclear Deal appeared to signal a tougher stance toward Iran, President Trump has not followed through, but his presidency is in its infancy. As pointed out by Kenneth Katzman of the Congressional Research Service, "The Trump Administration has not stated a position on any pending legislation, nor on the overall issue of the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive

8. Eric B. Lorber, "President Trump and the Iran Nuclear Deal," *Foreign Policy*, November 11, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/16/president-trump-and-the-iran-nuclear-deal/>; Elliot Smilowitz, "Trump: Iran Deal Was So Bad It's Suspicious," *The Hill*, Accessed April 10, 2017, <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/gop-primaries/264598-trump-iran-deal-was-so-bad-its-suspicious>.

plan of Action, a.k.a. the Iran Nuclear Deal].”⁹ The nature of the relationship between Riyadh and Washington could be growing closer as there is congruence in their demeanor toward Iran.

9. Congressional Research Service, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman, CRS Report No. RS20871, Washington, DC, 2017, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20170414_RS20871_a6ff6e74c41408f243d8856b337fb20dcb9f7ca9.html.

CHAPTER 1

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA (1932-1979)

While Abd al-Aziz ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Saud, better known as Ibn Saud, conquered the Arabian Peninsula from 1902 to 1932, Iran and Saudi Arabia had limited interactions. The key phases of their interactions dealt mainly with Iranian pilgrims making hajj to Mecca and with Persian merchants who accompanied them and conducted business along the hajj route.¹⁰ After bringing most of the Arabian Peninsula under his control, Ibn Saud established the Kingdom in 1932. After this point, the arrangement between Saudi Arabia and Iran became a relationship of mutual interests, especially during the rule of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1952-1970). After Nasser and his ideology of Pan-Arabism were neutralized, the next issue that required their joint attention was the British departure from the Middle East in 1971.¹¹ With the British departure, the Americans and British saw the creation of a vacuum that was ripe for unwanted Soviet influence.¹² To prevent the expansion of Soviet power, the Americans created a security system that would utilize the strengths of the two largest and most influential countries in the area, Saudi Arabia and Iran.¹³

10. Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 9.

11. In 1968, the British decided by 1971 that it would end its protective treaty relationships with (name countries) and gave them independence. It also decided to remove its military from the area.

12. Richard Haass, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Twin Pillars in Revolutionary Times." in *The Security of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Hossein Amirsadeghi, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 160; John P. Miglietta, *American Alliance Policy in the Middle East, 1945-1992: Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 56.

13. Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*, 9.

The making of the Saudi Kingdom and the Pahlavi Dynasty in Iran: The birth of diplomatic relations between the two states

Saudi Arabia and Iran shared similarities when it came to nation building in an age when most of the Middle East was still under colonial rule.¹⁴ In 1932, after uniting nearly eighty percent of the Arabian Peninsula under his rule and creating the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia based on a strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, Ibn Saud assumed the title of king. A little earlier in 1925, Reza Shah similarly proclaimed himself king after he came to power by toppling the ruling Qajar Dynasty in a successful coup d'état in 1921.

However, the two states took different stances toward Great Britain, the dominant colonial power in the region. The positions they chose would ultimately benefit Ibn Saud and hurt Reza Shah. The Shah's antagonistic stance toward Britain would cost him his throne when he sided with the Axis powers during the Second World War. When the Allies won the war, Britain and Russia forced him to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammed Reza.

The new shah maintained relations with Saudi Arabia until 1943, when the Saudi government executed an Iranian pilgrim, Abu Taleb Yazdi, for supposedly throwing his vomit on the Ka'ba. The Iranians objected bitterly to the execution, while the Saudis retorted that they had the right to administer their laws as they saw fit. The result of this row was the severing of diplomatic ties between the two countries, a state of affairs that would last until 1946.

In 1946, King Abd al-Aziz (Ibn Saud) wrote a letter to the Shah urging the resumption of diplomatic ties. The Shah agreed to the King's proposal, and ties resumed

14. Adel Al-Toraifi, "Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making: The Rise of Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement (1997-2009)" (PhD diss., The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), 2012), 97.

the following year. The Saudi historian, Saeed M. Badeeb, stated, “Between 1947 and 1950 Saudi-Iranian relations strengthened as the interests of the countries merged in two important areas. First, Iran decisively aligned itself with Western, particularly American, interests. Second, as the two countries developed their oil industries, they often dealt with common issues.”¹⁵ In 1953, Saudi-Iranian relations were disrupted but not severed when the Shah was forced to flee Iran after the Americans and British orchestrated a coup d’état to remove the democratically-elected Iranian Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadeqh. The Americans and British wanted Mossadeqh removed from power because he nationalized Iranian oil in 1951. Mossadeqh was motivated by a desire to end foreign economic domination of Iran. This move infuriated the British who had had a large stake in Iranian oil since 1901. The Shah fled Iran, briefly, as he was complicit in the coup. It was upon his orders that Mossadeqh was to be removed from office and replaced with a prime minister amenable to both the Americans and the British. After the failed coup, Mossadeqh, as the new leader of Iran, continued diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. During this time, trade expanded between the two countries.¹⁶

In 1953, the British and Americans staged another coup through a clandestine campaign, this time successfully overthrowing Mossadeqh. At the same time in 1953, King Abd al-Aziz died and his eldest son, Saud, became king. According to Badeeb, these dual changes of leadership ushered in a new era for the Iranians and the Saudis: “The Saudi-Iranian political relations began to evolve around three major issues: regional politics, oil and international security.”¹⁷

15. Saeed M. Badeeb, *Saudi-Iranian Relations: 1932-1982* (London: Centre for Arab and Iranian Studies, 1993), 51.

16. Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*, 62.

17. Ibid, 52.

The threat of Pan-Arabism to Saudi Arabia and Iran

Pan-Arabism was a secular Arab nationalist philosophy, which sought to unite all Arabs. Its greatest champion was Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Among the elites in Saudi Arabia, there was an Arab nationalist movement supported by Nasser. The Arab National Liberation Front and the Union of the People of the Arabian Peninsula sought the establishment of a republic in Saudi Arabia. These opposition groups had little support inside Saudi Arabia and thus were of little concern to the monarchy.¹⁸ However, there was conflict inside the monarchy regarding how to deal with Nasser and his anti-royalist stance. The King saw nationalism and socialism as a threat and a partial reason for the Shah's loss of power in 1953.¹⁹

At first, King Saud sought to placate Nasser. For instance, the King supported Egypt during the Suez Crisis, when Israel, Great Britain, and France invaded Egypt to regain control of the canal after Nasser nationalized it. Riyadh severed diplomatic relations with France and Britain during the crisis, and discontinued oil exports to the two states. The King believed that by placating Nasser he could rein in Nasser's ambitions.²⁰ However, as Nasser's popularity grew, so did dissent within the Kingdom. Labor unrests broke out in Saudi Arabia and were linked to Pro-Nasserist factions active within the Kingdom. The relationship between Riyadh and Cairo quickly soured after Nasser's Pan-Arabism turned anti-royalist as he supported the socialist element within the Saudi army,

18. Ibid., 104.

19. Keynough, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*, 62.

20. Ibid., 73.

which attempted to overthrow the Saudi monarchy in 1955.²¹ As a result, King Saud began to openly challenge Nasser and his ideology.²²

The turning point in the Egyptian and Saudi relationship came in 1961, when Nasser accused conservative regimes such as Saudi Arabia of financing the collapse of the United Arab Republic (UAR), the political union between Syria and Egypt, in existence from 1958–1961.²³ The collapse of the UAR prompted the 1962 Egyptian intervention in the coup in North Yemen because the breakup of the UAR was a major defeat and humiliation for Nasser and his Pan-Arabism. Fawaz A. Gerges pointed out, “The breakup of the UAR revealed deep fissures within Arab societies and exposed their heterogeneity and factionalism. The breakup also revealed the bankruptcy of ideology in Arab politics and the predominance of national interests.”²⁴ Furthermore, Gerges believed that Egypt needed to keep the revolution of Pan-Arabism alive and thus exported it to Yemen. By doing this, Nasser retained the possibility of regaining the prestige he had lost in the Arab world with the dissolution of the UAR. This loss of prestige was significant, as it affected Nasser’s presumptive role as the leader of Pan-Arabism, and as a leader in the Arab world. The coup in Yemen also gave Nasser the ability to show off Egypt’s military prowess and retaliate against the pro-Western conservative Arab nations that he blamed for the UAR’s downfall.²⁵ Involvement in the Yemeni Civil War also advanced the fading Arab nationalist cause. The downfall of Arab nationalism, Gerges notes, was not only an international problem but a domestic one as well.

21. Ibid., 69.

22. Al-Toraifi, 104.

23. Fawaz A. Gerges, "The Kennedy Administration and the Egyptian-Saudi Conflict in Yemen: Co-opting Arab Nationalism," *The Middle East Journal* (1995): 298.

24. Ibid., 295.

25. Ibid., 299.

He [Nasser] felt compelled to act decisively to escape entrapment and marginalization. His response was to plunge Egypt deeper into socialism domestically and to project Egyptian power in the Arabian peninsula (sic) by intervening militarily on the side of the republican elements in Yemen. Nasser's larger objective was to seize the initiative in the Arab arena by striking back at the pro-Western, Arab conservative forces as represented by Saudi Arabia.²⁶

In response to Nasser's provocation in Yemen, the Saudis aided the dethroned Yemeni Imam, Muhammad al-Badr, in regaining his power by providing military assistance and refusing to recognize the new Egyptian-backed government in Yemen.²⁷ The Saudis aided the Yemeni ruler because they saw their neighbor as integral to their own national security.

Saudi Arabia, because of the conflict in Yemen, also looked more toward its allies for support, including Iran. As a result, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran grew stronger because the Shah also feared the potential threat of Arab Nationalism. Both nations also feared a Soviet presence in the Gulf through its Egyptian proxy. This potential Soviet presence in the Gulf, combined with the thousand-mile border that Iran shared with the Soviets, made Iran feel as if it was being encircled by the Soviets.²⁸ Tehran and Moscow did not have a cordial relationship at that time because Russia, during the Qajar reign, had seized territory in northern Persia. This historical seizure of land made Iran wary of any Soviet incursions into the Gulf.

Egypt's involvement in Yemen turned out to be the beginning of Nasser's downfall, not his redemption. The involvement took a massive toll on the Egyptian economy and military.²⁹ The cost was magnified by the massive loss inflicted on Egypt during its 1967 war with Israel. Shortly thereafter, Nasser removed his troops from

26. Ibid., 309.

27. Al-Toraifi, 104.

28. Keynough, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*, 73.

29. Ibid., 309.

Yemen, reducing the threat to Saudi Arabia and the potential encirclement of Iran. As Nasser's prestige and influence began to wane, Saudi and Iranian interests shifted. By 1968, although the issue of Yemen had not receded, new issues began to take precedence, including the British decision to withdraw its forces from the Gulf.

The Nixon Doctrine and the Twin Pillars

With the British decision to retract its empire and to withdraw its political as well as military means from the Gulf, American President Richard Nixon commissioned a study to determine the US response to the British withdrawal and the best course of action for the US to take. According to James H. Noyes, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Near Eastern, African, and South Asian Affairs, at a hearing in front of the House Subcommittee on the Near East and South Asia in 1973, "A major conclusion of that study, and a number of follow-on studies, was that the United States would not assume the former British role of protector in the Gulf area, but that primary responsibility for peace and stability should henceforth fall on the states of the region."³⁰ The Nixon administration decided on a policy that would not have the US engaged in protecting the Gulf, a role the administration believed should be fulfilled by the Gulf States themselves. The Gulf States likewise believed that they should take on this responsibility without relying on an outside presence. The Nixon administration also did not want to be responsible for the protection of the Gulf because, as John P. Miglietta explained, requiring the countries in the Middle East to be responsible for their own

30. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Statement of James H. Noyes, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA) for Near Eastern, African, and South Asian Affairs – New Perspectives on the Persian Gulf: Hearings before the Subcommittee on the Near East and South Asia. 93rd Cong., 1st sess., June 6, July 17, 23, 24, and November 28, 1973.

security “was more efficient and cost effective for the United States.”³¹ The US was still involved in a costly war in Vietnam and did not have the resources to divert its attention away from Asia. Furthermore, Miglietta interpreted this course of action of having the Gulf States assume responsibility for their own security as an “ultimate strategic goal.” He posited, “The ultimate strategic goal of the United States was to reduce its conventional military forces and the defense budget in general.”³² He saw the Nixon Doctrine as reducing the American defense budget and troop presence in the region, which were overextended by Vietnam, while maintaining Western interests in the Gulf.³³ Faisal bin Salman al-Saud pointed out that the Gulf was important for three reasons: “the possibility of Soviet insurgence after British withdrawal; its linkage to the security of the Middle East as a whole in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict; and the question of access to oil.”³⁴ Noyes continued to explain that the plan was to rely on Saudi Arabia and Iran to maintain the status quo in the Gulf:

In the spirit of the Nixon Doctrine, we are willing to assist the Gulf states (sic) but we look to them to bear the main responsibility for their own defense and to cooperate among themselves to insure regional peace and stability. We especially look to the leading states of the area, Iran and Saudi Arabia, to cooperate for this purpose.³⁵

Noyes extrapolated these remarks from Nixon’s 1969 speech in Guam, where Nixon said, “But as far as our role is concerned, we must avoid that kind of policy that will make countries in Asia so dependent upon us that we are dragged into conflicts such as the one that we have in Vietnam.”³⁶ Therefore it was important for the US to empower

31. Miglietta, 298.

32. Ibid., 299.

33. Ibid..

34. Al-Saud, 65.

35. U.S. Congress, Statement of James H. Noyes, 39.

36. Richard Nixon, "Richard Nixon: Informal Remarks in Guam," *The American Presidency Project*, Accessed July 13, 2016. <http://www.presidency.ucsbs.edu/ws/?pid=2140>.

the largest and most prominent countries in the Gulf, namely Iran and Saudi Arabia, to assume the role of protector. Jones pointed out that “the Nixon Doctrine called upon American allies to bear a greater burden in providing for their own defense... Without the British present to preserve the Gulf’s balance of power, the United States moved to build up local militaries to maintain regional order.”³⁷ The US believed that the act of assuming the role the British had vacated would hobble rather than empower the Gulf States.

The US chose Tehran and Riyadh because they were the two largest and most influential states in the Gulf and because both had harmonious relationships with the United States. However, with Saudi Arabia’s paltry military, nonexistent navy, and small air force, as compared to Iran’s overall military prowess, an unequal burden would be placed on Iran.³⁸ According to Miglietta, both Saudi Arabia and Iran were important to the US, therefore the US could not rely solely on one of them to protect the Gulf security. Doing so could damage its relationship with the other country; thus, regional stability was seen as achievable only with a partnership between the two states.³⁹ The US did not see the partnership as a purely military joint venture, but rather as a collaboration between Iran’s military prowess and Saudi Arabia’s financial wealth and prominent place within Islam. Riyadh’s money, plus its credibility in the Arab world, would be used as a mediating force and a bulwark against Nasserism and any Soviet influence. Iran, with its military superiority, would fulfill the defense role vacated by Britain.⁴⁰ Both countries would be defenders of the status quo in the Middle East, each with roles to play. Richard Haass explained that this balancing act was strengthened by the fact that each country

37 Jones, 212.

38. Al-Saud, 66.

39. Miglietta, 56.

40. Ibid.

“complemented” the other. At the same time, the strength of the two states tended to complement rather than compete, Iran for all its military might, was never able to challenge Saudi legitimacy and leadership among Arab states, while Saudi Arabia, for all its economic and political influence, lacked the ultimate arbiter of military power.”⁴¹ Although Saudi Arabia, after the Nixon Doctrine, became the second largest purchaser of American weaponry (after Iran), Riyadh, unlike Iran, was unable to absorb all of the technology that it acquired. This obstacle resulted from “internal dynamics” within Saudi Arabia. However, Miglietta never explained in detail what these dynamics were.⁴² A possible interpretation of Miglietta’s “internal dynamics” could be Saudi Arabia’s smaller, less educated population.

Saudi Arabia was wary at first about assuming such a prominent role in the Gulf. Iran, on the other hand, did not have the same fears. Rather, Iran saw this as a chance to enhance its standing in the Middle East, as well as to increase its military capabilities. The US, meanwhile, saw Saudi Arabia as a counterweight to Iran’s ambition. Left unchecked, this ambition could have gone awry, especially if the policy relied solely on Tehran to maintain the status quo. Abdel al-Toraifi explained the Saudi fears, “At first, the Saudis were reluctant to play the role, fearing that Nasser and other radical Arab states would exploit the Saudi-US alliance to prove that they were traitors to the Arab cause...[but] the Saudis took advantage of Nixon’s policy to enhance their standing in the region.”⁴³ Although they had been wary in the beginning, the Saudis adapted to their new role wholeheartedly. According to Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp:

41. Haass, 161.

42. Miglietta, 281.

43. Ibid., 111-112.

From the British departure from the Persian Gulf in December 1971 until the revolution in Iran in February 1979, Iran and Saudi Arabia managed their mutual relations without incident...the two pro-Western monarchs coordinated their policies in the face of the mutually sensed threat from Abdul (sic) Nasser's Egypt to the Arabian peninsula (sic) and Persian Gulf.⁴⁴

Haass, writing immediately after the Iranian Revolution, acknowledged that peace in the region was maintained due to cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. He stated:

Any explanation of the source of this stability must in large part reflect Irani-Saudi co-operation, which in turn resulted from a basic coincidence of regional aims. Whatever anxiety Saudi leaders felt about Iran's ambitions and strength was allayed by the recognition that the two states shared many sources of security. Both opposed a major Soviet role in the region, and both were wary of any signs of radicalism regardless of the source. Armed conflict in the region was to be avoided if possible, and oil production and sea lanes protected against interference or interruption.⁴⁵

Haass furthers this point by saying "a large degree of informal and tacit co-operation existed between Iran and Saudi Arabia, reflecting a similarity in aims and a complementarity of means."⁴⁶ Despite Saudi Arabia's initial fears of working with the US and Iran, the British withdrawal ushered in almost a decade of stability in the region, which was marked by Iran and Saudi Arabia working together to maintain peace.

The one hiccup in their relationship during this rather cordial time was the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which precipitated the Arab oil embargo. The oil-producing Arab states of OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) imposed an embargo on the Western nations that had supported Israel during the war.⁴⁷ Jones said, "Gulf oil producers were infuriated when the United States helped re-equip the beleaguered Israeli military in the course of battle. Led by Saudi Arabia, Arab oil

44. Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 9.

45. Haass, 161.

46. Ibid., 162.

47. Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela created OPEC in 1960 giving oil producing countries a venue to coordinate oil production and prices.

producers and oil companies orchestrated an embargo of the United States thereby drying up supply and driving up prices.”⁴⁸ Iran did not join the embargo, because it could not afford to lose oil revenue. It took advantage of the increased global oil price, and continued to supply the United States.⁴⁹ Haass explained, “Iran, dependent upon a continuous source of income to meet domestic demands, was unwilling to interrupt sales.”⁵⁰ The Saudis, however, had a greater oil reserve than did Iran, and thus were capable of withstanding periods of reduced or even nonexistent production.

In spite of working toward different goals, the oil embargo did not strain the relationship between Riyadh and Tehran and they were able to continue to work together as the twin pillars. The period of 1968-1979 was probably the most peaceful, stable and genial time in their bilateral relationship.

Conclusion

The early years of Iranian-Saudi relations can be characterized as turbulent but affable, with diplomatic ties severed and restored numerous times resulting from clashes over multiple issues. Nevertheless, Iran and Saudi Arabia came together as Western-aligned states against the Arab nationalists and the potential Soviet threat which endangered their regimes as well as Western interests. They successfully maintained this relationship until the time of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when Iran redefined itself as anti-Western and anti-royalist. Jones aptly pointed out, “The fall of the shah, considered unthinkable by American officials just a few years before, demolished the twin-pillar

48. Jones, “America, Oil, and War in the Middle East,” 211.

49. Andrew Scott Cooper, *The Oil Kings: How the U.S., Iran, and Saudi Arabia Changed the Balance of Power in the Middle East* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 140.

50. Haass, 156.

policy.”⁵¹ This redefinition would set Iran against the Western-aligned Saudi monarchy and upturned the relationship between Iran and the US. Jones discussed the impact the revolution had on American foreign policy. He stated:

From the perspective of American policy makers, the revolution radically transformed the balance of power in the region, turning Iran from America’s strategic ally to a menacing rival. Whatever the reality of Iran’s new position in the region the revolution brought to a dramatic conclusion U.S. reliance on highly militarized local powers as defenders of the Gulf’s regional order. While they would continue to encourage and oversee the militarization of Saudi Arabia and other Arab oil producers in the 1980s and beyond, American leaders lost faith in the idea that local surrogates possessed the political capacity to safeguard U.S. interests.⁵²

Furthermore, the American hostage crisis and by extension the revolution along with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 were key factors that changed the course of American foreign policy in the region making the foreign policy more interventionist.⁵³

Despite its new outlook toward its role in the Middle East, the US continued to militarize the Gulf States only aggravated current uncertainties in regards to power grabs by despots and hurdled the region into an era of endless wars.⁵⁴

51. Jones, “America, Oil, and War in the Middle East,” 214. For a detailed analysis of the America’s intelligence failure in regards to predicting the Iranian Revolution see Robert Jervis. *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*. Cornell University Press, 2010.

52. Jones, “America, Oil, and War in the Middle East,” 214.

53. Barry Rubin, “American Relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979-1981,” *International Society of Iranian Studies* 13, no. 1/4 (1982): 317. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4310345>.

54. Jones, “America, Oil, and War in the Middle East,” 213.

CHAPTER 2

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION AND THE REDEFINITION OF IRANIAN- SAUDI RELATIONS (1979-1989)

In 1979, a fundamental shift occurred in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran and Iran and the US. The rupture was not sudden, but slow. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 has been characterized as one of the most significant revolutions in history, as it was able to sweep away the old regime and replace it with an entirely different system. The revolutionaries considered their cause to have universal appeal, and revolution was to sweep through the Muslim world starting with Iran's backyard and its Arab Gulf neighbors. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of Iran's revolution, believed that Muslims are naturally inclined toward Islamic governance. It was his view the Islamic principles, which were the basis of Iran's new government, would appeal to the citizens of these countries. They naturally would gravitate toward Iran's new government and replicate it in their respective countries.

Banafsheh Keynoush noted that Iran saw the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, as an obstacle to propagation of revolution in its neighbors because Tehran was now competing with Riyadh for the leadership position of the global Muslim community. She stated, "Naturally, after the revolution, Tehran viewed the Arab States as its main rival in its drive to attain leadership in the Islamic world. From the outset, Iran's goal to export its brand of Shi'ite revolutionary Islam collided with the Saudi claim over leadership of the Islamic world."⁵⁵ Saudi Arabia became the undisputed leader by having

55. Azra Banafsheh Keynoush, *The Iranian-Saudi Arabian Relationship: From Ideological Confrontation to Pragmatic Accommodation* (Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy: Tufts University, 2007), 84.

the two holiest sites within Islam, Mecca and Medina, and its claim to be a state built on a pure form of Sunni Islam. Both the Saudi and Iranian regimes used Islam to legitimize their rule at home and give them credibility abroad. Thus, the two states, given their ideological differences, clashed.

According to the French political scientist Gilles Kepel, “The Muslim world as such had been under Saudi religious domination since the creation of the Islamic conference in 1969 and the triumph of petro-Islam war of October 1973.”⁵⁶ These two factors, along with Mecca and Medina, cemented Saudi Arabia as the most important and influential leader in the Muslim world. The embargo showed the world that Riyadh was not beholden to the West and the establishment of the Islamic conference helped to foster Muslim solidarity. The domination of Saudi Arabia of the global Muslim community continued unabated until the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Kepel continued:

But after 1979 the new masters in Iran considered themselves the true standard-bearers of Islam, despite their minority status as Shiites. As far as they were concerned, the leaders in Riyadh were usurpers who sold oil to the West in exchange for military protection—a retrograde, conservative monarchy with a façade of ostentatious piety.⁵⁷

Iran’s method of disseminating its message was through propaganda directed to and tailored for the Muslim community. Kepel pointed out the Iranian propaganda “incited them [Muslims] to rise up against the impiety of their leaders.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, “Iran’s strategy sought to replace the supremacy of the Saudis throughout the Community of the Faithful with that of Khomeini. It took care to play down Shiism, since more than 80

56. Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: Tauris, 2014), 119. The establishment of the Islamic conference was a reaction to a fire started at al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest place in Islam after Mecca and Medina. The fire was started by an Australian man who thought that burning down the mosque would imitate Jesus’ return. In response to this incident, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia hosted a summit of 30 Muslim nations in Morocco to promote Muslim solidarity. The following year the location of the conference was permanently changed to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

percent of all Muslims were Sunni.”⁵⁹ Although the Shi’ite elements of the revolution were downplayed by the Iranians, the Saudis emphasized the Shi’ite nature of the Iranian revolution to dissuade the Sunni minority from adopting revolution.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the Saudis threw vast sums of money at the problem by financing the expansion of their form of Islam throughout the world.⁶¹

Saudi Arabia reacted to the changes in Iran by first attempting to placate the new Iranian government and power structure. The al-Saud family said it welcomed the change in leadership because now Tehran and Riyadh had Islamic principle-based government in common. The differences in their versions of Islam, Sunni and Shi’a, did not divide them; the principles of Islam, in general, united them. Furthermore, the Saudis viewed Iran’s new theocratic regime as a refreshing change after the secular machinations of the Shah. The Kingdom and the Islamic Republic were now united in their goals, at least so the Saudis believed.

Khomeini discarded the notion of a future united by commonalities. Iran’s new leader wanted Iran to be the leading example of Islamic virtue, and throughout his tenure he challenged Saudi Arabia and its ruling family about its level of commitment to Islam, calling Saudi Wahhabism “American Islam” or “false Islam.” Before assuming the role of Supreme Leader, Iran’s highest-ranking political and religious post, Khomeini had not shied away from voicing his views regarding the form of government in Saudi Arabia. Thus, it should not have come as a surprise to the Saudis that Khomeini’s regime would be antagonistic toward them. Much of the enmity stemmed from a struggle to redefine the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 120.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

dynamics of the Persian Gulf, according to Adel al-Toraifi.⁶² The change in relations between the countries only ameliorated after Khomeini's death in 1989, when much of the rhetoric espoused by him was, although not disavowed, at least compartmentalized as being part of Iran's past. Iran gave priority to a new path of reintegration into the world, politically and economically. However, the revolution and ensuing Iran-Iraq War awakened anxieties in the Gulf States and the US to Iran's ambitions. Jones emphasized that these anxieties created "Iran's status as one of the region's principal bogeymen and 'rogue' states [which] has endured and continues today to be one of the primary and repeated justifications for a continued American military presence in the region."⁶³

The transformation of Iran into the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI)

The Islamic Revolution began in earnest in 1977 after the wayward liberalization programs that the Shah began in 1963, better known as the "White Revolution," failed to grow Iran politically or economically. These liberalization efforts did, however, lead to an outpouring of opposition against the Shah's rule. The White Revolution, as described by Andrew Scott Cooper, was "an ambitious program of social and economic reforms to transform Iran from a semifeudal (sic) baron state into a modern industrial power."⁶⁴ The Shah used the influx of income from oil to fund his ambitious plan, but as oil prices declined, the Shah's spending became unsustainable. The Shah had high expectations for his plan, but the changes enacted were dismissed as superficial and effectively alienated several different strata of Iranian society. The liberalization was meant to cement middle,

62. Al-Toraifi, 126.

63. Jones, "America, Oil, and War in the Middle East," 216.

64. Andrew Scott Cooper, *The Fall of Heaven: The Pahlavis and the Final Days of Imperial Iran* (NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2016), 21.

as well as working, class support for the Shah and, in turn, strengthen the monarchy by elevating these groups economically and enfranchising them with political reform.

However, the reform impacted the economy negatively and as the economy declined, interest in religion increased. The Shah's programs became associated with opulence, inequality, and repression, the opposite of their intended purpose. People from all segments of society flocked to religion to soothe their uneasiness. Those involved in the religious revival came together with the secular segments of Iranian society over their shared hatred for the Shah and his policies. The silent majority the Shah thought he was empowering, mainly the middle class, was disturbed by the unrest and abandoned him by leaving Iran in droves.

As Iranians flocked to religion, Khomeini became the symbol under which disparate sections of Iranian society congealed into a unified voice. Moshen M. Milani stated, "Shi'ism became the umbrella under which different groups came together and destabilized the government."⁶⁵ Moreover, the Israeli victory in the 1967 war likewise served as a catalyst for this disillusionment according to Cooper:

For many Muslims, Israel's victory in the 1967 Six-Day War shattered the belief that Western idea held the key to a prosperous and just future. With the old panaceas—nationalism, socialism, and secularism—identified with failure and humiliation, their search for solutions led many young Muslims, Sunni and Shia alike, back to the mosque and the old ways.⁶⁶

David Menashri echoed Cooper's point about the role of Islam in pre-revolution Iran and stated, "Indeed, Iranians rose against the Shah for a variety of reasons, but viewed Islam as the panacea to end the social and economic crisis, to provide their children with a

65. Mohsen M. Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 192.

66. Cooper, *The Fall of Heaven*, 145.

better life and to lead their country to a brighter future.”⁶⁷ Islam gave the revolution its basis and appealed to various strata who felt disillusionment and despair. Religion was seen as the solution to all the ills facing Iran, such as “economic distress, social disparities, political repression, foreign exploitation and the unsettling consequences of rapid Westernization and modernization.”⁶⁸

Cooper further described the summer of 1977 as a cacophony of discontent, as the religious revival and leftist alienation coalesced around Khomeini. Students and intellectuals rallied together to support Khomeini, not because they shared his values, but because he was a charismatic figure and because of his anti-Western stance. Khomeini’s appeal to religion brought different segments of society together under a relatable shared identity. According to Menashri, “His [Khomeini’s] dogma, thus, became in the eyes of many revolutionaries the hope for salvation and a brighter future.”⁶⁹

The Shah’s reaction to dissent was to increase liberalization and not suppress the protesters, and most importantly not to quash unrest with a massive violent response. He saw such an action as having negative consequences for Iran’s future and the future of the crown. He had worked hard to improve Iran’s human rights record (a course of action the Carter administration had encouraged) and believed that large-scale violence would be counterproductive. It would tarnish Iran’s reputation in the eyes of foreign powers, which Iran needed for its geopolitical as well as financial security. He saw the unrest as necessary, a byproduct of progress. However, his plan for further liberalization to transform Iran from an authoritarian regime into a democracy signaled weakness in the

67. David Menashri, *Post-revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society, and Power* (London: Routledge, 2007), 3.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid., 5.

eyes of his opponents as well as his proponents.⁷⁰ By 1979, supporters of the monarchy were leaving Iran and being replaced by an influx of anti-royalists.

The chaos that erupted quickly turned into an environment inhospitable for the Shah to continue his rule. Under pressure from his main supporter, the United States, he left Iran, never to return. The same Western governments that insisted he reduce Iran's human rights violations were dismayed when he did not use violence to repress the unrest. His departure paved the way for the return of Khomeini after 15 years in exile.

Khomeini returned and seized power. Royalists, along with his nonreligious supporters including leftists, Communists, and anarchists, were all seen as threats to him and his theocracy and were summarily executed. According to Ervand Abrahamian, "In the twenty-eight months between February 1979 and June 1981, revolutionary courts executed 497 political opponents as 'counter-revolutionaries' and 'sowers (sic) of corruption on the earth.'"⁷¹ As this purge was occurring, Khomeini went straight to work producing a referendum for the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). After the April 1979 referendum that abolished the monarchy and brought him to power, Khomeini proposed the establishment of a government based on his ideas of the rule of the jurisprudent, *velayat-e-faqih*. A popularly supported vote on the new constitution in December 1979 created a state like the one espoused by Khomeini in his treatise, *Islamic Government*.

70. Cooper, *The Fall of Heaven*, 319.

71. Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 181.

Saudi Arabia reacts to the establishment of the IRI

Saudi Arabia responded to the change in Iran's government with tempered optimism and a little naiveté. In an interview al-Toraifi conducted with Prince Turki al-Faisal, the head of Saudi intelligence at the time of the revolution, the latter stated that the Saudis did not believe Khomeini would not govern, but instead would serve as a religious advisor. The Saudis inherited this belief from the Americans who did not believe that the religious establishment could or would involve themselves in the daily running of a state.⁷² The Saudis also did not see him as inimical to them. They knew from Khomeini's pamphlets and cassettes that he opposed the Shah, but did not extrapolate that his antagonism toward monarchy extended to all monarchies.⁷³ This point supported the idea of Saudi naiveté, as Khomeini had never been shy about his thoughts on monarchical government, saying several times that monarchy was in direct conflict with Islam. Although mostly speaking about the Shah, the universal principles Khomeini espoused applied to other monarchies as well. In a speech he gave in Najaf, Iraq in October 1971, Khomeini discussed Islam's incompatibility with monarchy.⁷⁴ He was explicitly talking about the Pahlavi Dynasty in Iran as he denigrated Iran's celebration of the 2,500th year anniversary of the institution of monarchy in Iran. However, in *Islamic Government*, Khomeini referred to monarchy as generally inconsistent with Islam, asserting that "Islam proclaims monarchy and hereditary succession wrong and invalid."⁷⁵ Instead, the Saudis saw themselves as the exact opposites of the Shah. They believed that the Shah's fast-

72 Rubin, 311.

73. Al-Toraifi, 127.

74. Ruhollah Khomeini and Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 200-8.

75. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islamic Government* (SIME, 2010), 20.

paced attempts at modernization were the real cause of his downfall.⁷⁶ Because of this narrow view, King Khalid of Saudi Arabia, along with Prince Abdullah, took the opportunity to placate the Iranian government now led by Khomeini. According to Nadav Safran:

On April 2, 1979, on the occasion of Khomeini's proclamation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Khaled (sic) sent him a note of congratulations in which he stressed that Islamic solidarity could form the basis of close ties between the two countries. Later that month Abdallah (sic) elaborated on the potential for Saudi-Iranian cooperation...in which he indicated that Saudi Arabia actually preferred Iran's new regime to the Shah's.⁷⁷

For Khomeini, the revolution was not to be limited to Iran. Rather, he saw it as a movement that should encompass the Muslim world. David Menashri quoted Khomeini as saying, "Iran was only 'the starting point,' Muslims 'are one family...even if they live in regions remote from each other.' Even being Shia or Sunni 'is not the question.'"⁷⁸ Regardless of the type of government, these governments oppressed Muslims and this oppression was exacerbated by the Western alliances enjoyed by these governments. Although a message for all Muslims, his rhetoric primarily empowered the Shi'a in other countries.

Despite ample evidence to the contrary stemming from Khomeini's own words regarding monarchy, the Saudi ruling family did not equate themselves to the dethroned Shah. They saw themselves as different from the Shah, his monarchy and ruling style. Yet, Keynoush argued that, the similarities were obvious, "Although the Saudi regime had attempted to portray the Iranian revolution as a non-threat to its Islamic credentials, it

76. Keynoush, *The Iranian-Saudi Arabian Relationship: From Ideological Confrontation to Pragmatic Accommodation*, 99.

77. Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 353-54.

78. David Menashri, "Iran's Regional Policy: Between Radicalism and Pragmatism," *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 2, IRAN: Sixtieth Anniversary Issue 1947-2007 (April 01, 2007): 154, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/24357976?ref=search-gateway:c8df9f625298d9f15d8f1432d87c719b>.

was impossible to overlook the analogy drawn between Iran and Saudi Arabia.”⁷⁹ Several incidents took place before the Saudis removed their rose-colored glasses and reevaluated the Iran Revolution.

The reverberations of the Iranian Revolution on Saudi society

On November 26, 1979, Shi’ites in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia attempted to hold an Ashura celebration despite a long-standing ban on such proceedings. Ashura is a special holiday for the Shi’a, as it marks the murder of Hussein, the grandson of Mohammed and the son of Ali, by the Caliph Yazid in Karbala in 680 C.E. Hussein’s lineage is important because the Shi’a believe that Ali was the rightful successor of the Prophet. Jacob Goldberg described Ashura as “the most solemn [event] in the Shi’i calendar.”⁸⁰ The Shi’a celebrate Ashura with mass parades, reenactments, and Passion plays depicting Hussein’s life and death.

Thus, that November four thousand marchers gathered to celebrate Ashura. The Saudi National Guard attempted to stop the celebration, prompting protests in another town in the Eastern Province. After a few days, demonstrations and violence erupted throughout the Eastern Province; dozens were killed and many more were wounded. In January 1980, forty days after the death of the first protestors, people marched to pay tribute to the dead. The National Guard was again in attendance, but there was no violence. These peaceful demonstrations were followed by more demonstrations marking the one-year anniversary of Khomeini’s return to Iran, which did turn violent as the

79. Keynoush, *The Iranian-Saudi Arabian Relationship: From Ideological Confrontation to Pragmatic Accommodation*, 86.

80. Jacob Goldberg, "The Shi’i Minority in Saudi Arabia," In *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, ed. Juan Ricardo Cole and Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 239.

marchers clashed with security forces. As the violence escalated, one person was killed and several were injured. A national emergency was declared and the National Guard arrived to protect the local infrastructure as marchers burned buildings and vehicles. Unrest continued throughout the month. During the state's crackdown on protesters, the authorities arrested many people and others fled Saudi Arabia.

There are many thoughts as to what sparked the uprisings in the Eastern Province. Goldberg and Jones both said that the uprisings were rooted in the economic and social conditions of the Shi'a in the Eastern Province who had not shared in the Saudi oil wealth and still lived in mud hovels without modern conveniences, but events in Iran played a role as well. According to Goldberg, "active Shi'i resistance was sparked by the Iranian revolution and the propaganda emanating from Tehran."⁸¹ He also added that the timing of the uprisings brought up their connection to the revolution as they occurred shortly afterward. He continued, "it was no coincidence that it surfaced just ten months after the revolution in Iran."⁸² Goldberg commented that the revolution was not just influential to the Saudi Shi'ites but was an example as to how the Shi'ites should react against the ruling regime. It was not only a model, but it gave them the strength to challenge the government, an asset they did not have before the revolution. Goldberg commented, that before the revolution "the Shi'is were anxious not to alienate the Saudi regime. However, the revolution in nearby Shi'i Iran provided the Shi'is in Hasa [Eastern Province] with a sense of power and self-confidence they had previously lacked."⁸³ Jones added that the

81. Jacob Goldberg, "Saudi Arabia and the Iranian Revolution: The Religious Dimension," in *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, ed. David Menashri (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 160. This propaganda took the form of leaflets and Radio Tehran's Arabic broadcasts calling for civil disobedience. Also cassettes of Khomeini's speeches and sermons were circulating throughout the community espousing his political rhetoric.

82. Ibid.

83. Goldberg, "The Shi'i Minority in Saudi Arabia," 241.

uprisings, despite having Iranian roots, were not just a response to the call by Khomeini for Shi'a to rebel. Although the Shi'a in the Eastern Province admired Khomeini, they did not look to him as their religious authority. Rather, they looked inward to a leadership that wanted change. That leadership called on the local population to celebrate Ashura, and people responded to this call. Once the regime cracked down on the marchers and the National Guard responded violently, participants grew in numbers. They were angry and frustrated. The riots were caused by their mistreatment and the oppression that they had suffered and were currently suffering at the hands of the regime.⁸⁴

The first uprising in 1979 coincided with the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Initially thought to be a Shi'ite plan, it was planned and executed by Sunnis who felt that the Saudi ruling family had been corrupted by their wealth and that the religious foundation of the Kingdom was in jeopardy. The Saudi regime was thus being attacked not only by a minority Shi'ite uprising but by members of the Sunni majority itself. The regime co-opted the religious message of the Sunni rebels and sought to pacify the Shi'a by attending to their needs, as the regime soon realized that the demonstrations and riots were rooted in the social and economic conditions in which the Shi'a suffered.⁸⁵ The Saudis placated the Shi'ite population, and according to Goldberg:

Once it became apparent, however, that they [the Shi'a] had scored significant economic gains their basic motivation to challenge the Saudi regime disappeared. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that there have been no outburst of anger or protests among the Shi'is in Hasa since violent February 1980 and that the whole region has been quiet and stable. This is all the more remarkable given that throughout this period the Iranian regime has continued to broadcast its special radio programs in Arabic and to publish and distribute leaflets, calling upon the Shi'is in Hasa to rise against the royal family. It is further proof that the basic reasons underlying the Shi'is' discontent had to do with their social and

84. Toby Craig Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, and the Shia Uprising of 1979," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 02 (2006): 224.

85. Goldberg, "The Shi'i Minority in Saudi Arabia," 243.

economic conditions. Once these issues started to be dealt with, the Shi'is became satisfied and abandoned any idea of challenging or confronting the Saudi regime.⁸⁶

The Saudi government came up with a “comprehensive plan” to address the issues faced by the Shi’a in the Eastern Province to improve their standard of living. The plan “included an electricity project, the reasphalting (sic) of streets, new schools for boys and girls, a new hospital, the draining of large areas of swamps, and projects for additional street lighting, sewage, and communications.”⁸⁷ The government seemed to take a genuine interest in the needs of the Shi’a population. The Eastern Province uprisings were the first political challenge expressed by the Saudi Shi’ite population since the founding of the Kingdom. According to Goldberg, “In many respects, not the least being their proximity to Iran, the protest by so many members of the Shi’i community had graver implications for the regime than the fragmented rebels who had seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca on November 20, 1979.”⁸⁸ The regime saw the Shi’ite uprising as more of a threat to them for one reason, the Eastern Province is the heart of Saudi oil production. A third of the workers in the oil fields were Shi’ite and there was a real fear that they might sabotage oil production, thus injuring the Kingdom’s main source of wealth. These oil fields are also close to Iran, making them more susceptible to Iranian propaganda, such as Arabic-language broadcasts by Iranian media. Goldberg commented, “There was also concern that foreign elements might try to exploit the Shi’is’ grievances for their own purposes and endanger the kingdom’s stability.”⁸⁹

86. Ibid., 245-246.

87. Ibid., 244.

88. Ibid., 242.

89. Ibid.

Saudi Arabia's attempt to balance the combatants in the Iran-Iraq War

The uprisings, however, did not trigger a Saudi turn against the Iranian regime. Rather, the Kingdom tried to maintain a balancing act, weighing its options but not wanting to disturb the existing state of affairs. This balancing act was a fixture of Saudi foreign policy, which favors the status quo and is averse to change, regardless of how subtle. But, it was more than a balancing act. Riyadh was mimicking America's reaction to the revolution. For the American government, according to Rubin, "[The revolution] was a wasteful diversion, conflicting with real American interests and intentions. Yet this view was coupled with a serious misunderstanding of the composition and direction of the postrevolutionary (sic) political situation in Iran and by a failure to comprehend the attitude of Iranians toward the United States."⁹⁰ Furthermore as Rubin pointed out, "[The revolutionaries] argued, the United States had actually ruled Iran using the shah as a puppet. Consequently, America was responsible for all their country's woes and for all the bloodshed during the revolution, as well as guilty of looting the country of its oil wealth."⁹¹ Both states, Saudi Arabia and the US, were engaged in "wishful thinking" based on a misreading of the political situation in Iran.⁹² Rubin argued, "Washington's main global and even regional problem was not Iran but the Soviet Union and its influence. Given the importance of the Persian Gulf area and given Iran's proximity to the U.S.S. R., a stable and united Iran was an American objective no matter who ruled

90. Rubin, 308

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid., 309.

Iran.”⁹³ The US did not want Iran to splinter and subsequently come under Soviet influence, thus the US sought to maintain good relations with the new government.⁹⁴

The hostage crisis issued in a new era for both the United States and Saudi Arabia in terms of their relationship with Iran. Riyadh felt that a significant shift toward radicalism had occurred in Iranian politics. Iranian students stormed the American Embassy in Tehran and took 52 American diplomats hostage in November 1979. Although not done under the direction or even the knowledge of Khomeini, he nonetheless endorsed the act.⁹⁵ According to Rubin, “the holding of the hostages became a symbol and demonstration of Iran’s independence and opposition to American power.” This independence brought about a change and Saudi Arabia shifted its support toward Iraq, seeing Iraq as a possible deterrent to Iran’s revolutionary zeal and its ambitions of exporting its revolution.⁹⁶ Riyadh felt threatened by Tehran’s revolutionary policies and rising regional prominence. Both threatened Riyadh’s identity within Islam, as well as its financial and regime stability. Saudi Arabia was given a chance to test the ability of its foreign policy to achieve balance with the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War on September 22, 1980.

Saudi Arabia had never been close to Iraq. After the Second World War, the British installed a Hashemite king in Iraq. The Hashemites had been historical rivals of the Saudi ruling family ever since Ibn Saud had ejected the Hashemite rulers from the Hijaz, in the western part of the Arabian Peninsula, in his quest to conquer the area. The Hashemite King of Iraq, Faisal II, was dethroned by a socialist coup in 1958, but Iraq’s

93. Ibid., 310.

94. Ibid.

95. Keynoush, *The Iranian-Saudi Arabian Relationship: From Ideological Confrontation to Pragmatic Accommodation*, 99.

96. Ibid., 101.

new socialist leaders did not curry favor with the Kingdom as the socialists were anti-royalist.

After the overthrow of the Shah in Iran and Saddam Hussein's assumption of power in Iraq in 1979, relations between Iran and Iraq deteriorated. In September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, ostensibly to achieve the following four objectives:

- 1) To return the enclaves of Saif Saad and Zain al-Qaws to Iraqi control
- 2) To gain full sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab
- 3) To return the Islands of Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunb to the United Arab Emirates
- 4) To stop Iranian meddling in the domestic affairs of its Arab neighbors as Iran attempted to export its revolution.⁹⁷

Saddam Hussein tried to frame the war in Pan-Arab terms. His objectives at first glance appeared to have Pan-Arab motivations with attempts to win larger Arab support.

However, they were, in truth, more about his desires to amass more power and to weaken and isolate the country he saw as his principal enemy, Iran. On this last point Rouhollah Ramazani pointed out, "Saddam Hussein wanted Iraq to fill the power vacuum he saw in the entire Gulf region after the Shah's departure, partly to provide a base for Hussein's bid for leadership in the larger Arab world, a bid that contributed, as seen, to the decision to invade Iran."⁹⁸

The United States claimed ignorance when it came to foreknowledge of Iraq's invasion of Iran and declared themselves neutral in the war.⁹⁹ However, according to Rubin, "many U.S. policy makers came to see a continuation of the war as a useful way to bog down two of the region's most highly militarized regimes and stave off short-term

97. Henner Fürtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2002.), 61-62.

98. Rouhollah K Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 90.

99. Jones, "America, Oil, and War in the Middle East," 215. and; Rubin, 320.

threats to the regional order and the political economy of oil. To this end, the United States supplied weapons, funding, and intelligence to both sides in the conflict.”¹⁰⁰ Saudi Arabia, however, is rumored to have had knowledge of Saddam’s plans to invade Iran, as Saddam visited the Kingdom in August 1980 and supposedly informed the royal family of his intentions. Also before this visit, Baghdad and Riyadh signed a security agreement stating that an attack on an Arab state was an attack on Iraq.¹⁰¹ There were also rumblings of a charter among the Gulf States and Iraq, which indicated that if Iraq were to go to war with a non-Arab state, the Arab states would support Iraq.¹⁰²

Continuing its pattern of mimicking the example set by the US, Saudi Arabia tried to balance both sides of the conflict. However, in November 1980, Baghdad’s war effort stumbled and it looked like the war was turning in Tehran’s favor. Riyadh was worried, as Khomeini saw the war as a conduit to export the revolution. He believed once Iraq fell, so would the rest of the Gulf. Khomeini was not going to conquer Iraq per se; his belief was essentially that the natural inclination and desire of all Muslims was for Islamic governance. Therefore, the Iraqis would see Iran as “liberators” and model their new government after the one in Iran.¹⁰³ At this point, Riyadh mobilized the other Gulf States in support of Baghdad, according to Fürting. He said that the Gulf States gave financial and logistical support to Iraq with most of this support coming from Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom did whatever it could to assist Iraq’s war effort short of military participation,

100. Jones, 215.

101. Gerd Nonneman, "The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War: Pattern Shifts and Continuities," in *Iran, Iraq and the Legacies of War*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 173.

102. Keynoush, *The Iranian-Saudi Arabian Relationship: From Ideological Confrontation to Pragmatic Accommodation*, 114.

103. Ray Takeyh, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment," *The Middle East Journal* 64, no. 3 (2010): 373. doi:10.3751/64.3.12.

because of Saudi fears of Iranian retaliation.¹⁰⁴ According to an interview conducted by Keynoush with Turki al-Faisal, former Saudi ambassador and director of Saudi intelligence, Saudi Arabia did not give financial support to Iraq until Iran invaded Iraq two years into the war, not in 1980 as argued by Fürtig. An unnamed Iranian official whom Keynoush interviewed for her book corroborates al-Faisal's claim. The official said that Iran was under the impression that Saudi Arabia did not aid Iraq at the outset of the war. There appears to be a discrepancy as to the exact moment when Riyadh began to support Baghdad financially, but Riyadh's support of Baghdad was not in dispute.

By 1982, Iran was able to regain the territory it had lost to Iraq initially in the war, and it began an invasion of Iraq. This turn of events raised fears among the Gulf States of a possible Iranian victory. To put an end to the conflict, Saudi Arabia offered to mediate between the warring states. Riyadh offered to give Tehran \$70 billion to rebuild if it stopped fighting, but Khomeini was not interested in ending the war.¹⁰⁵ Khomeini turned down the offer because, for him, the war was a religious crusade. For the entire Muslim community to be governed by Islamic governance, Iran needed to be successful in thwarting atheist Iraq.

In 1984, the IRI attempted to curtail Iraqi tankers, and any other tankers perceived to be carrying Iraqi oil, from navigating the Straits of Hormuz. Iraq's action toward Iran precipitated what became known as the "tanker war," which adversely affected the Gulf economies. Iraq targeted Iran's oil facilities both on- and offshore, and Iran retaliated. Keynoush explained, "Iran declared that Gulf security was indivisible, and that it would

104. Fürtig, 64-65.

105. Takeyh, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment," 373.

not allow their waterway to remain secure for some states and not others.”¹⁰⁶ Iran began the tanker war because it was unable to target Iraqi vessels, as most Iraqi oil was being transported overland through a pipeline funded by the Saudis. Instead, Iran could target the vessels of countries supporting the Iraqi war effort. According to Ray Takeyh, it was Iraq’s actions of targeting Iran’s oil facilities that led to the tanker war.¹⁰⁷

Although targeting tankers of countries supporting Iraq affected the Saudi economy, Tehran did not wish to alienate, and thus provoke, Baghdad’s main sponsor. Takeyh confirms, “Iran had a limited interest in extending the war to the Gulf emirates.”¹⁰⁸ Rather, the Iranian government, according to Fürtig, “sought to improve relations with Saudi Arabia and to coax the Kingdom away from its one-sided support for Iraq.”¹⁰⁹ However, the tanker war caused Riyadh and the other Gulf States to go to the Arab League to condemn Iran’s actions. With the Arab League’s support, Saudi Arabia secured a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Iran’s actions and guaranteeing the freedom of movement in international waters by nonparticipants in the conflict. Iran rebuked the resolution because the UN failed to condemn Iraq as the belligerent. Also, the resolution was worded in such a way that Iraq’s bombing of Iran’s oil facilities was acceptable because they occurred within the theatre of war. Iran’s actions were condemned because they were against nonparticipants and happened outside the designated arena of the war.¹¹⁰

106. Keynoush, *The Iranian-Saudi Arabian Relationship: From Ideological Confrontation to Pragmatic Accommodation*, 103-104.

107. Takeyh, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment," 374.

108. Ibid.

109. Fürtig, 67.

110. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, 106.

The resolution led to secret negotiations between Tehran and Riyadh to find ways of ending the conflict. Again, Saudi Arabia offered to help Iran rebuild. Numerous meetings took place over the next couple of years, but to no avail, as the Iranians insisted on Saddam's removal from power as a condition for a potential ceasefire. Keynoush suggested that Iran would not capitulate because:

The war helped Tehran consolidate central power after the revolution by mobilizing Iranian nationalism, controlling the army, and simultaneously cracking down on dissent. Moreover, peace proposals, especially during Iran's advancement seemed insincere, and Tehran felt disheartened when the proposals failed to recognize Iraq as the aggressor.¹¹¹

When negotiations stalled, the Kingdom continued to aid Iraq financially and logistically, allowing Iraqi planes to land and refuel in Saudi Arabia on their way to and from Iran. This was a risky venture for the Saudis, but terrorist attacks presumably undertaken by the Iranians against Kuwait only strengthened Saudi resolve.¹¹²

Despite the UN Resolution, Iran did not stop targeting vessels in the Persian Gulf. In 1987, the Soviets offered to assist Kuwait, whose tankers were under bombardment by Iran. The Soviets proposed the chartering of Soviet vessels to Kuwait, so that Kuwait could ship its oil freely under another flag, based on the assumption that Iran would be reticent to fire on a superpower's vessels. The United States countered the Soviet proposal and offered to reflag Kuwait vessels as American tankers to ensure the security of the oil shipping routes. At the same time, the US sent its warships into the Gulf. Oddly, Iran, not Iraq, was blamed for the escalation of the war and the involvement of other powers in the conflict. Despite foreign involvement in the conflict, Tehran continued to target ships in the Persian Gulf. Iran tried not to target American ships, but it

111. Keynoush, *The Iranian-Saudi Arabian Relationship: From Ideological Confrontation to Pragmatic Accommodation*, 102.

112. *Ibid.*, 68.

eventually did hit an American ship. In retaliation, the US destroyed an Iranian offshore oil facility in 1988. The participation of foreign powers, according to Keynoush, both escalated the war and hastened its end. Rubin discussed the extent of American involvement and engagement with Iran during the war. He stated:

American and Iranian military forces exchanged fire on several occasions in 1987. Hostilities escalated in 1988, with the United States sinking several Iranian warships and damaging oil platforms. That summer the USS *Vincennes* shot down an Iranian passenger jet, killing all 290 civilians on board. The incident was a stunning blow to Iran, and one that effectively sapped its will to fight further.¹¹³

With the involvement of foreign powers, the war promptly came to a halt. Although neither side signed a ceasefire agreement, hostilities ceased in 1988. Shahram Chubin explained that “the internationalisation (sic) of the war, regional isolation and the threat of a future comprehensive arms embargo increased the psychological pressure on Iran... [and] had also begun to diminish the domestic enthusiasm for the war...[furthermore,] the cost of continuing the war without any decisive result was beginning to be felt.”¹¹⁴ The above factors moved Iran closer to ending the war but, Chubin stated, “Only a perception that the continuation of the war would threaten the very existence of the Islamic republic, Khomeini’s legacy, could have done so.”¹¹⁵ Thus as the morale of Iran’s citizens and fighters waned and Iranians lost faith in their revolution and their leaders after a series of defeats at the hands of Iraq, Khomeini accepted the ceasefire. The war had been “a direct outgrowth from it [the revolution]” and as such the success of the revolution depended on winning the war and the creation by the Iraqi people of an

113 Rubin, 215-216.

114. Shahram Chubin, "The Last Phase of the Iran-Iraq War: From Stalemate to Ceasefire," *Third World Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (April 1989): 9, doi:10.1080/01436598908420154.

115. Ibid., 10.

Islamic-styled republic.¹¹⁶ Neither of these aspects was forthcoming. According to Chubin, “The major casualty of the war had been the credibility of the Islamic republic among its own rank and file. It will no longer be able to call effectively upon its populace for crusades and sacrifices, but will have to act like a traditional state.”¹¹⁷ Khomeini died soon after accepting the ceasefire, and the process of rebuilding Iran began under the looming specter of Khomeini and diminished revolutionary zeal.

The Iran-Iraq War and the foundation of the Gulf Cooperation Council

One of the steps taken by Saudi Arabia to insulate itself from the war was its involvement in the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. The GCC, also known as the “Six,” included several Gulf States. The Six consisted of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. These states were deeply distrustful of Iraq, Iran, and both of their intentions. These countries also came together to discuss issues such as mutual defense, the limitation of foreign fleets, a ban on foreign military bases, freedom of navigation, the division of the Gulf waterways, and to support each other against potential coups.¹¹⁸ Although there was a prior history of cooperation on these issues while under the British protectorate, the events surrounding Iran and Iraq were the primary impetus for the council’s formation. Ramazani posited, “In fact, the Saudi leaders’ desire to draw closer to the smaller sheikdoms stemmed from their need to protect themselves as well as their weak associates against not only Iran, but also the still-suspect Ba’thist revolutionary regime.”¹¹⁹ Each of these states had a sizable Shi’ite

116. Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 245.

117. Chubin, "The Last Phase of the Iran-Iraq War: From Stalemate to Ceasefire," 14.

118. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, 116.

119. *Ibid.*, 90.

population and/or Iranian expatriate workforce, toward which Iran had made overtures enticing them to rise up against the monarchies, which Iran perceived to be Western puppet regimes.

The founding of the GCC was not just a reaction to the Iran-Iraq War. In reality, however, this was only one of the perquisites for its foundation. Since its revolution, Iran had presented itself as a threat to the continued reign of the Gulf monarchs. Gerd Nonneman pointed out:

Iranian policy, indeed, was crucial in determining the policies of the Six toward Tehran and the war: all feared the impact of the revolution, all attempted to appease this new threat initially, all then, albeit to varying degrees, veered toward Iraq in the face of explicit ideological threats issuing from leading figures in Tehran. Yet none were willing to ignore possibilities of improving relations with the Islamic Republic if there appeared a chance.¹²⁰

Like Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf States had made overtures to Iran to prevent it from interfering in their domestic politics and enticing their populace to rise up against the monarchies. In addition to the fear of Iranian intervention in their domestic politics, two other factors influenced the GCC to support Iraq over Iran in the war. According to Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The first was the gradual rapprochement between Iraq and the Arab Gulf States after 1975, while the second was the perceived threat to the Gulf States' legitimacy, internal security, and external stability resulting from Iranian pan-Islamism after 1979."¹²¹ After 1975, Iraq shed its revolutionary and socialist zeal and sought to make Pan-Arabism a priority as a way of securing a leadership position in the region. Ramazani also pointed out that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the

120. Nonneman, 170. "There was an obvious sharp change in relations between the Six and Iran in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, both because of the implicit threat posed to regional stability and domestic security, and because of a series of threatening statements aimed at the monarchical regimes of the Gulf from senior Iranian officials and clerics."; Ibid, 172.

121. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War: Cooperation and Confusion." in *The Iran-Iraq War: New International Perspectives*, ed. Nigel Ashton and Bryan Gibson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 112.

potential for American intervention in the region to secure the supply of oil were also essential to the formation of the GCC. Iran had traditionally served as a buffer between the Gulf and the Soviets. Now, with Iran preoccupied, there was a risk of the Soviets interfering in other Muslim countries beyond Afghanistan. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Iraq's attitude toward the Soviet Union changed drastically, and Iraq no longer aligned itself with the Soviets. Iraq, once dependent on the Soviets for arms, was able to diversify its suppliers due to increased oil income after the Arab oil embargo of 1973.¹²² This change in alignment impacted the way the Gulf States viewed Iraq, in that they saw realignment as a positive development.

Soviet actions were also worrisome, especially after American President Jimmy Carter laid out the Carter Doctrine in his State of the Union Address in January 1980. In that speech, Carter promised American intervention in the region to ensure the supply of oil so as to prevent any harm to the American economy. Carter's speech, directed toward the Soviets, was a threat against further intrusion into the region. Jones pointed out, "the soviet invasion of Afghanistan prompted Carter to make clear America's deep attachment to the Persian Gulf and U.S. willingness to use militarily force to protect the flow of oil...Carter mapped out a new strategic/military vision for the region...the era of direct American intervention in the Persian Gulf began."¹²³ Rubin echoed this point by stating "the Carter Doctrine demonstrated the increased concern with the Gulf region. The undeniable economic and strategic importance of the area, the potential for greater

122. Frank Fukuyama, *The Soviet Union and Iraq Since 1968* (Ft. Belvoir: Defense Technical Information Center, 1980), vii.

123. Jones, "America, Oil, and War in the Middle East," 215.

instability created by the Iran-Iraq war, and the growing Soviet presence in the region, all raised its priority in the eyes of American policy makers.”¹²⁴

The Gulf States had a different view toward the doctrine; they saw it not as a protective umbrella, but rather they saw themselves as pieces in a game in which they had little say. There was a corresponding fear that the whole region would become embroiled in war and chaos as the superpowers fought among themselves. This feeling of vulnerability to the machinations of the superpowers contributed to the rise of the GCC.

During the Iran-Iraq War, the GCC maintained an outward position of neutrality, as a victory by either Tehran or Baghdad was not desirable. Support for the two combatants varied among the GCC states. However, they believed that a short war could be the shock Iran needed to end its revolutionary proselytizing.¹²⁵ Keynough pointed out:

A victorious Iran or Iraq could harbor future regional ambitions and disrupt the balance of power. This outlook allowed the organization to maintain open channels of communication with both Iran and Iraq throughout the war, as did growing division within GCC. While Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain supported Iraq, Oman and the U.A.E. were supportive of Iran given their cultural and social affinities with the country.¹²⁶

Additionally, the distance of Oman and UAE from Iraq contributed to their lack of desire to support Iraq, as there was less of a fear of the war spreading to them. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia contributed the bulk of the financial assistance to Iraq, to the tune of \$50 billion, because of the fear that an Iranian victory would lead to the creation of an Iraqi Shi'ite state. Besides financial assistance, those members of the GCC aligned with Iraq provided logistical support, such as the use of their ports and airbases, information on Iranian troop movement, and assistance to Iraq in selling its oil when Iran prevented it from being able

124. Rubin, 323-324.

125. Nonneman, 174.

126. Keynough, *The Iranian-Saudi Arabian Relationship: From Ideological Confrontation to Pragmatic Accommodation*, 102- 103.

to do so. Also, through OPEC, these countries kept oil prices low, which hurt Iran's ability to finance its war effort.¹²⁷ Although many of the members of the GCC supported Iraq, Baghdad's ambitions prevented them from extending an invitation to Iraq to join the council. Iraq, dependent on the GCC for assistance, was not in a position to object.¹²⁸

Unlike Baghdad, Tehran was alone. It was isolated by the West through sanctions stemming from the hostage crisis. Tehran did not have benefactors with deep pockets, nor did it have strong allies. Saudi Arabia had cut diplomatic ties with Iran in 1988, an action that had not been mimicked by the other GCC states, as the policies of the GCC countries toward Iran and Iraq differed.¹²⁹

Conclusion

Iran wanted to unite Muslims and create other Islamic republics in its own image. However, Iran had difficulty inciting non-Shi'ites to revolt against their governments. It even had difficulty inciting other Shi'ites, as many did not ascribe to Khomeini's politics, nor did they see him as their spiritual leader.

One of the reasons, as Fürtig pointed out, for the amicable relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran up until the revolution was that the Shah and the Saudi royal family saw themselves as operating in different spheres.¹³⁰ The Shah's secular leanings did not encroach upon the presumptive Saudi leadership in matters of Islam. With Khomeini, however, this dynamic changed. At first, the Saudis attempted to use the vocabulary of Revolutionary Iran to smooth the transition and maintain an alliance

127. Ibid., 103.

128. Nonneman, 176.

129. Riyadh had cut off ties because of the hajj incident in 1987 in which 400 Iranian pilgrims were killed and Iran's refusal to accept Saudi Arabia's new quota of 10% of a country's population as the maximum number of pilgrims.

130 Fürtig, 10-11.

following in the footsteps of America's conciliatory attitude toward Iran, but Iran had different ambitions and sought to supplant Saudi Arabia and eject America's presence from the Gulf.

Tehran was undermining Riyadh's authority and legitimacy. Therefore, it was only natural for Riyadh to align itself with Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq War. Iraq had an agenda that at times also appeared to challenge Saudi Arabia, because Iraq wanted to fill the power vacuum left by the Shah's Iran. Iraq's desires left Saudi Arabia in a precarious position, and Riyadh attempted to uphold the status quo by keeping an open dialogue with Iran for most of the war. At the same time, it provided support to Iraq by helping to form the GCC and by mobilizing the other Gulf States to aid Baghdad's war effort. Saudi Arabia aided Iraq, even though a victory by either Baghdad or Tehran was not a favorable outcome in Riyadh's eyes, as either side might be emboldened by its victory to consider further aggression toward the other Gulf States. In the end, both Iran and Iraq were denied victory. The fruitless war left hundreds of thousands dead on both sides, while neither side was able to regain any new territory. Khomeini died shortly after accepting the ceasefire with Iraq. His death paved the way for more pragmatic elements in Iran's government to come to the fore. When they did, they sought to re-engage with Saudi Arabia, ushering in an era of rapprochement between the states and thawing the once icy relationship. This new era, however, did not equal a similar warming of relations between the US and Iran, instead the US continued to isolate Iran.

CHAPTER 3

THE SAUDI-IRANIAN RAPPROCHEMENT (1989-2011)

The end of the Iran-Iraq War and the subsequent death of the Ayatollah Khomeini marked a transition in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran but not a similar transition in the relationship between Iran and the US. The shift in the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia is often attributed to the personal relationship between Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and President Mohammad Khatami of Iran.¹³¹ However, the groundwork for this new era of understanding between the two countries is properly attributable to the Iranian President after the death of Khomeini, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. According to Anoushavan Ehteshami, after the Iran-Iraq War, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) wanted “to recover ground lost in the debilitating war and, in doing so, to reassert its influence in the region. To recover economically and militarily entails the ending of Iran’s regional and international isolation.”¹³² Rafsanjani initially developed the policies that Tehran enacted to end its isolation.

This period was turbulent. After Iraq invaded, occupied, and annexed Kuwait in 1990, the United States threatened, and subsequently invaded Iraq to remove the Iraqi presence from Kuwait. The US did not accomplish this feat alone; it had the assistance of 34 other nations. During this turbulent time, the Soviet Union collapsed. The Cold War was over and years of bipolarity were replaced with the United States being the sole superpower.

131. Al-Toraifi, 176-179.

132. Anoushavan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London: Routledge, 1995), 146.

Violence bookends this era; the Iran-Iraq War began the period and the beginning of the Arab Spring in late 2010 marked its end. Tehran and Riyadh took different sides during the Arab Spring uprisings that spread throughout the Middle East. While Tehran mostly saw the uprisings as an extension of their revolution, Riyadh saw them as disruptive of the status quo. As a result, in the various uprisings each country aligned itself with different factions.

The end of the Iran-Iraq War and Iran's attempt to rebuild both its nation and its reputation

Khomeini died in June 1989, soon after the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 598 calling for a ceasefire between Iran and Iraq. Even before Khomeini's death, Rafsanjani had emerged as the strongest candidate for president. Khomeini had appointed Rafsanjani to the position of Commander-in-Chief of the military in 1988, an act some scholars view as an initial sign that Iran wanted to change its outward image.¹³³ Rafsanjani's more prominent role in Iranian politics signaled this change, as he had long been considered a moderate among Iran's political elite. Shireen T. Hunter discussed Rafsanjani's politics, pointing out, "Within the murky and ill-defined factionalism of Khomeini's Iran, Rafsanjani had long been labeled a moderate because of his support for private enterprise, his misgivings about Soviet intentions, his willingness to improve Iran's relations with the West and his periodic remarks about the possibility of resolving U.S.-Iranian differences."¹³⁴ Rafsanjani's political stance, along with his support of the Khomeini's fatwa calling for the death of Salman Rushdie, the author of

133. Fürtig, 93.

134. Shireen T. Hunter, "Post-Khomeini Iran," *Foreign Affairs* 68, no. 5 (1989): 134-35, doi:10.2307/20044204.

The Satanic Verses, galvanized support from the more radical factions in Iran.¹³⁵

Subsequently, in the July 1989 election Rafsanjani won the presidency, garnering support from multiple factions. However, Rafsanjani ran mostly uncontested, since the opposition candidate was an unknown. Rafsanjani secured 85% of the votes, but his victory was lackluster because voter turnout was low. The minimal public participation tarnished Rafsanjani's win, stopping short of giving him a mandate for change within Iran. His election is sometimes referred to as the birth of the second Islamic Republic because it marked a departure from the revolutionary politics that characterized the first decade in Iran after the revolution.¹³⁶

The relatively smooth transition of power after Khomeini's death was deliberate. Hunter pointed out, "The surprising unity and speed of the Iranian transfer of power reflected acute awareness that any sign of strife or delay would encourage internal and external enemies and would endanger the regime's survival," but also that Iran watchers believed that Khomeini's death would leave a power vacuum in the country and result in fighting among the various factions.¹³⁷

A few months prior to his death, Khomeini dismissed his chosen successor, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri because Montazeri was critical of the regime. When Montazeri was removed as the next-in-line to follow Khomeini, the choices of who could succeed him were limited. Most of the clerics who had supported the revolution and were currently involved in the government were low- or mid-ranking. The higher-ranking clergy did not support the revolution. According to Olivier Roy, "the Revolution has

135. Rushdie's book had a depiction of the Prophet which Khomeini did not just find unflattering but blasphemous.

136. Fürtig, 93; and; Ehteshami, *After Khomeini*.

137. Hunter, 135-36.

weakened the traditional Shi'i clerical structure in favor of a political organization. All the 'traditional' Shi'i clerical logic...has been ignored or bypassed by institutions created by the Islamic Revolution."¹³⁸ The Iranian political structure could not pull another leader from high-ranking members of the Iranian Shi'ite clerical establishment. Despite this dearth of potential talent, Farhang Jahanpour believed that Rafsanjani had strong influence in the choice of the next leader due to his close relationship with Khomeini before Khomeini's death.¹³⁹ Despite having his own aspirations to be Supreme Leader, Rafsanjani lacked the essential credentials to hold such a position. He was not a descendent of the Prophet, nor was he a high-ranking cleric. Jahanpour used the term "king maker" to describe Rafsanjani's role in the Assembly of Experts'¹⁴⁰ decision to pick Sayed Ali Khamenei. The body took Rafsanjani's suggestion that Khamenei should be Supreme Leader after Rafsanjani hinted that Khomeini himself wanted Khamenei to rule after his death. Although Khamenei was not a high-ranking cleric, he was a descendent of the Prophet and, immediately after he was placed in the position of Supreme Leader, was given the title of Ayatollah.¹⁴¹ He also received vows of allegiance from all the branches of government including the cabinet, the parliament, and the military.

Initially, Rafsanjani went to work attempting to rebuild Iran's economy and military following the war, which had left the country in great disarray. Virtually isolated after the war, Iran, through the actions of its new president, went about rebuilding its

138. Roy Olivier, "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran," *Middle East Journal* 53, no. 2 (April 01, 1999): 209, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/4329317?ref=search-gateway:aa89d82e70b02a447771d01f4ad7b363>.

139. Farhang Jahanpour, "Iran after Khomeini," *The World Today* 45, no. 8/9 (August 01, 1989): 151, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/40396134?ref=search-gateway:fa0c331fbb917c6a8fedc509330d793f>.

140. The Assembly of Experts is an elected body of Shi'ite clergymen who select and if necessary remove the Supreme Leader.

141. Ibid.

reputations through a “diplomatic charm offensive.”¹⁴² Al-Toraifi said “Rafsanjani’s prime objective in pursuing such politics was to recover ground lost during the eight years of the Iran-Iraq War, and consequently to reassert Iran’s influence in the region.”¹⁴³ To rebuild, Iran needed to reintegrate itself into the global community. The first step was to publicly distance itself from the once prominent goal of exporting its revolution. According to Fürtig, “For its part the Iranian government had to guarantee its ability to respect agreements and to create the right political conditions for peaceful trade and reconstruction to re-establish credibility. The minimum requirement for economic credibility was the elimination of the constant threat to export the revolution.”¹⁴⁴ Therefore, economic reconstruction required Rafsanjani, “to reassess the priorities of the Islamic revolution.”¹⁴⁵ Reconstruction replaced exporting the revolution as the top priority of the regime. The media and politicians, for the time being, abandoned revolutionary rhetoric in the attempts to appear “moderate and cooperative” to attract foreign investment.¹⁴⁶

As it rebuilt, the IRI sought to repair not only its economy but also its broken international relationships, a difficult task given the rancor and vitriol that had been spewed by Khomeini against the Arab monarchies, specifically Saudi Arabia. Even from the grave in the form of his last will and testament, Khomeini called the monarch of Saudi Arabia a charlatan and then trivialized Saudi Wahhabism as a “superstitious cult”

142. Ehteshami, *After Khomeini*, 147.

143. Al-Toraifi, 168.

144. Fürtig, 94.

145. Ibid.

146. Ibid, 95.

and therefore not a legitimate form of Islam.¹⁴⁷ Rafsanjani, in turn, expressed regret over the state of the relationship between Iran and its neighbors and attempted to regain their trust. He stated ““ We did not have expansionist intentions from the beginning, just as our southern neighbours (sic) do not have aggressive designs... We urge our southern neighbours (sic)...to co-operate with us in order to resolve existing issues concerning the oil market, maritime laws and Resolution 598 [i.e. relations with Iraq].””¹⁴⁸ Rafsanjani affirmed that having a good relationship with the Gulf States was imperative because Iran received 90% of its income from oil sales and needed to secure stable yet high oil prices within OPEC. The Gulf States also offered a new market for goods exported from Iran, and were potential investors in Iran’s economy.¹⁴⁹ Keynoush stated, “Iran’s foreign policy in this period reflected an understanding among its leaders that economic realities prevailed over ideological consideration.”¹⁵⁰ Exporting the revolution did not necessarily become an ideology of the past, but it transformed to fit with Iran’s new mission as a peaceful neighbor ripe for investment and key to regional stability. By being exemplars of a stable and prosperous republic governed by Islamic principles, Iran could be the face of revolution, setting an example of peace and stability that others would want to emulate.

However, a potential relationship with the Gulf States was stymied by Riyadh’s troubled relationship with Tehran in the wake of the Iran-Iraq War.¹⁵¹ Riyadh, as the dominant member of the GCC, dictated many of the actions undertaken by the other

147. R. Khomeini, Ayatollah, “Sayyed Ruhollah Khomeini-Wasiyya,” (Will)-Knowledge, <https://goaloflife.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/ayatollah-sayyed-ruhollah-khomeini-wasiyya-will.pdf> (accessed March 3, 2017).

148. Ehteshami, *After Khomeini*, 138-139.

149. *Ibid.*, 97.

150. Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*, 120.

151. *Ibid.*

members, and its refusal to renew diplomatic ties with Tehran hindered Iran's relationship with the rest of the Gulf. Complicating matters and preventing reconciliation was Riyadh's continuing close tie with Baghdad. Keynoush noted, "the fragile state of the ceasefire between Iran and Iraq and Iran's internal political transition made the Saudis uneasy about resuming ties with Iran."¹⁵² But, within a year, the nature of the relationship between Riyadh and Tehran was dramatically altered, thanks to Baghdad's aggressive behavior.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait aided Iran's effort to change its relationship with the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia. Chubin and Tripp mentioned, "Iraq's aggression against Kuwait gave Iran a reprieve. Without effacing the memory of Iran as a potential threat, it gave Tehran a chance to redefine its interests and integrate itself into Persian Gulf politics. With Iraq ostracised (sic) from Gulf politics, Iran's importance was correspondingly enhanced."¹⁵³ The Gulf monarchies began to fear Iraq's penchant for expansionism, making it easier for Iran to drive a wedge between Iraq and its former supporters. Now, instead of Iraq being a bulwark against potential Iranian aggression in the Gulf, the Gulf monarchies needed to be rescued from Iraqi aggression. This need threw a wrench into Saudi foreign policy, because the Saudis had historically used Iraq to balance Iranian aggression. Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States turned instead toward the United States, relying heavily on an outside presence for support. This policy, however, was not without risks. The Iranians were against any foreign presence in the Gulf, and reliance on America might put more strain on the already fragile relationship between the Iranians and the Saudis.

152. Ibid.

153. Chubin and Tripp, *Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations*, 20.

American intervention in the Gulf affairs distressed the Iranians. However, Tehran decided to remain passive and neutral during the war. Tehran's next moves needed to be calculated. It, therefore, supported the UN resolutions against Iraq. Tehran saw a solution involving the UN as preferable to the US acting alone. Iran, despite its desire for reintegration, was still against Western, particularly American, involvement in the region.

Iran also was the first state to object to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Iran proclaimed that Kuwaiti sovereignty should be respected and that Iraq should withdraw from the country. Iran recognized the legitimacy of the Emir of Kuwait's rule, a complete reversal of position given Iran's previous attempt to overthrow the monarchy in its support of Kuwaiti opposition groups. Ehteshami recalled, "In 1990, thus, Iran stood on the side of the West and for Kuwaiti sovereignty and the right of its Emir to rule the sheikhdom, when just a few years earlier it had not only tried to secure the demise of the ruling Al-Sabah family through support for Islamic dissident forces in Kuwait, but had played a significant part in escalating regional tensions."¹⁵⁴ Remaining neutral was the best move Iran could make. It could not support Iraq, which had been until recently, its adversary, and it could not completely support the American-led coalition, since this would undermine its desire for a Gulf independent from Western powers.

Neither objecting to nor supporting the conflict allowed Tehran to exploit the vulnerabilities of a weakened Baghdad. Mohsen Milani describes the policy that Rafsanjani and, by extension, Iran, took during the Gulf War. "He [Rafsanjani] opted for

154. Ehteshami, *After Khomeini*, 152-153.

what I called active neutrality: by choosing to stand on the sidelines without antagonizing either Baghdad or Washington, Iran would be acting to promote its national interests.”¹⁵⁵

For its part, Iran took in Gulf War refugees fleeing Iraq and Kuwait, thereby boosting its image among the Gulf States. According to Ehteshami, as a result of the Gulf War, “Iran launched its own diplomatic offensive aimed at enhancing and consolidating its regional influence through the isolation of Iraq and the opening of hitherto closed Arab doors.”¹⁵⁶ Tehran was maneuvering to be viewed as a counterweight to Baghdad’s aggression. Iran also hoped that, by being seen in this light, the need for American protection could be eliminated and Iran would be invited to participate in Gulf security arrangements. Iranian participation in Gulf security was wishful thinking on Iran’s part. The actions undertaken by more radical elements of the Iranian government would undermine Rafsanjani’s efforts. Until then, he was able to mend many Gulf relationships successfully, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Iran was rewarded for its neutrality with a thaw in its relationship with Saudi Arabia. Diplomatic relations had been severed in 1988, but in the aftermath of the Gulf War, the two countries reestablished diplomatic ties, and Rafsanjani visited Riyadh in 1991.¹⁵⁷ Saudi Arabia was surprised by Iran’s stance in the war and saw Tehran’s neutrality as a respectable move.¹⁵⁸ Riyadh rewarded Tehran accordingly, and responded cordially to Rafsanjani’s overtures. However, noted Fürtig, the two countries did not resolve any questions regarding security, since Saudi Arabia was relying heavily on the

155. Mohsen M Milani, "Iran's Post-Cold War Policy in the Persian Gulf," *International Journal* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 340, doi:10.2307/40202941.

156. Ehteshami, *After Khomeini*, 151.

157 Ties were severed in 1988 after an incident during hajj in July 1987 when Iranian protesters clashed with the Saudi Security Forces and 400 people were killed, most of whom were Iranians. In response to the deaths, Iranians ransacked the Saudi Embassy in Tehran which led the Saudis to sever diplomatic relations with Iran.

158. Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*, 124.

United States to secure its position in the Gulf. Iran, on the other hand, did not want a foreign presence in the Gulf, especially America. Iran wanted to show not only Saudi Arabia, but the Gulf monarchies as well, that it should be involved in all security relationships and that the Gulf States should not be so reliant on America. Fürtig further added that Tehran and Riyadh were ideologically at odds, still seeing the other as an enemy.¹⁵⁹ However, relations with Saudi Arabia and the GCC remained important to Iran because “oil, the location of the most important religious centres (sic) of Islam, and the American military presence” were the main areas of interests to Iran.”¹⁶⁰

Challenges to Rafsanjani’s foreign policy initiative

Rafsanjani faced challenges to his attempts at overtures to the Arab regimes. Noted Ehteshami, “The general reduction in the Second Republic’s hostile and anti-Arab propaganda since September 1989 has opened many doors to Tehran, but it has so frustrated the Iranian hard-liners that have sought their own independent avenues of criticism of the new policies.”¹⁶¹ The new Supreme Leader of Iran, Khamenei, was the means for confronting Rafsanjani’s policies. As mentioned earlier, Khamenei threatened to undermine any of Rafsanjani’s efforts that he perceived to go against Khomeini’s revolutionary ideology. Khamenei had this ability due to the amendments that the Iranian government made to the constitution after Khamenei died. The Supreme Leader, according to the Iranian Constitution, controls the military and makes foreign policy. Keynoush pointed out:

Article 110 of the constitution defines four different contexts in which the [supreme] leader, rather than the president, retains a prerogative over foreign

159. Fürtig, 106.

160. Ibid, 109.

161. Ehteshami, *After Khomeini*, 141.

policy. The [supreme] leader has the power and duty to delineate general foreign policy, exercise supervision over the execution of those policies, issue decrees and resolve disputes in consultation with Expediency Council. The [supreme] leader also retains direct control over the armed forces and the security apparatus. In effect, the [supreme] leader controls at least half of the country's foreign policy.¹⁶²

Khamenei's control over numerous areas of foreign policy aggravated the domestic situation in Iran and led to a bifurcation of power and policy narrative. With this control, Khamenei thwarted Rafsanjani's efforts at conciliatory moves toward the Gulf States, and thus indirectly hampered the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement. The controversy over the island of Abu Musa is an example of the way Khamenei hindered Rafsanjani's efforts.

The Abu Musa incident

Since the British vacated the Gulf in 1971, Iran and the UAE have shared sovereignty over the islands of Abu Musa, and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs. Bypassing Rafsanjani, in April 1992 Khamenei ordered the expulsion of Emiratis from these islands. In a scramble to reduce tensions in the Gulf, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Ali Akhbar Velayati, said that the expulsion only applied to non-citizens, specifically the expatriate workforce. Rafsanjani assured the Emiratis that Iran would abide by the 1971 signed agreement between the two countries. The UAE, for its part, was not in any hurry to make the situation an international incident as it stood to lose money if it objected to Iranian actions. The UAE was making money through exporting goods to Iran and did not want to jeopardize this lucrative relationship. Later that year in August, Iranian Marines occupied the islands and deported the Emirati citizens. Consequently, Iran asserted full sovereignty over the islands. By seizing these islands, Iran demonstrated

162. Keynough, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*, 154.

how its foreign policy had changed from one led by dogma to one driven by national interests. Menashri stated, “Clearly, Iran wished to control these islands not as a means to advance ideological creed but to advance its strategic interests by establishing Iranian control over the entrance to the Persian Gulf...Under the Islamic regime, Iran based its claim to sovereignty over the islands on historical, legal and geographical facts.”¹⁶³ According to Menashri, Khamenei was not trying to thwart Rafsanjani’s overtures to the Gulf States per se, but to aggrandize Iranian power. However, increasing Iranian power, especially over a waterway vital to the economies of the Gulf States, was not a ploy by Khamenei to win allies. The move was viewed as further isolating Iran and confusing others as to the real Iranian agenda.

Iranian actions reaffirmed the belief of the Gulf States that Iran had not changed its ideological views and still harbored hegemonic aspirations. They strengthened the view that their bilateral security arrangements with the United States were justified and necessary. The Iranians, for their part, saw these bilateral agreements as a sign of distrust that undermined its overtures. Tehran’s idea of security arrangements in the Gulf did not involve Western powers. Rather, the IRI saw an arrangement in which it was somehow involved. But the occupation of Abu Musa negated many of Rafsanjani’s efforts at repairing Tehran’s relations, not only with Saudi Arabia, but with the other Gulf monarchies as well. Keynough said, “As a result of its act, Iran struggled to prove that its goals in the Gulf remained peaceful for years after.”¹⁶⁴

163. David Menashri, "Iran's Regional Policy," 157.

164. Keynough, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*, 131.

The influence of American foreign policy on Saudi-Iranian relations

Soon after, although not necessarily connected to the events in Abu Musa, the United States enacted a policy of dual containment. The policy sought to curb the ambitions of not just Iran but Iraq as well. The US saw itself “as the dominant power in the region, uniquely capable of influencing the course of events...in the face of determined efforts by both Iran and Iraq to rebuild their arsenals, particularly in the nuclear and ballistic missile field.”¹⁶⁵ The US saw Iraq and Iran as the main hindrances to stability in the Middle East. Martin Indyk, the special assistant to President Clinton for Near East and South Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, outlined the policy in a speech he gave in 1993. He stated, “The Clinton administration’s policy of ‘dual containment’ of Iraq and Iran derives in the first instance from an assessment that the current Iraqi and Iranian regimes are both hostile to American interests in the region.”¹⁶⁶

After the Gulf War, the Clinton administration inherited an Iraq with Saddam Hussein still in power and still hostile to the US by being hostile to American interests in the Gulf. As espoused by Indyk, “The regime of Saddam Hussein must never again pose a threat to Iraq’s neighborhood.”¹⁶⁷ To prevent it from being a threat, the US sought to isolate it economically, politically and militarily from regional affairs. Similarly, the administration saw Iran and its regime as remaining hostile to the US. Indyk laid out five areas in which Iran was hostile to American interests. He said:

It [Iran] is the foremost state sponsor of terrorism and assassination across the globe. Through its support for Hamas and Hezbollah, Iran is doing its best to thwart our efforts to promote peace between Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab

165. Martin Indyk, “The Clinton Administration’s Approach to the Middle East.” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Retrieved September 18, 2016, from <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-clinton-administrations-approach-to-the-middle-east>.

166. Ibid.

167. Ibid.

states. Through its connections with Sudan, Iran is fishing in troubled waters across the Arab world, actively seeking to subvert friendly governments. Through its active efforts to acquire offensive weapons, Iran is seeking an ability to dominate the Gulf by military means. And, perhaps most disturbing, Iran is seeking a weapons of mass destruction capability including clandestine nuclear weapons capability and ballistic missiles to deliver weapons of mass destruction to the Middle East.¹⁶⁸

Like with Iraq, the US sought to isolate Iran.

Indyk framed the policy as different from previous administrations' Middle East policy. Instead of using either Iran or Iraq to balance the other, the US, using its allies will counter the ambitions of both Iran and Iraq. He stated:

Accordingly, we do not accept the argument that we should continue the old balance of power game, building up one to balance the other. We reject that approach not only because its bankruptcy was demonstrated in Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. We reject it because of a clear-headed assessment of the antagonism that both regimes harbor towards the United States and its allies in the region. And we reject it because we don't need to rely on one to balance the other.¹⁶⁹

Despite, not wishing to use either Iran or Iraq to balance the other, the US still engaged in a balancing act. During this period, the US also sought to build up Saudi Arabia militarily along with other Middle Eastern allies to, in his words, "preserve a balance of power in our favor in the wider Middle East region."¹⁷⁰

The policy of dual containment has been criticized as being "static" in regards to Iran; "the policy calls for a substantial transformation of Iran's policies and behaviour (sic) without establishing any benchmarks by which Iranian actions can be measured and without identifying how those changes might alter US policy."¹⁷¹ It appears that the US just bundled Iran into its policy to isolate Iraq but Gary Sick said that the policy toward Iraq was equally haphazard, requiring nothing short of removal of Saddam as the leader

168. Ibid.

169. Ibid.

170. Ibid.

171. Gary Sick, "Rethinking dual containment," *Survival* 40, no. 1 (1998):18.

of Iraq before the US ended sanctions against the country.¹⁷² Although seemingly an inconsistent strategy for Sick, dual containment for F. Gregory Gause III was not just a continuation of American policy in the Middle East but, “the culmination of a trend toward increasingly direct American strategic role in the gulf (sic).”¹⁷³ Gause pointed out:

America’s interest in the Gulf remains appropriately unchanged with the end of the Cold War: guaranteeing the uninterrupted flow of oil to the world market at prices that do not damage the economies of the United States and its allies in the advanced industrial world. What has changed is the perception of where the threats to that interest lie, and how the United States should respond.¹⁷⁴

For Gause, “It (the policy] assigns to the United States a unilateral role in managing gulf (sic) security issues.”¹⁷⁵ America’s participation in the Gulf War led to “precipitating an even more dramatic escalation of American military intervention in the Gulf.”¹⁷⁶ Toby Craig Jones agreed with Gause that the dual containment led to more American militarism in the Gulf. He stated, “The official American policy immediately after the war was one of containing both Iraq and Iran—keeping the region’s ‘rogue’ states from threatening the other oil producers. By the end of the 1990s, however, containment had given way to a policy of regime change, the high-water mark of direct American militarism in the region.”¹⁷⁷

Gause predicted in 1994 a host of problems that have come to fruition in 2017. The most notable of these problems was the role Iran would play in an Iraq devoid of Saddam. He said, “The problem with dual containment is it fails to address, and in fact makes more likely, the worst possible outcome for American interest in the area, collapse

172. Ibid, 17.

173. F. Gregory Gause III, “The Illogic of Dual Containment,” *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (1994): 59. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20045919>.

174. Ibid., 58.

175. Ibid., 59-60.

176. Jones, “America, Oil, and War in the Middle East,” *The Journal of American History*,” 216.

177. Ibid.

of the Iraqi domestic situation into chaos that Iran can exploit,” a void that Iran did exploit after the fall of Saddam in 2003.¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, Gause discussed the other issues with dual containment, such as the need for massive cooperation between several parties to contain both states. Most pointedly is the need for cooperation from Saudi Arabia, which the US was arming in order to balance Iran and Iraq to prevent any potential hostilities coming from either isolated nation. However, as noted, Saudi Arabia had been opening up to Iran because it saw Iraq as a major threat, more than Iran. Iran was less of a threat because it had reduced support of groups opposed to Gulf monarchies and a reduction of propaganda aimed at toppling these regimes. Despite sidelining Saudi’s main rival and by extension keeping the other Gulf monarchies dependent on the US, the policy led to a disjointed policy between the US and Saudi Arabia in their relations toward Iran.

The accession of Crown Prince Abdullah and his impact on Saudi foreign policy

In 1995, Crown Prince Abdullah sought to further ameliorate relations between the two countries. He assumed control of the daily operations of the Saudi government after his half-brother, King Fahd, became incapacitated by a stroke. Abdullah thought that Saudi Arabia should reduce its heavy reliance on American military support and place “a priority on regional relationships.”¹⁷⁹ Abdullah was trying to distance Saudi Arabia from its position of dependency on the US. The reason Abdullah was eager to distance Saudi Arabia from the US and form stronger regional relationships was because he was, according to Mehran Kamrava, “Locked in a battle for succession and eager to

178. Gause, “The Illogic of Dual Containment,” 63-64.

179. Joshua Teitelbaum, “The Gulf States and the End of Dual Containment,” *Middle East 2*, no. 3 (1998): 22.

demonstrate relative independence from the US and to emphasize his Islamic credentials, one of Abdullah's main goals was to improve relations with Iran."¹⁸⁰ Abdullah needed to balance internal and external threats, and believed that by reducing the American presence in the Gulf he could quell domestic opposition to his rule. Reducing Saudi reliance on America would also have the effect of improving relations with Iran.

According to Joshua Teitelbaum:

For the Saudis, the goal is to get along in the neighborhood. If the United States cannot get rid of Saddam, then Saudi Arabia will have to make local arrangements, with Iran as an important partner, at least in the short term...For Iran, the goal is to counterbalance Iraq and get the United States out of the region. The kingdom still feels a threat from Tehran but needs Iran to coordinate oil production and contain Iraq.¹⁸¹

Khatami as a symbol of rapprochement

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran changed further with the election of Mohammad Khatami to the Iranian presidency in 1997. Al-Toraifi pointed out, "Despite efforts made by the Rafsanjani administration to open up to the world, Iran remained somewhat isolated, if not a pariah, in the world community."¹⁸² Khatami won by a landslide because of a large youth and female voter turnout. Rafsanjani was not completely out of the political picture when it came to Saudi-Iranian relations, however; he had a significant role in Iranian foreign policy in his new post. He was now the head of the Expediency Council, which advises the Supreme Leader on foreign policy matters and helps in the development of that policy. Despite being depicted as an era of rapprochement, Khatami's presidency (1997-2005) was marked by tension and mistrust

180. Mehran Kamrava, "Iran and Its Persian Gulf Neighbors," in *Iranian Foreign Policy since 2001: Alone in the World*, by Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi (London: Routledge, 2013), 110.

181. Teitelbaum, 24.

182. Al-Toraifi, 169.

between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with neither side able to shake the images of the other that had developed during the evolution. Under Rafsanjani, relations between the two countries had begun to normalize, especially in the areas of trade, flights, and participation in the hajj. Khatami included several ministers from Rafsanjani's administration into his administration, which "signaled a continuation and desire for consensus rather than radical change."¹⁸³ Although not new, "Khatami's vision of a new state identity entailed that Iran no longer try to impose its normative views on the region, either by exporting revolutionary ideals or seeking to incite trouble in neighboring countries."¹⁸⁴ Khatami wanted to normalize relations with most countries, and tried to accomplish this through a "dialogue of civilizations." Al-Toraifi noted, "He [Khatami] advocated the rejection of any unipolar form of international order and argued that the logic of dialogue was the only viable way to resolve differences between peoples and nations."¹⁸⁵

During Khatami's term in office, the Iranians and the Saudis signed two important agreements, the 1998 Cooperation Agreement and the 2001 Security Agreement. The Cooperation Agreement was signed to expand cultural, educational, communication, commercial, intelligence and security ties, and was subsequently expanded to include technical, industrial, transportation, environmental, investment, sports and tourism activities. The Security Agreement was, in al-Toraifi's opinion, "the highest point of normalization between the two states" and "promised a new beginning for cooperation and trust building between the two former foes."¹⁸⁶ Although the Security Agreement

183. Ibid, 170.

184. Ibid, 175.

185. Ibid, 174.

186. Ibid., 209, 213.

neither created a defense pact between the two countries, nor resolved the influence of foreign forces in the Gulf, it nevertheless, “addressed the Kingdom’s and Iran’s mutual resolve to end tensions in the Middle East.”¹⁸⁷ The exact nature of the agreement is confidential, although the two countries did release a joint communiqué that laid out the goals of the agreement: cooperation in the areas of drug trafficking, terrorism, and illegal immigration. Significantly, the agreement also pledged that each side would not interfere in the internal affairs of the other, and would respect each other’s national sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁸⁸ That concession was a huge jump in their relationship. Iran appeared to be excluding Saudi Arabia from the nations to which it desired to export its revolution. It did not, however, give up its desire to usurp Saudi Arabia’s status as the leader of the Islamic world; this was reflected in the fact that the agreement applied only to internal affairs of each country, and not to their positions on the global stage. The agreement was not a defense pact. While Iran wanted such an agreement, the Saudis were wary of such an arrangement and did not want to move away from reliance on the US. Simply put, Saudi Arabia was not ready to trust Iran at that level.¹⁸⁹

The impact of Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy on bilateral relations

The impact of the 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Saudi-Iranian relations is the subject of some debate. Kamrava stated, “Ahmadi-Nejad’s (sic) election in 2005 may have brought back the gruff rhetorical style of Iranian diplomacy reminiscent of the earlier days of the Revolution, but it did not substantially change the

187. Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*, 150.

188. Al-Toraifi, 214.

189. Ibid, 215.

nature of Iranian-Saudi relations or the overall positive trend between the two.”¹⁹⁰ Abdel al-Toraifi, Fahad Alsultan, and Pedram Saeid argued the contrary. All referred to his presidency as marking the deterioration of the relationship between the two states. Alsultan and Saeid remarked that Ahmadinejad’s presidency can be “characterized by the reorientation of the country’s foreign policy. The emphasis shifted from détente to more adventurous and conflict-ridden foreign policy that manifested hostility toward the United States and a fierce determination to acquire nuclear energy.”¹⁹¹ They continued, “Although Iran appeared to remain conciliatory toward Saudi Arabia, there were clear signs that it was expanding its influences from Iraq to the Levant and thus the two countries’ longstanding regional rivalry intensified.”¹⁹² Even though cracks in the relationship between Riyadh and Tehran were starting to reveal themselves after the fall of Saddam in 2003, Saudi Arabia congratulated Ahmadinejad on his victory in 2005. The Saudis had wanted Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad’s opponent, to return to power, expecting a continuation of the rapprochement Rafsanjani had initiated during his terms as president. The Saudis felt that the Iranians would want to continue with the progress that had been made during the previous administrations.¹⁹³ Rafsanjani did stay on as head of the Expediency Council, however, and “was deemed still to be a significant figure in leading the two countries’ relations.”¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, in his first press conference, Ahmadinejad stressed the need to continue on a peaceful path and build upon the relationship that

190. Kamrava, 110.

191. Alsultan and Saeid, 130.

192. Ibid.

193. Al-Toraifi, 240.

194. Alsultan and Saeid, 138.

existed between Saudi Arabia and Iran.¹⁹⁵ Initially, therefore, it appeared that Ahmadinejad wanted to continue on the path of rapprochement.

Soon after his election, the Saudis invited Ahmadinejad to the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Mecca. This platform had in the past provided an opening for improving Saudi-Iranian relations. Khamenei insisted that Ahmadinejad accept the Saudis' invitation and pledge Iran's commitment to the rapprochement. However, Ahmadinejad used the conference to express a new direction in Iranian foreign policy. He addressed the conference and denounced the existence of Israel, adding that this scourge was aided by its imperialist overlords, the Americans.¹⁹⁶ His speech was problematic because it projected an image contrary to the one the Saudis wanted for Islam. The conference was meant to show "the moderate face of Islam" not showcase Islam as a continuing threat to the world, particularly Israel.¹⁹⁷

But Ahmadinejad was redefining Iranian foreign policy, gravitating toward a discourse based on defiance and nationalism and hearkening back to the ideology present early in the revolution.¹⁹⁸ His speech was meant to strike a chord with the Arab street, who were disgruntled over the Palestinian situation, and thus promote a Pan-Islamic agenda and exert influence over the region.¹⁹⁹ By speaking directly to the Arab street, Ahmadinejad was hearkening back to rhetoric used under Khomeini, and was indirectly attempting to usurp Saudi Arabia's role as the presumptive leader of the Muslim world.

195. Al-Toraifi, 240.

196. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, "Speech of His Excellency Mahmoud Ahmadinejad President of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the Extraordinary Islamic Summit," Accessed 2, 2016, <http://www.oic-oci.org/ex-summit/english/speeches/iran-speech.htm>.

197. Ibid.

198. Al-Toraifi, 242.

199. Ibid.; The Arab street is a metaphor for Arab public opinion. For more on this subject see: Terry Regier and Muhammad Ali Khalidi, "The *Arab Street*: Tracking a Political Metaphor," *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 1 (2009): 11-29, doi:10.3751/63.1.11.

Alsultan and Saeid described this phenomenon by saying, “Saudi Arabia had long aspired to be the champions of the Arab world. These remarks represented an attempt on the part of Iran to outmaneuver Saudi Arabia and other Arab rulers by hijacking the pan-Arab issue of support for Palestine.”²⁰⁰ However, Ahmadinejad was not interested in alienating the Saudis. Instead, he wanted to distance them from America’s influence and bring them closer to Iran. However, his speech did alienate the Kingdom, leading to real concerns over the new path in Iranian foreign policy. While the Saudis refrained from condemning his speech, Ahmadinejad’s appearance at the conference was the beginning of renewed tension between the two countries.

While both countries attempted to downplay their differences, global events complicated their efforts. The toppling of Saddam’s regime in 2003 weakened Iraq, leaving its Shi’ite population ripe for manipulation by Iran. Saddam’s downfall allowed Iran to extend its influence in ways that had not been possible before. Additionally, Tehran was asserting its right as a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty to have civilian nuclear facilities. Outwardly, Saudi Arabia supported this right. At the same time, however, Riyadh did not fully trust its old rival, and became increasingly anxious about Iran’s nuclear capabilities. This mistrust manifested itself when Ahmadinejad was elected to a second term in 2009 in a hotly contested election. This time, the Saudis did not send congratulatory remarks.

Conclusion

After Khomeini’s death and the election of Rafsanjani, Iran’s foreign policy turned a corner. It moved away from openly advocating exportation of the revolution and

200. Alsultan and Saeid, 138.

focused instead upon rebuilding its shattered infrastructure and economic ties. Iran sought to create a foreign policy more inclined to inclusion into the world at large. Much of Tehran's success during this period can be attributed to the first president after the Iran-Iraq War, Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani's successor, Khatami, embraced Rafsanjani's policies and perpetuated them. The groundwork laid by Rafsanjani is often overlooked, and most of the success in Saudi-Iranian relations is attributed to his immediate successor, Khatami. However, Rafsanjani's part in the rapprochement must be acknowledged. The ascendance of Ahmadinejad may be seen as the beginning of the deterioration in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, the troubles in Saudi-Iranian relations cannot be pinned solely on Ahmadinejad. Instead, external events such as the American intervention in Iraq also played a role in the demise of their relationship. The potential for Iran to exploit an Iraq without Saddam was foreseen in 1994 with the enactment of the American policy of dual containment. After the fall of Baghdad, the Arab Spring became the next testing ground for Saudi-Iranian relations. The tension that mounted as a result did not initially sever relations as it had in 1988, but it did bring about new battlegrounds where the two countries engaged each other indirectly through proxies in attempts to assert dominance over the region.

CHAPTER 4

ARENAS OF IRANIAN-SAUDI ENGAGEMENT: SYRIA AND IRAQ

Since Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) have been on a trajectory toward reconciliation and a restoration of relations. However, relations were not normalized by any means, nor were they restored to the level that had existed before the creation of the IRI. The beginning of the end to this era of rapprochement began with the American intervention in Iraq in 2003. The intervention did not stop the rapprochement, but it did stall the process.

Neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran approved of America's intervention in Iraq. Iran was against any American involvement in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia, conversely, did not fear American expansionism but rather feared a potential power vacuum that America's intervention and Saddam's removal from power would cause. Although Iran was not happy about America's intervention into Gulf politics, the US did remove Iran's long-time enemy, which created the power vacuum feared by the Saudis. Saudi Arabia was fearful that Iran would take advantage of this vacuum, and because Iraq is 60% Shi'ite, Riyadh assumed that any Iraqi government would naturally be inclined to support Iran and its policies. The Saudis' fear was soon to become a reality.

About eight years later, as the US was preparing to leave Iraq, a series of protest movements erupted across the Middle East and North Africa. For the most part, Iran was supportive of these protests, seeing them as an extension of its revolution 30 years

earlier.²⁰¹ It saw the movements not only as challenges to the region's conservative, pro-Western, governments, but also as Islamist in nature. Therefore, it believed that Islamic governments would replace authoritarian regimes.²⁰² Mohsen Milani explained, "Iran enthusiastically supported the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain, dubbing them the 'Islamic Awakening' inspired by its own revolution."²⁰³ On the one hand, they were supportive of the protests until protests occurred in Syria, Iran's old and only Arab ally. Tehran was not prepared for the Syrian uprisings and hastily denounced them as being part of an American and Israeli conspiracy to depose the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.²⁰⁴ On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, overall, was against the Arab Spring, since the movement was in direct conflict with its support of the status quo in the region. For instance, Riyadh was actively involved in halting the protests in neighboring Bahrain. Under the umbrella of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Riyadh sent troops to bolster the al-Khalifas, the Bahraini ruling family. However, the Kingdom's view of the protests in Syria was different. Instead of being against the protests, Riyadh called for Assad to capitulate to the will of the people and step down. Ana Echagüe said that Saudi Arabia saw the uprisings as an opportunity. She stated, "Riyadh saw the Arab uprisings as a challenge to regional stability but also as an opportunity to tip the scales against Iran. This led to a shift from its traditional cautious and conciliatory foreign and regional

201. Naysan Rafati, "Iran and the Arab Spring," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 50 (December 10, 2011): 52, http://bmcsr.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/FINAL_LSE_IDEAS_IranAndArabSpring_Rafati.pdf.

202. Jubin Goodarzi, "Iran: Syria as the First Line of Defence," in *The Regional Struggle for Syria*, by Julien Barnes-Dacey and Daniel Levy (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2013), 25.

203. Mohsen Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)," *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2013): 84, doi:10.1080/0163660x.2013.861715.

204. Ibid.

policies towards a sharper affirmation of its interests.”²⁰⁵ She pointed out that this new level of assertiveness was not due to a new sense of self-confidence, but rather to a sense of vulnerability precipitated by the American intervention in Iraq and the power vacuum it created. Regional events also created a sense of being surrounded by instability from Bahrain to Yemen, and a fear that the sectarian nature of these conflicts would prompt Saudi Shi’a to rise up.²⁰⁶

However, this fear ignores the policies that have disenfranchised the Shi’ite populations in the Gulf monarchies. These events were not triggered by sectarian grievances, but by an institutionalized repression that has favored certain groups over others. Benedetta Berti and Jonathan Paris pointed out, “The focus was not so much on sectarian demands but on calls for genuine social, economic, and political change,” stemming from “unequal development, corruption and center-periphery inequality.”²⁰⁷ Milani argued:

Sectarianism, or the co-called Sunni-Shia schism, is not the cause of this lingering cold war. The reality is that the two countries have been engaged in a relentless rivalry for power, or expansion of influence in the region, for decades. This is not to belittle the importance of sectarianism. Rather, it is to suggest that sectarianism is only one of the many tools at the disposal of the two countries for achieving their strategic goals. In this sense, sectarianism is not the cause of the cold war between the two countries; it is rather a symptom of the conflict.²⁰⁸

Thus, the cause of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is not the result of the Shi’ite-Sunni divide which occurred around 700 C.E. Madawi al-Rasheed aptly

205. Ana Echagüe, "Saudi Arabia: Emboldened yet Vulnerable," in *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East*, ed. Kristina Kausch (Madrid, Spain: FRIDE, 2014), 77.

206. *Ibid.*, 80-81.

207. Benedetta Berti and Jonathan Paris, "Beyond Sectarianism: Geopolitics, Fragmentation, and the Syrian Civil War," *Strategic Assessment* 16, no. 4 (2014): 23, <http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/Beyond%20Sectarianism.pdf>.

208. Mohsen Milani, "Iran's Regional Policies One Year After the Nuclear Deal," Accessed July 12, 2017, <https://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/91814/WorkingPaper-Iran-Milani-051916.pdf?sequence=1>.

articulated, this reductionist assumption is a tool to obfuscate the present situation in these countries. She said, “The sectarian lens of the alleged Sunni-Shi’a divide obscures rather than illuminates complex realities on the ground.”²⁰⁹ The complexities on the ground are that both Tehran and Riyadh are exploiting this divide for their own aggrandizement and to deflect from the uncertainties that their regimes are facing. Furthermore, as Emile Hokayem argued, “While both have at times pursued non-sectarian strategies, they have found their sectarian partners to be the most reliable and effective tools for projecting power.”²¹⁰ Therefore, sectarianism as it has been argued is a means to attain power, if not through deflecting from domestic uncertainties, but also to garner supporters in their quests for power.

The “two major battlegrounds” for this sectarian conflict are Iraq and Syria.²¹¹ This interpretation of the conflicts as sectarian, however, is inaccurate. In Iraq and Syria, both Tehran and Riyadh are supporting sides that support their interests. These interests relate to their national security concerns, not an attempt to dominate the region through hegemonic aspirations. In Syria and Iraq, Iran is directly involved in fighting, rather than merely using other groups to fight on its behalf as is Saudi Arabia. Plus, the number of groups involved in the fighting is extensive and not all are beholden to a patron. Actors such as the Islamic State (IS) have their own agenda separate from the desires of both Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Islamic State, whose agenda is not in line with Tehran or Riyadh, threatens to topple the governments in Syria and Iraq, thus bringing the interests

209. Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring," In *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, ed. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, (London: Hurst Et Company, 2017), 154.

210. Emile Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War," *Survival* 56, no. 6 (2014): 60, doi:10.1080/00396338.201.985438.

211. Milani, “Iran’s Regional Policies One Year After the Nuclear Deal.”

of both the Kingdom and the Islamic Republic closer together. The Islamic State opposes both the monarchical Gulf governments and Shi'ite Iran. In the Islamic State, Tehran and Riyadh have found a common enemy. The question is whether this common enemy can bring them together and to what extent do they perceive it to be an existential threat. According to Hokayem, a reduction in tension between Riyadh and Tehran would improve the situation in Iraq and Syria, but it would not put an end to the violence.²¹² The collaboration between Riyadh and Tehran is unlikely given that “The kingdom seems to believe that Iran poses a much greater threat to the region than ISIS [the Islamic State] and other violent jiahdists,” despite evidence to the contrary.²¹³

For instance, Christopher M. Blanchard pointed out, “IS leaders claim to have established a caliphate to which all pious Sunni Muslims owe allegiance, and they directly challenge the legitimacy of the Al Saud family, who have described themselves as the custodians of Islam’s holiest sites and rulers of a state uniquely built on and devoted to the propagation of Salafist interpretations of Sunni Islam.”²¹⁴ As the Islamic State undermines al-Saud legitimacy, it has declared war on the Kingdom. For instance, “Since 2014, IS supporters have claimed responsibility for several attacks inside the kingdom, including attacks on security forces and Shia civilians.”²¹⁵ Furthermore, “The aggressive expansion of the Islamic State in neighboring Iraq and Syria and the group’s attacks inside Saudi Arabia raised Saudis’ level of concern about the group, and may be leading the Saudi government to seek stronger partnerships with the United States, select

212. Hokayem, 61.

213. Milani, “Iran’s Regional Policies One Year After the Nuclear Deal.”

214. Congressional Research Service, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Christopher M. Blanchard, CRS Report No. RL33533, Washington, DC, June 2017, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20170613_RL33533_e78f9ec745c0d4d85db103385ac7c1354c0c614e.html.

215. Ibid.

Syrian opposition forces, Iraqi Sunnis and select regional countries,” but not with Iran.²¹⁶ Because, despite the Islamic State’s campaign against Saudi Arabia, Iran is still perceived to be a bigger threat. The Islamic State undermines the royal family’s legitimacy and tells its citizens that they owe allegiance to the Caliph, Abu Bakr Baghdadi, not to the corrupt Western-supporting al-Sauds. The Islamic State threatens Saudis’ domestic sphere, as well as their leadership of Muslims worldwide and in Arab affairs. Blanchard pointed to a particular incident in which “In May 2015, IS leader Abu Bakr Baghdadi aggressively challenged Saudi leaders’ credentials as defenders of Islam and implementers of Salafist Sunni principles, calling them, ‘the slaves of the Crusaders and allies of the Jews’ and accusing them of abandoning Sunni Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, and others.”²¹⁷ Iran, on the other hand, is not denigrating the royal family and its place within Islam or within Arab affairs. But the Saudis, see the Islamic State as a manifestation of Iranian aggression against Sunnis and that by stopping Iran from engaging in conflicts across the Middle East, the Islamic State will disappear as they are a reaction to the atrocities perpetrated by Iran and its allies on Sunnis. The Saudis are blinded by their obsession with Iran and currently “see all regional politics through the lens of Iranian advances.”²¹⁸

Iraq and its place in the Saudi-Iranian geopolitical landscape

For both Tehran and Riyadh, Baghdad represented a problem in that they had both dealt with Iraqi aggression in recent history.²¹⁹ Neither country wanted a strong Iraq to

216. Ibid.

217. Ibid.

218. F. Gregory Gause III, “The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations: The Kingdom and the Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no.4 (2016): 117.

219. W. Andrew Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security* (Carlisle, Pa: U. S. Army War College. Strategic Studies Institute, 2014), 44.

emerge after Saddam was toppled because a strong Iraq raised the specter of past Iraqi aggression. Instead, both Riyadh and Tehran wanted a puppet state, a nation that would go along with their policies and was not strong enough to impose its will upon the region. Unfortunately for the Kingdom, the likelihood that the new government in Baghdad would be pro-Saudi was remote. Saudi Arabia supported America's attempts to rebuild the Iraqi government but hoped that the groups and people they had been supporting would be a part of the new regime. However, to Riyadh's chagrin, those people that they had supported were former Ba'th Party members and, although they had fled Iraq and sought refuge in Saudi Arabia, Ba'th Party members were barred from participation in the new government by the Americans who controlled the Iraqi reconstruction process. Banafsheh Keynough stated, "Riyadh expected these leaders to shape the new Iraq, and serve as a counterweight against the pro-Iranian Iraqi political parties."²²⁰ Furthermore, the Saudis wanted the Ba'th Party members to be able to participate in the new government because "The party had challenged Iran over the past half century, and had helped contain the perceived Iranian Gulf hegemony that Arabs feared."²²¹ Although Riyadh wanted the new Iraqi government to include Ba'th members, Riyadh's relationship with the Ba'th party was not simple. Riyadh had reservations despite wanting the members to be a part of the new government. Keynough believed that Riyadh's decision not to have an ambassador in Iraq since the Gulf War was designed to minimize its exposure and connections to the party. Even with these reservations, it still allowed its

220. Keynough, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*, 176.

221. Ibid.

citizens to financially support Iraq and the Ba'ath party, despite international sanctions against the regime, which placed Riyadh in a precarious situation.²²²

According to Kenneth Katzman, Ba'th Party members were excluded from the new government because of the fear that Shi'ites and Kurds would question not just the validity, but the prospects for democracy in Iraq if Ba'th Party members were allowed to participate in the new government.²²³ Most Ba'th Party members were Sunni, which would presumptively make them natural allies of Saudi Arabia. The problem was, as Eric Stover et al. suggested, "the Party had been virtually synonymous with Saddam Hussein's regime and the brutality unleashed over its thirty-five years in power."²²⁴ For the new government to foster inclusion among the Shi'a and Kurds and to have a semblance of democracy, the former Iraqi government officials had to be excluded, otherwise it would have had the air of returning the Iraqi government to the old repressive guard. The US government sought to appease the Shi'a and Kurds by banning Ba'th Party members from any participation in the new government or army. Riyadh criticized the American decision as it removed tens of thousands of people with government experience from ever being able to participate in their new government.

Despite having a vested interest in the new Iraq, Saudi Arabia kept its distance and refused to participate militarily or politically in rebuilding Iraq. Its focus was humanitarian aid and hosting conferences that promoted reconciliation between the various Iraqi factions. Another issue was the \$28 billion debt that Iraq owed Saudi Arabia

222. Ibid., 176-177.

223. Congressional Research Service, *Iraq: Post-Saddam Governance and Security*, by Kenneth Katzman, CRS Report No. RL31339, Washington, DC, 2009, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20091229_RL31339_4a61810698d9f59259962b6c92cebb9378538818.html.

224. Eric Stover, Hanny Megally, and Hania Mufti, "Bremer's 'Gordian Knot:' Transitional Justice and the US Occupation of Iraq," *Human Rights Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2005): 845, doi:10.1353/hrq.2005.0044.

and private Saudi financiers mainly from funding Baghdad's protracted conflict with Iran. Blanchard pointed out that "Saudi Arabia's principal interests with regard to Iraq are: first, to prevent instability and conflict in Iraq from threatening Saudi Arabia's internal security and stability; second, to prevent the repression of Iraq's Sunnis by newly dominant Shiites; and third, to limit the regional influence of a potentially hostile Iran."²²⁵

Instead of having helped to rebuild Iraq, Riyadh is speculated to have financially supported the Sahwa, Awakening Movement, among the Iraqi Sunnis who were a part of the insurgency against the American presence in Iraq.²²⁶ Whether the government was funding them is unknown, but many individual Saudis had been supporting the movement through donations or volunteering to fight despite several Saudi clerics denouncing such activity.²²⁷ In spite of increased border security, many Saudis (an undeterminable sum) had been crossing into Iraq to fight. Their participation was a security risk to the Kingdom, as returned fighters from other conflicts have committed acts of terrorism in Saudi Arabia.²²⁸ Also, the empowerment of Iraqi Shi'a had led to tension within the Kingdom between the Saudi Shi'a and the government, leading to demonstrations.

Many of the Saudi worries mentioned by Blanchard have come to fruition, especially the worry about Iraq becoming heavily influenced by Iran. Turki al-Faisal said that because of Iran's influence in Iraq, "this is the major reason we [Saudi Arabia]

225. Congressional Research Service, *Iraq: Regional Perspectives and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard, Kenneth Katzman, Carol Migdalovitz, and Jeremy M. Sharp, CRS Report No. RL33793, Washington, DC, 2009, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20091006_RL33793_65f521e4351cbbf62d686de13a936480228e4f40.html.

226. Ibid.

227. Ibid.

228. Ibid.

continue to maintain the same distance from all Iraqi factions.”²²⁹ Riyadh maintains this distance on the belief that those involved in the government are working, not on the behalf of all Iraqis be they Sunni, Shi’ite, Kurdish or other, but as Iranian surrogates. This is one of the reasons al-Faisal said that Riyadh had not opened up an embassy in Iraq because “we [Saudi Arabia] still have serious and deep-seated reservations about the formation of the current Iraqi government, we are the only country not to have sent a resident ambassador to Iraq.”²³⁰ Although Saudi Arabia resumed diplomatic ties with Iraq in 2004, it did so with trepidation and did not reestablish an embassy in Iraq until December 2015.²³¹ Blanchard remarked that this was the beginning of resumption of normal relations between the two countries spurred on by the removal of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his replacement by Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi. The Saudis saw Maliki as an Iranian lackey, “a sectarian figure who hinders reconciliation among Iraqi communities,” according to W. Andrew Terrill.²³² Blanchard stated, “Saudi leaders viewed Maliki as unduly influenced by Iran and have appeared willing to engage Abadi in pursuit of better bilateral relations and in support of more inclusion of Iraq’s Sunnis by Baghdad.”²³³ This is not to say that Riyadh did not try to garner the favor of Maliki. King Abdullah invited him to Riyadh to discuss the formation of the Iraqi government in 2010 because Riyadh feared that its behavior was pushing the Iraqi government closer to Iran.

229. Turki Al-Faisal Bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy," *Middle East Policy* 20, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 39, <http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/saudi-arabias-foreign-policy>.

230. Ibid.

231. Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security*, 52.

232. Ibid., 51.

233. Congressional Research Service, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Christopher M Blanchard, CRS Report No. RL33533, Washington, DC, 2016, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20160920_RL33533_3e2f8ffb008db148217d5bcf8e357b5c5f11e0d.html.

Before the 2010 election, Saudi Arabia had favored and funded another candidate for Prime Minister, Ayad Allawi, who although Shi'ite, was secular and open to including Sunni factions within his government.²³⁴ Even though al-Faisal had said that Riyadh had distanced itself from all factions in Iraq, according to Wehrey:

Nevertheless, Riyadh is hedging its bets by backing an array of Sunni groups; it has long-standing links to the Iraqi Islamic Party, the former officer corps of Iraq's army, and Salafist groups. Regarding Shiite parties, Riyadh has seen the utility of backing nationalist actors in the south, such as Fadhila, as a counterweight to Iran, and of using tribal intermediaries who have both Shiite and Sunni branches, such as Shammar.²³⁵

According to Keynoush, Riyadh supported a wide range of Ba'th members, be they Sunni or Shi'ite. It also sought to sow a sense of Arab nationalism among the Iraqi to unite them. She stated:

The ascendancy of Shi'is to power in Iraq remained a secondary concern to Riyadh's decisionmakers who had long worked with and supported Shi'i political figures within the Baath Party hierarchy... In principle, it therefore did not oppose the prospect of Shi'i leadership in Iraq as long as Sunni Iraqis were not sidelined.²³⁶

They believed that the inclusion of Sunni members would prevent Iraq from completely falling under Iranian influence because the Sunnis would serve as a buffer against the aspirations of the Shi'ite members of government.

However, the Kingdom's actions mirrored those of Iran. Tehran supported different Shi'ite and even Kurdish groups, both financially and militarily.²³⁷ By supporting multiple options, Iran was looking to hedge its bets and benefit from fostering the development of the new Iraqi government, one that was neither too strong nor

234. Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security*, 52.

235. Wehrey, 355.

236. Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*, 78.

237. The Kurds were the second largest group in Iraq with a larger population than the Sunni. As the Kurds and the Iranians both spent years fighting against Saddam, relationships formed. Many Kurds sought refuge from Saddam in Iran which also has its own Kurdish population which makes their relationship at times disadvantageous. As there is fear that as the Iraqi Kurds agitate for independence, so will the Iranian Kurds.

fractured. Ray Takeyh stated, “Tehran fears that the insurgency and even the democratic process itself may lead to the fragmentation of Iraq into three independent and unstable entities.”²³⁸ A fractured Iraq in the midst of civil war could spill over into Iran, causing chaos. Therefore, Iran wants Iraq’s territorial integrity to remain intact. According to Takeyh, “Iran would prefer the Iraqi state to remain intact, although weakened and divided against itself.”²³⁹ Iran fears that a strong Iraq would be a threat to the Islamic Republic, no matter whether a Sunni or Shi’ite was in charge.²⁴⁰ Thus, Iran preferred a politically and militarily weak Iraq, but one strong enough to resist splintering.

For Keynoush, Iran was in a bind, as it did not want a weak neighbor nor a strong one either. She mentioned:

The safety of Iran’s borders was best guaranteed if power in Iraq was shared among multiple groups, and ideally if Baghdad was run by Shi’i factions with varying political orientations, to allow Iran to influence them more easily to secure their compliance in facing any potentially hostile trends against Tehran. In other words, a weak government in Baghdad was undesirable, but so was one led by a strong man even if a Shi’i.²⁴¹

This point is echoed by Alireza Nader: “Iran’s policy of maintaining influence in Iraq is to form Shi’a-led centralized governments while making sure they do not become too powerful. Thus, Iranian influence is strong within the central government *and* among non-governmental actors that challenge central authority.”²⁴² It was important that the government was run by the majority Shi’ite population, but it did not need to be a theocracy like Iran. One point that both authors stress is that the government needed to be weak, but not so weak that Iraq broke into separate parts. It was not a given that a Shi’ite-

238. Ibid., 27.

239. Ibid.

240. Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*, 179.

241. Ibid.

242. Alireza Nader, *Iran's Role in Iraq: Room for U.S.-Iran Cooperation?* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2015), 5.

led government would necessarily be friendly to Iran, because many Shi'ites are wary of Iranian influence in Iraq's government. Many Iraqi political groups were not only fostered by Iran, but fought alongside Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. However, they were suspicious of Iranian influence in Iraq's government. Those Iraqi Shi'a who had sought refuge in Iran during the Saddam era, had over the last decade, distanced themselves from Iran to appeal to a wider base and to prevent the semblance of any undue influence from Iran.²⁴³ In spite of this distancing, Iran had helped empower the Shi'a of Iraq and had maneuvered the various political and militia groups like chess pieces. It had convinced the different Iraqi Shi'ite groups to band together to form coalitions to strengthen their position in Iraq's parliamentary system.

These aspects are all a part of Iran's policy toward Iraq, which, according to Nader includes a three-point strategy of religious influence, arbitration between and unification of Iraqi political groups, and support for Shi'ite non-governmental militias.²⁴⁴ Tehran has been more active than Riyadh in cultivating partnerships. Terrill pointed out, "This Iranian effort has involved diplomacy, economic development, covert action, and cultivating Iranian clients within the Iraqi political system including the leadership of

243. Ibid., 2. For instance, the Da'wa Party and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq supported and fought with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq has even changed its name to distance itself from Iran and are now known as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. As Alireza Nader pointed out, "To mitigate this perception, SCIRI dropped the reference to the Islamic Revolution in its name in 2007, changing... The group also began highlighting its allegiance to Najaf-based Ayatollah Ali Sistani as a means of gaining local legitimacy." (Ibid, 4). According to Ray Takeyh, "The members of SCIRI and Da'wa insists that they have no interest in emulating Iran's theocratic model." Although these groups' relationship with Iran is complicated and fraught with friction as they are caught in a precarious relationship of benefactor and recipient, Takeyh continues, "In the end, although both parties have no inclination to as Iran's surrogates, they are likely to provide Tehran with a sympathetic audience, and even an alliance that, like all such arrangements, will not be free of tension and difficulty." (Takeyh, 24).

244. Nader, *Iran's Role in Iraq: Room for U.S.-Iran Cooperation?*, 3.

armed militias. This approach has produced results, and Iran has emerged as a major power in domestic Iraqi politics.”²⁴⁵

Nader admits that there is a bond between Iraqi and Iranian Shi’a, but notes that this bond does not lend itself to creating the kind of influence Iran would like to have in Iraq. Tehran, therefore, tries to increase the bond through soft power activities.²⁴⁶ For one, Tehran is trying to foster the next generation of Shi’ite clerics to be more in tune with the Islamic Republic and its form of theocracy. As of 2006, the majority of the world’s Shi’ite population followed the teachings of Ayatollah Ali Sistani, based in Najaf, Iraq.²⁴⁷ His ideas and desires have an effect on the amount of influence Iran has in Iraq. He is not an advocate of Iran’s governing ideology, the rule of the jurist. Although active in the Iraqi political sphere, he does not believe that the clergy should play as significant a role in government as they do in Iran. Instead, he wants Iraq to have a pluralistic government inclusive of its various religious sects.²⁴⁸ He is in his mid-60s and Iran is not looking to replace him, but is rather looking to the future and wants to have a hand in choosing his successor.²⁴⁹ Besides cultivating Sistani’s successor, Iran is engaged in other soft power activities, such as involvement in public works like building clinics, schools, and mosques around Iraq.²⁵⁰

As mentioned earlier, Iran played a significant role in Iraqi politics. It opened an embassy in Baghdad in 2003, and has consulates in Basra, Erbil, Karbala, Najaf, and Sulaymaniyah. According to Michael Eisenstadt, the way Iran asserts influence in Iraq is

245. Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security*, 48.

246. Ibid.

247. Ibid., 4.

248. Ibid., 3.

249. Ibid., 4.

250. Ibid.

through its embassy and consulates.²⁵¹ Both of the successive Iranian ambassadors to Iraq since the fall of Saddam, Hassan Kazemi-Qomi and current ambassador Hassan Danaifar, have also been members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) elite Qods Force.²⁵² According to Nader, this is important because the Qods Force commander, Qassem Soleimani, has been influential in bringing different Iraqi factions together. He says, "He heads all of Iran's activities in Iraq, including overseeing Shi'a militias, disbursing funds to political leaders, and overseeing 'soft power' activities."²⁵³ Soleimani has ties to all the major sects in Iraq: Kurds, Sunnis, and Shi'a. Nader also points out that he has been instrumental in "nearly all major Iraqi government deliberations since the fall of Saddam."²⁵⁴ He recounts Soleimani's escapades during the 2006 and 2010 Iraqi parliamentary elections. In 2006, Soleimani reportedly slipped into the Green Zone and met with Iraqi officials to broker Maliki's premiership and, in 2010, he convinced the Kurds and Shi'a to come together to support Maliki over Allawi. Their union enabled Maliki to retain his position despite the fact that Allawi's coalition won a plurality of parliament seats.²⁵⁵ In 2014, Soleimani was still a Maliki supporter, but there was international pressure to remove Maliki from power. Maliki was believed to be promoting a sectarian agenda. This time, it was a member of Iran's National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, not Soleimani, who orchestrated the transition from Maliki to Abadi.²⁵⁶ Despite US support for Abadi and his pledge to be more inclusive toward the

251. Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Accessed October 20, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-and-iraq>.

252. Ibid.

253. Nader, *Iran's Role in Iraq: Room for U.S.-Iran Cooperation?*, 5.

254. Ibid., 6.

255. Ibid.

256. Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's Expanding Military Role in Iraq," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 8, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-expanding-military-role-in-iraq>.

Sunnis, Iran decided to support Abadi as well once it became apparent that continued support for Maliki was fruitless and his tenure as prime minister was tenuous. Therefore, it can be argued that in order to remain relevant in Iraqi politics, Iran decided to support Abadi.

To manipulate the Iraqi political situation in other ways, Iran also supported non-governmental militias that can pressure the government to enact policies favorable to Iran. Eisenstadt noted that supporting Shi'ite militias was Tehran's initial focus, which subsequently expanded to include support for Sunni militias as well.²⁵⁷ It has also supported Kurdish militias in the past.²⁵⁸ Iran supported a myriad of militias because, as Nader pointed out, there was no single group that fulfilled all of Iran's needs.²⁵⁹ Tehran funded, equipped and trained these militias. Militia members traveled to Iran to receive training in dedicated camps. Members of the IRGC and Hezbollah also trained the militias in Iraq. Similar to its approach to the Iraqi central government, Iran did not want these militias to be too strong. Inevitably, when a group becomes strong enough to field a political party to appeal to a wide base, it needs to distance itself from its Iranian benefactors.²⁶⁰ Therefore, Tehran was seeding and feeding multiple militias from different sectors of Iraqi society to have numerous avenues by which to affect Iraq and, in turn, protect itself. Interestingly, Iran's position in Iraq is also beneficial for its Syria policy. Conversely, its policy for Syria has direct implications for its relationship with Iraq.

257. Nader, *Iran's Role in Iraq: Room for U.S.-Iran Cooperation?*, 7; Eisenstadt.

258. Eisenstadt.

259. Nader, *Iran's Role in Iraq: Room for U.S.-Iran Cooperation?*, 7.

260. Ibid.

The different strategies employed by Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Syrian Civil War

Syria has been an Iranian ally since the Islamic Revolution and was one of two lone Arab states to support Iran in its war with Iraq during the 1980s.²⁶¹ Syria and Iran share common interests such as Lebanon, Hezbollah, and the Palestinians, common enemies, like Israel and Iraq, and a distrust for the US. Syria is also run by the minority Alawites whose faith, although not exactly similar to Iran's Twelver Shi'ism, is also derived from Shi'ism. The Syrian-Iranian bond is held together by mutual strategic interests. Unsurprisingly, Syria's relationship with Iran has impacted the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Syria. Syria has inevitably aligned itself with Iran throughout the Islamic Republic's history. Iran supported former Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's because of his permissive attitude toward policies enacted by Iran to prop up the Assad regime in Syria. First and foremost, Maliki allowed transport of weapons through Iraq into Syria following Syria's fall into civil war.²⁶² One of the reasons Maliki permitted this policy is because Iraq, like Iran, sees Syria as an ally, at least since the civil war broke out.

Prior to the Syrian Civil War, Iraq and Syria had a contentious relationship, which began with different Ba'th ruling parties in control of each country. After the fall of Saddam, Iraq accused Syria of harboring al-Qaeda members along with former Iraqi Ba'th Party members who opposed Maliki's government. The members of the two groups had been traversing Syria and Iraq's porous borders "where they funnel personnel, arms,

261. The other Arab state that supported Iran was Libya.

262. Congressional Research Service, *Iraq: Politics and Governance*, by Kenneth Katzman and Carla E. Humud, CRS Report No. RS21968, Washington, DC, 2016, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20160309_RS21968_b60ae4902a966539a0d8ca72ba03e4d6f95dd058.html; Congressional Research Service, *Iran's Foreign Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman, CRS Report No. R44017, Washington, DC, 2016, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20160824_R44017_3d310a555ab3ff8b71386b881950759be3cad600.html.

and funds over the border to fighters inside Iraq.”²⁶³ The presence of al-Qaeda and members of the Iraqi Ba’th Party in Syria hindered bilateral cooperation, despite both states being an ally of Iran. However, as the Syrian regime became threatened by Sunni jihadists also plaguing Iraq, Damascus and Baghdad became allies. Hayder al-Khoei described the situation in which Damascus and Baghdad grew closer together:

Having previously been seen as a threat to Maliki’s rule, Assad, faced now with a Sunni-dominated and regionally backed uprising, emerged as a natural ally and bulwark against that same hostile Sunni block...The Iraqi government now believes that a victory for the rebels in Syria will mean not just a post-Assad neighbour (sic) under the influence of hostile Gulf forces intent on destabilising (sic) Maliki’s rule, but also a resurgent al-Qaeda at home.²⁶⁴

Terrill also made a similar point about Iraqi Shi’ite fears of Assad being replaced by a Sunni government friendly toward Sunni jihadists in Iraq and hostile to Iraq’s Shi’ite-led government.²⁶⁵ Iraq’s fears are coming true as the civil war in Syria spreads to Iraq because jihadists in both countries have been working together.²⁶⁶ Furthermore, the establishment of a hostile regime in Syria and its potential for spill-over are also among Iran’s fears, and Tehran has been working with Russia to do everything possible to prevent such an occurrence, and to prevent the Assad regime from disintegrating.

Supporting Assad has created a situation from which Iran cannot easily extricate itself. Iran began to send advisors to help quell the protests in 2011. Tehran even counseled Assad to implement reforms and talk with opposition groups, and allow them limited participation in the government. But Assad balked at this idea, and preferred to

263. Congressional Research Service, *Iraq: Regional Perspectives and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard, Kenneth Katzman, Carol Migdalovitz, and Jeremy M. Sharp, CRS Report No. RL33793, Washington, DC, 2009, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20091006_RL33793_65f521e4351cbbf62d686de13a936480228e4f40.html.

264. Haydar Al-Khoei, "Iraq: Sunni Resurgence Feeds Maliki's Fears," in *The Regional Struggle for Syria*, ed. Julien Barnes-Dacey and Daniel Levy, (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2013), 34.

265. Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security*, 29.

266. Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)," 86.

unleash massive amounts of force on the uprising to discourage any further dissention.

When this approach failed, Iran sent weapons and volunteers to train, advise, and fight.

Terrill discussed Iran's involvement in Syria and stated:

Iranian military support for the Asad (sic) regime then rapidly expanded in fields such as training, advising, and intelligence gathering and analysis. Iran has also provided badly needed financial support to the Syrian regime, which has allowed it to keep its military largely intact despite significant desertions early in the conflict and to provide for the economic needs of loyalists.²⁶⁷

Iran has proven adept at convincing Shi'a from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq to volunteer and fight in Syria. Hezbollah had also been instrumental, not just in fighting, but in advising and training Syrian fighters. Hezbollah did not have to be pushed into supporting Assad, as Syria has supported Hezbollah over the years and assisted in the transport of weapons from Iran, through Syria, to Hezbollah.

Unlike Iran's policy on Iraq, which is based on national security concerns, Tehran's Syria policy is not just about national security, but also encompasses Iran's ability to project power and influence throughout the Middle East.²⁶⁸ Juban Goodarzi said that, should a regime change occur in Syria, "Iran would lose not only an important Arab ally, but also its ability to provide support for Hezbollah, curtailing its influence in Lebanon and over the Arab-Israeli question."²⁶⁹ Because Syria shares a border with Lebanon, Tehran uses Damascus to transport weapons and advisors into Lebanon for Hezbollah. Syria borders Israel and Lebanon. For Terrill:

If the Iranians lose their influence over Syria, it is also uncertain how they will transfer weapons and equipment to Hizbullah (sic) in Lebanon. Syria is the main transit point for such arms and largely irreplaceable in this role. It is possible that

267. W. Andrew Terrill, "Iran's Strategy for Saving Assad," *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 226, doi:10.3751/69.2.13.

268. Goodarzi, 25.

269. Ibid., 27.

Iran would attempt to supply Hezbollah forces by sea, but they have had difficulties with this approach in the past.²⁷⁰

Hezbollah is used as a defense against or retaliation for any possible Israeli or American incursion into Iran, as Hezbollah's strategic position in Lebanon allows it to attack Israel (although not without repercussions). This ability also allows Hezbollah to be an element in Iran's support for the Palestinians, and thus works as both offense and defense. If Assad is removed and replaced, it is possible that his replacement would be less open to assisting Tehran in fostering Hezbollah's capabilities against Israel.²⁷¹ Therefore, supporting Assad is a way of protecting both Hezbollah and Iran's foreign policy interests in terms of Israel and Palestine. The Palestinian issue is very important to the Iranians because they "derive enormous prestige and legitimacy—both domestically and regionally—from being seen as patrons of the Palestinian cause."²⁷²

Iran sees the toppling of Assad as a potential domino effect that could have internal implications, starting with replacement by a Sunni-led government that could be inimical to Iran and more willing to work with other Arab states over Iran. Along with working with other Arab states, it is possible that a post-Assad Syrian state would be willing to work with the US. Also, Assad's fall could affect Iraq, as Sunni jihadists in Syria and Iraq band together and develop alliances. According to Goodarzi, "This would have major security implications for Iran and could produce enormous internal problems, especially in the Kurdish and Arab-inhabited regions of the country bordering Iraq."²⁷³ Also, it is believed in Iranian power circles that the toppling of Assad would allow

270. Terrill, "Iran's Strategy for Saving Assad," 226.

271. Ibid.

272. Wehrey, 354.

273. Ibid., 28.

foreign interests to press for regime change in Iran.²⁷⁴ Furthermore, a Syrian civil war could engulf the entire region in a sectarian civil war and the vacuum created by toppling Assad could create a failed state and terrorist safe haven.²⁷⁵ Milani pointed out, “Today, Syria has become the center of gravity for an assorted array of Jihadist and terrorist organizations...If Assad falls, it is very unlikely that these Jihadist and terrorist organizations will leave Syria. They will likely challenge any post-Assad government to impose their rule.”²⁷⁶

Iran wanted a say in deciding Syria’s fate because there was a great deal at stake for Iran. Tehran would not allow Syria to become an enemy, and it knew that if Assad did remain in power he would be indebted to Iran. However, Iran was not wedded to Assad remaining in power.²⁷⁷ It wants the structure that exists to remain; this means retaining security and armed forces personnel, but allowing a power-sharing agreement between the Alawites and non-jihadist opposition groups. But it quickly became clear to those in Iran that “Assad was the regime...The organisation (sic) of the Syrian state, based on *assabiyyah*, or kinship, made it impossible to remove him and his top lieutenants while keeping the system in place...Most, importantly, powerful constituencies in Tehran saw Assad as an indispensable ally, and equated Syria’s security with Iran’s security.”²⁷⁸ Tehran feared wholesale change and reorientation of Syria’s government and military.²⁷⁹ Thus, Iran had been instrumental in helping Syria get around sanctions and extending credit to help prop up its economy. Despite facing its own economic difficulties, Iran had

274. Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)," 85.

275. Ibid., 89.

276. Ibid.

277. Andrew Parasiliti, Kathleen Reedy, and Becca Wasser, "Preventing State Collapse in Syria," *Rand*, Accessed April 23, 2017, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE219/RAND_PE219.pdf.

278. Hokayem, 72.

279. Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)," 85.

spent billions of dollars to support Assad.²⁸⁰ Although the exact amount of money is unclear, experts have debated that, as of 2015, the amount was between \$6 and \$20 billion dollars spent annually to support the regime through lines of credit, oil transfers, military personnel (Iranian and other militias) and subsidies for weapons.²⁸¹ It had also rallied supporters, most notably Iraq. In the end, Assad has become completely reliant on Iran. This situation may or may not be Iran's desire. Iran does need Assad, or some version of him, in power to maintain its influence in the region.

Early in the conflict, the exact nature of the Syrian-Saudi relationship was unclear, as were Saudi Arabia's interests in the Syrian Civil War. Riyadh was on the fence when it came to the removal of Assad from power. Although it would not mind if Iran lost one of its key allies and its ability to project power in the region, the toppling of a government goes against Saudi foreign policy, which strongly supports the status quo. Terrill said:

Riyadh almost certainly would not view the situation in Syria as an unqualified Saudi victory, even if the Assad regime was overthrown and replaced by an anti-Iranian government. The Saudi leadership remains ultra-conservative, and correspondingly takes a dim view of birth revolutionary turmoil and Arab democracy. A strong, vibrant Syrian democracy would at least be a serious inconvenience for Riyadh, and it could emerge as a real challenge to the Middle Eastern status quo.²⁸²

However, Saudi Arabia's stance has since changed because as Milani stated:

Riyadh is determined to overthrow Assad and bring to power a Riyadh-friendly regime willing to terminate its strategic cooperation with Iran and disallow Tehran to use Damascus as a reliable conduit to transfer money and weapons to Hezbollah. And, perhaps most importantly, Riyadh seems to believe that a friendly Syria would

280. Hokayem, 74.

281. Eli Lake, "Iran Spends Billions to Prop Up Assad," *Bloomberg*, June 09, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-06-09/iran-spends-billions-to-prop-up-assad>.

282. Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security*, 33.

provide the kingdom with a backdoor reentry into Iraq with the ultimate goal of undermining a Tehran-friendly government in Baghdad.²⁸³

Riyadh has condemned Hezbollah as a terrorist organization through use of group condemnation by the GCC which issued a statement accusing Hezbollah of “carrying out ‘hostile acts’ in the six GCC member-states and engaging in campaigns of ‘terror and incitement’ in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.”²⁸⁴ These campaigns of terror and incitement are believed to be at the behest of or in coordination with Iran.²⁸⁵ Furthermore, Riyadh’s desire to see Assad overthrown is departure from previous Saudi foreign policy, which has been in the past a staunch supporter of the status quo.

Initially Riyadh was silent about the Syrian uprisings, neither approving nor disapproving of them. Its caution was intended to prevent more uprisings and the overthrow of additional governments in the region. Eventually, though, the Kingdom condemned the Syrian government’s harsh crackdown on the protesters and recalled its ambassador—an action that was followed by other Gulf monarchies—and urged Assad to implement reforms. In a written statement, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia said “‘What is happening in Syria is not acceptable for Saudi Arabia...Syria should think wisely before it's too late and issue and enact reforms that are not merely promises but actual reforms.’”²⁸⁶ Hokayem saw this statement as “a radical shift in Gulf policy in favour (sic) of regime change,” although the king had not called upon regime change.²⁸⁷

283. Milani, “Iran’s Regional Policies One Year After the Nuclear Deal.”

284. Matteo Legrenzi and Fred H. Lawson, “Saudi Arabia Calls Out Hezbollah: Why Now?,” *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 2 (2016): 31. doi: 10.1111/mepo.12193.

285. *Ibid.*, 35.

286. Al Jazeera, “Saudi Arabia Calls for Syrian Reforms,” *Al-Jazeera English*, Accessed October 20, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/08/201187213922184761.html>.

287. Hokayem, 63.

The change in Saudi strategy regarding Syria was due to the Saudi people's overwhelming support for the Syrian protesters.²⁸⁸ Riyadh recalled its ambassador to Damascus to quell public outrage over Syria's strong crackdown on protesters.²⁸⁹ Saudi Arabia followed this move by pushing for sanctions against Syria in the Arab League to isolate and undermine the Assad regime. Saudi Arabia initially had not gone as far as to call for Assad's removal, instead attempting to co-opt Syria. When Syria rejected Saudi overtures, Saudi Arabia began openly supporting the opposition to the Syrian regime. Removing Assad became vital to Saudi Arabia as a means of countering the loss of Iraq to Iran. Turki al-Faisal described Iran's activities as having a level of malevolence that needed to be curbed. He stated, "Their [Iran's] invasion of Syria is underway and growing. This must end. Saudi Arabia will oppose any and all of Iran's interference and meddling in other countries."²⁹⁰ He further pointed out that Iran had no business meddling in the affairs of any state, especially not an Arab state.²⁹¹

Although Assad's removal would not restore balance in the Gulf to the level that Riyadh sought, it would nevertheless be a good starting point. Hassan Hassan noted that "Gulf leaders believe that a new—Sunni—regime in Damascus will naturally ally itself with the Gulf states at Iran's expense, particularly if they have helped establish the new order through financial and military support."²⁹² Syria's population is almost three-quarters Sunni and as such Riyadh assumed that based on population size, the Sunnis will come to power. It is reasonable to conclude that the new Syrian regime would be more

288. Hassan Hassan. "The Gulf States: United against Iran, Divided over Islamists," in *The Regional Struggle for Syria*, by Julien Barnes-Dacey and Daniel Levy (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2013), 19.

289. Ibid.

290. Al-Faisal, 39.

291. Ibid.

292. Hassan, 17.

inclined to support, or even to follow, Riyadh's lead on regional issues. Also, cutting Iran's access to Syria would prevent it from being able to actively support Hezbollah and have influence in Lebanese politics and in the Palestinian issue. Hassan goes on to make an assumption that the Gulf States believed that supporting a Sunni regime in Syria would help their standing in Iraq because a Sunni Syrian state could strengthen the Sunnis in Iraq.²⁹³ With this realignment, the regional balance of power would sway back in favor of the Gulf Sunni monarchies, a position that was lost with the fall of Saddam.

Although returning the regional balance of power back toward the Sunni Gulf monarchies was a key goal, the monarchies disagreed on how to achieve this goal. The two key players, Riyadh and Doha, supported different opposition factions. Instead of the Gulf States banding together against their common foe, Iran, their differences have hindered the Syrian opposition.²⁹⁴ Qatar has backed the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadists in an attempt to topple the Assad regime. Saudi Arabia, however, has been more cautious regarding who it supports and is not eager for Assad to be replaced by jihadists whose motives are in opposition to the Kingdom's.²⁹⁵ Riyadh is suspicious of the Muslim

293. Ibid., 17-18.

294. According to CRS, "Qatari leaders have generally stood with their GCC allies and the United States in countering Iran strategically, while at the same time seeking to maintain dialogue with their Iranian counterparts." In 2016, Qatar withdrew its Ambassador from Tehran as an act of solidarity with Saudi Arabia, but it did not cut off all ties. Qatar shares a natural gas field with Iran which requires it to maintain a cordial relationship with the Iranians. Congressional Research Service, *Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman, CRS Report No. R44533, Washington, DC, 2017, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20170315_R44533_e789563dfe3913e42701ec328b78cc7d73cc9f49.html.

295. June 2017, Saudi Arabia cut off diplomatic ties with Qatar citing its support of jihadist and its relationship with Iran. Blanchard stated, "Saudi Arabia accuses Qatar's government of supporting terrorism, interfering in the internal affairs of fellow Arab states, and facilitating Iranian efforts to destabilize Saudi Arabia and its neighbors. Qatar rejects the charges and views Saudi Arabia as seeking to violate Qatari sovereignty and impose its will on the country's leaders and population." (Congressional Research Service, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, June 2017) The role of the US is currently unclear. It remains to be seen if Qatar and Saudi Arabia will pressure the US to take a side in the dispute. For the US' part, "[it] maintains close defense cooperation, including arms sales, with both countries and continues to operate from military bases in Qatar." (Ibid.)

Brotherhood that Qatar supports because the Brotherhood's radical ideology advocates a level of change unacceptable to the Kingdom. Instead, Riyadh has backed Western allied non-Islamists, secularists, nationalists, and non-radical Salafists.

At first, Riyadh advocated complete regime change through military means, but changed its position once it became clear that the West was not interested in being actively involved militarily and that the forces taking control in Syria were the jihadists who Saudi Arabia actively opposes.²⁹⁶ Despite financing a variety of opposition groups, Saudi Arabia has stopped short of funding the Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra (an al-Qaeda affiliate) mainly because both groups despise the Saudis. Gause maintained, "Both groups despise the Saudis, in part because of their close ties to the United States and in part because official Saudi clerics regularly condemn the groups for their 'deviations' from the true path."²⁹⁷ The Kingdom had also enacted measures to prevent its citizens from financially contributing to these groups, declaring them terrorist organizations in 2014 and insisting that financial contributions go through official channels. Saudi Arabia had taken steps to prevent financing or associating with these groups both in Saudi Arabia and abroad by punishing such activities with lengthy prison sentences.

Unlike the Iranians, the Saudis lacked the infrastructure to properly support the opposition. Saudi Arabia provided financial support only, and even then, through hastily formed groups. It lacked the ability to provide military support in the form of training or intelligence gathering. Their support was not enough to tilt the balance. Hokayem pointed out, "Injections of weaponry into the battlefield at times translated into military advances,

296. Hassan, 22.

297. Gause, "The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations," 120.

but were not regular enough to overcome Assad's military superiority."²⁹⁸ Additionally, Hokayem stated, "Rebel groups behaved opportunistically, seeking support from any quarter and changing loyalties when needed."²⁹⁹ Saudi Arabia, unlike Iran, also had limits placed on which groups it could support by Western States with which Riyadh had a complicated relationship. Western States monitored Saudi financing of Syrian opposition and determined the criteria of whom could be given assistance based on "ideological and religious orientation; battlefield behaviour (sic); relations with the political opposition, civilians and radical actors; managerial competence; and accountability."³⁰⁰ By contrast, Iran did not put limits on the groups it supported.

A resumption of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and possible areas of cooperation

The likelihood that Iran and Saudi Arabia will coordinate efforts to fight their mutual enemy, the Islamic State, is remote. The relationship between the two is strained to the point that Saudi Arabia opposes Iran's participation in negotiations regarding Syria. Riyadh is exploiting the sectarian nature of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq to its advantage to diminish Tehran's perceived success in gaining power in the region. In reality, Riyadh has not been marginalized, but the perception is that Tehran has gained status at Riyadh's expense. Iran sees the existence of the Islamic State as the result of Saudi soft power of funding and establishing Wahhabi mosques and schools worldwide, but Saudi Arabia sees the Islamic State's existence as a part of the repression of Sunnis

298. Hokayem, 61.

299. Ibid.

300. Ibid., 78.

by the Iraqi and Syrian regimes.³⁰¹ The sectarian nature of the conflicts hurts both Iran and Saudi Arabia. It hurts Iran because Iran wants to be perceived as representing all Muslims, not just the Shi'a. It hurts Saudi Arabia because, although Riyadh has been exploiting the sectarian rift, it cannot combat the Islamic State without appearing to be persecuting its fellow Sunnis, something that could generate domestic troubles.

Riyadh is incapable of finding a satisfactory solution to the current conflicts on its own. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Iran is implementing a long-term strategy, not only to safeguard its regional interests but also to defend itself from the same jihadists plaguing both Syria and Iraq. Iran's reliance on Shi'ite militias in both countries has increased the sectarian nature of both conflicts, and added to Sunni dissatisfaction and greater support for jihadists. In Iraq, Shi'ite militias perpetrate atrocities against Sunnis, and in Syria, the Alawite government engages in violent acts that also garner Sunni support for the jihadists. Saudi Arabia is reassessing its Syria strategy, trying to decide which is more disagreeable, Assad remaining in power and assisting Iran's rise, or the rise of jihadists. Iran believes that Assad is necessary to fight against the Islamic State. Saudi Arabia, however, finds both possibilities—the ascendance of the Islamic State and Assad remaining in power—threatening to its sovereignty. If the Islamic State gains in power, there could be internal disturbances within Saudi Arabia. The royal family has already adopted massive economic reforms to placate its citizens. It also has cracked down on political agitation, imprisoning scores of people to eliminate any possible threat to the royal family.

301. Behnam Ben Tableblu and Karim Sadjadpour, "Iran: Leveraging Chaos," in *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East*, ed. Kristina Kausch (Madrid, Spain: FRIDE, 2014), 42.

Since 2015, Iran worked with Russia to oust the Islamic State from Syria and Iraq. Saudi Arabia has also done its part by participating in air strikes led by a US coalition of forces in Syria. Riyadh has likewise sent 30,000 troops to its border with Iraq to guard against any infiltration by the Islamic State. However, cooperating with Iran is not plausible for Saudi Arabia, at least not at this juncture. Just like the US, Saudi Arabia is not willing to partner with Iran in ridding the area of the Islamic State. However, the US does acknowledge that Iran's efforts further American objectives even if they are not willing to cooperate in these efforts.³⁰² If the US were to cooperate with Iran, Saudi Arabia might see the benefit of also doing so. However, cooperating with Iran does not require a push from Washington. Saudi Arabia needs to realize that "an effort to accommodate reasonable Iranian interests in the gulf (sic) should not be mistaken for an American tilt toward Tehran."³⁰³ Nor should such a move be seen as an abandonment of Saudi Arabia in favor of Iran. Instead, the move should be seen as an effort to thwart a common enemy shared by all three states. However, to accomplish this goal requires a reorientation in Saudi priorities, away from the fear of Iranian hegemony and toward an emphasis on regime survival. Milani pointed out that Saudi Arabia sees itself in a bind. He stated:

At the same time, the rise of ISIS has been both a blessing and a potential danger for Saudi Arabia. It has been a blessing because ISIS is anti-Shiite, anti-Iran... It is also a potential danger for Saudis because ISIS seeks to create a caliphate whose heart would be Mecca in Saudi Arabia. This Janus-faced quality of ISIS explains the Saudis' reluctance to seriously engage in the U.S. coalition to defeat ISIS.³⁰⁴

The reorientation of Saudi Arabia to be engaged in cooperation with the US and Iran is only a possibility if the Kingdom realizes the threat that the Islamic State poses. The

302. Congressional Research Service, *Iraq: Politics and Governance*.

303. Gause, "The Illogic of Dual Containment," 66.

304. Milani, "Iran's Regional Policies One Year After the Nuclear Deal."

Islamic State is not just a countering to perceived Iranian aggression but a threat to Saudi stability and territorial integrity. This risk is currently not strong enough for Saudi Arabia to act. However, neither is the threat that the Islamic State poses strong enough for Iran to cooperate with Saudi Arabia. For its part, the US was no longer interested in Assad's removal but was more interested in fighting terrorism. Gause pointed out, "The Obama administration's top priority in the region is rolling back and ultimately destroying Salafi jihadist groups-above all, ISIS and al Qaeda. These groups may not represent an existential threat to the United States, but they do pose an immediate danger to the country and its allies."³⁰⁵

305. Gause, "The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations," 116.

CHAPTER 5

IRANIAN NUCLEAR AMBITIONS AND THE SAUDI REACTION

Against the backdrop of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and the rising threat of the Islamic State lies the potential of a nuclear-armed Iran. Just like the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, a nuclear Iran divides Riyadh and Tehran. Iran, as a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968, believes it has the right to nuclear energy. The NPT was the brainchild of President Dwight Eisenhower, and was designed to quell the spread of nuclear weapons, but also to allow the world to benefit from the civilian applications of the technology. The United Nations adopted the NPT in 1968 to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons based on the belief that their proliferation could lead to a nuclear war.

Iran's belief in its right to nuclear technology is rooted in Article IV of the NPT which grants the "inalienable right of all the Parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination."³⁰⁶ Iran says that as signatory to the NPT it has the right to develop a nuclear program. The Shah signed the treaty in 1970 and with American support pursued nuclear technology. Although Iran's government changed 9 years later and it became inimical rather than friendly to the West, it was still a signatory to the treaty. Iran maintains that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, such as nuclear energy and medical isotopes. However, there is fear that its research and development extend beyond these areas and that Iran will use this technology to develop a nuclear weapon. The future of Iran's nuclear program is unclear as attested to by the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). The

306. United Nations Department of Disarmament Affairs, "The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)," July 1, 1968, United Nations, <http://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2005/npttreaty.html> (accessed October 28, 2016).

NIE stated that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003 due to intense international pressure, and therefore did not currently have a nuclear weapons program. The NIE went on to further state that the future of this program could not be determined.³⁰⁷

This uncertainty when it comes to the exact nature of Iran's nuclear program leads Saudi Arabia to fear that the real motivation behind Iran's nuclear program is to develop a bomb one day. Riyadh views Iran's program as a part of Tehran's bid to become the dominant power in the Gulf. According to Fahad M. Alsultan and Pedram Saeid, "A nuclear Iran would be a nightmare for Saudi Arabia. Even the suspicion of Iran acquisition of nuclear weapons capability, regardless of the reality, would change the regional balance of power in Iran's favour (sic)."³⁰⁸ In response to Iran's nuclear program, Riyadh has become more vociferous in its desire to have similar nuclear technology and capabilities to avoid being surpassed by its rival and to maintain the balance of power in the region.

The road to an Iranian nuclear agreement

From 1982, Iran developed an indigenous clandestine nuclear program with the assistance of China, Russia, and Pakistan through the Abdul Qadeer (A.Q.) Khan proliferation network.³⁰⁹ In 2002, the National Council of Resistance to Iran, an Iranian dissident group living in exile, revealed the existence of this program. Iran subsequently

307. Director of National Intelligence, "National Intelligence Estimate," 2007, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports+and+Pubs/20071203_release.pdf.

308. Alsultan and Saeid, 150.

309. For a detailed account of the building of Iran's nuclear program see Gordon Corera. *Shopping for Bombs: Nuclear Proliferation, Global Insecurity, and the Rise and Fall of the A.Q. Khan Network*. London: Oxford University Press, 2006.

confirmed the existence of its program when it revealed the building of a uranium enrichment facility and a heavy water reactor during the Ahmadinejad presidency. Ahmadinejad constantly asserted that Iran had the right to pursue a nuclear program given the parameters of the NPT.³¹⁰ Alsultan and Saeid pointed out, “Iran’s attempts to acquire nuclear power predate the Islamic Revolution; it was not until 2002 that preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear capability became a serious issue in Iran’s relations with the United States and other Western countries.”³¹¹ Therefore, over the course of the next 12 years, the international community engaged in negotiations with Iran regarding the future of Iran’s nuclear capability.

A change in tone of the negotiations came in 2013. In that year, Hassan Rouhani replaced Ahmadinejad as president of Iran. One of Rouhani’s campaign promises was to begin negotiating with the West in earnest to remove the sanctions that were crippling Iran’s economy.³¹² Two years later, the framework for a final agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was reached by the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) and Iran. The agreement did not dismantle Iran’s nuclear program, but rather ensured that it was used strictly for peaceful purposes.³¹³ Iran agreed to restrictions which subjected its nuclear program to comprehensive and extensive monitoring for 10 to 15 years. Once Iran complied with the

310. Shahram Chubin, “The Domestic Politics of the Nuclear Question in Iran,” in *Iran’s Nuclear Programme*, ed. Joachim Krause (New York: Routledge, 2012), 130.

311. Alsultan and Saeid, 149.

312. Sanctions only related to the nuclear program will be removed; other sanctions such as those related to human rights abuses, links to terrorism and missiles, will continue.

313. In his testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, Ilan Berman stated, “The nuclear deal does not dismantle Iran’s nuclear capability, as originally envisioned by the United States and its negotiating partner.” U.S. Congress, House, Homeland Security Committee, *The Future of Iranian Terror and Its Threat to the U.S. Homeland*, by Ilan Berman, 114th Cong., 1st sess., February 11, 2016, H. Doc, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20160211/104455/HHRG-114-HM05-Wstate-BermanI-20160211.pdf>.

JCPOA, economic and nuclear sanctions on Iran that had been implemented due to its non-compliance with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) were lifted. However, if Iran violated the terms of the JCPOA, sanctions would be re-imposed. The most touted accomplishment of the JCPOA was that it increased the break-out time for Iran, extending the amount of time needed for Iran to build a nuclear weapon from a several months to one year. Kenneth Katzman suggested, “[Currently,] Iran’s adherence to the JCPOA indicates that Iran has deferred a decision on the long-term future of its nuclear program,” but this future is vague and filled with many variables.³¹⁴ Although the deal limited Iran’s enrichment program, A.K. Pasha stated, “For Tehran, the deal was concluded from a position of strength with its growing regional influence, especially in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.”³¹⁵ This growing influence is key to the Saudi fears regarding Iran.

The fear of a nuclear Iran

Iran’s nuclear program instills fear in the region because there is uncertainty about its exact nature. While Iran does not currently have nuclear weapons, their development is presumed inevitable. Mark Fitzpatrick stated, “In Iran’s case, the nearly universal consensus is that, whether there has been a final decision to build a bomb, Tehran is at

314. Congressional Research Service, *Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman, CRS Report No. R44017, Washington, 2017, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20170615_R44017_83753f27aff10eeba172d9bef0a51efecf1e2097.html.

315. A.K. Pasha, “Saudi Arabia and the Iranian Nuclear Deal,” *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3, no. 4 (2016):388, doi:10.1177/2347798916664613.

least seeking a latent nuclear-weapon capability.”³¹⁶ This belief has perpetuated fear about Iran’s nuclear program.

Iran’s potential desire for having a nuclear capability is a multi-layered issue involving a quest for prestige, regional stability, the ability to trump the capabilities of the United States, security, or regional rivalry. Willis Stanley suggested that not only would a nuclear capability help the current leadership remain in power, but “a nuclear weapon capability also would help fulfill the leadership’s ambitions to make Iran the Islamic world’s preeminent power, a fulfillment of Iran’s self-appointed role as regional hegemon and as a beacon for all to convert to the true Islam.”³¹⁷ Aside from status, nuclear weapons afford states a buffer from outward aggression. Fitzpatrick clarified, “Iran is presumed to have a security motivation for arming itself, particularly when it sees how American enemies that have nuclear weapons survive [like North Korea] while Iraq’s regime, which did not have them, no longer exists.”³¹⁸ One of Iran’s fears is that the US will attempt a regime change in Iran, like the one they achieved in Iraq, especially after President George W. Bush included Iran in the “Axis of Evil”³¹⁹ along with Iraq in his State of the Union address in 2002. A year after this speech, America instigated regime change in Iraq. The thought that the US would attempt a similar intervention permeated throughout the Iranian leadership. Katzman noted, “Some Iranian leaders argue that a

316. Mark Fitzpatrick, "Assessing Iran's Nuclear Programme," *Survival* 48, no. 3 (2006): 5, doi:10.1080/00396330600905494.

317. Willis Stanley, "Iranian Strategic Culture and Its Persian Origins," in *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Culturally Based Insights into Comparative National Security Policymaking*, eds. Jeannie L. Johnson, Jeffrey Arthur Larsen, and Kerry M. Kartchner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 153.

318. Fitzpatrick, 6.

319. Axis of Evil refers to countries that supported terrorism and pursued weapons of mass destruction.

nuclear weapon could end Iran's historic vulnerability to great power invasion, domination, or regime change attempts.”³²⁰

Although Iran has seen the US as a threat since the formation of the Islamic Republic, the most immediate concern for Iran was Iraq. Iran's nuclear program restarted in the 1980s as a response to Iraqi aggression. A nuclear weapon could have possibly deterred Iraq and “provided the strongest incentive [at the time] for Iran to seek non-conventional capabilities.”³²¹ Furthermore, Gawadat Bahgat stated, “This rivalry [between Iraq and Iran] was fueled by territorial disputes, ethnic and sectarian divisions, and conflicting ideological and foreign policy orientations.”³²² With Iraq, now an ally instead of an enemy, Iran's fear is directed toward the United States, which during the nuclear negotiations never repudiated the option of attacking Iran's nuclear facilities. Thus, such a program, according to Bahgat, is more about “detering a U.S. intervention in Iran's policy and ensuring the survival of the Islamic regime.”³²³ Like its continued intervention in Iraq and Syria, regime survival has become paramount to the Iranian leadership. Bahgat stated, “Generally Iranian policy seems increasingly driven more by concern of the regime's survival and less by ideological appeals.”³²⁴ A point echoed by the “Annual Report on Military Power of Iran” for 2015:

Iran's military doctrine is primarily defensive; it exists to insulate Iran from the consequence of Tehran's more aggressive policies, such as use of covert action and terrorism, rather than as a means to project Iranian power. It is designed to deter attack, survive an initial strike, and retaliate against an aggressor to force a

320. Congressional Research Service, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*.

321. Gawdat Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 314, doi:10.1080/00210860600808102.

322. Ibid.

323. Ibid., 320.

324. Ibid., 316.

diplomatic solution to hostilities while avoiding any concessions that challenge its core interests.³²⁵

Despite the regime's opacity, survival appears to be a facet in their tactical thinking regarding domestic and foreign policy.

Consequences of the Iran deal: From mass proliferation, increased terrorism, to possible regional stability

One of the major outcomes of the JCPOA is that Iran received a windfall and recovered over \$100 billion of assets previously frozen in foreign banks as a consequence of the imposition of nuclear sanctions. Once it complied with the guidelines outlined in the JCPOA in 2016, the funds were released.³²⁶ In addition to this \$100 billion, it will have the unrestricted ability to sell its oil. With the repatriated funds and additional oil sales, the World Bank now predicts that the Iranian economy will grow by 6% by the end of 2016.³²⁷

According to Patrick Clawson, the state of the Iranian economy is not as "dire" as perceived.³²⁸ Clawson saw the injection of funds as generating new opportunities for Iran. He pointed out that Iran's economy, because of the 2008 financial crisis and the collapse of oil prices, underwent a recession in 2012 and 2013. This recession was followed by

325. U.S. Department of Defense, "Fiscal Year 2014 Annual Report on Military Power of Iran," January 2015, <https://fas.org/man/eprint/dod-iran-2014.pdf>.

326. The Treasury Secretary, Jack Lew, estimated that \$65 billion is owed to debtors and Iran will only have access to about \$56 billion. Congressional Research Service, *Iran Nuclear Agreement*. https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20161004_R43333_da0d10be43983882580610ef492c6c3cac6e9a42.html. Berman argued that reasoning behind Lew's estimate is "flawed." He stated, "The U.S. government's estimate presupposes that the Iranian government will pay back all of its debts before accessing any of the previously-escrowed funds—an unrealistic prospect, particularly in light of the desire of creditor nations (such as China) to engage more deeply in trade with Iran now that sanctions have been lifted." Homeland Security Committee, *The Future of Iranian Terror and Its Threat to the U.S. Homeland*.

327. Homeland Security Committee, *The Future of Iranian Terror and Its Threat to the U.S. Homeland*

328. Patrick Clawson, "How Iran's Economic Gain from a Nuclear Deal Might Affect Its Foreign Policy," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Accessed October 28, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-irans-economic-gain-from-a-nuclear-deal-might-affect-its-foreign-policy>.

several years of weak economic growth.³²⁹ However, during the last couple of years, economic growth increased (although it did not recover to 2007 levels).³³⁰ Clawson compared Iran's economy to Greece's, saying that, unlike Greece, Iran is far from economic collapse.³³¹ He further stated that the increase of funds into Iran's economy will not impact Iran's foreign policy, as its foreign policy has never been tied to an economic rationale. Regarding its foreign policy, the Islamic Republic uses low-cost methods to be influential. Clawson estimated that Iran's various pursuits, from its support of numerous militias to activities in Iraq and Syria, which he identified as wide as "from bribery to humanitarian aid" is only a tenth of the amount it will repatriate.³³² He admits that most of the money will be spent on the domestic economy, but a portion "could" be devoted to foreign endeavors. Ilan Berman agreed with Clawson that much of the money may be spent domestically to heal its ailing economy, but money also be used for military modernization despite the continuation of a ban on conventional arms sales to Iran. Berman believes that Iran will circumvent this ban as it has in the past. Tehran will also boost its rogue state sponsorship and increase these alliances. It will also increase its terrorism financing and its endeavors in regional expansionism.³³³ It can be argued that Iran's recent activities are not directed toward regional hegemony but more toward national security concerns, but Berman maintained:

The past several years have seen the Islamic Republic embark upon an ambitious multi-pronged effort to reshape the region in its own image. This effort has included, *inter alia*, attempts to undermine the monarchy in Bahrain; extensive backing for Yemen's Houthi insurgency; both financial and direct military

329. Ibid.

330. Ibid.

331. Ibid.

332. Ibid.

333. Homeland Security Committee, *The Future of Iranian Terror*.

assistance to the Assad regime in Syria, and; broad geopolitical support for Iraq's Shi'a militias.³³⁴

Furthermore, with this money, Michael Eisenstadt predicted, "it [Iran] will try to demonstrate that is a far more reliable partner than the United States" by furiously funding its foreign policy activities and allies.³³⁵ As the US is perceived to retreat from the Middle East, increased Iranian activities such as funding allies could prove a successful strategy. While it will not initially replace America, Iran could over time prove itself to be a strong partner. Therefore, Iran now has the potential to reshape regional alliances more in line with its interests.

Fall out from a potentially nuclear-armed Iran

Despite Iran's defensive posture in regards to foreign policy, James M. Lindsay and Ray Takeyh spelled out the fears of an Iran with nuclear capabilities—that they could lead to weaponization:

The dangers of Iran's entry into the nuclear club are well known: embolden by this development, Tehran might multiply its attempts at subverting its neighbors and encouraging terrorism against the United States and Israel; the risk of both conventional and nuclear war in the Middle East would escalate; more states in the region might also want to become nuclear powers; the geopolitical balance in the Middle East would be reordered; and broader efforts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons would be undermined.³³⁶

The threat of a nuclear-armed Iran, regardless of its posture, has created a global rippling effect. For instance, Saudi Arabia has reacted to a potentially nuclear-armed Iran in multiple and increasingly elevated ways. Much of its response to this possibility has

334. Ibid.

335. Michael Eisenstadt, Simon Henderson, Michael Knights, Matthew Levitt, and Andrew J. Tabler, "The Regional Impact of Additional Iranian Money," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Accessed October 28, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-regional-impact-of-additional-iranian-money>.

336. James M. Lindsay, and Ray Takeyh, "After Iran Gets the Bomb: Containment and Its Complications," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2010): 34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20699849>.

stemmed from a reaction to American policy. Riyadh in the beginning adhered to its moderate foreign policy stance in which it reacted in conjunction with the US and did not deviate from American policy. As such, after the conclusion of the JCPOA, the Saudis appeared to be open to a reconciliation with Iran. Stating by way of the official Saudi Press Agency that it had always been supportive of such an agreement and that this agreement laid the foundation for a normalization of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as long as Iran invoked a good neighbor policy and thus refrained from interfering in its neighbors' domestic spheres.³³⁷ This statement was in line with Saudi foreign policy at the time, but Saudi Arabia and Iran did not normalize relations. Instead, the exact opposite ensued.

The exact opposite occurred because Riyadh saw American policy as an opening toward a rapprochement with Tehran and Riyadh became worried about this development. It became so worried that it felt that Washington was abandoning it in favor of Tehran. Negotiating the deal was seen as an opening to a new relationship between Iran and the US at the expense of Saudi Arabia as the US and Iran engaged in an unheard of and new level of diplomacy because of the tension and hostility between them. According to Mai Yamani, Saudi Arabia saw a thawing of the relationship between Iran and the US because of the deal. This new opening Riyadh perceived as Washington acknowledging and thus legitimizing Tehran's growing influence in the region. Legitimizing Iran's influence also by extension, conceded Iran's hegemonic aspirations.³³⁸ Initially, the US adamantly opposed the possibility of a nuclear Iran

337. Pasha, 392.

338. Mai Yamani, "The Bewildered Kingdom," *Project Syndicate*, January 3, 2014, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/print/mai-yamani-asses-saudi-arabia-s-increasingly-assertive-regional-foreign-policy-since-the-start-of-the-arab-spring>.

because “the United States feared once Iran acquired nuclear weapons capability, it would no longer be susceptible to conventional US military intervention and would pursue an aggressive anti-US foreign policy in the Middle East.”³³⁹ Furthermore, Katzman pointed out, “U.S. officials also assert that Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear weapon would produce a nuclear arms race in one of the world’s most volatile regions and that Iran might transfer nuclear technology to extremist groups.”³⁴⁰

However, America’s position regarding a nuclear Iran changed as the US engaged in diplomacy with Iran to mitigate Iran’s nuclear capabilities, not to remove its nuclear program. It changed because “the Obama administration saw the nuclear deal as a way to mitigate that threat [of a nuclear-armed Iran] and did not view Iran as an existential threat.”³⁴¹ Plus, Obama saw the deal as a way to enhance Gulf security as Iran’s nuclear capability would be veraciously verified and by curtailing Iran’s nuclear capabilities, a nuclear arms race in the region would be stemmed.

The prevention of an arms race was not the only outcome from the deal. The Obama administration had high hopes for the future of Iranian-American relations. According to Gause, “After the deal, Washington hoped to engage Tehran in regional diplomacy, particularly over Syria, and perhaps even normalize relations. The administration has not yet realized those hopes, but Obama clearly wants to cooperate with Iran even as he seeks to limit its influence.”³⁴² This change by the Americans caused the Saudis to think that the US was engaging in conciliatory gestures toward Iran and

339. Pasha, 389.

340. Congressional Research Service, *Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies*.

341. Perry Cammack, “Examining the United States-Saudi Arabia Relationship,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 18, no.1 (2017): 76, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1353/gia.2017.0011>.

342. Gause, “The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations,” 116.

subsequently indifferent to the Saudi plight in regards to Iran and its agenda.³⁴³ But as Blanchard pointed out, Saudi Arabia maybe mistaken in its assessment of America's policy. Despite, a change toward Iran coming from the former President, "U.S. officials downplay the prospects for such a change, and some Members of Congress vocally oppose the idea."³⁴⁴ Perhaps, what is not understood by the Saudis is the President is not the sole arbiter of policy and despite his wishes, he needs to maneuver and gain approval from the legislative branch of government before making sweeping changes in the American relationship with Iran.

In response to this perceived opening, Saudi Arabia intensified its foreign policy, shifting from a passive to an active policy. Furthermore, Pasha deduced from Riyadh's actions that:

Riyadh feels threatened and targeted by the growing Iranian interference in its traditional spheres of influence and feels without a fundamental change in Iranian policies, there can be no dialogue or improvement in relations... Since the situation in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, or Iraq is not moving in its direction, the Saudis fear Iran is backing its enemies and the new Saudi leadership sees 'Iran's policies as part of an expansionist, sectarian agenda aimed at empowering Shia Muslims in the region at the expense of Sunnis.'³⁴⁵

For its part, Iran makes similar accusation against Saudi Arabia. Katzman described Iran's frustration with Saudi foreign policy. He said, "Iranian leaders assert that Saudi Arabia seeks hegemony for its school of Sunni Islam and to deny Iran and Shiite Muslims in general any influence in the region."³⁴⁶ As such, "Iranian aid to Shiite-dominated governments and Shiites in Sunni-dominated countries aggravates sectarian tension

343. Pasha, 395.

344. Congressional Research Service, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, June 2017.

345. Pasha, 393.

346. Congressional Research Service, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*.

contributing to a virtually existential war by proxy with Saudi Arabia.”³⁴⁷ Saudi Arabia has not seen this level of engagement from Iran in supposedly Arab affairs since the revolution, when it was actively attempting to export its revolution to its Arab neighbors. Riyadh believed that a nuclear Iran would continue to pursue its hegemonic agenda as it desired through increased intervention because power within the region would have tilted so heavily in Iran’s favor that there would not be anyone to impede its actions. Iran would grow in influence to the detriment of Saudi influence. Riyadh would not be able to counter Tehran as it lacked similar capabilities and America would be absent because of its growing indifference. Pasha further argued, “The Saudis also feared the United States might try to use the nuclear deal with Iran as an excuse to get out of the region or at least lessen its commitments.”³⁴⁸ Saudi political analysts and outspoken members of the royal family “strongly reflected the Saudi thinking though not public which also highlighted that the only option available for Saudi Arabia and its friends was to take matters into their own hands, and if necessary, including the acquisition of a full nuclear cycle to match the Iranian capabilities.”³⁴⁹ Unimpeded Iranian influence was unacceptable to the Saudis. Thus, a nuclear Iran could prompt a regional arms race.³⁵⁰

Saudi options for procuring a nuclear capability

Saudi Arabia has always believed that Iran’s nuclear program was not purely for civilian purposes, but also possessed military applications.³⁵¹ The Kingdom, for its part,

347. Ibid.

348. Pasha, 395.

349. Ibid., 394-395.

350. Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic M. Wehrey, "A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbours," *Survival* 49, no. 2 (2007): 113, doi:10.1080/00396330701437777.

351. Norman L. Cigar, *Saudi Arabia and Nuclear Weapons How Do Countries Think about the Bomb?* (New York: Routledge, 201), 49.

has expressed an interest in having the same nuclear capabilities as Iran.³⁵² As a signatory of the NPT, Riyadh does have this right. Pasha concluded, “Spurred by the American overtures [to Iran], Saudis appeared to be inclining toward building nuclear plants and signed nuclear cooperation agreements with countries such as South Korea.”³⁵³ Nuclear energy would or could be the precursor to developing weapons capabilities which George Perkovich determined is the sole way Riyadh could deter Iran and “equalize Iran’s overall power” because again, an Iran with nuclear weapons tilts the balance of power in the region in its favor.³⁵⁴ However, the development of nuclear capabilities remains decades away for Saudi Arabia. For one, it lacks the indigenous expertise to foster nuclear capabilities. It is committed to creating this workforce, but this will not occur anytime soon. This lack of a qualified workforce places Riyadh in a predicament, as Saudi Arabia believes that the threat Iran poses is imminent.³⁵⁵ Saudi Arabia has a host of other hurdles (too many to name here) that must be resolved before it can even begin developing its nuclear energy capabilities.³⁵⁶ Regardless of the path Riyadh takes to gain nuclear weapons, as Eric Edelman et al., pointed out, “Any decision by the Saudi government to seek out nuclear weapons, by whatever means, would be highly destabilizing. It would increase the incentives of other nations in the Middle East to pursue nuclear weapons of their own. And it could increase their ability to do so by

352. Simon Henderson and Olli Heinonen, "Regional Nuclear Plans in the Aftermath of an Iran Deal," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Accessed October 28, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/regional-nuclear-plans-in-the-aftermath-of-an-iran-deal>.

353. Pasha, 395.

354. George Perkovich, "Why the Iran Nuclear Deal Is Not the North Korea Deal," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Accessed October 28, 2016. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/04/28/why-iran-nuclear-deal-is-not-north-korea-deal-pub-59923>.

355. In 2010, the Kingdom proposed building sixteen nuclear reactors by 2020; the date has been pushed back to 2040.

356. For more details see: Lauren Sukin, "Beyond Iran: Containing Nuclear Development in the Middle East," *The Nonproliferation Review* 22, no. 3-4 (2015): 379-400, doi:10.1080/10736700.2016.1152010.

eroding the remaining barriers to nuclear proliferation.”³⁵⁷ Therefore, should Saudi Arabia proceed with attaining nuclear capabilities, the region would drift dangerously into a nuclear arms race.

But the exact path it would take to acquire its own nuclear capability are vague. Christopher M. Blanchard stated, “Specifically, analysts continue to debate whether the kingdom might seek to acquire a nuclear weapons capability [through its close connections with nuclear-armed Pakistan], a nuclear threshold status, or a formal U.S. defense guarantee if Iran moves toward creating a nuclear weapon or retains the capability to do so without what Saudi officials see as sufficient constraints or warnings.”³⁵⁸ Furthermore, there are limits to the restrictions that could be placed on Riyadh if it decided to attempt to build an indigenous program in a search for parity with Iran. Blanchard acknowledged, “Isolating Saudi Arabia economically in the event its nuclear program becomes a matter of proliferation concern would likely prove difficult for concerned parties given the kingdom’s central role in the world’s oil market, its vast wealth, and its global investment posture.”³⁵⁹ Therefore, Riyadh has room to maneuver in regards to its developing a nuclear capability as isolation or sanctions might have little to no effect on the path it takes.

However, for Kenneth Waltz, the possibility of a nuclear arms race would be a stabilizing factor. He stated, “Yet so far, every time another country has managed to shoulder its way into the nuclear club, the other members have always changed tack and decided to live with it. In fact, by reducing imbalances in military power, new nuclear

357. Eric S. Edelman, Andrew F. Krepinevich, and Evan Braden Montgomery, "The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran: The Limits of Containment," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (January/February 2011): 71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/25800382?ref=search-gateway:8d7f15efcf2696bfcd4ffab0b491413>.

358. Congressional Research Service, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, June 2017.

359 Ibid.

states generally produce more regional stability, not less.”³⁶⁰ He further argues that regional instability was created by Israel, the lone nuclear power in the Middle East, instead of by the supposed aspirations of other states in the region. He added that the desire to be a part of the Middle East nuclear club was not a relatively new phenomenon, but began when Israel created its nuclear program. This was not the case, however, as other Middle Eastern states did not seek out nuclear capabilities until Iran’s program was brought to the forefront.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia shares the US view regarding nuclear proliferation and feels threatened by Iran’s nuclear program. Riyadh has shown tepid approval of the agreement. Despite this view, King Salman of Saudi Arabia, along with President Barack Obama, released a joint statement regarding the JCPOA. The statement reads:

The two parties affirmed the need to continue efforts to maintain security, prosperity and stability in the region and in particular to counter Iran’s destabilizing activities. In this regard, King Salman [of Saudi Arabia] expressed his support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 countries, which once fully implemented will prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and thereby enhance security in the region.³⁶¹

Given Saudi Arabia’s relationship with the United States, it is not surprising that the King released a joint statement regarding the Iran nuclear agreement. The relationship that Riyadh has built with Washington, especially since the Iranian Revolution, has been instrumental in the way Riyadh interacts with the world. It has been the stable pillar that

360. Kenneth N. Waltz, Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 4 (July/August 2012): 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/23218033?ref=search-gateway:7e26b0fa999692d52bbc431c63b47f9c>.

361. Office of the Press Secretary, "Joint Statement on the Meeting between President Barack Obama and King Salman Bin Abd Al Aziz Al Saud," *The White House*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/04/joint-statement-meeting-between-president-barack-obama-and-king-salman> (accessed October 28, 2016).

the US relies to maintain American influence in the Gulf. With the Saudi fear that the deal would be used by the US to reduce or abandon its commitments in the region, Obama reassured the King that “the United States is committed as ever to work with our Gulf partners to counter Iran’s destabilizing activities in the region and promote stability as well as resolutions to the region’s crises.”³⁶² Furthermore, as Blanchard attested, “The Obama Administration, like its predecessors, engaged the Saudi government as a strategic partner to promote regional security and global economic stability.”³⁶³ Blanchard continued, “Saudi Arabia has close defense and security ties with the United States anchored by long-standing military training programs and supplemented by ongoing high-value weapons sales and new critical infrastructure security cooperation and counterterrorism initiatives. These security ties would be difficult and costly for either side to fully break or replace.”³⁶⁴

Despite reassurance that America was committed to the Gulf, during his time in office, Obama attempted to pivot American foreign policy away from the Gulf and toward other concerns. This attempt toward a reorientation of American foreign policy has left the Kingdom feeling even more abandoned, and now it feels overtaken by Iran. There is fear within the Kingdom that the nuclear deal will bring Iran closer to the US, which again adds to Riyadh’s sense of abandonment. President Obama told Jeffery Goldberg of *The Atlantic* that “they [the Saudis] need to find an effective way to share

362. Office of the Press Secretary, “Readout of the President’s Call with King Salman bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia,” *The White House*, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/14/readout-president%E2%80%99s-call-king-salman-bin-abdulaziz-saudi-arabia> (accessed July 14, 2017).

363. Congressional Research Service, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, June 2017.

364. Ibid.

the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace.”³⁶⁵ Statements like this worry the Saudis, who were suspicious of Obama’s intentions toward the Middle East and “never trusted Obama.”³⁶⁶ The Saudis were wary of any attempts by the Obama administration to change American foreign policy, especially as it concerns Iran, and saw such changes as overtures toward reconciliation. The pivot the US made in foreign policy was toward Iran according to the Saudis.³⁶⁷

Regarding the JCPOA, Katzman said, “The Obama Administration assessed Iran as implementing the JCPOA and asserted that the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran has receded. The Trump Administration has not contradicted that assessment, while, on February 1, 2017, clearly articulating the view that Iran is an adversary whose ‘malign activities’ in the region continue.”³⁶⁸ Now that Donald Trump is in office there are questions regarding the nature of his administration’s Iran policy. Blanchard pointed to a joint statement between Trump and King Salman after Trump’s state visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017. The statement “condemns Iranian ‘malign interference in the internal affairs of other states’ and says the JCPOA ‘needs to be re-examined in some of the clauses.’”³⁶⁹ As it stands, despite maligning the JCPOA as a “bad deal” and vowing to “tear [it] up,” while he was Candidate Trump. He has not pursued an Iran policy. Instead, he has been preoccupied with other policies, such as the border wall, healthcare reform and a “Muslim ban.” His campaign promise to renegotiate the JCPOA has pitfalls.

365. Jeffery Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine.” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, 70.
http://businesstoday.lk/pdf/june_2016/President_Obamas_Interview_With_Jeffrey_Goldberg.pdf.

366. *Ibid.*, 56.

367. Gause, “The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations,” 114.

368. Congressional Research Service, *Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies*.

369. Congressional Research Service, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, June 2017.

Even if the US were to walk away from the agreement, there are five other countries involved. The US needs the other states to re-impose a strict sanctions regime. According to David Hannay and Thomas R. Pickering, “Five of the negotiating partners (China, France, Germany, Russia and the UK) have all made clear to the US Congress at an official level that they would not support new sanctions if the US sought to void the agreement by withdrawing from it.”³⁷⁰ Furthermore, “it [Iran] could well decide to remain in the JCPOA with the other five negotiating countries, leaving the US isolated and without the backing needed for widespread trade and economic pressure.”³⁷¹ Walking away according to Hannay and Pickering could have an impact on America’s ability to be an international leader, as the majority of the world supports the agreement and “would not understand or support destroying it on the promise of future benefits.”³⁷²

In April 2017, the State Department issued a certification that Iran was complying with the agreement. After the certification was issued, Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, stated that “Iran continued to threaten the United States and the rest of the world, and he announced that the Trump administration was reviewing ways to counter challenges posed by Tehran.”³⁷³ However, he stopped short of saying that the administration was going “to retain it instead of ripping it up or renegotiating the agreement as promised [during the campaign].”³⁷⁴

Despite the lack of a consistent Iran policy, the Trump administration has, according to *The New York Times*, attempted to repair the relationship between the US

370. David Hannay and Thomas R. Pickering, "Building on the Iran Nuclear Agreement," *Survival* 59, no. 2 (March 20, 2017): 156, doi:10.1080/00396338.2017.1302195.

371. Ibid.

372. Ibid.

373. Gardiner Harris, "Tillerson Toughens Tone on Iran After U.S. Confirms Nuclear Deal Compliance," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/19/world/middleeast/trump-administration-grudgingly-confirms-irans-compliance-with-nuclear-deal.html?_r=0.

374. Ibid.

and Saudi Arabia. At the United States–Saudi Arabia chief executive summit meeting, Tillerson said “he was ‘pleased to be here today to reaffirm the very strong partnership that exists between the United States and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.’”³⁷⁵

Notwithstanding a strain in relations during the Obama administration, Blanchard stated, “Nevertheless, bilateral ties have been bolstered by major new arms sales, continued security training arrangements, enhanced counterterrorism cooperation, and shared concerns about Iran, Al Qaeda, and the rise of the Islamic State organization (IS, aka ISIL/ISIS or the Arabic acronym *Da’esh*).”³⁷⁶ The new \$110 billion arms sales nearly double the Obama administration’s last arms sale to Riyadh in 2016.³⁷⁷ Blanchard pointed out, “With limits on arms sales to Iran in place at least until 2020, expanded U.S.-Saudi defense cooperation and arms transferred should further improve Saudi Arabia’s conventional military advantage and ability to meet potential unconventional threats from Iran or Iranian proxies.”³⁷⁸

Even with the state visit and the arms sales, Blanchard argued, “It remains to be seen if the Administration’s stated desire to repair and deepen relations with the kingdom will result in more aligned and cooperative joint efforts on issues of common concern.”³⁷⁹ However, the month that Trump took office he called King Salman “reaffirming bilateral ties and discussing a range of proposals for further strengthening relation, particularly in terms of counterterrorism, regional stability, and economic and energy cooperation.”³⁸⁰

375. Ibid.

376. Congressional Research Service, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, June 2017.

377. Ibid.

378. Ibid.

379. Ibid.

380. Ibid.

In spite of this reaffirmation of Saudi-American ties and interests, there are not any public plans to demonstrate this commitment besides the arms sales.

CONCLUSION: THE CURRENT STATE OF AN INTRACTABLE RELATIONSHIP

Presently, Saudi Arabia and Iran are mired in an intractable conflict in which each side sees itself as a martyr fighting against a hegemonic malevolence with ambitions to control the Middle East.³⁸¹ There is not an actual war between the two states, but rather verbal sparring and multi-front proxy fighting in regional conflicts.³⁸² The likelihood that they would engage in an actual war is low, as provocation by either side would lead to American involvement to stabilize the situation. As the American relationship with Saudi Arabia, especially, was built in an era of state on state violence. However, Perry Cammack suggested this type of relationship is becoming obsolete “in a region of failed states, collapsing states, and non-state actors.”³⁸³ According to Cammack, in a situation such as Iranian aggression toward Saudi Arabia, “Washington has signaled its intentions to support the Saudis against external threats, as it did by evicting Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991. The problem is that Saudi Arabia doesn’t necessarily see external threats as their main security threats,”³⁸⁴ otherwise they would recognize the Islamic State as an existential threat. Instead, as Cammack continued:

They look around at the collapse of states in the region, like in Syria, and the threat of Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Lebanon and worry that the United

381. Congressional Research Service, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, May 2017.

382. In 2016, after the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and the sacking of the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, Iran and Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations. Shortly thereafter, the foreign ministers of each country took to the American press to deride the other. Mohammad Javad Zarif, “Let Us Rid the World of Wahhabism,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/14/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-let-us-rid-the-world-of-wahhabism.html>; Mohammad Javad Zarif, “Saudi Arabia’s Reckless Extremism,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/11/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-saudi-arabias-reckless-extremism.html>; Adel Bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir, “Can Iran Change?”, *The New York Times*, January 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/19/opinion/saudi-arabia-can-iran-change.html>.

383. Cammack, 78.

384. Ibid.

States isn't doing enough in response. So the two sides are defining the security challenges differently, and neither the United States nor the Saudis, nor anyone else frankly, has an answer as to how to deal with the internal political challenges that these states are facing.³⁸⁵

For Saudi Arabia, the threat comes from Iran and its dalliances in the region. Iran's activity threatens Riyadh's role in the Gulf. It sidelines its influence and relevance.

The decline of the Saudi-Iranian relationship has multiple origins, beginning with the American intervention in Iraq in 2003, and accelerating after the Arab Spring, which began toward the end of 2010. These two events had significant impacts on the region and, unlike other causes often blamed as the root of their conflict, they had immediate and tangible consequences.

The American intervention in Iraq in 2003 and subsequent toppling of the Iraqi government led by Saddam Hussein was the beginning of the change within Saudi-Iranian relations, which had begun to take a positive trajectory after the death of Iran's former leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini had been a fervent anti-monarchist and detested the Kingdom and its form of Sunni Islam, Wahhabism.³⁸⁶ With the toppling of Saddam, a power vacuum opened in Iraq, Iran was fearful that the US was going to invade it next. Afshon Ostovar pointed out, "After being dubbed part of an 'axis of evil' in [then President George W.] Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, Iran's leaders began to worry about growing military threat from the United States...The presence of hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops right across the border in Iraq, not to mention also in nearby Afghanistan, was threatening to Iran."³⁸⁷ The Iranian regime has always feared

385. Ibid.

386. R. Khomeini, Ayatollah, "Sayyed Ruhollah Khomeini-Wasiyya.

387. Afshon Ostovar, "Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. November 30, 2016,

that the Americans would instigate regime change within Iran, as the US has a history of engaging in such activities (e.g. the coup in 1953). This past has left the Iranian regime fearful to the point of paranoia regarding American actions in the region.³⁸⁸ According to Ron Tira and Yoel Guzansky, “Iran’s national objectives were the preservation of the state and its territory, and from 1979, also the preservation of the revolutionary-religious identity of its political system—the *nizam*.”³⁸⁹ Iran’s foreign policy, especially since Khomeini’s death in 1989, has moved away from revolutionary fervor and toward “preventing the emergence of threats and neutralizing existing threats.”³⁹⁰ According to Eskander Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, “Iran’s asymmetric strategies in the post-Khomeini era are best understood as emerging from its security dilemma as opposed to territorial ambitions or the intractable need to perpetually export its Islamic revolution.”³⁹¹ To insulate itself from potential threats and create a strategic depth, Iran sought ties with the burgeoning Iraqi government, which was dominated by the Shi’ite majority of Iraq.³⁹² Also, through sectarian affiliations Iran began to assist Iraqi Shi’ite militias to uproot any foothold the Americans might have in Iraq that could be used to invade Iran. Ostovar described the Iranian strategy, “Through its Shia clients, Iran possessed the ability to harass and target

<http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/30/sectarian-dilemmas-in-iranian-foreign-policy-when-strategy-and-identity-politics-collide-pub-66288> (accessed May 10, 2017).

388. Ron Tira and Yoel Guzansky, "Is Iran in Strategic Equilibrium?," *Strategic Assessment* 18, no. 4 (January 2016): 7.

389. Ibid.

390. Ibid., 8.

391. Eskander Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Strategic Depth, Counterinsurgency, and the Logic of Sectarianization: The Islamic Republic of Iran's Security Doctrine and Its Regional Implications," In *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, ed. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, (London: Hurst Et Company, 2017), 165.

392. Kayhan Barzegar and Abdolrasool Divsallar define strategic depth as “security buffer zones, comes from the idea of stretching the front lines of conflict outward from Iranian borders to reduce rivals’ options for attacking Iranian territory directly.” Furthermore, they add, “Building a secure defensive line far from Iran’s borders and respectively creating a more secure homeland, is the objective of this strategy.” Kayhan Barzegar and Abdolrasool Divsallar, "Political Rationality in Iranian Foreign Policy," *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 48-49, doi:10.1080/0163660x.2017.1302738.

U.S. forces by proxy, and it could threaten to escalate that violence should the United States ever strike Iran.”³⁹³

Although Iran used more than Shi’ite militias, Iran’s actions have been touted as sectarian in nature to vilify its actions and thus isolate it. Tira and Guzansky aptly pointed out, “Iran is increasingly perceived in the Arab and Sunni world as a threatening force, and its operation, mainly through Shiite communities, is arousing primal fears.”³⁹⁴ Its main affiliates may be Shi’a, but it has also worked with Sunnis and Kurds.³⁹⁵ However, Iran’s affiliations with Shi’ite militias have overshadowed its attempt to diversify its supporters in Iraq. Nader described Iran’s actions as leading to distancing any potential Sunni support. He said, “Iran’s favoring of Shi’a political parties and militias is viewed by Sunnis as a broader campaign of disenfranchisement and marginalization.”³⁹⁶ Furthermore, the abuses committed by Shi’ite militias against Sunnis have empowered Sunni jihadist groups like the Islamic State.³⁹⁷

Similarly, Iran’s actions and affiliations in the Syrian Civil War have given credence to the perception that it works only with the Shi’a or on behalf of the Shi’a. Being perceived as having a sectarian agenda only hurts Iran, which has continued to see itself as a Pan-Islamic movement that appeals to all Muslims since the revolution. Despite this desire for universal appeal, Iran is using the sectarian tensions to aid its fights in Iraq and Syria. Ostovar pointed out, “Such sectarianism runs counter to Tehran’s official positions, but close relationships with Shia allies have become the basis of Iranian

393. Ostovar.

394. Tira and Guzansky, 14.

395. Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq."

396. Alireza Nader, *Iran After the Bomb: How Would a Nuclear-Armed Tehran Behave?* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2013), 17.

397. *Ibid.*, 12.

influence in the region. With its allies threatened...Iran has doubled down on its pro-Shia strategy as a way of protecting its regional interests and investments.”³⁹⁸ Iran has been using the sectarian nature of these conflicts to its advantage. Ostovar noted, “Iran has facilitated the entry of Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, and eventually Shia Afghan and Pakistani mercenaries to help the loyalist effort [in Syria]. This has made Iran’s side of the conflict distinctly Shia and sectarian.”³⁹⁹ Iran does not see itself as involved in a sectarian war in Syria on behalf of fellow Shi’a. Instead, according to Nader, Iran sees the Alawite government “as a useful geopolitical ally,” that helps facilitate its strategic depth against enemies like Israel and the US.⁴⁰⁰ It needs Iraq and Syria to be home to friendly governments because it fears outward aggression toward its regime. It is trying to insulate itself from attacks like the one that occurred in June 2017.

Iran’s actions have been described as overtly sectarian and part of Iran’s expansionist agenda.⁴⁰¹ Many see Iran’s feverish activity throughout the region, particularly Riyadh, as the very definition of expansionist. Ostovar explained:

Iran’s critics, especially Saudi Arabia, view its foreign policy as sectarian and expansionist. They argue that Iran has been exploiting political unrest across the region to champion its militant Shia clients and undermine the Sunni-dominated status quo. They see Iran’s endgame as an expansive, transnational, pro-Iranian Shia policy stretching from Iran to Lebanon and encompassing Iraq and Syria—something akin to a resurrected Persian empire, but with the Shia faith and allegiance to Iran’s supreme leader as the unifying characteristics.⁴⁰²

This is the “Shi’ite Crescent;” an idea coined by King Abdullah of Jordan to rally Sunnis together and present Iran as an external threat poised to take over the Middle East.⁴⁰³

398. Ostovar.

399. Ibid.

400. Nader, *Iran After the Bomb*, 14-15.

401. Congressional Research Service, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, May 2017.

402. Ostovar.

403. Ian Black, "Fear of a Shia full moon," *The Guardian*. Jan. 26, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jan/26/worlddispatch.ianblack> (accessed May 12, 2017).

Although a tool of manipulation, the idea of the “Shi’ite Crescent” has fueled debate over the nature of Iran’s activities. This external threat is used to deflect from domestic instability, especially in Saudi Arabia.

Riyadh has demonized the Shi’a to prevent a bonding across sectors of the Saudi populace, first after the revolution and again after the Arab Spring.⁴⁰⁴ al-Rasheed explained, “The Saudi regime frightened its own Sunni majority by exaggerating the Iranian expansionist project in the region and its rising influence among the Shi’a of the Arab world.”⁴⁰⁵ Along with this act, the al-Sauds have successfully bought the loyalty of the Sunni majority in their country through “economic largesse” from oil profits to prevent them from seeking a voice in the government, so that the al-Sauds can maintain a firm control on power.⁴⁰⁶ Further, the act of demonizing the Shi’a led to a division between the Sunni and Shi’ites, which prevents them from bonding over shared goals, such as a voice in Saudi government, which could lead to a toppling of the Saudi regime. Once different segments of Saudi society realize that they share commonalities, they will be able to unite, a prospect that frightens the regime. Its survival is paramount because, as al-Rasheed pointed out, “The real threat to Saudi authoritarianism is the development of a national opposition composed of both Sunnis and Shi’a, and Islamists and secularists.”⁴⁰⁷ The Saudi regime is not trying to save their Sunnis or the entire Sunni community from Shi’ite encroachment, but is trying to save itself.⁴⁰⁸

In the end, both Iran and Saudi Arabia are trying to save themselves, not from each other but from the possibility of their regimes being toppled by foreign entities (in

404. Al-Rasheed, 144.

405. Ibid., 145.

406. Ibid., 143, 153.

407. Al-Rasheed, 153.

408. Ibid., 157.

the case of Iran) or through domestic upheaval (in the case of Saudi Arabia). They both also face threats from the Islamic State, whose growth and increasing appeal they blame on the US.⁴⁰⁹ It is also unlikely that Saudi Arabia and Iran will work together given that each blames its problems on the other, while each is asserting that they would work together if the other would refrain from sectarian and expansionist activities.⁴¹⁰ It is unlikely that the US and Iran will work together in the fight against the Islamic State because Tehran still fiercely defines itself as against the US. Any diplomacy between the US and Iran may ease hostilities, but it will not end them. Saudi Arabia and the US, especially since President Donald Trump took office, see Iran as the greater threat. Former President Barack Obama wanted Iran and Saudi Arabia to work together to “share” the Middle East. Under Obama, Riyadh began to reevaluate its friendship with the US, particularly after the Iran Nuclear Deal. With this reevaluation, Saudi Arabia changed the focus of its foreign policy to be more active, instead of steeped in cash and diplomacy. Iran, according to Kayhan Barzegar and Abdolrasool Divsallar, believes that Saudi Arabia is working outside of its “strategic limits” and thus will have to mitigate its active foreign policy.⁴¹¹ They state, “From Iran’s perspective, Saudi Arabia is currently acting beyond its strategic capability and national strength. This policy cannot last long, and sooner or later Saudi Arabia will adjust its regional policies to region’s political-security and societal realities.”⁴¹² For Barzegar and Divsallar, Iran’s real fear is that Saudi Arabia will get the US more involved in regional conflicts.⁴¹³ This involvement by the

409. Ostovar.

410. Congressional Research Service, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, May 2017.

411. Barzegar, 47; Barzegar and Divsallar defined strategic limits as “[the] set of internal and external characteristics and conditions which can strain foreign policy choices and decrease freedom of actions.” Barzegar and Divsallar, 41.

412. Barzegar and Divsallar, 50.

413. Ibid.

US, once again heightens fears by Iran of American meddling in Iran's domestic affairs and the potential for regime change. Given the desire of the Trump administration to rebuild the strained Saudi-American relationship, Iran's fears of American involvement in the Middle East are not unfounded. In the latest CRS Report on Saudi Arabia, Christopher M. Blanchard pointed to a call Trump made to King Salman in January 2017 in which Trump vocalized support for stronger ties between the two states.⁴¹⁴ In May 2017, Trump visited Saudi Arabia. During this visit, Trump wanted to repair the weakened Saudi-American relationship and Trump and King Salman agreed to a "Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century."⁴¹⁵ In this partnership the United States and Saudi Arabia will be "charting a renewed path toward a peaceful Middle East where economic development, trade, and diplomacy are hallmarks of regional and global engagement."⁴¹⁶ The exact details of this partnership were not given but it appears as if both countries are making strides to strengthen the bonds between them after the distance that was created during the Obama administration. The renewal of their relationship might be an attempt to isolate Iran, but Trump's Middle East policy is still considered to be under development, therefore the celebrations by Saudi Arabia and cries of foul by Iran may be premature.⁴¹⁷

414. Congressional Research Service, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, May 2017.

415. Ibid.

416. Office of the Press Secretary, "Joint Statement Between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States of America," *The White House*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/23/joint-statement-between-kingdom-saudi-arabia-and-united-states-america> (accessed May 28, 2017).

417. Congressional Research Service, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, May 2017.

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