

National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations



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All is not well in Arabia and the Gulf. The further unraveling of security and stability in Iraq has exemplified this and more to the increasingly beleaguered government of Iraqi Arab Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in Baghdad, the country's capital. The accelerated breakdown of law and order in the land between the rivers has also rattled the governments and political dynamics of Iran, Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Yemen, and the six member-countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Among these countries, Saudi Arabia and Iran are of out-sized importance. Greater information, insight, and knowledge about how these two competitors for regional prominence perceive, interact with, and analyze and assess the likely intentions of the other – not just regarding Iraq but also Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon – is essential to understanding key trends and indications in Arabia and the Gulf at the present time and where the region is likely to be headed in the days to come.

It is in this context that the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations is privileged to present the essay that follows by National Council Distinguished International Affairs Fellow Dr. Imad Kamel Harb. Dr. Harb recently returned to Washington, DC after spending the previous seven years working as a researcher and analyst in the GCC region.

Dr. Harb previously worked to help rehabilitate the Iraqi higher education sector as a Senior Program Officer for Education at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). There he authored a USIP Special Report on "[Higher Education and the Future of Iraq](#)," published in 2008.

Since earning his PhD from the University of Utah, Dr. Harb has been an Adjunct Professor at San Francisco State University, the University of Utah, Georgetown University, George Washington University, the University of Maryland, and the Middle East Institute.

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THE DYNAMICS OF FUTURE SAUDI ARABIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS IN CONTEXT

By Dr. Imad Kamel Harb

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Recent diplomatic overtures emanating from Saudi Arabia about possibilities for a thawing of relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran are unlikely to produce their desired results. Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal's recent invitation to his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif, to visit the kingdom was tepidly received at the Iranian Foreign Ministry.

A potential visit by the former Iranian President, and former Chairman of the Assembly of Experts, Ayatullah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, itself originating from an invitation by the new Saudi Ambassador to Tehran, Abdul-Rahman bin Ghorman, still awaits the approval of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatullah Ali Khamenei.

Myriad contentious issues from Bahrain to Yemen to Iraq, and from Lebanon to Syria have had the two countries' leaderships at loggerheads and made an *entente* improbable. Indeed, Iranian-Arab acrimony promises to be the state of affairs for the foreseeable future, negatively affecting regional peace and inter-communal relations between the Gulf's Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

Interference in the Neighborhood

Despite Saudi Arabia's intervention in support of the Bahraini monarchy in 2011, the tiny kingdom continues to experience extremist attacks and other challenges to the state. Continued Saudi Arabian armed forces presence, combined with ongoing UAE police detachments that help to protect Bahraini state institutions, have yet to return communal peace.

Riyadh still complains about Iranian saboteurs and interference in Manama and the kingdom's Eastern Province. Further periodic territorial claims to Bahrain by hardline Iranian politicians and clerics raise the specter of Persian irredentism about which everyone in the GCC region is apprehensive.

In Yemen, Iran has not shied away from championing the cause of the minority Houthis, an armed component of Zaidi Shiism that seeks to restore the Zaidi Imamate that was overthrown in September 1962. The Houthis control two northern



HRH Prince Saud Al Faisal, the world's longest serving foreign minister (since 1975). Photo: UN.

governorates. They seek to expand their territory in anticipation of the promulgation of a federal system in Yemen's new constitution.

The Houthis have not only waged six armed campaigns against the Sana'a government in the last decade but are also at war with Yemen's Sunni Muslim Salafis, Saudi Arabia's friends in the country. Between 2008 and 2009, they infiltrated Saudi Arabia and fought its forces in bloody battles in which tens of Saudi Arabian soldiers died.

Iran is also helping Yemen's southern secessionists by supplying weapons through Lebanon's Hezbollah. To Saudi Arabia this smacks of an outright Iranian threat against its southern underbelly and the entire GCC states' system. Riyadh continues to await a decision by Tehran to address the kingdom's sensitivities.

Since 2003, Saudi Arabia believes Iraq has been transformed from a guardian of the Arab world's eastern gate to an ally of old-time Persian hegemony.

But it is in Iraq where Saudi Arabia sees Iran's penetration and role as most threatening to its immediate interests and security. Tehran has maneuvered itself into a position of decision-maker in Iraq's affairs under Shiite control: from influencing the determination of who becomes Prime Minister to affecting the cobbling together of ruling coalitions to recruiting Iraqi militiamen to fight in Syria. Since 2003, Saudi Arabia believes Iraq has been transformed from a guardian of the Arab world's eastern gate to an ally of old-time Persian hegemony. Additionally, Iraqi instability, fueled in part by al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism, whose primary target is the kingdom, has become one of the greatest threats

Riyadh fears. That al-Qaeda's violent attacks have not yet reached Iran, the organization's main Shiite target, raises many questions in Saudi Arabia about a possible conspiracy between Iran and the terrorist group to undermine the kingdom.

Regional Overreach

On the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, Iran's success in Lebanon has been at Saudi Arabia's strategic expense. This is despite the delicate political arrangements in Beirut that have allowed the kingdom's traditional allies to retain some share of political power. Even so, Iranian-supported Hezbollah has become the country's power broker, undermining what it decides is detrimental to its interests and promoting what it thinks will propel its ideology and expand its power. Everyone is convinced that moves by the party and Iran are coordinated to serve one overall strategic posture: that of assisting a *pax-Iranica* from Tehran to Beirut. To wit, the former Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and current military advisor to the Iranian Supreme Leader himself, General Yahya Rahim Safavi, recently affirmed that Iran's borders extend to southern Lebanon, Hezbollah's traditional Shiite power base. Anachronistic as this might seem, it translates in the short term into a net



General Yahya Rahim Safavi with Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps officers.
Photo: sajed.ir.

strategic loss for Saudi Arabia in light of its traditional position and role as Lebanon's main Arab and Sunni Muslim ally and protector.



Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad has been bolstered by assistance from Iran and Russia.
Photo: Agencia Brasil.

If Iraq and Lebanon appear to be satellites orbiting within Iranian space, Syria, in Riyadh's eyes, appears to be Iranian-occupied territory. The kingdom's leaders see Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as not only fighting his battle of survival but also Iran's fight for hegemony over the Levant, the kingdom's geographical extension. Indeed, the IRGC's supplying of materiel, money, training, and advisors has been augmented by the heavy involvement of Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shiite militia *'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* on the side of Syria's military and paramilitary forces.

With Russian military assistance, Iran's direct involvement in the fight has given the Assad regime undreamed-of victories around the capital of Damascus and the central city of Homs, although much of the Syrian countryside is still under the control of the country's opposition. That majority-Sunni Syria remains under *de facto* Shi'ite-Iranian and *de jure* 'Alawite-Syrian control – after more than 130,000 killed and injured and untold billions of dollars in losses and destruction – is enough to keep the kingdom's relations with the Islamic Republic cool for a long time to come.

To be sure, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif might yet show some enthusiasm about visiting Saudi Arabia, and the Iranian Supreme Leader may soon approve a visit to Riyadh by Rafsanjani. But in the event they meet, any conversation about reconciliation and accommodation between the two countries will likely be tense, given the many elephants in the room, each demanding its share of undivided attention. In light of the pervasive lack of trust and confidence between Riyadh and Tehran, it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia and Iran will go far in talking about potential good times.

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