

Tinderbox Tensions Rise: Saudi Arabia and Iran

by William O. Beeman

As the U.S. provides more arms sales to Saudi Arabia, here's a look at the kingdom within its regional context, and its history with the U.S. from the end of World War II up to more recent times.

The Middle East region is once again a tinderbox as tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran are rising to new heights.

Although hostility between the two states has been simmering for decades, two new factors have served to cause their mutual enmity to heat up further. The first is the presidency of Donald J. Trump in the United States. The second is the rise of Mohammad bin Salman (MBS in the vernacular) as heir-apparent to the Saudi kingship. Both of these leaders are hostile to Iran, and highly friendly to each other. This heightened alliance has created a new dynamic relationship in the Middle East. MBS is young and ambitious, and seeks a new and heightened role for Saudi Arabia in the Middle East and the world. Trump is anxious to flex American muscle wherever he is able. For both, Iran is a highly suitable target.

Saudi Arabia has long been a rentier sleeper state in the Middle East. It had two primary identifiers on the world scene: its petroleum exports and its guardianship of the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina with the attendant annual Hajj pilgrimage. It has been a staunch ally of the United States since after World War II, when U.S. commercial interests coincided with the Cold War need to keep the Soviet Union at bay.

The U.S. “Twin Pillars” Policy: The Shah of Iran and Saudi Arabia

The United States was petrified that the Soviet Union would invade Iran, as it did briefly after the war, and make its way to the oil fields of Iran, Southern Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula. The U.S. then forged an unusual policy—the “Twin Pillars” policy to serve as a bulwark against the Communists. Iran under the Shah was one of the “pillars.” Saudi Arabia was the other. When the British pulled out of the region in 1972 for financial reasons, American fear of the Soviets went into overdrive. The United States under Nixon, Ford, and Carter sold astonishing amounts of military weaponry, planes, and defense equipment to both Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Shah used American financing to beef up his military forces and repress dissent. The Saudi royal family already had its population under tight control, so it used the American funds to increase the size of its military.

The Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1978-79 was cataclysmic in reshaping the landscape of the region. Within a year of the revolution Iran and the United States had become implacably antagonistic toward each other. Iran accused the United States of supporting the Shah and his repressive regime. The United States was infuriated at the occupation of the American Embassy and the holding of its personnel captive for 444 days. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were broken and have never been restored.

U.S. Weaponizes Saudi Arabia As Its Ally

This left Saudi Arabia as the sole remaining major military power in the region allied with the United States, and American administrations continued massive arms sales to the Saudis down to the present, even after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. As an American ally, Saudi Arabia also went along with post-revolutionary U.S. hostility toward Iran.

As a result of earlier American investment in the military of the region, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have two of the largest armies in the world. Iran is eighth in size with 523,000 troops, and Saudi Arabia is 21st in size with 227,000 troops. Both have military troop strength greater than France, Germany, or Israel.

Though the Saudi Arabian army is much smaller than the Iranian army, Saudi military expenditures are massively larger than those of Iran. Saudi Arabia has the third or fourth largest military expenditures (measures vary) and the largest expenditures as a percentage of GDP in the world (10 percent). Iran by contrast is 19th in the world in terms of expenditures, spending 3.0 percent of GDP. Saudi military equipment is state-of-the-art, and is continually being upgraded by the United States.

The current Saudi regime has internal difficulties that it must deal with. It has dissidents on its own soil and abroad who disapprove of the royal family and their personal conduct on social and religious grounds. An example is Al-Qa'eda. Most Americans think that Al-Qa'eda primarily directs its efforts against the United States and the West. This is fundamentally wrong. The main target of Al-Qa'eda is and always has been the Saudi regime, which it considered to be an impure and imperfect guardian of the sacred shrines in Mecca and Medina.

Additionally, there is a significant population of Shi'a Muslims in Saudi Arabia, where Sunnis are the majority sect. Inconveniently, the Shi'a population is located in the Eastern Province on top of the oil and gas fields that provide the Saudis with their primary income.

Saudi Arabia's Regional Worries: Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen

The Iranian Revolution frightened Sunni rulers throughout the region. Saddam Hussein launched an attack on Iran in 1980 to halt what he feared would be a Shi'a takeover of his government. The Lebanese government became fearful that their Shi'a population would become restive—and with good reason. Eventually the Lebanese Shi'a coalesced into Hezbollah, which had been started by Iranian revolutionaries, and which is now the strongest political force in Lebanon. The majority Shi'a in Bahrain threatened to overthrow their Sunni royal family. Because Bahrain is adjacent to the Shi'a population of Saudi Arabia, a spillover movement would threaten the entire Saudi state. Finally, the Zaidis, a Shi'a offshoot sect that had ruled Yemen for centuries but was overthrown in the 1970s, threatened to return to power under the *nom de guerre* the Houthis (named after the movement's founder, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi—the real name of the movement is *Ansar Allah*, "Supporters of God"). This was a problem for the Saudis because the

Zaidis were not only resident in Yemen, they also spilled over the Saudi southwestern border, again threatening the integrity of the state.

Focus on Iran

The Saudi regime found in opposing Iran a way to concretize all of their fears about these internal and regional dangers. They surmised that if the Shi'a were restive, it must be because they were being provoked and masterminded by Iran. Therefore, they concluded that eliminating Iran as a power in the region would make Saudi Arabia secure.

Up until the Trump administration, the United States was nervous about these rising tensions, and tamped down moves by the Saudi government to take serious military action against Iran for fear of destabilizing the entire region—and a major source of petroleum for the world. However, now that Donald Trump is in office, and MBS [Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman] has come into power, the restraints appear to have been greatly loosened. The Trump administration is itself openly hostile to Iran, and so has been supportive of Saudi efforts to control Shi'a forces. Recent arrests of Saudi royal family members and businessmen for “corruption” have quieted any forces in Saudi Arabia that would oppose Saudi government action against Shi'ites and against Iran. Deadly strikes against the Houthis in Yemen have tamped down Shi'a advances there.

On November 4, Sunni Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri was visiting Saudi Arabia. From Riyadh he abruptly announced his resignation, causing speculation that he had been forced to do so by the Saudi government. At this writing he has not returned to Lebanon. The immediate result is that Lebanon has been left under the effective control of Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia ordered its citizens living in Lebanon to leave for their safety. [Updated: In a bizarre twist, Hariri returned to Lebanon later in November of 2017 and reversed his resignation. Then on February 28 of 2018, he visited Saudi Arabia again and, it's reported, pledged to stay out of regional conflicts.]

Although Saudi Arabia lays the blame for all of this regional unrest at the feet of Iran, Iran has denied categorically any direct involvement. Indeed, Hezbollah has been independent of Iran's direct control for nearly two decades, though they fought alongside Iran and Russia to support President Assad of Syria against Syrian Sunni groups [*takfiri* extremists] trying to overthrow him, including ISIS (also known as IS and DAESH). Iran has denied providing any weapons support to the Houthis, although a rocket launched by the Houthis against the Riyadh airport on November 11 was tentatively identified as having Iranian identification marks.

Ironically, Could Russia Be the Wild Card Winner?

There is a strange “wild card” in the current Saudi-Iranian situation. This is Russia under Vladimir Putin, who is forging positive relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. This is paradoxical, since the original “Twin Pillars” policy was designed to thwart Soviet ambitions in

the region. It appears that whatever transpires between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Russians may now be the ultimate winners.

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