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## Saudi-Iranian future: Three games, three scenarios

By Manal Saadi

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There is no need to argue on Saudi Arabia and Iran as the two biggest regional powers in the Gulf, the rising tension between the two countries who are engaged in proxy wars in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and somehow Bahrein had installed a climate of Cold War 2.

How did we get there?

Saudi Arabia existed since 1932 as a Sunni country and the birthplace of Islam. Its history of creation is so unique, mesmerizing and fascinating.

Iran, has a glorious past, with various empires that conquered the Arab-Islamic world at certain period of time.

While the Shah was in power, Iran's relations with the Arab Gulf States were normalized, Iran's navy used to act as the policeman of the gulf. The situation has changed when the Iranian Islamic revolution occurred in 1979, with consequences on both countries and on their relationships. Iran's Ayatollah wanted to export their respective model and undermine Saudi Arabia that Iranian officials see as corrupt and unworthy due to its relation with the United States and the

West. The Shia country is also supporting Shia communities in the Gulf which is seen as a direct threat to Saudi Arabia.

Not only the leaders of the Iranian revolution see Saudi Arabia as a corrupt country, but they also see them as treacherous and disloyal. The reason behind is more than a Shia-Sunni rivalry; it is important to contextualize the order before the Islamic revolution; an oil embargo was occurring in the world where Iran's leaders wanted to stop selling oil to Western powers. They called upon Saudi Arabia to do the same in retaliation toward countries who helped Israel in the « Yom Kippur War », but Saudi Arabia didn't stop selling its oil, and decided to increase the price of the barrel to destabilize the economy of the Western countries that helped Israel, without disturbing their strategic alliance with the United States.

Today, the relationship between the two countries is delayed.

The succession of events from 2011 where Iran wants to seize the opportunity of a possible vacuum of power during the Arab Spring, by supporting the Shia protests that erupted in Bahrain and the idea of a Shia Islamic republic, has proved the ability of Saudi Arabia and the GCC to send its troops into Bahrain. Was it a symbolic gesture, or a warning for Tehran?

Then it came to Yemen, Iraq and Syria, where today Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in a proxy war. The Iranian Nuclear deal with the P5+1, the uncontrolled situation in Yemen, the Hajj crush where Iran claimed more than 400 dead citizens, The execution of 27 Sunnis by the Iranians, the execution of Nimr al Nimr (a Shia Sheikh) by the Saudis, the attack of the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, then the cuts of the diplomatic ties between the two countries, and the intensification of the rivalry.

What is for the future to expect? Three games, three scenarios.

### **Accommodation game:**

In this scenario, Saudi Arabia and Iran will have to sit in the table of negotiation and find a compromise. But how can two rival countries negotiate? common interest if there is any or a mutual threat?

Iran and Saudi Arabia are both rich countries, with large access to natural resources, big territories and their economic model is based on oil. If there is no common interest between the two powerful states in the region, the creation of ISIS constitute a threat to both governments. Iran doesn't want a powerful Sunni group in Iraq and Syria and ISIS is threatening the Gulf monarchy. However, Tehran and Riyadh seems to have no intention to lower the temperature and

talk again for a potential solution toward the defeat of « Daesh », and the rivalry between them is distracting attention from the war against ISIS. If a mutual threat is not enough to push for negotiations what can be the other solution?

As a consequence of the Iranian deal, the Saudis seem to be fed up with the *shock therapy* that the United States is exerting in the region at a point that they refused a seat in the Security Council. Saudi Arabia is today looking for new partnership with different countries, the latest highest meeting of the GCC has proved the lack of confidence of the Saudis regarding their alliance with the United States. With the intensification of tensions between Riyadh and Tehran, the Americans show no will to interfere and defend the interest of their historical ally, and Saudi Arabia is being exacerbated by the Washington-Tehran reconciliation.

Recently Saudi Arabia's King Salman met the Chinese President in Riyadh where they signed a memorandum of understanding on the construction of a high-temperature gas-cooled reactor that can help the growing energy demand for electricity and water desalination in the Monarchy. This will also evolve the beginning of a nuclear program in Saudi Arabia. Actually, Since 2006, The monarchy was projecting to construct and promote a peaceful nuclear capacity program within the GCC, and in 2007 the six Gulf States studied with the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) the feasibility for a regional nuclear power, with the assistance of France. Saudi Arabia started signing many international agreements for a nuclear cooperation with different countries as France, Argentina, South Korea, China.

Recently, in June 2015, Russia and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement for cooperation in the field of nuclear energy including the design, construction, operation of nuclear power, education and training and other aspects related nuclear reactors. Now, what if Saudi's decide to weaponize the use of nuclear? It will have subsequent effects in the region and will lead to an arms escalation of WMD.

Nevertheless, if this situation is unwanted, it can bring back stability in the region, the history has proved it.

During the cold war, the Soviet Union and the United States were expending their ballistic missiles, the Cuban missile crises and the threat of a nuclear war between the two blocs that can destroy Russia and the United States and may be the world, had generated the need for negotiations to find a compromise. Khrushchev was going to dismantle the offensive weapons in Cuba and in exchange the U.S made a public declaration that it would never invade Cuba without a direct provocation, but it also said it would dismantle its missiles from Turkey and Italy. The outcome of the negotiations between the two blocs resulted in the establishment of a hotline between the Kremlin and Pentagon and the beginning of the « detente » period.

The struggle of power in the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran is already leading to an arms escalation, and it might be possible for both countries to start a weaponization of nuclear facilities, it doesn't matter who will start first, as long as the other will follow. Pakistan never wanted a nuclear bomb until India got one. Achieving parity with a rival country would lead to sit in the table of negotiation and the achievement of a compromise. Iran can promise not to get involved in Yemen and in Bahrain while Saudi Arabia would pull-out its intervention in the Syrian conflict, and Iran would join the war against ISIS.

### **Destruction game:**

The year 1979 marked the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Iranian theoretical or « spiritual » leader was aiming at exporting the Shia-Islam brand to Shiites minorities within the Middle East, this constitute a threat for the powerful Sunni-Monarchy, as it can undermine the existing equilibrium in the region. The Iranian clerics were urging the Shiites communities of the gulf States to rebel against their rulers, and demonstrations started in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Iraq.

A year later, Iraq attacked Iran, and the two countries engaged in a war that was serving the interests of Iraq, and the Gulf countries, more precisely Saudi Arabia; despite the support by western countries, this war undermining the West's interests in terms of oil flows disruption. Saudi Arabia with Kuwait were financing Iraq, and the United States was indirectly supporting the Iraqi government by cutting off Iran's supplies. The Iranian revolution, followed by the war installed a climate of increasing rivalry between the powerful Shia and Sunni countries. With the recent uprising of the Arab Spring, the situation intensified.

Since the conflict in Syria and Yemen seems to offer no political solution, a climate of cold war is installed in the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The 3rd round of the Geneva peace talks about Syria, included the participation of delegates from the Saudi-backed opposition, the delegates from the Syrian government, the High Negotiations Committee and other opposition figures to discuss a possible ceasefire, relate of prisoners, humanitarian aid deliveries and the threat posed by ISIS. The problem is that neither the opposition nor the actual Bashar's government wants to negotiate with each others, and neither Saudi Arabia and Iran are willing to bury the hatchet in Syria.

With the Iranian nuclear deal, the reconciliation between Iran and the west and the failure of finding a solution in Syria and Yemen, the tensions between the two powerful nations in the regions are reaching their peak. One should not forget that the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand was sufficient to cause the first World War; and today a small incident in the region

can have large consequences. Both nations are exacerbated from each others, we can imagine a small event going wrong in Syria or Yemen leading to a direct war between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

A war in the region can erupt at any moment, it is certainly the least preferable scenario, but the most likely to happen if the tensions between the two regional powers are not softened. A direct conflict between the two influent States would undermines the west interests, the oil prices, and the economy of the world and will shift a regional war to a Third World War.

In one side, the United States with the European powers would back Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Golf States; on the other side Russia would back Iran and Syria militarily and financially. Who will be the winner? We can't tell, but a War is very expensive for both countries and for their allies, especially for Russia that is now suffering economically from its intervention in Syria. What is certain is that a Third World War can leave the economy, culture and politics of Iran and Saudi Arabia completely destroyed, and would change the actual « World Order ».

### **Conversion:**

Since the Arab Spring, Iran started increasing its military presence in the Middle East. In Iraq, it has sent its soldiers to fight alongside the Iraqi Army, in Syria the Iranians are financially supporting the Assad's government, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen are backed by Iran. Can Iran's rising power destabilize the region stability and create a conversion of power?

As my professor Anis Bajrektarevic well summarized on the Gulf and its surrounding intellectual scenery: "as it solely bridges the two key Euro-Asian energy plateaus: the Gulf and Caspian. This gives Iran an absolutely pivotal geopolitical and geo-economic posture over the larger region - an opportunity but also an exposure! ...Nearly all US governments since the unexpected 1979 Shah's fall, ... have formally advocated a regime change in Teheran. On the international oil market, Iran has no room for maneuver, neither on price nor on quotas. Within OPEC, Iran is frequently silenced by a cordial Saudi-led, GCC voting". Therefore, only now, the United Nations sanctions against Iran are formally lifted, which reconnected Iran to the global economy. The European embargo on Iranian oil is to come to an end and the Iranian banks will re-establish connections with the European banking system and private companies would be able to operate with no fear of a western sanction.

Nowadays, Iran is representing a diverse emerging market in the fields of manufacturing, retail and energy.

The public sphere was demonizing Iran for decades, but with the Rouhani government Iran is converting to a charming country. Jawed Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, gives the image of an open country for negotiations, that is looking for long term solution and for stability in the region and in the world, but also a country that is trying to improve the economical and political situation of its young citizens.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is suffering from a huge deficit in its public financing for the first time. With the crash of the crude prices, the deficit in the resource-rich Monarchy is more than 20% of the GDP that is according to Saudi Arabia's finance minister around \$120bn. To balance the budget, the kingdom needs an oil price of 100\$ a barrel, its decision to keep the production high caused the plunge of the oil prices.

The decision of OPEC with the influence of Saudi Arabia to keep the production high, is going to burden the U.S shale oil and put the U.S gas industry under pressure, which can undermine the relationship between the two allies in the region.

The emergence of a prosperous Iran at the international level could serve as a pattern in the region, and shift the attention from the petrodollar monarchy to the « charming » country not far from it. While today Iran is improving its image in the public opinion, changing from the « devil » to « the sexy lady », Saudi Arabia's model of « Wahhabism » is more and more connected to Islamic extremism and is blamed of causing terrorism.

Iran can use its new charisma plus its energy resources to attract the west, improve the situation in the country, offer a stability in Iraq and Syria and fill all the gaps where Saudi Arabia has failed.

The two regional powers are playing a poker game... Will the winner take it all?