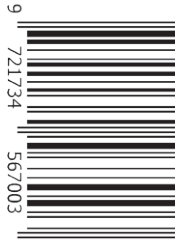


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Middle East proxy war escalates



Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

As the US steps back from a global leadership role, the chances of a final clash between two regional powers in the Middle East edges closer.

What connects the conflict and bloodshed in Syria, Yemen, and an 'arc of instability' across the Middle East and North Africa? Some analysts point to

the Shia/Sunni schism in Islam and argue these conflicts are the Muslim world's modern equivalent of Christianity's 30 Year War in the 1600s between European Protestant and Catholic denominations.

Viewed through this prism, the two key players here are Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, both

of which, important regional powers in their own right, have been fighting a series a proxy wars between each other for religious leadership of the Muslim world. This rivalry has seen Saudi-backed rebel forces fight Iran's ally Syria, while in Yemen, Iran-backed Houthi rebels have seen Saudi Arabia intervene

directly to assist its neighbours government. The delicate geopolitical balance has also been upset by the US-led invasion of Iraq and subsequent chaos - allowing Iran to move into the power vacuum vacated by their bitter rival. In this analysis, the West, though

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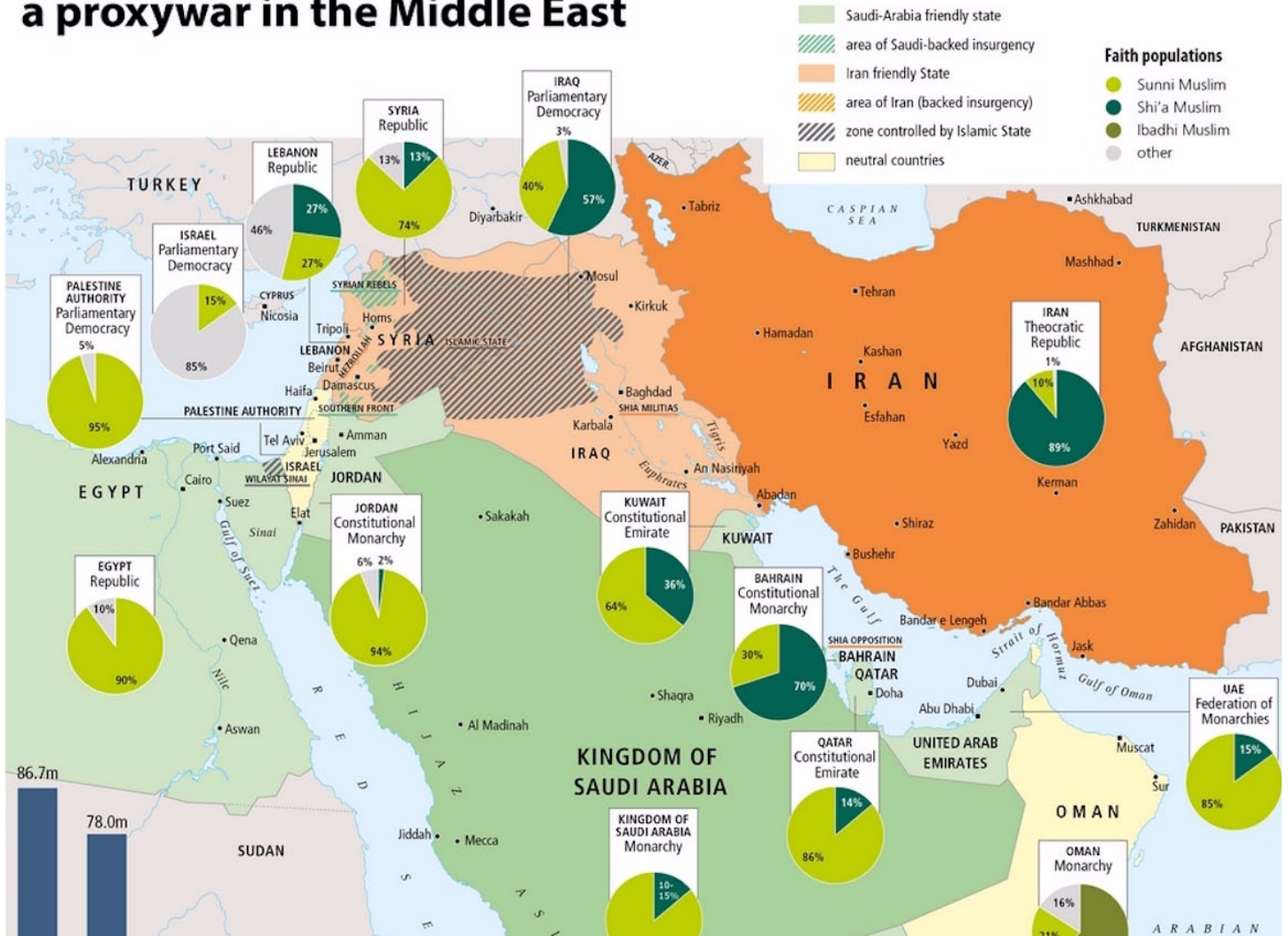


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Kingdom of Saudi Arabia vs Islamic Republic of Iran : a proxywar in the Middle East



The brewing proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

undoubtedly a source of friction and a rallying call for extremists, is actually a bystander in a deep-seated and long-standing religiously-inspired war for regional dominance.

This schism is of course, not new, and the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s saw Shia-Sunni states clash directly. And indeed, the Cold War itself saw proxy wars fought in Korea, Afghanistan and Vietnam between the two super-powers on a global scale to assert the supremacy of opposing political systems.

However, now we are in new territory. Nuclear weapons and Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) in the Cold War meant that the US and USSR were aware that escalation could quickly spiral out of control and thus were careful not to stray beyond recognised limits.

Today, the situation is much more ambiguous. Iran, under

suspicion for years of developing nuclear weapons, is now enjoying a relaxation in international sanctions, after agreeing to halt

work on WMDs. And, while Saudi Arabia is currently a non-nuclear power, some analysts suspect it could quickly acquire nuclear

weapons thanks to close links to the Pakistan nuclear programme if Iran moves to resume or accelerate its nuclear development



Saudi F15.

“ Similar claims that Tehran has developed and has operational super-cavitating torpedoes, or reverse-engineered US stealth UAVs must thus also be taken with caution. ”

in defiance of the international community. (Indeed some observers note that while Saudi Arabia does not have formal diplomatic relations with Israel, it would most likely turn a 'blind eye' if Tel Aviv decided to transit through Saudi airspace to strike Iranian nuclear facilities). The threat of Iran's exporting its subversion, thus has resulted in oddball alliances like Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Second, there is a new factor in that the US is seemingly pulling back from its global leadership role, to an America-first agenda focussed on jobs and trade. Some effects of may already being felt. It is notable, for instance, that earlier in 2017 saw a major crisis erupt between Saudi Arabia, UAE and other Gulf allies against Qatar over this states too-friendly relations with Tehran and support for the Muslim Brotherhood. More recently, both Saudi Arabia and UAE have reportedly steered away from traditional US defence suppliers by seeking to acquire S-400 SAM and Su-35 multiple fighters respectively from Russia – an illuminating statement of intent that they may see Washington's influence on the wane and may be acting to hedge their bets with a new partner.

So how do the these regional powers measure up?

Saudi Arabia

With its vast oil wealth and connections to the US, Saudi Arabia has one of the most potent armed forces in the Middle East – with Typhoons and F-15s in the Royal Saudi Air Force, as well as E-3 AWACS and Saab Erieye AEW platforms. It also has a modern air-to-air refuelling fleet in the form of Airbus A330MRTT tankers. While the RSAF has a long history with the F-15C dating back to the 1980s, it is also in the process of acquiring the most advanced

version of the Strike Eagle – the F-15SA. This has new cockpit displays, AESA radar, digital EW and a new FBW system, which adds two extra weapon stations and will give the Saudi AF a lethal long-range strike aircraft.

In addition, the Kingdom also maintains a strong National Guard as a domestic paramilitary arm, but equipped with heavy weaponry such as APCs, self-propelled artillery and AH-64 and AH-6 Littlebird helicopters.

Unable to acquire the heavily restricted armed UAVs from the US, Saudi has turned to China and operates the Rainbow CH-4B armed drone.

In naval forces, its most recent acquisition has been the La Fayette-class Frigates from France. However a giant \$110bn defence deal, agreed with the US in March 2017, also included four multi-mission frigates as well as the US THAAD anti-ballistic missile system – like the S-400 deal, a defence procurement with

an eye on the threat across the Persian Gulf.

Traditionally, Saudi Arabia's military capability while fearsome on paper has been weak in personnel, relying heavily on foreign contractors for training, maintenance, support and advice. However the recent actions in Yemen have provided valuable experience in modern COIN operations, precision targeting and undoubtedly helped to hone the combat edge of the Saudi armed forces.

Iran

Meanwhile, Iran's armed forces, though powerful in terms of numbers, have been severely dented by years of international sanctions and restrictions on

arms sales. To its credit, its engineers and technicians have worked wonders to operate, maintain and even upgrade and reverse-engineer US weapon systems first delivered in the 1970s. Some of these have demonstrated high levels of innovation – keeping F-14 Tomcats (probably the IIRAFs most potent interceptor) flying and even adding new capabilities in modified I-Hawk SAMs as AAMs. (It is notable that the vast 'Boneyard' of hundreds of retired US military aircraft in Arizona has only a handful of Tomcats – a clue that the US was keen not to see spare parts be used to keep Iranian F-14s flying). Meanwhile it has also modified its F-4 Phantoms, another relic of the Shah's era to



La Fayette Frigate.



Iranian MiG-29A.

carry Chinese anti-ship missiles. The IIRAF also operates Russian types, such as MiG-29As, Su-24 Fencers and Su-25s.

However, in other areas this reverse-engineering and indigenous weapons systems has had mixed results and is of uncertain quality or usefulness – from twin-tailed variants of the F-5E, to modified AH-1 gunships. Iran's own indigenously developed 'stealth fighter', the Qaher-31, revealed the world in 2013, generated much derision from experts with speed gauges apparently removed from a Cessna, an opaque canopy and other design features that seemed to indicate that this was a propaganda stunt aimed at domestic audiences, rather than an actual combat aircraft.

Similar claims that Tehran has developed and has operational super-cavitating torpedoes, or reverse-engineered US stealth UAVs must thus also be taken with caution.

However, the two main strengths of Iran are in its ballistic missile forces (its latest test in September 2017 saw a 2,000km ranged missile, reportedly able to carry multiple warheads test fired) and in its asymmetric warfare capabilities – through the Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Its rocket forces range from short-range artillery missiles and upgraded tactical SCUDs to medium-range ballistic types. It also supplies allies and insurgent groups such as Hezbollah

and the Houthi rebels in Yemen with rockets. Indeed, it was believed to be Chinese-made, Iran-supplied C-802 anti-ship missiles launched by Houthi forces that were fired at and, intercepted by a US warship off the coast of Yemen in October 2016.

In asymmetric capabilities, Iran's Revolutionary Guard also operates small armed speedboats, fast attack craft and even Wing in Ground effect craft. In any conflict, these can be expected to be a significant threat in the narrow waters of the Straits of Hormuz, a natural

choke point for the world's oil. Iran has also developed a capability in UAVs, and claims that it has reverse-engineered and put into production a captured US stealth ISR drone, the Lockheed Martin RQ-170 Sentinel, that crashed in 2011. Other Iran-built tactical UAVs have also been supplied to groups such as Hezbollah.

Summary

In conclusion, then, the potential for escalation and for one of these proxy wars (or a different incident altogether) to

ignite a wider and direct conflict between these two religiously conservative and muscular regional powers is significant. Absent of the focus of Iran's nuclear programme (now on hold) the most likely targets for each side will be the other country's oil and gas facilities, with the intention of strikes to cripple their overall energy production and therefore income (as was in the Iran-Iraq war). Whether one side can swiftly overmatch the other, or whether this indeed drags on for another 30 years is another question.



Khark island, Iran.