

Iran-Saudi Arabia relations Figuring out the next move

SUMMARY

Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia – two powerhouses and major rivals of the Muslim world – have always been complicated. The 1979 Revolution in Iran, and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), have contributed to entrenching their historical antagonisms and left an imprint in the foreign policies of both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Since 2011, Tehran and Riyadh have repeatedly exchanged blows, including through their proxies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Iran has also often been accused of interfering in the internal affairs of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and other Gulf countries with significant Shiite minorities. Iran, on the other hand, has accused Saudi Arabia of promoting anti-Shiite policies and practices.

Both sides have also resorted to downgrading or suspending diplomatic ties in the past – as was the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia in 1988, and Iran and Bahrain in 2011 and 2015. In that sense, the recent decision by Saudi Arabia and several other Gulf countries to cut or downgrade diplomatic ties with Iran does not represent a radical change in their bilateral relations but is nonetheless worrying given growing sectarian problems in the region. The escalation of the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia – only a few weeks after the two countries sat for the first time at the same table to discuss the conflict in Syria – comes at a particularly sensitive moment. Implementation of the carefully brokered diplomatic undertakings of the past few months – in particular the nuclear deal with Iran and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) on Syria – depend on good relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Therefore, diplomatic efforts to find a means to help de-escalate the conflict and present all sides with a face-saving option will remain the main challenge for the coming months.



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Iran and Saudi Arabia: multi-layered rivalry

In recent months, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as other Gulf countries have seriously deteriorated. At international level, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been on opposite sides of the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, often acting through proxies. Both have also traded critical remarks concerning their respective domestic affairs. In September 2015, for instance, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani [criticised](#) Saudi Arabia for 'mismanagement' after the *hajj* [stampede](#) in the Mina valley left more than 1 800 pilgrims dead. The most recent series of hostilities between the two countries and across the region follows Saudi Arabia's decision to [execute](#) prominent Shiite cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, together with 46 individuals [suspected](#) of terrorism. However, the dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia – which resulted in suspension of diplomatic ties, trade and air traffic between the two countries – has not only religious but also historic and political [roots](#). [Diplomatic](#) ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran have always been tense, and were [frozen](#) in the past. Riyadh and Tehran had a three-year break in their relationship after hundreds of Iranian pilgrims were killed in clashes at the *hajj* in 1988. The current escalation is particularly worrying because implementation of the laboriously brokered diplomatic undertakings of the past few months – in particular the nuclear deal with Iran, and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) on Syria – depend on good relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia has [made](#) assurances that the row with Iran will not affect talks on Syria. Many [countries](#) in the Gulf fear that Iran's improved international standing – in particular due to the suspension of economic sanctions – may embolden Tehran to become more involved in other countries' internal affairs, especially in Lebanon, Bahrain and Yemen. Bahrain, for instance, [explained](#) its recent decision to expel Iranian diplomats by accusing Iran of 'increasing, flagrant and dangerous meddling' in the internal affairs of Gulf and Arab states. The multinational coalition against terrorism [announced](#) in December 2015 by Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the Saudi-led military operation in [Yemen](#) are a clear indication of the direction which the Gulf countries intend to follow to curb Iran's regional ambitions. On the other hand, [hardliners](#) in Iran rely on anti-Saudi rhetoric to [minimise](#) the potential gains of President Rouhani's reformist camp in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

	Chronology of events leading up to and following Nimr al-Nimr's execution
2011	Anti-government demonstrations in Qatif in Eastern Province.
2012	Arrest of Nimr al-Nimr for seeking 'foreign meddling' in Saudi Arabia's internal affairs and 'disobeying' its rulers.
2014	Riyadh's Specialised Criminal Court sentences Sheikh Al-Nimr to death.
2 Jan 2016	Saudi Arabia executes al-Nimr together with 46 suspected terrorists.
	Iranian protesters storm, loot and set fire to the Saudi Embassy in Tehran and attack the Consulate-General in Mashhad.
3 Jan 2016	Saudi Arabia breaks off diplomatic ties with Iran.
	Bahrain cuts diplomatic ties with Iran. Sudan and United Arab Emirates downgrade their relations with Iran. UAE recalls its ambassador.
4 Jan 2016	Two Sunni mosques in central Iraq attacked overnight. A muezzin (i.e. a person appointed to recite the Muslim call to prayer) is shot and killed south of Baghdad.
5 Jan 2016	Kuwait downgrades diplomatic ties with Iran and recalls its ambassador.
	Iraq offers to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran.
6 Jan 2016	Djibouti cuts diplomatic ties with Iran, and Qatar and Jordan downgrade their diplomatic relations.

Origins of the Sunni-Shia divide

Despite the fact that all Muslims share a number of fundamental convictions, the Muslim community has, over time, split into different [branches](#) and groups. The major split – into Sunni ([87 to 90%](#) of the global Muslim population) and [Shiite](#) Muslims (10 to 13%) – occurred as a result of leadership disputes which arose after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in AD 632. Faced with the question of who should lead the *umma* (community), and on what grounds, Muslims argued over whether the leader had to be a member of the prophet's family and, if so, in what lineage; whether leadership should be hereditary at all; and whether the leader was to be considered infallible. Over time, such differences in opinion evolved and were consolidated in the form of theological and legal teachings, giving rise to distinctive group identities. [Shiites](#) – who represent the majority in Iran and Iraq but also have significant minorities in other Muslim countries – refer to the leaders of the Muslim community as imams and view them as infallible. Sunnis, on the other hand, do not believe that the leaders of the Muslim community can be infallible and do not have a centralised religious [authority](#). In Saudi Arabia, a particularly rigid brand of Sunni Islam thought has become the [state doctrine](#), usually referred to as Wahhabism. Its state-backed proselytisation efforts have been instrumental in spreading this version of Islam throughout the world.

Map 1 Distribution of Sunni and Shia Muslim population in the Middle East



Shia minority in Saudi Arabia

The Shia minority in Saudi Arabia [accounts](#) for about 10-15% of the country's population and lives mostly in the oil-rich Eastern Province, in Najran Province, and in small numbers in the western Hejaz region. Saudi Arabia's [legal system](#) does not provide for any legal recognition or protection of religious freedom. According to Human Rights Watch, Saudi Arabia systematically [discriminates](#) against its Shia citizens, including through limiting their access to public education and government employment, and their religious freedom – accusations that the Saudi authorities deny. Sheikh [Nimr Baqir al-Nimr](#) was one of the key figures during the protests calling for an end to Shia discrimination and marginalisation at the hands of the Sunni royal family and religious establishment. Al-Nimr was arrested in 2012 for allegedly encouraging 'foreign meddling' in Saudi Arabia's internal affairs and 'disobeying' its rulers and [sentenced](#) to death in 2014. His arrest and detention were criticised by human rights organisations, who called for a fair trial and respect for his fundamental freedoms, including those enshrined in the [Arab Charter on Human Rights](#). The US State Department [estimates](#) that more than 1 000 Shia living in the Eastern Province have been arrested since 2011, including al-Nimr's nephew, Ali al-Nimr. Most of them are imprisoned on non-violent charges, including participating in or publicising protests, inciting unrest, and insulting the king. The new Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and Financing that came into force

in February 2014 [contains](#) a number of provisions which further curtail religious freedoms and criminalise acts such as 'calling for atheist thought in any form' or participation in events 'sowing discord in society'. Amnesty International stresses that the retroactive effect of new counterterrorism [decrees](#) is in clear violation of international standards, as it exposes those alleged to have committed acts in the past to prosecution on terrorism charges. This criticism, however, does not refute the fact that Saudi Arabia is faced with a jihadist [threat](#).

International reactions

Both the execution of al-Nimr and the attacks on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran have sparked [international](#) criticism. The **United Nations** Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, [called](#) a break in Saudi diplomatic relations with Iran 'deeply worrying', while at the same time expressing criticism of the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran. The UN Security Council has also issued a [statement](#) in which it condemned the attacks against Saudi Arabia's Embassy in Tehran and its Consulate-General in Mashhad. The statement recalls the fundamental principle of the inviolability of diplomatic and consular premises, and the obligations on host governments ensure their protection. The United States and the European Union – each with stakes in the successful completion of the peace talks on Syria and the coalition operations against ISIL/Da'esh – have tried to find a middle ground. The **United States** – whose image as a traditional defence guarantor in the Gulf has [suffered](#) following the nuclear deal with Iran – is in a particularly delicate [position](#). To date, the White House has [called](#) on all sides to 'show some restraint and to not further inflame tensions that are on quite vivid display in the region'. The **European Union**, on the other hand, has recalled its opposition to the use of the death penalty in all circumstances, and in particular in cases of mass executions. The [statement](#) issued by High Representative Federica Mogherini highlighted the need to safeguard freedom of expression and basic civil and political rights, including in the framework of the fight against terrorism. The EU called on the Saudi authorities to promote reconciliation between the different communities, and on all actors to show restraint and responsibility. On 10 January 2016, the **Arab League** held emergency meeting to discuss the attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran. In the statement [adopted](#) at the meeting, members of the organisation – with the exception of Lebanon – condemned Iran but stopped short of recommending any collective action against Iran. The matter will be further discussed by a special subcommittee to be established by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

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