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Saudi Arabia Is Iran's New National Security Threat

06/03/2016 05:00 pm ET



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Seyed Hossein Mousavian
Head of Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's National Security Council (1997-2005)



ASSOCIATED PRESS

TEHRAN, Iran — The relationship between Iran and the [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) countries — a political and economic union consisting of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates — is on a dangerous trajectory and risks leading to direct confrontation. During a recent seminar in Europe, a European diplomat who has made the case to officials in Riyadh for Saudi-Iran rapprochement starkly told me that the regional situation was even comparable to pre-World War I Europe. The relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, he said, has deteriorated to such an extent that both sides and their allies have found themselves at the precipice of a major war.

For years, Iran's primary national security threats have been the United States, Israel and terrorism committed by groups such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the Taliban and others in their [ideological vein](#). However, since [cutting ties](#) with Iran in January, Saudi Arabia has adopted a more overtly hostile policy towards Iran. It has also managed to convince several other GCC states and a number of countries

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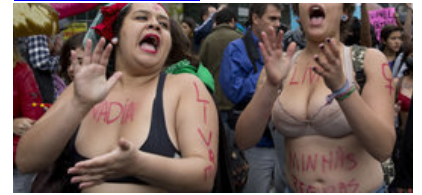
The relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, a European diplomat said, has deteriorated to such an extent that both sides and their allies have found themselves at the precipice of a major war.

This is an unfortunate development, as casting blame on Iran for the region's ills or seeking to ostracize Iran is not the solution to regional crises. The only path to achieving stability in the Middle East is to foster regional cooperation, which can be accomplished through a framework I outline here. Unfortunately, however, Saudi Arabia has for the time being opted for escalating tensions with Iran. The following seven points summarize Saudi Arabia's hostile approach:

1. Making unprecedented [secret overtures](#) to Israel in an effort to coordinate their policies against Iran.
2. Expending considerable effort and resources to persuade the [GCC](#) and [Arab League](#) to adopt anti-Iranian stances. In the past, such endeavors were only taken to mobilize Arab countries against Israel.
3. Attempting to create a Sunni crescent against majority-Shia Iran, signified by Riyadh's efforts to bolster cooperation with [Ankara](#) and [Cairo](#).
4. Fostering a [coalition](#) between Arab autocracies and Israel against Hezbollah in Lebanon.
5. Doing everything it can to prevent a reduction of hostilities between Iran and the United States and an improvement in Iran's relations with the West.
6. Lending [support](#) to groups carrying out terrorist acts in Iran such as the [Mojahedin-e Khalq](#), which until 2012 [was](#) on the U.S. State Department's list of terrorist organizations.
7. Attempting to stoke chaos in Iran's Sunni regions through [propaganda](#) and other means.

The principal implication of these seven tactics undertaken against Iran is that Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as a significant national security threat to Iran. This has not always been the case, as both countries pursued [détente](#) in the 1990s after the Iran-Iraq War and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, culminating in the [signing of a security pact](#) in 2001.

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Saudi King Salman (L) shakes hands with Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani before a GCC summit in Saudi Arabia on May 31, 2016. (Saudi Press Agency/Handout)

There is still much that remains unclear about Iran's relations with its neighbors across the Persian Gulf. Will the other GCC states come in lockstep with Saudi Arabia and follow its lead on Iran or not? What will be the final outcome of the tension-laden path Saudi Arabia and Iran are on now? How can these two states remove themselves from this road to conflict?

What is clear is that the GCC states share a view that Iranian influence in the region threatens them and is illustrative of Iran's desire for regional hegemony. I recently attended a workshop in Doha where all the participants from the GCC states expressed concern about Iran's regional clout, which stretches from Iran to Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

However, four GCC states (Oman, the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar) have expressed their concern at Saudi Arabia's approach towards Iran by [not yielding](#) to Saudi demands that they sever relations with Iran.

“**The GCC states share a view that Iranian influence in the region threatens them and is illustrative of Iran's desire for regional hegemony.**”

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threat it faces from Iran. Riyadh is enraged at the United States for changing its broader strategy towards the region, for which Iran cannot be blamed. This change in the U.S. approach was spurred in large part because of America's decreased dependence on Persian Gulf hydrocarbons and its failed interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, the United States wants its partners in the region to play [more of a role](#) in securing themselves and the region.

The GCC countries, in [particular Saudi Arabia](#), have not been happy about the developments in Afghanistan after the downfall of the Taliban regime, but they seemingly forget that the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan was precipitated by the 9/11 attacks, of which [15](#) of the 19 perpetrators were Saudis, and none were Iranian. Likewise, the GCC states are [angry](#) about the consequences of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, but they avoid the fact that they [supported](#) Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980 while Iran [condemned](#) the 1990 Iraqi invasion of GCC member state Kuwait. Furthermore, the GCC countries should be cognizant that after the United States overthrew the Baathist Iraqi government in 2003, there was nothing it could do to prevent the majority-Shia population from playing a dominant role in Iraqi politics.

Saudi Arabia was also infuriated at the Arab Spring and the popular overthrow of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali; events Iran had nothing to do with. Iran in fact [condemned](#) the attack on Libya by NATO and some GCC states, which turned an Arab country into a failed state.



U.S. soldiers and Iraqi civilians topple a statue of Saddam Hussein in downtown Baghdad on Wednesday April 9, 2003. (AP/Jerome Delay)

The GCC is also frustrated at the strength of the Lebanese Hezbollah movement, exemplified by it [declaring](#) Hezbollah a "terrorist" organization in March. Hezbollah first emerged as a group resisting Israel's invasion and occupation of Lebanon in the early 1980s. Most Arab states during that time were muted in response to

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Lebanese territory and has played a key role maintaining the territorial integrity of Lebanon.

The Arab world today is suffering from a variety of real ailments, with deep-rooted economic and social problems taking an increasingly unsustainable toll on Arab societies and governments. Issues such as chronic unemployment, massive corruption and inept dictatorial governance are the real threats facing the Arab people. Iran has been turned into a convenient scapegoat to distract Arab nations from the domestic factors that have been plaguing their lives. Saudi Arabia is a case in point, with much [reporting](#) done on the dire political and socioeconomic situation in the country.

Ultimately, the GCC and Iran playing the blame game is not a solution. For its part, Iran needs to acknowledge and take steps to alleviate the legitimate security concerns of the GCC states. Iran also needs to remember that the alternative to House of Saud in Saudi Arabia will be the "[House Wahhab](#)." On the other hand, if the GCC continues to follow Riyadh in its aggressive approach towards Iran, highlighted by the aforementioned seven points, it will set itself up for perpetual conflict with Iran. The GCC should not burn all bridges with Iran and instead the smaller states in the GCC should do everything they can to push for compromise with Iran. Furthermore, the GCC should know that an alliance with Israel against Iran could put the credibility and legitimacy of their own individual governments in jeopardy.

“

Iran has been turned into a convenient scapegoat to distract Arab nations from the domestic factors that have been plaguing their lives.

The people of Iran and the GCC states are condemned by geography to be neighbors forever. They would both benefit from living side by side in peace and harmony as opposed to viewing one another in a zero-sum manner. It also goes without saying that whether in the short or long run, the United States will withdraw from the region. At that point, the countries of the Persian Gulf will have to bear the responsibility of providing security themselves.

I believe it would be wise for the GCC and Iran to establish a regional dialogue forum to commence discussions on a broad spectrum of security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf, including:

- Mutual understanding, cooperation;
- Arms control, regional conflicts, military contacts;
- Promotion of non-proliferation;
- Establishment of zone free from Weapons of Mass Destruction;

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envisage practical measures to gradually expand cooperation in the following fields.

This framework will allow Iran, Iraq and the GCC states to regularly engage in sincere dialogue to address their concerns and work with each other. I am confident that Iran will earnestly support the creation of such a regional cooperation system in the Persian Gulf.

Ambassador [Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#) is a scholar at Princeton University and a former head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's National Security Council. His latest book, "Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace" was released in May 2014.

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CONVERSATIONS

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Thomas Peters · Works at Self-Employed

I think the root of the problem remains a combination of religious blood feud, and tribal conflict. The Saudis enjoyed an extended period of influence, particularly over the US, due to their strategic role in international oil markets, which had the effect of making America their "attack dog" against Iran going back to before the Shah. I strongly suspect it was Saudi influence that kept the "enemy" relationship between the US and Iran going far longer than it made any sense.

But in the end, it is still Sunni against Shi'ia, and Arab against Persian, with both extending back 1000 years or more.

The challenge for the world, and US leadership, is to help the region evolve beyond the past conflicts and find a way to live as modern nations in the region. The Iran deal was a giant step forward, though like most improvements, its immediate effects seem to make things worse. But having the US take a more neutral stance between these traditional rivals is a positive thing.

Like · Reply · Jun 4, 2016 5:46pm



Richard Pearce · Calgary, Alberta

The author carefully dances around the one core issue that is driving the Saud regime to pressure the rest of the 'GCC', and to pursue an alignment with the Israeli regime, and that is the effort to stamp out democracy movements in Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are trying to form the same sort of antidemocracy axis that used to hold Latin America firmly in its grasp (with the full cooperation of the US). The fiction that the Saudis conflict with Iran has something to do with Sunni vs Shia falls apart when one includes the subject of Hamas/Palestine in the picture. Iran supports them against the brutal antidemocratic regime that oppresses and impoverishes them, and they are Sunni.


Like · Reply · 19 hrs



Change Iran Now



with Saudi Arabia. Iran is clearly the engine driving almost all of the disruption occurring there. Until we stop treating Iran with kid gloves and as a serious threat, the mullahs will never alter their behavior.

Like · Reply ·  1 · Jun 4, 2016 6:17pm



Mac Nayeri

what crap...

Like · Reply · 21 hrs



Richard Pearce · Calgary, Alberta

So, the democratic yearnings of the Yemenis (and Bahrainis), the broad support for the multireligious, multiethnic Syrian government by the Syrian population, the rejection of extremism by the Iraqi people, all trace back to Iran, by your thesis, and those things make Iran the force for bad in the region. Pretty clear where you're coming from.

Like · Reply · 19 hrs



Nawaf Almansour · Boston College

very true. I hope the Iraninan and the Arab people will liberate themselves from the Power Hungry Iranian Mullahs

Like · Reply ·  2 · 18 hrs



Rana Al-Hanaya · Teacher at King Saud University

"The relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, a European diplomat said, has deteriorated to such an extent that both sides and their allies have found themselves at the precipice of a major war."

War isn't a new situation at all. I don't understand why it seems like the work is making it seem like a Saudi VS. Iran situation while it has so many other states involved. Even netanyahu has stated this ... He who stands not with the Kingdom.

Like · Reply ·  1 · Jun 4, 2016 9:41am



Siavash SZ · Calgary, Alberta

Writing from within the KSA nobody expects you to be fair but at least read the article before commenting. Read the seven points, everyone knows KSA is collaborating with Israel. Preparation of embassies were done months before and yesterday jobeir asked Israel to accept 2002 peace initiative which was much anticipated. Overall this article is very fair an correct. You just need to read it. I believe it is an unofficial declaration from Iran. I also think KSA would lose more of it doesnt listens may be never reach its 2030 goal because of conflicts it is fueling.

Like · Reply · Jun 4, 2016 10:36am



Nawaf Almansour · Boston College

- What is clear is that the GCC states share a view that Iranian influence in the region threatens them -

Iran implants and funds cells in Arab countries that is all arabs are against Iran - except ofcourse an Iran loyalist Shia like the writer which makes Iran sound like it is a victim !!

Like · Reply · 18 hrs



Sultan Z. Al-Shehri · 3D artist at Science Source Images

Iran, the number one threat to all Arab states. Iran is actually occupying more Arab lands than Israel illegal settlements.. Iran is driven by a deep racial hoistility towards Arab people. Maz Jobrani, a great Iranian-American comedian for example has made tours across all Gulf states. He was welcomed with open arms. He wasn't allowed in Iran. Can an Arabian guy be allowed the same treatment by the racist regime in Iran? The Arab region occupied by Iran are treated as second class citizens. Their language, their heritage is constantly supressed. Every single country Iran has entered is in absoute chaos (Iraq post-2003, Syria, Lebennon and now Yemen with their Houthis rebels)

Like · Reply · Jun 4 2016 1:17pm · Edited

Like · Reply · 21 hrs



Sultan Z. Al-Shehri · 3D artist at Science Source Images

Mac Nayeri That was very informative reply Mac (name-dropping).. really, thank you!!

Like · Reply · 21 hrs



Beverly Harlow · Weyers Cave, Virginia

Looks like, if the payments are automatically deducted from one's bank account EVERY MONTH, and never late, that it would give one a better than POOR credit rating. On one account, the interest rate is 29.9%, and is impossible to pay down-BUT we still keep paying--almost all is interest!!! We could get a much higher credit rating if we could pay down the principle on our credit card. Slate talks the talk but doesn't walk the walk. At least not for us!!

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Thomas Peters · Works at Self-Employed

Are you lost, Beverly? Your post has nothing to do with anything here.

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