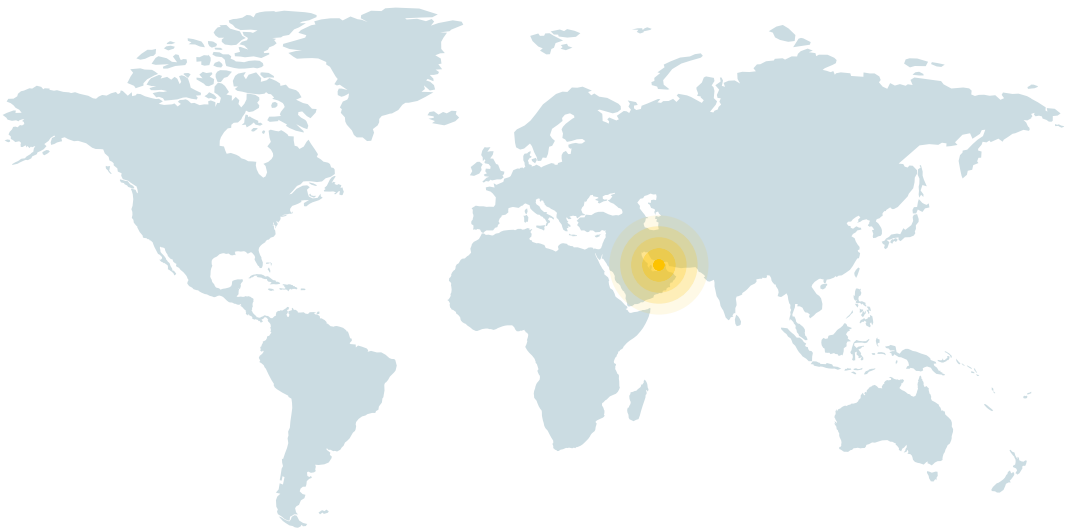


Cold War in the Gulf

The Rivalry of Saudi and Iranian Narratives
for Hegemony in the Middle East

Gidon Windecker / Peter Sendrowicz



The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is much more than just a sectarian conflict: Two regional powers compete over the hegemony in the Middle East. In this struggle for dominance, both use a sophisticated arsenal of rhetorical means to construct sectarian narratives which back their real-political intents.

At first sight, the latest escalation between Saudi Arabia and Iran is in line with growing sectarianism in the conflicts in the Middle East. In January 2016, Saudi Arabia executed the Shiite cleric Nimr Al Nimr. A mob then set fire to the Saudi embassy in Tehran which led to a cessation of diplomatic relations between the Gulf monarchy and Iran. In September, for the first time in three decades, Iranian pilgrims were excluded from the Muslim *hajj* and religious leaders in both countries engaged in a war of words about the privilege of interpretation in Islam: the Saudi Grand Mufti described Iranian Shiites as “non-believers” and Iran’s Ayatollah Ali Khamenei denounced the Saudi royal family as the “small and puny Satan”.¹

However, upon closer inspection it becomes obvious that while the sectarian aspect plays an important role in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, its reduction to a religiously motivated conflict, namely, Saudi-Sunni versus Iranian-Shiite, misses the mark. The dispute between both regional powers is ultimately played out on diverse levels and by multiple means. And the instrumentalisation of the case of Nimr Al Nimr is about much more than only the execution of a Shiite cleric by a Sunni ruled state. Reading between the lines of the front-page stories clarifies that this is about a classic power conflict of two emergent hegemonies. This acts as a prism which sheds light on countless events in the region. In this case, the privilege of interpreting Islam is merely one aspect. The underlying motives for verbal hostilities and strategic maneuvers in the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran are the pragmatic and expansionist efforts for self-preservation and broadening the

respective area of influence in one of the world’s most volatile regions which like no other territory is undergoing radical geopolitical transformation.²

The stakes here are about dominance in the Middle East both ideologically and in terms of power politics, where all measures are enforced – similar to the Cold War era between East and West. Direct military confrontation has been avoided between Saudi Arabia and Iran.³ Instead, both states have amassed an extensive *soft power* arsenal to guarantee on the basis of corresponding narratives the widest possible audience and public following. Both countries use the print media, international satellite television and social media to reach out to a global audience in as many as 20 languages.⁴

The Saudi-Iranian struggle for power is pursued on multiple levels.

The levels at which this antagonistic conflict is enacted and in what way it is in certain respects reminiscent of a Cold War scenario will be examined in detail as a first step. Particular attention will be paid here to the institutionalised sectarian narrative between Saudi Arabia and Iran, its regional implications as well as the motivation of both parties engaged in the conflict to conduct the war of words and histories to complement their strategic and operative actions. Following on from this, more light should be shed on the background to the conflict. The focus on the historic development



Commemorating the 18th anniversary of Khomeini's death: Even decades after the Revolution, the Ayatollah's narrative has not lost its compelling appeal among his followers. [Source: © Morteza Nikoubazi, Reuters.](#)

of the sectarian narrative should highlight how the sectarian perspective is by no means adequate to comprehend the rivalry in the Gulf, given that the origins of the divisive conflict tend to be ethnic and real-political. In the third section, the focus will be on the extent to which sectarian rhetoric influences and intensifies the current regional conflicts. The war of words between Saudi Arabia and Iran finally assumes another dimension in terms of the battle for favour with the West, which is necessary for the consolidation of power of both adversaries, domestically as well as towards the outside

world. These reflections will serve as a basis for demonstrating the complexity of the struggle for supremacy in the Middle East and the rhetoric that is tied to it.

1. Parallels with the Cold War

For almost four decades now, a dark shadow has been cast over the Gulf, be it *Persian* or *Arab*, the source of which has been the tense relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Despite temporary moments of *détente*, primarily the considerable potential for escalation between



both regional powers has shaped destinies in the Middle East. As was previously true of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the U.S., to a certain extent the uneasy *status quo of deterrence* is maintained – in this sense, a conflict scenario between the two powers has the capacity to deter them from taking the first military strike, so peace is preserved, at least superficially.

The rivalry is originally founded on a system conflict, as was notably analogous with the situation between the Soviet Union and the West. Since the overthrow of the Shah of Iran

in 1979 by the radical Shiite revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, and the transformation of Iran from a monarchy to an Islamic Republic as a hybrid form of theocratic and republican and democratic elements, two fundamentally opposing political systems have confronted one another. Khomeini's propaganda for the export of the revolution to the entire Middle East region met with irritation and unease among the Arab Gulf states. The monarchies feared that the idea of Islamist Revolution could stir their own populations and sweep away the ruling elite.

Although there is no direct confrontation, elements can be identified of a militant conflict and the utilisation of military power to defend one's position. This leads to proxy wars that are also typical of a Cold War. The antagonists conduct the military dispute in third states where pre-existing conflicts, for example, civil wars can be manipulated for their own ends to weaken the adversary's following and by association the opponent itself. This can be observed in Yemen, Syria and Iraq. However, Saudi Arabia and Iran also influence events in Lebanon and Bahrain, and not necessarily to the benefit of maintaining the otherwise fragile balance of peace in a given country.

Besides proxy wars the conflicting parties resort to versatile instruments to strengthen their own positions and so are engaged in constant rivalry for recognition and prestige. In the style of the old East-West conflict and aided by sophisticated media infrastructure, propaganda plays a central role in the battle for dominance in the Middle East. Over and above this, without a shadow of doubt this conflict is also affected by a series of extensive secret service activities, for instance, if one takes into consideration the 2011 assassination attempt in the U.S. on the former Saudi Arabian ambassador and current Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubeir. According to official sources, an officer in the revolutionary guards in Tehran gave the order for *Operation Chevrolet* which, however, U.S. agents managed to thwart.⁵

Another method in the dispute is the contest on an economic level, in particular on the oil



Revolutionary leader: The export of the revolution in Iran propagated by Khomeini is one of the causes for the ongoing conflict with the Saudi royal house. [Source: © Morteza Nikoubazi, Reuters.](#)

markets. The battle over falling oil prices is an efficient instrument adopted by Saudi Arabia to further weaken Iran. This is because Iran cannot keep up with the glut on the world market due to

Saudi oil, which is cheaper to exploit, since the Islamic Republic depends on higher oil prices for a comparatively lower production volume. By contrast, at least for the time being, Saudi

Arabia can still afford low oil prices, as the Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman provocatively announced at the OPEC negotiations in April 2016.⁶

Saudi oil price politics is certainly a reaction to the international rehabilitation of Iran, since in June 2015 the Islamic Republic signed the nuclear agreement with the West and therefore ended decades of international isolation. Since then, Saudi Arabia feels neglected by the West, particularly the U.S., and fears a renewed resurgence of Iran in the regional competition for the leading position in the Middle East. Against this backdrop, the Cold War between the two adversaries takes on a new quality and dimension that becomes particularly obvious in the conflict narratives and charged language of the propaganda between the two states.

2. From Ethnic to Sectarian Narrative

Even though the hostilities between Sunnis and Shiites date as far back as the disputes concerning the political succession of the Prophet Muhammad in the early years of Islam – which influenced the identity of the Shiites into the 21st century – for many years this was hardly decisive for the Saudi-Iranian conflict. The centuries of suppression of Shia Islam by the Sunni rulers may always resonate in the background, in particular the slaying of the second Imam and the Prophet's grandson Hussein by the Umayyads in the Battle of Karbala, which forms the genesis of Shiite self-understanding. Nevertheless, until the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Shiite faith was influenced by the acceptance of suffering and martyrdom in the classical sense, and thus was largely free of political ideology.

Accordingly, the narrative between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the era of the Shah was also not primarily religious in nature. Rather, it was influenced by the traditional concept of the enemy as *Arabs* versus *Persians*. Iran regards itself as a cultural nation with a glorious, thousand-year-old history that is not a product of colonialism. Emanating from this self-awareness from the

Iranian viewpoint is not least a natural claim to the Persian Gulf along with its abundant resources, the strategically important Strait of Hormuz, as well as individual islands that are also claimed by the United Arab Emirates.⁷

The sectarian dimension has only shifted to the forefront since the proclamation of the Islamic Republic in April 1979 by Ayatollah Khomeini. The Islamic Revolution was not only political, but also religious in character. From then on, Shiites were no longer to patiently endure persecution and await their redemption from the end-times appearance of the Mahdi. Rather, they should take their fate into their own hands. The Islamic Republic and the striving to export the revolution therefore gained religious legitimacy which had been unthinkable under classic Shiite doctrine. Furthermore, Khomeini regarded himself as the leader of the entire Muslim community, not only of Shiites – hence the *Islamic* Revolution – which represented direct rivalry with the Saudi leadership claim.

On a strategic level, too, the Islamic Republic brought about a decisive turnaround. The end of the pro-Western Shah era also meant the end of U.S. President Nixon's *twin pillar* doctrine, according to which Iran and Saudi Arabia, both U.S. allies, had formed a strategic balance of power in the region. From then on Saudi Arabia was supported financially by the West and armed with military resources, which was again regarded by Iran as a strategic threat.

Khomeini also sharply attacked Wahhabi Saudi Arabia on a religious level. In particular, the "anti-Islamic" hereditary monarchy and close ties with the U.S. (the "Great Satan") were at the forefront here. Besides, the Ayatollahs now claimed the authority to lead the Islamic world and Iran's foreign policy consisted primarily of exporting the revolution especially to Arab neighbouring states with a significant Shiite population such as in Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon, yet also in the oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

Since the proclamation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran has been challenging Saudi-Arabia's claim to leadership.

For Saudi Arabia, this new narrative and its consequences represented a substantial threat both in terms of power politics and ideology. Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine offered an alternative model to the Wahhabi Kingdom and called into question its political and religious legitimacy. The Saudi royal house regards itself as a "mother" and a natural protective power for the Gulf monarchies as well as an anchor of stability throughout the Gulf region. As a reaction to the Iranian effort at expansion in 1981, it therefore initiated the founding of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in which the six Arab Gulf monarchies are represented. Ideologically, the Kingdom regards itself as an *Islamic state* that is attuned to Sharia law and organised according to the example of the prophet and the first caliphs. In particular, Saudi Arabia has the two most holy sites of Islam, Mecca and Medina, under its sovereignty which makes its claim for religious leadership possible in the Muslim world. When in the wake of a disaster during the hajj (during which also many Iranian pilgrims lost their lives) Khomeini wanted to contest Saudi Arabia's holy sites, King Fahd changed his official title in 1986 from "His Majesty" to "Custodian of the Holy Shrines".

Since 1979 both Saudi Arabia and Iran have used a narrative based on sectarianism in the battle for influence in the Arab world, in order to draw sections of the population and political groups into their range of influence. Both states base their political legitimacy on their respective religious orientation. Wherever religious tensions are implicated between Sunnis and Shiites and conflicts follow sectarian lines, Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic are involved. Religion therefore becomes an important means of power, given that both countries regard them-

selves as a protecting power for their related denominations. Saudi Arabia regards itself as the patron for 1.4 billion Sunni Muslims, while Iran acts as a supporter of the 240 million Shiites.

In the Saudi context, 1979 was not only the year of the Iranian Revolution, it was also influenced by the radicalisation of Sunni Saudis that culminated in the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, at which point the responsible extremists called for the overthrow of the Saudi regime. The almost simultaneous Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the rise of Communist powers offered the Kingdom a chance to utilise Sunni extremism both against the Iranian as well as the Communist threat. Saudi young people were encouraged to join in the jihad in Afghanistan and the regime began to fund pro-Wahhabi Pashtuns who ultimately formed the core of the Taliban leadership. Additionally, the Saudi royal family supported Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran (1980 to 1988) with 25 billion U.S. dollars. Against the backdrop of these geopolitical developments, Saudi Arabia also began to set up Wahhabi schools and centers throughout the Muslim world to establish a counter-pole to the revolutionary Shiite doctrine and Communist movements.⁸

A decisive bone of contention in foreign policy arose in the ensuing power struggle. While Iran pursued its foreign policy goal for a Middle East free of Western influence, particularly military influence, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states were increasingly dependent on American support to maintain the status quo in the region. This was manifested not least in the Iraq war of 1990/1991, when Saddam Hussein's troops in Kuwait could only be beaten with American help.

At the same time, the expansion of the Islamic Revolution was only crowned with moderate success. In 1981, there was a failed coup attempt by pro-Iranian Shiites in Bahrain, and even in the majority Shiite Iraq, where Saddam Hussein ruled over a Shiite majority, the sectarian discourse could hardly assert itself. This was

mainly due to the fact that a large number of Iraqi Shiites followed the traditionally oriented doctrines of Ayatollah Sistani and were hardly influenced by Khomeini's revolutionary ideas. The doctrine could only be asserted in Lebanon among the marginalised Shiites of Jabal Amil, a region bordering with Israel. In many places, the traditional self-flagellation commemorating the death of Imam Hussein gave way to the doctrine of active resistance against Israeli and American troops. In this context, classic martyrdom was reinterpreted, on the basis of Khomeini's doctrines, as suicide attacks. This development was actively supported by Iran and in 1985 culminated in the amalgamation of various jihadist groups under Hezbollah.

The sectarian conflict between the Sunni Muslims in Saudi Arabia and Shiites in Iran is used as an important means of power.

Nevertheless, until today the power political conflict goes far beyond the sectarian aspect. For example, Iran proclaimed itself the pioneer for the Palestinian cause and for many years has supported various Sunni jihadist groups. Its main allies in the region are also the Alawite and more secular Baathists in Syria, who in turn were enemies of the Iraqi Baathists around Saddam Hussein. Saudi Arabia for its part supported the (Shiite) Zayidis in Yemen during the 1960s in their fight against the socialists who were in alliance with Egyptian President Nasser. Furthermore, until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the Kingdom also maintained largely good relations with the Assad regime.

Only the regional new order in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War actually led to rapidly increasing sectarianism in the region. Because of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, who for many years maintained the balance with Shiite Iran and defeated the nominally Sunni Baath

regime, Iran was able to skilfully exploit the resulting power vacuum and to win stronger loyalty from large parts of the Shiite population. The Arab Gulf states saw a clear sign of the power-political ascendancy of Iran in the new Shiite government in Baghdad, indeed the so-called "Shiite Crescent" now extended from Tehran via Baghdad and Damascus as far as Beirut. Now Shiite sections of the population in the Gulf were also observed with growing mistrust, in particular, in Bahrain and the Saudi Eastern Province. From the viewpoint of the Sunni rulers these offered the potential to threaten the stability of the Gulf regime as the "Fifth column". This scenario dramatically escalated with the uprisings of 2011. When Egypt, as a Sunni regional power, fell to the Muslim Brothers that were by now adversaries of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf regimes feared all the more for their own survival. The rulers felt their security interests were ignored and the traditionally protective power of the U.S. increasingly lost trust because of what many actors in the region perceived as a policy of *regime change*. Iran on the other side saw the collapse of the Sunni states as an opportunity to expand its power regionally.

3. Fuelling Regional Conflicts

The main motive for the Saudi and Iranian sectarian narratives is based on power consolidation both internally as well as externally. The rivals often act on the basis of internal political weakness. By depicting the other as the enemy and each side presenting themselves as the victim, they attempt to unite their population behind them, while simultaneously masking everyday social, economic and political problems. The focus of public attention is steered towards the perceived threat, and the people's confrontation with concepts of the enemy and shock scenarios contributes to legitimising and securing the survival of the regime and prevailing (foreign) policy.



← Pilgrimage destination: In particular the fact that Saudi Arabia has the two most holy sites of Islam, Mecca and Medina, under its sovereignty, underpins its claim to leadership in the Muslim world.

Source: © Bazuki Muhammad, Reuters.

Bahrain

In light of the Iranian expansion effort in 2011, the monarchs were particularly sensitive to protests and reform attempts in the Gulf in 2011, in particular in Bahrain, where the Shiite population is in the majority. While the social protests were initially of a non-sectarian nature, the rulers framed them as motivated by religious factors and successfully alienated Sunni protestors from the Shiite demonstrators who allegedly acted on behalf of Iran. In this way, and based on the shock scenario that Iran was supposedly virtually on the doorstep, the emergence of a widespread reform movement could be prevented. In this context, Saudi Arabia feared that serious political reforms in Bahrain and a potential regime change could lead to a domino effect and ultimately threaten its own stability. In fact, Iran repeatedly enforces its claim to the small island that belonged to the Persian Empire until the 18th century and was then conquered by the Arab Al Khalifa family. In March 2011, when GCC forces under Saudi leadership invaded Bahrain, it was not least meant to be a clear signal to Tehran. This warning was underlined when security forces pushed back the protestors from Pearl Square and it was redeveloped into a traffic junction that was tellingly named *Al Farooq Junction*. This name goes back to the second caliph Umar bin Al Khattab who is revered by the Sunnis, yet who from a Shiite standpoint denied the cousin of the Prophet and first Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib the rightful succession and threatened to burn down his house. According to Shiite sources, when Ali's pregnant wife Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, intervened, she was attacked by Umar, lost her child and died shortly afterwards.

Syria

In a similar way, in the Syrian Civil War, the sectarian narrative is used both internally and regionally to preserve power-political interests. The Assad Regime violently struck down the non-sectarian, socio-economic protests of 2011 and deliberately used sectarian rhetoric to ratchet up the tensions. On the one hand, it was able to secure the support of its ally, Iran, and on the other hand it succeeded in connecting the fate of the Alawite and Christian minority directly with the survival of the regime. For Saudi Arabia the uprising in Syria initially had no wider foreign policy significance. Syria only became a priority in spring 2012 with the fall of Egypt, the closest anti-Iranian ally. In Riyadh, the hope is in particular that with the fall of Assad Iran would lose its land bridge to the Hezbollah in Lebanon. Initially, the Saudi Kingdom and its Western allies supported moderate, secular rebels around the Free Syrian Army. However, this changed abruptly when in May 2013 the Hezbollah intervened in the Syrian Civil War in the battle of Al Qusayr, therefore influencing the balance of power in Assad's favour. As a consequence, Saudi Arabia supported the founding of the *Syrian Islamic Front* and began to fund radicalised Salafist groups. The call of the influential Sunni scholar Yousef Qaradawi to support the "Syrian brothers" in the jihad against the non-believers was reciprocated by the Saudi Grand Mufti. This appeal drew the attention of countless young Saudis which caused Saudi Arabia to become the leader in providing the number of *foreign fighters*, many of whom pledged allegiance to the so-called Islamic State.⁹

Yemen

Another precarious case in the Saudi-Iranian antagonism is the war in Yemen. Similar to the situation in Lebanon and Bahrain, the conflict here also began as an uprising of the Shiite minority against discrimination and marginalisation. However, when the Zaydi Ansar Allah under Abdul Malik Al Houthi conquered the capital city Sanaa with the help of ex-President Ali Abdallah Salih in August 2014, Saudi Arabia

saw itself confronted on all sides with what it perceived as a “Shiite front”. This came at a time when Washington seemed to have left its allies in the Gulf in the lurch and concentrated on achieving an agreement with Iran. During the 1960s Riyadh had militarily supported the Zayidis against Nasser supporters, yet at the latest since the 2009 border conflict in North Yemen the Saudi Kingdom considered this group an Iranian ally. In fact, politicians in Tehran exploited the situation by stoking these very fears in Riyadh in the media: “The capture of Sanaa by the Houthis was a victory for the regime in Tehran. Now, Iran controls four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus and Sanaa”, was how an Iranian representative in parliament commented in the Iranian press.¹⁰

The Saudi intervention in the war in Yemen is another precarious case in the conflict.

While the Zayidis do not belong to the same religious group as the Iranian Twelver Shiites and in contrast to Hezbollah cannot be regarded as henchmen for Tehran, the Saudis’ worst fear is also based on their ideology and rhetoric being of a similar revolutionary quality to that of Khomeini. After all, the slogan printed on their flag is already reminiscent of the 1979 revolution and expresses the general aims of the militia: “Death to America, Death to Israel, Damn the Jews, Victory to Islam!” In their ideology, Saudi Arabia is also branded as a state propped up by the West and therefore “anti-Islamic”. To this extent, the conquest of Sanaa can certainly be described as a “Saudi Cuban Crisis”, since it highlighted just how close “the enemy” had advanced to the Arab Gulf states. Furthermore, the Bab-el-Mandab Strait between Djibouti and Yemen is of vast strategic importance for the Saudi Kingdom, given that every day five per cent of the world’s oil trade passes here on the way to Suez.

It is therefore not surprising that the Saudi intervention not only consists of a military operation but also a media campaign. Since the start of the war, media sources close to the Saudi state justified the military intervention as “self-defence against an external aggressor” and define it – in particular in Arabic – as a “religious duty” to stop the Shiite Houthis as Iranian allies. In the Saudi media the war is generally described as a heroic act whereby the stability of the Kingdom as well as the entire “Islamic community” is to be secured.¹¹

The interest and commitment of the Islamic Republic at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula intensified particularly due to the Saudi, sectarian discourse in Yemen. From Tehran’s perspective the Middle East continues to be dominated by the U.S. as a hegemonic power and its allies, in particular, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Since the Yemeni Hadi government has close ties with Riyadh, it is certainly of strategic interest for Tehran. To that extent the Houthis are a useful tool for Tehran, even if there is no direct control here.

The media discourse influenced by Ayatollah Khamenei and the Iranian Guardian Council therefore frequently resorts to a revolutionary narrative that – again as a reference to Imam Hussein – is based on the fight of the “oppressed” against the “oppressors”. The basis of this narrative is the same as in Bahrain, Lebanon and Palestine. The substantive factor here is that it is not primarily beset with sectarian issues, but represents the “oppressed” as law-abiding Muslims (Shiites and Sunnis) and the “oppressors” as the unlawful rulers (the U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia).

In Yemen, according to Iranian media, the Zayidi majority is fighting a brave fight against the Saudi “oppressors” who commit the massacre of innocent civilians.¹² In turn, this offers Iran the opportunity to portray itself as a “saviour at a time of distress” that is protecting the Yemenis from Saudi “terrorism”. Tehran is committed worldwide to the “humanitarian” support for the “oppressed”, which is also the case in

Yemen: “We wanted to send [Yemenis] medications, not weapons. They do not need our weapons.”¹³ Furthermore, Iran portrays the uprising of the Houthis as part of an “axis” of “awakening” that began with the protest movement in 2011. This awakening was in the tradition of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and was “Islamic” and therefore non-sectarian.¹⁴ However, Tehran also likes to resort to more drastic rhetoric. Hence, Iranian government representatives assert the impending collapse of the “Saudi henchman” Israel and fuel Saudi fears: “The Islamic Republic’s victory in Yemen will open the gates to conquer Saudi Arabia.”¹⁵

4. Battle for Favour with the West

In the context of the 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and the West, which gave the Islamic Republic a significant boost on the international world stage, the narrative is no longer oriented merely internally, but the antagonists also attempt to gain sympathy externally, in particular in the West. The intention remains the same: namely, to consolidate power – this time through strategic partnerships. President Rohani defines the Wahhabi extremism of Saudi Arabia as the “real problem” and accuses the Kingdom of being the true political barrier for



Morning prayers: Even though it plays an important role, it would be wrong to reduce the conflict between Riyadh and Tehran to the sectarian opposition alone. Source: © Damir Sagolj, Reuters.



Regaining respectability: The nuclear agreement between Iran and the West involves a tremendous gain in prestige for Tehran on the international stage. Source: © Carlos Barria, Reuters.

peace in the region. In his rhetoric he makes use of radical notions that are not only directed at Shiites, but also at his definition of non-believers, which therefore includes the West and Christians.¹⁶ Rohani's visit to the Vatican early in the year also linked up with this discourse when he was received by Pope Francis during his state visit to Italy. Since 1953 Iran has maintained unbroken diplomatic relations with the Holy See that gives the country an ideal standing to win over the hearts and minds of Europeans. In this case, the message to the Christian West is clear: the Islamic Republic, in contrast to others, stands for religious tolerance and seeks dialogue. Iran would like to seize the chance it has been offered to win the West's favour again to the detriment of Saudi Arabia, and to give a correspondingly negative portrait of the Kingdom – such as in the most recent guest contribu-

tion by Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in the *New York Times*, in which he appeals to “rid the world of [Saudi financed] Wahhabism”.¹⁷ However, criticism of Saudi Arabia appear questionable – in particular in view of the human rights violations and the numerous politically motivated executions in the Islamic Republic.¹⁸

As regards its standpoint, Saudi Arabia does not accept propaganda aimed against it without commentary and relies on various channels to clarify its status towards the West and to use its portfolio of *soft power* instruments. In Germany, for example, the Kingdom inserted a full-page advertisement in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* with the intention of highlighting Saudi Arabia's commitment in the fight against international terror and to improve its image.¹⁹ In particular, this was a reaction to the controversial

paper published by the German Federal Intelligence Service in which the “impulsive intervention policy” of the Kingdom was criticised.²⁰

From ally to warfarer: Saudi Arabia’s reputation has sustained severe damage in the West.

Undoubtedly, public opinion in the West, at the latest since the 2015 nuclear agreement, draws a less complimentary image of Saudi Arabia than previously. The narrative of Saudi Arabia as the most important partner and as a strong ally in the Middle East prevailed for decades in the West, while Iran was demonised as part of the “Axis of Evil”. However, since Iran is regaining its respectability within the international community, the West in particular has its sights set on the potential for a resurgence of trade relations, it appears as if the previously overriding atmosphere in public discourse in the West has gone the other way – this is definitely also in view of being less dependent on Saudi oil, Saudi Arabia’s unpopular intervention in the Yemen war, the recurring criticism of the many executions in the Kingdom and the worldwide dissemination of Wahhabi ideas. The trend towards “Saudi bashing” is also confirmed by the draft bill passed at the end of September in the U.S. House of Congress that should allow the surviving dependents and victims of September 11th to take court action against Saudi Arabia to seek compensation for potential complicity in the terror attacks. This degree of involvement is not seen as improbable given that 15 of the 19 perpetrators were Saudi Arabian citizens. This decision overruled President Obama’s veto and his warning about the foreign policy consequences was ignored.²¹

Conclusion

It must be remembered that Saudi Arabia and Iran are aware of the fact that they can only consolidate their power if they retain the support of their own people as well as backing through partnerships with the West. To this end they are exchanging blows in the media in a manner that is characterised by innuendo relating to political and sectarian narratives, thus underscoring the Cold War in the Gulf. The hopes of the West that the two antagonists will turn to a more sensitive reporting of the conflict and to more moderate language, will probably not be satisfied in the interim. Ultimately, the conflict in both states is virtually a national *raison d’être*; an independent media is lacking and propaganda as well as sabre-rattling are important vehicles of diplomacy. Nevertheless, Germany and the West can continue to offer their mediation and bring together moderate forces from both countries that strike more conciliatory tones with the assistance of “Track II” activities. These could fall on open ears and resort to an existing network for dialogue as soon as the tensions between the regional powers subside once more. Ultimately, the escalation between the Kingdom and the Islamic Republic is subject to continual fluctuations. Prior to the 2015 deal reached on the nuclear program matters seemed to be approaching a normalisation of Iranian and Saudi relations, for example, in January 2015 when the Iranian foreign minister Jawad Zarif paid a visit of condolence to Riyadh following the death of Saudi Arabia’s King Abdallah. Today, two years on, this would be almost unthinkable after Saudi Arabia cut off its diplomatic relations to Iran in January 2016 as a reaction to the attack on the embassy in Tehran. However, these highs and lows pervade the history of the relationship between both countries and accentuate how in the long term the rivals cannot avoid each other and will have to enter a more constructive discourse in future. Here, however, it will not be sufficient to de-escalate the rhetoric and conduct reciprocal visits out of courtesy calls.

In order to build mutual trust, the Islamic Republic would first have to stand back from interference in the affairs of the Arab world, in particular, with regard to support for Shiite militias. This is the case in Syria as well as in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. With a positive and intermediary role in regional conflicts instead of its provocative rhetoric, Iran could not only contribute to a decisive image change, but also to a de-escalation of the regional conflicts.²²

For their part Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states could contribute to the *détente* by granting their Shiite minority populations the appropriate political and social participation whose denial has so far provided Iran with a welcome cause for provocation. Similarly, the Kingdom would have to be pro-active in pushing for a de-escalation of military conflicts, in particular, in Yemen. Additionally, the ruling houses should engage more intensively so that no more funds reach radical Salafist groups from their state territories. Furthermore, the anti-Shiite propaganda ought to be stopped, particularly in schools and Mosques. On this basis, in the long run both antagonists could establish a constructive and sustainable dialogue and commit to an integrative solution for regional conflicts.

Dr. Gidon Windecker is the Regional Representative to the Gulf States with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

Peter Sendrowicz is the Programme Manager and Research Fellow for the Regional Office Gulf States.

- 1 Cf. Böhme, Christian / Lipkowski, Clara 2016: Kalter Krieg um Mekka, Der Tagesspiegel, 10 Sep 2016, in: <http://tagesspiegel.de/14525716.html> [28 Nov 2016].
- 2 Cf. Gizbert, Richard 2016: Saudi Arabia vs Iran: Beyond the Sunni-Shia narrative, The Listening Post, 9 Jan 2016, in: <http://aje.io/aw3v> [28 Nov 2016].
- 3 Cf. Bin Salman, Mohammed 2016: Transcript: Interview with Muhammad bin Salman, The Economist, 6 Jan 2016, in: <http://econ.st/2g0gDe8> [28 Nov 2016].
- 4 Cf. Gizbert, n. 2.
- 5 Cf. CNN 2011: Iranian plot to kill Saudi ambassador thwarted, U.S. officials say, 12 Oct 2011, in: <http://cnn.it/2guGhZn> [2 Dec 2016].
- 6 Cf. Wallstreet Online 2016: "Uns sind die Ölpreise egal! Ob 30 oder 70 Dollar – das ist alles dasselbe für uns.", Wallstreet Online, 19 Apr 2016, in: <http://bit.ly/2guI4xj> [28 Nov 2016].
- 7 Cf. Windecker, Gidon / Sendrowicz, Peter 2015: Cooperation between Antagonists – The Gulf States' Complex Relationship with Iran, KAS International Reports, May 2015, pp. 73–94, in: <http://kas.de/wf/en/33.41542> [28 Nov 2016].
- 8 Cf. Hermann, Rainer 2015: Der Nährboden des Terrors, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 28 Nov 2015, in: <http://faz.net/-gpf-8ansi> [28 Nov 2016].
- 9 Cf. Zelin, Aaron Y. 2014: The Saudi Foreign Fighter Presence in Syria, CTC Sentinel, 28 Apr 2014, in: <http://bit.ly/2g0isb5> [28 Nov 2016].
- 10 Cf. Middle East Monitor 2014: Sanaa is the fourth Arab capital to join the Iranian revolution 27 Sep 2014, in: <http://bit.ly/2guPGQw> [28 Nov 2016].
- 11 Cf. Sons, Sebastian / Matthiesen, Toby 2016: The Yemen War in Saudi Media, Muftah, 20 Jul 2016, in: <http://bit.ly/2gUG3Ys> [28 Nov 2016].
- 12 Cf. Khalaji, Mehdi 2015: Yemen war heats up Iran's anti-Saudi rhetoric, Policywatch 2423, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 18 May 2015, in: <http://bit.ly/2g0k2K3> [28 Nov 2016].
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Cf. Rafizadeh, Majid 2016: Why Iran needs an "enemy" to survive, Al Arabiya English, 2 Sep 2016, in: <http://ara.tv/pppqh> [28 Nov 2016].
- 15 Cf. Khalaji, n. 12.
- 16 Cf. Gizbert, n. 2.
- 17 Cf. Zarif, Mohammad Javad 2016: Let Us Rid the World of Wahhabism, The New York Times, 13 Sep 2016, in: <http://nyti.ms/2cHxvnr> [28 Nov 2016].
- 18 Cf. Nashashibi, Sharif 2016: Saudi Nimr's execution: Condemnation and hypocrisy, Middle East Eye, 7 Jan 2016, in: <https://shar.es/186zFd> [28 Nov 2016].
- 19 Cf. Weiland, Severin / Gebauer, Matthias 2015: Lost in Translation: Saudis verteidigen sich mit seltsamer Zeitungsanzeige, Spiegel Online, 11 Dec 2015, in: <http://spon.de/aeDOX> [28 Nov 2016].
- 20 Cf. Spiegel Online 2015: Interventionspolitik: BND warnt vor Saudi-Arabien, 2 Dec 2015, in: <http://spon.de/aeDnX> [28 Nov 2016].

- 21 Cf. Steinhauer, Jennifer / Mazzetti, Mark / Hirschfeld Davis, Julie 2016: Congress Votes to Override Obama Veto on 9/11 Victims Bill, The New York Times, 28 Sep 2016, in: <http://nyti.ms/2cVX6aT> [28 Nov 2016].
- 22 Cf. Rafizadeh, n.14.