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POLICY Roundtable 2-4 (2018): The Saudi-Iranian Cold War

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Introduction by Joshua Rovner, American University

The bitter rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is more than just a contest for regional influence. It is certainly no run-of-the-mill cold war as far as U.S. officials are concerned, as it involves issues that have dominated policy attention for the last two decades: terrorism, nuclear weapons, and oil. The conflict threatens U.S. forces directly in overlapping civil wars in Iraq and Syria. And support for the Saudi war against Iranian-linked Houthis is increasingly controversial in Washington, where congressional opponents are questioning the legal basis of U.S. policy.

This roundtable provides three views of the intensifying cold war across the Persian Gulf. Emma Ashford of the Cato Institute looks at the conflict from the U.S. perspective. Ashford describes the complex causes of Saudi-Iranian hostility, warning against simple explanations. She pays special attention to the effects of U.S. policy, arguing that the war in Iraq unleashed regional forces beyond its control. The deteriorating security environment ought to spur the Trump administration to reconsider the U.S. approach, but Ashford sees no evidence of change.

Turning to the motives of Saudi Arabia and Iran, F. Gregory Gause of the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M challenges the idea that the conflict is a clash between Shi'a and Sunni Islam. Instead, Gause argues, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is fueled by pure balance of power politics. Both sides use sectarianism instrumentally, but it is not the fundamental source of the dispute. Iran has outplayed Saudi Arabia so far, despite Riyadh's ability to greatly outspend Tehran.

Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, also of Texas A&M's Bush School, takes issues with both arguments. Neither sectarianism nor power politics fully explains the nature of the conflict. Instead, Tabaar argues that factionalism in both Iran and Saudi Arabia explains when and how they choose to compete. A closer examination of domestic politics offers a richer picture of the conflict, though it suggests no easy policies for interested outside powers.

Participants:

Joshua Rovner is Associate Professor in the School of International Service at American University. He is author of *Fixing the Facts: Intelligence and the Politics of National Security* (Cornell University Press, 2011), and co-editor of *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Columbia University Press, forthcoming in 2018).

Emma Ashford is a Research Fellow in defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. Her work on U.S. policy towards the Middle East has been published most recently in *U.S. Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: The Case for Restraint* (Routledge, 2018). She holds a PhD from the University of Virginia, and is currently writing a book on the foreign policy predilections of oil-rich states, including Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Venezuela.

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Essay by Emma Ashford, Cato Institute

By late 2017, about the only thing lower than President Donald Trump's approval rating was the likelihood of a near-term Saudi-Iranian rapprochement in the Middle East. Five years of constant low-level regional proxy conflicts between the states during the Arab Spring and its aftermath have increased the long-standing animosity and security fears of the two countries, and brought this rivalry into the public eye. It's now widely accepted that Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a 'Cold War'-style struggle for primacy of the Middle East.

But while there are some aspects of this picture that are accurate, it is also an oversimplification of a complex regional environment. This narrative also underplays the extent to which U.S. foreign policy in recent years has helped to shape today's regional conflicts, a mistake that the Trump administration's one-sided approach to the region risks exacerbating.

The description of Saudi-Iranian tensions as a new "Cold War" did not originate in a direct comparison to the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, but in the 1950s-1960s regional struggles dubbed by the historian Malcolm Kerr the "Arab Cold War."¹ This earlier rivalry between Nasser-style Arab nationalism and regional monarchies was driven in part by domestic political factors—notably fears about regime stability—and in part by insecurity and a zero-sum picture of regional power dynamics. Instead of direct military conflict, states focused on proxy conflicts and support for non-state actors to gain the upper hand. The similarities today are clear.

But while the pithy 'Cold War' framing has become shorthand for media stories about Saudi-Iranian tensions, relying on it to actually understand regional dynamics is problematic.² For one thing, it implies a struggle over ideology comparable to that of the United States and Soviet Union, with many outside observers focusing on the idea of a sectarian religious conflict to explain the rivalry. Yet the notion of monolithic Sunni and Shi'a blocs of states struggling against one another is largely inaccurate.

Instead, there are strong divisions inside the Sunni camp, which Gregory Gause has described as an "intra-Sunni Cold War."³ These divisions are most clearly visible in the ongoing Saudi embargo of Qatar, a country not only culturally and religiously similar to Saudi Arabia, but also a fellow member of the Gulf Cooperation Council. They also played a key role in worsening the post-Arab Spring wars: the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia each backed different foreign rebel groups often directly at odds with one another. And there are many regional flashpoints—from Kurdish separatism to the role of the Muslim Brotherhood—that will never fit into this simplistic bipolar frame.

Nor is the tension between Iran and the Sunni states driven purely by sectarianism. In fact, scholars have often noted that while sectarianism is clearly apparent in today's tensions, causality appears to mostly run the

¹ Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

² Zack Beauchamp, "Iran and Saudi Arabia's Cold War is Making the Middle East Even More Dangerous," *Vox*, 30 March 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/3/30/8314513/saudi-arabia-iran>.

³ F. Gregory Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism: the New Middle East Cold War* (Doha: Brookings Doha Center 2014), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf>.

other way. Regional governments themselves encourage sectarian identity to build support for their foreign policies and increase regime stability.⁴ Sectarianism may be more of a tool for these states in achieving their foreign policy goals than a cause of their foreign policy orientations.

Treating the Iranian-Saudi rivalry as a ‘Cold War’ also helps to obscure domestic politics, which scholars have long highlighted as pivotal to the international relations of the Middle East. The fact that most states in the region ‘underbalance’ against threats has often been explained as a function of domestic constraints (for example, public opinion on Palestine makes it difficult for Saudi Arabia to ally with Israel). And fears about domestic regime stability have often been a key driving force for states’ foreign policy decisions.

The bottom line is simple: rising bipolar tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia are real, and have serious implications for U.S. foreign policy. Yet claiming that the current situation is easily explicable as an endogenous or ideological ‘Cold War’-style rivalry oversimplifies the issue and makes it more challenging to formulate a coherent and effective U.S. policy response.

To understand the potential implications of this rivalry for U.S. foreign policy, policymakers first need to understand why it is happening now. Saudi Arabia and Iran have never been particularly friendly; tensions have fluctuated for years. But there are two key reasons why tensions are today at an historic high.

The first is domestic. As Marc Lynch describes in his recent book, the wars now roiling the Middle East originated in the domestic revolutions of the Arab Spring.⁵ Though it will be many years before scholars fully understand the causes of the Arab Spring movements, it is clear that economic malaise and long-running political repression played key roles in popular mobilization and unrest. This unrest led to upheaval in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon and elsewhere, providing a convenient space for both Saudi Arabia and Iran to seek to expand their regional influence, as well as an impetus to do so lest the other gain an advantage.

The second reason requires U.S. policymakers to look closer to home: America’s policies in the Middle East in recent years have also contributed to these tensions. The overthrow of the Iraqi government in 2003 helped to turn one of the Middle East’s most populous states – and one that had been at least somewhat stable - into the exact kind of weakly institutionalized state perfect for regional proxy struggles. The invasion also substantially increased Iranian influence inside Iraq, a shift in the regional balance of power that increased Saudi perceptions of threat.⁶

As the Arab Spring revolts unfolded – and anticipating the potential U.S.-Iranian nuclear deal–Saudi leaders reacted by supporting groups in Syria and elsewhere. The Iranian government, meanwhile, faced with the prospect of losing a traditional ally in Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the example of another U.S.

⁴ “The Politics of Sectarianism,” *Project on Middle East Political Science Brief #4*, 13 November 2013, <https://pomeps.org/2013/11/14/the-politics-of-sectarianism/>.

⁵ Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars* (New York: Public Affairs, 2017).

⁶ Frederick Wehrey et al, *The Iraq Effect: The Middle East after the Iraq War* (Washington, D.C.: RAND Corporation, 2010), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2010/RAND_MG892.pdf.

regional intervention against Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, fought all the harder to hold their ground. Threat perceptions drove both states to intervene throughout the next few years, perhaps most notably in the 2015 Saudi intervention in Yemen.

It's important, therefore, to understand that U.S. foreign policy is not exogenous to today's regional tensions. Nor can U.S. policy necessarily provide a solution. The Obama administration's relatively even-handed approach to the region—concluding the nuclear deal and refusing to help the Gulf States overthrow Bashar al-Assad—still tended towards supporting America's traditional Gulf State allies, particularly in support for their war in Yemen. In doing so, it served to worsen tensions.

The Trump administration appears to be willing to go much further, effectively backing Saudi Arabia by dialing up diplomatic pressure, and placing troops in Syria with the express purpose of countering the 'strategic threat' from Iran.⁷ Such moves are likely only to increase Iranian threat perceptions, encouraging them to engage in further asymmetric actions. Nor will this approach likely yield good outcomes for U.S. foreign policy: it undermines the U.S. campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), drives continued regional conflict, and makes diplomacy more difficult.

This is unfortunate, as the so-called Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War' offers a chance for U.S. policymakers to reconsider our approach to the region. Though policymakers are quick to fall back on historic ties to the Gulf States and animosity towards Iran when formulating U.S. policy, it is worth questioning how relevant this framing still is. American and Saudi interests are no longer as aligned as they were when the Soviet Union still stood. Modern Saudi foreign policy—particularly its focus on proselytizing abroad—has undoubtedly contributed to the spread of more extreme and intolerant variants of Islam. Even as the Saudi government has been an active partner in fighting the War on Terror, its citizens and religious missions have undermined it.

At the same time, Iranian and American interests sometimes overlap, in a way they did not thirty years ago. Tehran still engages in much of its traditional destabilizing behavior, but Iran has also played an active role in the defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and in recent years has shown itself to be willing to negotiate on key issues like the nuclear question. Some of the criticisms that are commonly used to describe Iran as a pariah state, though they may be accurate, ignore the broader picture. Tehran is no democracy, but its citizens have more rights than their counterparts in the Gulf States. Iran continues to develop missiles in part to maintain military parity with Saudi Arabia and other neighboring states who have also obtained such capabilities.⁸ And the last five years make it abundantly clear that while Iran funds and arms non-state actors throughout the region, other states are also heavily reliant on this tool of foreign policy.

The Iranian-Saudi rivalry thus offers an opportunity for policymakers to consider whether a more balanced approach to Middle Eastern policy might produce better outcomes. Such a policy would continue the Obama administration's attempts to increase engagement with Tehran, criticizing when necessary, but negotiating on

⁷ Liz Sly and Carol Morello, "U.S. Troops will stay in Syria to counter 'strategic' threat from Iran," *The Washington Post*, 17 January 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/us-troops-will-stay-in-syria-to-counter-strategic-threat-from-iran/2018/01/17/eed9d16-fb8f-11e7-9b5d-bbf0da31214d_story.html.

⁸ Jeff Stein, "Exclusive: CIA Helped Saudis in Secret Chinese Missile Deal," *Newsweek*, 29 January 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/exclusive-cia-helped-saudis-secret-chinese-missile-deal-227283>.

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key issues, attempting to empower moderates, and seeking to reintegrate Iran into the global economy. At the same time, it would seek to maintain good ties with Riyadh, but dial down U.S. support for its more aggressive foreign policy initiatives, ending U.S. military support for the war in Yemen and refusing to deploy U.S. troops to fight Iranian proxies in Syria.

The idea of a new Cold War between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a passable metaphor for today's Middle East, but a poor way to actually understand the causes and impact of today's regional tensions. The Trump administration's one-sided approach to the region—which appears to buy into this simplistic, good versus evil narrative—will do little to lower tensions. Instead, policymakers have an opportunity to question America's regional strategy and consider whether a more balanced approach will produce a better outcome in the long run.

Essay by F. Gregory Gause, III, Texas A&M University

"It's the Balance of Power, Stupid!" Sectarianism, State Failure and the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry

If I had a nickel for every time somebody asked me (or told me) about how sectarianism defines the modern Middle East, I would have a lot of nickels. I might be richer, but I would not be smarter. Sectarianism is a very important part of understanding the current regional crisis. People are getting killed because of it. But it is not the driver of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry that plays into so many of the region's conflicts.

Tehran and Riyadh (and Ankara and Moscow and Washington and some other players) are playing out a classic balance-of-power game in the Middle East. But the tools of that game are not primarily conventional military power. The Saudi and Iranian militaries are not about to engage each other on the ground at the Euphrates, in the water of the Persian Gulf or in the skies overhead. What counts in the Middle East power game now is the ability to support allies, clients, and proxies in the civil conflicts that are determining the political futures of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories. Those clients need money, guns, political support, and diplomatic backstopping. The player that can find the strongest local allies and give them these things most effectively will win the game. So far, that player is Iran.

Which is not to say that sectarianism is irrelevant to this game. As state authority breaks down in so many places, people find protection and sustenance among the communities that define their political and personal identities. In Libya, where practically everyone is a Sunni Muslim, those identities are regional, tribal, and ideological. In so many places in the Arab East, for historical reasons too complicated to address in a short essay, those identities are sectarian. They are not exclusively sectarian—there are Sunni and Shi'i Kurds, but Kurdish national identity trumps sectarianism in that community. But sectarianism is a major identity marker in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and, to a lesser but important extent, in Yemen. So, when the state retreats or fails in those places, the political salience of sectarian identities will increase. It is natural that Shi'i groups will look to Iran, the largest Shi'i country in the region, for support, just as it is understandable that Sunni groups will look to Turkey and Saudi Arabia (and, for money, to Qatar and the UAE) for support. But sectarianism is a bottom-up phenomenon in the region, not a top-down phenomenon. The Saudis and Iranians are not imposing a sectarian frame on non-sectarian fights; they are exploiting the elective affinities of their co-sectarians, who desperately want their support, to advance their own regional power.

The Iranians are winning the fight for regional influence, at least so far. They are the dominant external power in Iraq, more important than any of their regional rivals and more important than the United States. They have sustained their ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Asaad, through a bitter and violent civil war. Their closest regional ally, Hezbollah, is the dominant political actor in Lebanon. While the Houthis in Yemen are more interested in being an Iranian client than Iran is in being their patron, even there the group affiliated with Tehran currently has the upper hand (or at least controls the capital). The Saudis can claim very few successes in this game. They (and the Turks) failed to roll back Iranian power in Syria. Despite the combined air (mostly Saudi) and ground (mostly Emirati) campaign they have waged in Yemen since 2015, the Houthis still control most of northern Yemen. Riyadh has just begun to re-engage with the government in Baghdad, trying to offer an alternative to the Iranian support that has buttressed Iraqi governments since 2003. The Saudis tried to build up the Lebanese Army as a counter-weight to Hezbollah, but abandoned that effort in 2016 when they realized it was throwing good money after bad.

The Iranians are not winning this game because they have more money than the Saudis. On the contrary, Riyadh has more cash to throw at regional crises than Tehran could ever hope for. Iran's comparative strength lies in two areas. First, it can deploy small numbers of its own forces—the Qods Forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—to train and support its local allies in these civil wars. The Saudis cannot deploy their own ground forces anywhere; they have to rely on the UAE for the fight in Yemen.

Second, and more importantly, the Iranians have loyal allies. Building upon their success with Hezbollah, they have been nurturing local Shi'i militias in Iraq and Afghanistan for years, if not decades. They essentially created the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which has morphed since 2003 into the Badr Brigade, during the Iran-Iraq War from among Iraqi prisoners of war and deserters. Tehran skillfully absorbed much of Muqtada al-Sadr's militia support, or broke off elements from it (like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq), in the period after the American invasion of 2003, despite the fact that al-Sadr himself resisted becoming an Iranian client. These militias are tied to Iran ideologically, in their support for its revolutionary mission, and organizationally, through their ties to the IGRC. They are so loyal to Iran that Tehran can deploy them in the fighting in Syria, far outside the borders of their own countries. Iran is now building up a similar militia among the Syrian Alawi community, known locally as "shabiha" (ghosts), whose influence in Syrian politics will last long after the civil war ends.

The Saudis, conversely, cannot build up this network of ideologically loyal clients and proxies. The groups that most closely resemble them ideologically—al-Qaeda and the Islamic State—hate the Al Saud and want to kill them. Moreover, on the Sunni side, the Saudis are competing with the Qataris and the Turks (at least in Syria) to find and fund clients who can get the job done. Intra-Sunni rivalry, both on the ground among Sunni fighting groups in Syria and at the inter-state level, hampers the Sunni side in the fight against Iran's Shi'i allies.

Which brings us back to sectarianism. It is a key element in how the map of patron-client relations works in the current regional crisis in the Middle East. But for sectarianism to become salient, the state must retreat. There are Shi'i political groups in Bahrain that would love to get rid of the Sunni ruling family. Radical Shi'a in Saudi Arabia (not representing the whole community, but substantial enough) would like nothing better than to get Iranian help to slough off Riyadh's rule. But in both cases the state has retained enough coercive power and distributive capability to put down revolts and retain the grudging loyalty of enough of the Shi'a community. The regional crisis begins with state failure, not sectarianism. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is best understood not as a sectarian conflict, but as a balance of power game played out through intervention in civil conflicts in the Middle East, in which sectarianism plays an important, bottom-up role.

Essay by Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, Texas A&M University

Iran-Saudi Relations: Factional Politics All The Way Down

There are two predominant views on the nature of the ongoing Iranian-Saudi rivalry in the Persian Gulf. The first emphasizes their sectarian differences, while the second focuses on a cold war between the two states over regional hegemony. This essay provides an alternative framework focusing on factional politics that shed light on the diverse, deeply rooted, and yet malleable identities that inform the two states' foreign policies. Elite competition for state domination parallels, if not overshadows, the states' competition for regional domination. To that end, in each state elites construct and deploy specific identities as force multipliers¹ that correspond to their internal threat perceptions and locus within the domestic political system.

Since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran and Saudi Arabia have engaged in a proxy war throughout the Middle East, from Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and Yemen. The Arab uprisings and the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal have only exacerbated the growing competition between Tehran and Riyadh. Some scholars see evidence of Shi'a revivalism after a millennium of dormancy in a Sunni-dominated region, and worry about a violent response.² Policymakers warned of a Shi'a crescent spanning from Iran to the Levant, one that has now turned into a full moon as a Saudi war against Yemen's Houthis deepens in the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula.³

Other scholars argue that Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a classic balance-of-power game.⁴ According to this view, the current rivalry has little to do with centuries-old theological disputes, and states in the region do not let sectarian boundaries get in the way of balancing. Qatar's recent overture toward Shi'a Persian Iran—and against its fellow Sunni Arab Saudi Arabia—is a case in point. And while it is true that they have cultivated sectarian proxies in civil wars, these are instruments of power projection. Saudi-Iranian rivalries have developed in the conflicts of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, but those sectarian fights obscure a deeper struggle for regional power. If in the first framework ideological domination is the actors' primary objective, in the second, it is regional domination, albeit through the use of existing ideological tools.

¹ Reyko Huang and Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, "We Are All Coethnics: A Comparative Constructivist Approach to Religion and Foreign Policy," working paper.

² For different versions of this argument, see Vali Nasr, "When the Shiites Rise," *Foreign Affairs* 85:4 (2006): 58-74; and Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a Sunni Divide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³ Robin Wright and Peter Baker, "Iraq, Jordan See Threat To Election From Iran," *Washington Post*, 8 December 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43980-2004Dec7.html>.

⁴ Mohsen M. Milani, "Iran and Saudi Arabia Square Off: The Growing Rivalry Between Tehran and Riyadh," *Foreign Affairs*, 11 October 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2011-10-11/iran-and-saudi-arabia-square>; F. Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," Brookings Doha Center, 11 July 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf>.

This approach can explain contradictory outcomes. One could explain various foreign policy decisions as balancing acts between the region's two great powers. The Saudi-Qatari conflict can be seen as an intra-Sunni conflict in the broader regional cold-war context. The problem, however, is that a hypothetical Saudi-Qatari alliance against Iran could be viewed in the same geostrategic context.

Additionally, both frameworks risk offering a misleadingly simple picture of religion and nationalism in the Persian Gulf. States contain many identities and ideologies, and leaders construct and deploy them for their own purposes. Neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia takes their ethnic and religious identities as fixed. Instead, they strategically define what many otherwise may see as primordial identities. Iran often portrays Shi'a Islam as a mainstream legal school along with the four Sunni legal schools of thought in order to overcome its 10-15 percent minority status in the 85-90 percent Sunni Muslim world. It also frames Wahhabism, the Saudis' official version of Sunni Islam, as a fringe sect of a legal school of thought within Sunni Islam in order to drive a wedge between Wahhabis and the rest of the Sunnis. Similarly, Saudi Arabia is branding the Yemeni Houthis as Shi'ites despite critical differences between the two and the commonalities between the Houthis and Sunnis.⁵ This is a strategic step to cast the indigenous group as an Iran proxy, thereby justifying Riyadh's military campaign and the humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

State actors can invoke a wide range of identities at any time: Arab vs. Persian vs. Kurds; Shi'ites vs. Wahhabi vs. Muslim Brotherhood; Twelver Shi'ites vs. Zaidis vs. Alawites; monarchies vs. republics; pro-American vs. anti-American, and so on. In 2008, Iran provided protection to the anti-American Shi'a Iraqi Moqtada al-Sadr.⁶ Saudi Arabia a decade later tapped into his Arab identity to use him and his powerful faction against Iran.⁷

To further complicate matters, Iran and Saudi Arabia do not consistently deploy the same set of sectarian tools with the same level of intensity. Their choices depend on the internal balance of power within each regime.

While they compete for regional hegemony, Iranian and Saudi rulers are immersed in domestic factional rivalries for state control. These have intensified with the looming prospect of succession in each capital. In Iran, the long battle between the conservative establishment and the pragmatist-reformist coalition has deepened with rumors about the failing health of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the 78-year-old Supreme Leader. Having lost almost every election to the moderate reformists and pragmatists in recent years, the conservatives and their IRGC allies are hard pressed to maintain control over appointed institutions—including the divine office of the Supreme Leader—and prevent a Soviet-style soft revolution.

⁵ Anna Gordon and Sarah E. Parkinson, "How the Houthis Became Shi'a," *MERIP*, 27 January 2018, <http://merip.org/mero/mero012718>.

⁶ "Aide: Iraq's al-Sadr may stay in Iran for years," *NBC News*, 22 August 2008, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/26351543/ns/world_news-mideastn_africa/#.Wn4sZ4JG1Bw.

⁷ Fanar Haddad, "Why a controversial Iraqi Shiite cleric visited Saudi Arabia," *Washington Post*, 10 August 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/10/why-a-controversial-iraqi-shiite-cleric-visited-saudi-arabia>.

Domestic threats have shaped Iran's foreign policy decisions, from the negotiations on the nuclear issue to the battlefields of Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The IRGC and conservatives perceived the nuclear deal as a U.S.-designed reward for the moderate President Hassan Rouhani, who is a potential candidate for Supreme Leader. In his reelection campaign, Rouhani promised restless voters that he would use the nuclear deal as a stepping stone to resolve other outstanding issues with the United States.⁸ This prospect, no matter how unlikely it might be, has long concerned both the Saudis and the IRGC. To counter the possibility of a U.S.-Iran rapprochement, the IRGC test-fired ballistic missiles with "Death to Israel" inscribed on the missiles, lobbied in the Kremlin for deeper military and security ties with Russia, and engaged in an ambitious shadow state-building project throughout the Middle East.⁹ Replicating its own and Hezbollah's success stories in establishing militias to control formal security forces and other state institutions in Iran and Lebanon, respectively, the IRGC has backed the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, pro-Assad Shi'a militias in Syria, and Ansar Allah in Yemen. While externally using a Shi'a identity to attract Iraqi and Afghani Shi'ites to fight against ISIS, internally the IRGC emphasizes Persian nationalism to reduce public protests against its controversial regional actions. The conservatives claim that if the IRGC did not fight in Damascus, it would be fighting in Tehran. But Rouhani also has accused the IRGC of adventurism to undermine the nuclear deal and his popular, diplomatic and pro-Western overtures to reduce regional tensions.¹⁰ Before his sudden death in 2017, former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, too, lamented that Iranian hardliners—for factional reasons—severed the relations that he had long secured with Saudi Arabia in the 1990s.¹¹ In short, if the internal balance of power were more in Rouhani's favor, we would expect Iran to pursue a less confrontational foreign policy in the region.

The same logic applies to the southern side of the Persian Gulf. Although the House of Saud has perhaps not been as fragmented as the Iranian polity, recent events in Riyadh should compel analysts to avoid treating the state or even the regime as a monolith.¹² The Saudis' extraordinary military operations in Yemen coincided with the unprecedented rise of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), who is in line to succeed his ailing father, King Salman. In an uphill battle against the Saudi conservative establishment to become the crown prince, MBS has taken control of the security and military apparatus, brought his country into a bloody conflict in

⁸ "Hassan Rouhani: Dar Chahar Sal-e Ayandeh Baghieh Tahrir-ha-ye Iran ra Barmidaram," *Radio Farda*, 12 May 2012, https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f4_rouhani_lift_remaining_sanctions_iran_next_four_years/28482974.html.

⁹ Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, "Iran's Russian Turn: The Start of a New Alliance," *Foreign Affairs*, 12 November 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2015-11-12/irans-russian-turn>.

¹⁰ Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Revolutionary Guards tried to sabotage Iran's nuclear deal, says president," *The Guardian*, 5 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/05/iran-president-hassan-rouhani-nuclear-agreement-sabotaged>.

¹¹ "Siasat-e Khareji ra Nabayad Vared-e Ekhtelafat-e Dakheli Konim," *BBC Persian*, 12 July 2011, http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2011/07/110710_u03_rafsanjani_foreign_policy.shtml.

¹² Samia Nakhoul, Angus McDowall and Stephen Kalin, "A house divided: How Saudi Crown Prince purged royal family rivals," *Reuters*, 10 November 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-arrests-crownprince-insight/a-house-divided-how-saudi-crown-prince-purged-royal-family-rivals-idUSKBN1DA23M>; Mark Mazzetti and Ben Hubbard, "Rise of Saudi Prince Shatters Decades of Royal Tradition," *The New York Times*, 15 October 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/world/rise-of-saudi-prince-shatters-decades-of-royal-tradition.html>.

Yemen, imposed a blockade on Qatar, and promised to roll back Shi'ite influence in the region and destabilize Iran.¹³ MbS also acted aggressively to remove a long-time U.S. ally and formidable establishment figure, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, from the line of succession. MbS outbid his rival's anti-Iranianism,¹⁴ portrayed himself as a nationalist reformist,¹⁵ pledged to stifle the radical Wahhabis and unearth "moderate" Islam,¹⁶ and launched a Trump-esque nationalist and anti-establishment campaign to tap into popular grievances as well as Washington's post-9/11 grumbles.¹⁷

As I have explained elsewhere, a lack of appreciation for the nature of factional politics has long led international relations scholars and foreign policy analysts to reduce the causes of some of the most critical conflicts of the region—such as the Iran-Iraq War and the U.S. hostage crisis in Tehran—to ideological or systemic factors, and ignore the decisive role of elite competition.¹⁸ What look like moves to increase the state's power or ideological influence are, in fact, survival strategies of ruling factions.

¹³ David Kenner, "Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Cracks the Whip," *Foreign Policy*, 6 November 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/06/saudi-arabias-crown-prince-cracks-the-whip/>.

¹⁴ Thomas L. Friedman, "Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at Last," *The New York Times*, 23 November 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/23/opinion/saudi-prince-mbs-arab-spring.html>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rick Noack, "Saudi Arabia wants to return to 'moderate Islam.' Skeptics say it's a marketing ploy." *Washington Post*, 25 October 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/10/25/saudi-arabia-vows-to-return-to-moderate-islam-but-critics-wonder-what-it-will-look-like>.

¹⁷ "Saudi anti-corruption drive generates \$106bn in settlements," *BBC News*, 30 January 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42874245>; "WATCH & READ: Mohamed Bin Salman's full interview," *Al Arabiya English*, 3 May 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/05/03/Read-the-full-transcript-of-Mohammed-Bin-Salman-s-interview.html>.

¹⁸ Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, "Causes of the US Hostage Crisis in Iran: The Untold Account of the Communist Threat," *Security Studies* 26.4 (2017): 665-697; Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, "Factional Politics in the Iran-Iraq War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (August 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1347873>.