

The "Cold War" between Saudi Arabia and Iran has the potential to escalate into a "Hot War". Not since the 1979 Iranian Revolution have relations between the two countries been so strained, writes Joseph E Fallon.

The Iranian Revolution radically altered how Tehran and Riyadh perceived the other. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia now defined their respective identities in sectarian terms, Shia and Sunni, with each viewing the other as an existential threat.

For Tehran and Riyadh, the past became the present. The 1,400 year old battle of Karbala at which Hussein, son of Caliph Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammed, was killed, resulting in the schism of the Islamic community into Shia and Sunni, is being refought daily by Tehran and Riyadh. Through inflammatory rhetoric and proxy wars, each seeks to defeat the other, religiously and politically, to become the paramount power in the Middle East.

For Shia Iran, Sunni Saudi Arabia is the "usurper". For Sunni Saudi Arabia, Shia Iran is the "heretic". The religious "battle" between them stretches from Bosnia to Qatar to Nigeria and Sudan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The proxy wars began with Lebanon and expanded to include Iraq, Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen.

While the war of words is often framed in a religious context, the proxy wars are not all based on religious affinity. Iran is allied with secular Syria. Saudi Arabia is allied with secular Egypt. In Lebanon, Iran is allied with Christian President Michel Aoun and his March 8 Alliance, as well as with Hezbollah. Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, is in confrontation with Wahhabi Qatar over the latter's good relations with Iran.

The proxy wars waged by Riyadh and Tehran to curb the influence of the other in the Middle East, wars which Tehran has been winning and Riyadh has been losing, is threatening to escalate into open hostilities between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

In May 2017, Saudi then-Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) said: "we will work to have the battle in Iran rather than in Saudi Arabia." To which Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan replied: "If the Saudis do anything ignorant, we will leave no area untouched

except Mecca and Medina."

In November 2017, by-now Crown Prince MBS declared: "The involvement of Iran in supplying missiles to the Houthis [rebels in Yemen opposed to Saudi Arabia's military intervention in that country who unsuccessfully launched a missile at Riyadh] is a direct military aggression by the Iranian regime...and may be considered an act of war against the Kingdom." Iran denied the accusation.

At the end of November, in an interview with the New York Times, MBS compared Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to Hitler, ominously adding Saudi Arabia is building an alliance against Iran. "We don't want the new Hitler in Iran to repeat what happened in Europe in the Middle East".

Iran's Foreign Ministry advised the crown prince "to think and ponder upon the fate of the famous dictators of the region in the past few years now that he is thinking of considering their policies and behaviour as a role model".

If war erupts between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it may involve nuclear weapons. Tehran has them; and Riyadh can purchase them from Pakistan.

Riyadh has been making its case for years. In 2009, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia informed U.S. Special Envoy, Dennis Ross, if Iran obtained nuclear weapons, "we will get nuclear weapons".

This warning was reiterated in 2011 when Saudi officials told "a journalist from the Times 'it would be completely unacceptable to have Iran with a nuclear capability and not the kingdom'".

In 2012, Major General Feroz Hassan Khan published *Eating the Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb*, in which he wrote: "Saudi Arabia provided generous financial support to Pakistan that enabled the nuclear program to continue."

According to 2013 report by BBC, "One senior Pakistani, speaking on background terms, confirmed the broad nature of the deal - probably unwritten - his country had reached with the kingdom and asked rhetorically 'what did we think the Saudis were giving us all that money for? It wasn't charity.' Another, a one-time intelligence officer from the same country, said he believed 'the Pakistanis certainly maintain a certain number of warheads on the basis that if the Saudis were to ask for them at any given time they would immediately be transferred.'"

In 2013, in his address to a conference in Sweden, former chief of Israeli military intelligence, Amos Yedlin, stated if Iran develops an atomic bomb, "the Saudis will not wait one month. They already paid for the bomb, they will go to Pakistan and bring what they need to bring."

In 2015, Prince Turki bin Faisal, former head of Saudi intelligence stated "Whatever the Iranians have, we will have, too".

Like World War I, a local conflict could escalate to engulf much of a continent. In 2016, Gen. Raheel Sharif, head of Pakistan's army, repeated Islamabad's official policy that it would respond to any threat to the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia. He was quoted as saying Pakistan would "wipe Iran off the map."

If Pakistan attacks Iran, how would India, governed since 2014 by the BJP, described by some as a Hindu nationalist party, react? In 2016, for the first time in 20 years, India conducted "surgical strikes" against alleged terrorist camps in Pakistani controlled Kashmir. If Pakistan's military engages Iran, would India take the opportunity to launch additional "surgical strikes"?

What of Pakistan's ally, China? Tensions already exist between China and India. Their shared 2,175 miles long border is disputed by both sides.

During July-August 2017, a confrontation arose between Beijing and New Delhi over China building a road in the strategic Doklam plateau, land belonging to Bhutan, an ally of India. It borders the "Chicken's neck", the narrow strip of territory that connects India to its northeastern states. Control over Doklam would give China a military advantage and endanger India's territorial integrity.

However, on August 28, 2017, China and India negotiated a resolution to the dispute. But a war between Saudi Arabia and Iran that draws in Pakistan and India could also pull in China. Defense of Pakistan and "resolution" of border issues could motivate Beijing to intervene.

And what of North Korea? Will it take the opportunity of a war in the Middle East to engage in further provocative acts of nuclear testings and missile launchings?

Riyadh is in a difficult position. Its support for the U.S. War on Terror undermined its national security. Before that war, Iran was contained by hostile Sunni powers – Saddam Hussein's Iraq to the west and the Taliban in Afghanistan to the east. The war eliminated the containment of Iran. The war restored Iran to a regional power; enabling Tehran to establish a presence in Iraq and Afghanistan it never could have done before. Iran's sphere of influence now stretches from the Mediterranean to the Pamirs.

Saudi Arabia finds itself nearly surrounded by hostile Shia forces – Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran to its north, Houthis in Yemen to its southeast, and Shia unrest in Bahrain to its east.

It would be a mistake for Riyadh, believing it has the most advanced weaponry, to try to break this encirclement by going to war with Iran.

The Washington Times, November 12, 2017, opined "Riyadh's formidable military arsenal would quickly overwhelm Iranian forces in a conventional war". But in 16 years of war, the "formidable military arsenal" of the U.S. has failed to defeat the Taliban of Afghanistan.

To defeat Tehran in a conventional war would require Saudi Arabia to effectively occupy Iran. But Riyadh lacks the manpower to occupy Iran, a country with a population twice as large as Saudi Arabia. Even with sufficient manpower, local resistance and geography would effectively prevent a successful occupation. Look at the inability of the U.S. with a population exponentially greater than Afghanistan's to successfully occupy Afghanistan.

The Shia "threat" to Saudi Arabia is internal, not external. It is in the response of the Shia population of Riyadh's oil-rich, Eastern Province, to decades of discrimination and persecution.

According to Human Rights Watch, "The criminal justice system in particular has been used as a cudgel to mete out draconian punishments against Shiites following egregiously unfair trials."

Riyadh has stigmatized Shia as agents of Iran. Their protests as Iranian propaganda. In a war with Iran, Riyadh's treatment of Shia may come back to haunt it. An uprising by Shia in conjunction with a war between Saudi Arabia and Iran may result not just in Riyadh's defeat, but in its loss of the Eastern Province and its oil wealth.

And Washington may not support the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia. There is a belief among some US policy makers that Saudi Arabia is as great a threat to the West as Iran, if not greater.

On June 6, 2002 in a conference entitled "Discourses on Democracy: Saudi Arabia, Friend or Foe?" influential Neo-Cons advocated independence for Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Max Singer, co-founder of the Hudson Institute, which sponsored the event, stated: "It is well within the power of the U.S. to make it possible for the EP [Eastern Province] to become independent from the Wahhabis, a new Muslim Republic of East Arabia."

In August 2002, Singer formally presented a paper to the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment calling for Washington to support the independence of the Eastern Province as a new "Muslim Republic of East Arabia".

In 2003, Richard Perle, Chairman of the Defense Advisory Board under Republican President George W. Bush and David Frum, author President Bush's "Axis-of-Evil" speech, co-authored *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror*. They wrote: "Independence for the Eastern Province would obviously be a catastrophic outcome for the Saudi state, but it might be a very good outcome for the United States. Certainly, it's an outcome to ponder."

In 2006, in his article, "Blood Borders", published by the influential *Armed Forces Journal*, retired U.S. Army Colonel Ralph Peters, formerly with Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence called for, among other things, the independence of the Eastern Province from Saudi Arabia.

In 2013, Robin Wright, "distinguished scholar at the United States Institute of Peace and the Wilson Center" had an article in the New York Times, "Imagining a Remapped Middle East", which also called for the independence of the Eastern Province from Saudi Arabia.

Add to this, the criticism of Saudi Arabian policy on terrorism expressed by Democrat Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton in her 2009 memos released by WikiLeaks. "More needs to be done since Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qaida, the Taliban, LeT and other terrorist groups". And "Donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide".

Under these circumstance, in a war between Riyadh and Tehran, many Republicans and Democrats in Congress may demand Washington no longer protect the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia.

Riyadh may find itself "between a rock and a hard place".

Â

*Joseph E Fallon is a U K Defence Forum Research Associate*