



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

IRAN-SAUDI ARABIA: THE GREAT CONFRONTATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

ZURAB BATIASHVILI

116

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

EXPERT OPINION

ZURAB BATIASHVILI

**IRAN-SAUDI ARABIA:
THE GREAT CONFRONTATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

116

2019



The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia. The views expressed in the publication are the sole responsibility of the author and do not in any way represent the views of the Embassy.

Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

All rights reserved and belong to Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, including electronic and mechanical, without the prior written permission of the publisher. The opinions and conclusions expressed are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies.

Copyright © 2019 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

ISSN 1512-4835

ISBN 978-9941-8-1004-6

The Middle East remains one of the most troubled regions in the world. Unfortunately, for various objective reasons, the situation is unlikely to change for the better. Nevertheless, it is possible for the already difficult situation to deteriorate further.

At present, there are two main opposing camps in the Middle East.

One camp, which is under Washington's protection and is led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, can be termed as "pro-American". This camp largely includes the Sunni Arab nations: United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan and Morocco¹. Israel can also be considered their ally; however, in light of its problematic relations with the Arab countries, at the official level this alliance is less visible.

The second Middle East camp can be referred to as "pro-Russian" and its leader is the Islamic Republic of Iran. The camp primarily encompasses the Shiite countries and pro-Iranian groups² - Iraq, the Assad regime in Syria, "Hezbollah" (Arabic for "the Party of Allah") in Lebanon, the "Hussite" faction in Yemen, and others³.

Reasons behind the confrontation

The confrontation between the two camps has a long history, originating in the VII century when followers of Islam divided into Sunnis and Shiites. Over the course of time, Shiite Islam became an integral part of the Persian civilization and identity, which for centuries actively opposed the Sunni world (at first Arabs and later the Ottomans).

Today, out of the 1.8 billion Muslims⁴ living in the world, approximately 90% are Sunni, and about 10% are Shiite⁵. However, the difference in ratio is not so decisive in the Middle East region.

In the Sunni-Shiite and Arab-Persian confrontation, an important moment was 1979: the year the Islamic Revolution took place in Iran. The country itself was officially named "The Islamic Republic of Iran", and the export of the Islamic Revolution to the world became a significant part of Tehran's foreign policy⁶, which was also projected to cause a change in the existing regimes in the Middle East. This idea was, and still is, perceived as a primary threat by many regional rulers. To this is added the fact that Saudi Arabia ideologically juxtaposes the idea of a puritan Sunni Islam, which is more commonly known as "Salafism" or "Wahhabism".

In recent years, Iran has been able to create a well-organized pro-Iranian network in the Middle East. The aim of the network, otherwise known as the “axis of resistance”, is to increase Iran’s influence in the region⁷.

However, the Sunni coalition assembled around Saudi Arabia is no less idle, since Official Riyadh believes that Tehran is building up a geopolitical siege against it.

The two countries are in a state of extreme mutual distrust. As a result, we face growing confrontation across the dividing lines throughout the region, seeing the sides fighting each other through so called proxies (local supporters).

The Dividing Lines

The dividing lines permeate the majority of the Middle Eastern countries. Among others, regions within these two countries are also considered battlegrounds.

1. Within Iran and Saudi Arabia

Tehran suspects that Saudi Arabia and its coalition are trying to induce a separatist movement in the Sunni Arabs inhabiting Iran’s southwestern province of Ahwaz⁸.

In turn, Riyadh believes that Tehran is trying to organize riots in the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia where a significant part of the population are Shiite, and where large oil fields are located⁹.

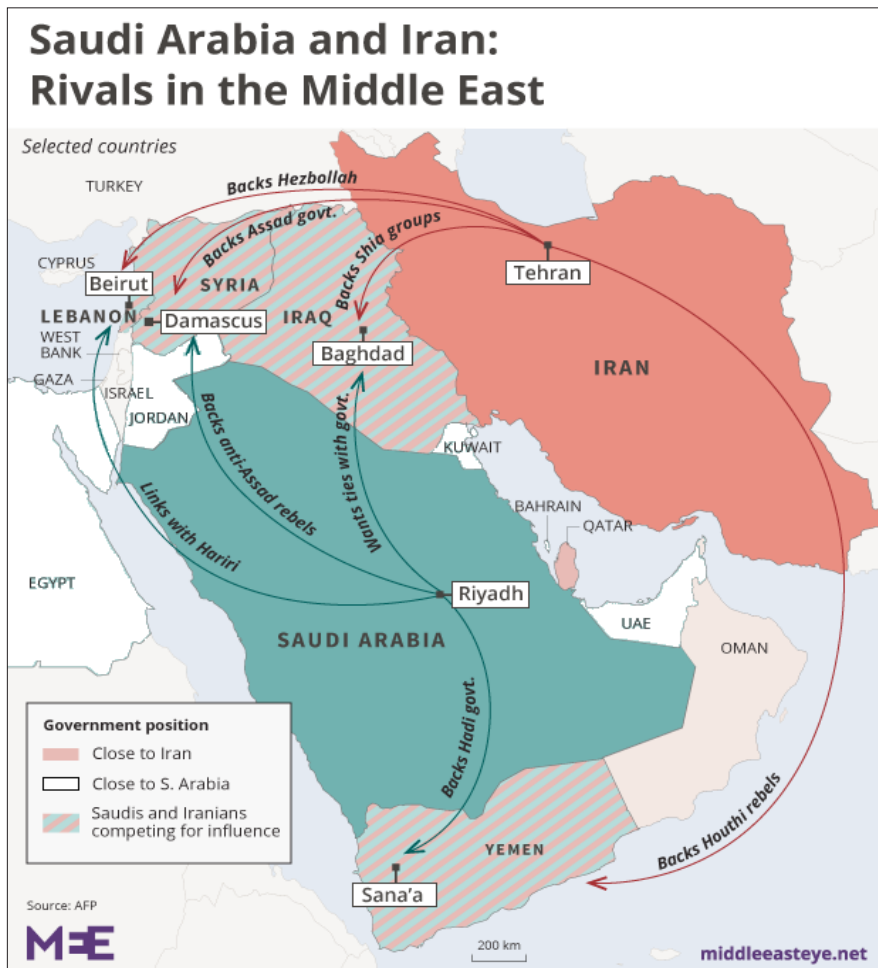
2. In Lebanon

Lebanon was one of the first countries where, in the early 1980s, based on the fact that Shiites constituted about a quarter of the population of the country, the Iranians established the Lebanese Shiite military-political organization Hezbollah. Iran has since invested billions of dollars in this organization¹⁰, and in 2008, Hezbollah won the right to present 11 ministerial nominations to the Lebanese Parliament. This number of ministers is enough to veto any decision made by said government¹¹.

Hezbollah was responsible for the murders of the Saudi ally Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri and other influential Lebanese in 2005.

The most striking example of how Tehran uses Hezbollah for its own purposes is the current conflict in Syria. While the government of Lebanon

officially declared neutrality, Hezbollah, itself a part of the Lebanese government, remains actively engaged in the Syrian civil war and fights beside Iran and the Assad regime¹².



3. In the Gaza Strip

Although virtually all the almost two million people in the Gaza Strip are Sunni, Iran for years has had considerable influence over the “Hamas” organization, which controls the aforementioned territory. However, of late, Hamas has fallen more under Turkish-Arabian influence, with Egypt having played a key role in the change of Hamas’ position. Egypt, which is a part of the Sunni coalition led by Saudi Arabia, controls the sole passage

connecting the Gaza Strip to the rest of the world and, as needed, by threatening to blockade said passage, is able to exert pressure on Hamas¹³.

4. In Bahrain

Bahrain is the only country in the Persian Gulf where the Sunni minority governs the Shiite majority. Tehran claims that this island has historically always belonged to Iran, hence, it often refers to Bahrain as “Iran’s 14th Province”¹⁴.

In March 2011, at the initial stage of the “Arab Spring”, against a backdrop of mass demonstrations and riots in Bahrain, the threat was made to oust the ruling Sunni al-Khalifa dynasty. This was put down only after Saudi Arabia’s military units intervened at the invitation of Bahrain’s Amir. By taking decisive measures, Saudi Arabia demonstrated to everyone that it will not tolerate Bahrain falling under Iranian influence¹⁵.

5. In Iraq

In ethnically and religiously diverse Iraq, out of a total population of 37 million, 60-65% are Shiites. However, for decades the Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein ruled the country. The situation changed in favor of the Shiites only after his downfall in 2003, when a Shiite dominated government was formed in Iraq with strong pro-Iranian sentiments.

However, this has led to a bloody sectarian conflict between the Sunnites and Shiites, the negative consequences of which have yet to be eradicated. A significant portion of the Iraqi Sunni population came to feel they were being exploited by Shiites, and because of that, many Sunni tribes have contributed to the strengthening of Al Qaeda and Daesh (ISIS) in the country¹⁶.

Apart from the Shiite community, Iran traditionally has significant mechanisms of influence over Iraqi Kurdistan¹⁷.

6. In Yemen

In Yemen, out of the overall 26 million, 65% of the population are Sunni and live in the south and central parts of the country. The remaining 35% are followers of one of the branches of Shiism, Zaidiyah, and live in the north¹⁸.

Iran supported the military units of the rebellious Shiites, which are united in the “Hussite” group, and Saudi Arabia took the side of the Sunnites. As a result, the civil war and famine that began in 2015 and continues to date,

has left approximately 170,000 people dead in Yemen¹⁹. About 85,000 of those killed were children who died of starvation due to the war²⁰.

7. In the Persian Gulf Islands

Of the three Persian Gulf Islands - Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb - only the first is inhabited (a mere 1000 residents). However, these islands have a special significance since they are located in the vicinity of the strategically important Hormuz Strait. Moreover, there are large reserves of oil in their deep waters.

After the British withdrawal, Iran took over the islands. However, ownership is contested by a major ally of Saudi Arabia - the United Arab Emirates²¹.

8. In Qatar

Although Qatar was also involved in a military campaign in Yemen organized by Saudi Arabia in 2015-2016²², until June 2017, it was still pursuing a relatively balanced policy vis-à-vis both parties and sought to avoid a surge in antagonistic sentiments against itself²³.

The situation dramatically changed in the summer of 2017, when the Saudi coalition accused Qatar of financing terrorist organizations and using Al-Jazeera for propagandist purposes. Saudi Arabia and its allies broke diplomatic relations with Doha and declared a full-scale embargo²⁴.

In such an environment, Tehran became the natural ally of Doha, offering all kinds of support to its small neighbor²⁵. Ankara followed suit, distancing itself from the Saudi coalition.

9. In Syria

Syria has long since become a major scene of confrontation among external forces in the Middle East²⁶. Iran and the pro-Iranian forces (Hezbollah and other Shiite militia groups) are actively engaged in the conflict and are the main allies of the Assad regime in ground combat²⁷. Russia has been providing air support since fall 2015. As a result of this joint effort, Russia and Iran have managed to turn the situation around and save the Assad regime from destruction.

The role of Saudi Arabia in Syria is much more restrained. Where it was more dynamic at the start of the conflict, it has since ceased efforts to overthrow the Assad regime in the short-term and employs covert support of the armed opposition. Saudi Arabia is currently trying to reduce Iranian influence in Syria through Russia, the United States of America, and Israel²⁸.

10. In Other Places

The confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia transcends the Middle East: in Pakistan, in Afghanistan, in the Caucasus, in Central Asia and even on the African continent. There, they usually support different local forces in conflict with each other²⁹.

There are also some signs of this confrontation in Georgia. One source of controversy is Ponichala, where conflict between two communities (Sunni “Wahhabis” and Shiites) led to a casualty on December 28, 2015³⁰.

Economic and Military Potential of the Parties

As Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a long-term conflict over an extensive geographical area, both sides require substantial economic and military capabilities to promote their own interests.

These capabilities, however, differ substantially.

	Iran	Saudi Arabia
Population	82 Million	28.6 Million
Dominant religion	Shiite Muslims (90-95%)	Sunni Muslims (85-90%)
Budget (expenditure)	\$86.3 billion	\$227.8 billion
Foreign Exchange and Gold Reserves	\$133.7 billion	\$535.8 billion ³¹
Oil Reserves	266.5 bln barrel	158.4 bln barrel ³²
Natural Gas Reserves	34 trillion cubic meters	8.3 trillion cubic meters ³³
GDP (Gross Domestic Product)	\$427.7 billion	\$678,5 billion
Military Budget	\$14 billion	\$63.7 billion ³⁴
Military Personnel (active)	563,000	251,000
Combat Tanks	2,500	1,100
Rocket Artillery	1,400	120
Artillery Equipment	6,800	760
Aircrafts	850 (old)	855 (modern) ³⁵
Patrol Vessels	194	11 ³⁶
Submarines	40	0
Frigate	6	7 ³⁷

The opportunities available for the parties to sell natural resources and purchase modern weaponry also vary. As a result of the American sanctions, Iran cannot afford to freely trade its natural resources on the world market and has a limited possibility of acquiring modern weaponry. Saudi Arabia, however, spends a substantial sum of money annually on the purchase of ultra-modern armament (mostly American). As such, in this regard, Riyadh indeed has the advantage.

However, it should also be noted that Tehran has its own advantages, with a well-developed naval fleet, missile systems and combat-capable military apparatus.

In 2018, Iran scored 13th place in the global Military Strength ranking, while Saudi Arabia was ranked 26th³⁸. However, in case of direct confrontation, Riyadh has the not quite baseless hope that the United States will provide military assistance.

Conclusions

- Based on the historical and contemporary context, a resolution to the Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict is unlikely to be seen in the near future;
- As the parties lay claim to the leadership of the Sunni and Shiite world, the confrontation between the two countries is also somewhat sectarian in nature, which adversely affects the already explosive situation in the Middle East;
- The sides are sensible enough to refrain from initiating direct confrontation; however, the situation in and of itself contains a threat - a minor incident transformed into an open conflict (the second threat of this nature is the feud between Israel and Iran) that might lead to unforeseen consequences for the region.

The opposition between Iran and Saudi Arabia will have a negative impact on Georgia for several reasons:

- A) Both Sunni and Shiite Muslims reside in Georgia. Therefore, any confrontation with a sectarian veneer in the neighborhood threatens Georgia;
- B) The Iran-Saudi Arabia confrontation will create the greatest threat and challenges in the Middle East as well as in the neighboring Caucasus, the most striking example of which is the Syrian conflict. The Syrian

War took not only the lives of the indigenous population, but also the lives of many Georgian citizens. It also provoked the radicalization of certain groups in Georgia, as well as Chataev and his unit's involvement, related incidents, and more;

- C) Nearly half a billion people live in the Middle East today. Should there be a large-scale war, even if only 10% of these people become refugees (about 25% of the population are refugees in Syria) that will still amount to 50 million people. Some of those escaping the war may seek shelter in a geographically close area, i.e. the Caucasus. Georgia is not prepared for such a contingency. In addition, there is the risk of a possible inflow of terrorists along with the refugees. For a country of Georgia's size, handling such a threat would be extremely hard.

Literature and Sources:

1. Ebtesam Al-Ketbi, "United Arab Emirates", www.ecfr.eu/mena/battle_lines/uae
2. Zurab Batiashvili, "Only Russia is Capable of Shooting Down its Own Aircraft and Blaming Others for Doing it", www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/513119-zurab-batiashvili-mxolod-rusets-sheuzlia-chamoagdos-sakutari-tvitmprinavi-da-amashi-sxva-daadanashaulos/
3. Brian Katz, "Axis Rising: Iran's Evolving Regional Strategy and Non-State Partnerships in the Middle East", www.csis.org/analysis/axis-rising-irans-evolving-regional-strategy-and-non-state-partnerships-middle-east;
4. Lipka, Michael; Hackett, Conrad (6 April 2017). "Why Muslims are the world's fastest-growing religious group", www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/06/why-muslims-are-the-worlds-fastest-growing-religious-group/
5. "Mapping the Global Muslim Population," Pew Research Center, 2009, www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population
6. Avi Melamed, "Inside the Middle East", New York, 2016, pp. 89-90.
7. Avi Melamed, "Inside the Middle East", New York, 2016, pp. 89-90.
8. Goulka, Jeremiah; Hansell, Lydia; Wilke, Elizabeth; Larson, Judith (2009). "The Mujahedin-e Khalq in Iraq: a policy conundrum", www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG871.pdf
9. www.worldview.stratfor.com/article/reform-promises-more-same-saudi-arabias-shiites
10. Al Arabiya, 2012, www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/28/234698.html
11. Avi Melamed, "Inside the Middle East", New York, 2016, pp. 90-91.
12. Avi Melamed, "Inside the Middle East", New York, 2016, pp. 92-93.

13. Avi Melamed, "Inside the Middle East", New York, 2016, pp. 99-101.
14. Fred Lawson, "Bahrain: The Modernization of Autocracy", pp. 124-125.
15. Avi Melamed, "Inside the Middle East", New York, 2016, p. 98.
16. Avi Melamed, "Inside the Middle East", New York, 2016, pp. 101-102.
17. Julien Barnes-Dacey, Ellie Geranmayeh, "Iraq", www.ecfr.eu/mena/battle_lines/iraq#menuarea
18. The World Fact Book, Central Intelligence Agency, 2016, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ym.html
19. "Civilian death toll in Yemen mounting despite US assurances", www.apnews.com/24ee4b33373a41d389e2599c5aa7bbfa
20. "Save the Children says 85,000 kids may have died of hunger in Yemen", www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/11/21/yemen-children-hunger/2076683002/
21. Avi Melamed, "Inside the Middle East", New York, 2016, pp. 109-110.
22. "Qatar Recalls Envoy to Iran After Attacks On Saudi Missions: State News", Reuters, 6 January 2016, www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-iran-qatar/qatar-recalls-envoy-to-iran-after-attacks-on-saudi-missions-state-news-idUSKBN0UK23Z20160106.
23. "In Davos, Gulf Arabs Slam an Absent Iran", 24 January 2018, Reuters, www.af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN1FD2YV.
24. "Qatar-Gulf crisis: Your questions answered", www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/06/qatar-gulf-crisis-questions-answered-170606103033599.html
25. Kenneth Katzman, "Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy", Congressional Research Service, 1 March 2018, www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44533.pdf.
26. Julien Barnes-Dacey, Ellie Geranmayeh, Hugh Lovatt, "Syria", www.ecfr.eu/mena/battle_lines/syria#menuarea
27. "Iran boosts support to Syria", www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/10654144/Iran-boosts-support-to-Syria.html
28. Julien Barnes-Dacey, Ellie Geranmayeh, Hugh Lovatt, "Syria", www.ecfr.eu/mena/battle_lines/syria#menuarea
29. Tomi Oladipo, "Saudi Arabia and Iran fight for Africa's loyalty", www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35252039
30. www.dfwatch.net/მკვლელობა-ორად-გახლეჩილ-40097
31. www.indexmundi.com/factbook/compare/iran.saudi-arabia
32. www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2244rank.html
33. www.opec.org/opec_web/static_files_project/media/downloads/publications/ASB2015.pdf
34. www.indexmundi.com/factbook/compare/iran.saudi-arabia
35. www.armedforces.eu/compare/country_Iran_vs_Saudi_Arabia
36. Jonathan Marcus, "Why Saudi Arabia and Iran are bitter rivals", www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42008809
37. www.armedforces.eu/compare/country_Iran_vs_Saudi_Arabia
38. www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.asp
39. www.unocha.org/syria