

# Saudi Arabia's Failed Power Projections since the Arab Spring

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## Abstract

Although Saudi Arabia is the largest Arab power, it has been restricted and countered by Iran that is challenging the control of the regional order from U.S.-backed states. The paper argues that there have been several critical flashpoints of rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh, in which, Iran has successfully outmanoeuvred its rival and won these geopolitical contests. Although the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is often viewed in the context of Sunni-Shi'ite divisions, the paper argues that this is secondary when viewed from the Iranian vision that they are engaged in an anti-imperialist struggle against U.S.-supported Saudi Arabia. Rather, the respective regional powers utilize sectarian divisions to further their ambitions of controlling the Middle Eastern regional order, the most significant being Iran's support for the Lebanese Shi'ite militant group Hezbollah. Despite the billions invested and making pre-emptive moves, such as backing terrorists in Syria since 2011, invading Yemen since 2015, and fomenting diplomatic crises with Qatar and Lebanon in 2017, Riyadh has failed in its policy goals to contain Iran.

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## **Introduction**

Saudi Arabia saw the outbreak of the Arab Spring in December 2010 as an opportunity to project its own vision of how the Middle Eastern regional order should be shaped. Saudi Arabia as the Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques has the immense task of maintaining and protecting the Al-Masjid al-Haram (the Sacred Mosque) in Mecca and Al-Masjid an-Nabawi (the Prophet's Mosque) in Medina, the two holiest sites in Islam. It is for this reason that they believe themselves to be the leading Islamic power and a representative of all Muslims.

This is however challenged by Iran who views the regional order of the Middle East through the prism of imperialism and anti-imperialism. Saudi Arabia as Washington's main Arab partner in the region follows a puritanical interpretation of Sunni Islam known as Wahhabism and is denounced by Iran, an overwhelmingly Shi'ite country, as being puppets for United States (U.S.) imperialism. However, many scholars and analysts argue that the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is based along the sectarian division of Sunni and Shi'ite Islam.

This paper challenges this common but myopic view and argues that the geopolitical rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran is one of ideology and power projections. The paper does not reject the notion of sectarianism, but downplays its importance when considering hegemony as the main cause for this rivalry. The ideology is not necessarily one of Political Islam and the Shi'ite-Sunni division, but one between pro-U.S. (imperialist) and anti-U.S. (anti-imperialist) sentiment.

Although Political Islam espouses pan-Islamism, Graham E.

Fuller asserts that the difference between Iranian and Saudi approaches to Political Islam is directly linked to state interests rather than ideological differences between Shi'ite and Sunni Islam, and that the geopolitical interests of the two rivals are in direct competition whether they are Islamic or not.<sup>1</sup> The weakness in Fuller's argument however is that he does not delve into what the geopolitical interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia are. Despite Saudi Arabia being one of the most oppressive states in the world, with the political and economic power controlled by a small ruling elite family, the free flow of oil has meant that U.S. and Saudi interests have deep commonalities.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 1 Article 3 of the Iranian constitution states the "Islamic Republic of Iran has the duty of directing all its resources" to achieve "the complete elimination of imperialism and the prevention of foreign influence".<sup>3</sup> British socialist John A. Hobson argued that imperialism sought to redistribute wealth on unequal terms and that it was a great danger as it created rivalries and authoritarian forms of government.<sup>4</sup> Although Iran does not identify as a socialist state, the Iranian constitution "guarantees the rejection of all forms of intellectual and social tyranny and economic monopoly, and aims at entrusting the destinies of the people to the people themselves in order to break completely with the system of oppression".<sup>5</sup> Effectively, it is through this anti-imperialist scope that Tehran believes that it has broken the so-

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1. Graham E Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 41.

2. William B. Quandt, *Saudi Arabia in the 1980s: Foreign Policy, Security, and Oil* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute, 1981), 47-48.

3. The British Iranian Chamber of Commerce, "The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran," [www.bicc.org.uk/downloads/iranianConstitution.pdf](http://www.bicc.org.uk/downloads/iranianConstitution.pdf)

4. Michael Heinrich, "The Theory of Imperialism," in *Theories of International Relations*, ed. Siegfried Schnieder and Manuela Spindler (New York: Routledge, 2014), 182.

5. British Iranian Chamber, "Constitution."

called system of oppression and economic monopoly that the U.S. seeks to implement on the Islamic Republic. Iran still remains a capitalist state, but rather than attempting to defeat the capitalist class, Iran's interpretation of imperialism is of a greater power attempting to undermine the sovereignty of another state. It is in the Iranian view that the U.S. is an imperialist power as it attempts to force the country into submission so that its own corporations can control Iranian gas and oil.

Therefore, the rivalry must be viewed from the scope of realism. In Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, if Saudi Arabia was the only Islamic power in the Middle East, they would strive to achieve hegemony in the region through conquest as it does in Yemen.<sup>1</sup> In this context, a power can be defined as a state capable of credibly threatening the survival of neighbouring countries and exerting global influence that benefits their state, just as Riyadh does in Yemen without impudence from the international community.<sup>2</sup> This can be defined as the offensive realist theory as Riyadh would use its power and influence to become an imperialistic hegemon in its desire to control the Middle East through intimidation, as it did against Lebanon and Qatar in 2017, or with Syria through proxy terrorist forces.

It must be noted that offensive realism and power projections can be used interchangeably. Power projection is defined as:

*the ability of a nation to apply all or some of its elements of national power - political, economic, information, or military - to rapidly and effectively deploy and sustain forces in and from multiple dispersed locations to respond to crises, to contribute*

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1. John Mearsheimer. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001).

2. Rusty Treviño, "Is Iran an Offensives Realist or a Defensive Realist? A Theoretical Reflection on Iranian Motives for Creating Instability," *Journal of Strategic Security* (6) 3, 2013: 384.

*to deterrence, and to enhance regional stability.*<sup>1</sup>

With offensive realism predicting that states attempt to maximize their influence in the international system, especially if they have the power to do so, it suggests that states are power maximisers. It is for this reason that power projection and offensive realism can be used interchangeably.<sup>2</sup>

However, on the opposite spectrum is defensive realism. The most important concept for defensive realism is the ‘balance of threat’ instead of the ‘balance of power’. Stephen Walt emphasises that attention to stability and balance is given to the balance of threat rather than power and that states decide what to do according to the threats they perceive towards themselves, which is effectively, attaining security as the main priority to defend against perceived threats.<sup>3</sup>

Iran can be seen through the lens of defensive realism as it has had to create or establish ties to non-state groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Popular Mobilisation Units in Iraq, in order to protect its security concerns from external threats. Iran has been forced by external pressures from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia to create a pro-active defensive position. Effectively Iran's defensive position has been created in a way that any aggressive threat against the Islamic Republic could set off a regional crisis with armed groups who have access to Iranian weapons, like those in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

From the Iranian anti-imperialist perspective, defensive realism must be measured when considering their view that not only Saudi Arabia, but also the U.S., are attempting to contain it

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1. Don Philpott, *A Guide to Federal Terms and Acronyms* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 677.

2. Eric A. Miller, *To Balance Or Not to Balance: Alignment Theory and the Commonwealth of Independent States* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 38.

3. Salavatian, Hossein., Abadi, Abbas Salehi and Moradi, Jahan Bakhsh. “Iran and Saudi Arabia: the dilemma of security, the balance of threat,” *Journal of Scientific Research and Development* 2 (2): 142, 2015.

and implement influence over it. This stems from Iran's experience of dealing with imperialism, foreign influence and economic subversion for the better part of the past two centuries. With Iran labelled as a part of the so-called "Axis of Evil" and with threats emanating from Riyadh, it is unsurprising that they have come into defensive positions not only within its own borders, but also throughout the region.

Saudi and Iranian decision-making has always been realist in nature. For the Saudi rulers, hegemony is the goal whilst for Iran in the post-Arab Spring period, it has been one of survival. Considering the entirety of the Middle East is governed by security concerns, it is undeniably an anarchic region that has seen endless wars, often simultaneously, since the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1923.

The Iranian view explicitly believes that Riyadh is the main Arab-enforcer for Washington's designs on the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has supported the U.S. conquest to dismantle secular, but anti-Washington governments, in the Arab World, particularly Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's Libya and pro-Iran Ba'athist Syria. However, disagreements between Riyadh and Washington has emerged, especially regarding methods on dealing with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Iran. Saudi Arabia has also showed inconsistencies in its reactions to the Arab Spring. The turbulent period of the so-called Arab Spring allowed Saudi Arabia to take an aggressive foreign policy with the changing regional order and security system that was unfolding. Quamar claims that despite the strategic partnership between the US and Saudi Arabia, it has engaged in a subtle but intense tussle in understanding and approaching the Arab Spring, especially since Riyadh "significantly diluted American appetite for a greater political reforms and changes in the wake of the Arab Spring".<sup>1</sup>

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1. Md Muddasir Quamar, "External Powers in the Arab Spring: The US-Saudi Tussle," in *Interpreting the Arab Spring: Significance of the New Arab Awakening*, ed. Priya Singh and Kingshuk Chatterjee (New Delhi: KW, 2013), 98.

As part of redesigning the Arab world in its own vision, Saudi Arabia supported the Libyan terrorists and the NATO aerial intervention against Gaddafi and has supported jihadist groups in Syria since the outbreak of the Arab Spring. However, Riyadh also did all it could to ensure the status quo remained in Bahrain by sending military units to support the Al-Khalifa regime at a time of escalating popular protests. Although it may seem like a contradictory policy, rather it demonstrates the pragmatism in Riyadh's strategy to ensure its main policy interests are upheld, especially regarding regime security, stability and containing, or preferably, reverse Iran's influence in the region, particularly in Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Saudi Arabia's reaction to the uprisings in the Arab world reflects Riyadh's perception to the specific challenges it faces in their policy interests which arises from the dynamics in the individual states.

It is through this context that the paper will scope why Saudi Arabia is engaged in power projections in the Middle East to become the sole hegemonic regional Islamic power, and why they have consistently failed to achieve their aims, particularly in Yemen, Qatar, Syria and Lebanon. Their failure has partly been because of efforts by Tehran, who believe they are engaged in an anti-imperialist struggle, to undermine Saudi power projections that also strengthens Washington's position in the Middle East. Although the paper acknowledges the sectarian differences in the Saudi-Iranian power struggle, it goes against consensus and conventional thought that it is the primary reason for this rivalry. Rather, the paper argues that the sectarian narrative is used by both Tehran and Riyadh to galvanise proxy forces to further their own foreign policy goals in the region, especially the imperialist/anti-imperialist struggle, but also the struggle to control the flow of Middle Eastern gas and oil.

Saudi Arabia in its quest to become the major Islamic state has made significant power projections since the Arab Spring, such as in Yemen where they are attempting to topple the Houthis-led Ansarullah movement that controls the capital of Sana'a and

are accused of being backed by Iran; attempting to subdue Qatar into submission in 2017 which forced the strengthening of Qatari-Iranian relations after the micro-kingdom was blockaded diplomatically and economically; the failed attempts to have Hezbollah disarmed by causing a political crisis in Lebanon when the Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri resigned while on a visit in Saudi Arabia; and, attempting to remove Assad from leadership in Syria.

### **I. Hegemony and the Axis of Resistance**

Iran leads the anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist coalition known as the “Axis of Resistance” that also includes Syria and the Lebanese Shi’ite militia group known as Hezbollah.<sup>1</sup> It is this ideology that drives the Axis of Resistance to reject all forms of American influence in the wider region as they perceive the U.S. to be an imperialist power.

When considering the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and Washington’s support for the removal of Assad in Syria, Hezbollah from positions of power in Lebanon and the Ansarullah movement in Yemen, the Axis believes that the U.S. are engaged in a project to change the regional order of the Middle East within their own systemic vision. In support of changing the regional order along the U.S. vision is Israel and Saudi Arabia, who have all found themselves supporting each other directly and/or indirectly in achieving regime change in Iran, Syria and Lebanon. It is for this reason that the Axis charges Riyadh as being supporters of imperialism and Zionism.

Although Israel and Saudi Arabia have no official diplomatic relations, unofficially, relations are beginning to warm as they have a common security concern against Iran and terrorist organizations, which has sidelined the longstanding and never-ending Palestinian question. Essentially, this is a classic case of

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1. Paul Antonopoulos and Drew Cottle, *Syria: The Hegemonic Flashpoint Between Iran and Saudi* (New Delhi: Vij, 2017), 2.



“the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. Kobi Michael, a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, explains that the warming of relations between Riyadh and Tel Aviv are based on mutual interests. He states:

*Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf states - excluding Qatar - have two strategic threats: Iran and the Salafi or radical Islamic terrorism. Unfortunately, the U.S. left a vacuum in the region which was filled by the Russians in Syria and by the Iranians and their proxies in other parts of the Middle East. Israel is perceived as the most reliable potential ally. Therefore, the Saudis understand pretty well that it is a good time to be good friends with Israel.<sup>1</sup>*

After decades of no relations, it definitely appears that they are now warming, especially when considering landmark steps made in 2017, including the Israeli army's chief-of-staff, Gadi Eizenkot, giving the first-ever interview to a Saudi news outlet, saying that Israel is ready to share intelligence with Saudi Arabia on Iran; Israel co-sponsored with Saudi Arabia a resolution against Syria in the UN Human Rights Council in November 2017; and, Israeli Communications Minister Ayoub Kara Extending a warm invitation to Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti, Abdul Aziz Al Sheikh, to visit Israel for what he said was his friendly rhetoric towards Israel<sup>2</sup> Although it appears that Israel is making all the effort to warm relations, Saudi Arabia is in a precarious position where it must ‘test-the-waters’ so to speak and observe reactions from other Islamic states. Little condemnation has occurred, including from Iran who believes that the Saudi

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1. Linah Alsaafin, “What is behind the covert Israeli-Saudi relations?” *Al-Jazeera*, November 21, 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/covert-israeli-saudi-arabia-relations-171120142229835.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/covert-israeli-saudi-arabia-relations-171120142229835.html)

2. Ibrahim Fraihat, “Why Saudi-Israeli normalisation could be dangerous,” *Al-Jazeera*, November 19, 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/saudi-israeli-normalisation-dangerous-171119083143078.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/saudi-israeli-normalisation-dangerous-171119083143078.html)

kingdom has always cooperated unofficially and indirectly with Israel.

With Riyadh siding with Washington and warming relations with Tel Aviv, it can be demonstrated why Syria is naturally at odds with Saudi Arabia when considering that the Syrian constitution states:

*The march toward the establishment of a socialist order besides being a necessity stemming from the Arab society's needs, is also a fundamental necessity for mobilizing the potentialities of the Arab masses in their battle with Zionism and imperialism.<sup>1</sup>*

The very foundation of the Syrian constitution explicitly elucidates that the state ideology is resistance to Zionism and imperialism. It is for this reason that Syria is a key player in the Axis of Resistance. Although Iran leads the Axis with its superior military backed by its oil and gas revenues, it is Syria that provides a land bridge for Iranian arms, funds and aid to reach Hezbollah in Lebanon, who not only provides a significant security threat to Israel, but also undermines Saudi power projections into the small eastern Mediterranean country.

It is for this reason that Saudi Arabia with its own regional ambitions, backed Washington's wishes, played its part in attacking Iran's economy with an oil oversupply beginning in late 2014, compounding the damage of U.S.-led sanctions against the Islamic Republic which are partly in place in the hope that Tehran will have to withdraw material and financial support to Hezbollah and Syria, especially as Syria currently relies on Iranian loans and investments to prevent the collapse of its war economy.

## **II. 2017 Lebanon-Saudi Crisis**

The crisis began when Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who also holds Saudi citizenship, announced his resignation from his

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1. International Constitutional Law, "Syria – Constitution," March 13, 1973, [www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sy00000\\_.html](http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sy00000_.html)

governmental position on November 4, 2017 from Saudi Arabia citing Iran's and Hezbollah's meddling in Arab affairs and fears of assassination.<sup>1</sup> Lebanese President Michael Aoun claimed that Hariri was forced by Saudi Arabia to resign so that strains could emerge to pressurize the fragile sectarian divisions in Lebanon.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that by the National Pact, the President of Lebanon must be a Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni and the Speaker of Parliament a Shi'ite.<sup>3</sup>

Two days after the resignation, Saudi Arabia claimed that Lebanon had declared war between the two states, a charge immediately denied by Beirut.<sup>4</sup> Then, with war appearing imminent, Saudi Arabia, along with Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates announced all their citizens to evacuate Lebanon.<sup>5</sup>

Sensing an opportunity to disarm or for Hezbollah to be militarily defeated in what appeared to be a rapidly deteriorating situation, Israeli Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz announced that "Now is the time to press and isolate Hezbollah, until it will be

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1. Zeina Karam, "Lebanon Prime Minister Saad Hariri announces surprise resignation over 'assassination plot'," *The Independent*, November 4, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/lebanon-prime-minister-saad-hariri-resignation-resigns-quits-future-movement-surprise-latest-a8037266.html>

2. Tamara Qiblawi and Hamdi Alkhshali, "Lebanese PM held 'captive' in Saudi, president says," *CNN*, November 15, 2017, [edition.cnn.com/2017/11/15/middleeast/lebanon-saudi-arabia-hariri-aoun/index.html](http://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/15/middleeast/lebanon-saudi-arabia-hariri-aoun/index.html)

3. Hunt Janin and André Kahlmeyer, *Islamic Law: The Sharia from Muhammad's Time to the Present* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2007), 147.

4. Al-Jazeera, "Saudi, UAE, Kuwait urge citizens to leave Lebanon," November 9, 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/saudi-arabia-issues-travel-alert-lebanon-171109143454070.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/saudi-arabia-issues-travel-alert-lebanon-171109143454070.html)

5. Ibid.

weakened and eventually disarmed".<sup>1</sup> Although Riyadh and Washington mediated the Taif Agreement that brought an end to the fifteen-year Lebanese Civil War in 1989, the agreement allowed Hezbollah to remain as the only armed militia because of their resistance to Israel's occupation of south Lebanon, home to most of Lebanon's Shi'ite community.<sup>2</sup>

Although Israel pulled out from south Lebanon, Hezbollah has continued its insurgency against Israel and has stated it intends to do so until it achieves its goals of liberating the occupied Shebaa Farms and destroying "the Zionist Entity".<sup>3</sup> As Hezbollah operates with little restrictions from the Lebanese state, the resistance group has been known to be a state within a state, and through this tolerance, Iran has been able to exert great economic and political influence over large segments of Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia has the greatest influence out of the Sunni-majority regional states because of its extensive business interests and support for Lebanon's Sunni community, who in the Saudi view, should be balancing the power against Iranian and Syrian interests in Lebanon. However, as Sunni militias officially remain unarmed and only have access to limited stockpiles of weapons, they are unable to pose a serious threat to Hezbollah and exert Saudi influence over Lebanon.

It is through this very context that Tel Aviv and Riyadh share a common interest in removing Hezbollah, albeit for different

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1. Jonathan Ferziger, David Wainer, Margaret Talev and Donna Aby-Nasr, "Trump's Secret Weapon: The Hidden Ties That Bind Israel, Saudis," *Bloomberg*, November 10, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-11-10/trump-s-secret-weapon-the-hidden-ties-that-bind-israel-saudis>

2. William M. Arkin, *Divining Victory: Airpower in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War* (Maxwell Air Force Base: Air University Press, 2007), 20.

3. The Jerusalem Post, "Nasrallah: Hezbollah Committed to fighting Zionist Entity alongside Palestinians," October 18, 2015, [www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Nasrallah-Hezbollah-committed-to-fighting-Zionist-entity-alongside-Palestinians-426296](http://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Nasrallah-Hezbollah-committed-to-fighting-Zionist-entity-alongside-Palestinians-426296)

reasons. Israel is primarily motivated by its security concerns, while Saudi Arabia is engaged in a proxy struggle with Iran. By launching a diplomatic crisis with Lebanon in November 2017, Riyadh had hoped that Beirut would capitulate to the demands that Hezbollah be disarmed and Iranian influence removed from the country. It is for this reason that many within Lebanon, including Hezbollah, as well as Iran, accused the Saudis of keeping Hariri as a hostage in Saudi Arabia.<sup>1</sup> Although this was officially denied, Hariri refused to talk about what happened in Saudi Arabia and claimed that events will remain undisclosed, bringing further speculation that he was forced to resign in Saudi Arabia and make anti-Hezbollah/Iran comments.<sup>2</sup>

Even Saudi partners found it difficult to support the manufactured diplomatic crisis with former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stating that “any party, within or outside Lebanon,” should not be “using Lebanon as a venue for proxy conflicts or in any manner contributing to instability in that country”.<sup>3</sup> U.S. and European officials urged Hariri to return to Beirut from Riyadh for the sake of Lebanon’s stability, while in private, they berated Saudi Arabia to back down from the unnecessary tensions.

Despite the anti-Hezbollah rhetoric emanating from Hariri during his stay in Riyadh, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah took a unity approach by stating that Hariri's resignation was “illegal,

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1. PressTV, “S Arabia has openly declared war on Lebanon with Hariri house arrest: Nasrallah,” November 10, 2018, [www.presstv.com/Detail/2017/11/10/541699/Hezbollah-leader-speaking-on-Hariris-resignation-regional-issues](http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2017/11/10/541699/Hezbollah-leader-speaking-on-Hariris-resignation-regional-issues)

2. Al-Jazeera, “Hariri: What happened in Saudi stays in Saudi,” November 28, 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/hariri-happened-saudi-stays-saudi-171128062831431.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/hariri-happened-saudi-stays-saudi-171128062831431.html)

3. Reuters, “UPDATE 1-Tillerson warns region against using Lebanon as proxy for conflict,” November 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/lebanon-politics-tillerson/update-1-tillerson-warns-region-against-using-lebanon-as-proxy-for-conflict-idUSL1N1NG109>

unconstitutional, and invaluable since it occurred under force and coercion” and that “We [Lebanese] deprecate the blatant Saudi interference in Lebanon's internal affairs and condemn this insulting act against PM Saad Hariri”.<sup>1</sup> Rather than weakening Hezbollah, Hezbollah gained even more legitimacy in the country as it was defending Lebanon's sovereignty and did not react to any of Hariri's divisive rhetoric and focussed on Riyadh's intrusions into Lebanese politics.

On November 21, Hariri finally returned to Beirut after a short visit to France from Saudi Arabia, and announced the suspension of his resignation, before finally rescinding his resignation in full on December 5 after it was agreed Lebanon would remain neutral in all regional conflicts.<sup>2</sup> Ensuring Lebanon's neutrality was a weak consolation prize for Saudi Arabia that had hoped to break Hezbollah's and Iran's position in Lebanon, but rather, because Hezbollah ignored the aggressive rhetoric from Hariri and took a nationalist agenda and approach, the group had preserved its favourable image and status among the majority of Lebanese. Despite announcing Lebanon's neutrality to regional wars, this has not meant the withdrawal of Hezbollah fighters from Syria where they are currently fighting militants who are directly or indirectly supported by Saudi Arabia. This effectively demonstrates a power projection made by Saudi to contain or challenge Iran, but utterly failing. This however was not the first power projection made by Saudi Arabia in 2017, and rather the events in Lebanon were preceded by the Qatari crisis that are still ongoing.

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1. National News Agency, “(Update) Nasrallah in televised speech on Martyr Day: Hariri is detained in Saudi Arabia, prohibited from returning to Lebanon,” November 10, 2017, [nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/85302/Mashnouq-stresses-keenness-on-foreign-nationals-39-safety-following-abduction-of-Saudi-in-Adma](http://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/85302/Mashnouq-stresses-keenness-on-foreign-nationals-39-safety-following-abduction-of-Saudi-in-Adma)

2. The Telegraph, “Lebanese prime minister Hariri rescinds his resignation,” December 5, 2017, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/12/05/lebanese-prime-minister-hariri-rescinds-resignation/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/12/05/lebanese-prime-minister-hariri-rescinds-resignation/)

### III. 2017 Qatari-Saudi Crisis

The diplomatic crisis began when Riyadh severed its diplomatic relations with Doha on June 5, 2017 with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt quickly following suit by withdrawing their ambassadors, imposing trade blocks and implementing travel bans against Qatar. The reason for the cut in diplomatic relations was because of the charge that Qatar supports terrorism, with Saudi Arabia's Minister for Culture and Information Dr Awwad Alawwad stating that "For too long, the Government of Qatar has followed a policy of supporting terrorist organizations, which have as their stated objectives, the destabilisation of governments in the region, while professing to support efforts to destroy those same entities".<sup>1</sup>

However, terrorism was the ploy executed to legitimise Riyadh's dismay at Doha, and rather there are three main tenants to the diplomatic crisis:

Qatar's cordial relations with Iran, Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Jazeera, the Arab worlds most mainstream and powerful media service.

The charge of cutting relations with Qatar must be questioned when considering that Saudi Arabia has supported ISIS. A batch of emails to and from Hillary Clinton released by WikiLeaks found that an email sent to John Podesta stated that,

We need to use our diplomatic and more traditional intelligence assets to bring pressure on the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which are providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL [ISIS] and other radical Sunni groups in the region.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the open acknowledge that Saudi Arabia

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1. Leila Hatoum, "Doha's Actions May Destabilize the Region: Saudi Minister," *Newsweek Middle East*, June 14, 2017, [www.newsweekme.com/dohas-actions-may-destabilize-region-saudi-minister/](http://www.newsweekme.com/dohas-actions-may-destabilize-region-saudi-minister/)

2. Wikileaks, "Re: Here's what I mentioned," [https://wikileaks.org/podesta-emails/emailid/55380#efmA\\_RBEL](https://wikileaks.org/podesta-emails/emailid/55380#efmA_RBEL)

supports ISIS, Saudi Arabia also serves as the main financial hub for radical terrorist organisations, like Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, to receive funds from individuals, charities and other organisations based in the kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Therefore the crisis is not because of Qatar's support for terrorist organisations, rather, it is primarily about Doha's cordial relations with Tehran, in which they attempted to weaken.

On June 22, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain issued Qatar a list of 13 demands that they had to concur to within 10 days without exception. These demands were

- 1- Close Al-Jazeera.
- 2- Close other news outlets that Qatar funds, directly and indirectly, including Arabi21, Rassd, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed and Middle East Eye.
- 3- Close the Turkish military base in Qatar, and terminate the Turkish military presence and any joint military cooperation with Turkey inside Qatar.
- 4- Reduce diplomatic relations with Iran. Only trade and commerce with Iran that complies with US and international sanctions will be permitted.
- 5- Expel any members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and cut off military and intelligence cooperation with Iran.
- 6- Qatar must announce it is severing ties with terrorist, ideological and sectarian organizations including the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.
- 7- Surrender all designated terrorists in Qatar, and stop all means of funding for individuals, groups or organisations that have been designated as terrorists.
- 8- End interference in the four countries' domestic and foreign affairs and having contact with their political opposition.
- 9- Stop granting citizenship to wanted nationals from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain.
- 10- Revoke Qatari citizenship for existing nationals where such citizenship violates those countries' laws.
- 11- Payment of reparations for years of alleged

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1. Wikileaks, "Terrorist Finance: Action request for senior level engagement on terrorism finance," December 30, 2009, [https:// wikileaks. org/ plusd/ cables/ 09STATE131801\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09STATE131801_a.html)



wrongs. 12- Monitoring for 10 years. 13- Align itself with the other Gulf and Arab countries militarily, politically, socially and economically, as well as on economic matters, in line with an agreement reached with Saudi Arabia in 2014.<sup>1</sup>

The demands were of course rejected by Doha, and rather than weakening relations with Iran, Qatar announced on August 24 that it will restore full diplomatic relations with Iran, with the ambassador arriving in Tehran two days later.<sup>2</sup>

The Saudi-led coalition had hoped to isolate and starve out Qatar. It should be noted that Qatar's only land border is with Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-led coalition closed all land, maritime and air ports with Qatar in an attempt to completely isolate the micro-kingdom. However, rather than leaving it isolated and failing in its attempt to create a critical shortage of essentials like food, Iran and Turkey galvanised to assist Qatar.

When considering that 80% of Qatar's food comes from neighbouring states and arrives through the land crossing with Saudi Arabia, it was expected that Doha would quickly capitulate to the unrealistic demands made. Rather, with confidence, Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani proclaimed on June 8 that "We're not worried about a food shortage, we're fine. We can live forever like this, we are well prepared".<sup>3</sup> Three days after Thani's announcement, Iran sent four cargo planes with fresh fruit and vegetables and assured Qatar that

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1. Al-Jazeera, "Arab states issue 13 demands to end Qatar-Gulf crisis," July 12, 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/arab-states-issue-list-demands-qatar-crisis-170623022133024.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/arab-states-issue-list-demands-qatar-crisis-170623022133024.html)

2. The Peninsula, "Qatari envoy back on the job in Iran," August 27, 2017, <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/27/08/2017/Qatari-envoy-back-on-the-job-in-Iran>

3. Tom Finn, "Qatar vows no surrender in Gulf crisis as U.S., Kuwait seek solution," *Reuters*, June 8, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar/qatar-vows-no-surrender-in-gulf-crisis-as-u-s-kuwait-seek-solution-idUSKBN18Z1C9>

it would continue to supply the country with food and water.<sup>1</sup>

This suggests that when the Saudi-led coalition launched its diplomatic aggression against Qatar, it had not anticipated that Iran, as well as Turkey, would step up efforts to ensure the micro-kingdom was not isolated. When considering that Doha recalled their ambassador from Tehran after Iranian mobs damaged Saudi diplomatic facilities in early 2016 in response to Riyadh's execution of Nimr al-Nimr, a Shi'ite cleric that called for democracy, the Saudi-led attacks on Qatar provided Iran the opportunity to not only restore its relations with Doha, but to strengthen them immensely and gain a new regional friend. For Iran this is paramount when considering that projects spearheaded by the U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia are occurring with the aim to isolate the Islamic Republic.

Riyadh also failed to realise that despite U.S. President Donald Trump's ignorant tweet that Qatar is solely to blame for terrorism in the region, the Pentagon and State Department took a more neutral approach as Qatar hosts the largest U.S. airbase in the region that is critical for their operations in Syria and Afghanistan, and to pressure Iran. Riyadh quickly realised that it could not military attack Qatar as it does in Yemen without facing significant opposition and potentially damaging relations with Washington.

What must also be considered is the implications the Iranian-Qatari rapprochement has had on the Syria war where Qatar from the beginning of the conflict in 2011 supported anti-government militants. With Saudi Arabia and Qatar having a commonality in supporting anti-government forces in Syria, Iran's lifeline to Qatar has seen the micro-kingdom significantly reduce its support for militant groups operating in Syria. This in turn has weakened Saudi efforts to undermine Iran in Syria as it lost a major financier

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1. Samuel Osborne, "Qatar crisis: Iran begins food aid flights into nation isolated by Arab neighbours," *The Independent*, June 11, 2017, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/qatar-crisis-iran-food-flights-shortages-isolated-by-arab-neighbours-saudi-arabia-a7784871.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/qatar-crisis-iran-food-flights-shortages-isolated-by-arab-neighbours-saudi-arabia-a7784871.html)

of the anti-government forces. This again demonstrates that Saudi power projections through diplomatic measures failed as it did in Lebanon in 2017.

#### IV. Regional Issues

Although the previous case studies revolved around Saudi-manufactured diplomatic crises, Riyadh has also played a key role in the Syrian and Yemeni hot wars. This demonstrates a pragmatism in Saudi foreign policy where it is willing to take every step necessary to become the region's sole Islamic power.

Riyadh announced in December 2017 that it had budgeted \$56 billion for military spending in 2018, surpassing education that was in a close second place in the 2016 and 2017 budgets.<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that in 2016, Saudi Arabia had the fourth largest military budget in the world,<sup>2</sup> however, it was in top place on military spending per capita, even surpassing the U.S.<sup>3</sup> This also does not factor in how much Saudi Arabia spends on its proxy forces in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere across the region.

Iran in comparison spent a little over \$10 billion on its military budget in 2015,<sup>4</sup> effectively meaning it was completely dwarfed by its rival. However, Iran also embarks on ambitious missile programs and funds its own proxy groups in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, with allegations that it also supports the Houthis in

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1. Vivian Nereim, "Defense Is Top Item in Saudi Budget as Yemen Fighting Rages On," *Bloomberg*, December 20, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-20/defense-is-top-item-in-saudi-budget-as-yemen-fighting-rages-on>

2. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Military expenditure by country, in constant (2015)," 2017, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Milex-constant-2015-USD.pdf>

3. Sharon Omondi, "Countries Who Spend The Most On The Military Per Capita," *World Atlas*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-who-spend-the-most-on-military-per-capita.html>

4. fStockholm Institute, "Military expenditure."

Yemen, despite officially denying that it does.<sup>1</sup>

Although Saudi Arabia is militarily superior 'on paper,' the primary advantage that Iran has over its rival is demographics and real time war experience. Whereas Iran is home to around 80 million people, Saudi Arabia is home to about 34 million.<sup>2</sup> This of course is not a reason why a state wins a war or a geopolitical rivalry, but it must be considered that the horrors of the Iran-Iraq War it is within living memory of many Iranians, whereas Saudi Arabia has not had to face a direct aggression against it from a regional power since the borders of the kingdom were settled in 1932. Although the Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988, Iranian military advisors have played a key role in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War, the Syrian War and Iraq's war against ISIS, giving real time battle experience to Iranian military personnel. In contrast, Saudi military experience in the past decades has been aggressive in nature against Yemen, where even their intervention against the Houthi-led movement is reduced to an air force capacity with only a limited amount of personnel on the ground, mostly African mercenaries. The significant difference in battle field experience gives Iran a competitive advantage against Saudi Arabia despite the latter's far superior military budget.

Syria: The Syrian War began in March 2011 at the height of the Arab Spring protests that removed leaders throughout the Arab world and also saw protestors come out in their hundreds of thousands to demand changes be made. Protestors in Syria demanded legitimate changes, including greater political freedoms, media freedoms and an end to bureaucratic corruption, with Assad quickly promising to meet the demands made.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Farea Al-Muslimi, "Iran's Role in Yemen Exaggerated, but Destructive," *The Century Foundation*, May 19, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/iran-role-yemen-exaggerated-destructive/>

2. S. Asmat Hassan, "Saudi Arabia Versus Iran," *The Huffington Post*, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/s-azmat-hassan/saudi-arabia-iran\\_b\\_5332879.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/s-azmat-hassan/saudi-arabia-iran_b_5332879.html)

3. Paul Antonopoulos and Drew Cottle, *Syria: The Hegemonic Flashpoint*

However, despite Assad promising to meet the demands made by protestors, many members of Syria's security forces were killed, which led to a violent reaction from government forces.<sup>1</sup>

According to Tim Anderson a careful "study of the independent evidence [...] shows that the Washington-backed rebel story, while widespread, [...] was] part of a strategy to delegitimise the Syrian Government, with the aim of fomenting "regime change""<sup>2</sup> Saudi Arabia also projected the narrative of a brutal regime despite nearly every facet of Saudi social and professional life being extremely sex-segregated and simple joys in life like music being extremely prohibited.<sup>3</sup> Rather, Riyadh is not motivated for the removal of Assad because of any concern for civilians as it claims but rather it believes that by removing Assad from power, it will lead to the complete isolation of Iran without the need for a direct conflict.

Iran however believes it is engaged in an anti-imperialist struggle in Syria against the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. The Iranian view is that U.S. interventions against Iran throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the 1953 U.S.-backed coup d'état, the backing of the vastly unpopular Iranian monarchy, and the support for Saddam's invasion of Iran, including the supply of chemical weapons, is part of expanding U.S. imperialism in the region. It is for this reason that Tehran finds the survival of the Ba'athist government in Syria paramount for their own survival.

Ali Akbar Velayati, a former foreign minister and adviser to Iran's supreme leader, explained in 2012 that "Syria is the golden ring of resistance against the Zionist regime. Syria has

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*Between Iran and Saudi Arabia* (New Delhi: Vij, 2017), 15.

1. Paul Antonopoulos and Drew Cottle, "Venezuela's 2017 Crisis: A Failed Bolivarian Experiment or a Legitimate Claim of US Imperialism?" *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 46 (1), 4.

2. Tim Anderson, *The Dirty War on Syria: Washington, Regime Change and Resistance* (Montreal: Global Research, 2016), pp. 55–56.

3. Antonopoulos and Cottle, "Syria," 70.

demonstrated its resistance against the Western states and Zionists through its support for Lebanon and Gaza.”<sup>1</sup> UN special envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, estimates that Iran spends \$6 billion annually to prop up the Syrian government,<sup>2</sup> which does not include the cost of deploying the IRGC to Syria, as well as bringing Shi'ite fighters from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, other estimates have emerged, such as that of Steven Haydemann, a former official of the U.S. Institute of Peace, who claimed that Iranian support for Syria amounted to \$15-20 billion annually.<sup>3</sup> Although a huge disparity between \$6 and \$20 billion, it still demonstrates an Iran, that is crippled with U.S.-led sanctions against it, that it is prepared and willing to make huge sacrifices to preserve the leadership in Syria. In support, Karim Sandjadpour, a senior associate of the Middle East program at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, believes that “people will go hungry in Tehran before Iran will cease its investment in this so-called ‘axis of resistance’”.<sup>4</sup>

Saudi Arabia has not been idle as Iran poured money, weapon and aid to Syria. For the majority of the war, Riyadh has been the main financier and weapon supplier to radical militants and terrorists in Syria.<sup>5</sup> With the formation of the Army of Conquest, a

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1. Shenaz Kermalli, “Why thousands of Iranians are fighting in Syria,” *Al-Jazeera*, January 19, 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/11/thousands-iranians-fighting-syria-161120090537447.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/11/thousands-iranians-fighting-syria-161120090537447.html)

2. Michael Jansen, “Iranian support of Assad regime in Syria amounts to billions,” *The Irish Times*, June 11, 2015, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/middle-east/iranian-support-of-assad-regime-in-syria-amounts-to-billions-1.2246378>

3. *Ibid.*

4. Nicholas Blanford, “How oil price slump is putting a squeeze on Hezbollah, Iran's Shiite ally,” *CS Monitor*, January 4, 2015, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2015/0104/How-oil-price-slump-is-putting-a-squeeze-on-Hezbollah-Iran-s-Shiite-ally>

5. Mariam Karouny, “Saudi edges Qatar to control Syrian rebel support,”

coalition of jihadist groups, in March 2015, Saudi Arabia provided weapons and money to the group despite it being made up primarily of the Al-Qaeda linked Al-Nusra Front.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that Riyadh was desperate for a victory in Syria as the war had been waging on for four years at that point and the Syrian government had not capitulated within months, as was expected when considering the Libyan experience in 2011. It indicates that Riyadh is willing to set aside their domestic security concerns by cooperating with the same jihadists in Syria who threaten the kingdom from within.<sup>2</sup>

With around 74% of Syrians being Sunni Muslims,<sup>3</sup> Riyadh had expected that because of its religious prestige as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosque's and having vast economic resources, would be enough to be able to gain significant influence in a post-Assad Syria and thus undermine Tehran. What it did not consider however is that the overwhelming majority of Syrians support the government and do not identify with radical Saudi Wahhabism, and rather, Syrians pride themselves on being secular. Although undoubtedly a significant minority of Sunnis in

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*Reuters*, May 31, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-saudi-insight/saudi-edges-qatar-to-control-syrian-rebel-support-idUSBRE94U0ZV20130531>

1. Kim Sengupta, "Turkey and Saudi Arabia alarm the West by backing Islamist extremists the Americans had bombed in Syria," *The Independent*, May 12, 2015, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-crisis-turkey-and-saudi-arabia-shock-western-countries-by-supporting-anti-assad-jihadists-10242747.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-crisis-turkey-and-saudi-arabia-shock-western-countries-by-supporting-anti-assad-jihadists-10242747.html)

2. Jonathan Steele, "Most Syrians back President Assad, but you'd never know from western media," *The Guardian*, January 17, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jan/17/syrians-support-assad-western-propaganda>

3. The World Factbook, "Syria," *Central Intelligence Agency*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

Syria identify with Wahhabism, Riyadh had not taken into consideration the long-standing influence that decades of Ba'athist propaganda would have on Syrians. Despite being a flawed democracy, the majority of Syrians - including the Sunni majority - have no interest in a Saudi system of governance. Saudi Arabia also has no interest in implementing Western-modelled democracy in Syria when considering the kingdom is ruled by an inner-circle of octogenarian members of the royal family allied with the powerful Wahhabi hierarchical clergy.

Although Riyadh has spent untold billions in support of Syrian opposition groups, the efforts have not been enough to topple Assad's government and in turn, weaken the Axis of Resistance. Rather, we have seen the consolidation and strengthening of the Axis as Hezbollah, the Syrian Army and the IRGC has gained valuable battlefield experience that can be utilized in any future wars in the region. Although Riyadh has not directly been involved in the Syrian war militarily, it has been one of the key states of not only fostering this conflict, but preserving the war as Saudi Arabia continues to support anti-government militants. However, the pro-Iranian Ba'athist government has been preserved, signifying another failure in Saudi power projections since the outbreak of the Arab Spring.

Yemen: Unlike Saudi power projections in Syria, Lebanon and Qatar, this is the first where Riyadh has taken on a significant military intervention to achieve its regional goals. Saudi Arabia successfully intervened in Bahrain in March 2011 during the Arab Spring to preserve the Sunni Al-Khalifa regime, in what was a four-day operation to stop the Shi'ite majority from toppling the Saudi ally. This was a rapid security operation that marks Riyadh's only successful intervention since the Arab Spring began. However, unlike in Bahrain, Yemen has descended into a years-long war that has become the world's biggest humanitarian catastrophe.

A Saudi-led coalition launched *Operation Decisive Storm* against Houthi-led rebels in Yemen on March 26, 2015. The operations name suggests that the Saudi-led coalition had



expected for the mission against the Houthi-led rebels to be concluded in a short period of time. However, despite Saudi Arabia being backed by the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Sudan, Egypt, and Qatar up until the 2017 diplomatic crisis, it has not been able to topple the Houthi-led forces.<sup>1</sup>

Saudi Arabia was invited by the internationally recognised President of Yemen, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, based in Yemen's second city of Aden, while the Ansarullah Movement control the capital of Sana'a after liberating it from Hadi's forces in September 2014. The Houthis are a Shi'ite tribe from the north of Yemen on the border of Saudi Arabia. It is for this reason that Riyadh believes they are an Iranian proxy,<sup>2</sup> despite the fact that many Yemeni experts claim this is not the case, including, Michael Horton who stated that:

*These constant reports that the Houthis are working for the Iranians are nonsense, but the view is right out of the neocon playbook. The Israelis have been touting this line that we lost Yemen to Iran. That's absurd. The Houthis don't need Iranian weapons. They have plenty of their own. And they don't require military training. They've been fighting Al-Qaeda since at least 2012, and they've been winning. Why are we fighting a movement that's fighting Al-Qaeda?*<sup>3</sup>

In support, Steffen Hertog, a Saudi Arabia expert at the London

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1. Jon Gambrell, "Here are the members of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and what they're contributing," *Associated Press*, March 30, 2015, [www.businessinsider.com/members-of-saudi-led-coalition-in-yemen-their-contributions-2015-3](http://www.businessinsider.com/members-of-saudi-led-coalition-in-yemen-their-contributions-2015-3)

2. Associated Press, "Yemen turmoil escalates as Saudi Arabia bombs rebels," March 26, 2015, [www.cbc.ca/news/world/yemen-turmoil-escalates-as-saudi-arabia-bombs-rebels-1.3010698](http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/yemen-turmoil-escalates-as-saudi-arabia-bombs-rebels-1.3010698)

3. Mark Perry, "US generals: Saudi intervention in Yemen 'a bad idea'," *Al-Jazeera America*, April 17, 2015, [america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/4/17/us-generals-think-saudi-strikes-in-yemen-a-bad-idea.html](http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/4/17/us-generals-think-saudi-strikes-in-yemen-a-bad-idea.html)

School of Economics and Political Science, stated that,

This is always a concern on the Saudi side, although fears of Iranian involvement are usually overblown. The political agendas of most Shiite movements are local, even if their theological allegiance is often to Shiite clergy in Iraq or Iran.<sup>1</sup>

Although Iran openly supports Shi'ite groups in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, there is little evidence that it supports the Houthis in Yemen, Bahraini Shi'ites, or the Shi'ite minority in eastern Saudi Arabia. Despite the lack of evidence, Riyadh's primary security concern is containing potential Iranian influence over these Shi'ites. Unlike Syria and Lebanon, countries that have no border with Saudi Arabia, Iran could utilise Shi'ites in Bahrain, that is only separated from the Arabian Peninsula by a causeway, and Shi'ites in Yemen and within the kingdom's border, to sow dissidence and bring instability to Saudi Arabia.

It is this fear and security concern that motivates Riyadh to defeat the Ansarullah Movement. *Operation Decisive Storm* was not decisive, it was ultimately concluded less than four weeks later on April 21, 2015. The very next day, *Operation Restoring Hope* began and has seen no end in sight as the Ansarullah Movement remain stubbornly in power in Sana'a. Rather, the so-called *Restoring Hope Operation* has seen tens of thousands of Yemenis killed in indiscriminate airstrikes, cross-border clashes between the Saudi military and their mercenaries against the Ansarullah Movement, and a Saudi-imposed naval blockade, that according to the UN in November 2017, saw seven million people face famine-like conditions, two million children malnourished with 400,000 of those being severe, and an unprecedented cholera epidemic that infected around 900,000 people.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Nick Amies, "Saudi intervention in Bahrain increases Gulf instability," *DW*, March 16, 2011, [www.dw.com/en/saudi-intervention-in-bahrain-increases-gulf-instability/a-14912216](http://www.dw.com/en/saudi-intervention-in-bahrain-increases-gulf-instability/a-14912216)

2. Heba Kansa, "Factbox: Could Yemen face 'the largest famine' in decades?" *Reuters*, November 9, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-famine->

The supposed Iranian threat that is posed against the kingdom via the Houthi-led movement, is more so perceived than real when considering the significant lack of real and credible evidence that they receive Iranian material support. This perceived threat has culminated into one of the worst humanitarian crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This demonstrates not only a significant foreign policy blunder that has embroiled Saudi Arabia into an endless and unwinnable war like U.S. efforts in Vietnam or Soviet efforts in Afghanistan, if we are to draw comparisons, but also a major humanitarian crisis that has been unrelenting.

### **Conclusion**

Although experts claim the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh is based on the 1,400-year-old rift between Shi'a and Sunni Islam, Iran's deepening relations with Sunni majority Qatar, and also Turkey, demonstrates the propaganda weapon utilized by Riyadh and also regurgitated by so-called specialists. Although the overwhelming majority of the Arab World is Sunni, this sectarian narrative is being discredited because the hostilities lay with the power struggle to control the region in its vision. Sectarianism is used as a weapon of propaganda and an instrument of war to utilize and galvanizing Sunni and Shi'ite forces against Iran and Saudi Arabia respectively. Because of Riyadh's miscalculations, Iran has achieved diplomatic and military victories in Qatar, Lebanon, Syria and even Yemen.

The Iranian victories can be attributed to its patience in the face of aggression, whilst Riyadh always attempts to gain a victory in the shortest amount of time possible with little planning for alternative scenarios that may occur. Policy makers in Riyadh are yet to realize that these real issues need real solutions and that by blaming Iran for the failures of its self-created problems does not equate to regional hegemony. Rather Saudi Arabia needs to re-

strategize its top geopolitical goal of attaining maximum power at Iran's expense and rather work within the new international order of multi-polarity.

Effectively, although Saudi Arabia has overstretched in its aggressive foreign policy when events in Qatar, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and even in Iraq and Bahrain are considered, the continuous failures and its adamant behaviour in continuing with traditional but futile policies will see Riyadh's so-called security concerns exaggerate and become increasingly desperate. Viewing Riyadh's failures in Syria and Yemen, it would have given lots of confidence to smaller Arab states like Lebanon and Qatar to stand up to Saudi aggression. However, their failure to achieve policy goals has also allowed for non-Arab powers, and not only Iran, but also Turkey and Russia, to utilise this opening and foster new strategic links that should have been securely Saudi-influenced.

This pattern of failed power projections has rather weakened Saudi Arabia's image as a powerful regional state. This is seen with the Qatari example which demonstrates that so-called weaker or smaller states can resist short-term intensified acts of aggression that results in them not only readjusting, but also realigning their strategic partnerships with other states, including Iran. This sets a dangerous precedent and security concern in Riyadh, as those against the rule of House of Saud, including radical Islamists who do not believe in monarchies, the Shi'ite minority who want greater rights and freedoms, and those who want to turn Saudi Arabia into a democracy based on the Western model, can see the weaknesses in the current state security apparatus.

This potentiality is a direct result of the failed Saudi projections and failure to contain Iran's spreading influence in the region. As demonstrated, Saudi Arabia has provided not only the context, but also the excuse and reason for Tehran to control the regional order and undermine Saudi power projections and exacerbate its security concerns, something it has done to great effect.

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