

SAUDI ARABIA VERSUS IRAN: REGIONAL BALANCE OF POWER

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Current sectarian divisions between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) appear to be more a result of a geopolitical struggle with ideological antagonism, in the two nations' quest for predominance in the Middle East, than purely related to religiosity. This new 'cold war' can be demonstrated by the strategies used by both states since the events of the Arab Spring, which have shown a growing bipolarisation, based on the sectarianism of the conflicts facing more and more Sunnis and Shias in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since 2011.

This situation could increase the probability of the sectarian narrative prevailing in their joint quest for predominance in the Middle East. However, these two states are also challenged by their own domestic agendas, which do not necessarily fit with their regional rhetoric concerning sectarianism.

THE SAUDI–IRANIAN RIVALRY AS A TRADITIONAL GEOPOLITICAL REGIONAL STAKE SINCE 1979

The intense and direct contest between Iran and Saudi Arabia for regional influence in the Persian Gulf, and more generally in the Middle East, is a recent phenomenon. The two countries are hardly natural allies. One is overwhelmingly Sunni; the other Shia. Since the Iranian Revolution, both have advanced claims to speak for the larger Muslim world. They also both share substantial coastlines along the Persian Gulf and have ambitions in the area. Iran is considerably larger in population; Saudi Arabia produces much more oil. Yet none of this means they are fated to permanent conflict. During the days of the Shah, the two countries regarded each other if not as allies, then at least not as enemies.

The more direct conflict of recent times stems from the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The removal of the Saddam Hussein regime in Baghdad fundamentally altered the balance of power in the Persian Gulf. Since then, we have witnessed a new ‘cold war’ between the KSA and IRI, with Iraq becoming the principal arena of that ideological rivalry, underpinned by the quest for leadership of the Middle East.

When Iraq was a functioning state it served as a balance against Iranian power. The Saudis knew this and supported Hussein in his war against Iran from 1980 to 1988—even though they did not like or trust him. Even after Hussein’s ill-fated invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Iraq served as a buffer zone between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The fall of Hussein’s regime and the inability of America to build a stable Iraqi establishment to succeed him turned Iraq from a player into a playing field in the Middle East power game. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia supported, and continue to support, local allies in the domestic political struggle in Iraq. The Iranians definitely have the upper hand, with many allies among the country’s Shia majority and a strong relationship with the government of Nouri al-Maliki, the Iraqi prime minister.

One of the unanticipated consequences of the US intervention in Iraq has been the increase in sectarian tensions, not only in that country but in the entire region. The collapse of the Iraqi state has led to greater Iranian assertiveness, prompting growing concern amongst Arab countries. King Abdullah of Jordan used the term ‘Shia crescent’ to describe alleged Iranian plans to shift the regional balance by supporting an alliance of Shia regimes. This fear is now becoming a reality, more in terms of an Iranian sphere of influence than a purely Shia umbrella dominated by Iran, because of the significant differences in theology between the Iranian Republic and the rest of the Shia in Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the Alawites, Zaidites and Isma’ilis, whose beliefs are far from those of the Twelver majority. The Shia-oriented solidarity demonstrated by Iran’s strong support of the Syrian regime, which for two and a half years has faced a massive Sunni rebellion, is today vocally denounced by the dynastical Arab Gulf monarchies, with Saudi Arabia at the forefront.

The Saudi–Iranian contest for influence in Iraq provides a template for their larger regional rivalry. That battle is fought in the fragmented domestic politics of weak Arab states: Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen, as well as Iraq. Each side backs local allies in the hope that those allies will come to power—as Maliki has in Iraq—and tilt toward their foreign patron. For Iran, those allies include Hezbollah in Lebanon and, to a certain extent, Hamas in Palestine; for Saudi Arabia: the Palestinian Authority; and in Lebanon: the Sunni partisans of former prime minister Sa’ad al-Hariri, who are now challenged by a powerful Salafi trend openly backed by Riyadh. The KSA also supports various tribal sheikhs and Sunni political figures in Yemen, Syria and Iraq.

Neither Riyadh nor Tehran presents a real military threat to their neighbours. The Saudi army is quite small, untested and rarely used outside Saudi borders, other than its short and

ultimately failed campaign against Huthi rebels in North Yemen between November 2009 and February 2010. The Iranian army is larger and more battle-tested, from its war with Iraq in the 1980s, but it too is not a real offensive threat—with the exception of its non-conventional ballistic missiles and nuclear enrichment program, intended only as a deterrent.

THE SAUDI–IRANIAN RIVALRY SINCE THE ARAB SPRING

Saudi Arabia and Iran battle for regional influence in the MENA region through the deployment of money, guns, ideology and sectarian influence in the domestic politics of their neighbours. This state of affairs became the big story of the Arab Spring: the main issue being how the rivalry for regional influence between the two countries is affected by domestic changes taking place in the Arab states.

That rivalry, emerging from the two states' geopolitical contest in the Persian Gulf, is now the most important international factor in the Middle East. While the Arab–Israeli conflict remains key, it is largely frozen right now. The main regional and international dynamic comes from the manoeuvrings of Tehran and Riyadh. Both have made gains and losses in the Arab Spring and both, ultimately, share a common interest in seeing the democratic process fail in the region—or at least the failing status quo prevail in the weak states of the Levant, Iraq and Yemen.

The Arab Spring, by shaking the stability of a number of Arab states, has opened up new fields of contestation for Saudi Arabia and Iran. In Yemen, Saudis claim that Iranians have established tentative ties with the Huthi movement, which began a rebellion against the central government in the mid 2000s and currently controls much of the northern part of the country. In Bahrain, the government alleged (without much evidence) that the popular mobilisation for political reform that roiled the country in February to March 2011 was orchestrated from Tehran—which was enough for the Saudis to send troops into Bahrain in support of the ruling Sunni monarchy. In Egypt, the Saudis lost their major Arab ally against Iran when Hosni Mubarak fell from power, and they are trying to make the Iranians suffer the same fate by supporting the Syrian rebellion against Iranian-allied Bashar al-Assad. Syria is now becoming another major playing field in the Saudi–Iranian rivalry, as the power of the central government crumbles and the country devolves into civil war.

Sectarianism has experienced a boost in the aftermath of the popular uprisings in the Arab world. The fall of authoritarian Arab leaders and fragile transitional processes has led to a number of rifts between Islamists and secularists, and conservatives and liberals, as well as religious divisions between Sunnis and Shias. Recent events have also prompted improbable alliances, such as that in Egypt today between so-called pro-democratic liberals and the military, or that forged between a section of Salafis (*Hizb al-Nour*) and Christians (the Coptic Church) to get rid of the powerful Muslim Brotherhood movement from the political sphere.

However, while sectarianism in the region is real and carries risks, I believe the rise of sectarian strife in the aftermath of the 2012 uprisings has mainly been stoked by political

strategies. The deepening of sectarian rifts in the region goes back to the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and has been accelerated by the Arab Spring, especially the Syrian conflict. In Iraq, for example, the central government remains weak and is struggling to ensure national unity. The rise of a strong Kurdish presence in the north and a Shia bastion in the south saw the Sunnis of the centre squeezed between strong rivalling regional factions. In the aftermath of the 2011–2012 power shifts, several Arab countries now fear that such sectarian tendencies could reach and destabilise their own territories, and their governments have felt pressure to respond to these developments in order to avoid possible spillovers. The risk of sectarian splits is real and present in several Arab countries, including Lebanon, where sectarian strife between Sunnis and Alawites in Beirut and Tripoli has resurfaced. However, Arab governments have also adroitly instrumentalised and overemphasised the dangers of sectarianism in order to safeguard ruling elites' hold on power and maintain a lead on protests.

In Saudi Arabia, repression of timid uprisings in the east of the country was portrayed by the rulers as a struggle against Shia-led sedition. A similar public diplomacy strategy was adopted in Bahrain, where violence extended on a wider scale. And in Yemen, President Saleh referred to tensions between communities as a plot aimed at destabilising and dividing the country.

Sectarian tensions have assumed the most alarming proportions in Syria, where riots quickly turned to violence between Sunnis and Alawites. This emphasis today on the 'Shiatisation' of the Alawite sect, even though they never claimed to be Shias in the past, is a clear sign of growing sectarianism. The Syrian regime exerted harsh repression and justified its acts using the threat of a 'foreign conspiracy'. The sectarian argument eventually served the Assad regime in its efforts to curtail the dynamics of protests by keeping people away from the streets.

SAUDI STATE STRATEGY

As a traditional conservative regional player, Saudi Arabia's aim is to 'contain' threats and maintain its own security. While the country seeks to distance itself from the impacts of the Arab Spring's socio-political dynamics and prevent them from crossing its borders, its active role in the Syrian and Bahraini crises is focused on constraining Iran's regional role, as well as strengthening its own relative security.

Nevertheless, the only major Arab country likely to engage in active diplomacy today is Saudi Arabia. Its enormous oil wealth gives it the means, and it feels threatened by a nexus of external and internal forces demanding an active foreign policy to curb the growth of Iranian influence in the region. With its vast reserves of oil, significant demographic base and huge inventory of sophisticated armaments bought from the West, principally the United States, Saudi Arabia is located at the centre of the Arab Gulf system and is the predominant power in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which incorporates the six dynastical monarchies of the Arabian peninsula.

Its geostrategic competition with Iran and self-proclaimed role as the protector of Sunni interests against Iran and its Shia co-religionists in Iraq and the Levant have increased Saudi Arabia's value as the major influential Arab state—and not Qatar, as it has often been related in the media. That tiny emirate faces a number of diplomatic, religious and demographic restrictions to expanding its influence, while the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia makes use of various instruments and mechanisms to export religious ideologies beyond its borders. The influence of the Saudi territory as the 'cradle of Islam' has favoured, as stated by Laurent Bonnefoy,¹⁸ the emergence of a number of mechanisms of proselytism, used as a tool of Saudi 'soft power' through the combination of major oil revenues with the diplomacy of NGOs and International Islamic organisations (World Muslim League, etc.).

However, as a state, Saudi Arabia is like a colossus with feet of clay. Bolstering its capabilities, principally with the transfer of high-tech weapons from the United States, is unlikely to change the balance of power between Riyadh and Tehran. The Saudi state is vulnerable, mainly as its old leadership is regularly challenged by the issue of succession. This issue is now openly raised by the third generation of princes led by King Abdallah's sons and the powerful heirs of the Sudeiri clan.¹⁹

As a result, despite its considerable financial and religious influence, Saudi Arabia's inherent weakness and the built-in contradictions in its foreign policy are likely to limit its regional appeal and considerably hobble its diplomacy. The refusal of Saudi Arabia to give its speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2013, shortly followed by its rejection of a non-permanent seat on the UN National Security Council because of its disagreement with the adopted UN resolutions in the Syrian file, showed a lack of the pragmatism traditionally used in diplomacy. If the aim was to show its dissatisfaction with the United Nations and the new US diplomatic orientation towards the Middle East, which demonstrates a clear unwillingness to participate in any other military interventions in the MENA region, this display of public discontent did not push Saudi authorities to challenge the US, their major ally in the area.

Since the first events of the Arab Spring, Riyadh has adopted a defensive approach, based on maintaining the status quo, because of its deep fear of the irreversible winds of change in the Arab world. This explains its sense of panic when President Mubarak stepped down and the Muslim Brothers came to power after their success in the 2012

18 Laurent Bonnefoy (2013). 'Saudi Arabia and the export of religious ideologies', *NOREF Policy Brief*, September 2013.

19 Sudeiri is the name of the mother of the six brothers who used to represent this clan: King Fahd, crown princes Sultan and Nayef (all dead), Princes Abdulrahman and Ahmad (both now without official functions) and the current crown prince, Salman. The clan is now represented more by the younger third generation, who have a less close-knit relationship than the previous generation, which was linked by direct brotherhood. The new main figures are Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef, Minister of Interior; his brother Saud, Governor of the Hasa Province; Prince Bandar Bin Sultan, Chief of General Intelligence; his half brother Salman Bin Sultan, Deputy Minister of Defence; and the sons of Prince Salman: Abdel-Aziz, Vice Minister of Oil; Sultan, Head of the Supreme Council for Tourism; and Faysal, Governor of Medina.

legislative and presidential elections. Indeed, Riyadh focused its primary actions on preserving its immediate sphere of influence, that of the GCC, and containing the Yemeni chaos.

The first major unprecedented intervention was that of the Arabian Shield in Manama on 14 March 2011—a Saudi-led intervention, under the cover of a multilateral GCC action, to help the Khalifa Sunni dynasty put an end to the popular, Shia-dominated mobilisation. This mobilisation was started not for sectarian reasons but to make political demands and fight the social discrimination that its participants faced as Bahraini citizens.²⁰ However, the fact that the Shia represents a majority of the population gave authority to the argument that it was a sectarian contestation willing to put an end to the Sunni leadership.

The other diplomatic tool used by the KSA was the idea of launching a Union of the Gulf. The GCC was created on 25 May 1981 in response to the threatened expansion of the Islamic Revolution and the Iraqi–Iranian war in September 1980. The launching of the Gulf Union project by the KSA, during the 32nd GCC state summit in Abu Dhabi in December 2011, aimed to show its strength vis-à-vis its Iranian enemy. The GCC military intervention in Bahrain that has created discontent in the US administration also disturbed Iran. Even if the idea of the Union itself is not popular among the GCC member states that refused it,²¹ the idea of reinforcing GCC states with a united security and defence framework gained approval from the rulers, to a certain extent. Furthermore, although the proposal of a Gulf Union is written in Article 4 of the GCC charter, King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia prefers to use the concept of *Tawhid* or unity, which is emphasised in Hanbali Wahhabi ideology and is the cornerstone of the religious and ideological foundation of the modern KSA. Through their sermons and Friday speeches, the Higher Council of Ulama (the official Wahhabi establishment), as the pre-eminent imams of the great mosques of Mecca and Medina, also praised several times during 2012 the great relevance of the economic and security-based union created within the GCC in order to be able to defeat hostile forces.²²

The announcement made by the US defence secretary, Chuck Hagel, in the Manama meeting of December 2013, concerning the US commitment to provide security to its Arab Gulf allies, has been reasserted by America's new willingness to help the GCC build its security and defence architecture, through new, sophisticated military capacities able to prevent any foreign aggression.²³

20 Geneive Abdo (2013). *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a–Sunni Divide*. Analysis paper number 29, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy, 10 April 2013.

21 During the Manama Dialogue (6–8 December 2013), an annual forum on security issues in the Gulf region, the minister of foreign affairs of the Sultanate of Oman publicly and firmly rejected any idea of joining the Gulf Union project introduced by the Saudi minister of state for foreign affairs, Nizar Madani. See Manama Dialogue, <http://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama%20dialogue/archive/manama-dialogue-2013-4e92> and <http://susris.com/glossary/manama-dialogue/> [Consulted on 8 December 2013].

22 Several articles in the Saudi press raised this issue (*al-Watan*, *al-Sharq-al-Awsat* and *al-Hayat*).

23 Walter Pincus, 'Hagel's verbal assurances for continued U.S. presence in the Middle East come with action', <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/hagels-verbal-assurances-for-continued->

The catalyst for this new ideological assertiveness and intensity in the Saudi–Iranian regional rivalry was provided by the Syrian civil war. A reduction in regional sectarian tensions is unlikely in the short term, especially on the Syrian battleground. Iran has no interest in making concessions relating to the Syrian file while it is trying to secure a final deal with the US and other members of the P5+1 group on its nuclear program. As for Saudi Arabia, it will never accept in Syria a situation like the Iraqi one, where Iran has the upper hand.

IRAN STATE STRATEGY

Tehran gained the most from the geopolitical changes that accompanied the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. However, the Arab Spring runs counter to Tehran's efforts to expand its influence in the Middle East. Tehran has damaged its reputation with its still-ongoing support for Syria's Bashar al-Assad. If Assad falls, Iran will lose a major ally. Also, at the same time that Arabs are becoming increasingly proud of their own revolutionary achievements, Iran is losing its reputation as an anti-Israeli and anti-American regime, especially since the last presidential elections, which saw President Hassan Rouhani addressing a rapprochement with Washington.

As Mohsen Milani stresses,²⁴ before the start of the Arab Spring, the alliance between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah was strong and popular with the so-called 'axis of resistance', which took its ideological basis from the narrative of 'resistance' against the United States and Israel. This triple alliance gave Iran strategic depth at the heart of the Arab Middle East, and opened up to Tehran what Milani calls a 'corridor of resistance', connecting it to Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. So, ironically, whilst Iran supported the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain but not Syria; Saudi Arabia, which strongly opposed the Arab Spring uprisings, found in the Syrian uprising an opportunity to undermine Assad, Iran and Hezbollah.

The only positive outcome of the Arab Spring for Iran was the fall of Mubarak, but with the removal of the elected president, Morsi, and the sharp repression of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, thwarting its initial aim to establish relations with Egypt, Iran followed a two-pronged policy of expanding its regional role and containing threats.

Iran favoured acceleration of internal dynamics in Egypt, since it would lead to closer relations with Morsi's government. In terms of Syria, Tehran's policy is to contain the possible shift in the current regional balance of power, which would be to Iran's detriment. By supporting Assad, Iran has fallen into a trap from which it cannot escape without substantial political and economic cost. Knowing that, the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—who was appointed by Ayatollah Khomeini as special representative to supervise the creation of the Hezbollah organisation in 1982—is still

us-presence-in-the-middle-east-come-with-action [Consulted on 11 December 2013].

24 Mohsen Milani (2013). 'Why Tehran won't abandon Assad(ism)'. *The Washington Quarterly*, Fall 2013, pp. 79–93.

resolute in his support for Assad. Syria is a major front in Tehran's geostrategic competition with the United States, its cold war with Saudi Arabia and its war against Salafis and al-Qaida affiliated groups, whose hatred of Shiism is well known. Tehran perceives the collapse of the Assad regime would be an inauspicious move that could checkmate Hezbollah and the Islamic republic. This is why, argues Milani in his article, Iran will fight to the bitter end to protect the Syrian regime, with or without Assad. Rouhani's moderate messages to Saudi Arabia won't convince Riyadh about Iran's Syrian policy, which cannot fundamentally change, especially in regard to its historical support for Hezbollah (created under Iranian supervision).

THE IMPACT OF SECTARIAN RHETORIC IN THE GEOPOLITICAL SAUDI–IRANIAN RIVALRY ON THEIR OWN DOMESTIC AGENDAS

The growing fragmentation of territories and weakened states in the Levant and Iraq has led to a deepening of sectarian divisions and the assertion of community identities by default. The new self-assertion of 'Shiatisation' by Alawites in Syria and Turkey is a clear example of the growing solidarity within the Sunni community, be it from Salafi or Muslim Brotherhood ideology, to assist their Syrian counterparts. These assertive solidarities are helping the Saudi and Iranian states to emphasise the sectarian divisions even though this stance could cause major damage to both their domestic agendas.

Iran's sectarian attitude is a clear sign that it no longer has the will to replicate its Islamic revolution on a universal model in the Islamic world. For the first time in its history as an Islamic republic, Iran is defending its regional interests as a sectarian state, and this is already damaging its reputation as the first Islamic revolutionary state. Operating a different strategy to the axis of resistance can affect balances of power inside the country too, on the domestic front.

Due to the Arab uprisings, Iran is already finding it increasingly difficult to influence Arab states and societies through religious and ideological means, as it has done in the past. The following four reasons can explain why this is the case:

- The suppression of the 2009 protests in Iran demonstrated the same brutal authoritarianism shown by most of the neighbouring Arab Sunni states;
- As Sunni societies and governments become more empowered, interest in Iran wanes and animosity increases. The ideology of the 'resistance' and the occupation of Palestine is no longer a mobilising factor in Arab political life today;
- The uprisings, particularly in the case of Egypt, brought to power the Muslim Brotherhood. But they have been removed from power by militaries that are backed by conservative Sunni countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates;

- The restoration of the Iraqi city of Najaf as a theological centre has elevated it over the Iranian centre of Qom in the eyes of the Arab Shia and this makes it more difficult for Tehran to continue to claim to be the exclusive guardian of Shiism.

Today, the picture is considerably different for Iran's regional ambitions. The situation in Iraq between Sunnis and Shias is worsening, especially with the threat posed by the continuing uprising against the Alawite rule in Syria. This is one of the reasons that have driven the newly elected president, Rouhani, to come to an agreement with the P5+1 group concerning the nuclear file. The aim of the accord is to progressively give Iran the opportunity to reintegrate into the international community and regain its position as the major regional player in the Middle East and along its eastern borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nevertheless, Iran's nightmare remains regime change in Syria. A fundamental change in orientation of the Syrian government, as well as its military and security forces, would be perceived by Tehran as a fatal move that could, as outlined before, checkmate Hezbollah and the Islamic republic. But the longevity of the civil war has allowed Iran to provide vital assistance to Assad's regime, through militia-building capacities and strategic, military and financial help—also perfected in Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Syria has become the new centre of gravity for jihadist and terrorist organisations, such as the al-Nusra Front, which is affiliated to al-Qaeda. If Assad falls, it's unlikely that these jihadist organisations will leave Syria, and, consequently, Iran and the United States will share the strategic objective of eliminating these extremist groups and ensuring that the Syrian state does not totally collapse.

The longevity of the Syrian civil war has also changed Saudi Arabia's position. Even if it remains one of the most significant supporters of the Syrian rebellion (the Free Syrian Army and the National Coalition), the kingdom can no longer permit 'Assadism' or even a regime without Assad. The hatred of Assadism is deeply anchored in the Saudi public consciousness, as revealed by sermons of imams, social-network discussions and the hundreds of Sunni Saudi fighters battling Assad with their Syrian co-religionists. The longevity of the Syrian civilian war will emphasise the radicalisation of the Saudi position, similarly to that of its population, with an intensification of sectarianism.

For the Saudi Kingdom and other dynastical Gulf monarchies, such as Bahrain and even Kuwait, the growing sectarian narrative and deepening divisions could erode the narrative of the Shia communities, which is mainly focused on their local and national integrative agenda. The danger is to see this agenda as becoming transnational, which is not the case according to Laurence Louër, who focuses her attention mainly on Bahrain, a kind of ideal case in the Gulf monarchies.²⁵

25 Laurence Louër (2008). *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. London: Hurst & Company.

In Saudi Arabia, the state has encouraged a sectarian propaganda, succeeding in isolating the Shia community, as Madawi al-Rasheed stressed.²⁶ Her picture of the al-Saud House fearing any attempts by elites to bridge the sectarian divide and unite Sunni and Shia activists is unlikely in the KSA, because the huge majority of Saudis consider the Saudi Shia community as heretic and a fifth column, according to the teaching of the Wahhabi religious establishment. In that sense, the al-Saud House, despite its growing sectarian rhetoric, appears much more moderate than its population. And it is precisely the growing sectarian rhetoric regarding the geopolitical rivalry that could cause great damage to the Saudi leadership. Because the majority of Saudi Shias still remain loyal to the al-Saud House, the radicalisation of the secessionist movement in the city of al-'Awamiyya in the Hasa province, the Eastern region traditionally dominated by a Shia population, is quite minor. Today, according to unofficial sources from the ministry of the interior, the Shia majority in the province has been reduced by a massive arrival of Sunni Saudi citizens coming from the Najran and 'Asir southern regions—highly encouraged by the state, in order to rebalance the demography. The same situation is occurring in Bahrain, where the Shia population today only represents about 55%, compared to 70% during the 1980s, due to the massive naturalisation of Sunni Jordanians, Syrians and Pakistanis.

With its highly centralised decision-making process and huge financial means, the KSA has the ability to limit the effects of Shia and sectarian conflicts in its territory. But the overemphasis of the sectarian rhetoric could affect, in the medium term, the narrative of the Shia communities in the Gulf States. It is already the case for Bahrain and also Saudi Arabia, which has seen some limited uprisings in the cities of al-Qatif and al-'Awamiyya. This move may establish more formal transnational solidarities, given that most of the Shia families in Bahrain are family connected with Saudi Shia. In Kuwait, the Shia community has particularly close ties with the ruling family, and the al-Sabah dynasty has always ruled the country with the Shia community as one of its basic pillars. This situation has provoked tensions among the Sunni population, with some Salafis and prominent tribal figures accusing the al-Sabah ruling dynasty of favouring Shia community interests at the expense of the Sunni community. This has created a sort of 'positive discriminative' sectarian feeling and a growing identity polarisation that compares with the country's urban versus tribal tensions.

CONCLUSION

Almost three years after the Arab uprisings began, the benefits for Iran and Saudi Arabia are clearly limited and the picture complicated. The Syrian war, in particular, has provided a mechanism for amplifying traditional sectarian conflict, effectively elevating

26 Madawi al-Rasheed (2013). 'Saudi Arabia's Domestic Sectarian Politics', *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF)*, August 2013.

it to a transnational affair. The Sunni in Lebanon believe that by confronting Hezbollah they are fighting for all Sunni, especially their persecuted co-religionists in Syria who are being slaughtered at the hands of President al-Assad's Alawite-dominated regime. Similarly, the Shia in Bahrain believe their uprising is for the benefit of their long-oppressed co-religionists across the border in Saudi Arabia. In the Levant and Persian Gulf, sectarianism has become so pronounced that Sunni clerics now warn of the 'Shiatisation' of the Middle East and exploit the brutality committed by Assad's regime to call for Sunni ascendancy.

As a result, a strong argument can be made that the Sunni–Shia divide is on its way to replacing the broader conflict between Muslims and the West as the primary challenge facing the Islamic societies of the Middle East. Such sectarian conflict is also likely to supplant the occupation of Palestine as the central mobilising factor in Arab political life. As Arab societies become more politically active and aware in the aftermath of the uprisings, fighting Israel is less a priority, especially when there are so many domestic crises. For the next several years, it is likely we'll see an intensification of identities, with religion, ethnicity and other local solidarities and primordial ties playing a far more prominent role in socio-political interactions.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

Sectarian divisions between Saudi Arabia and Iran appear to be a result of the two nations' geopolitical struggle in the Persian Gulf, driven by their quest for dominance of the Middle East. This 'cold war', with a sectarian narrative emphasised over that purely based on religiosity, is now the most important international factor in the Middle East, replacing the ancient regional order. The Syrian civil war provided the new catalyst for the Saudi–Iranian rivalry, with the two states now competing chiefly through the Syrian conflict, as well as Iraq and Lebanon. As a result, Iran is defending its regional interests as a sectarian state for the first time—rather than as an Islamic revolutionary state. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's regional credibility could be severely damaged by its radicalised sectarian narrative, potentially eroding its domestic stability.

KEYWORDS

Saudi Arabia vs Iran, regional competition, sectarian polarisation, 'cold war', Sunni vs Shia, Syrian catalyst.

الملخص

تبدو الإنقسامات المذهبية ما بين العربية السعودية و إيران كنتاج للتنافس الجيوسياسي من أجل الهيمنة في منطقة الشرق الأوسط مع التشديد على السردية المذهبية و ليس على التدين. و تعكس هذه «الحرب الباردة» التنافس الناتج عن المواجهة الجيوسياسية ما بين البلدين في الخليج الفارسي التي تعد اليوم العامل الدولي الأكثر أهمية في منطقة الشرق الأوسط، و الذي حل محل النظام الإقليمي القديم. و تتنافس إستراتيجيات الدولتين بشكل رئيسي من خلال الحرب الأهلية في سوريا و على ساحات المعارك في كل من العراق و لبنان. و قد تحولت الحرب الأهلية في سوريا إلى حفاز جديد للتنافس ما بين العربية السعودية و إيران. و النتيجة هي أن إيران أصبحت تدافع -لأول مرة- عن مصالح إقليمية كدولة مذهبية بدل دولة الثورة الإيرانية كما كانت تفعل في السابق. و من جهة أخرى، فإن مصداقية العربية السعودية في المنطقة سيلحقها الضرر بشكل جدي بسبب سرديتها المذهبية المتشددة و التي يمكن أن تؤدي إلى تقويض إستقرارها الداخلي.

الكلمات المفتاحية

العربية السعودية ضد إيران، التنافس الإقليمي، التقاطب المذهبي، «الحرب الباردة»، السنة ضد الشيعة، الحفاز السوري.