From detente to containment: the emergence of Iran's new Saudi strategy

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Across today's Middle East, Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in fierce and competitive brinkmanship with significant consequences in multiple arenas of conflict. In Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Qatar, Bahrain and elsewhere, the two countries are backing rival sides.[1] Not only is the Iran–Saudi contest increasingly embroiled in the local politics of a number of countries in the region; it is also taking on deeper interconnected and internationalized dimensions. The drone and missile strikes on Saudi Aramco in late 2019 which destroyed half of Saudi Arabia's oil production capabilities overnight pointed to Iran (although the Yemeni group Ansar Allah, allied to Iran, publicly claimed responsibility), adding a significant dimension both to the global geopolitics of energy and to the regional balance of power dynamics. Mindful of this intense rivalry, Iranian decision-making on Saudi Arabia has undergone a significant transformation, with multifaceted reverberations across the Middle East. In response to its changing perceptions, which in turn have arisen from regional developments—namely Saudi Arabia's regional activism following the Arab Spring of 2010–2011—Iran's long-held strategy of detente with the Kingdom has shifted to one primarily of containment.[2]

In the Middle East beyond Saudi Arabia, Iranian strategic conduct since 1979 has been largely consistent in pursuit of its dual foreign policy goals of deterrence and counter-containment.[3] These strategic choices are based on Iran's post-revolutionary threat perceptions, which have led the country to invest heavily in its ballistic missile programme and to support non-state armed movements in an effort to enhance its deterrence capacity. Further, faced with the American strategic objective of isolating and weakening the country regionally, Iran has put in place a counter-containment strategy aimed at increasing its influence across the

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1 Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, 'Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence', *International Affairs* 95: 2, 2019, pp. 361–4.

2 Rory Miller and Sarah Cardaun, 'Multinational security coalitions and the limits of middle power activists in the Middle East: the Saudi case', *International Affairs* 96: 6, 2020, pp. 1509–25.

3 Mohsen Milani, 'Tehran's take', *Foreign Affairs* 88: 4, 2009, p. 88.

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Middle East with the support of new allies, ranging from Palestinian resistance groups to a diverse range of parties and militias across Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and the Arabian Peninsula. As for Saudi Arabia itself, Tehran pursued detente with the Kingdom following the end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988 as another plank in its counter-containment strategy, with the aim of dividing the US anti-Iran coalition through engagement.

Since the Arab Spring, however, Iran has, we argue, increasingly abandoned that strategy of detente with Saudi Arabia, prompted by its perception of a growing threat from a more assertive Saudi regional policy. Multiple factors—from the instability created by the Arab Spring to the US policy of 'leading from behind' under President Barack Obama, to the Iran nuclear deal and the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS)—have led to the adoption by Saudi Arabia of a more proactive and muscular role in the Middle East, reflected in a confrontational approach towards Iran in places such as Syria and Lebanon as well as its advocacy of stringent economic sanctions against Iran itself. In response, Iranian strategy has shifted to prioritize containing what it sees as an increasingly serious threat arising from its southern neighbour, viewing its longstanding detente policy as no longer providing benefit.

For the first time since 2003 with the removal of Saddam Hussein, Iran has developed a regional strategy not aimed at the United States or Israel but rather specifically targeted at Saudi Arabia, a country Iran has traditionally ignored from a strategic vantage-point owing to Riyadh's security and political dependence on Washington. As this article will demonstrate, neither Iran's previous policy of detente nor its new containment strategy is adequately explained in terms of commonly used explanatory frameworks such as Shi'a sectarianism,[4] Iranian aspirations for regional hegemony,[5] or major revolutionary and revisionist behaviour.[6] Nor, given the largely cross-factional nature of foreign policy decision-making in Tehran, can theories relying on Iranian domestic politics and factional disagreements persuasively explain the changes in Iranian policy. In fact, Iran's detente policy *vis-à-vis* Saudi Arabia was consistent throughout the presidential administrations of Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, thus spanning the Iranian political spectrum.

Despite the rising salience of the Iran–Saudi rivalry, scholarly work on the drivers of Iranian policy, especially in the period since the Arab Spring, is still relatively limited and theoretically underdeveloped. While there are several works that look at the historical development of Iran–Saudi relations,[7] there

[4] Basheer Nafi, 'Iran's sectarian wars must be confronted, but not with more of the same', *Middle East Eye*, 16 March 2017, http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/irans-sectarian-wars-must-be-confronted-not-more-same-452011045. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 6 Jan. 2021.)

[5] See e.g. Marc Champion, Jonathan Ferziger and David Wainer, 'Israel, Saudis find common cause in warning of Iran expansionism', *Bloomberg*, 18 Feb. 2018, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-18/netanyahu-in-munich-speech-urges-west-not-to-appease-iran.

[6] Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, 'The Iran deal and its consequences', *Wall Street Journal*, 7 April 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-iran-deal-and-its-consequences-1428447582.

[7] See e.g. Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran–Saudi relations and regional order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Henner Fürtig, *Iran's rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars* (Reading: Ithaca, 2002);

are fewer pieces that systematically track Iran's strategic decision-making and national security policy towards Saudi Arabia across time—a necessary foundation for understanding the current political dynamics between the two countries. Moreover, as the vast majority of work on 'containment' has been undertaken from a western, in particular American, perspective, our work also contributes to the theoretical literature by broadening the study of containment from the perspective of a non-western country and regional power, Iran.

To support our argument, we begin this article with a theoretical discussion of Iranian strategic thinking in the light of broader security dynamics in the Persian Gulf and continue with an examination of Iran's Saudi strategy since the end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1989 in two phases: one of detente in the 1990s and 2000s, in which Iran pursued normalization across reformist and conservative administrations; and one of active containment in the period since the Arab Spring. The article concludes with three case-studies of contemporary Iranian containment of Saudi Arabia in Syria, Yemen and Qatar. The research undertaken in compiling this analysis builds on insights acquired through fieldwork and interviews in multiple countries of the region, including Iran, Iraq, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon and Turkey. It also draws extensively on a rich array of primary Persian- and Arabic-language sources.

Persian Gulf security and Iranian strategic thinking

Security triangle or binary dynamic?

In order to delineate the main contours of Iranian strategy in respect of Saudi Arabia prior to the Arab Spring, this section begins by discussing the Persian Gulf security architecture and Iranian strategic thinking about this regional subsystem. In the academic literature, Persian Gulf security is commonly analysed using the framework of a strategic triangle formed by Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.[8] The balance of power between these three countries determines the dynamics of peace and conflict in the region. According to this framework, the geopolitical root of regional insecurity lies in the shifts in power and imbalances in their trilateral relations, alliances and enmities. According to this narrative, in the 1980s Saudi Arabia and Iraq allied to confront a revolutionary Iran in the Iran–Iraq War; in the 1990s, especially following the Gulf War of 1990–91, Iran and Saudi Arabia entered a stage of detente in part to balance against Saddam's Iraq; and since 2003 Iraq has become closer to Iran, deeply alarming Saudi Arabia.

We argue, however, that the fundamental conceptual challenge to this security triangle lies in the fact that neither Iraq nor Saudi Arabia has served for long as an indigenous source of power able to balance Iran.[9] Both have consistently required

Frederic M. Wehrey, *Saudi–Iranian relations since the fall of Saddam: rivalry, cooperation, and implications for US policy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009); Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: power and rivalry in the Middle East* (London: Tauris, 2013).

[8] See F. Gregory Gause, *The international relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Henner Fürtig, 'Conflict and cooperation in the Persian Gulf', *Middle East Journal* 61: 4, 2007, pp. 627–40.

[9] Fürtig, 'Conflict and cooperation in the Persian Gulf'.

the support of a foreign power—usually the United States—to check Iran. Therefore, the notion of a local security triangle masks the more fundamental power struggle that exists between Iran as the dominant regional power and the United States as an extraregional power, reflecting a binary security dynamic rather than a triangular one. In other words, the regional security balance is largely tilted towards Iran as the natural power of the Persian Gulf, owing to its size, population and geostrategic position, with the longest coastline on the Gulf and dominance over the Strait of Hormuz. American policy-makers have increasingly reinforced such an understanding of Persian Gulf security: for example, Senator Lindsey Graham stated in 2018 that 'if it weren't for the United States they'd be speaking Farsi [Persian] in about a week in Saudi Arabia'.[10] President Donald Trump also famously stated: 'I love the king, King Salman, but I said, "King, we're protecting you. You might not be there for two weeks without us. You have to pay for your military, you have to pay."'[11]

As a consequence of this bipolar security dynamic, Iranian and Saudi visions of Gulf security are fundamentally at odds. Because of its security and military needs, Saudi Arabia relies on US backing to balance Iran. Therefore, it has traditionally welcomed the US presence in the region, to the point of calling for American deployment to the Gulf in order to 'internationalize the [Iran–Iraq] war' during the 1980s,[12] and, as US Defense Secretary Robert Gates outlined in his memoir, demanding that the United States undertake a full-scale military attack on Iran in 2007.[13]

In contrast, post-revolutionary Iran is staunchly opposed to a US presence in the region. Given its dominant position locally, Iran favours indigenous security frameworks for the Persian Gulf constructed among regional countries alone, and has historically viewed both Saudi Arabia and Iraq under Saddam as US pawns. This dilemma in the security equation of the Persian Gulf—between the presence and absence of external powers—has shaped Iranian strategy regarding the subregion.

Containment

Containment is defined as a strategy of statecraft that primarily aims to restrict the scope available for an adversary to pose a serious threat or military challenge to a state's interests. The concept was originally formulated by George Kennan in 1947,[14] in the context of a call for the United States to adopt a new approach to the Soviet Union, working actively to disable Soviet expansionism and the

[10] Gregg Re, 'Graham: Saudis would be "speaking Farsi in about a week" without US support against Iran', Fox News, 9 Dec. 2018, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/graham-saudi-arabia-would-be-speaking-farsi-in-about-a-week-without-us.

[11] Lin Noueihed, 'Trump says Saudi king wouldn't last two weeks without US help', *Bloomberg*, 3 Oct. 2018.

[12] Gary Sick, 'Slouching toward settlement—the internationalization of the Iran–Iraq War, 1987–1988', in Nikki Keddie and Mark Gasiorowski, eds, *Neither East nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union, and the United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 219–46.

[13] Robert M. Gates, *Duty: memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Random House, 2014), p. 185.

[14] George F. Kennan, 'The sources of Soviet conduct', *Foreign Affairs*, no. 25, 1947, pp. 566–82.

increasing threat it posed to US global interests.[15] Consequently, much of the literature on strategic affairs during the Cold War focused on the different means by which the United States could contain the USSR through depleting Soviet resources, dividing communist parties and leftist movements internationally from the Soviet Union, or shaping internal Soviet foreign policy decision-making.[16]

With the end of the Cold War, the discourse on containment shifted to the US containment of 'rogue states' such as Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea and Syria.[17] This manifested itself in the policy of 'dual containment' towards Iran and Iraq.[18] This switch in the targeting of the policy, and the asymmetrical nature of the power dynamics between the United States and these weaker states, made containment a more exclusivist approach. In other words, the United States increasingly avoided 'engagement' alongside containment, whereas during the Cold War it had viewed the two strategies as complementary.[19] After the events of 9/11, a debate arose within the United States on the continued viability of containment as a US strategy, from which the Bush Doctrine emerged as an approach that relinquished containment in favour of pre-emption.[20] Nevertheless, the United States has continued to engage in containment, reflecting the durability of the strategy. Many scholars have indeed advocated the continued use and applicability of containment in the post-9/11 world, including in the war on terror.[21]

Generally, however, the US-centrism of writing on containment, and its traditional focus on the Soviet Union as a paradigmatic case-study of this strategy, represent a shortcoming in the literature. Only rarely have scholars focused on containment strategies undertaken by countries other than the United States. One such exception is research on Israel's containment strategy against non-state actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah.[22] Research on containment practices by non-western or non-nuclear states, however, is very scarce.[23] This foundational lacuna has limited our theoretical understanding of how states such as Iran engage in containment (or indeed whether they do so at all), as the literature is underdeveloped and undertheorized.

Iran's post-Arab Spring containment strategy against Saudi Arabia is the result of the development of its national security strategy over the past few decades. After the revolution, Iran did not develop a comprehensive strategy *vis-à-vis* Saudi Arabia, which it viewed as a mere US puppet rather than an autonomous actor. Iranian deterrence and counter-containment strategies against the United

[15] John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of containment: a critical appraisal of American national security policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 24.
[16] Gaddis, *Strategies of containment*.
[17] Robert S. Litwak, *Rogue states and US foreign policy: containment after the Cold War* (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2000).
[18] On dual containment, see Gary Sick, 'Rethinking dual containment', *Survival* 40: 1, 1998, pp. 5–32.
[19] Litwak, *Rogue states and US foreign policy*.
[20] On this debate, see Ian Shapiro, *Containment: rebuilding a strategy against global terror* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
[21] Shapiro, *Containment*.
[22] Amnon Aran, 'Containment and territorial transnational actors: Israel, Hezbollah and Hamas', *International Affairs* 88: 4, 2012, pp. 835–55.
[23] There are a few exceptions, such as Christopher Hughes, 'Japan's response to China's rise: regional engagement, global containment, dangers of collision', *International Affairs* 85: 4, 2009, pp. 837–56.

States nevertheless covered Saudi Arabia indirectly. For example, Iran's deterrence policies have targeted Saudi Arabia and its oil installations in order to raise the costs of any potential US attack on Iran. Moreover, Iranian detente policies and diplomacy with Riyadh, which lasted for over two decades from the end of the Iran–Iraq War up to the Arab Spring, were pursued as part of Iran's greater counter-containment strategy against the United States. Iran considered Saudi Arabia to be situated under the US security umbrella as a weak, militarily dependent actor, and chose to engage in detente in order to end its own isolation and reduce the threat posed by the United States.

Since the Arab Spring, however, Saudi Arabia's adoption of a proactive and hostile policy towards Iran has reduced the efficacy of detente and counter-containment for Tehran. Tehran has thus been quick to exploit emerging crises with a view to containing Saudi Arabia and countering Riyadh's aggressive policies aimed at Iran—perceived or real—in places such as Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Qatar and Iraq, which is a line of action that Iran had not pursued under its previous approach of detente.[24] To further elucidate these developments, we must turn our attention to the history of Iranian strategy regarding Riyadh.

Iran's pursuit of detente before the Arab Spring

During the Iran–Iraq War, despite Saudi's extensive backing of Saddam Hussein, Iran did not militarily engage the country in substantive ways, but it did work to delegitimize Saudi Arabia ideologically through official and media statements while establishing links with the Saudi Shi'a opposition.[25] After the war, Tehran pursued detente with Riyadh as part of its counter-containment strategy, marking a new phase in the bilateral relationship that would last until the Arab Spring. Just as it sought to leverage its diplomatic and trade relations with Europe, Russia and China, so Iran used diplomatic outreach in an attempt to split the US-led Gulf coalition. Tehran was also hoping to attract foreign investment for post-conflict reconstruction and to normalize its regional relations. Throughout this period, Iran's Saudi policy remained largely constant, despite fluctuations in the political orientation of the various Iranian administrations.

Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 alerted Saudi Arabia to the necessity of balancing an increasingly aggressive Iraq and its shared interests with Iran in doing so. Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati even claimed that the foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states had apologized to him for supporting Saddam during the Iran–Iraq War.[26] And although this growing closeness occurred against the backdrop of Saudi Arabia hosting US troops on its territory, at this point Iran ceased to pursue its prior policy of demonizing

[24] Marwa Daoudy, 'Water weaponization in the Syrian conflict: strategies of domination and cooperation', *International Affairs* 96: 5, 2020, pp. 1347–66.

[25] Christin Marschall, *Iran's Persian Gulf policy: from Khomeini to Khatami* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p. 27.

[26] See Hooshang Amirahmadi, 'Iran and the Persian Gulf: strategic issues and outlook', *Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 5: 2, 1993, pp. 366–407.

the Saudi monarchy.[27] Shared threat perception and a closer outlook on regional order thus induced Iran and Saudi Arabia to cooperate between 1990 and 2003 to contain Iraq as the state posing the most significant regional threat to both. Thus began the detente phase of Iranian policy towards Saudi Arabia, Tehran adopting a new approach to reduce Riyadh's incentives to collaborate with US plans to isolate and contain it.[28] In 1991 the two countries reopened their embassies in each other's capitals and officially resumed diplomatic relations after President Rafsanjani had met with then Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz at an Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) summit.[29]

Rafsanjani's reformist successor as president, Mohammad Khatami, continued and deepened the detente policy. While Rafsanjani had focused on areas of joint cooperation such as oil agreements,[30] Khatami improved relations with GCC states through his 'good neighbour' policy. This period saw a major breakthrough in relations when Saudi Prince Abdullah participated in the 1997 OIC summit in Tehran, which paved the way for a 2001 security agreement on a variety of issues, including border control and cooperation in the fight against organized crime.

As the 2003 Iraq War progressed, however, this trend went into reverse, leading to a deterioration in the Iran–Saudi relationship. After 9/11, Tehran and Riyadh had initially continued to follow a similar line, cooperating against Al-Qaeda and issuing a joint declaration opposing the US invasion of Iraq. Nevertheless, as US animosity towards Iran intensified significantly, and fearing a shift in the regional balance of power in Tehran's favour following the US deposition of Saddam, Riyadh decided to join the United States in increasing pressure on Iran.[31]

It was during this time that Iran also experienced a political shift with the election of President Ahmadinejad. Despite the increased Saudi anxiety about Iran following the Iraq War and the change of administration, Tehran maintained its policy of detente, believing in the effectiveness of this diplomatic approach as part of its overall counter-containment strategy.[32] Iranians continued to view this strategy as an effective means of creating some distance between Saudi Arabia and the United States, and thus preventing the former from adopting in full the US line on Iran.

For these reasons, despite his different factional orientation, Ahmadinejad largely continued the Saudi policy of Khatami and Rafsanjani. This was evident in his frequent visits to Saudi Arabia—the most made by any Iranian president.[33] Controversially, Ahmadinejad also participated in the 2007 GCC meeting in Doha, even though many Iranians consider the organization to be hostile to Tehran, given

[27] Marschall, *Iran's Persian Gulf policy*, p. 107.

[28] Alireza Azghandi, 'Tanishzudai dar siyasat-i khariji, mowrid: Jumhuri-ye Islami-ye Iran 1367–78' [Detente in foreign policy: the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran 1988–99], *Foreign Policy Journal* 13: 4, 1999, pp. 1035–47.

[29] Rafsanjani's wife, Effat Marashi, claimed that she initiated the ties while travelling to Saudi for the hajj when she was invited to a dinner ceremony by King Abdullah's wife and had a meeting with her: *Irtibat-i khanivadih-ye Hashemi-ye Rafsanjani ba Arabistan* [Hashemi Rafsanjani family's ties to Saudi Arabia], Islamic Revolution Documents Center, 18 Nov. 2015, http://www.irdc.ir/fa/news/149/.

[30] Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at war* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 66–70.

[31] Hassan Ahmadian, 'Iran and Saudi Arabia in the age of Trump', *Survival* 60: 2, 2018, pp. 133–50.

[32] Author interviews with Iranian officials and diplomats, Tehran, 2017 and 2018.

[33] He travelled to Saudi Arabia five times between 2005 and 2013.

its origin in an effort to contain Iran. Meanwhile, during this period the Saudis supported the March 14 Alliance in Lebanon against the Iranian-backed Hezbollah following the 2005 Cedar Revolution. Riyadh also attempted to estrange Syria from Iran, in part through the tribunal established to investigate the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri, and compensated for the loss of Iranian oil in the world market when the Obama administration heavily increased sanctions against Iran. None of these moves, however, were military in nature and thus did not pose an existential threat to Iran's allies.

Importantly, Iran's policy of detente with Saudi Arabia remained in place irrespective of changes in the US approach towards Iran across multiple US administrations and of various factional shifts across Iranian administrations. Detente was built on the premise that diplomatic *rapprochement* could suppress Saudi hostility towards Iran and distance Riyadh from the United States' anti-Iran policy. After more than two decades, however, with the onset of the Arab Spring and a more regionally proactive and militant Saudi foreign policy, this Iranian strategy would change.

A brave new Saudi Arabia

Since the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia has increasingly changed from a cautious actor to a proactive, risk-taking player struggling to assert its power in the Middle East. Two significant developments are largely responsible for this alteration in its traditional pattern of behaviour: the revolutionary dynamic of the Arab Spring, and Riyadh's perception of a US retrenchment from the Middle East and a tilt towards Iran. Both these factors contributed, directly and indirectly, to Saudi Arabia's embrace of a more adventurous foreign policy, a trend that became all the more pronounced with the rise of MbS and the coming to power of King Salman. The Kingdom's new-found agency became manifest most evidently in what Iran perceived to be aggressiveness towards itself—with consequent impacts on its own international and regional strategy.

In the face of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia under King Abdullah embarked on a more activist foreign policy with the aim of subverting the regional uprisings and weakening the Muslim Brotherhood.[34] It directly assisted the Bahraini regime's repressive efforts, sending in ground troops to help crush the massive pro-democracy protests. It supported Egyptian General Sisi's government politically and financially after the 2013 *coup d'état* against Mohamed Morsi. It also pushed for a transition of power in Yemen through a GCC initiative to simultaneously preserve the regime and disrupt the popular protests. Syria was the only country where Riyadh backed the opposition.

Besides the Arab Spring, a US policy shift in the Middle East away from large-scale deployment of US boots on the ground and towards diplomacy with Iran also had an impact on the Kingdom. Departing from George W. Bush's unilateral and strategically costly interventionism, Obama sought to limit America's direct

[34] Mehran Kamrava, 'The Arab Spring and the Saudi-led counterrevolution', *Orbis* 56: 1, 2012, pp. 96–104.

military engagement in the region. A discourse of US retrenchment in the Middle East occurred in parallel to America's grand strategy of the 'pivot to Asia'. US military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 represented one of the main policy departures from the assertive state- and nation-building projects of the Bush era. As part of this shift, the Obama administration developed a 'leading from behind' strategy aimed at assembling broader multinational coalitions and forging stronger multilateral frameworks within which the burden of military and security costs would be shared. Obama openly criticized the Saudis for 'free-riding' on US security guarantees and regional policies, explaining in a noteworthy interview in the *Atlantic* that

> our Gulf partners … do not have the ability to put out the flames [of regional conflicts] on their own or decisively win on their own, and would mean that we have to start coming in and using our military power to settle scores. And that would be in the interest neither of the United States nor of the Middle East.[35]

He also stated: 'What has been a habit over the last several decades in these circumstances is people pushing us to act but then showing an unwillingness to put any skin in the game.'[36] Saudi Arabia, in other words, should deal with its own challenges and share more in the costs of regional order, rather than expecting the United States to take care of all its problems.

Riyadh, which had traditionally relied on Washington to preserve its geostrategic position and balance Iran, perceived these statements unfavourably and as indicative of US retrenchment—if not abdication—in the Middle East. Obama's outreach to the Iranians with the nuclear negotiations further heightened Saudi Arabia's fear of a larger shift in US strategy on Iran and an increase in Iran's regional standing. The deal greatly worried the Saudis, who felt left out of the discussions and thereby marginalized in consideration of the future order in the Middle East. Significantly, following the agreement, Riyadh put pressure on a number of countries and companies on an international level to abstain from doing business in Iran in order to undermine the benefits of the deal,[37] thereby greatly angering the Iranians.

The Saudis thus generally felt a sense of misalignment with the United States regarding regional order, especially given the recent US support for the ouster of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. In reaction, Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and a close associate of MbS, called Obama 'untrustworthy', while Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former head of Saudi intelligence, stated that Obama had 'lied' regarding his red line in Syria and set the Middle East back 20 years.[38] Discussing the fundamental change in

[35] Jeffrey Goldberg, 'The Obama Doctrine', *Atlantic*, April 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/.

[36] Goldberg, 'The Obama Doctrine'.

[37] Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'Europe's big banks remain wary of doing business with Iran', *Guardian*, 24 Jan. 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/24/europes-big-banks-remain-wary-doing-business-with-iran.

[38] Lukas Mikelionis, 'Obama lied about Syria "red line", set Middle East back 20 years, top Saudi official says', Fox News, 29 Jan. 2019, https://www.foxnews.com/world/obama-lied-about-syria-red-line-set-middle-east-back-20-years-top-saudi-official-says.

US–Saudi relations, Turki al-Faisal claimed that 'there is going to have to be a recalibration of our relationship with America—how far we can go with our dependence on America. How much can we rely on steadfastness from American leadership[?].'[39] In another instance reflecting the Kingdom's desire to show its agency, Al-Faisal derided the United States for not being more appreciative of all the assistance Riyadh had undertaken for Washington and asserted: 'No, Mr Obama. We are not the "free riders" to whom you refer. We lead from the front and we accept our mistakes and rectify them.'[40]

One of the strategic consequences of these overarching changes was a more assertive Saudi foreign policy. This trend, which began with the Arab Spring and the shift in US strategy under the Obama administration, was exacerbated by the death of King Abdullah and the empowerment of MbS. Some proponents of this shift called it the 'Salman Doctrine' in direct opposition to the 'Obama Doctrine'.[41] The Kingdom's new proactive foreign policy was strikingly active and explicit in its hostility towards Iran, which became the focus of Saudi actions because Riyadh saw Tehran as its chief regional rival and the power towards which Obama was tilting. Nevertheless, it had firmly begun in the response to the Arab Spring under King Abdullah, with the direct military crackdown and intervention in Bahrain, the extensive support of the 2013 coup in Egypt, and the widespread funding and training of opposition militant groups in Syria.

Crystallizing this Saudi perspective, MbS stated that his Kingdom faced a 'triangle of evil' in the Middle East: Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood and terrorism.[42] Threatening 'to take the battle inside Iran'[43]—which was perceived by Iran as a direct military threat— he also significantly intensified Saudi Arabia's proactive foreign policy, initiating the war on Yemen, the Qatar blockade and the taking hostage of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, and allegedly personally ordering the gruesome assassination and beheading of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Importantly, in 2016 under King Salman the Kingdom executed Ayatollah Nimr al-Nimr, a prominent civil rights campaigner and the only Shi'a ayatollah officially executed in over 100 years in the Islamic world.

From Iran's viewpoint, the conservative Kingdom had turned into an aggressive actor, headed by an unsophisticated and inexperienced crown prince striving to flex his muscles.[44] Comparing Saudi foreign policy between the Abdullah and Salman periods, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated: 'We always said that they demonstrate sobriety and dignity in their foreign policy, but

[39] Mick Krever, '"Yesteryear" US–Saudi relations are gone, says former intel chief', CNN, 20 April 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/04/20/world/saudi-prince-turki-amanpour/index.html.

[40] 'Turki al-Faisal, "Mr Obama, we are not 'free riders',"' *Arab News*, 14 March 2016.

[41] Nawaf Obaid, 'The Salman Doctrine: the Saudi reply to Obama's weakness', *National Interest*, 30 March 2016, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-salman-doctrine-the-saudi-reply-obamas-weakness-15623.

[42] 'Saudi Prince says Turkey and Iran anchor a "triangle of evil"', *Time*, 7 March 2018, https://time.com/5189385/saudi-prince-turkey-iran-evil/.

[43] 'MbS: lan nuldagh min Iran marataynʼ… wa sana'mal li-takun al-ma'rika 'indahum wa laysa fi-l Su'udiyya' [MbS: We won't be stung by Iran twice… we will work to take the battle to them and not in Saudi], CNN Arabic, 2 May 2017, https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/2017/05/03/saudi-mohammed-bin-salman-relationship-iran.

[44] Author interview with an Iranian diplomat, Tehran 2017.

now a few inexperienced youths have taken the country's affairs in their hands and elevated the dimension of madness over sobriety.'[45] Despite the Kingdom's new policies in the region in response to the Arab Spring, King Abdullah had kept open the door for dialogue with Iran. In contrast, King Salman has so far refused any dialogue with Tehran.

Iranian containment in practice

Taken off guard by Saudi activism, in addition to the leaked news of Riyadh encouraging the United States to attack Iran[46]—which came as a surprise to many officials in Tehran—Iranian strategists began re-evaluating detente and came to the conclusion that their current policy was not sufficient to restrain Saudi behaviour.[47] In an op-ed in the *New York Times* published in 2016, reformist Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif lambasted Saudi Arabia for its 'malign' regional policies and its animosity towards Iran, listing a range of grievances arising from the Kingdom's new behaviour and writing: 'The Saudi strategy to derail the nuclear agreement and perpetuate—and even exacerbate—tension in the region has three components: pressuring the West; promoting regional instability through waging war in Yemen and sponsoring extremism; and directly provoking Iran.'[48]

These perceived Saudi provocations and hardened positions against Iran contributed to the emergence over time of Iran's new containment strategy, representing its first use of a substantive containment strategy against a regional rival since 2003. The shift from detente to containment, moreover, marked not just a change in strategy but also a change in target: Saudi Arabia had now become for Iran a semi-autonomous actor to be reckoned with independently. Before, Iran had seen the Kingdom as a non-autonomous piece of the larger US challenge.

One of the difficulties of studying Iran's containment strategy is Tehran's silence on its use—deniability being an important element of Tehran's asymmetric military and security doctrine. This is evident in the remarks made by the former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Mohammad Ali Ja'fari, in 2018, to the effect that, in the face of Saudi's regional policies, Iran's responses 'are largely non-publicized and non-disclosed with the headlights off, [and] in secret, but painful for [Saudi Arabia]'.[49] Nevertheless, underlying indicators of this strategy can be gleaned from statements by top Iranian officials as well as from evidence of Iranian behaviour on the ground. The use of plausible

[45] 'Bayanat dar didar-i maddahan-i ahl-i bayt 'alayhum al-salam' [Statements in a meeting with panegyrists of the family of the prophet (PBUH)], 9 April 2015 (author's translation), http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=29415.

[46] The Saudis encouraged the United States to pursue adversarial options against Iran, with King Abdullah calling for the 'head of the snake', Iran, to be cut off. See Wikileaks, 'Saudi King Abdullah and senior princes on Saudi policy toward Iraq', 20 April 2008, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH649_a.html.

[47] Author interview with an Iranian diplomat, Tehran, 2017.

[48] Mohammad Javad Zarif, 'Saudi Arabia's reckless extremism', *New York Times*, 10 Jan. 2016.

[49] 'Sardar Ja'fari: pasukhha-ye ma bih al-i Su'ud chiraq-khamush ama dardnak ast' [General Ja'fari: our responses to the Saudi [royal] family are non-disclosed, but painful], Iranian Students' News Agency, 15 Nov. 2018 (author's translation), https://www.isna.ir/news/97082411858/.

deniability is evident in many cases, including in Yemen, where it took Tehran four years to acknowledge its support of Ansar Allah.

Iran's containment strategy took on a number of different forms, depending on the nature of the Saudi threat in different regional arenas. Where Saudi Arabia attempted to overthrow an Iranian ally through proxy military means, such as in Syria, Iran worked to expel the rival proxy forces. Where Saudi Arabia intervened with direct military force, as in Yemen, Iran sought both to thwart Saudi military objectives and to exhaust the Kingdom through more indirect means. And finally, where Saudi Arabia tried to put political pressure on governments without recourse to military activity, Iran acted to support established governments in resisting such pressure. This can be seen in Iran's policies in Qatar and Lebanon. Here we examine Iran's containment in the cases of Syria, Yemen and Qatar.

Syria: containment through expulsion

Syria's strategic importance to Iran is hard to overstate. As a member of the 'axis of resistance',[50] and a historical ally for the past four decades, Syria is a crucial geopolitical partner of Iran, with a largely shared threat perception and regional security outlook. Accordingly, Tehran saw the Syrian crisis as a US, Israeli and Saudi conspiracy to inflict a strategic setback on Iran by undermining Hezbollah and thus reducing Iran's 'forward deterrence' of Israel.[51] Iran's intervention in Syria in favour of Assad was based first and foremost on its need to preserve its capacity for deterrence—*not* containment of Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, to preserve this deterrence effectively, Iran had to deal with the Saudi policy in Syria and contain it—thus setting in motion the development of Iran's Saudi containment strategy.

As the Kingdom's support for the Syrian opposition was a critical component in the anti-Assad effort, Iran saw Saudi policy not only as following America's bidding in Washington's 'leading from behind' strategy but also as an attempt to replace the Syrian government with a pro-Saudi one. Tehran's concern at the Saudi-led push against Damascus was reflected in comments by Ali Shamkhani, the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and a reformist figure appointed by Rouhani, who stated that 'all the *takfiri* forces in Syria are the army of Saudi Arabia'.[52] Iran's regional adversaries were explicit in framing the Syrian conflict as one that would weaken Iran's regional position by shifting the regional balance of power. For example, one senior Saudi official claimed that 'the King knows that other than the collapse of the Islamic Republic itself, nothing would weaken Iran more than losing Syria'.[53]

[50] This axis includes Hezbollah, Iraq, Syria and the resistance in Palestine as a formidable geopolitical bloc in the region. See Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, 'Iran's axis of resistance rises', *Foreign Affairs*, 24 Jan. 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-01-24/irans-axis-resistance-rises.

[51] On the concept of forward deterrence, see Ahmadian and Mohseni, 'Iran's Syria strategy'.

[52] 'Shamkhani: magar Arabistan dar Suriyih huzur nadarad' [Shamkhani: isn't Saudi Arabia present in Syria?], *Dana News*, 9 Feb. 2016 (author's translation), http://www.dana.ir/news/642585.html/. *Takfiri*s refer to those individuals or groups who practise the excommunication of Muslims as infidels.

[53] John Hannah, 'Responding to Syria: the king's statement, the president's hesitation', *Foreign Policy*, 9 Aug. 2011, https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/09/responding-to-syria-the-kings-statement-the-presidents-hesitation/.

The Iranian pushback against Saudi Arabia was also motivated by Iran's perceptions of Saudi links to Syrian armed opposition groups, most of whom adhered to radical *takfiri*–Wahhabi ideology,[54] including Jaysh al-Islam (JAI) and Ahrar al-Sham. JAI established a foothold in eastern Damascus, known as eastern Ghouta.[55] Its leader, Zahran Alloush, 'avoided declaring personal opposition to al Qaeda or to the SNC [Syrian National Council]', and his father Abdallah, a Salafist cleric based in Saudi Arabia, had established Liwa al-Islam (a predecessor to JAI).[56] Prince Bandar bin Sultan requested that the United States allow anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles to be supplied to JAI.[57] Saudi Arabia's direct sponsorship of JAI became even clearer when it welcomed the group to the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), usually referred to as the Riyadh opposition bloc,[58] in December 2015.

The Saudis also supported other militant *takfiri* opposition groups, including Ahrar al-Sham,[59] which was also hosted in Riyadh in late 2015. Ahrar al-Sham, with an estimated 20,000 fighters, was closely coordinated with Al-Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusra and had worked with Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) at least until 2014.[60] While Jabhat al-Nusra took steps to create a semblance of distance from Al-Qaeda's central leadership, this was mainly an attempt to relieve international pressure on the group and did not reflect any serious ideological disagreement. In fact, Al-Qaeda's leadership openly endorsed the split as a sound strategy and al-Nusra's leader, al-Julani, never revoked his oath of allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri, while Abu Khalid al-Suri, one of the leaders of Ahrar al-Sham, explicitly pledged affinity with Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.[61] Other groups documented as being backed by Saudi Arabia included the Nour al-Din al-Zinki brigades, a group which later joined Al-Qaeda offshoot Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra), and came under the international spotlight for their publicized taunting and beheading of a teenager.[62]

[54] Radical Wahhabi groups (e.g. ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and other Al-Qaeda subgroups) employ *takfir* against Shi'a Muslims and other religious minorities to legitimize their bloodshed and subjugation, resulting in policies of slavery, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

[55] Indeed, many corroborating accounts point to the group being directly established by Saudi Arabia. See Ian Black, 'Syria crisis: Saudi Arabia to spend millions to train new rebel force', *Guardian*, 7 Nov. 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/07/syria-crisis-saudi-arabia-spend-millions-new-rebel-force.

[56] Khaled Yacoub Oweis, 'Saudi Arabia boosts Salafist rivals to al Qaeda in Syria', *Reuters*, 1 Oct. 2013, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-jihadists-insight/insight-saudi-arabia-boosts-salafist-rivals-to-al-qaeda-in-syria-idUSBRE9900RO20131001.

[57] Black, 'Syria crisis'.

[58] JAI was also a vocal supporter of Saudi anti-Iran policies, backing, for instance, Riyadh's decision to sever its relations with Iran. See 'Jaysh al-Islam: we support the decision of the Kingdom to cut relations with Iran' [Jaysh al-Islam: nad'am qarar al-mamlaka bi-ghat' al-'alaqat ma' Iran], *Al-Madinah*, 5 Jan. 2016, https://www.al-madina.com/article/424344.

[59] Kim Sengupta, 'Turkey and Saudi Arabia alarm the West by backing Islamist extremists the Americans had bombed in Syria', *Independent*, 11 May 2015, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-crisis-turkey-and-saudi-arabia-shock-western-countries-by-supporting-anti-assad-jihadists-10242747.html.

[60] Stanford University Mapping Militant Organizations, 'Ahrar al-Sham', 5 Aug. 2017, http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/523#cite16.

[61] Michael Doran, William McCants and Clint Watts, 'The good and bad of Ahrar al-Sham: an Al Qaeda-linked group worth befriending', *Foreign Affairs*, 23 Jan. 2014, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2014-01-23/good-and-bad-ahrar-al-sham.

[62] Martin Chulov, 'Syrian opposition group that killed child "was in US-vetted alliance"', *Guardian*, 20 July 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/20/syrian-opposition-group-which-killed-child-was-in-us-vetted-alliance.

Although Saudi Arabia was not Iran's primary concern in respect of its Syria policies, the Kingdom's involvement increased Syria's strategic importance for Iran. The Syrian uprising and war thus heralded the initial stages in Iran's development of a containment strategy regarding Saudi Arabia in order to preserve its 'forward deterrence' strategy in the area. Accordingly, Iranian containment was at first limited to Syria, and did not represent a comprehensive framework for dealing with Saudi Arabia in the broader region. Saudi involvement in other regional developments—from the Kingdom's military deployment in Bahrain to crush the protestors to its support for the Egyptian coup against Morsi—elicited no substantive Iranian reaction.

In part to push back against Saudi-sponsored militias, Iran began to bolster its military support for the Syrian government, including military training and advice, and the establishment of paramilitary groups in Syria. Iran's response to the Syria crisis reflected a multilayered strategy, beginning with the establishment of indigenous militia organizations within Syria based on the model of Iran's own Basij volunteer force and its experience in the eight-year Iran–Iraq war. By the end of 2012, Iran had helped Syria establish the new National Defence Forces (Quwat al-Difa' al-Watani), which added some 100,000 'motivated fighters', recruited across sectarian and ethnic lines, to government ranks with critical deployment in the key battlegrounds of Aleppo, Homs and Latakia, among others.[63] Iran later broadened this strategy both regionally and internationally to support the introduction of foreign, mainly Shi'a-constituted militias into Syria, and then to coordinate with Russia in order to facilitate the extension of a Russian security umbrella over the country.[64]

With Iran's successful provision of military and political support to Syria, Saudi Arabia lost its regime change gambit in the country. In 2018, Riyadh reduced its footprint in Syria, indicating its acceptance of the status quo, in marked contrast to the assertive tone previously often taken by Saudi officials in commenting on Syria's future and government.

Yemen: containment through exhaustion

While the Yemeni conflict, a by-product of internal Yemeni politics and Saudi intervention, had little to do with Iran, Tehran made strategic use of the situation against its rival, with the conflict creating a self-fulfilling prophecy haunting Saudi Arabia through a security vulnerability on its borders exploited by Iran.[65] Iran did not have embedded interests or allies as such in Yemen as it did in Syria. While Ansar Allah (informally known as the Houthis) are majority Shi'a, they belong to the Zaydi sub-branch of Shi'ism and do not have the same contemporary socio-cultural connections with the Shi'a of Iran as other Twelver Shi'a communities in

[63] 'Ulgugiri-ye basij-i mardomi-ye Suriyih az Iran' [The modelling of Syria's popular mobilization [*basij*] from Iran], *Basirat*, 3 Dec. 2018 (author's translation), http://basirat.ir/fa/news/312979/.
[64] Ahmadian and Mohseni, 'Iran's Syria strategy'.
[65] International Crisis Group, *Yemen: is peace possible?*, Middle East and North Africa report (Brussels, 1 March 2016), p. 12.

the Middle East. Yemen did not represent any high geostrategic priority for Iran, which had not historically sided with the Shi'a Zaydis in Yemen in any meaningful geopolitical manner.

Prior to the Arab Spring, the Zaydis of northern Yemen had independently and autonomously fought six rounds of war with the Yemeni army. In the sixth round, in 2009–2010, Saudi Arabia joined forces with President Ali Abdullah Saleh's army to weaken and disarm the Houthis. Though vocally opposing the Saudi intervention in the conflict, Iran did not at this point interfere or support the Yemeni Zaydis, not yet having its strategy of Saudi containment in place. And while Saleh and the Saudis accused the Houthis of carrying out Iran's agenda at the time, there was no substantive evidence to demonstrate that these Yemeni wars were proxy conflicts.

Indeed, as Iran did not have a Saudi containment strategy in place during the Arab Spring, the Houthis initially fought alone. Nonetheless, by the end of 2014, after the Saudi failure to damp down the Yemeni protests through a 2011 GCC initiative undertaken as part of its counter-revolutionary policy, Ansar Allah had achieved military and political dominance. As a consequence, Saudi Arabia launched its own war in Yemen in March 2015 with the aim of obliterating Ansar Allah's mounting power, accusing the group of advancing Iran's agenda. In addition to an extensive air campaign and naval blockade, Riyadh directly funded a range of armed militias and sought to establish military bases in the country.[66]

The Saudi war in Yemen presented Tehran with the opportunity to contain its rival by exhausting its military potential in a protracted asymmetrical war. According to the Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, the Saudi intervention was a 'divine gift',[67] which paved the way for Iran to enter into partnership with Ansar Allah to thwart Saudi objectives and drain Saudi resources in Yemen. Though Tehran's first move was to engage Riyadh diplomatically on Yemen, as tensions between the two countries intensified, 'proponents of broader support for the Houthis gained the upper hand in the [Iranian] SNSC'.[68]

Before the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia enjoyed 'a sphere of influence that allow[ed] it to affect events in the area to an equal or greater degree than … the [Yemeni Government] itself'.[69] With the rise of Ansar Allah, that influence diminished. From this perspective, an independent Yemen, or at least one not aligned with Saudi Arabia, gained strategic value for Iran, shaping its policy to limit Saudi influence and challenge Riyadh's domination over its southern neighbour. The fact that Ansar Allah, against all odds, managed to preserve its military

[66] Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Eric Schmitt, 'Army special forces secretly help Saudis combat threat from Yemen rebels', *New York Times*, 3 May 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/us/politics/green-berets-saudi-yemen-border-houthi.html.

[67] 'Khabarha-ye khubi az nabudi-ye Da'ish khahim shenid' [We will hear good news about the elimination of ISIS [soon]], *Fars News*, 1 Dec. 2014 (author's translation), https://www.farsnews.ir/news/13930901001724/.

[68] International Crisis Group, *Iran's priorities in a turbulent Middle East*, Middle East and North Africa report (Brussels, 2018), pp. 22–3.

[69] Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and periphery in northern Yemen: the Huthi phenomenon* (Rand Corporation, 2010), p. 36.

and political power attested to its rising value in Iran's strategic thinking. The war had the important effect of depleting Saudi military resources and constraining its capacity for taking a more active role against Iran in the region.

While Iran does not have command and control of Ansar Allah, it has provided substantive support for the movement in two main ways. First, it has supported Ansar Allah politically, pushing back against Saudi political campaigns to marginalize the movement. Not only has Tehran received Ansar Allah's diplomatic delegations at a time when it was under immense pressure regionally and internationally, it has also been providing Ansar Allah with alternative sources of international legitimacy and encouraging its allies and friends to enhance their ties with the movement's regime in Sana'a.

This is especially true with regard to members of the 'axis of resistance', which strengthened their ties with Ansar Allah and in some cases even expressed their willingness to fight in Yemen.[70] In 2016, a high-ranking Ansar Allah delegation met with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who welcomed the delegation as 'the representative of Yemen and confirmed that Iraq, both at a governmental and popular level … opposes unjustified aggression against Yemen'.[71] Members of the Yemeni delegation also met with well-known members of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), including Abu Azrael of the Imam Ali Brigades, who pledged his willingness to fight against the Saudis alongside their Yemeni comrades. The same delegation visited Beirut afterwards, also making a final stop in Tehran. In 2018 another prominent Ansar Allah delegation travelled to Beirut, where it was warmly received by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. Ansar Allah's media station, *Al-Masirah*, is also based in Beirut, with likely assistance from Hezbollah. In another significant act of support, in 2019 Iran received an ambassador from the Sana'a government controlled by Ansar Allah.

Second, and just as importantly, Iran has been reported to have given Ansar Allah military support, although this is not officially confirmed by Tehran. While the question of Iranian arm shipments to Yemen was a matter of controversy, with the US Trump administration alleging that Iran was providing the Yemenis with ballistic missiles, General Mohammad Ali Ja'fari, former commander of the IRGC, stated that Iran's support of Yemen was 'at the advisory and moral level, which is what Yemen needs'.[72] According to earlier US investigations, 'contrary to ROYG [Yemeni government] claims that Iran is arming the Houthis, most analysts report that the Houthis obtain their weapons from the Yemeni black market and even from the ROYG military itself'.[73]

[70] 'Faysal min al-hashd al-sha'bi fi-l Iraq ya'lan tatawa'a li-l qital ma al-Huthi' [A faction of the PMF in Iraq announces its willingness to fight with the Houthis], *Russia Today*, 7 July 2018.

[71] Karim El-Bar, 'Iraq PM Abadi reportedly calls Houthi delegation "representative of Yemen"', *Middle East Eye*, 1 Sept. 2016, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/yemen-delegation-claim-iraq-recognition-iranian-satellites-consolidate-ties-1798001054.

[72] 'Sardar Ja'fari az kudam kumak bih Yamani-ha sukhan goft?' [About which assistance to the Yemenis did General Ja'fari speak?], *Mashregh*, 26 Nov. 2017 (author's translation), https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/802551/.

[73] Wikileaks, 'Who are the Houthis, part two: how are they fighting?', 9 Dec. 2009, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09SANAA2186_a.html.

Nonetheless, Ansar Allah's possession and use of ballistic missiles contributed to military cost–benefit calculations consistent with Iran's containment strategy in respect of Saudi Arabia. Right after the first use of a ballistic missile against Riyadh in November 2017, Iran's *Kayhan* newspaper, an outlet close to the Supreme Leader, praised the targeting and encouraged Ansar Allah to target the United Arab Emirates if it continued to be the victim of aggression.[74] Moreover, in perhaps one of the most explicit statements of Iranian military influence, IRGC commander Nasser Sha'bani supposedly claimed in 2018 that 'we told the Yemenis to strike two Saudi tankers and they struck … the enemy has so much vulnerability that we can bog them down on that side of the border'—although *Fars News* and *Etemaad Online*, which published this news, later removed his statement.[75]

Ansar Allah controversially and publicly claimed responsibility for the significant 2019 strikes on Saudi Aramco installations in Abqaiq and Khurais, conducted by a combination of drones and missiles, which knocked out half of Saudi's oil production capabilities. Shortly afterwards, the head of Iran's joint chiefs of staff, General Mohammad Bagheri, stated that Iran provided advisory support to Yemen's popular armed forces—that is, Ansar Allah.[76] Frequent attacks against Saudi targets have continued since, on targets including oil infrastructure, military bases and international airports. For example, in November 2020, during Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's secret visit to the Kingdom, Ansar Allah conducted a precision missile attack on an Aramco oil distribution site in Jeddah, to which Saudi Arabia responded by filing a complaint at the UN.[77]

Moreover, while Nasrallah refuted accusations that Hezbollah was taking part in fighting in Yemen, he stated that 'we do not confirm nor do we deny' support short of sending military combatants.[78] There are unconfirmed reports suggesting that Hezbollah has been training Ansar Allah on the basis of its own guerrilla fighting experiences. Nasrallah's statements embody a plausible deniability that reflects Iran's own use of deniability in its strategy of containment.

The war in Yemen has also enabled Iran and Ansar Allah to undermine Saudi credibility in two important ways. First, aggressive Saudi policies against one of the poorest Arab countries and the massive humanitarian crisis in Yemen have damaged the Kingdom's credibility and moral standing regionally. They have also damaged its image internationally, attracting blame for creating the 'world's worst humanitarian crisis', according to the UN Secretary-General António Guterres,

[74] 'Shillik-i mushak-i Ansar Allah bih Riyadh, hadaf-i ba'di Dubai' [Ansar Allah's missile launch on Riyadh, next target: Dubai], *Kayhan*, 11 Nov. 2017.

[75] 'Farmandeh-ye sepah: bih Yamani-ha goftim du naftkish-i Su'udi ra bizanand va zadand' [IRGC commander: we told the Yemenis to strike two Saudi tankers and they struck], Radio Farda, 7 Aug. 2018.

[76] 'Sarlashgar Bagheri: sipah-i pasdaran bih artish-i mardomi-ye Yaman kumak-i mustashari mikonad' [General Bagheri: the IRGC provides advisory assistance to the popular army of Yemen], *Tasnim*, 1 Oct. 2019.

[77] 'Al-Su'udiyya li-Majlis al-'Amn: al-Huthiyun mas'ulun 'an hujum khazan Jida' [Saudi to the [UN] Security Council: the Houthis are responsible for the attack on the [oil] reserves in Jeddah], *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 25 Nov. 2020.

[78] 'Kalimat al-Sayid Hassan Nasrallah hawla akhir al-tatawurat fi lubnan wa-l mantiqa' [Statement of Sayed Hassan Nasrallah on the latest developments in Lebanon and the region], *Al-Moqawama Al-Islamiya*, 29 June 2018 (author's translation), https://video.moqawama.org/details.php?cid=1&linkid=2003.

who has reported that 18 million Yemeni individuals face severe food insecurity;[79] other senior UN officials have called Yemen the 'world's worst humanitarian crisis in 50 years'.[80] In 2018 Iran hosted an international conference on the Yemeni humanitarian crisis in which over 80 countries participated,[81] making sure to condemn and actively publicize Saudi atrocities in Yemen.

Second, Saudi Arabia, which has one of the highest military expenditures in the world both in terms of absolute and per-capita spending and receives substantial international assistance in its conduct of the war from world powers including the United States,[82] suffered a severe blow to its standing from its failure to defeat a small non-state actor and underfunded militia. By discrediting Saudi operations and playing up Saudi failures, Iran has been able to enhance the effectiveness of its containment strategy significantly and also to increase the legitimacy of resistance against Saudi forces in the Yemen war.[83] More importantly, on a strategic level, the war forced Saudi Arabia to concentrate its energies on Yemen, inhibiting any Saudi effort to confront Iran elsewhere in the region. Therefore, exhausting Riyadh in Yemen provided strategic gains for Iran.

Qatar: containment through division

Like the war in Yemen, the dispute between Saudi Arabia and Qatar in 2017 was a crisis of Riyadh's own making. Though Iran was not the primary issue in the disagreement between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Riyadh did not miss the opportunity to insist that Qatar sever its ties with Iran. This crisis provided Iran with yet another opportunity to contain its regional adversary as it disrupted efforts by Riyadh and Washington to construct an anti-Tehran coalition.

Iran's use of the Qatar crisis allowed it to further its containment strategy regarding Saudi Arabia in a manner previously unseen in Iran–Gulf relations. Iran had always viewed the GCC and US support of the organization with suspicion, and thus welcomed the dispute as it created a strategic rift within the GCC. It perceived this rift as offering a chance to counter Riyadh's anti-Iran narrative, especially as it revolved around intervention by Saudi Arabia in the internal affairs of other countries, thereby undermining Riyadh's criticism of Tehran's alleged meddling in other countries' affairs. Qatar's foreign minister claimed that Riyadh

[79] Refugees International, *A chance to end the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen*, 19 March 2018, https://www.refugeesinternational.org/advocacy-letters-1/endingcatastrpheinyemen?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIpqq8lLbt3AIVgoSzCh3XvAhhEAAYAyAAEgJKZvD_BwE; Ewelina U. Ochab, 'Yemen became the world's worst humanitarian crisis', *Forbes*, 5 April 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2018/04/05/yemen-became-the-worlds-worst-humanitarian-crisis/#6f9c4e0d5050.

[80] 'Yemen could be "worst" humanitarian crisis in 50 years', *Al Jazeera*, 5 Jan. 2018, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/yemen-worst-humanitarian-crisis-50-years-180105190332474.html.

[81] 'Hamayish-i Bayn-ul Millali-ye Himayat az Mardum-i Mazlum va Muqavim-i Yaman barguzar shod' [The International Conference for Supporting the Steadfast and Oppressed People of Yemen was held], *Fars News*, 19 Nov. 2018 (author's translation), https://www.farsnews.ir/news/13970828000678/.

[82] Saudi Arabia spent US$69.4 billion or 10% of its GDP on military expenditures in 2017. See Nan Tian, Alexandra Kuimova, Diego Lopes Da Silva, Pieter D. Wezeman and Siemon T. Wezeman, *Trends in world military expenditure, 2017* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, May 2018).

[83] Scholars have argued that legitimacy is a significant element in shaping the success or failure of containment: see e.g. Aran, 'Containment and territorial transnational actors', p. 855.

wanted to 'force Qatar into a state of trusteeship to interfere in its foreign policy, to undermine its sovereignty and to interfere in its domestic policy'.[84] Iran's support for Qatar, like Saudi Arabia a Sunni Wahhabi country, also served to counter 'the myth that the struggle in the Middle East is based on the 1,400-year-old Sunni-Shia rift'.[85]

From Iran's perspective, the Saudi–Qatari crisis initiated in 2017 by MbS provided yet another indication of Saudi's regional hegemonic tendencies and its enmity towards Iran.[86] From this perspective, Riyadh was trying to further its control over Qatar by closing off its scope for pursuing an independent policy. As the head of Iran's SNSC, reformist Ali Shamkhani, stated: 'For sure the Qatar–Saudi conflict is similar to the Yemen–Saudi conflict. Saudi Arabia says: "I must say who is the president of Yemen," it says: "I must say who is the ruler of Qatar." This is the root of the Saudi conflict in Yemen and Qatar.'[87]

Tehran also took seriously the possibility of a Saudi attack on Qatar.[88] Consequently, Iran took unprecedented steps to support Qatar, actively aiming to disable Saudi Arabia's regional effectiveness and undermine its leadership role within the GCC, and to signal its own readiness to defend Qatar. This was different from Iran's position during the military skirmish between Saudi Arabia and Qatar in 1992, known as the al-Khafus incident, that resulted in several deaths when Riyadh took control of the disputed area.[89] At that time, despite its objection to the Saudi move, Iran declined to intervene or to back Qatar actively owing to its detente with Saudi Arabia.[90]

Iran's new posture was significant, providing a crucial lifeline for Qatar under the Saudi blockade. Qatar's foreign minister, Khalid bin Mohammad al-Attiyah, acknowledged that 'Iran opened the only way for Qatar to breathe'.[91] Iran provided Doha, including Qatar Airlines, with both the maritime and the air access it needed to escape the blockade.

Doha immediately upgraded its diplomatic relations with Tehran at the ambassadorial level, having downgraded those relations in 2016 following Iranian protestors' attacks on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran. It is also reported that, perceiving the threat of a possible Saudi attack on Doha, Iran provided military assistance to Qatar, possibly including the dispatch by the IRGC of advisers to Doha as a signal

[84] AFP, 'Blockade attempt to force Qatar into "trusteeship": minister', *Daily Mail*, 11 Sept. 2017, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-4872746/Blockade-attempt-force-Qatar-trusteeship-minister.html.

[85] Mohammed Ayoob, 'The Saudi–Qatar crisis amounts to a big win for Iran', *National Interest*, 4 Sept. 2017, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-saudi-qatar-crisis-amounts-big-win-iran-22147.

[86] Author interview with Iranian diplomat, Tehran, June 2017.

[87] 'Iran hargiz dar siyasathaye mantighih-ye khud tajdid-i nazar nakhahad kard' [Iran will never reconsider its regional policies], *Moj News*, 27 May 2018 (author's translation).

[88] Author interview with Iranian diplomat, Tehran, January 2018.

[89] 'Al-Alaqat al-Su'udiya al-Qatariya: Tarikh hafil bil-khilafat wa-l tawatturat' [Saudi-Qatari Relations: a history filled with divergence and tension], BBC Arabic, 6 June 2017, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-40172428.

[90] Bassam Salah, 'Al-Alaqat al-Qatariya al-Iraniya wa-l amn al-ighlimi al-arabi' [Qatari–Iranian relations and the Arab regional security], Arab Center for Research and Studies, 5 July 2017, http://www.acrseg.org/40533.

[91] 'Wazir al-difa' al-qatari yakshif l-RT masir al-qa'ida al-Amriki' [The Qatari minister of defense reveals to RT the fate of the American base], *Russia Today*, 23 July 2017 (author's translation), https://rb.gy/f2mfro (shortened URL).

to Riyadh.[92] In March 2018, moreover, the deputy commander of the IRGC, Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri, visited Doha as part of a security delegation in an official capacity as a strong demonstration of the increasingly close ties between the two countries.

By the time the Qatar crisis occurred, Iranian objectives and strategy towards Riyadh were much more clearly defined than in earlier years of the decade, which explains the speed and effectiveness of Iran's response. As Shamkhani stated: 'We were the first country that defended Qatar in the face of the unjust and oppressive Saudi blockade, and we provided an array of our capacities to Doha for opposing Saudi coercion.'[93] Qasim Mohibali, a former senior official of Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the reformist Khatami administration, further asserted:

> In the current situation, one can imagine that closeness between Doha and Riyadh is not in our interest. The necessary condition for us to defend reconciliation between Qatar and [Saudi] Arabia or even Iranian mediation is that the relationship between Tehran and Riyadh should improve.[94]

This amounted to a statement by Mohibali of Iran's interest in the persistence of a division between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Iranians agreed on the need to contain Riyadh, given the latter's new position on Iran, and Qatar served as a welcome opportunity to check Saudi ambitions in the Persian Gulf.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how Iran has shifted its strategy regarding Saudi Arabia from one of detente to one of containment. This represents Iran's first use of a fully developed containment strategy against a country in the region, and, importantly, its first use of such a strategy aimed directly at Saudi Arabia, a country Tehran had previously largely ignored, considering it a dependent actor under the patronage of the United States. Iran's strategy is now evident across the board in the Middle East, where it uses containment to bring about exhaustion in Yemen, as a means of division and wedging in Qatar, and with an intent to eliminate Saudi forces in Syria.

Iran has largely been successful in the application of containment across Syria, Yemen and Qatar. However, its use of containment highlights the increased risks and tensions in the region, especially with tensions rising between Iran and the United States. With suspected Iranian support of or involvement in the 2019 attacks on Saudi Aramco installations as well as on oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, the risks have never been higher. Nevertheless, it appears that the Iranian strategy may have been paying off, as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have moved to de-escalate

[92] 'Iran Revolutionary Guards "protecting Qatar's Sheikh Tamim inside his palace"', *Al Arabiyya*, 7 June 2017, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/06/07/Iran-s-Revolutionary-Guards-protecting-Qatari-emir-inside-palace-.html.

[93] 'Iran will never reconsider its regional policies'.

[94] 'Muhasirih-ye Qatar bih tarikh payvast' [The siege of Qatar is [now] history], Islamic Republic News Agency, 3 June 2018 (author's translation), http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82933301.

the situation and the US anti-Iran coalition may be showing cracks.[95] Indeed, it has been claimed by the Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi, and by Iran, that General Soleimani was delivering a response to a message of reconciliation sent by Riyadh immediately prior to his assassination in Baghdad in January 2020.

Nevertheless, any new instances of instability or turmoil in the Middle East can immediately offer new opportunities for Iran to pursue containment. Given the new normalization agreements between Israel and some Arab states, and the Kingdom's discreet alignment with Israel, moreover, Iran is likely to reinforce its containment strategy in the future. By theoretically contextualizing Iranian policies towards Saudi Arabia as part of a containment strategy, this article contributes to a more nuanced and rational understanding of Iranian strategic objectives and behaviour in its regional foreign policy decision-making. In the context of a strongly US-centric literature, the article also contributes to the understanding of containment strategies undertaken by a non-western country in the developing world. We can better understand the drivers of regional conflicts and the nature of the Iranian–Saudi rivalry by focusing on the underlying drivers of Iranian policy.

[95] Mark Mazzetti, Ronen Bergman and Farnaz Fassihi, 'How months of miscalculation led the US and Iran to the brink of war', *New York Times*, 13 Feb. 2020.