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## Contrasting Leadership Styles In The Saudi-Iran Conflict

JANUARY 4, 2018 ([HTTP://LOBELOG.COM/CONTRASTING-LEADERSHIP-STYLES-IN-THE-SAUDI-IRAN-CONFLICT/](http://lobelog.com/contrasting-leadership-styles-in-the-saudi-iran-conflict/)) [GUEST \(HTTP://LOBELOG.COM/AUTHOR/GUEST/\)](http://lobelog.com/author/guest/) / [LEAVE A COMMENT \(HTTP://LOBELOG.COM/CONTRASTING-LEADERSHIP-STYLES-IN-THE-SAUDI-IRAN-CONFLICT/#RESPOND\)](http://lobelog.com/contrasting-leadership-styles-in-the-saudi-iran-conflict/#respond)

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by *Seyed Hossein Mousavian*

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) is steadily consolidating power in Riyadh and positioning himself to become the most powerful ruler in Saudi history. His rise has been accompanied with a ratcheting up of hostilities against Iran and even war rhetoric (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-politics/saudi-arabia-says-lebanon-declares-war-deepening-crisis-idUSKBN1D61SZ>). As Saudi-Iran tensions increase, the lived experiences and leadership styles of the 78-year-old Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and 32-year-old MBS will decide the future of peace and stability in the region.

Before Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Khamenei was a political activist who opposed the dictatorship of the Shah and endured 15 years of prison, torture, and exile. He rose through the revolutionary ranks after the revolution and in 1981, was elected president. During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988)—which saw the United States and other global powers as well as regional Arab states support (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/26/exclusive-cia-files-prove-america-helped-saddam-as-he-gassed-iran/>)the aggressor Saddam Hussein—Ayatollah Khamenei played (<http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/supreme-leader>) a key role in overseeing and leading the war effort. MBS, on the other hand, was just born in 1985 and has no comparable experience.

During the 1980s, Iran also faced a wave of terrorism, with the MEK group (<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/giuliani-mek-terrorist-group-money-bolton-iran-214479>) alone responsible for over 17,000 deaths ([https://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-hoh/17000-dead-iranians-who-k\\_b\\_9843370.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-hoh/17000-dead-iranians-who-k_b_9843370.html)). Ayatollah Khamenei is himself a victim of terrorism, with one his arms left paralyzed after a bomb attack in 1981. The silver lining of Iran's history of falling victim to terrorism is that its leaders have become counterterrorism veterans—another reason for Iran's success in combatting terrorist groups throughout the region. MBS, meanwhile, does not have a counterterrorism track record and was preparing to take the reins of power at a time when, according (<https://theintercept.com/2016/10/12/hillary-clinton-acknowledges-saudi-terror-financing-in-hacked-email-hinting-at-tougher-approach/>)to a 2014 email by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, his country was “providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL.”

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Ayatollah Khamenei has for 28 years presided over a state that has been subject to every form of economic, political, and security pressure by outside powers—chiefly the United States—aimed at spurring regime change. However, not only has Iran’s security and stability endured during this period, but the country has emerged (<http://theconversation.com/the-rise-and-rise-of-iran-how-tehran-has-become-pivotal-to-the-future-of-the-middle-east-83160>) as an influential regional power. Policies of sanctions, pressure, and threats of war against Tehran have in fact resulted in Iran consolidating its position as the only regional state not beholden (<http://www.presstv.com/Detail/Fr/2017/05/01/520171/Iran-Persian-Gulf-Middle-East-Sea-of-Oman-Habibollah-Sayyari-Navy-Army-Armed-Forces>) to foreign powers for its security.

Moreover, Ayatollah Khamenei’s national security strategy has been premised on the belief that resisting U.S. hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East is not only the source of Iran’s strength, but allows it to maintain its independence (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/04/middleeast/ayatollah-death-to-america/index.html>).

On the contrary, the Saudi royal family views the United States as its security guarantor and has relied on U.S. military, political, and economic patronage for decades. In May, MBS signaled his aim to continue this dependency by signing the largest arms deal in U.S. history for \$350 billion—and thereby winning full support (<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/05/saudi-relations-timeline-170518112421011.html>) for his regional and domestic agenda from the White House.

Within the region, Tehran has formed (<http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/iran-and-russia-strategic-alliance/>) a strategic partnership with Russia. At the behest of the Syrian and Iraqi governments, Tehran has played (<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/4961792/isis-finished-hassan-rouhani-iranian-president-announces-obliterated-syria-iraq/>) a key role in those countries to secure their territorial integrity and defeat terrorist organizations in the vein of the Islamic State (ISIS or IS). Saudi Arabia, despite being given *carte blanche* by the Trump White House, has waded into a quagmire in Yemen, creating the world’s greatest humanitarian catastrophe (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/yemen-war-saudi-arabia-united-kingdom-crisis-starvation.html>) with its ferocious bombing campaign. It has failed in its attempt to orchestrate regime change in Qatar and Syria, witnessed its effort to undermine the Lebanese government backfire (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/22/world/middleeast/lebanon-saad-hariri-resignation.html>) in full view of the international community, and maintains an ever-more precarious (<http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-41959522/oil-pipeline-explodes-in-bahrain>) hold over Bahrain. Such actions have earned MBS a reputation as hotheaded and impulsive, with *The New York Times* noting (<https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/11/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-waleed-bin-talal.html?referer=https%3A%2F%2Ft.co%2FmUr0haN5z1%3Famp%3D1>) how many in Saudi Arabia view him as “brash, power-hungry and inexperienced.” Other analysts have stated (<https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/23/saudi-arabia-has-become-an-irrational-actor-in-the-middle-east-says-analyst.html>) how under MBS, “Saudi Arabia has become an irrational actor in the Middle East.”

Another vital aspect of Iran’s national and regional security strategy has been its experience in successfully mobilizing popular forces to complement its professional armed forces. Ayatollah Khomeini initiated this policy after Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran in 1980, which led to the creation of popular militia units that would eventually become the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic\\_Revolutionary\\_Guard\\_Corps](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_Revolutionary_Guard_Corps)) and *Basij* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basij>). Ayatollah Sistani, Iraq’s most senior religious leader, emulated this model of mobilizing popular forces in 2014 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27834462>) after IS overran large parts of

the country. The ensuing “Popular Mobilization Forces” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular\\_Mobilization\\_Forces](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular_Mobilization_Forces)) played a decisive role in the fight against IS. A similar model has also been implemented in Syria with the National Defense Forces ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Defence\\_Forces\\_\(Syria\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Defence_Forces_(Syria))) and other groups.

Iran has also made opposition to Israel a core aspect of its foreign policy and has paid a high cost for its support of the Palestinians. On the other side, MBS is rapidly fostering (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/07/jared-kushner-mohammed-bin-salman-and-benjamin-netanyahu-are-up-to-something/>) ties with Israel in an attempt to confront Iranian regional influence. Saudi Arabia’s green light (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171208-israel-tv-saudi-arabia-egypt-gave-trump-green-light-regarding-jerusalem/>) to President Donald Trump to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel will contribute (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/02/world/middleeast/trump-israel-jerusalem-capital.html>) dramatically to the erosion of the king’s popularity and legitimacy while making it easier (<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/donald-trump-israel-jerusalem-iran-turkey-sunni-shia-palestine-uprising-a8099801.html>) for Iran to influence the Muslim world to stand together to resist the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia in defense of the Palestinians and the holy sites.

Ayatollah Khamenei is well entrenched in his position, coming into it by way of a majority vote from Iran’s Assembly of Experts—a popularly elected ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/02/24/why-irans-assembly-of-experts-election-is-the-real-race-to-be-watching/?utm\\_term=.ccf09839ecc4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/02/24/why-irans-assembly-of-experts-election-is-the-real-race-to-be-watching/?utm_term=.ccf09839ecc4)) body. He maintains legitimacy as a political figure and, as a Shia marja (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marja%27>), is a religious guide to millions around the world. As recent purges (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/opinion/saudi-arabia-donald-trump.html>) indicate, MBS is sidelining his rivals to ward off potential obstacles to the crown once his father passes away or abdicates.

On matters of the economy, Ayatollah Khamenei and MBS also differ fundamentally. Although both Iran and Saudi Arabia suffer from corruption, chronic unemployment, and an oil-price plunge, Iran has in the face of these challenges taken steps to reform its inefficient subsidy system ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian\\_subsidy\\_reform\\_plan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_subsidy_reform_plan)) and diversify its economy. The World Bank has noted how oil accounts for roughly 30 percent (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/publication/economic-brief-july-2016>) of government revenues in Iran, as opposed to nearly 90 percent (<http://www.heritage.org/index/country/saudi-arabia>) in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the IMF has said ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/what-the-royal-purge-means-for-saudi-arabia--and-its-oil/2017/11/06/9cba9142-c256-11e7-afe9-4f60b5a6c4a0\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.ee2d6a9c2765](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/what-the-royal-purge-means-for-saudi-arabia--and-its-oil/2017/11/06/9cba9142-c256-11e7-afe9-4f60b5a6c4a0_story.html?utm_term=.ee2d6a9c2765)) that Saudi Arabia will again this year run a deficit, further draining its foreign reserves. Given that traditionally Saudi Arabia’s influence in the Arab world has been based on its financial power, this declining financial prowess will undermine Saudi political leadership in the Arab world.

The recent (<http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/34931/Misreading-Qazvin-in-Washington>) protests in various Iranian cities that have claimed a number of lives and injuries are rooted in economic grievances. At the same time, the Trump White House has coordinated (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-11-10/trump-s-secret-weapon-the-hidden-ties-that-bind-israel-saudis>) belligerent actions against Iran with Israel and Saudi Arabia to more aggressive ends than in the past. MBS, whose consolidation of power in the kingdom Trump has emphatically supported, has explicitly declared (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-defense-minister.html>) that he would take “the battle” inside Iran. After the failures

of the coup d'états in Turkey, Qatar, and most recently reportedly (<https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/898032/middle-east-news-latest-jordan-king-brothers-arrested-saudi-arabia-iran-war>) in Jordan—as well as the effective hostage taking (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/24/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-saad-hariri-mohammed-bin-salman-lebanon.html>) of the Lebanese prime minister by Saudi Arabia—the Washington-Riyadh-Abu Dhabi-Tel Aviv axis is now seeking to exploit peaceful protests in Iran and stoke instability and chaos inside the country.

### **Divergent Leadership Styles**

Iran's leader was raised (<https://owa.princeton.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=1t5oRqJah0ebrM5JA24qImhPX7sKwKbNbp5xMeQ9QYPx6mEafnFPVCA..&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.leader.ir%2fen%2fbio%2fbiography>) in a poor household and has maintained a modest lifestyle since assuming official positions after the revolution. In contrast, MBS has from birth lived in ornate palaces and never tasted personal hardship or poverty. Last year, *The New York Times* even reported ([https://owa.princeton.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=8OBk-KLVVqPUUvY08oPX\\_fOsKOLiWEW\\_yVj7M2JtIR6mEafnFPVCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fwww.nytimes.com%2f2016%2f10%2f16%2fworld%2frise-of-saudi-prince-shatters-decades-of-royal-tradition.html](https://owa.princeton.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=8OBk-KLVVqPUUvY08oPX_fOsKOLiWEW_yVj7M2JtIR6mEafnFPVCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fwww.nytimes.com%2f2016%2f10%2f16%2fworld%2frise-of-saudi-prince-shatters-decades-of-royal-tradition.html)) that he owned a \$500 million yacht.

With over 50 years of political, military, and security experience (<https://owa.princeton.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=rGzxRSvMsDYrvBawu1YtY156Ofi6zJgl9pIYtEnrbMZ6mEafnFPVCA..&URL=http%3a%2f%2fenglish.khamenei.ir%2fnews%2f130%2fbio>), the Iranian leader is well versed in geopolitics and strategic decision-making and presides over a relatively efficient state with a rich civilization heritage. This is chiefly why, within the region, Iran has been able to make maximum gains with minimum costs, while Saudi Arabia has paid maximum costs and made minimum gains.

Nevertheless, Mohammad bin Salman is a young and ambitious leader who has an unprecedented reform plan to transform Saudi Arabia into a more open society and curb the power of its fundamentalist Wahhabi religious establishment. This is precisely what Saudi Arabia needs. If he manages to succeed, the country will become a major force for stability and development in the region and the Arab world. On the other hand, the entire Middle East will witness a new wave of havoc if Saudi Arabia succumbs to chaos.

After the eruption of the Arab uprisings in 2011, a major change in the region's geopolitical landscape is inevitable. A zero-sum Iran-Saudi relationship will not only be detrimental to regional stability, it will diminish—not enhance—prospects for Saudi reform. Cooperation between these two major regional heavyweights remains the key element to shape a new peaceful Middle Eastern order and enable MBS to manage Saudi Arabia's domestic challenges.

*Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian* (<https://owa.princeton.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=k2QuoB95Q0-AAYGPW8daG087y5rwpSy4iPuhsBS1pdJ6mEafnFPVCA..&URL=http%3a%2f%2fhosseinmousavian.com%2f>) is Middle East Security and Nuclear Policy Specialist at Princeton University and a former Iranian diplomat. His latest book, *Iran and the United States: An Insider's view on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace* ([https://owa.princeton.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=neuTfN55Y5LCE3JOzTW7wjD0Q-TTO\\_9xNbRj1Glw3WaKv0afnFPVCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fwww.bloomsbury.com%2fus%2firan-and-the-united-states-9781628920079%2f](https://owa.princeton.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=neuTfN55Y5LCE3JOzTW7wjD0Q-TTO_9xNbRj1Glw3WaKv0afnFPVCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fwww.bloomsbury.com%2fus%2firan-and-the-united-states-9781628920079%2f)), was released in May 2014. Photo: Mohammed bin Salman and Ayatollah Khamenei


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