

Iran and Saudi Arabia

Struggle for Regional Hegemony & Islamic Primacy

Saudi Arabia

- Iran's most significant ideological and strategic competitor
- The main sponsor of Iran's enemies across the World
- The only country in the Gulf region with the economic and military power to take on the Islamic Republic.
- Had replaced the US and Israel as the biggest security threat to Iran

Early Years

Twin pillars of the Gulf

- Iran and Saudi Arabia were on the same side of the divide in the Middle East, strategic allies of the US, played the role of the “twin pillars” of the Gulf.

Restarting of the ancient Sunni–Shiite rift

- The modern rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia began just after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when Khomeini called on Shiites across ME to replace their governments with theocratic regimes
- Khomeinists considered monarchical rule as inherently unIslamic and has enshrined the leadership of religious authorities in politics.
- Khomeini repeatedly called for the elimination of the Gulf monarchies

Leadership of Islamic World

- Both countries claim the leadership of the Muslim world. The official title of Iran’s Supreme Leader is Guardian of the Muslims, while the Saudi king’s title is Servant of the Two Holy Sanctuaries.

Challenging Each other

- To counter IRI:
- Saudi Arabia began to back Sunni groups
- Formed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981
- Khomeinists backed & called on Shiites to overthrow their corrupt govts.

Exporting Revolution

- To Khomeini:
- KSA was part of the so-called “American Islam,” a corrupt form of Islamic subjugation to the imperialist West led by the United States.
- Khomeini felt that the export of revolution should challenge the seat of Wahhabism.

Geopolitical Rivalry

- The two countries competing for dominance in global energy markets and for political influence in the Persian Gulf and the Levant.

US Factor

- Before 1979
 - The rivalry was managed and controlled by US, which was their strategic ally.
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- After 1979
 - Saudi Arabia remained an ally of the United States; Iran became an enemy.
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 - Since then, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia became defined by the new U.S. strategy: ally with Saudi Arabia to offset Iran.
 - Result:
 - **Iran** sees Saudi Arabia as a wealthy, ambitious proxy of the United State
 - **KSA** views Iran as a major source of instability in the region, believing that it seeks to establish a Shiite Crescent to dominate Arab Sunnis

Saudi Arabia Counter-Campaign

- Having been challenged as the custodian of the Islamic world and anxious about the political and social upheaval among its Shiite minority, KSA unleashed a countercampaign:
 - **Siding With Saddam**
 - **Manipulated Oil Price to Undermine Iran's Economy**
 - **Increasing Oil production by utilizing its dominant position within OPEC**

Islamic Cold War

- At the End of Iran-Iraq War, the idealistic challenge turned to **Full-fledged Power Rivalry** known as the Islamic “Cold War.”
- To unnerve Saudis, Iran started to speak directly to Arab populations to undermine the Arab rulers’ legitimacy (portraying them as puppets of Washington and upstaging them on the Palestinian question).
- Khomeini Death & Pragmatism: Relations improved

Rafsanjani-Khatami Easing Tension

Restoring Diplomatic Relations

- Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami took a more moderate stance and tried to improve relations with the Gulf states.
- The two countries restored diplomatic relations in March 1991 and conducted reciprocal visits between their leaders aimed at easing regional tensions and enhancing Iran–Arab relations

Limited Cooperation

- Limited cooperation became possible within an overall atmosphere of suspicion and competition.
- A cooperation agreement (1998) and a security accord (2001) were signed.

Agreements were short-lived

- Because in 2003 US invaded Iraq and derailed the reconciliation.
- A democratic political order in Shia-majority Iraq meant a friendly neighbour for Iran. Saudis were against war because it could only increase Iran's regional influence. Saudis resisted the new reality in Iraq, and refrained from re-establishing diplomatic relations with Baghdad until 2015.

Shift of Balance of Power

Rise of Iran

- The fall of Saddam Hussein shifted the balance of power in Iraq in favor of Iran.
- Iran formed the so-called Axis of Resistance (Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas), to advance its hegemonic aspirations.
- IRGC renewed its campaign for Shiite dominance & created a formidable Shiite militia force in Iraq
- IRGC penetrated the Iraqi political system.
- Another upsetting point was the IRGC approach to Houthis in Yemen and extended material support to the Houthis, to challenge the Saudis from the south.
- Formation of this axis demonstrated Iran's greater skill at using proxies to advance strategic goals.

Ahmadinejad Poisonous Rhetoric

- For the Sunni Arab monarchies, Ahmadinejad presidency was troubling;
- Ahmadinejad constantly reminded his neighbors of Iran's hegemonic goals.
- The two countries officially maintained a cordial relations but they worked behind the scenes to undermine each other:
- Saudis tried to curtail Iran's influenced by supporting Iran's opposition groups.
- Iran tried to undermine Saudis through covert attacks (i.e. attempting to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to Washington in 2011 and launching targeted cyberattacks against Aramco facilities and Saudi government websites).
- **Fomenting Unrest among Minorities**
- **Enhancing Missile Program**

Iran-Saudi Arms Race

- The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): 98.5 billion dollars on its militaries annually,
- Iran: 10.6 billion dollars.
- Data released by the U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS) indicate that the GCC took possession of 38.5 billion dollars' worth of new arms between 2004 and 2011, 35 times more than Iran's acquisition of 1.1 billion dollars for the same period.
- In 2009 Saudi's imports of weapons and military technology were 18 times larger than Iran.
- Between October 2010 and October 2014: \$90.435 billion
- In 2015: \$85.3 billion (compared to Iran's \$10 billion)
- Arms imports of the UAE were 16 times larger compared with Iran

Iran under Arms Embargo



The Arab Spring in the Gulf from Popular Protest To Civil War

Arab Spring turned the traditional Iran–Saudi rivalry into a fierce regional confrontation

- Reviving claim to Bahrain, encouraging its Shiites to oppose Gov (Operation Peninsula Shield) (Hardliners Vs Pragmatists).
- IRGC encouraged Shiites in Saudi Arabia Eastern Provinces to challenge the Kingdom.
- King Abdullah responded by offering economic concessions, but Sheikh Nimr al Nimr did not stop challenging the ruling elite. Nimr was executed.
- Iran's respons? Direct military option? Or proxy war?
- Yemen Houthis

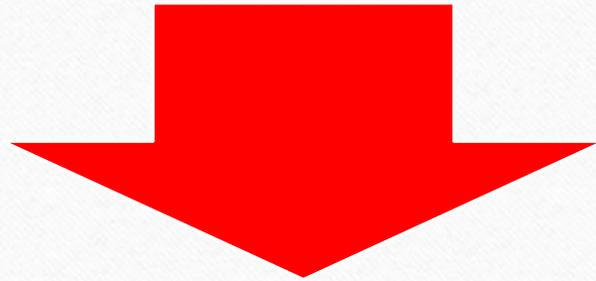
Rouhani's Short Détente With Saudi Arabia

The War in Yemen As a Spoiler



**What is the Saudi Arabia Plan to Push
Back the Iranian Hegemony Project?**

Saudi Arabia Stood the way of Trotskyites



IRI



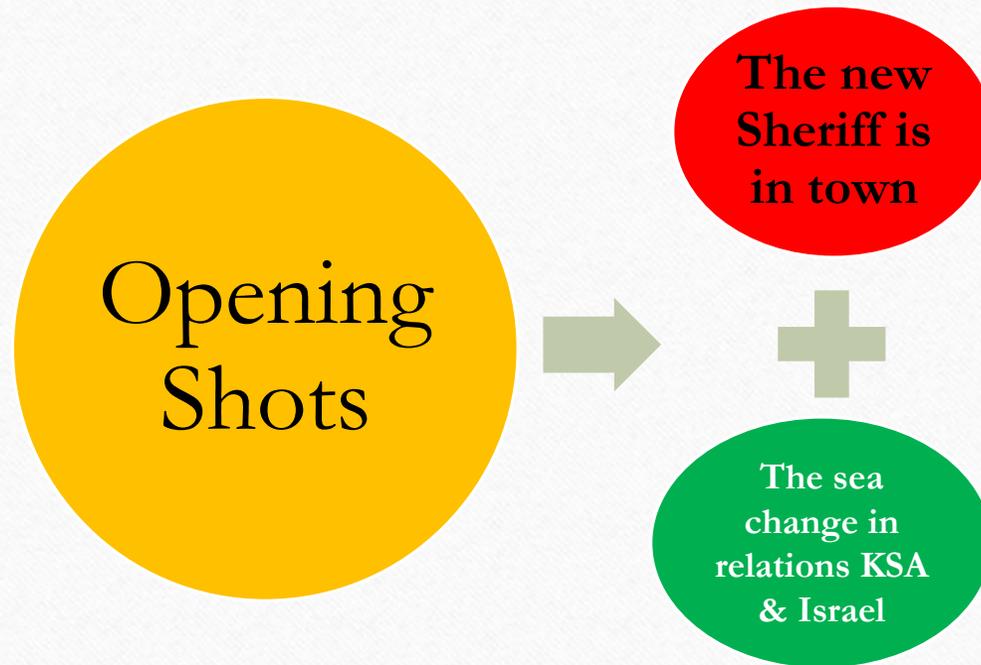
KSA



Saudi Reaction



Opening shot in the new phase of the cold war



The Trump Administration

Tilting The Balance Toward Saudi Arabia

- **Suadi Arabia and Bahrain Blamed Iran for Supporting Radical Shiite Groups**
- **Bahraini authorities prepared a dossier documenting Iran's involvement in arming and training the terror groups**
- **Trump listed Iran as Driver of Instability**
- **Trump Visit to Saudi Arabia**

KSA End Game: How are they going to push back the Iranian hegemony project?



Two Opportunities



Trump's plan to
impose sanctions
on the IRGC



Israel Help

What is the Iranian thinking?

Moderates

- Avoid direct provocations, Cost of War is high/detente with KSA

- Withdraw from Yemen

- Stop Meddle in the Gulf States

Hardliners

- Verbal confrontation, avoid kinetic actions/Protecting the hegemony project, no matter the costs!

- Increase support for the Huthis in Yemen

- Continue mobilization of Shite minorities & other proxies