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Study

The conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran: How to respond to developments and regional implications?

No. 07 | July 2018

Institute for Strategy & Foresight

Summary

The hegemonic struggle in the Middle East between Saudi Arabia and Iran – and in a broader sense between Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey – for supremacy in the Islamic world has already led to proxy conflicts in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. This not only raises the threat of interstate conflict but could also lead to territorial reorganisation in the Middle East. It calls for a reassessment of existing alliances and partnerships in the region.

The security situation in the Middle East

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the security situation in the Middle East has substantially deteriorated. Having succeeded in occupying Iraq, the U.S.-led coalition faced an insurgency between 2004 and 2009. Moreover, Israel launched operations against Hezbollah in the 2006 Lebanon War. Numerous military operations were carried out against Kurdish separatists in Turkey, Syria and Iran. At the same time, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continued to flare at low to medium-intensity in Gaza and the West Bank. The Arab Spring further destabilised the region, leading to several changes of government in Egypt. It also led to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Following the withdrawal of the U.S. coalition from Iraq, and as civil war took hold in Syria, the Islamic State group (ISIL) – which had grown during the Sunni uprising in Iraq and disassociated itself from Al Qaida – became so strong that by 2015 it controlled large parts of Syria and Iraq. This was facilitated by ISIL's use of *double sanctuary*,[1] and by the weakening of the Syrian and Iraqi governments, and by the fact that this was a *multi-party asymmetric conflict*.[2] It was only between 2016 and 2018 that ISIL was forced out of its territories as a result of the international intervention in Syria (airstrikes), the equipping of Kurdish fighters, financial support to the Iraqi government, the deployment of Iranian militias and advisors in Iraq, and a strong Russian presence in Syria. At present, ISIL has barely any territorial control in Iraq or Syria, but is still active in parts of those countries and is currently undergoing a reorganisation phase.

The conflict in Yemen, which has been ongoing since 2004, is another manifestation of the region's instability. The Houthi insurgency, supported by Iran, escalated in 2014 when rebels took control of the capital Sana'a. Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has intervened in support of the former Hadi government, while in the south another interim government formed after the siege of Aden had ended. Other parties to the conflict, including Al Qaida, ISIL and other Islamist groups, control about one third of the country.

Global and regional hegemonic war

The current situation in the Middle East can best be described as a hegemonic conflict on two different levels. In this context, the oft-cited religious conflict between Sunni and Shia Islam is of lesser importance. At international level, it can be seen as a struggle for influence in the region between the United States and Russia. While the former has Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia on its side, the latter has considerable influence on Iran and Syria. Both America and Russia carry out military operations in the region, mainly in Syria, with America mainly fighting terrorist organisations such as ISIL and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Al Nusra), while Russia sides directly with the

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1 *Sanctuaries* are places of refuge for militias or insurgents that are difficult to access or located in another country, making it difficult or impossible for government forces to operate against them. *Double sanctuaries* are reciprocal in nature: Syria was a sanctuary for militias in Iraq, while Iraq provided a safe haven for militias under pressure in Syria.

2 *Multi-party asymmetric conflicts* are conflicts in which a state actor faces several groups of insurgents that are in turn involved in a civil war.

Syrian government and operates against all other parties to the conflict, including the Free Syrian Army supported by the West. Russia is involved primarily to protect its naval facility in Tartus, which gives it crucial influence in the Mediterranean, but also because Syria under Assad acts as a Russian satellite. The United States were initially interested in regime change in Iraq and a democratisation of the region. Until 2017, American strategy was focused on bringing about regime change in Syria, protecting Iraq from Iranian influence, and fighting radical groups. Having pushed back ISIL, the United States now seems to be focused on containing Russian and Iranian influence. Turkey's role is of particular interest here because as a NATO member it is a partner of the United States, yet on account of numerous breakdowns in its relations with Western countries it is increasingly aligning itself with Russia. Thus, Turkey has become a political barometer in the hegemonic conflict between the United States and Russia. Meanwhile, Turkey is also involved in operations in Syria, supporting militias of Turkish origin and fighting the Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units) supported by the West. It has also repeatedly confronted American units as well as pro-Russian Syrian troops.

At regional level, the hegemonic conflict is of a triangular nature, because in addition to the open conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Turkey, too, has aspirations to power in the region. Iran has grown more powerful since the U.S. invasion. Iraq, its former arch-enemy, has gradually become a close Iranian ally – mainly through the establishment of the Badr Corps, the influence of the pro-Shia Mahdi movement, the deployment of military advisers, and the exclusion of Sunnis from high-level government and military positions. As a result, and with Russian support, Tehran has established the Iran–Iraq–Syria–Lebanon (Hezbollah) axis as a pro-Iranian block. This development is more or less the opposite of what U.S. foreign policy hoped to achieve since 2003. Moreover, Tehran, by supporting pro-Iranian Houthi militias in Yemen, has drawn Saudi Arabia into a regional proxy war.

An endless threat to NATO and EU security?

The highly complex situation in the Middle East, with intertwined global and regional hegemonic conflicts and dyadic rivalries, has had lasting adverse effects on the security and stability of NATO and the EU. Lack of economic prospects, and instability in the region provide a breeding ground for new radical groups that may actively oppose Western ideas and standards. Mass migration of refugees is only one of several symptoms of regional instability. Turkey's erratic behaviour towards its NATO partners (in Syria, Iraq and the Aegean), and towards EU members and Israel (in the Eastern Mediterranean), and towards the United States (mutual sanctions), as well as Istanbul's flirt with Moscow, threaten a lasting break with NATO. This would have to be interpreted as a victory for Russia

(cf. Metis Study No. 03/2018 on Turkey). A more powerful Iran reflects the failure of U.S. policy in the Middle East over the last two decades. Finally, the Western world is directly affected by the instability of the Middle East, as its societies become polarised on the issue of terrorism and migration.

Moreover, an interstate conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran would have far-reaching consequences for the global economy because it would probably involve the closure of the Strait of Hormuz to international shipping. Such a conflict would also threaten the fragile status quo in Iraq and continue to fuel the proxy conflicts in Yemen and Syria. The conflict management capability of the United Nations and its Security Council are undermined by the following factors: Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen at the request of the beleaguered Hadi government; UN Resolution 2216 (which in the eyes of Russia and Iran is biased and demonises the Houthis); and timid investigations into war crimes against civilians.

For NATO and the EU, this ongoing instability and insecurity makes it necessary to think ahead about how to protect their eastern flank (from the Baltic states to the Black Sea) and their south-eastern and southern flanks (from the Bosporus to the Eastern Mediterranean) against potential threats and risks. Recent confrontations between the United States and Turkey have made the withdrawal of Turkey from NATO seem a realistic prospect. If Turkey actually left NATO, the EU's external border would coincide with NATO's border, at least in the Aegean, and NATO would lose an important base for operations in the region. Moreover, a high-intensity interstate conflict would result in increased refugee flows towards Europe, more fragile nations states, and the emergence of radical groups in the region. Such a conflict would be likely to spread to other countries, further internationalising the hegemonic conflict in the region.

Strategic and operational implications for the German-Israeli relations

Germany and Europe have a historical obligation to help maintain the integrity and survival of the state of Israel. It is in the interest of NATO and the EU to support Israel (the only true democracy in the Middle East) in overcoming regional challenges, and to act as mediators to resolve the Israeli-Arab conflict and Israel's conflict with Iran. In terms of defence policy, it is worth considering enhanced cooperation with Israel as an advanced partner outside the NATO framework. (Israel's admission to the PfP programme would be difficult due to Turkish reservations.) Thus, a multilateral forum composed of the USA, GBR, FRA, DEU and ISR might be established in addition to NATO. At EU level, it would be desirable to involve Israel more closely in the European defence architecture by concluding a third-country agreement within the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)

framework. Israel could even be considered as a host nation for EU Battlegroups (e.g. the ESP-ITA amphibious or Balkan Battlegroup). This is a sensible precaution looking forward, since the maritime choke point of the Suez Canal and the southern Israel–Cyprus–Greece energy corridor will make the region increasingly significant for Europe in future. Closer cooperation with Israel is necessary and makes sense if Europe is to reduce its energy dependence on Russia. Additionally, the recent partnership between Israel and Saudi Arabia, though seemingly a marriage of convenience, might help to stabilise the region, for example by expanding the axis to include Jordan. If conflict should escalate between Iran and Saudi Arabia, especially with Israeli involvement, Germany and other NATO and EU members might be called upon to enter the conflict – perhaps under the terms of Article 42 (7) of the Treaty of Lisbon (that is if Cyprus becomes involved as a result of Israeli-Cypriot defence cooperation). Germany and its partners should take all preventive diplomatic, political and military measures to reach a political solution to the conflict in Yemen. This is important because Germany maintains the nuclear deal with Iran and cooperates with Saudi Arabia and Israel. A possible solution might include a ceasefire, a demilitarised zone along the country's borders, immediate humanitarian aid, and a federal state system in Yemen. Moreover, the EU should maintain and expand the agreement on Iran's nuclear programme to prevent military use of nuclear energy in Iran. Adjusting existing sanctions on Iran might also be considered as a means of further de-escalation. Should such mediating efforts fail, Israel could launch a pre-emptive strike that might well trigger a chain reaction.

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