



HOW EFFECTIVE IS SAUDI ARABIA'S 'COUNTER-IRAN POLICY'?

Hassan Ahmadian



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Abstract: This article is aimed at scrutinizing Saudi Arabia's new policy toward Iran in the Middle East. While King Salman's ascendance to power brought a new leaf to Iran-Saudi relations, Mohammad bin Salman's approach has led to a trend of continued escalation between the two countries. And yet, that is not the whole story. The change of leadership in Saudi Arabia came alongside shifts in the regional balance of power, which, coupled with Trump's presidency, created a momentum for an active – and opportunistic – Riyadh in the Middle East. Accordingly, there has been a growing focus on Iran's regional role on the part of Saudi Arabia. The defeat of the Islamic State and the Syrian opposition, the regaining of control by Syrian and Iraqi governments over their territories and the continuation of the Yemeni war without any light at the end of the tunnel have all driven Riyadh to see its rival's position as having been strengthened and its own weakened. Therefore, Riyadh came up with a counter-Iran policy aimed at controlling and, ideally, reversing that regional trend.



Saudi Arabia is shifting its traditions of regional engagement. It has never been so active in defiance of the balance of power in the region. Why? Because it perceives the balance to have been shifting into Iran's favor. Things could not have unfolded worse from Riyadh's point of view. While the Syrian war, along with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is almost finished, Saudi Arabia is still wrestling with its war in Yemen, and trying to get Qatar and Egypt in line with its regional priorities. And while the Iran-Turkey-Russia partnership has been so effective, Riyadh's Yemen and so-called 'anti-terror' coalitions are scattered. Meanwhile, an anti-Iran U.S. administration has been sworn in. Trump is seen as an opportunity to counter Iran. And as a catalyzer of Riyadh's anti-Iran push, Trump's presidency is motivating the Saudis to escalate in the hope of an Iran-U.S. confrontation. Thus the Qatar crisis, Hariri's resignation, and the 'act of war' accusation against Iran. This policy, no matter how effective, is causing regional shockwaves. This article deals with this shift, Iran's reactions to it and its regional repercussions.

Decades of cautiousness rendered Saudi Arabia a passive regional polity. Traditionally, Riyadh has been a status-quo seeker, trying to integrate its regional ambitions within the regional balance. Its new policy, however, is out of step with that tradition. King Salman's new track, aimed at curbing Iran's regional influence, is shifting Riyadh's regional posture. With the lack of much-needed compromise over the region's main crises, Saudi's new policy adds to regional uncertainties, taking opportunities according to Riyadh and emboldening challengers according to its critics.

Stemming from Riyadh's shift, Iran-Saudi relations have moved to a new track. Ever since the 1970s, Iran-Saudi relations have undergone different phases characterized by limited cooperation at times and rivalry and open hostility at others. The balance

of power has been a crucial proponent of their mutual and regional calculations and conduct. As such, when the balance tilted in Iran's favor, Saudi Arabia inclined to an anti-Iran posture. And at times of Saudi-American enhanced cooperation, Tehran's emboldened insecurity widened the room for differences. Therefore, U.S. regional policy has been affecting Iran-Saudi relations, and as such, the more imbalanced – perceived or real – that U.S. policy becomes, the less opportunity for compromise.

Since curbing Iran's influence is the cornerstone of the new approach, and because Iran-Saudi dealings have had a regional impact, it is expected that Riyadh's new policy and Tehran's reactions will add new dimensions to regional rivalries. Syria, Qatar, Lebanon and Yemen have been the main stages for the Saudi shift and its new track with Tehran. In the first part of this article, I will discuss Saudi's regional shift. The second part deals with the causes of the shift and Iran's reactions. And the third part speculates on possible regional repercussions.

And with the change of U.S. posture toward Mohammad Khatami's reformist government in Iran, Riyadh eased its hostile attitude as well. Therefore, dealing with U.S. policies over four decades, Iranian policymakers can draw a line connecting U.S. and Saudi policies toward Iran

The Saudi Shift

Riyadh has never been so active in regional affairs. Traditionally, it used to lag behind developments rather than ignite them. Previous behaviors reflected Riyadh's relatively weak position in the Middle East back in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. That position opened her arms to a bilateral and, later on, regional partnership with Washington. The partnership was based on the Kingdom's oil wealth on the one hand and Washington's protective capacities on



the other. The result was a Saudi-U.S. long-lasting partnership that overcame both the oil embargo of 1973 and the 9/11 crisis.

The Saudi-U.S. partnership in post-1979 Iran revolution has been a crucial factor in Saudi's regional conduct. The more the stability of the regime preoccupied Riyadh, the higher it prioritized its partnership with Washington. As such, like Washington, Riyadh supported Saddam's war effort during the 1980s, went along with the 'dual containment' policy during the 1990s and supported the United States' threats of regime change and crippling sanctions during the 2000s and early 2010s. And with the change of U.S. posture toward Mohammad Khatami's reformist government in Iran, Riyadh eased its hostile attitude as well. Therefore, dealing with U.S. policies over four decades, Iranian policymakers can draw a line connecting U.S. and Saudi policies toward Iran.¹

But Saudi's new posture averted the previous picture during the 2010s. First, Riyadh appeared less as a status quo seeker, embarking on a campaign to overthrow President Assad of Syria and later on, President Morsi of Egypt. But backing change abroad was coupled with an anti-change campaign within the Arabian Peninsula. Riyadh's military campaign in Bahrain as well as her war on Yemen, another indicator of its unprecedented actions, showed its defiance to any sort of uncontrolled change in the peninsula. Regionally, however, Riyadh kept struggling to shift the balance.

Riyadh's blockade on Qatar, forcing the resignation of Lebanese Premier Saad Hariri, its return to Iraq, and its heightened anti-Iran posture in Yemen all indicate a new set of Saudi activities. The campaign is said to be intended to counter Iranian 'interference' in Arab affairs. By moving against Iran regionally, Riyadh is expressing its uneasiness with the regional balance stemming from

the developments of recent years, including Lebanon's power sharing agreement, Qatar's regional activities, and especially ISIS's defeat in Syria and Iraq. They are all perceived to have moved in Iran's favor. As such, Saudi Arabia is struggling to avert these outcomes.

The Saudi shift comes in accordance with Washington's new policy toward Tehran. The only period of overt difference distancing Saudi posture toward Tehran from that of Washington came during Obama's second term. Obama's Iran policy aborted a decades-long U.S.-Saudi policy of coordination toward Tehran. Therefore, Trump crystallized an opportunity to overcome and even avert that trend.² Mohammad bin Samlan's "general view seemed to be that with the backing of the Trump administration – he praised President Trump as "the right person at the right time" – the Saudis and their Arab allies were slowly building a coalition to stand up to Iran.³ In other words, Trump's ascendance and his hostile attitude toward Tehran has been a catalyzer of Saudi's new adventurous regional policy. Additionally, it seems that Riyadh is escalating to encourage Washington to move against Tehran.

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Deepening Rifts

Iran finds itself embedded in Riyadh's new plans. Iran's – perceived or real – policy and influence in the Middle East has ignited Riyadh's reactions. And that is a crucial problem. For Tehran also interprets Riyadh's policies as hostile and its own as reactions to those of Riyadh's. As such, a security dilemma has been building up, with Saudi actions threatening Iran and Iran's regional conduct



threatening Saudi Arabia. If this vicious cycle is not aborted at some point, this may well lead to conflict. And that's why Riyadh's security-driven anti-status quo policies could be counterproductive. They might lead to more disequilibrium, adding more regional uncertainties and hence instabilities.

As such, a security dilemma has been building up, with Saudi actions threatening Iran and Iran's regional conduct threatening Saudi Arabia. If this vicious cycle is not aborted at some point, this may well lead to conflict

After more than a decade, Riyadh is finally coming into terms with the new realities in Iraq. This, in and of itself, is good news that could lead to more stability in the war-torn country. But in terms of its relations with Tehran, Saudi's intentions bear more significance. As the rhetoric of its first ambassador to Iraq, Thamer Al-Sabhan, suggests, Riyadh's new course in Iraq is planned to counter Iran. This could build up a healthy rivalry like that of Iran and Turkey in Iraq. But to function as such, it has to refrain from an exclusively zero-sum mentality. Up until now, Saudi's Iraq conduct has the markings of being the opposite, igniting Iraqi wrath and provoking the Saudi ambassador's expulsion.⁴ The new plan, said to focus on post-war construction, could also lead to a new diplomatic track. The old mentality however still remains. Additionally, Iraq cannot be evaluated in isolation, and Riyadh's regional policy is far from new.

Saudi's Qatari dilemma has been one of its most problematic relationships Within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). For decades now, Qatar has been resisting Riyadh's hegemonic conduct within the GCC and beyond. Doha's regional policy, including its close relations with the region's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) movements, its partnership with Turkey and its continued

semi-balanced relationship with Tehran, have differed drastically from those of Riyadh. A temporary alignment became possible in Syria and later in Yemen. However, Qatar's independent policy vs. Riyadh's hegemonic tendencies could not guarantee continued cooperation.

The Qatar crisis demonstrated the futility of issue-based cooperation. Riyadh and its allies demanded Qatar's capitulation in terms of its relations with both the MB and Iran.⁵ Those demands have proved counterproductive. First, as means to counter the pressure, Qatar moved closer to Iran and Turkey. Second, Iran found yet another common ground for cooperation with Turkey, Qatar and the region's MB. Third, it deepened the divergence within the GCC. Therefore, Iran benefited from Saudi's policy without moving a muscle. Riyadh's Qatar problematique stems from its obvious lack of alternatives. As such, neither Saudi Arabia nor Qatar will be easily able to overcome the repercussions of the standoff. Plus, Qatar was not the only case of this.

Riyadh's new course in Iraq is planned to counter Iran. This could build up a healthy rivalry like that of Iran and Turkey in Iraq. But to function as such, it has to refrain from an exclusively zero-sum mentality

Saudi's Lebanon policy, inconsistent as it may be, has forced Saad Hariri to resign in its latest anti-Hezbollah endeavor. Hariri's premiership came a result of a general agreement to peacefully address Lebanon's power void. After Riyadh's suspension of its financial aid to the Lebanese military in February 2016, Hariri, Lebanon's main Sunni leader, was left short of choices. He embarked on a deal rendering Michael Aoun the presidency, Hezbollah a share of the cabinet and himself the premiership. The deal was not appealing to Riyadh. Still, as long as the



Saudis had their plate full, the deal went on as expected.

Hariri's unexpected resignation, aired from Riyadh, signaled Saudi's Lebanese shift.⁶ He assailed Hezbollah and Iran for their 'destabilizing activities' both within Lebanon and beyond.⁷ But what did Riyadh aim to achieve? Hezbollah pulling out of political scene, its withdrawal from Syria or its disarmament? None of these outcomes were likely. But an escalation against Tehran through its main ally in Lebanon seemed worthy enough. It came alongside Trump administration's escalation against Tehran and was aimed at ratcheting up the pressure on Tehran. But the results were different.

Riyadh had to explain Hariri's situation as speculations of him being under house arrest were raised. At last, Saudi Arabia found no other choice but to let him go to Paris and then Beirut where he resumed the premiership. Saudi's Lebanese shift proved to be counterproductive. First, Hariri's resignation ignited an unprecedented rally behind the flag within the divided Lebanese society. Second, it dealt another blow to Saudi's Lebanon allies' banking on Riyadh – the first happened when Riyadh withdrew her support. Third, instead of focusing on Hezbollah's Lebanese and Syrian roles, the international community was pursuant of Hariri's situation. All three repercussions were unintended.

After Riyadh's suspension of its financial aid to the Lebanese military in February 2016, Hariri, Lebanon's main Sunni leader, was left short of choices. He embarked on a deal rendering Michael Aoun the presidency, Hezbollah a share of the cabinet and himself the premiership. The deal was not appealing to Riyadh

Iran, the targeted party, campaigned politically against Riyadh's action, with its president slamming Riyadh for setting a

precedent in Middle East's politics by forcing Hariri to resign.⁸ In general, with the failure of Saudi's Lebanon campaign, Iran benefited without any change in its own conduct. In fact, while Hariri stepped back from resigning, Saudi anti-Hezbollah campaign did nothing but to damage the Kingdom's reputation in Lebanon and its credibility among Sunni Lebanese.

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The Yemeni war, Riyadh's prolonged quagmire, remains a costly involvement. Starting in March 2015, the war stopped the Houthis' advance on Aden and forced their withdrawal from huge chunks of Yemeni territory. However, the lack of an exit strategy has kept Riyadh between a rock and a hard place. For over 30 months now, Riyadh has been struggling to disarm the Houthis militarily. And although the mission has appeared impossible since 2015, Riyadh has kept insisting on its military choice. Riyadh's Yemeni problem is not so unique. Just like its Qatar crisis and Hariri's resignation, it stems from a lack of an exit or alternative strategy. Therefore, Riyadh is spending, the war is ongoing and Yemenis are suffering.

What is new is Riyadh's renewed focus on Iran's support for the Houthis. Tehran's political and media support of the Houthis is clear. Its military support however remains unclear. Nevertheless, it has obviously been exaggerated by Saudi Arabia.⁹ As a means of deterrence, Houthi missiles have been targeting Saudi Arabia since 2015. And over time, the missile attacks have become ever more sophisticated and precise. Still, when



Houthi targeted Saudi soil on November 2017, Riyadh accused Iran of an 'act of war'.¹⁰ Witnessing the pattern of missile attacks, Riyadh should have not missed the coming truth: Instead of capitulating, the Houthis and their Yemeni allies will target even bigger Saudi targets. If anything, the Houthis' leader, Abdul-Malik, warned Riyadh and Abu Dhabi of the range of Yemeni missiles long ago.¹¹ Still, Riyadh has accused Iran of an 'act of war'; taken the case to the United Nations; and called upon the Arab League to address Iranian hostilities. Saudi's response presupposes that the Houthis are an Iranian proxy. It also presupposes their adherence to an Iranian chain of command. But most importantly, it holds that the missiles fired from Yemen are Iranian-made. Riyadh was able to rally the Arab league to denounce Iranian 'interventions' and 'hostilities'.¹² But its efforts fell short in putting Iran under U.S. pressure and retaliation, as well as in diverting international pressure from its war on Yemen.

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In general, encouraged by Trump's Middle East policy, including his hostile attitude toward Iran, Saudi Arabia has moved from taking part in regional confrontations into igniting them. The aim is not to miss out on the Trump opportunity. It comes in accordance with loose talk of a 'slap to Iran's face' in Washington. Heightened regional confrontations in which Iran could be seen as an aggressive actor can help the crystallization of that 'slap,' or so Riyadh believes. Additionally, Saudi Arabia seems eager to head a regional U.S.-allied front against Tehran. This explains its institutional

moves within the Arab League and the United Nations.¹³

Iran on the other hand, is celebrating the demise of ISIS, and has reacted to Saudi escalation in three ways:

■ **Denial:** Iran has officially campaigned against Riyadh's stepping up of its accusations in both Lebanon and Yemen. President Rouhani, Foreign Minister Zarif and their spokesmen have all denied Riyadh's allegations;

■ **Retaliation:** As a tit-for-tat sort of diplomacy, Tehran has stepped up its calls for the stopping of Saudi interference in both Lebanon and Yemen, and thereby averted the Saudi escalation from backfiring on Riyadh itself;

■ **Neutralization:** Most importantly, by decoupling its relations with Saudi Arabia from its international engagement, Tehran has tried hard to neutralize Saudi escalations' effect on its international outreach. This has in fact been part of Iran's diplomacy ever since the negotiations leading up to the JCPOA.

In general, since Iran has a bigger fish to fry, namely Trump's hostility toward Iran and the JCPOA, it is not willing to allocate much of its diplomatic energy to Riyadh's escalations. It is and will however react to the Saudi escalations first by trying to neutralize them and second by introducing Riyadh as the main destabilizing actor in the region. So long as Saudi escalations remain indirect, Iran's reactions are likely to remain within the abovementioned framework. Besides their mutual effects, Riyadh's escalations are likely to bring regional changes. But are they?

Regional outcomes

Increased tension is a general outcome of Iran-Saudi stakes frequently becoming high. With regional crises being the main scenes at play, their developments during recent months and particularly after the



unfolding of Saudi escalations are important in understanding the possible consequences. There are four cases to consider:

Qatar's independent and balancing approach: Clinging to its independent status regionally and its sovereign rights within the GCC, Qatar has built a case against Saudi interference. As such, despite huge differences with Tehran during the Arab Spring, it has continued distancing its approach from that of Riyadh. Therefore, the odds distancing Doha from Tehran and Riyadh did not play in either actor's favor. It improved Qatar's value as a balancer instead. The main take-away from the Qatar crisis is that Doha is not willing to capitulate. Therefore, facing more pressure from one side would lead Qatar to the other, and with that, comes its balancing value. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has no other option but to accept Qatar's reality, which can bear both reputational and political burdens. Saudi reputation has been damaged for its hegemonic tendencies even at its allies' expense. And politically, Qatar's policy vs. Saudi's exhausted capabilities to counter it, could turn into a pattern within the GCC.

Having Hariri resign while in Riyadh and attacking Hezbollah and Iran as the 'destabilizing' parties was meant to challenge Lebanon's 'business as usual' through a vacuum that could unravel the power arrangement acceptable to Hezbollah and thereby having it react as a destabilizer

The misleading value of the Lebanon vacuum: Riyadh has banked heavily on using the political vacuum in Lebanon against Iran and Hezbollah. Having Hariri resign while in Riyadh and attacking Hezbollah and Iran as the 'destabilizing' parties was meant to challenge Lebanon's 'business as usual' through a vacuum that could unravel the power arrangement acceptable to Hezbollah and thereby having it react as a destabilizer.

It also meant to put Hezbollah – and Iran – under the spotlight to hasten U.S. pressure on both. But speculations surrounding Hariri's status worked the other way around. It brought Saudi Arabia under the spotlight, forcing it to explain its actions and finally having Hariri fly to Paris then Beirut, where he resumed his premiership. In general, Lebanon has lived through a power vacuum for years. Yet, this never broke down the post-civil-war coexistence and did not bring a clear cut clarification of who was who, a situation far from changing.

Saudi's attempts to exclude Iran will most probably backfire, giving Riyadh shrinking chances of success in Iraq. In fact, it could turn into another Lebanon, where Riyadh's efforts to pressure Iran create a backlash

The limits of Iraq's balancing value: Saudi Arabia's engagement with Iraq is meant to balance Iran's influence. But if the rhetoric of her first ambassador to Iraq is of any indication, it is doing it the wrong way. Saudi leaders now speak of post-war investments in reconstruction. This, in and of itself, should not be problematic. A review of Saudi intentions in Iraq however, including its post-2015 policy, shows some strings attached. Saudi Arabia seeks to roll Iran back in Iraq. This is the main motive for taking this new tack. Yet, taking Iran's natural (cultural, political and economic) partnership with Iraq, Saudi's attempts to exclude Iran will most probably backfire, giving Riyadh shrinking chances of success in Iraq. In fact, it could turn into another Lebanon, where Riyadh's efforts to pressure Iran create a backlash.

The trajectory of the war in Yemen: one of Saudi's main problems in Yemen is analyzing the country's internal politics merely through its own regional rivalries with Iran. However connected they might be to regional politics, Yemen's developments have their own



So, as long as Saudi Arabia continues to see Yemen's troubles and internal affairs through its rivalry with Iran without appreciating Yemen's own aspirations, its Yemen policy is doomed to fail

internal dimensions as well. Understandably, Saudi Arabia has used the Houthis' connection to Iran as a means to justify the war. But Riyadh is well aware of the limits of Iran's capabilities in Yemen. Additionally, the prolonged war has brought up Riyadh's uneasiness with an independent Yemeni politics both internally and regionally. The Houthis are carrying this out. As such, they are the enemy in Saudi eyes. So long as this characterization is there, one can imagine Yemeni resistance. The missiles fired from Yemen into Saudi soil, the most effective means of deterrence at their disposal, are consequences of the war itself. The Saudis can use them to ratchet up the pressure on Iran. However, accusing Iran of an 'act of war' does not divert the real question of the war itself. So, as long as Saudi Arabia continues to see Yemen's troubles and internal affairs through its rivalry with Iran without appreciating Yemen's own aspirations, its Yemen policy is doomed to fail.



Endnotes

- 1- The only exception being Saudi defiance towards Obama's approach towards Iran and the JCPOA. Riyadh was obviously opposed to the deal and did a lot to stop it from being concluded, only to find itself in a distant position to that of the U.S. administration. Yet Trump has remedied that gap and Washington-Riyadh regional cooperation are once again back on track.
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- 3- Thomas Friedman, "Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at Last," The New York Times, November 23, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/23/opinion/saudi-prince-mbs-arab-spring.html>
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- 5- "Arab states issue 13 demands to end Qatar-Gulf crisis," Al-Jazeera, July 12, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/arab-states-issue-list-demands-qatar-crisis-170623022133024.html>
- 6- See Samia Nakhoul, Laila Bassam, Tom Perry, "Exclusive: How Saudi Arabia turned on Lebanon's Hariri," Reuters, November 11, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-politics-hariri-exclusive/exclusive-how-saudi-arabia-turned-on-lebanons-hariri-idUSKBN1DBoQL>
- 7- Angus McDowall, Tom Perry, Sarah Dadouch, "Lebanon PM Hariri resigns, assails Iran and Hezbollah," Reuters, November 4, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-politics-hariri/lebanon-pm-hariri-resigns-as-sails-iran-and-hezbollah-idUSKBN1D4oDY>
- 8- President Rouhani's full address is available at: <http://president.ir/fa/101489>
- 9- See for instance: Mareike Transfeld "Iran's Small Hand in Yemen," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 14, 2017. <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/67988>
- Seyed Hossein Mousavian, "Is Iran really to blame for Yemen conflict?" Al-Monitor, May 8, 2015. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/iran-saudi-houthi-yemen.html#ixzz4zKuugWgb>
- 10- Simeon Kerr, Katrina Manson, Ahmed Al Omran, "Saudi Arabia Accuses Iran of 'act of war' as tensions rise," Financial Times, November 7, 2017.
- 11- "Mr. Al-Houthi reveals a successful missile test; threatens Abu Dhabi, UAE and Saudi regimes," Yemen Press, September 14, 2017. <http://www.yemenpress.org/ticker/mr-al-houthi-reveals-a-successful-missile-test-threatens-abu-dhabi-uae-and-saudi-regimes-2.html>
- 12- Patrick Markey, Mohamed Abdellah "Saudi Arabia and Arab allies push for unity against Iran, Hezbollah meddling," Reuters, November 19, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-politics-arabs/saudi-arabia-and-arab-allies-push-for-unity-against-iran-hezbollah-meddling-idUSKBN1DJo6M>
- 13- Since the GCC rift, Kuwait has been hesitant to host the summit in order not to officially show its fragility or even cause its demise. Saudi Arabia has the same reservations. Therefore the Arab League has been the main venue for an institutional escalation against Iran.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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How Effective Is Saudi Arabia's 'Counter-Iran Policy'?

This article is aimed at scrutinizing Saudi Arabia's new policy toward Iran in the Middle East. While King Salman's ascendance to power brought a new leaf to Iran-Saudi relations, Mohammad bin Salman's approach has led to a trend of continued escalation between the two countries. And yet, that is not the whole story. The change of leadership in Saudi Arabia came alongside shifts in the regional balance of power, which, coupled with Trump's presidency, created a momentum for an active – and opportunistic – Riyadh in the Middle East. Accordingly, there has been a growing focus on Iran's regional role on the part of Saudi Arabia. The defeat of the Islamic State and the Syrian opposition, the regaining of control by Syrian and Iraqi governments over their territories and the continuation of the Yemeni war without any light at the end of the tunnel have all driven Riyadh to see its rival's position as having been strengthened and its own weakened. Therefore, Riyadh came up with a counter-Iran policy aimed at controlling and, ideally, reversing that regional trend.