

The Struggle Of Power Between Iran And Saudi Arabia In The Gulf Region

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Introduction

The struggle for influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia is one of the most consequential rivalries in the Gulf region. The original essay correctly emphasized that the competition became especially visible after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the Arab uprisings that began in 2011. It also followed Hashemi and Postel's argument that political leaders have repeatedly used sectarian identity to mobilize support for strategic goals. The rivalry is often described as a conflict between Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, but religion alone does not explain it. The two states compete over regional leadership, security partnerships, oil policy, relations with the United States, influence in fragile states, and the political legitimacy of their governing systems. At different times they have cooperated, reduced tensions, or backed opposing actors in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen. Their relationship should therefore be understood as a changing geopolitical contest in which sectarian language can intensify conflict but does not mechanically determine state behavior. (Hashemi & Postel, n.d.)

Historical Foundations Beyond a Simple Sunni-Shia Divide

The division between Sunni and Shia Islam originated in disputes over leadership after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, but it is misleading to treat a seventh-century theological disagreement as the direct cause of modern Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Contemporary Iran and Saudi Arabia are states with particular institutions, security interests, economies, and foreign-policy goals. Their leaders use religious identity selectively, and both have cooperated with governments or movements outside their own sectarian traditions when strategic interests required it. Before 1979, Iran under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Saudi Arabia were both partners of the United States and were broadly aligned against Soviet influence and revolutionary Arab nationalism. As the original essay noted, they supported the royalist side during the North Yemen civil war in the 1960s. This history demonstrates that political alignment can outweigh sectarian difference. Religion matters because it shapes legitimacy, networks, and public narratives, but the conflict becomes understandable only when religious identity is considered together with regime security and regional power. (United Nations, 2024)

The 1979 Iranian Revolution as a Turning Point

The Iranian Revolution transformed the relationship by replacing a pro-Western monarchy with an Islamic Republic that presented itself as anti-imperialist and revolutionary. Iran's new leaders criticized monarchical rule, challenged United States influence, and claimed that their revolution offered a model of political Islam beyond Iran. Saudi leaders viewed this message as a threat to regional order and to the legitimacy of their own monarchy. Riyadh responded by strengthening alliances, supporting conservative religious institutions, and portraying revolutionary Iran as a specifically Shiite project rather than a universal Islamic movement. The rivalry was therefore ideological as well as strategic. Iran criticized Saudi dependence on Western security guarantees and its custodianship of Islam's holy places, while Saudi Arabia feared revolutionary mobilization among regional populations, including Shia communities in the Gulf. The contest was intensified by incidents surrounding pilgrimage, diplomatic confrontation, and competing claims to Islamic leadership. Yet the central issue was not simply doctrine; it was whether revolutionary republicanism or conservative monarchy would define political authority in the region.

The Iran–Iraq War and Saudi Support for Baghdad

The Iran–Iraq War from 1980 to 1988 hardened mistrust. Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, and Saudi Arabia and several Gulf monarchies provided substantial political and financial support to Baghdad. They feared that an Iranian victory would expand revolutionary influence and destabilize neighboring governments. From Iran's perspective, Gulf support for Iraq demonstrated that Saudi Arabia was willing to strengthen a hostile regime in order to contain the Islamic Republic. The war caused enormous loss of life and reinforced Iranian beliefs that the country had to develop independent military capabilities and relationships with non-state partners. For Saudi Arabia, the conflict confirmed the danger of regional upheaval and the need for external security protection. The rivalry thus became embedded in competing security doctrines: Iran emphasized strategic depth, asymmetric capabilities, and allied movements, while Saudi Arabia relied more heavily on conventional arms, Arab partnerships, economic influence, and close ties with the United States.

Periods of Rapprochement in the 1990s

The relationship was not permanently hostile. After the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the end of the Iran–Iraq War, pragmatic leaders sought to reduce tensions. Iran's presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami pursued improved relations with [Gulf states](#), and Saudi Arabia also saw advantages in dialogue. Diplomatic exchanges, agreements, and greater cooperation during the 1990s showed that rivalry could be moderated when leaders considered confrontation too costly. This period is important because it contradicts the idea that Sunni–Shia conflict makes accommodation impossible. States can redefine threats, separate areas of disagreement, and build

mechanisms for communication. However, rapprochement remained vulnerable because neither side resolved deeper disputes about United States military presence, regional leadership, or political movements. The relationship improved, but the strategic foundations of competition remained.

The 2003 Iraq War and the New Regional Balance

The United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 altered the balance of power by removing Saddam Hussein, one of Iran's most important regional enemies. Iraq's new political order gave greater influence to Shia parties, many of which had historical relationships with Tehran. Saudi policymakers feared that Iran was gaining strategic depth through Baghdad and that Iraq could become part of a wider Iranian sphere of influence. Public discussion of a "Shia crescent" reflected these anxieties, although the phrase oversimplified the different interests of Shia communities and governments. Iran benefited from the removal of Saddam, but influence did not mean total control. Iraqi parties, religious institutions, and public opinion have their own interests and frequently resist external domination. Nevertheless, Iraq became a central arena in the competition, with both Saudi Arabia and Iran seeking political, economic, religious, and security connections. The war also contributed to sectarian violence, allowing political actors to frame power struggles in communal terms.

The Arab Uprisings and Competing Interpretations

The uprisings that began in 2011 initially involved broad demands for political participation, dignity, economic opportunity, and an end to authoritarian abuse. Protesters were not simply acting as representatives of sectarian blocs. Iran and Saudi Arabia nevertheless interpreted different uprisings through their strategic interests. Iran praised movements that weakened United States-aligned governments but supported the Syrian government when protests threatened President Bashar al-Assad, a critical ally. Saudi Arabia supported some political transitions while viewing unrest in Bahrain and other monarchies as a threat to Gulf security. Both states used selective narratives: one side described resistance as popular liberation when it served its interests, while the other emphasized stability and foreign interference. The original essay correctly noted that Sunnis and Shias participated together in some early protests and that sectarian polarization intensified later. This sequence matters because it shows that sectarian conflict was not inevitable; it was produced and amplified through repression, war, propaganda, [foreign intervention](#), and institutional collapse. (Wehrey, 2013)

Syria and the Expansion of Proxy Competition

Syria became one of the most destructive arenas of rivalry. Iran supported the Assad government with financial assistance, military advisers, and allied armed groups, including Hezbollah and militias recruited from other countries. Saudi Arabia supported parts of the armed opposition, although

opposition groups were fragmented and external support changed over time. The conflict cannot be reduced to a direct Iran–Saudi proxy war because it involved the Syrian government, numerous rebel organizations, Kurdish forces, extremist groups, Russia, Turkey, the United States, and other actors. Still, Saudi and Iranian intervention contributed to the regionalization of the war. Sectarian rhetoric was used to recruit fighters and portray the conflict as an existential struggle. Iran justified its role through alliance obligations, resistance to extremist organizations, and defense of religious sites, while critics argued that its intervention helped sustain a government responsible for large-scale violence. Saudi policy was also criticized for fragmentation, escalation, and support reaching groups with incompatible agendas. The result was not regional stability but deeper humanitarian and political catastrophe.

Yemen and the Limits of the Proxy-War Label

Yemen became another major point of confrontation. Saudi Arabia led a military coalition beginning in 2015 after the Houthi movement seized Sanaa and expanded against the internationally recognized government. Iran supported the Houthis politically and provided forms of military assistance, but the movement has local roots, grievances, leadership, and decision-making that predate its relationship with Tehran. Calling the war only a Saudi–Iranian proxy conflict obscures Yemen’s internal political failures, the legacy of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, regional inequalities, tribal politics, and the collapse of the post-2011 transition. At the same time, external intervention intensified the conflict. Coalition airstrikes, restrictions on movement and imports, Houthi attacks, repression, recruitment, and the use of missiles and drones caused severe civilian harm. The original essay’s moral concern about attacks affecting hospitals, markets, schools, and residential areas remains essential. Neither geopolitical competition nor sectarian language excuses violations of humanitarian law.

Bahrain, Lebanon, and Regional Political Networks

In Bahrain, Saudi Arabia viewed the 2011 uprising as a direct security threat and supported the monarchy, while Iran rhetorically backed protesters and criticized Gulf intervention. The protest movement included substantial participation from Bahrain’s Shia majority but also reflected demands for political reform that cannot be reduced to Iranian direction. In Lebanon, Iran has developed a close relationship with Hezbollah, which is simultaneously a political party, social organization, and armed movement. Saudi Arabia has supported different Lebanese parties and institutions, often seeking to counter Hezbollah’s influence. These cases demonstrate how the rivalry works through local political systems rather than through complete control of obedient proxies. Local actors accept external resources but pursue their own agendas. The term “proxy” is useful only when it does not erase the agency of people within the affected countries.

Energy, the Gulf, and Relations with the United States

Saudi Arabia and Iran are major energy producers whose security policies are shaped by the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. Saudi Arabia has historically maintained a close security partnership with the United States, purchasing weapons and hosting or cooperating with American forces. Iran presents the United States military presence as a threat and argues that regional security should be organized by Gulf states without outside domination. This creates incompatible security visions. Saudi leaders have feared Iran's missiles, drones, allied movements, and nuclear capabilities, while Iran has feared encirclement, sanctions, covert action, and military attack. Oil infrastructure and maritime routes are vulnerable points. Attacks or threats affecting tankers, ports, refineries, and pipelines can rapidly internationalize the rivalry because disruptions influence global energy markets. Economic competition therefore exists alongside military competition, even though both states also have incentives to avoid a war that would threaten their infrastructure and development plans.

The 2016 Diplomatic Break

Relations deteriorated sharply in January 2016 after Saudi Arabia executed the Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. Protesters attacked Saudi diplomatic facilities in Iran, and Riyadh severed diplomatic relations. The break removed important channels of communication at a time when the two states were backing opposing sides across the region. Without direct diplomacy, misunderstandings and escalation became more difficult to manage. The episode also illustrated how domestic political decisions can acquire regional significance when they involve religious identity and symbolic figures. Iran condemned the execution, while Saudi Arabia defended it as an internal legal matter. The resulting diplomatic rupture lasted several years and reinforced hostile media narratives on both sides.

The 2023 Restoration of Diplomatic Relations

A major shift occurred in March 2023 when Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed, through Chinese mediation, to restore diplomatic relations. The agreement reopened embassies and created opportunities for direct communication, economic exchange, pilgrimage coordination, and regional dialogue. It did not eliminate the rivalry, but it demonstrated that both states had reasons to reduce confrontation. Saudi Arabia was pursuing economic transformation and needed a more stable regional environment. Iran faced economic pressure, domestic challenges, and the risks of escalating conflict. China's role also reflected changes in regional diplomacy and the importance of Asian economic relationships. The restoration of ties should be understood as de-escalation rather than alliance. Differences over armed groups, nuclear policy, relations with the United States, and regional order remained.

A Fragile Relationship in a Volatile Region

By 2026, diplomatic engagement had not removed the effects of wider regional conflict. Iran and Saudi Arabia continued to have channels for communication, but attacks on Gulf infrastructure, conflict involving Iranian-aligned groups, and confrontation between Iran, Israel, and the United States placed renewed pressure on relations. Recent reporting indicates that Iranian and Saudi officials have continued diplomatic contact even while accusations and security fears have increased. This mixed pattern—dialogue alongside mistrust—shows why the rivalry cannot be described as either fully resolved or permanently hostile. Saudi Arabia has incentives to avoid becoming a battlefield in conflicts involving Iran, while Iran has incentives to prevent Gulf states from aligning completely with military pressure against it. Yet armed networks, missile and drone capabilities, and unresolved wars create constant risks of miscalculation.

Sectarianism as a Political Instrument

Hashemi and Postel's central argument remains valuable: modern sectarian hatred is not simply an ancient inheritance. Political institutions, state media, clerical networks, armed organizations, and foreign interventions can intensify communal identity for strategic purposes. Saudi narratives have sometimes portrayed Iranian influence as a comprehensive Shia conspiracy, while Iranian narratives have sometimes presented opposition to its regional policies as hostility toward Shia communities or resistance movements. Both approaches erase diversity. Sunni communities do not share one political position, and Shia communities do not automatically support Iran. Sectarian framing can transform negotiable political disputes into existential struggles, making compromise appear like betrayal. Reducing the conflict therefore requires more than official diplomacy; it requires rejecting collective blame and recognizing the political, national, and socioeconomic causes of local disputes.

Prospects for Regional Stability

A more stable Gulf order would require sustained direct dialogue, crisis communication, respect for sovereignty, limits on attacks against civilian infrastructure, and political settlements in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq that are not merely negotiated by external powers. Confidence-building could include maritime communication, pilgrimage coordination, environmental cooperation, trade, and agreements against attacks on energy facilities. International actors can support mediation, but durable stability cannot be imposed solely from outside. Iran and Saudi Arabia must decide that their security is not improved by making neighboring states permanently weak. Local populations must also have meaningful political participation because external bargains that ignore domestic grievances often postpone rather than resolve conflict.

Conclusion

The struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia has changed repeatedly from cooperation to confrontation and back toward cautious engagement. Its roots lie not simply in the Sunni-Shia division but in regime legitimacy, regional leadership, military strategy, foreign alliances, and competition within fragile states. The Iranian Revolution, Iran-Iraq War, 2003 Iraq invasion, Arab uprisings, Syrian war, Yemen conflict, and 2016 diplomatic break all intensified rivalry. The restoration of relations in 2023 demonstrated that diplomacy is possible, but subsequent regional crises have shown how fragile de-escalation remains. Lasting stability requires both states to limit proxy competition, respect the autonomy of neighboring societies, maintain communication, and avoid transforming political disputes into sectarian hostility. The international community can encourage this process, but regional governments bear primary responsibility for ensuring that their pursuit of influence does not continue to impose destruction on civilians. ("International Crisis Group", 2024)

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