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# Iran's Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf: Common Interests over Historic Rivalry

*Edited by Maaïke Warnaar,  
Luciano Zaccara and Paul Aarts*



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge  
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 Gerlach Press

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First published 2016  
by Gerlach Press  
Berlin, Germany  
[www.gerlach-press.de](http://www.gerlach-press.de)

Cover Design: [www.brandnewdesign.de](http://www.brandnewdesign.de), Hamburg  
Printed and bound in Germany by Hubert & Co, Göttingen  
[www.hubertundco.de](http://www.hubertundco.de)

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Bibliographic data available from Deutsche Nationalbibliothek  
<http://d-nb.info/1102545120>

ISBN: 978-3-95994-004-7 (hardcover)  
ISBN: 978-3-95994-005-4 (ebook)

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## 4

## The Hobgoblin of Little Minds: Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Sectarianism in the Gulf

Sean Foley

*"Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act, but to act in concert."*  
Hannah Arendt<sup>1</sup>

*"In Egypt...people would not ask your religion,  
they would ask whether you were Ahly or Zamalek."*  
Adel Abdel Ghafar<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

In March 2013, two Saudis with seemingly little in common met for breakfast in Kuwait. The first, a Shi'a Muslim from the Eastern Province, had firm ties with Western academics and diplomats, especially Americans. He had won a King Abdullah Scholarship to study journalism in the United States. His frequent commentary in English on the Kingdom and affinity for America had made his website and Twitter account well known in the West. By contrast, the second was a Sunni and a professor at one of Riyadh's foremost universities. He was a pillar of the Saudi establishment and was frequently called upon to defend his country's positions in international media and global conferences.<sup>3</sup>

But there was a force that transcended their differences: namely Riyadh's al-Hilal football club, the most successful club in Saudi history and one that is associated with the Saudi Royal Family. Its supporters, often called Hilalis, refer to the team as za'im, or the boss, a reference to its success and proximity to power. Following the meeting, the Sunni Saudi noted to me, "He was a Hilali, so it was it all right."<sup>4</sup> His comment demonstrates the wisdom of what a scholar in Riyadh once confided to me only partially in jest: "You know that football is bigger than God in Saudi Arabia?"<sup>5</sup> His perspective was not meant to be irreligious: he was simply emphasizing the immense importance of the sport in Saudi Arabia.<sup>6</sup>

The meeting brings into stark relief the role of sectarianism that is part of virtually every analysis of the Kingdom's policies towards Iran and the other Shi'a communities. While sectarianism is a tangible factor in daily life in the Kingdom, a scholarly focus purely on sectarianism overlooks (a) non-religious factors that shape Saudi foreign policy (b) the collective approach and flexibility inherent in the Saudi royal family's web of "special relationships." For decades this approach has provided an avenue to avoid what the leading American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson called "the foolish consistency that is the hobgoblin of little minds."<sup>7</sup> But in recent years they have also limited the Kingdom's ability to ability to pursue its interests regionally. In particular, they have limited Riyadh's options in responding to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (*Dā'ish*) and building a meaningful relationship with Iran and other states that could help check the growth of an organization that is clearly hostile to the Kingdom's rulers.

The central role of special relationships in forming Saudi foreign policy (and the limits they impose) emerged clearly in a question that a Saudi intellectual asked me about Lebanon in July 2013, following one of my visits to the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riyadh. As we discussed the deteriorating political situation in the Middle East and my conversations at the ministry, he rhetorically asked, "Why must we Saudis always support the Hariri family when there are far more powerful Lebanese parties we could partner with?"<sup>8</sup> Although the intellectual did not specify who these other Lebanese powers were, it was clear he was referring to Hezbollah, the Shi'a political party that is closely allied with Iran, is a rival of the Hariri family, and is the most powerful force in the country.

When thinking about the intellectual's question, we should remember that the Hariri family's patriarch—the late businessman and Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri—not only maintained close financial and personal ties with the Saudi government, but he also physically resembled the late Saudi King, King Fahd. The resemblance between the two was so close that Saudis jokingly refer to Rafic Hariri as "Ibn Fahd," or the son of King Fahd. Such ties extended to the next generation of the Hariri family: After Rafic Hariri's assassination in 2005, his son and successor as leader of the family, Saad Hariri, was told to cut his trademark long hair. Were he to receive the same Saudi support that his father had, Saad also had to appear as if he too could be a blood relative of the Kingdom's royal family.<sup>9</sup> Riyadh both supported Saad when he was Lebanon's Prime Minister from 2009 to 2011 and afterwards. When Riyadh provided \$1 billion to the Lebanese Army in August 2014 to purchase new weapons, Saad announced the grant to the Lebanese public after he met with Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah in Jeddah.<sup>10</sup>

### Past as Prologue

If the policy of "special" relationships with the Hariri family in Lebanon and others has clear limitations, why do Saudis continue to use it? To answer this question, it is best to start with geography and history. Saudi Arabia stretches over a vast peninsula rich in natural resources



with a diverse society but where, in the words of the *Tao Te Ching*, "Heaven and Earth are ruthless."<sup>11</sup> The Saudi royal family, however, built a governing structure in this environment by rejecting the "foolish consistency" "of little minds," beginning with the landmark settlement of the tribes. Although King Abdulaziz used a variety of means to transform nomadic tribes into permanent inhabitants of new settlements, he allowed portions of tribes to remain nomadic for much of the year and to maintain their social norms in the confines of neighborhoods and homes, often behind large walls.<sup>12</sup> When walls were not feasible for reconciling different social norms or preventing the interaction of strangers, Saudis utilized collective dialogue and institutions, such as the Majlis, an institution in which the word we is central and multiple views are aired.<sup>13</sup>

The vast geography of the Kingdom served the same purpose that walls did in cities. Few Saudis or foreigners in the Kingdom travel (or traveled) beyond the communities where they live or have more than anecdotal knowledge of anywhere in Saudi Arabia outside of the central cities: Dammam, Jeddah, and Riyadh. The Saudi state utilized this reality to its advantage: instead of imposing a uniform religious and social code on the country, it built direct personal ties with leading families and tribes and made a series of informal (but nonetheless binding) arrangements for communities to maintain their cultural and religious traditions—even if those traditions contradict the Salafi principles that the state and religious elites in Riyadh publicly uphold. Some of that rhetoric was as harshly critical of non-Muslims and others who did not adhere to the teachings of Wahhabi Hanbali Islam as we see today in Saudi Arabia.<sup>14</sup> Such an approach to diversity and distance is not unusual. The Viceroy who once governed Spain's vast empire in Latin America often saw the great physical distance from Europe as a license to either ignore or to obey specific orders from Madrid with discretion, using the famous maxim, "Obedezco pero no cumpro" ("I obey but do not comply").<sup>15</sup>

The state's relationship with the Shi'a community illustrates this balance. Hasa and the other Eastern regions of the peninsula, had been part of the first two Saudi states and community leaders, Sunni Muslims and even some Shi'a requested that King Abdulaziz annex the community and administer the community in place of Ottoman officials. A good example is Sheikh Musa Abu Khamsin (or Haji Ali), an important Shi'a official in Mubarraz who welcomed the King into his community.<sup>16</sup> Toby Matthiesen notes the importance of this sheikh in *The Other Saudis* and that Shi'a merchants from Al-Hasa "may have supported Ibn Saud before his capture of al-Hasa because they suffered from frequent raids."<sup>17</sup> While an official ban remains in place since that time prohibiting Shi'as from building new mosques and community centers in the Kingdom, Saudi governors routinely issue exemptions that allow Shi'a to build these buildings. Under this arrangement, which was explained to me by a leading scholar in Qatif who had been imprisoned by the Saudi government for political activism, Saudi Shi'a pay for their mosques and are allowed to control their weekly Khutbas, a privilege that is not extended to Sunnis, whose mosques are usually financed by the state.<sup>18</sup> This flexibility helps to explain why the Shi'a inhabitants of Najran chose a Salafi Sunni monarchy in Saudi Arabia in 1934 instead of allying with the Shi'a one in Yemen.<sup>19</sup>

Decades later, Shi'a Saudis in Najran and elsewhere dress like other Saudis, eat Kabsa, serve in the National Guard, and many live in large residential villas that are identical to those of their Sunni colleagues. Some elite Najranis describe a culture of leadership and shared trust akin to a close family. Saudi leaders routinely give the impression that they know Najran's elite better than the city's elite, thereby creating a process that puts "politics ahead of religion."<sup>20</sup> One hears similar comments in Asir and in other parts of the Kingdom, including the hereditary families that rule communities there.<sup>21</sup>

That culture was critical to resolving the most serious challenge to the Saudi state in recent decades that dwarfed anything that took place during the Arab Spring: namely the April 2000 revolt in Najran when Ismaili Shi'a took up arms against the security forces and the Saudi state briefly lost control of a city of a quarter of million people. The conflict grew out of tensions that had built up after Prince Mishall bin Saud had become governor in 1996: namely, significant environmental change, gaps between society and government leaders, and sectarian animus. Cell phones, the Internet, and other modern technologies amplified those forces by rapidly spreading accusations and questionable information, which simultaneously angered and terrified thousands of ordinary people.<sup>22</sup>

The result was an unprecedented blend of old and new and a political crisis without precedent in recent Saudi history. Not only was there a bloody confrontation between Najran's society and Saudi security services in front of the Holiday Inn Hotel in Najran, but the entire city of Najran slipped out of Saudi government control for several days. Human Rights Watch's report on Najran and the events in 2000 articulated the feelings of many of these who resisted the state well: "They are second-class citizens in their ancestral region, where they constitute a large majority."<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, Najran's community leaders drew on their common history with the Saudi royal family in devising a mechanism to resolve problems in such a way that *no one was blamed*. Critically, the possibility of good will—rather than accusation and suspicion—remained on all sides in the community when Prince Mishall was finally replaced as governor in 2008.

But the mechanism that resolved the conflict in Najran, however, does not promise absolute equality among partners any more than the individuals and groups in Saudi Arabia and other Wahhabi polities enjoy equality. Saudi society does not view equality as the key to justice. Instead, it focuses on the common good and on networks of relationships that depend on Saudis of all faiths not behaving as autonomous individuals. Rather, they are treated as wards where no one functions as an individual, a word derived from the Medieval Latin word, *individuum*, or not divided. Western modernity promises that uniformity will bring social harmony, but the Saudis view it the other way round: harmony comes from the acceptance of diversity: improvements can happen, but ultimately the tensions between oppositional forces cannot be humanly resolved. As the Quran reminds the faithful, "Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [in religion]" (5:48).

For decades, the Saudis have upheld this teaching by presiding over differing, at times contradictory, social norms for the hundreds of tribes that call the Kingdom home. A key



part of this system has been walls, segregated communities, and geographic distance—all of which allow various peoples to maintain social and religious norms that clearly contradict the Salafi principles upheld by the state. One can see the fruits of such arrangements in the contrasting social norms that exist among Saudi families in the same cities, the differing behaviors in urban and in rural settings, and the Shi'a mosques that exist in Qatif and Najran. This type of diversity is also visible in group settings beyond the home: campsites outside of the large cities, shopping malls, schools, and the majālis (the ubiquitous group meeting areas) have vastly different social norms and codes of behavior. While women cannot drive in the large cities, they are allowed to drive in rural settings and in some compounds. Nor is online culture uniform, for Saudis display contrasting norms on different social media platforms.<sup>24</sup>

### The Challenge of the Twenty-First Century

Such frameworks are hard for many to discern but they are real and have had a tangible impact on policy, especially on Saudi Arabia's longstanding special relationship with United States and with the international institutions that Washington created in the mid twentieth century. For many Saudis the contemporary world is inseparable from the cultural norms and institutions of the United States, a bilateral relationship as all-encompassing as that of France with North African nations and one which Saudi officials have compared to a tight familial bond, especially when Prince Bandar Sultan was Ambassador to the United States (1983–2005). He was a media personality in Washington, called the U.S. Saudi relationship a "Catholic Marriage," and was so close to the Bush family, which would hold the U.S. presidency for a decade of his tenure, that he was nicknamed "Bandar Bush."<sup>25</sup> When Prince Bandar said "We" in public, nobody doubted that it meant both America and Saudi Arabia. Bandar's successors as Ambassador have similar ties to the American elite and are both graduates of Georgetown University, a top university in Washington, and one had graduated in the same class as former president Bill Clinton.<sup>26</sup>

A critical factor facilitating close bilateral ties was Iran, a factor that more than offset any disagreements over the Arab-Israeli conflict. The government that emerged in Tehran after the 1979 Iranian Revolution viewed its national interests as aligned firmly against those of the United States and Saudi Arabia, especially after the start of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, the riots in Mecca in 1987 that left 400 Iranians dead, and the U.S. Navy's downing of a civilian Iranian airliner in 1988. Further facilitating U.S.-Saudi ties was their cooperation combating Iranian fighter jets that entered Saudi airspace in 1984 and the Iranian military's attacks on Saudi shipping in the Gulf. Officials from both Riyadh and Washington also blamed Tehran and its allies for destabilizing the Middle East. Washington routinely classified Tehran a state sponsor of terrorism and a key opponent of the Arab-Israeli Peace Process, while Riyadh backed Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war and argued that Iran sought to destabilize its Shi'a populations and those of Bahrain in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>27</sup>

The American-Saudi linkages forged during this era, however, came under enormous strain in the twenty-first century. Saudi leaders had opposed the invasion of Iraq in 2003, were horrified by the inability of Washington to secure the country or prevent the emergence of Iranian influence in the wider region, including in Lebanon, after that time. Saudi and other Sunni leaders in the Arab World also began to discuss the dangers from the emergence of a "Shi'a Crescent" linking Iran to a host of Shi'a Muslim communities from the Mediterranean to the Gulf. U.S.-Saudi ties were brought under even greater strain by Washington's evolving position in the nuclear negotiations with Tehran and when protests erupted during the Arab Spring. For their part, Iranian officials sought to brand the protests "an Islamic Awakening" akin to their nation's revolution in 1979 and an opportunity to rebuild ties with states long allied with Riyadh and Washington against Tehran, especially Egypt.<sup>28</sup>

That country is critical to Saudis for a host of historical and social factors—factors that are far more important than anything between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Egyptian military forces occupied large portions of the Arabian peninsula in the nineteenth century, and they leveled the first Saudi capital, al-Diriyah, in 1818. The two nations fought for control of the Arab World in the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>29</sup> and they waged a direct and fierce proxy war for control of Yemen, where Egypt deployed 70,000 soldiers, an action that played a role in its defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.<sup>30</sup> A large army base and the largest Saudi air force base are located in Tabuk, a city that is thousands of kilometers away from Iran or the Persian Gulf but which provides ready access to the Saudi border with Jordan and is a short flight to Israel, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Suez Canal.<sup>31</sup>

Those military facilities are a potent reminder of lessons learned from past conflicts and how important Egypt was (and is) to Saudi Arabia in strategic and human terms. Egypt is the largest state by population in the Arab World. Portions of Egypt's Sinai peninsula are as little as seven kilometers away from Saudi Arabia—close enough for someone to swim—and there are Saudi border guard stations down the coast of the Gulf of Aqaba. Egypt sends thousands of workers annually to the Kingdom, and hosts the Arab League, an organization important to Saudi identity and to its foreign policy. Thousands of artists, intellectuals, politicians, revolutionaries, and ordinary individuals from the two countries have forged common bonds of family and friendship for decades. They share a common love of football, with the rivalries between Ahly and Zamalek in Egypt parallel to those between al-Hilal and al-Itihad or al-Hilal and Nasser in the Kingdom. Not only did Saudi religious traditions influence Egyptian society in the 1980s and 1990s, but Egyptians had also shaped the thinking of leading Saudis such as Muhammad Abdu, Prince Talal, Osama Bin Laden, and Muhammad al-Arefe. These bonds were especially close after Hosni Mubarak became president in 1981. He cooperated closely with American and Saudi policy goals in the Middle East from the Arab-Israeli negotiations to Iran to Iraq to the war on terrorism. Such actions severely limited the political options of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization which Saudi officials viewed as a threat given its ties to popular Sunni preachers who are



not closely aligned with the Kingdom's religious establishment. In addition, Egypt helped maintain the stability of the Sinai and to protect shipping lanes central to U.S. Naval operations in the Middle East and to Saudi trade in the Red Sea and in the Mediterranean.

Initially, the Obama Administration's response mirrored Riyadh's to the growing protests against Mubarak in January 2011: Vice President Joe Biden, in an interview aired on American public television, stated that President Mubarak strongly supported American policies, refused to label the President a dictator, and stressed that he saw absolutely no reason for him to step aside in the face of mounting public protests.<sup>32</sup> But such "traditional" arguments carried little weight publicly in the United States, where support grew rapidly for the protestors, many of whom were young and were led by individuals who spoke English well and utilized American social media and political principles. Many Americans also saw their nation's future in Asia, a view voiced by Kurt Campbell, a State Department official when he said that Americans had been on "a Middle East detour over the course of the last 10 years" when their "future will be dominated utterly and fundamentally by developments in Asia."<sup>33</sup> In response, Obama abandoned the "realist" rhetoric of his vice president and threatened to employ Washington's most potent leverage over Cairo: suspending the \$1 billion in assistance the United States gives to Egypt as part of the 1979 Camp David Accords. By making such a threat, Obama made clear that he no longer accepted the status quo in Egypt and expected a more democratic form of government to emerge there and in other states in the region.<sup>34</sup>

The new U.S. policy, however, shocked Saudi policy makers. Their vision of the Kingdom's strategic interests was unchanged by the events in Egypt. President Mubarak's government protected vital national interests. On January 29, 2011, King Abdullah warned President Obama that Saudi Arabia would replace U.S. assistance to Egypt should Washington suspend it. The stakes were too high for Saudi Arabia not to take action—no matter what Americans believed about the events in Egypt.<sup>35</sup> While the Egyptian military's decision to compel Mubarak to leave office in February 2011 prevented what was building to be the worst crisis in U.S.-Saudi ties since the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the post-Mubarak Egyptian governments—both military and civilian—proved unable to address the country's challenges. When the military acted to remove the civilian government of President Muhammad Morsi in July 2013, Saudi Arabia provided the new government of Egypt \$5 billion in aid, an action done in close conjunction with similarly large aid pledges from the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and other states in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).<sup>36</sup> Although the United States, Europe, and Turkey registered objections to the overthrow of a democratically elected government in Egypt and the violence that followed it, Saudi Arabia held firm. The stakes were far too high *not* to act.

The close coordination of the aid for the post-Morsi government among the Gulf Cooperation Council countries was consistent with the approach of Saudi politics and foreign policy—an approach in which nothing is done alone. The King usually appears in public with other people, while Saudi leaders always meet with their counterparts in the

GCC before they travel to international negotiations or a major global meeting such as the general assembly of the United Nations. Two multinational institutions critical to Riyadh's foreign policy are based in the Kingdom: the GCC and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Even Riyadh's battles in the GCC are rarely waged alone: when differences arose between Doha and Riyadh over the presence of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Qatar and other security issues, Riyadh took decisive action in coordination with Abu Dhabi and Manama: all three governments withdrew their ambassadors, an action that generated headlines around the world and prompted some pundits to wonder if the withdrawal of diplomats presaged the end of the GCC.<sup>37</sup> The swift resolution of the dispute a month later without Qatar having to make significant concessions demonstrated the importance of the GCC as an institution to Riyadh despite policy differences with Doha and other member states on a number of regional issues.<sup>38</sup>

Manama's role as an ally in that dispute illustrates the importance to Riyadh of its ties with Bahrain, which is connected by a causeway, countless marriages, the oil industry, and socio-cultural ties to Saudi Arabia.<sup>39</sup> Riyadh has provided substantial funds to Manama for years.<sup>40</sup> Both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province have large Shi'a populations which are closely interconnected with each other and with their Sunni neighbors, from whom they are virtually indistinguishable, particularly those of the same class. Since the disturbances in Hasa of the late 1970s, the Saudi government has worked to integrate Shi'a Saudis, moving them from farming and fishing into businesses or the education and petroleum sectors.<sup>41</sup> While the graffiti in Hasa that Shi'a activists there like to show visitors attacks the leaders of Bahrain and of Saudi Arabia equally, it is noticeably less prevalent and public than political graffiti in cities such as Tabuk, which lacks a large Shi'a population and is far from Iran.<sup>42</sup>

As the Shi'a movement in Bahrain blossomed in Manama's Pearl Square in February 2011 and overwhelmed the island's security services, Saudi officials worried that it would threaten their gains in the Eastern Province and embolden other forces in the region opposed to Saudi Arabia—a fear intensified by demonstrations that took place among Saudi Shi'a. But these protests were far smaller than those in Najran in 2000 and were dwarfed by those in Oman, where Sultan Qaboos appeared to be powerless to put a damper on simmering anger at corrupt officials, and in Yemen. There a large movement akin to that in Egypt challenged the position of the country's long-term president and Saudi ally, Ali Abdullah Salah. Although Yemen was not a member of the GCC, its linkages to Saudi society were as close as Bahrain's. Thousands of Yemenis lived and worked in Saudi Arabia, and there were many Yemeni families which had made a tangible impact on the Kingdom's development. The conflict over the Yemeni presidency was made far worse by the shortage of water, the presence of al-Qaeda, regional differences, open rebellions, and the absence of a national institution equivalent to the Egyptian Army that was capable of winning the respect of all parties.<sup>43</sup> In 2009, Saudi Arabia deployed thousands of soldiers in response to a Shi'a rebellion in Yemen's north which crossed the Saudi-Yemeni border and impacted Jizan City and other communities in southern Saudi Arabia.



While the day of rage in Saudi Arabia scheduled online for March 11, 2011 passed without major incidents, it was now clear to Riyadh that events in Bahrain and other neighboring states could negatively impact the strategic environment around the Kingdom. The result was that Riyadh fell back on a strategy that had served it well. In coordination with its GCC partners, Saudi Arabia raised salaries, pledged billions of dollars for economic and social development, and offered a rescue plan for both Bahrain and Oman akin to resources that would later be given to Egypt and Yemen. Riyadh also continued a process it had started years before: it devoted extensive resources to its southern regions bordering Yemen. Abha and Jizan City boomed economically, while security forces carefully scrutinized travelers, especially from Yemen in Asir and Jizan.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, Riyadh worked with its GCC partners in the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to provide crucial diplomatic support for Western leaders who wished to pass United Nations' Security Council resolutions 1970 and 1973, which created a no-fly zone to protect civilians in Libya. In exchange, Washington and other Western capitals accepted the Saudi-led GCC military intervention in Bahrain, the home of the U.S. Fifth Naval Fleet. This implicit quid pro quo is noteworthy because of the contrast with Egypt, where Saudi Arabia threatened to (and eventually acted) to undermine Washington's leverage with Cairo and did not bother to find a mechanism for Washington to save face.

### **Syria: The Hard Lessons of Power**

As the situation in the Gulf began to subside, things grew far worse in Syria—a fact which would trouble Riyadh and create a strategic challenge that would put Saudi Arabia at odds with both Iran along with its natural partners in the region and the international community. The initial Saudi response to events in Syria was cautious and with good reason. The Syrian opposition that emerged in the early months of the Arab Spring lacked the basic cohesion and determination of its counterparts elsewhere. The government's forceful responses to the demonstrations and to the brief insurgency that developed in 2012 drew on its vast intelligence service and its sizeable and well-funded military. Important segments of Syrian society accepted the government's legitimacy and felt that that it should be given a free hand to suppress the rebellion.<sup>45</sup>

If the weakness of the Syrian opposition and the power of Hezbollah was not enough to give Riyadh pause, the position of the Syrian government internationally would have made the situation look worse. Before the start of the Arab Spring, President Bashar al-Assad and his wife, Asma, had developed a wide network of contacts and friends who helped win Syria positive media and academic coverage in the West. The Syrian government's soft power was backed by significant strategic power that Saudi Arabia could not possibly counter on its own. China and Russia were determined to prevent the United Nations from authorizing a military intervention in Syria similar to the one that had taken place in Libya. They routinely

vetoed any resolution critical of Syria and helped make the opposition position appear desperate.<sup>46</sup> That assessment was shared by many in authority in Washington and reinforced caution on the part of U.S. officials towards Syria,<sup>47</sup> further limiting Saudi options in Syria. Under these circumstances, Saudi policy remained cautious and defined by anything other than sectarianism.

Public and elite opinion in Saudi Arabia, however, moved decisively in favor of the opposition in the later months of 2011 and 2012, as the moral, human, and the strategic arguments for intervention coalesced into a social force compelling Saudi leaders to act. Not only did popular preachers such as al-Arefe press for more action but a poem by Hayid Wahal al-Shammari presented the Syrian conflict as directly related to the king. This poem was especially powerful because it appeared online with a backdrop of repeated stirring video images. Reinforcing the power of these images was the poem's diction and its style of rhetoric. While describing the slaughter of children and gruesome atrocities, the poet repeatedly addresses King Abdullah by his rarely used nickname, "Abu Mit'ib," the father of "Mit'ib," the King's eldest son. Here it is important to remember that the king's mother and two of his wives are of the Shammari tribe,<sup>48</sup> a tribe which once ruled much of northern Saudi Arabia from Hail and has tens of thousands of members in Syria.<sup>49</sup>

Throughout the poem, there is a *positive* argument grounded in both justice and duty to protect people to whom the King (and by extension Saudi Arabia) are intimately linked and have an obligation to help by intervening. Implicitly, the poet suggests that "we" in Saudi Arabia includes Syria. Here is the situation in Syria: take action so that the people of Syria may live in justice, just as we do here under your rule. He calls the King the "shield of truth" and reminds him that his people enjoy justice under his rule. Of course the poet feels personal emotion, but he does not speak in the poem from a personal or an even an egocentric point of view. In fact, the poem is effective because of the tension between what the audience knows he feels (but he is not saying) and the public stance he takes.<sup>50</sup> At no point is there any mention of either Iran or sectarianism.

This message resonated with Saudis and the Syrian community in the country so much that a rival video and poem were posted online to refute it.<sup>51</sup> Wristbands, watches, television programs, and automobile signs supporting the Syrian opposition became easy to find throughout the Kingdom. A small store linked to al-Jazeera Supermarket, a hypermarket store located in the heart of Riyadh near the fashionable Tahlia's central business district, sold products linked to the opposition. Throughout the summer of 2011, there were demonstrations by Saudis and Syrians in multiple Saudi cities against the Syrian government's actions during what was becoming a civil war.<sup>52</sup> One of Riyadh's most popular chains of restaurants—Shayah, which serves both Iranian and Lebanese food—prudently erected a sign at its restaurant on King Abdullah road that reminds its customers that it is 100% Saudi owned.<sup>53</sup> Such signs reflected growing public feelings that could be seen on school playgrounds in the Kingdom's south or pictures and videos shared on social media by retired university professors and government officials.<sup>54</sup>



On August 7, 2011, King Abdullah responded to the growing calls to do something in Syria and acted. At the start of Ramadan, he issued an unprecedented personal statement that called upon the people of Syria to stop the "killing machine," to restore rationality, and implement reforms before it was too late. By talking directly to the Syrian people, he made it clear that he shared the concerns of al-Arefe and especially al-Shammari and had little choice but to take action. To emphasize the seriousness of his message, he recalled the Kingdom's ambassador from Damascus for consultations.<sup>55</sup>

The King's action, however, also reflected sound strategic calculations for Riyadh. Syria's opposition was quickly transforming in late summer 2011 from a protest movement to a military uprising, one with the potential (should it succeed) to transform the strategic map of the Middle East and to deal a devastating blow to two of the Kingdom's (and Washington's) most intractable foes: Iran and Hezbollah. Not only was Syria a pivotal player in its own right in the Middle East, but it was an indispensable partner for two of the Kingdom's chief opponents in the region: Iran and the Lebanese Shi'a organization, Hezbollah, which Saudi officials fear. After the organization's leader, Hasan Nasrallah, threatened Saudi Arabia directly in a December 2013 speech, the Saudi government deployed stringent security checkpoints throughout Riyadh and had fighter jet aircraft patrol the center of the city in midmorning at low altitudes for several consecutive days.<sup>56</sup>

The King also had sound economic reasons to support the rebellion in Syria and its quick resolution. The loss of the land bridge through Syria and Turkey to Europe that had been open since 2005 and had already begun to overwhelm the Saudi transportation infrastructure, led to higher food prices, and had negatively impacted the position of the domestic agricultural sector. Margins were far higher than in the past, and some of the Syrian refugees brought significant skills for growing grains, nuts and spices. While the quality of the Syrian refugees' product was not as strong as those of Saudi producers, they were significantly better on price.<sup>57</sup> Again, none of these factors had anything to do with either sectarianism or Iran.

A regional proxy war had begun in Syria, one that Riyadh looked increasingly well positioned to win. While the Chinese and the Russians continued to veto any resolution dealing with Syria at the United Nations' Security Council, they and the Syrian government and its allies were far weaker economically and militarily than the states now aligned against them, the new "we" of Saudi Arabia's regional diplomacy: Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Turkey, the United States, and other Western powers. The Syrian government lost its seat in the Arab League, while Muslim states outside of the Arab World provided key support for Saudi-backed positions denouncing Syria in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.<sup>58</sup> Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria's Civil War damaged the group's reputation politically in Lebanon and compelled some Sunni Lebanese to directly and indirectly assist the Syrian rebellion.<sup>59</sup>

Bashar al-Assad's government, however, hung on to power and reversed rebel gains, revealing deep fissures in the alliance arrayed against him, fissures that grew with time. Qatar

and Saudi Arabia supported rival Syrian opposition groups, which themselves fractured into rival groups, some of which had ties to al-Qaeda.<sup>60</sup> While Riyadh wholeheartedly supported the new government in Egypt in July 2013, Turkey, the United Kingdom, United States, and other Western powers were critical of the ousting of a civilian government and the treatment of the demonstrators which followed it. Riyadh soon found that its positions on Egypt were consistent with those of the countries whose actions it was opposing in Syria, such as Russia. Its president, Vladimir Putin, rebuked an offer made by Prince Bandar in 2013 for Saudi Arabia to purchase Russian weapons in exchange for changing its position on Syria at the United Nations' Security Council.<sup>61</sup> During that time, no envoy with the status of Prince Bandar visited Beijing and sought to change China's position on Syria.<sup>62</sup> Hasan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, indirectly threatened Sunnis in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia in a speech in December 2013, police checkpoints arose in Riyadh and Saudi fighter jets made daily flights over central Riyadh for several days.<sup>63</sup>

None of these issues, however, would have mattered had Riyadh's priorities not run into a policy priority of President Barak Obama. On paper, the Obama Administration and Saudi Arabia agreed on the broad strategy for Syria, its rebellion, and that the removal of President Assad was warranted. In reality, a widening gap existed on Iran and by extension on Syria. That gap represented differing assessments about the danger posed by the Islamist wing of the rebellion in Syria, al-Qaeda's influence there, and events in Egypt. But it also reflected Obama's desire to end the hostility and mistrust between Tehran and Washington and reach agreements on common economic and political goals in a host of areas. In reality, his policies in the Middle East were (and are) far more defined by Iran (and sectarianism in the region) than those of Riyadh.

Obama's commitment to improving U.S. relations with Iran was hardly new and had served him well politically. Obama answered "Yes absolutely" when asked in a 2007 debate among Democratic Party candidates for the 2008 presidential nomination whether he would meet separately without precondition with the leaders of Iran in the first year of his Administration to bridge differences. While he received considerable public criticism for the answer and his advisors pressured him to change his position, he stuck with it, using it as a vehicle to differentiate himself from both the Bush Administration and his opponents in his own party, especially Hillary Clinton. It resonated strongly with a key segment of the electorate hungry for change, since it illustrated his willingness to challenge conventional wisdom and to resolve key international disputes—disputes that had forced American politicians to advocate an activist foreign policy and to support frequent military actions abroad out of fear of being labeled as "weak" on national security during elections. That was of course the same position that had been instrumental to U.S.-Saudi ties when Prince Bandar had been the Saudi Ambassador in Washington.<sup>64</sup>

Following his election in 2008 and reelection four years later, Obama authorized historic sanctions on Iran and kept a host of advisors in his Administration who were hawks on Iran.<sup>65</sup> He also refused to rule out the use of force against Iran on multiple



occasions, authorized unprecedented economic sanctions with other nations against Iran, which reportedly cut Iran's income from oil sales by 50%.<sup>66</sup> He also kept open ties with traditional allies like Israel and Riyadh, which vehemently distrusted Iran. At the same time, he authorized clandestine negotiations with Iran that reportedly facilitated a 2013 landmark interim deal on Iran's nuclear program that could pave the way for a permanent diplomatic deal.<sup>67</sup> That agreement could become one of the signature accomplishments for the Obama Administration and had broad support among the U.S. policy community, especially in Obama's own Democratic Party, which welcomed a chance for Iran to take a greater role in American diplomacy and remained deeply distrustful of Saudi Arabia, a Kingdom still closely linked with the Republican party and for limiting the rights of women, a key Democratic constituency. Indeed, John Kerry, who now serves as Obama's Secretary of State, declared at the Democratic Party's national convention in Boston in 2004: "I want an America that relies on its ingenuity and innovation, not the Saudi royal family."<sup>68</sup>

The difference on Iran of course impacted how both Washington and Riyadh would look at Syria given that Iran considered maintaining the government of Bashar al-Assad to be essential to its national security. Consequently, Obama and his advisors would have to weigh carefully how any American action in Syria (or elsewhere in the Middle East) would impact an agreement with Tehran. Such a calculus by definition disadvantaged long-term existing U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia, which still saw their interests and those of Tehran as incompatible. The calculations for Obama hardened still further against Saudi Arabia and in favor of Iran when Hassan Rouhani won Iran's presidential elections in summer 2013. He appeared to want to improve relations with Washington as much as the Obama Administration desired to improve relations with Tehran. He articulated views on the threat posed by al-Qaeda in Syria that were far closer to those of U.S. leaders than to those of Saudi Arabia. The Russian-brokered agreement in September 2013 ending Syria's chemical program (and averting U.S. airstrikes) along with Tehran's decision *not* to oppose a United Nations' resolution criticizing Russia's annexation of Crimea demonstrated what might be possible should Washington continue to pursue diplomacy with Iran and the broader Middle East.<sup>69</sup>

## The Islamic State

ISIS' victory in Mosul in June 2014, however, altered the political dynamic for Saudi Arabia and its relationship with both Iran and the United States. In response to the fall of Iraq's second largest city, the Obama Administration dispatched Secretary of State Kerry, to the Middle East, where he met with Saudi and other regional leaders with long-term ties with Washington. Kerry won agreements with Saudi officials to host the training of Syrian rebels in the Kingdom and for an air campaign against Islamic State targets in Iraq and in Syria.<sup>70</sup> For their part, Saudi officials reportedly tirelessly worked to convince U.S. officials that they *had to bomb ISIS* and that they could not contemplate backing out of airstrikes in Syria as they had done a year earlier.<sup>71</sup>

Not only did Saudi Arabian fighter jet aircraft join a U.S.-led coalition in bombing targets in Syria on September 23, 2014, but Riyadh also permitted American air and naval forces based in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea to launch attacks on ISIS. The U.S. coalition included Saudi Arabia's allies in the Arab World during the Arab Spring—Bahrain, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates—along with Saudi Arabia's GCC rival, Qatar. The Saudi government also promoted its involvement in the US-led attack widely on social media, where there were pictures of the pilots, including a son of then Crown Prince Salman. These actions built on the earlier deployment of Saudi Arabia's military forces and the building of a security fence along the Kingdom's border with Iraq.<sup>72</sup>

While these actions targeted an institution that Riyadh believed threatened the Kingdom's national security, they also provided a useful opportunity for the Saudi government to signal its position to international, regional, and domestic audiences. Internationally, the airstrikes built on efforts by Saudis—including a September 8, 2014 *New York Times* opinion piece comparing ISIS' ideas to Wahhabism<sup>73</sup>—to distance the Kingdom from ISIS. Repeatedly one heard Western experts along with many Iraqis describing ISIS as adhering to a "Saudi/Wahhabi" worldview and blaming the Kingdom for the group's suppression of the Shi'a Christians, and Yazidis.<sup>74</sup> Many also cited the assistance the Saudis provided to aid radical groups around the world, including groups in Syria that later joined ISIS.<sup>75</sup>

Regionally, the airstrikes signaled to Tehran that Riyadh's relationship with Washington remained special and that a potential nuclear deal and improved U.S.-Iranian ties could not compete with Washington's half-century alliance with Riyadh. While American and Saudi officials developed plans for joint military operations against ISIS, Secretary of State Kerry made clear that Washington was not considering a military alliance with Tehran. Equally importantly, the fact that Qatar and Saudi Arabia participated in the airstrikes made clear to ISIS that the Gulf States were united in their opposition to it and that ISIS' leaders would not be able to form alliances with one state against another.

Still, the most important audience for the airstrikes was domestic, where religious elites have faced challenges in 2014 voicing credible alternatives to ideas promoted by ISIS. Take the exchange between one of the Kingdom's most respected scholars, Salih Al-Fawzan, on a Saudi television show in spring 2014. When an ordinary Saudi man asked the Sheikh about a discussion that he and his friends were having about takfir (excommunication) and whether Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad, is a kafir (a Muslim who is declared to be an apostate, or non-believer), Al-Fawzan firmly but politely counseled the caller that he and his brothers "should not talk about these matters" since "they were not subjects that should concern them."<sup>76</sup> Despite his rhetoric, Al-Fawzan was not telling the caller that he should not think about such things. How could he prevent the man from thinking about a subject that was obviously troubling him? He was insisting that this was not a subject for *public* discussion, whatever the man might think in private. It was not something that was grist for a call-in program.

Saudi religious and secular leaders adopted an even more direct public approach since the fall of Mosul. They have discouraged all popular and scholarly discussions which could



be seen as supporting ISIS and its ideas.<sup>77</sup> Such messages may be especially important given that there is sympathy among Saudis on a host of levels—humanitarian, tribal, and sectarian—for groups like ISIS opposing the Syrian government. At least 2500 Saudi citizens have reportedly gone to fight in Syria against the government, a higher number than any other country in the world except for Tunisia.<sup>78</sup>

Critically, ISIS offers Saudis two tangible things, namely the chance to be part of a state that upholds strict Islamic values without compromise in public or private and that provides generous financial compensation for their work.<sup>79</sup> While there has been considerable attention to the ideological attraction of ISIS among Saudis, the financial one should not be overlooked. On average ISIS reportedly pays fighters as much as \$2,000 or more a month.<sup>80</sup> That is not a minor number in a country where average salaries in some regions for men stood at \$584 in 2013 and where unemployment of young men and women remains high.<sup>81</sup> The International Monetary Fund had estimated that the unemployment rate among young Saudi youth stood at 30% in 2013.<sup>82</sup>

Youth unemployment in Saudi Arabia, however, is not a new problem, and it did not generate the same mass political unrest in the Kingdom over the past five years that it did in other parts of the Arab World, including in neighboring states in the Gulf. But there is a critical difference in 2014. During much of the five years of the Arab Spring, the Saudi government could address domestic and regional political challenges by deploying its security and financial reserves and by partnering with organizations with which it had existing long-term relationships. Over time the partners may have changed but the process remained consistent (and reasonably successful) in meeting Riyadh's goals.<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

In coming years, Riyadh's ability to meet its foreign policy goals will depend on how well Saudi leaders decouple themselves from history and old relationships, for the regional actor whose interests are most aligned with theirs against ISIS in the long run is not the United States but Iran, a state where there is no "special relationship." The two countries have long borders with ISIS and would see their interests in the region diminished if the state gained a permanent foothold. Saudis across the political spectrum view Iran as a rival country, whose successes always come at their expense. In January 2014 a Saudi in Najran asked me, "Why are you Americans forcing us Saudis to kiss the ass of the Iranians again as they did in the days of the Shah?"<sup>84</sup> Sunnis and Shi'a elsewhere in the country asked me nearly the same question later in 2014.

Even in areas where there are clear areas of common interest—such as transforming the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) a viable institution that can fight ISIS in Lebanon and on Syria's Western border—there are disagreements. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have provided assistance to LAF in 2014,<sup>85</sup> but Riyadh has stunned Lebanese officials by demanding guarantees that Hezbollah will not benefit from its \$3 billion aid package to army.<sup>86</sup> An exasperated Lebanese General told Lebanon's *Daily Star* that Lebanon had

fulfilled its part of the contract and he still doesn't "know what happened."<sup>87</sup> While the process will likely eventually go forward, it signals the degree of reticence that Saudi officials have towards anything that might even appear to support Iran or its allies.

These types of concerns along with Tehran's own history of conflict with Riyadh dating back decades, in part explain why there has been no significant improvement in bilateral relations despite the common threat posed by ISIS.

A potential way out of the impasses may oddly be a country with which Iran and Saudi Arabia already have a special relationship: the United States. Today there are tens of thousands of Saudi students studying across North America from New York County to Los Angeles County, a county that includes the city of Los Angeles. That Californian city is widely known as "Tehrangles" because it has the largest community of Iranians outside of Iran, many of whom arrived as students during the reign of the Shah or who fled the country following the 1979 Revolution.<sup>88</sup> In the future, the City of the Angels may serve as one of the places where Iranians and Saudis can begin the process of solving a problem that is less a sectarian one than it is the result of the absence of a "special relationship" needed for Riyadh and Tehran to jointly address the common challenges they face in the Middle East.<sup>89</sup>

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