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## Ending the Iran-Saudi Cold War

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by Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Sina Toossi

In January, Saudi Arabia severed formal diplomatic ties with Iran after a row over its execution of a prominent Shia cleric ended with angry protestors attacking its Tehran embassy. Diplomacy has since been replaced by an ever-escalating war of words, and tensions have reached an all-time high.

Under pragmatist president Hassan Rouhani, Iran has for its part sought to foster dialogue on multiple occasions. Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif initiated meetings with his Saudi counterpart at venues like the UN General Assembly, attended the funeral of the late King Abdullah, and repeatedly dispatched envoys for talks with Saudi officials. "Once our Saudi friends are ready to engage in serious dialogue, they will find Iran to be ... ready," Zarif proclaimed in late 2015. His efforts have thus far been met with a muted Saudi response.

Instead, King Salman bin Abdulaziz's Saudi Arabia has elected to pursue overt hostility. Among the kingdom's provocations have been lending support to notorious Iranian terrorist groups like the MEK and expending considerable resources to persuade the GCC, Arab League, and Organization of Islamic Cooperation to adopt anti-Iranian stances.

The most recent Saudi-Iran spat to dominate global headlines stems from last year's Hajj stampede, which resulted in a death toll the Saudis have obfuscated but Western sources have estimated at over 2,400 and Iran at roughly 4,700. It marked the latest in a long line of Hajj accidents under Saudi supervision.

According to *The New York Times*, Saudi authorities triggered the stampede by spontaneously blocking access to a key road near an Iranian encampment. A plurality of the fatalities were Iranians.

At the time, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei emphasized Iran was exercising "self-restraint in accordance with Islamic ethics" but cautioned it was nearing its limits. The succeeding year would prove to break this patience.

“Because of Saudi rulers’ oppressive behavior towards God’s guests, the world of Islam must fundamentally reconsider the management of the two holy places and hajj,” Ayatollah Khamenei declared on the stampede’s anniversary. Even the usually measured Javad Zarif recently stated that the al-Saud ruling family has turned into a “ruthless and illogical” regime.

### Saudi Fears

At security conferences with many Saudis in the past two years, one of the authors, Seyed Hossein Mousavian, has consistently heard the same grievances. Iran, Saudis believe, has after three decades of sanctions and pressure still gained the upper hand over its neighbors. With traditional Arab powers like Egypt and Iraq either in domestic disarray or aligned with Iran, Saudi Arabia feels that it is the last Arab country standing in the way of total Iranian regional dominance.

It is understandable for Saudi leaders to feel vulnerable. Saudi Arabia is a young state that by itself is not capable of competing with Iran, given its population of roughly 20 million native citizens, upwards of 15 percent of whom are Shia Muslims that face routine discrimination. As an absolute monarchy, it also faces the triple threat of Sunni extremism, mainstream Islamist opposition, and calls for liberal democratic reform. Less discussed but also pertinent are the sharp regional and tribal fissures lurking just underneath the surface of Saudi society.

To bolster its regional position, Saudi Arabia has relied on its partnership with the United States. Over the past several decades, the US has effectively underwritten Saudi Arabia’s ability to exert power and influence in the region. Thus, what frightens the kingdom more than anything, and the prime reason for its opposition to the Iranian nuclear negotiations and much of President Obama’s Middle East policies, is the prospect of US engagement with Iran coupled with broader US disengagement from the Middle East.

The nature of Saudi provocations against Iran today suggests that it is bent on stoking regional tensions to keep the US embroiled in the region on its behalf. As President Obama has said, U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia “seek to exploit American ‘muscle’ for their own narrow and sectarian ends.”

### A Realistic Peace Predicated on Mutual Acceptance

Saudi leaders must understand that Iran, regardless of its government, will always play a major regional role. This is primarily due to its structural characteristics, its strategic location and size, its demographics and natural resources, and a millennia-spanning history of unbroken statehood. Today, Iran is a nation of 80 million, endowed with the world’s largest combined oil and natural gas reserves, an increasingly diversified economy, self-reliance in key economic and security matters, and a highly educated population.

Saudi leaders have two choices before them. The first is to continue down their current path of pursuing aggressive, unilateralist foreign policies and preconditioning dialogue on quixotic notions of Iran having zero role in its neighborhood. This approach has been exemplified by the Saudis bombing Yemen with impunity, crushing pro-democracy protests in Bahrain, refusing to recognize the post-war democratic Iraqi government for six years, aiding and abetting terrorism (as attested by both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump), and countering the Arab Spring revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, to name but a few destabilizing policies. Of course, Saudi efforts to export its intolerant state ideology of Wahhabism and the disastrous effects this has had on the Muslim world have been well documented, most recently by Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif in a *New York Times* op-ed highlighting the global danger of this creed.

In taking this path, Saudi rulers would be wise to consider that for years the US, the sole global superpower, attempted a similar approach of altering Middle Eastern politics to align with its preferences through military intervention, only to meet failure and sow further destabilization. Given Saudi Arabia’s mounting economic and political woes, it is already bleeding while trying to make Iran bleed.

However, an alternative approach exists, predicated on abandoning self-defeating zero-sum mindsets and recognizing legitimate regional security threats and interests. Only then can Riyadh and Tehran begin to view their respective capabilities as assets and move towards establishing a credible, sustainable equilibrium that bolsters regional peace and security. Iran’s president has already demonstrated his readiness for such dialogue. The onus is now on Saudi Arabia.

*Photo: Saudi ambassador to Iran Abdolrahma Bin Gharman al-Shahri meets with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in 2014. Photo by Amin Hosroshahi vis ISNA.*

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