

# Saudi Arabia's Regional Foreign Policy is Fracturing the Gulf

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**Abstract:** At the height of the previous Arab Cold War between Egyptian Gamal Abd Al-Nasir and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia in the 1960s, the level of hostility between rival camps took several years to be contained. Today, a new Arab Cold War is raging across the Arabian Peninsula without any prospect of resolution in the near future. One camp is led by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, backed up by Cairo and Manama. Surprisingly, Israel is standing firmly on the side of this camp. The target of this alliance is Doha, which has managed to secure the backing of non-Arab regional powers such as Turkey and Iran. This round of inter-Arab rivalry and hostility is not entirely new, but there is an element of unpredictability and danger specific to the current Saudi-Qatari conflict. The entry of three regional powers—Turkey, Iran, and Israel—into this conflict may have a long-lasting impact on the region as a whole.

This new episode of Saudi-Qatari conflict has truly fractured the Gulf—one might even claim beyond repair. It is threatening to become a permanent feature of GCC inter-state relations. The level of hostility no longer contains rhetoric of reconciliation, fraternity, and shared interests; instead, this has given way to slander. The future of the Gulf Cooperation Council is in peril. The consequences are certainly potentially dangerous, especially at a time when there is no alternative regional forum able to play a politically and economically unifying role. With the Arab League becoming completely redundant and defunct, from Rabat to Baghdad, the Arab world is exposed and weakened. If Saudi Arabia had aspired to a leading role, now this has become unlikely, as its regional foreign policy has become aggressive, interventionist, and oppositional. The fact that Saudi Arabia is seen as having shared interests with Israel further complicates the picture and may backfire to the detriment of Saudi Arabia.

### **The Old Axis of Conflict: Nationalism versus Islam**

In a previous era, Cairo, Beirut, Amman, and Baghdad were the seats of fierce media wars between an Arab nationalist camp that defined itself as anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist and anti-Israeli and another one that defined itself as Islamic, an ally of the West and a force for stability. Beyond this 1960s rhetoric, there was a wider battle as Egypt wanted to lead, define and contain the Arab world underneath its umbrella. On the other side, Saudi Arabia and a consortium of other regimes felt threatened by the Egyptian Arab nationalist rhetoric and Nasser's charisma. Saudi Arabia struggled to maintain a countercurrent and register its presence on the Arab geopolitical map in the 1960s. With Israel defined as the enemy, Iran policing the region under U.S. hegemony, and Turkey outside the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Arab Cold War remained partially Arab despite the involvement of the U.S., the Soviet Union and other regional powers.<sup>1</sup>

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With a long history of statehood and regional ambitions, Egypt differed deeply from nascent Saudi Arabia, which had been quickly put together in the shadow of the first World War. While Egypt had been playing the trumpet of Arab nationalism since the 1950s, Saudi Arabia countered this propaganda with flaunting its own Islamic credentials as the seat of the two holy mosques. The rest is history, but there are two important lessons to be drawn from this first round of the Arab Cold War. First, Saudi Arabia was determined to eliminate any rival Arab powers and

would only accept other Arab countries as subservient clients in need of Saudi petrodollars in return for loyalty and services. For the Saudi leadership, the ideal Arab is one who lives off its abundance, does not seek autonomy and is willing to compromise his sovereignty. The quiet Arab is the only Arab acceptable to Saudi Arabia.

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The second lesson of the first Arab Cold War is how far Saudi Arabia in using Islam as a weapon in its regional foreign policy. It unleashed the army of Salafi religious scholars at its disposal to denounce Arab nationalism, depicting it as a Zionist conspiracy against the Muslim ummah.<sup>2</sup> This instrumentalization of religion created a deep rift between nationalism and Islam and set the two forces against each other. Saudi Arabia hoped that the struggle would weaken both rather than simply defeat Arab nationalism. Equally, Saudi Arabia did not want Islam to triumph, as this would threaten its own future as an absolute monarchy far removed from the ideal Islamic polity imagined by Muslims. With the end of the first round of the Arab Cold War, Saudi Arabia wanted an exhausted Islam and fugitive Muslims incapable of emancipation or any kind of nahda (renaissance). Saudi Arabia played with Islam to the extent of exhausting it. It had hopes that nationalists and Islamists would eventually eliminate each other in an eternal struggle.

### **Qatar: the Enfant Terrible**

In the 1990, Qatar appeared on the scene as a rival hub for alternative political discourses. Having spent several years in the shadow of its Gulf 'Big Brother', Qatar was able to rise and assert itself against Saudi attempts to



put it back in its place. With its small size and enormous wealth, coupled with ambitious rulers, Qatar was quickly able to shed its image as the Gulf's backwards backyard.

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In order to understand the current Saudi-led crisis with Qatar, we must comprehend the long-term objective of Saudi Arabia to defeat Islamism and deprive it of its potential to inspire revolutionary thinking and mobilization. When it played with Islam as an instrument of foreign policy in the 1960s, Saudi Arabia may not have fully recognized how its potential as a double-edged sword. Like many other religions, Islam can be a conservative force forbidding uprisings and maintaining acquiescence, especially in the context of an absolute monarchy. But in a different context, it has the potential to be a revolutionary force inspiring people to rise against oppression. It is this that frightens Saudi Arabia, a country and society without long experience in secular ideologies, mobilization or civil society. What Saudis had was Islam and it is the potential of this religion to inspire an uprising that most frightens the Saudi leadership.

***However, Qatar's rise thwarted this dream and antagonized Saudi Arabia, as Qatar competed with Saudi Arabia over the production of religious knowledge, ending the short-lived Saudi monopoly***

With Qatar refusing to shut its media empire or make it subservient to the whims of its Saudi neighbour, Riyadh will remain on edge. Qatar was able to appropriate Islam the moment it started airing regular weekly programs hosting famous religious scholars such as al-Qardawi, and thus ending the Saudi monopoly on the production of religious knowledge and discourse. With the Egyptian al-Azhar losing its credibility under successive repressive Egyptian regimes, Saudi Arabia believed that it would then begin to dictate interpretations of Islam that suited its own politics. However, Qatar's rise thwarted this dream and antagonized Saudi Arabia, as Qatar competed with Saudi Arabia over the production of religious knowledge, ending the short-lived Saudi monopoly. Despite its small size, Qatar won its share of the religious airwaves, angering Saudi Arabia as a result.

***So the Saudi-Qatari conflict is not simply about a defiant emir of a small emirate on the fringe of the Arabia Peninsula, but about the future of political dissent, the discourse of mobilization and the prospects for serious political change across the Arab world***

Saudi Arabia worries that the media tentacles of Qatar, including al-Jazeera and other newer institutions, will succeed in mobilizing a new generation of Saudi youth.<sup>3</sup> The Saudi regime is struggling to depoliticize this generation by substituting the promise of entertainment, football, and consumption in shopping centers for revolutionary Islamic discourse. The new Vision 2030 and the Economic Transformation programs of Crown Prince Muhammad ibn Salman attest to a serious effort to achieving the complete depoliticization of Saudi's young people, who are estimated at 60 percent of the population.<sup>4</sup> The Crown Prince must have seriously believed in the slogan that "entertainment helps put the political mind



to sleep". If he wanted young people to occupy themselves with trivial matters and only concern themselves with non-political issues, he needed to entertain them. He thus created a special government entertainment committee in charge of providing the right dose of fun as an antidote to critical thinking and dissident opinions.

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As long as there is an alternative Islam in contrast to that preached by the Saudi Council of the Higher Ulama, Saudi Arabia will remain very worried. So the Saudi–Qatari conflict is not simply about a defiant emir of a small emirate on the fringe of the Arabia Peninsula, but about the future of political dissent, the discourse of mobilization and the prospects for serious political change across the Arab world. For these reasons, Qatar will always be a source of trouble and suspicion in Saudi eyes as long as it does not change its policy and accept Saudi pressures.

As long as Qatar continues to support and propagate a populist Islamic discourse, Saudi Arabia will be hostile and will mobilize all its resources to shut it down. Saudi Arabia does not want to simply shut down Al-Jazeera. In fact it wants to shut down Qatar itself. Its pervasive land and air embargo on Qatar attests to a serious effort to bring the small emirate down.

Furthermore, should Qatar shut down its media empire, there will be only one voice under the control of Saudi Arabia and its allies. The Saudi media empire can present and frame any news, events and new alliances the way they want, without

serious and credible challenges in the Arab world. This gains importance in light of the recent proximity between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The latter has openly endorsed Saudi demands to shut down Al-Jazeera offices in solidarity. Reports point to greater security and economic cooperation following recent visits to Israel by Saudi professionals and academics.<sup>5</sup>

Who will investigate Israeli–Saudi cooperation and report on in in the Arabic-speaking world?<sup>6</sup> Who will expose the secret alliances, security cooperation and economic exchanges between the two countries? Muhammad ibn Salman may have scored success with the elephant in the room, Israel. He has continued to clandestinely cooperate with Israel on security and economic matters.<sup>7</sup> In July 2016, a Saudi delegation of academics and businessmen visited Israel with a view to establishing discreet relations, the purpose of which was to strengthen Saudi Arabia's military capabilities and enlist Israel in any possible armed confrontation with Iran.<sup>8</sup> Saudi Arabia also has a new geographical and strategic link to Israel, after Egypt offered to cede the two Red Sea islands of Sanafir and Tiran to Saudi Arabia.<sup>9</sup> Both islands sit on the Straits of Tiran, Israel's only access to the Red Sea, and they may in the future serve as launching pads from which to enhance military and security cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi public is being prepared for greater cooperation with Israel, especially through Saudi-sponsored media, now much more willing to permit articles that do not overtly criticise the Israeli occupation and its treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Saudi Arabia has also criticised Qatar for supporting the Palestinian group Hamas, now designated as a terrorist organisation. Muhammad ibn Salman has certainly pleased the Israelis by doing so and assured them of his willingness to foster greater cooperation.<sup>10</sup>



***The Saudi–Qatari crisis has already fractured the Gulf, but Saudi Arabia has yet to succeed in silencing alternative narratives and discourses about its domestic affairs and regional policies. Domestically, the Saudi regime would feel more secure should Qatar draw the curtains and abandon its role as the enfant terrible of the Gulf***

Furthermore, who in future will challenge the Saudi narrative about the marvellous Saudi economy, the privatization schemes and flourishing neoliberal trade? Who will report on the abuse of human rights and the detention of prisoners and peaceful activists inside Saudi Arabia? Saudi Arabia wants to ensure that nobody dares or does.

The Saudi–Qatari crisis has already fractured the Gulf, but Saudi Arabia has yet to succeed in silencing alternative narratives and discourses about its domestic affairs and regional policies. Domestically, the Saudi regime would feel more secure should Qatar draw the curtains and abandon its role as the enfant terrible of the Gulf. But more than three months into the crisis, there is no obvious sign that this is happening. What frightens Saudi Arabia most is a discourse that fuses Islam with modern political concepts such as human rights, democracy and civil society. Saudi Arabia wants an Islam that prepares people for the afterlife rather than this life, hence its recent denunciation of Islamism, especially those forms which preach the compatibility of Islam and democracy. As long as Qatar espouses this kind of Islamism, reconciliation in the Gulf remains remote.

The crisis with Qatar has exposed the fears of the Saudi regime and undermined its standing in the Arab world. It has confirmed the assessment of its regional policy as erratic, leading to failure in several Arab hotspots, such as Damascus, Sana'a and now Doha. Since the crisis, it has tried to build bridges

with Iraq in order to reach an agreement or a modus vivendi with Iran. But successful moves towards Iraq have yet to yield tangible outcomes in favour of Saudi Arabia. It is true that the pilgrimage season this year did not result in serious friction with Iran but given the history of animosity and sectarianism, it is difficult to imagine that hostility will be replaced by harmony in the near future.

The crisis with Qatar and the severity of Saudi reactions have not helped the latter enhance its stature globally or regionally, not to mention at the domestic level. From the pervasive embargo on Qatar and the silly and overblown Saudi performances denouncing Qatar to the ad hominem attacks on the Qatari leadership and their genealogy, Saudi Arabia has sent the wrong message to the world. The country does not appear tough and strong. In fact, its management of the crisis has been amateurish and counterproductive, likely making its allies wonder about the benefits of closeness to such a regime. Its enemies must be rejoicing at its bad judgment and taste when it comes to conducting international relations and foreign policy.

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Finally, hopes of ending the Saudi–Qatari crisis emerged after news of a phone call that Sheikh Tamim of Qatar had made to the Saudi Crown Prince. But the Saudi leadership through its mouthpieces on social media began to interpret this as Qatar being brought to its knees and ready to surrender. The Saudis saw the phone call as an opportunity to humiliate Qatar rather than reconcile with it. This approach to conflict resolution



is proving to be counterproductive and even dangerous, as a pattern of disrespecting foreign countries' sovereignty could easily backfire onto Saudi Arabia itself in future. The Saudi leadership is prolonging a conflict that should have not become a thorn in the Gulf's side. Under Saudi Arabia's assumed leadership, we may soon see the fractured Gulf descend into further divisions.



## Endnotes

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- 4-<sup>4</sup> "More than Half of GCC Population under Twenty Five" <http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/more-half-gcc-population-under-age-25>
- 5- David Graham, 'Israel and Saudi Arabia: Togetherish at Last,' 5 June 2015 <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/israeli-saudi-relations/395015/>
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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