

The Middle East is recognized as one of the most complex regions in the world. Violence is rampant as various armed militias and terrorist groups spill across borders. The region has witnessed conflict after conflict for more than a century now. Two regional actors observed across all uprisings, civil wars and insurgencies are Saudi Arabia and Iran. They are bitter rivals and their relations are essential in understanding the cold war in the region.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have long battled for the hegemonic status in the region. Their differences are distinct as they vary in sectarianism, nationalism, revolutionary ideology, oil prices, attitudes towards the US military presence in the Gulf, and towards the Hajj. These differences make the possibility of their conciliation near impossible and result in a never-ending rivalry.

The two countries have competed indirectly by supporting opposing sides in the other countries in the Middle East and provoking conflicts; they engage in proxy warfare which has been a significant cause of disruption in the region.



During the Iranian Revolution, thousands of people were jamming daily into a Tehran schoolyard to see the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. This photo is from Feb. 4, 1979.

The Iranian Revolution

Relations between the two countries before 1979 were relatively cordial. The ties had improved in the 1960s as both cooperated in the wake of threats posed by Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabism and by potential Soviet penetration as well as the rise of secular Arab-nationalist Baathists in Iraq. By the 1970s, both Saudi Arabia and Iran had oil-based economies and had governments heavily backed by the United States. However, the Shah of Iran did not possess the same control over his people like the monarch of Saudi Arabia did.

Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979 overthrew the powerful regime under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi who was backed by the United States and was instead replaced by the government with an Islamic republic under the leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini.

This led to the first spike in tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini and his ideology of anti-western-backed secular monarchies incited strong reactions in Saudi Arabia and led to the Saudi monarchy being afraid that Khomeini would inspire their population to rise up against them.

Another major factor in the rise of tension was the religious difference. Saudi Arabia believed themselves to be the leaders of the Islamic world, mostly because they were the site of Islam's holiest places, Mecca and Medina. But Khomeini countered that Iran was the legitimate Muslim state because of his popular revolution. In addition, the deteriorating situation was exacerbated by the fact that Saudi Arabia's population is mostly Sunni, in contrast to Iran's population which are mostly Shia.

Post- Iranian Revolution

Saudi Arabia's worst fears were realised when Iran began to export its revolution from 1980 onwards as the Iranian government supported Shias in an attempt to overthrow the government in Iraq, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia. This pushed Saudi Arabia to better its relations with the United States and form the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Tensions deepened when Iraq attempted to invade Iran in 1980, under the rule of dictator Saddam Hussein. Throughout the ensuing war between Iran and Iraq which lasted eight years that killed nearly a million people, Saudi Arabia backed Iraq despite concerns about Saddam Hussein.



Smoke rises from Saudi Arabia's embassy during a demonstration in Tehran January 2, 2016. Iranian protesters stormed the Saudi Embassy in Tehran early on Sunday morning as Shi'ite Muslim Iran reacted with fury to Saudi Arabia's execution of a prominent Shi'ite cleric/ Image source: REUTERS/TIMA/Mehdi Ghasemi/ISNA

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq soured further when around 400 pilgrims, including 275 Iranians, died in the clashes in the holy city of Mecca in 1987. As a result, there was a rise in protests in Tehran; protestors occupied the embassy of Saudi Arabia and set fire to the Kuwaiti embassy. A Saudi diplomat lost his life which eventually led to Riyadh severing their diplomatic ties with Tehran in 1988.

A Brief Détente and Invasion of Iraq

In 1990, Saudi Arabia sent aid to Iran after an earthquake killed 40,000 people, and in 1991, Riyadh and Tehran restored the diplomatic relations between them. President Mohammad Khatami got elected in 1997 and worked on reconciliation with Riyadh. He visited Saudi Arabia in 1999 on the first visit by an Iranian president since the revolution and later, the

Saudi King congratulated him on his second victory in 2001. The two countries sealed better relations with a security pact in April 2001.

However, the détente did not last long as the invasion led by the United States of Iraq in 2003 made Saudi Arabia nervous. The removal of dictator Saddam Hussein created a power vacuum which led to proxy warfare where the Saudis supported the Sunni militant groups and Iranians supported the Shia militant groups the ensuing civil war. It eventually allowed the rise of Iraq's majority Shias, who were kept on the margins by Hussein's Sunni-led regime. Saudi Arabia's insecurities furthered when Iran-sponsored Lebanese militant group waged war with Israel in 2006 - proving that Iran was seeking to create new regional alliances. Iran's disputed nuclear energy program also contributed to the Saudi suspicions.



Arab Spring demonstration/ Image source: Getty

Arab Spring

The Arab Spring spanned across the Middle East in 2011 when a series of anti-monarchy, pro-democracy protests gripped the region. It was Saudi Arabia's worst nightmare come true as they wanted stability in the region and not people rising up to overthrow autocratic governments which could inspire their own to do the same. Iranians, on the other hand, welcomed the cause who wanted to overturn the regional order. In countries such as Tunisia, Saudi Arabia supported a dictator while the Iranians incited protests in the people. Throughout the region, the two exploit upheavals to increase their influence and power in the region, notably in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen, further heightening mutual suspicions.

Since 2011

In the ongoing Syrian civil war since 2011, Iranian and Russian support for President Bashar al-Assad has allowed his forces to fight the rebel groups backed by Saudi Arabia. Iran has accused Saudi Arabia of supporting terrorists whereas Saudi Arabia has accused Syrian leaders of genocide and Iran of being an occupying power.

In 2015, another stampede in Mecca inflamed tensions further as more than 700 died, including 464 Iranians. According to some sources, the real figures were over 2400 fatalities. Iran blamed the Saudi government for the tragedy and accused them of incompetence. Iran barred its pilgrims from travelling to Mecca to take part in the annual Hajj for the next year.

In the same year, Saudi Arabia commenced a bombing campaign in Yemen in support of the Yemeni government against the rebel movement, the Houthis, who are backed by Iran. Iran also reached a deal over its controversial nuclear program with six major powers which infuriates Saudi Arabia.

In 2016, Saudi Arabia executed Sheikh Nimr al Nimr, a known Shia leader who spoke in favour of anti-government demonstrations, along with 46 others for alleged offences relating to terror. This event stokes protests all over the world. In Iran, the protestors rioted in Tehran and attacked as well as burned the Saudi embassy, which leads to suspension of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Bahrain, Djibouti.

In 2017, United States President Donald Trump announced his intentions of shifting his foreign policy toward preferring Saudi Arabia over Iran. Saudi Arabia was later accused by Iran for the 2017 Tehran attacks which targeted the Iranian Parliament building and the Mausoleum of Ruhollah Khomeini. Later in the year, Royal Saudi Air Defence intercepted a

ballistic missile over Riyadh International Airport. Saudi Arabia accused Iran of supplying the missile and Hezbollah militants of launching it from Yemen. Saudis referred to it as an incident of direct military aggression from Iran toward Saudi Arabia.

In 2018, both Israel and Saudi Arabia supported the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. Iran, in return, announced its intentions of aligning with Russia and China. In Saudi Arabia, the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi prompted an international backlash. However, the United States issued a statement expressing its backing for Saudi Arabia and blaming Iran for the war in Yemen.

In 2019, Iran allegedly launched a drone strike against an oil facility in Saudi Arabia. The Saudis were also concerned about Iranian military activity in the Persian Gulf, and both Saudi Arabia and the UAE actively sought American military support. In addition, the Iranian nuclear deal loomed as a threat to Saudi Arabia as there was a strong possibility of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon. The continued Iranian support for various Shia groups in the region, including in Iraq and Lebanon, has also contributed to Saudi-Iranian tensions.



An Iranian holds a picture of late General Qassem Soleimani, head of the elite Quds Force, who was killed in an air strike at Baghdad airport, as people gather to mourn him in Tehran, Iran January 4, 2020. Nazanin Tabatabaee/WANA (West Asia News Agency) via REUTERS

In 2020, Qasem Soleimani, the major general of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [was assassinated](#) by an American drone strike in Baghdad airport, when he was invited by the Prime Minister of Iraq, Adil Abdul-Mahdi as a mediator for discussions concerning Iran's response to a previous message from Saudi Arabia related to the normalization of relations between the two nations.

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