SAUDI, IRAN AND COVID-19

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In the early hours of Wednesday 12th June 2019, missiles were launched at Abha airport in Saudi Arabia by Houthi rebels from Yemen, injuring 26 people. In response to the attack, the Kingdom's Deputy Defence Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman proclaimed that "the Iranian regime is the only party in the region that has been pursuing reckless escalation, through the use of ballistic missiles and UAVs to directly target civilian installations and innocent civilians," adding that "the continuation of the Iranian regime's aggression and reckless escalation, whether directly or through its militias, will result in grave consequences."[1]

The remarks from Khalid bin Salman reveal the depth of animosity towards Iran. Indeed, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has long been central in shaping regional politics across the Middle East, dating back before the revolutionary events of 1979, yet taking on new meaning with the establishment of the Islamic Republic. However, there is nothing inherently belligerent about the rivalry: its nature is rather a consequence of the complexities of time and space, bringing together concerns about power, security, survival and religious legitimacy.

These themes, of power, security and religion are routinely used by scholars and analysts to reflect on the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Some seek to reduce the rivalry to a struggle over power and hegemony over the Middle East.[2] Others suggest that it is fundamentally about religious difference and claims to leadership over the Islamic world.[3] Both

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[1] Diffman, Zak, "U.S. Blames Iran For Tanker Attacks as Saudi Arabia Threatens 'Grave Consequences'", *Forbes*, 13.06.19, www.forbes.com/sites/zakdoffman/2019/06/13/saudi-arabia-threatens-appropriate-measures-as-tankers-and-airport-attacked/#6eb0a9c35a17

[2] Furtig, Henner, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia Between the Gulf Wars* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2006); Chubin, Shahram and Tripp, Charles, *Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order* (London: OUP for IISS, 1996); Keynoush, Banafsheh, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?* (London: Palgrave, 2016); and Mason, Robert, *Foreign Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia: Economics and Diplomacy in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

[3] Nasr, Vali, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

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approaches have problems, struggling to address the complexity of a rivalry that ebbs and flows over time, leading to periods of apparent rapprochement, such as the one seen in the 1990s.

A third camp emerges, seeking to combine the two, which is where my early work is located. Here, the quest for power is central, albeit beyond the traditional *Realist* understandings of power,[4] in order to include legitimacy and influence across the wider Muslim world. Yet there is more at play here, with strategic calculations about regional engagement shaped by domestic factors across both states, with regimes in Riyadh and Tehran navigating serious challenges in order to survive. Yet the rivalry is not static and immutable, but, rather, it is shaped by the complexities and contingencies of time and space.

For example, across the years after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the rivalry between the two states was characterised by antagonism, belligerence and mutual suspicion. After the de,ath of Ruhollah Khomeini, relations between the two states improved – following a devastating earthquake in Iran – leading to a period of burgeoning rapprochement.[5] Yet the presence of the United States in the Middle East – seen in diametrically opposed ways by Riyadh and Tehran – added additional complexity to the understandings of regional security.

Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, new spaces emerged for regional powers as they competed for influence across an Iraqi state that had been decimated by the process of deba'athification.[6] At this time, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states were concerned by Tehran's aspirations across the region, best documented in King Abdullah of Jordan's claims about a "Shi'a Crescent".[7] These fears were exacerbated by claims from hardliners in Tehran that Iran was in control of four Arab capitals, namely Beirut, Baghdad, Damascus and Sana'a.[8]

In the years that followed the Arab uprisings, the rivalry between the two states escalated, gaining traction when political projects begin to fragment.[9] Here, scholars and analysts have often sought to frame the rivalry in terms of "proxy wars", with Riyadh and Tehran cultivating relationships with local actors who do the bidding of their sponsors. Yet reflecting on events in arenas where the two states are involved suggests that the picture is more complex than the

[4] MABON, Simon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

[5] MABON, Simon, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: Islam and Foreign Policy in the Middle East", in AKBARZADEH, Shahram (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxon: Routledge, 2019).

[6] MABON, Simon and ROYLE, Stephen, *The Origins of ISIS: The Collapse of Nations and Revolution in the Middle East* (London: IB Tauris, 2017).

[7] BLACK, Ian, "Fear of a Shia full moon", *The Guardian,* 26.01.07.

[8] www.lawfareblog.com/sanaa-irans-fourth-arab-capital

[9] GAUSE III, F. Gregory, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War", *Brookings Doha Center - Analysis Paper* (2014), and GAUSE III, F. Gregory, "Saudi Arabia and Sectarianism in Middle East International Relations", *Sectarianism and International Relations* (POMEPS, March 2020), 12-17.

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proxy wars framing appears to suggest. Indeed, both Saudi Arabia and Iran are directly involved rather than relying on their proxies in a number of arenas, such as the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Qods Force involvement in Syria, or the Saudi bombing campaign in Yemen. Of course, this is complex when factoring in the more clandestine actions of both states.

What has long been overlooked within the context of the rivalry between the two states is the importance of local factors in the arenas in which Riyadh and Tehran are involved. Traditional understandings of the *second image* posit that domestic events have the capacity to shape regional affairs but, as Peter Gourevitch argues, this *second image* can also be reversed, with regional politics impacting on domestic affairs.[10] These forces shape the type of rivalry that emerges. Indeed, the political, social, economic and cultural structures create particular opportunities for both Riyadh and Tehran to exert influence over states, either directly or indirectly. This adds an additional layer of complexity to the ways in which the rivalry plays out, while the involvement of other actors in these arenas can further complicate matters.

Thus, in order to understand the nature of the rivalry and its characteristics across time and space, it is important to reflect not only on the issues that determine Riyadh and Tehran's strategy internally, but also on the complexities and contingencies of political organisation across the region. Divided societies have created fertile ground for Riyadh and Tehran to seek to exert influence, but the nature of these societies conditions the type of response. In Iraq, after the 2003 invasion, conditions favoured direct Iranian involvement, much to the chagrin of Saudi Arabia.[11]

In Bahrain after the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia's military involvement was a consequence of close relations with the Al Khalifa ruling family and shared membership of the GCC. In Yemen, Saudi strategic interests prompted military activity but the nature of political life across the state facilitated effective and relatively inexpensive Iranian involvement. In Lebanon, the picture is more complex, given the nature of political organisation which has led to the formation of two main political blocs, each with an external sponsor. Across these five cases, the nature of local politics has a significant impact on the nature of the rivalry in these spaces, with local issues often becoming sites of contestation between regional players.

Yet we should not ignore the way that geopolitical developments resonate across local communities. As Paul Noble famously suggested, the Middle East is a vast echo chamber, where

[10] GOUREVITCH, Peter, "The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics", *International Organization,* 32:4 (1978), 881-912.

[11] MABON, Simon. "Muting the Trumpets of Sabotage: Saudi Arabia, the US and the Quest to Securitize Iran", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies,* 45:5 (2018), 742-59.

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events resonate across time and space.[12] This claim is certainly true in the case of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, where domestic challenges in both the Kingdom and the Islamic Republic are often resolved through regional actions.[13] Moreover, in divided societies across the region, the presence of shared identities and security concerns means that local political issues are often positioned within regional tensions. Here, as the *second image* of International Relations Theory is reversed, we can see how regional currents affect local political climates.

Changing domestic circumstances in both the Kingdom and the Islamic Republic has placed additional pressure on foreign policy agendas. In Iran, economic hardship stemming from crippling sanctions imposed by the US meant that protesters took to the streets expressing anger at on-going financial support for groups including Hizballah. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's reform project set out in Vision 2030 faced an array of challenges. At the same time, the dramatic fall in oil prices has decimated the Kingdom's economy, challenging Vision 2030 and its flagship project NEOM whilst also placing additional strain on a state that had already been subjected to austerity measures.[14] All the while, in 2018 Saudi military spending topped $60 billion according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, leaving it with the fifth largest military budget in the world.[15]

Of course, a key justification for the Kingdom's military spending was the threat posed by Iran. Yet in a surprising move, after the assassination of Qassim Soleimani in early 2020, the Kingdom deployed a conciliatory tone, choosing to de-escalate, perhaps fearing the repercussions of war with Iran.[16] Another reading of this, of course, is the suggestion that this tone hid an inability to strike back against the Islamic Republic. These decisions were taken in the midst of rising pressure from the international community following the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist, and the on-going war in Yemen.

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 added a new range of challenges to strategic planners in both states. In Iran, the virus spread rapidly, with a devastating loss of life. In contrast, while the death toll in Saudi Arabia was far lower, officials were forced to cancel the minor pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, while the annual *hajj,* due to take place in July, is likely to be cancelled, removing both a valuable income stream and eroding the Al Saud's main source of legitimacy.

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[12] NOBLE, Paul, "The Arab System: Pressures, Constraints, and Opportunities", in KORANY, Bahgat and HILLAL DESSOKI, Ali E. (eds.), *The Foreign Policies of Arab States* (Boulder: Westview, 1991).

[13] MABON, Simon, 2013, op. cit.

[14] RIEDEL, Bruce, "As a global economic crisis wreaks havoc on Saudi Arabia, the kingdom should reduce military spending", Brookings, 27.05.20, www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/05/27/as-a-global-economic-crisis-wreaks-havoc-on-saudi-arabia-the-kingdom-should-reduce-military-spending/

[15] MEHTA, Aaron, "Global defense spending sees biggest spike in a decade", *Defense News,* 27.04.20, www.defensenews.com/global/2020/04/27/global-defense-spending-sees-biggest-spike-in-a-decade/

[16] ALJUBEIR, Adel, 03.01.2020.

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While the pandemic exacerbated existing tensions within states across the world, it also provides opportunities to re-imagine and re-structure regional politics. As Michael Barnett argued in *Dialogues in Arab Politics,*[17] regional affairs are not static, moments of crisis provide opportunities to create new forms of regional ordering. The Covid-19 crisis perhaps offers such an opportunity, with a number of states in the Gulf opening up dialogue with Iran. In particular, the United Arab Emirates – previously a vociferous critic of the Islamic Republic – provided support to Iranians in the early stages of the pandemic when the Islamic Republic was badly affected.[18] In spite of the UAE's decision to engage with Iran – a decision that was perhaps a consequence of long-standing track II diplomatic efforts[19] – this was not matched by Saudi Arabia.

As we have seen, both Saudi Arabia and Iran will face an array of serious challenges   both domestic and regional – in the coming months and years. It remains to be seen if these challenges will provide opportunities for de-escalation, or whether it will remain an expedient for elites in both states to maintain a belligerent posture towards the other.

[17] Barnett, Michael, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia, 1998).

[18] GALEEVA, Diana, "The UAE's Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak in Iran", *LSE Middle East Centre,* 05.04.2020, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/04/05/the-uaes-response-to-the-covid-19-outbreak-in-iran/

[19] IBISH, Hussein, "UAE Outreach to Iran Cracks Open the Door to Dialogue", *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington,* 01.08.19, https://agsiw.org/uae-outreach-to-iran-cracks-open-the-door-to-dialogue/

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