

Former Saudi and Iranian Diplomats Agree: The Region is Stuck

by [Andrew Ledford \(/experts/andrew-ledford\)](#), [Banafsheh Keynoush \(/experts/banafsheh-keynoush\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Andrew Ledford \(/experts/andrew-ledford\)](#)

Dr. Andrew Ledford worked in the Middle East extensively between 2003 and 2013. He received his Ph.D. from Princeton University, and is currently an Assistant Professor at the U.S. Naval Academy.

[Banafsheh Keynoush \(/experts/banafsheh-keynoush\)](#)

Dr. Banafsheh Keynoush was a Visiting Fellow at the King Faisal Center for Islamic Studies and Research in Saudi Arabia, and has spent time in Iran as visiting researcher. She is a Visiting Scholar at Princeton University and Non-Resident Scholar at the International Institute for Iranian Studies. She is the author of “Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?” (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; Arabic edition, Dar AlSaqi, 2017; Persian edition, Zarir Publishing 2017).



Brief Analysis

Saudi Arabia and Iran are not often presented as being ‘in dialogue.’ Yet on January 29, 2018, two former Saudi and Iranian diplomats discussed a host of key issues at the Joint Special Operations University in Tampa, Florida. Prince Turki al-Faisal Al-Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Ambassador Seyyed Hossein Mousavian of the Islamic Republic of Iran both remain well connected to their current respective governments, lending greater weight to their respective views and presenting insider views on how each government sees its conflict with the other. Each suggested that their respective countries shared the goal of reducing regional instability, though the mechanisms to do so differed.

This previously unreported dialogue reflects a larger reality of the tensions between the two countries. Despite the frequent harsh exchange of rhetoric between the countries, Saudi Arabia and Iran have continued to deflect direct military confrontation, demonstrating that strategic interests continue to be prioritized over ideological clashes, though both participants noted that antagonistic rhetoric played a role in preventing the amelioration of tensions. Neither state appears to have the power or the will to expend on a heavy military conflict or to deal with its consequences. Yet neither does either state perceive an end to the stand-off, which the authors of this article argue cannot be obtained without external intervention.

The authors further believe that the region’s significant power imbalances represent the practical root of tensions between the two regional powers. The dialogue between the diplomats emphasized that as of yet, neither state has enough regional clout to negotiate to its own satisfaction a conclusion to any of the several prolonged proxy wars between the two states. The authors argue that the United States has done its own share of exacerbating current tensions in the region, characterizing U.S. policy as generally taking sides with Saudi Arabia while attempting to isolate Iran, but consistently failing to provide enough support to decisively tip the regional imbalance of power in a manner that better aligns the Saudi and Iranian security interests. Without an outside catalyst to shift the current

status-quo, Saudi Arabia and Iran's deadlock does not appear to have a natural end.

Encouragingly, both states have responded to this reality by attempting to bolster domestic stability. During periods of increased regional tensions, Saudi Arabia often turns inwards and attempts to ignore all but the most major of Iranian provocations. The Kingdom's new Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud, has explicitly stated that the government is keen to move away from the disruptive influences of Iran's revolutionary agenda in order to focus on reforming and building Saudi Arabia. Saudi influence has not proved strong enough to effectively alter U.S.-Iran relations, so while Saudi Arabia has made some attempts to influence the U.S. stance towards Iran during periods of conflict, the investment in domestic stability to counteract a larger regional threat by Iran has proven more fruitful.

Prince Turki al-Faisal affirmed this interpretation of Saudi general policy, noting that in times of heightened tensions with Iran, the Kingdom has frequently attempted to secure its energy and investment policies in order to counterbalance broader regional instabilities. Prince Turki al-Faisal noted that the country's ongoing transformation from an energy-dominant economy to one that capitalizes more on its human resources, specifically through education, is partly a response to a sense of regional uncertainty. He argued that through its emerging human resource asset, Saudi Arabia could better retain its status as a capable regional power.

Intriguingly, Iran may be on the cusp of following the current Saudi model of refocusing on domestic issues after periods of tension with the Kingdom. This is not a model that Iran has relied on in the past when it attempted to expand its regional influence. But, with its economy continuing to depend heavily on oil resources, and restricted opportunities for its citizens as a result of economic mismanagement and U.S. sanctions, Iran is forced to redress its policies. Even as Iran has taken an increasingly active regional role, its own domestic pressures in the form of major protests have pushed its government to begin to look inward. President Rouhani's recent calls for domestic social and economic reforms for Iran and diplomacy with the West, while in reaction to major internal pressures, may also represent nascent efforts within the Iranian government to refocus its efforts on domestic economic diversification and reduced regional tensions.

Though the focus on domestic concerns and economic diversification is encouraging, competition over oil remains a key concern for both countries. The kingdom, historically a swing producer, is proving its willingness to make up for the loss of Iranian oil in international markets when U.S. sanctions against Iran's oil and gas industry begin in November. Saudi Arabia may not necessarily be aiming to bring Iran down entirely through its new oil policy, but rather force the country to scale back its disruptive regional foreign policy, effectively 'readjusting' the regional balance to a more stable condition that would also work in Saudi Arabia's favor.

However, Saudi Arabia's new position on oil production will more likely serve as one more moment of a momentary upper-hand in a see-sawing conflict. Both governments continue to navigate regional crisis after crisis as opportunities to demonstrate their strength and highlight the other's weakness, with little concrete movement towards one outcome or another.

The intractability of the current conflict on a regional level highlights the major potential of outside influence, effectively applied. A more promising direction of Saudi effort would be to draw on the support of external partners, including an Arab-led military coalition and with U.S. military assistance, to develop an alliance focused on regional stabilization. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has often sought international support to obtain greater regional influence. Iran, in contrast, attempts to bolster its position by attempting to isolate the region from external influence. What is clear from the comments shared by the former diplomats and corroborated by the events of the past year is that both sides view the approaches as exclusive, meaning that only one approach can succeed.

It is this formulaic zero-sum approach to issues that may produce instability for the region. However, engaged U.S. leadership is necessary to shift the region firmly into the broader international framework. Otherwise the region's

proxy wars and general instabilities will continue. It is not easy to restore the regional balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran, especially as Washington is currently pursuing the strategy of isolating Tehran by leaving the 2015 Iranian nuclear agreement—which Iran once viewed as an opportunity to gain greater regional power and prestige.

As Washington resumes sanctions against Iran, an offer to enter into negotiations with the country may actually prove fruitful if Tehran takes the offer. Were negotiations to commence, it is important that officials create an internationally supported framework whereby Iran is called on to scale back its regional interventions in return for support for the country's growth and development. The success of this strategy would allow for the de-facto success of the Saudi policy of supporting U.S. involvement in the region, indirectly strengthening the Saudi position in the Middle East. This does not expressly weaken the Iranian position but would create a more durable balance of power.

While a negotiated agreement with Iran may be far off, U.S. promotion of greater stabilization in the region is also possible through a few practical measures. For example, Washington should focus on finishing the job of stabilizing Iraq from a security standpoint, and encourage more Saudi investments in Iraq to counter Iranian influence. Sustained engagement with Iraqi development would slowly help rebalance a country that has increasingly been included in Iran's sphere of influence since 2003. While Iranian influence in Iraq is undeniable, many regional countries have the power to compete with Iran by promoting Iraq's security and building its infrastructure through joint projects.

More complicated but still necessary is rolling back Iranian influence in Syria, otherwise a likely center of future conflict—especially in light of the recent Israeli air strikes on Iranian positions in Syria. While pressures on Iran to remove its forces from Syria have so far proved fruitless, continued economic protests in Iran demanding increased attention to domestic matters may provide Iran with the internal pressure it needs to reduce its regional expansion. This outcome, while favoring Saudi Arabia from a regional perspective, may ultimately help both countries domestically.

It is clear that the status-quo represents an unwinnable state of affairs—each party struggles to make advances that weaken the other and support an unrealistic goal as a lone regional superpower. The involvement of the United States and international community is imperative to rebalancing the power scales between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both countries enjoy a degree of political and economic leverage in the region that needs to be reformulated in a manner that consistently encourages balanced power and relations between them. While Iran and Saudi Arabia may not be fighting each other directly, the regional tension's adverse effects on Iraq, Yemen, and Syria suggest that it is beneficial for all concerned parties to quell the instability and encourage this re-tipping of the regional scales.



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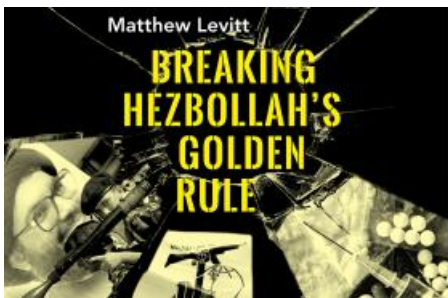
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