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Recommended Citation

Cardinali, Thomas G. () "The Sunni-Shia Political Struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia," *Strategic Informer: Student Publication of the Strategic Intelligence Society*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/si/vol1/iss2/6>

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The Sunni-Shia Political Struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia

Thomas G. Cardinali, Morgan L.A. Murray

The tense relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran is founded on opposing sentiments, including religious and economic differences, which have impacted the United States in various ways. Saudi Arabia is primarily comprised of Sunni Muslims while Iran is predominately comprised of Shia Muslims, causing an immediate aversion between the countries. Although both are sects of Islam, they oppose each other on a key issue that is the foundation for the constant tension between the two countries.

Shiites make up approximately 10 to 15 percent of the global Muslim population, but in the Middle East they are predominate in Iran's population.¹⁶⁴ Sunnis are the subsequent majority and enjoy primary influence over Saudi Arabia.¹⁶⁵ The divergence between Shiites and Sunnis dates back seventeen hundred years at the choosing of the Prophet Mohammed's successor.¹⁶⁶ Shiites believe that Islam's leader should be a direct male descendant of the Prophet while Sunnis contest that leaders can be chosen by the community consensus.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ "Sunni and Shia: The Worlds of Islam," PBS Wide Angle: Pilgrimage to Karbala. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/episodes/pilgrimage-to-karbala/sunni-and-shia-the-worlds-of-islam/1737/> (accessed March 22, 2013).

¹⁶⁵ Lionel Beehner, "Shia Muslims in the Mideast," Council on Foreign Relations, June 16, 2006. <http://www.cfr.org/religion-and-politics/shia-muslims-mideast/p10903> (accessed March 22, 2013).

¹⁶⁶ Michael Williams, "Shia Vs. Sunni," Master of None. <http://www.mwilliams.info/archive/2003/06/shia-vs-sunni.php> (accessed March 22, 2013).

¹⁶⁷ John L. Esposito, "Ten Things to Know About Islam," TeachMideast, 2002. <http://www.teachmideast.org/essays/35-religion/58-ten-things-to-know-about-islam> (accessed March 23, 2013).



Sunni-Shiite Population in Persian Gulf (June 2012), CIA World Factbook, JPG file. http://cms.outlookindia.com/Uploads/SunniBIG_20120529.jpg (accessed March 26, 2013).

The foremost points of contention between Iranian and Saudi Arabian relations are the manipulation of jihad as an intercultural weapon, attempted Saudi domination of the Middle Eastern world, and the fight to control economic growth. These primary issues are affected by the underlying religious tension, and have the capacity to affect the United States. Although the two countries may choose to downplay the core issues, the differences are quite recognizable. Even as then-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sat next to King Abdulla of Saudi Arabia during the Organization of Islamic Corporation, held in Mecca in August 2012, there was underlying tension beneath the veneer of shared Islamic unity.¹⁶⁸

Iran has the ability to religiously influence Shiite Arabs across the Middle East, just as Saudis influence the Sunni communities.¹⁶⁹ Iran and Saudi Arabia rarely go head to head; instead, they use Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Afghanistan and Yemen as their battlegrounds.¹⁷⁰ Saudi

¹⁶⁸ "Saudi Arabia: King Invites Iranian President to Summit," Stratfor: Global Intelligence, August 5, 2012. <http://www.stratfor.com/situation-report/saudi-arabia-king-invites-iranian-president-summit> (accessed March 22, 2013).

¹⁶⁹ Beehner, "Shia Muslims in the Mideast."

¹⁷⁰ Richard Javad Heydarian, "Iran-Saudi Relations: Rising Tensions and Growing Rivalry," Washington,

Arabia and Iran place their militaries on high alert, pursue nuclear power, and work through proxy politicians, as well as covert militias; activities that are intended to undermine each other politically as a regional power.¹⁷¹

In 2006, during the Israeli-Lebanon War, both Iran and Saudi Arabia backed factions and used Lebanon as a proxy war territory. During this war, Iran's President Ahmadinejad openly challenged Saudi Arabia's monarchy while at the same time Saudi Arabia grew wary of the growing Shia community in Iraq. Saudi Arabia now launches military aerial raids on Shia Houthi rebels located in Northern Yemen,¹⁷² which can be viewed as Saudi Arabia flexing its military might as a warning to Shia communities. Saudi Arabia also exhibits its strong arm in the area of energy by proposing counter offers to Iran's primary partner, China. In January 2013, Saudi Arabia stated that they planned to use the internal chaos of Iran's impending collapse of the Bashar al Assad regime in Damascus in an attempt to oust Iran from the Sunni Arab stage.¹⁷³

In an effort to enhance national security against Hezbollah and other potentially dangerous groups, the U.S. has taken a strong interest in its policy regarding the Middle East. Iran has not made their motives clear regarding their intent in post-Saddam Iraq, and for obtaining nuclear

weapons. These uncertainties leave the United States in a position to formulate a policy that either endorses Saudi Arabia or places restrictions on its relationship with Iran. This endorsement is not so much an approval of Saudi Arabian policy but instead a support of the Kingdom as a balance of Arab power against Iran.¹⁷⁴ Supporting Saudi Arabia can effectively serve as a method to oppose Iran, due to the friction that already exists from the Sunni-Shi'a divide. The countries will continuously confront each other for Middle Eastern dominance, which will make it extremely difficult for Iran to achieve their desire for supremacy. Should this strategy prove successful, the threat of nuclear weapons will decrease and U.S. strategic investment in the Middle East will grow increasingly difficult in balancing between both Iran and Saudi Arabia. The U.S. must continue relations with both countries, as Middle Eastern power and dominance can have national security implications for the United States based on the potential development of nuclear weapons and Middle Eastern countries serving as breeding grounds for terrorist organizations. Furthering domestic oil production and continued importation of oil from Canada and Latin America will persist in the reduction of oil obtained from the Middle East and further protect the U.S. from the religious, geographic, and economic conflict that could prove harmful to the economy and national security in the United States. This economic leverage could also escalate force towards preventing nuclear weapons from settling in oil-rich regions where Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda have established themselves.

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran profit immensely from the oil industry. The Middle East produces an overwhelming amount of oil and acquires significant revenue from its

DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, August 6, 2010.

<http://fpif.org/iran-saudi-relations-rising-tensions-and-growing-rivalry/> (accessed March 23, 2013).

¹⁷¹ Bill Spindle and Margaret Coker, "The New Cold War," *The Wall Street Journal*.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704116404576262744106483816.html> (accessed March 23, 2013).

¹⁷² "Air Strike 'kills 70 civilians' in Yemen," BBC News, December 14, 2009.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8411726.stm (accessed March 23, 2013).

¹⁷³ "Iran Seeks a Response to Saudi Policy in Syria," Stratfor: Global Intelligence, January 24, 2013.

http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/iran-seeks-response-saudi-policy-syria?0=ip_login_no_cache%3D34dcdcd3f7784b7c9dbc70f6113edf0 (accessed March 23, 2013).

¹⁷⁴ Frederic Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy J. Ghez, Lydia Hansell and Robert A. Guffey. "Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy," Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009. <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG840> (accessed March 23, 2013).

oil exports. The success from the oil industry leads to strong competition between oil producing countries and conflicting agendas related to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). OPEC's official description is "a permanent intergovernmental organization of 12 oil-exporting developing nations that coordinates and unifies the petroleum policies of its Member Countries."¹⁷⁵ Over 80 percent of the world's oil is located in an OPEC country which means that OPEC also has the potential to impact economies around the world due to its goal of stabilizing the oil market.¹⁷⁶ Since the U.S. is dependent on oil, they also have a vested interest in OPEC and the activities of its member countries.

As a result of OPEC attempting to stabilize the market, all countries within the organization must be in agreement on items such as level of production and market price. Historically, Iran and Saudi Arabia have had opposing views regarding these issues, but other OPEC countries usually choose to side with Saudi Arabia, mainly in part because they are the world's largest petroleum exporter and hold 18 percent of the world's proven petroleum reserves.¹⁷⁷ This makes Saudi Arabia a strong leader in the organization, much to the distaste of the Iranians. In one instance, Saudi Arabia wanted to increase the level of production, which the Iranians opposed, and to the surprise of the Saudis, the other countries sided with Iran.¹⁷⁸ This was a result of smaller oil producers not being able to

increase oil production at the same rate as Saudi Arabia.¹⁷⁹ This outcome only added to the mutual distaste between Iran and Saudi Arabia and increased the overall rivalry between the countries.

The religious struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran is one that has the potential to affect not only those particular countries, but also the rest of the world. The two Muslim rivals clash over religious and economic issues; with each strategically contending to be the Middle Eastern powerhouse. The religious divide constantly affects the relationship between Hezbollah and Al Qaeda do to their Sunni/Shia divide that not only puts them at odds with the U.S., but with each other. The ties that these organizations have with each other could strengthen one another and even encourage the transformation of attacks by Hezbollah in order to strike outside their normal borders and attack the U.S.¹⁸⁰ Additionally, their conflict can put the U.S. in a situation where some direct or indirect involvement in the conflict is necessary in order to protect from enemies grasping greater control of the Middle East. The two organizations' power struggle in Syria is a prime example.

These differences between nations could have a detrimental impact on the safety of the United States from both a security and economic standpoint. Although the religious divide is one that will likely never be solved, it can, however, be contained and prevented from negatively impacting the rest of the world which is why the U.S. continues to search for appropriate policy regarding the Middle East.

¹⁷⁵ "OPEC: About Us." OPEC.

http://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/17.htm (accessed April 26, 2013).

¹⁷⁶ "OPEC Share of World Crude Oil Reserves 2011," OPEC.

http://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/data_graphs/330.htm (accessed April 26, 2013).

¹⁷⁷ "Saudi Arabia facts and figures," OPEC.

http://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/169.htm (accessed April 26, 2013).

¹⁷⁸ "OPEC, Saudi Arabia and Iran," *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, June 13, 2011.

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/871400665?accountid=12085> (accessed April 26, 2013).

¹⁷⁹ "OPEC, Saudi Arabia and Iran," *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, June 13, 2011.

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/871400665?accountid=12085> (accessed April 26, 2013).

¹⁸⁰ "The Al-Qaeda-Hezbollah Relationship," *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 14, 2006.

<http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-organizations-and-networks/al-qaeda-hezbollah-relationship/p11275>.