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The Saudi Cold War With Iran Heats Up

While the Obama administration may hope the nuclear deal paves the way for a more peaceful Middle East, it just may convince Riyadh to turn its conflict with Tehran up a notch.

By Kim Ghattas

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n the days before the nuclear deal with Iran was signed, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry sounded excited about the prospect that an agreement could pave the way for other diplomatic breakthroughs in the region. In an interview with his hometown *Boston Globe*, he spoke about how the deal is "an opportunity here to galvanize people" and potentially "open some doors" to future regional cooperation.

Having come up empty-handed on the Middle East peace process, Kerry has now won the centerpiece accomplishment of his term as secretary of state. But on the point of further breakthroughs, he is bound to be disappointed. This success will only exacerbate regional tensions in the short term by escalating the cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

U.S. President Barack Obama's first overtures to Iran in 2009, and the back-channel negotiations that started in 2012, took place when the regional landscape looked very different. That was before Iran and Hezbollah sunk their men and resources into propping up Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, before Shiite militias in Iraq deployed in force to counter the so-called Islamic State (IS) — and, crucially, before disenfranchised Sunnis started feeling, rightly or wrongly, that they were taking a beating by Iran across the region.

The negotiations have concluded in Vienna as the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh is raging across the Middle East, and the deal will make it only harder to get under control. While Riyadh will likely publicly acquiesce to the agreement, the depth of its hostility toward Tehran remains unchanged.

We already know that Saudi Arabia is working to counter Iran on even the most minor of issues. From banning Iranian carpets in Mecca, to tracking the movement and numbers of Shiites in countries like Egypt, to removing the head of a university in Islamabad, Saudi diplomacy is extremely hands-on and more effective than most people probably assume, thanks to the power of its checkbook and the relentless pursuit of its key goal: countering the Islamic Republic, as well as the political power of Shiites more generally.

This is the picture you get when you sift through the Saudi diplomatic cables released in June by WikiLeaks. The organization has released 60,000 cables so far, out of an expected total of 450,000; most of those published were written between 2010 and 2013. The Saudis have neither confirmed nor denied the authenticity of the cables.

Sifting through the Arabic documents, with Islamic calendar dates, letterheads, stamps, and hand-written scribbles is time -consuming and tedious. But if you get past the random airfare bills and passport copies, the reward is a fascinating window into the usually secretive world of Saudi diplomacy and the Saudi-Iranian cold war raging across the Middle East.

Riyadh's obsession with Tehran should not come as a total surprise. We know from U.S. diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks that in 2008 the Saudis were already calling on the United States to strike Iran and "cut off the head of the snake."

There are no calls to cut off anyone's head in the Saudi cables, but they do show in granular detail how Saudi Arabia is obsessively working on pushing back against Iran. Saudi ambassadors around the world monitor every move the Iranians make and report back to the Saudi foreign minister on the smallest, most tedious of details. In one undated cable, for instance, the economic and cultural affairs section of the Foreign Ministry informed then Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal that a renowned Iranian carpet-maker expressed interest in weaving custom-made rugs for the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina.

For the Saudis, this was not merely a matter of decoration, but an issue fraught with geopolitical significance. The Saudi embassy in Iran weighed in on the matter: This was not a commercial endeavor, it wrote, but a clear political and religious maneuver in line with Iran's long stated desire to get a foothold into the two holy sites of Islam. The embassy advised that the Iranian request should be turned down, and the minister was urged to agree. We don't know Saud al-Faisal's answer — but it's fair to assume the Iranian carpets never made it to Mecca.

In 2012, the Saudi Embassy in Pakistan sent a cable categorized as "very urgent" to Riyadh to inform the Foreign Ministry that Mumtaz Ahmad, president of the International Islamic University, Islamabad, had committed the terrible faux pas of inviting the Iranian ambassador as a guest of honor to a reception at the university. The president, furthermore, refused to retract the invitation. The embassy urged the ministry to swiftly dispatch the head of Riyadh's Al-Imam

Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University to Islamabad for a meeting with the Pakistani university's board in order to choose another president more in tune with Saudi Arabia's vision.

I haven't found the cable that shows the Foreign Ministry's response, but the current president of the Pakistani university is now a Saudi citizen. Ahmad, who had only been appointed in 2010, is now the head of one of the university's departments.

Many of these efforts to constrain Iran are seemingly minor. The big issues — such as possible funding for rebel groups in Syria — would be the remit of the intelligence services and are discussed in different cables of a much higher classification.

The hack itself of the cables may be part of the Saudi-Iranian cold war. There is speculation that Iranian hackers were involved, and the cables got most coverage from Iranian or pro-Iran publications, such as Lebanon's *Al-Akhbar*, which conveniently omitted any details about Iran's aggressive behavior in the region relayed in the same cables.

The cables include, for example, an undated missive from the Saudi Embassy in Tehran reporting that the Iranians warned Turkey that if any Turkish bases were used to conduct military operations in Syria, Tehran would strike them.

Tehran doesn't shy away from boasting about its growing regional power, taunting Saudi Arabia with loud talk about its influence in Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad. The scrutiny that intelligence agencies give its activities, as well as the U.S. and European sanctions slapped on Iranian officials and institutions, means that Iran's more nefarious activities get a lot of coverage, painting a more detailed picture of what Tehran is up to across the region.

But until it launched a war in Yemen, Saudi Arabia's own efforts to bolster its regional influence were quieter and much more subtle. They were, however, no less effective — and included the funding of mosques, Islamic organizations, and religious schools from Morocco to Egypt and all the way to Pakistan and the Maldives.

After the United States, Saudi Arabia is probably the country that has been most successful at exporting its culture. The cables show its patient, persistent work to push back against what Riyadh sees as the spread of Shiite Islam, or other Muslim minority sects, whether it's by pressing Egypt's famed Al-Azhar University not to allow Iranians to study at the institution, or working with Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs to raise awareness about the true nature of the minority sect of Ahmadi Muslims, whom Saudi Arabia doesn't recognize as Muslims. While Riyadh is perhaps most interested in expanding its geopolitical clout, this kind of religious outreach and control also feed dangerous anti-Shiite sentiments.

For both Iran and Saudi Arabia, sectarianism is a useful tool for much more profane goals. This is not a theological debate or even a purely Sunni-Shiite struggle. This is a war about power, a struggle for the leadership of the Muslim world that really kicked off in 1979, with the return of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to Iran. Iran's Islamic Revolution had profound domestic consequences for Saudi Arabia: Among other things, it inspired Shiites in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province to briefly rise up and demand better rights; the protests were quickly and violently

quelled. For Riyadh, the rise of a theocratic power next door, which had ambitions as a transnational leader of all Muslims, was a direct threat to its role as the custodian of the two holy mosques, so it embarked on an unrelenting mission to maintain its religious bona fides.

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Since the removal of Iraq's Saddam Hussein, which unleashed Iranian power across the region, the standoff has rapidly approached its crescendo. Now the prospect of an international rapprochement with Tehran seems to have unleashed Saudi Arabia. Whatever the real extent of Iran's involvement in Yemen, the Saudi-led war there was designed to send a message to Tehran that Riyadh is willing and able to deploy its fighter jets. (The fact that the war is going horribly wrong is another story.)

This all has real implications for whether the deal just signed in Vienna goes down in history as a success or a failure. Obama's vision was that an agreement would curtail Tehran's power by not only taking away its nuclear option, but also by undermining its credentials as the leader of the anti-Western camp. By diffusing the enmity with Tehran, the United States could also alter its military posture in the Persian Gulf, which has been partially driven by the threat from Tehran since 1979.

Instead, tinkering with the status quo has caused deep anxiety within the Arab countries of the Gulf and has frayed ties with America's allies — from Israel to the United Arab Emirates — which felt betrayed by the administration's lack of transparency during the negotiations. They're stepping into what they see as a void — taking more aggressive actions in Syria, launching a war in Yemen, and bombing militants' bases in Libya.

The Obama administration kept a safe distance from regional issues that could antagonize Iran while the nuclear negotiations were ongoing. It has now signaled it wants to deal more forcefully with conflicts in the Arab world — including tackling IS and ending the conflict in Syria — but it will have to work harder and faster to convince the Saudis that it is serious about offsetting Iranian power in the wake of an agreement.

Despite Saudi Arabia's concerns about the jihadi threat, the kingdom could continue to ignore IS's expansion if it further eats away at territory under Assad's control and battles Hezbollah, spilling Shiite and Iranian blood and treasure in the process.

In the short term, the nuclear deal will only embolden both Iran and Saudi Arabia to ramp up their cold war. We have a sense of what the Iranians are capable of and what more they could do with cash from a nuclear deal. It's less clear what the Saudis will do next — but however Riyadh reacts, you can be sure it will not limit itself to banning Persian carpets or sacking more university presidents.