

## Offensive Realism and Saudi Foreign Policy towards Iran

*Dr. Faisal AlSulaib*

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### Introduction

The Arabian Gulf has long been one of the world's tensest regions. Since 1980, three main wars occurred, and the region has undergone a military buildup ever since. Most of those in the Arabian Gulf states see the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which changed the face of the entire region, as the predominant causal factor for its instability. Since then, tensions and hostility have only increased between the two sides of the Gulf: the Arabian side, led by Saudi Arabia, and Iran. This article is an attempt to explain an iteration of this relationship between the two sides, via an examination of Saudi foreign policy (SFP) towards Iran.

The concept of offensive realism developed by John Mearsheimer will be used in order to explain SFP towards Iran. Mearsheimer assumes that the international system is anarchical, and the strategic goal of all states is survival. Thus, all states will seek to increase their power in order to maintain their security. In addition, Mearsheimer argues that all states are suspicious of the intentions of the other, and consequently, each state will rely on its military capabilities to ensure its survival. Because of these suspicions, the relationship between states is a zero-sum game; the security of one state will be seen as occurring at the expense of another state. In offensive realism, all states are seen as "revisionist" rather than as maintainers of the "status quo". This means that the state which seeks to be a "hegemonic regional power" will seize every opportunity to achieve, maintain, and increase its hegemony, and prevent any rising or competing power from changing this situation.

### The Iranian Revolution in 1979

The Iranian Revolution is the event that gave rise to all of the subsequent events in the region. Scholars desirous of explaining the motives behind the US war on Iraq in 2003 would not be able to do so without returning to the Gulf war of 1991, and the liberation of Kuwait. And no one can understand the 1991 war without having some background on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. In turn, the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait was also a result of the Iranian-Iraqi war (1980-1988), which itself was a consequence of the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution.

The Revolution led to significant strategic shifts in the region. It resulted in the collapse of the American strategy in the Gulf region known as the "twin pillars policy", in which the US relied upon Iran and Saudi Arabia to maintain the security of the Arabian Gulf.

During the Shah's rule, Iran and Saudi Arabia were allies and their foreign policies were almost identical. For instance, during the Yemen crisis in the 1960s, or on the occasion of the Dhofar Rebellion in Oman — Iran and Saudi Arabia collaborated with each other. The Iranian Islamic Revolution changed the nature of their relationship, which shifted from one of cooperation to hostility. The new regime in Iran adopted a foreign policy indirectly reliant upon Shia minorities in other Arab countries so as to spread its influence.

Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, particularly Kuwait and Bahrain, and of course Iraq felt threatened by the revolutionary discourse of the Iranian Islamic regime, and its new policies. Because Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states were not able to confront Iran, Iraq undertook this role and launched a war against Iran with the financial and logistical support of the Gulf States.

## The Shift of the Saudi Role in the Region

Saudi Arabia used to play the role of a mediating power in the region, however this has gradually shifted to one of greater leadership. However, this shift can be traced back to several factors. First, the leading role of King Faisal in OPEC when he imposed a partial oil embargo against the United States, and several other countries, during the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, leading to a jump in oil prices, and a consequent strengthening of the Saudi economy. Secondly, the relative weakening of Egypt's influence in the region following the Camp David Accords of 1978 which established a framework for peace with Israel; this step isolated Egypt from the rest of the Arab countries, and caused the Headquarters of the Arab League to move from Cairo to Tunis. Third, Saudi Arabia's backing of the US strategy of containing the communist influence in the region by supporting the so-called Islamic *Al Sahwa* and *Al Jihad* following the Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Fourth, the weakening of Iraq's role in the region, following its invasion of Kuwait, and the subsequent Gulf war of 1991, and accompanying economic siege it suffered. All of these elements led to Saudi Arabia's relative increase in influence, successfully filling the power gap in the Arabian Peninsula.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001 put Saudi Arabia under enormous political pressure since most of the hijackers were Saudis. However, the consequences of the US invasion of Iraq, which led to the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, increased tensions instead between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This event highlighted Iranian influence in the region, since the power vacuum in Iraq was immediately filled by Iran's allies in the country. Seven years on from this, and the Saudi Arabia's situation had worsened as the so-called 'Arab Spring' uprisings started, first in Tunisia, then in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. Iran was eager to exploit the opportunity these protests offered by intervening in them, especially in those of Bahrain and Yemen, two countries in which Saudi Arabia has historically enjoyed significant influence. Meanwhile, the Iranian side has started to speak of a "Shia crescent", stretching from Iran to Iraq, and onwards to Syria and Lebanon. This confidence increased when the US under the Obama administration, together with five other international powers, signed the Nuclear Deal with Iran, thereby indirectly bestowing legitimacy on the Iranian regime.

## Offensive Realism and Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy

The consequences of these events – which have mainly occurred over the past two decades – have led Saudi Arabia to seek to rebalance and/or undermine Iran's influence in the region. In other words, Saudi Arabia has shifted its foreign policy from that of the "status quo" state, which marked its foreign policy before the year 2000, to the that of the "revisionist" state, seeking hegemony in the region. As the offensive realism paradigm assumes, the relationship between competing powers is a zero-sum game – a consideration precisely applicable to the Saudi-Iranian dynamic today.

Saudi Arabia's current objective is to be the hegemonic regional power. It will therefore confront any rising or competing power which risks interrupting the country's achievement of this objective. Saudi Arabia believes it has the requisite qualifications to become a regional power: it has one of the strongest economies in the world; militarily, it is one of the world's top three countries, as ranked by defence spending; geographically, it is one of the largest countries in the region, and its geo-strategic location renders it both regional and global relevance.

Based on a perspective of offensive realism, Saudi Arabia will thus strive to increase its own power to surpass Iran and will also do what it can in order to undermine Iran's influence in the region.

There are other regional players, such as Turkey, which on the whole follow or complement Saudi Arabia's own positions. Iran's regional foreign policy, however, stands in contradiction to that of Saudi Arabia. Each success Iran achieves in the region is thus counted by Saudi Arabia as a loss. Saudi Arabia's objective is therefore to prevent Iran from becoming a hegemonic regional power. In doing so, Saudi Arabia seeks to change the structure of the regional system from one of competitive multipolarity to that of a unipolar hegemonic power

which ensures the stability and protection of its smaller regional allies. In other words, Saudi Arabia desires to implement its own version of the “Monroe Doctrine” in the Arabian Peninsula region, thereby preventing any other regional powers to intervene in its sphere of influence.

In view of these considerations, it would be naive to expect a peaceful relationship to blossom between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the near future, especially if Iran maintains its foreign policy of intervening in the region and destabilizing Saudi interests.

### **The GCC States Relations with Iran**

There is not a unified foreign policy among GCC states toward Iran. However, nor are there two clear-cut camps between them, so to speak of belligerent ‘hawks’ and peace-loving ‘doves’. Each state in the GCC has its own interests and must consider different domestic factors which influence its foreign policy. It is true that there is an axis that emerged in 2017, which includes Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain. Yet this does not automatically mean that states such as Kuwait and Oman are against them. Kuwait, for instance, is a small state influenced by geographic and domestic factors which enforce it to maintain a balanced and neutral foreign policy. Kuwait is located between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, which forces the country to balance its foreign policy between these three big powers. Domestically, the Sunni-Shia divide in Kuwaiti society prevents the government of Kuwait from aligning itself clearly against Iran. Kuwait instead seeks to deescalate the region’s sectarian conflicts that may negatively reflect on its society, and thereby destabilize its national security.

### **Conclusion**

Mearsheimer posits, following the theory of offensive realism, that the US will not allow China to rise peacefully to the point of becoming a competing hegemonic power in East Asia. It can be argued that his thesis applies similarly to Saudi foreign policy towards Iran. Saudi Arabia will not permit Iran to become a hegemonic power in the Gulf region or in the Arabian Peninsula at large. This means that the status of tension and instability in the region will continue until one of the powers achieves hegemony, and the remaining countries of the region fall in line.

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**Dr. Faisal AISulaib** is the director of the Center of Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies (CGAPS) at the University of Kuwait and a professor of the political science department at the same university.

**Contact Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.**

Regional Programme Gulf States

Fabian Blumberg

Representative to the Gulf States

Email: [fabian.blumberg@kas.de](mailto:fabian.blumberg@kas.de)

Dr. Mohammad Yaghi

Research Fellow and Programme Manager

Email: [mohammad.yaghi@kas.de](mailto:mohammad.yaghi@kas.de)



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