



BEYOND THE PROXY POWDER KEG:

THE SPECTER OF WAR BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

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CONTENTS

*		KEY POINTS
*	1	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
*	4	IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA: A MILITARY COMPARISON
*	9	IRANIAN DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN MILITIA
*	10	HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO
*	14	RISK OF WAR IS REAL
*	16	SAUDI ARABIA'S POLITICAL-STRATEGIC GOALS
*	17	SAUDI ARABIA'S MILITARY STRATEGY
*	21	SAUDI ARABIA'S TACTICS AND CAPABILITIES
*	25	IRAN'S POLITICAL-STRATEGIC GOALS
*	26	IRAN'S MILITARY STRATEGY
*	26	IRAN'S TACTICS AND CAPABILITIES
*	31	DILEMMAS OF RIYADH, TEHRAN, AND WASHINGTON
*	36	ABOUT THE AUTHOR
*	36	ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE

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KEY POINTS

- * An Iran-Saudi Arabia war is unlikely, but it is now more likely than ever before.
- * A military confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran should command respect and inspire concern because it could cause tremendous harm to an already volatile Middle East and possibly to the global economy.
- * Iran seems to have an upper hand in a direct military confrontation with Saudi Arabia because of its combat experience, geography, manpower, strategic depth, and greater cost tolerance. However, none of these attributes give Iran any decisive advantages in a contest with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is neither helpless nor without military options.
- * While it is easy to start a war with Iran, it is anything but to finish it. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman would have to think hard about the capabilities of the Saudi military and the resilience of Saudi society before embarking on such a risky course.
- * In any war dynamic between Iran and Saudi Arabia, U.S. military intervention or support would be the most decisive exogenous factor for both Riyadh and Tehran.
- * The United States has a security commitment to Saudi Arabia, but the extent to which Washington can tolerate subtle Iranian aggression against the kingdom that falls below the threshold of conventional warfare, while potentially upending Saudi stability, is unclear.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The predominant view of the U.S. foreign policy community is that the probability of direct military conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran is small, largely because of these antagonists' preferences and capabilities, as well as the U.S. military deterrent in the Gulf. However, this view might be mistaken for four reasons.

First, it fails to appreciate Riyadh's evolving national security considerations, which might lead it under certain circumstances to initiate military action against Iran. Second, it is insufficiently sensitive to the leadership transitions that have occurred in Riyadh and Washington. Third, it incorrectly judges Saudi Arabia's understanding of its own military capabilities. Fourth, it assesses that war between Saudi Arabia and Iran will be a result of

deliberate and well-thought-out decisions by either side, when in reality it is more likely to erupt following accidents and escalatory actions.

A military confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran should command respect and inspire concern because it could cause tremendous harm to an already volatile Middle East and possibly to the global economy. Such a war could also intensify religious-sectarian tensions across the Middle East and beyond, leading to more intractable civil wars.

On the surface, Iran seems to have an upper hand in a direct military confrontation with Saudi Arabia because of its combat experience, geography, manpower, strategic depth, and greater cost tolerance. That said, none of these attributes give Iran any decisive advantages in a contest with Saudi Arabia. Iran would still have to consider serious trade-offs, operate with various constraints, and deal with



a number of real challenges at every step of its decision-making process. Balancing between conventional warfare against Saudi Arabia and uncontrollable escalation that might lead to U.S. intervention would be both absolutely crucial and especially difficult.

It is true that Iran survived eight years of war with Iraq almost alone in 1980–88, but that does not guarantee it could do the same today. Iran would also have to weigh the ramifications of war with Saudi Arabia against its broader interests and agenda in the region. Iran sacrificed a lot to carve its sphere of influence, stretching from Beirut to Baghdad and with a foothold in Yemen. Iran's main interest is the consolidation of those gains. An escalated conflict with the Saudis might risk serious Iranian overstretch—militarily, politically and economically.

Saudi Arabia would have to struggle with some tough choices of its own too. At a time when Crown Prince

Mohammed bin Salman is trying to project an image of a responsible and reformist Saudi leader, initiating a conventional war with Iran would very much run counter to that goal. A military conflict with Iran would also be a major distraction from the crown prince's top priority—domestic modernization—and pose a serious challenge to the success of Saudi Vision 2030, on which Crown Prince Mohammed's credibility rests.

Furthermore, while it is easy to start a war with Iran, it is anything but to finish it. That is an important reason why Washington has been reluctant to pursue that option throughout its problematic relationship with Iran. Crown Prince Mohammed would have to think hard about the capabilities of the Saudi military and the resilience of Saudi society before embarking on such a risky course.

It is obvious that in any war dynamic between Iran and Saudi Arabia, U.S. military intervention or support would

be the most decisive exogenous factor for both Riyadh and Tehran. The U.S. and its allies have every interest in averting a military conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. But Washington would have some difficult decisions to make, and possibly some juggling to do should direct hostilities between Riyadh and Tehran erupt.

Every American president since Franklin Roosevelt has committed to ensuring the safety and security of Saudi Arabia. Even Barack Obama, who lacked any affinity with the Saudis, reaffirmed America's security commitment to Saudi Arabia. When Iraq invaded Kuwait and threatened Saudi Arabia in 1991, Washington assembled the most powerful coalition in history to act decisively against Saddam and thus protect the kingdom. There is no compelling reason why the U.S. would not do the same today if Iran overtly attacked Saudi Arabia, which was the destination of President Donald Trump's inaugural international trip. That is precisely why U.S. Central Command is stationed in the region: to act quickly and authoritatively against threats to U.S. interests and the security of America's partners.

But given that Iran's leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, probably will not be rolling his tanks into Saudi Arabia and seeking to capture territory, how would Washington react to Iranian violence against the kingdom that falls short of outright, conventional aggression? If the Iranians play their cards right

and manage to avoid conventional escalation, could Riyadh still count on Washington to intervene?

On the one hand, the U.S. prefers to avoid war with Iran, assuming that Tehran does not blatantly cross red lines concerning its nuclear program, the safety of American troops in the region, freedom of navigation in the Gulf, and the regime survival of U.S. regional partners. On the other hand, the extent to which Washington can tolerate subtle Iranian aggression against the kingdom that falls below the threshold of conventional warfare but that could still upend Saudi stability is unclear.

But the search for clarity does not have to be purely an American exercise. Indeed, it should not be. Such a search needs to be a joint effort between allies. Nonetheless, the reality is that Washington does not consult nearly enough with its Arab partners about the scenarios and contingencies that might lead to war. All talk and strategy is centered on deterrence, but should deterrence fail, what happens next? There is almost no joint planning when it comes to mutual threats beyond transnational terrorism.

U.S. and Saudi interests would be well served by a meaningful and broad dialogue that touches on some of these difficult matters from both perspectives. Needless to say, it is better to have that kind of conversation before a military crisis erupts with Iran.

IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA: A MILITARY COMPARISON

OVERVIEW	IRAN	SAUDI ARABIA
DEFENSE BUDGET 2016 – CONSTANT 2018 USD BILLION	13,729	50.165
PERCENT OF GDP	3.39%	7.47%
DEFENSE BUDGET 2017 – CONSTANT 2018 USD BILLION	16,201	52.098
PERCENT OF GDP	3.85%	7.55%
DEFENSE BUDGET 2018 – CONSTANT 2018 USD BILLION	17,393	56.000
PERCENT OF GDP	3.95%	7.93%
ACTIVE PERSONNEL	398,000	129,500
ACTIVE IRGC AND SANG	145,000 (PLUS IRGC AIR FORCE—UNKNOWN SIZE)	100,000
ARMY	IRAN	SAUDI ARABIA
STRENGTH	350,000	75,000
PRIMARY COMBAT UNITS	4 INFANTRY DIVISIONS 4 INDEPENDENT INFANTRY BRIGADES 4 ARMORED DIVISIONS 3 INDEPENDENT ARMORED BRIGADES 7 ARTILLERY REGIMENTS 2 SPECIAL FORCES COMMANDO DIVISIONS 3 INDEPENDENT SPECIAL FORCES BRIGADES 1 SPECIAL FORCES BRIGADE 1 AIRBORNE BRIGADE	1 GUARDS BRIGADE 6 MECHANIZED INFANTRY BRIGADES 3 ARMOR BRIGADES 8 ARTILLERY BATTALIONS 1 AIRBORNE BRIGADE

ARMY	IRAN	SAUDI ARABIA
ARMORED VEHICLES	<p>480 T-72M1 (T-72S) MAIN BATTLE TANKS</p> <p>200 SAFIR-74 (T-72Z) MAIN BATTLE TANKS</p> <p>T-55 MAIN BATTLE TANKS</p> <p>T-54C MAIN BATTLE TANKS</p> <p>TYPE 59 MAIN BATTLE TANKS</p> <p>150 T-62 MAIN BATTLE TANKS</p> <p>200 TYPE 69-II MAIN BATTLE TANKS</p> <p>100 CHIEFTAIN Mk 3/5 MAIN BATTLE TANKS</p> <p>170 M47M MAIN BATTLE TANKS</p> <p>150 M48A5 MAIN BATTLE TANKS</p> <p>160 M60A1 MAIN BATTLE TANKS</p> <p>20 TOSAN LIGHT TANKS</p> <p>140 TYPE-86 BMP-1 ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIERS</p> <p>BORAQ APC (TYPE 86) ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIERS</p> <p>300 BTR-60 ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIERS</p> <p>200 M113A1 ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIERS</p> <p>RAKSHSH ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIERS</p>	<p>373 M1A2S MAIN BATTLE TANK</p> <p>AMX-30S MAIN BATTLE TANK</p> <p>460 M60A3 MAIN BATTLE TANK</p> <p>570 AMX-10P ARMORED INFANTRY FIGHTING VEHICLE</p> <p>400 M2 BRADLEY ARMORED INFANTRY FIGHTING VEHICLE</p> <p>224 VCC-1 ARMORED INFANTRY FIGHTING VEHICLE</p> <p>1,700 M113 ARMORED RECOVERY VEHICLE</p> <p>150 PANHARD M3 ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIER</p> <p>AMX-30D ARMORED RECOVERY VEHICLE</p> <p>302 M88A1 ARV ARMORED RECOVERY VEHICLE</p> <p>138 M88A2 ARV ARMORED RECOVERY VEHICLE</p>

ARTILLERY	<p>130 105 MM M101A1 HOWITZERS</p> <p>20 105 MM M56 HOWITZERS</p> <p>550 122 MM D-30 HOWITZERS</p> <p>122 MM SHAFIE D-301 (D-30) HOWITZERS</p> <p>100 122 MM TYPE 54 (M-30) HOWITZERS</p> <p>40 122 MM TYPE 60 (D-74) HOWITZERS</p> <p>120 155 MM GH N-45 HOWITZERS</p> <p>155 MM HM41 (M114A1) HOWITZERS</p> <p>70 155 MM M114A1 HOWITZERS</p> <p>50 203 MM M115 HOWITZERS</p> <p>122 MM RAAD-1 SELF-PROPELLED HOWITZERS</p> <p>60 122 MM 2S1 GVOZDIKA SELF-PROPELLED HOWITZERS</p> <p>150 155 MM M109A1 SELF-PROPELLED HOWITZERS</p> <p>60 155 MM RAAD-2 SELF-PROPELLED HOWITZERS</p> <p>170 MM M1978 KOKSAN SELF-PROPELLED HOWITZERS</p> <p>175 MM M107 SELF-PROPELLED HOWITZERS</p> <p>30 203 MM M110 SELF-PROPELLED HOWITZERS</p> <p>250 107 MM TYPE 63 MULTIPLE ROCKET LAUNCHERS</p> <p>107 MM FADJR-1 MULTIPLE ROCKET LAUNCHERS</p> <p>100 122 MM BM-21 MULTIPLE ROCKET LAUNCHERS</p> <p>50 122 MM ARASH MULTIPLE ROCKET LAUNCHERS</p> <p>240 MM FADJR-3 MULTIPLE ROCKET LAUNCHERS</p> <p>330 MM FADJR-5 MULTIPLE ROCKET LAUNCHERS</p> <p>333 MM SHAHIN 1 MULTIPLE ROCKET LAUNCHERS</p> <p>333 MM SHAHIN 2 MULTIPLE ROCKET LAUNCHERS</p>	<p>158 M109 SELF-PROPELLED GUNS</p> <p>100 CAESAR SELF-PROPELLED GUNS</p> <p>54 PLZ-45 SELF-PROPELLED GUNS</p> <p>51 AMX-GCT SELF-PROPELLED GUNS</p> <p>72 ASTROS II MLRS MULTIPLE ROCKET LAUNCHERS</p> <p>50 M270 MULTIPLE ROCKET LAUNCHERS</p>
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GROUND-BASED AIR DEFENSE SYSTEMS	529+ SAM 250 FM-80 (CROTALE) 30 RAPIER 15 TIGERCAT 150+ MIM-23B I -HAWK/ SHAHIN 45 S-75 DVINA (SA-2 GUIDELINE) 10 S-200 ANGARA (SA -5 GAMMON) 29 9K331 Tor-M1 (SA -15 GAUNTLET) S-300 (SA-20 GARGOYLE) FIM-92A STINGER 9K32 STRELA-2 (SA-7 GRAIL) 9K36 STRELA-3 (SA-14 GREMLIN) 9K32 STRELA-2 (SA-7 GRAIL) MISAQ 1 (QW-1 VANGUARD) MISAQ 2 (QW-11) IGLA-S (SA-24 GRINCH) HN-54	73 SHAHINE SELF-PROPELLED AIR DEFENCE VEHICLES (MISSILE) 19 SHAHINE ATTS AIR DEFENCE VEHICLE (MISSILE) 68 MPCV SELF-PROPELLED AIR DEFENCE VEHICLE (MISSILE) 20 M163 VADS SELF- PROPELLED ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUN 15 ZU-23-2 ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUN L/70 ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUN 20 SKYRANGER ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUN
ROTARY-WING COMBAT/ATTACK AIRCRAFT	46 AH-1J/TOUFAN 2	11 AH-64 APACHES
TRANSPORT AIRCRAFT	2 F27 FRIENDSHIP SERIES 400M/600 20 CH-47 CHINOOK	
NAVY	IRAN	SAUDI ARABIA
STRENGTH	18,000	15,500. 3,000 MARINES
SUBMARINES	3 KILO CLASS 17 GHADIR CLASS 1 NAHANG CLASS	
FRIGATES	3 MOWJ CLASS 3 ALVAND CLASS	3 AL RIYADH (MODIFIED LA FAYETTE) CLASS 4 MADINA (TYPE F 2000S CLASS)
FAST ATTACK CRAFT – MISSILE	15 KAMAN CLASS	

IRGC – SURFACE FLEET	<p>10 THONDOR (HOUDONG)-CLASS FAST ATTACK CRAFT – MISSILE</p> <p>25 PEYKAAP II (IPS 16 MOD)-CLASS PATROL CRAFT – COASTAL, MISSILE</p>	
AIR FORCE	IRAN	SAUDI ARABIA
STRENGTH	30,000	AIR FORCE: 20,000 AIR DEFENSE: 16,000
FIXED WING COMBAT AIRCRAFT/ COMBAT AIRCRAFT	<p>48 MiG-29 'FULCRUM'</p> <p>44 F-14A TOMCAT</p> <p>30 CAC F-7N</p> <p>53 F-4 PHANTOM II</p> <p>48 F-5 TIGER II (SAEGHE)</p> <p>18 MIRAGE F1</p> <p>28 SU-24 'FENCER'</p>	<p>165 F-15 EAGLE</p> <p>68 TORNADO IDS</p> <p>71 TYPHOON</p>
RECONNAISSANCE/ INTELLIGENCE GATHERING		<p>11 TORNADO IDS</p> <p>2 RE-3</p> <p>2 KING AIR 350I</p>
TRANSPORT	<p>47 C-130 HERCULES</p> <p>7 IL-76 'CANDID'</p> <p>14 F27 FRIENDSHIP/TROOPSHIP</p> <p>9 Y-12</p> <p>10 BOEING 747</p> <p>4 BOEING 707</p> <p>6 CH-47 CHINOOK</p>	<p>36 C-130/L-100 HERCULES</p> <p>4 CN235</p> <p>9 KC-130 HERCULES</p> <p>6 A330 MRTT</p> <p>7 KE-3A</p>
MISSILE FORCE	<p>LARGEST MISSILE FORCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: 10,000+</p> <p>ZELZAL-1</p> <p>ZELZAL-2</p> <p>FATEH-110</p> <p>KHALIJ FARS</p> <p>HORMUZ-1/-2</p> <p>FATEH-313</p> <p>SAJIL-2</p> <p>SHAHAB-1</p> <p>SHAHAB-2</p> <p>QIAM</p> <p>SHAHAB3</p> <p>GHADR</p> <p>EMAD</p> <p>YA-ALI</p> <p>SOUMAR</p>	<p>ESTIMATED 10 LAUNCHERS AND SEVERAL DOZEN CHINESE-MADE DF-21 BALLISTIC MISSILES. POSSIBLY ALSO AN UNDISCLOSED NUMBER OF DF-11 AND DF-15 CHINESE-MADE MISSILES</p> <p>UNDISCLOSED NUMBER OF PATRIOT PAC-2 AND PATRIOT PAC-3 MISSILE DEFENSE BATTERIES</p>

Source: Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment – The Gulf States

IRANIAN DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN MILITIA

	INDEPENDENT ESTIMATES
BASIJ	1.5+ MILLION
BASIJ (SYRIA)	UP TO 7,000 (MID-2015)
BASIJ (IRAQ)	UP TO 2,000
PRO-IRAN MILITIAS IN SYRIA	20,000+
PRO-IRAN PMUs IN IRAQ	140,000+
MULTINATIONAL SHIITE FIGHTERS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA	8,000+ PAKISTANIS, LEBANESE, AND AFGHANS

Sources: Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment; Anthony Cordesman, "Military Spending; The Other Side of Saudi Security," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 13, 2018; Kenneth Katzman, "Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies," Congressional Research Service, March 20, 2018.

HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO

Riyadh, 5:40 a.m.: It is the first day of Ramadan, the holy month of fasting. It is a time of intense prayer and introspection for Saudis and more than 1.8 billion Muslims around the world.¹

A Houthi, Scud-type ballistic missile aimed at a military camp in Riyadh province shatters the early morning peace and lands erringly in the Saudi capital, killing 34 people and injuring dozens more. It is unclear why Saudi missile defenses, supplied by the U.S., fail to intercept the Burqan-2 missile.

Awake and at work since 4:30 a.m., Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince and de-facto ruler of the kingdom, hears the sound of the massive explosion, even though it was many miles from his office in the Ministry of Defense.

Like a cat on a hot tin roof, he is thinking of worst-case scenarios, frantically moving from one room to another trying to process what

might have just happened. Twelve minutes later, as he begins to receive information from his security services and the governor of Riyadh, his worst fears materialize: Saudi Arabia has been attacked.

Crown Prince Mohammed has seen this movie before, twice in fact: a few months ago when the Houthis launched a missile at Riyadh's international airport,² and more recently when they reportedly lobbed seven missiles at Riyadh, killing one person and wounding several others. This time, however, there appears to be significant damage and multiple Saudi civilian casualties.

This attack has put Riyadh on high alert, causing the drums of war to pound throughout the Middle East.

By 6:30 a.m., the crown prince has carefully reviewed the status reports and made multiple calls to Saudi government personnel nearest to the blast. But he wants to personally inspect the scene. He alerts his security guards that he is heading to King Saud Medical City hospital, where doctors are attending to the injured. His mind is racing faster than his armored, black

1. This hypothetical scenario was first published by The American Interest. Bilal Y. Saab, "The Middle East's Next Big War? Saudi Arabia and Iran Could Be Just One Houthi Missile Away From War," The American Interest, April 11, 2018.

2. The Saudis claimed that the missile did not even hit its target because it was intercepted in air by a Patriot battery.

Suburban Chevrolet and the huge convoy that follows him. "How dare the ayatollahs act so rashly and brazenly?" he thinks to himself.

After checking on and trying to comfort the wounded, he drives to the targeted area to assess the damage. There, he finds a nine-story apartment complex almost completely demolished. It was a lucky but direct hit, right in the middle of the building. He stands there for at least ten minutes, scanning the scene with piercing eyes, immobile, speechless. He does not make a press statement. He gets in his SUV and speeds to the al-Yamamah Royal Palace, where he immediately convenes the Council of Political and Security Affairs (CPSA), which he has led since 2017 following the ousting of Mohammed bin Nayef, his elder cousin and the former CPSA chair and heir to the Saudi throne.

King Salman, Crown Prince Mohammed's ailing, 82-year-old father, attends the meeting but departs soon after to take calls from foreign leaders, including President Trump. After saying a few prayers, the crown prince asks for the latest updates. As he reads them uninterrupted, silence descends around the room, creating an unbearable tension. His first words set the tone of the discussion: "My brothers, we have been attacked, and we all know who is responsible." Crown Prince Mohammed does not explicitly mention Iran, but everybody knows who he is referring to.

The crown prince then orders his generals to provide him with strike options against Iran. Meanwhile, a young assistant enters the room and shares with the crown prince data of the preliminary inspection of missile debris, showing that it is Iranian-made. It is enough to confirm his suspicions of Iranian complicity.

A little after midnight in Washington, after he hangs up with King Salman, President Trump announces on Twitter that Iran should be punished for its "naked aggression against our Saudi ally!" U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis is at the very same moment on the line with the young Saudi prince, reassuring him of America's security commitment to the kingdom. But Mattis also deftly urges him not to over-interpret his boss's tweet, and to exercise restraint, at least until hard evidence of an Iranian role is in hand.

Crown Prince Mohammed thanks Mattis for his call and concern but explains to him the strategic need and domestic political logic behind acting sooner rather than later. He leaves it to Washington to decide whether it wants to intervene, but his mind is set: Saudi Arabia has to respond rapidly in order to send a firm message to the Iranians. The alternative is political suicide at the hands of his vexed and alienated cousins in the al-Saud family, and the weakening of Saudi Arabia in relation to its arch-nemesis. "I cannot let this happen on my watch," the crown prince tells Mattis.

Later that day, a little before midnight Saudi local time, six Saudi F-15SA Strike Eagle aircraft—the most advanced variant of the American F-15 planes, specially designed for the Saudis—take off from Prince Sultan Air Base with a mission to bomb an Iranian missile plant in Shiraz in southwestern Iran. The force is split into two squadrons, with three fighters each. To the surprise of many in the Pentagon, the planes succeed in destroying their target and manage to return to base safely. Saudi pilots use standoff munitions to avoid Iranian air defenses and the technical challenges of air refueling. They also avoid a dogfight with the Iranian air force because Tehran, completely caught off guard, could not scramble interceptor aircraft in time.

A few minutes later, Tehran receives the news of the attack. Iranian citizens are starting to learn about the incident and sharing news with each other via social media. Street agitation quickly surfaces in major cities across Iran. Mohammad Ali Jafari, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), has the unenviable task of waking up Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in the middle of the night to brief him about what just transpired.

Khamenei vividly remembers Saddam's invasion on Sept. 22, 1980—and the chaos and panic it created. He specifically remembers the debate that raged in the government about how to respond to Iraq's aggression. In the end, Ruhollah Khomeini, the godfather of

the Iranian revolution, decided to fight back hard and go after Saddam. The rest is well documented by historians. Eight years and more than a million dead Iranians later, the Iran-Iraq War ended in virtual military stalemate, but with a political edge favoring Iraq, for Tehran had failed to depose Saddam.

This attack by Riyadh does not seem as threatening to Khamenei as Iraq's aggression in 1980, but Khamenei does not know if this is a one-off attack or the beginning of a major campaign. In any event, the fact that it was launched by an old nemesis who had helped bankroll Saddam's war effort hardens the resolve of Khamenei and his colleagues. He calls a late-night meeting with members of the Supreme National Security Council. There is some disagreement about how Iran should respond, but there is an overwhelming consensus on the need to retaliate.

Conventional escalation could lead to general war with the Saudis and likely with the U.S. and other Gulf partners, an outcome the Iranians want to avoid. A mere slap on the wrist, on the other hand, would signal Iranian weakness, undermine Iranian deterrence, and incur political costs at home. Would the Iranians de-escalate after a retaliation so as to use the incident as an opportunity to ramp up their proxy warfare and augment their gains in the region, or would hotheads calling for

more serious punishment of Saudi Arabia prevail? How does Khamenei achieve the right balance?

This hypothetical scenario is only one example among many of a potential war dynamic between Saudi Arabia and Iran. At every stage of this scenario, critical decisions by Iranian and Saudi leaders, who harbor deep animosities toward each other, have to be made quickly under conditions of tremendous domestic and international pressure. Such decisions are always attended by an avalanche of cognitive distortions owing to small group dynamics and other variables, yet it is those decisions that will make the difference between war and peace.³

Credible military historians are right to counsel against making predictions of as complex a phenomenon as war, even among fierce and longtime rivals who are more predisposed to combat one another than any other set of adversaries. There is, however, ample merit in analyzing how strategic competitors—in this case the Saudis and the Iranians—might approach military conflict, how they might perform in relation to one another, what the costs and fallout of such developments would be, and which side—if any—might come out on top under different circumstances.

3. Dina Badie, "Groupthink, Iraq, and the War on Terror: Explaining U.S. Policy Shift toward Iraq," *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2010), 6, 277-296.

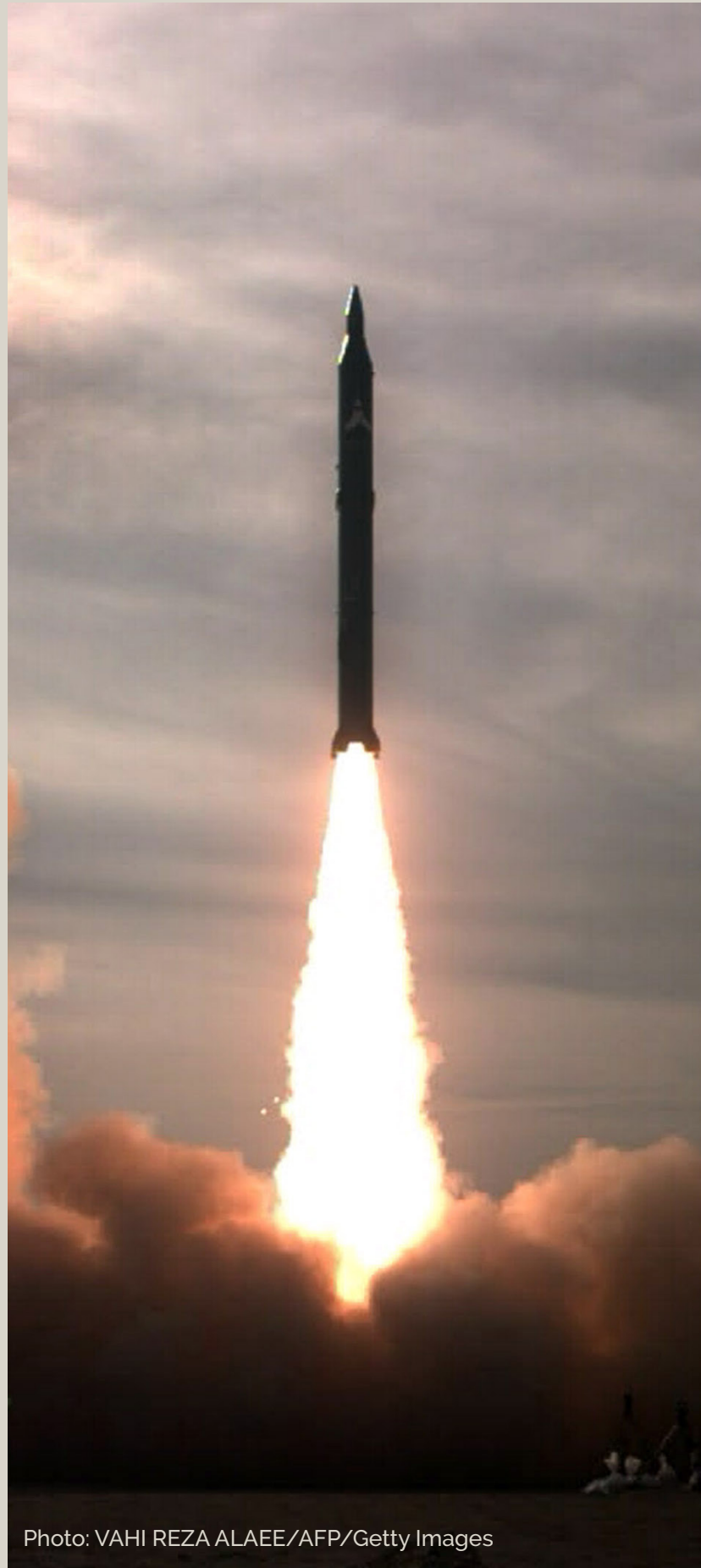


Photo: VAHI REZA ALAEE/AFP/Getty Images

This intellectual exercise, though hypothetical, is important for decision-makers both in the region and in Washington.

It might also offer guidance on what to do, and equally important, what not to do, in the event of sudden escalation.

RISK OF WAR IS REAL

The above scenario, or more generally, the risk of serious escalation in and around Yemen leading to some form of direct war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, has been seen by U.S. policymakers as farfetched. Most U.S. practitioners and analysts of the Middle East believe that the likelihood of direct military conflict between the Saudis and the Iranians is quite small.⁴

Indeed, their intense rivalry notwithstanding, Saudi Arabia and Iran do not have territorial disputes—a major reason why

nations go to war—and do not share a history of direct military conflict. Moreover, Iran does not feel existentially or directly threatened by Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Arabia competes with Iran across the region and challenges its Islamic regime's religious pretensions, Riyadh does not pose an independent and direct military threat to Iran, unlike Israel. It is the Saudis' close partnership with Washington that concerns the Iranians, not Saudi military power per se.

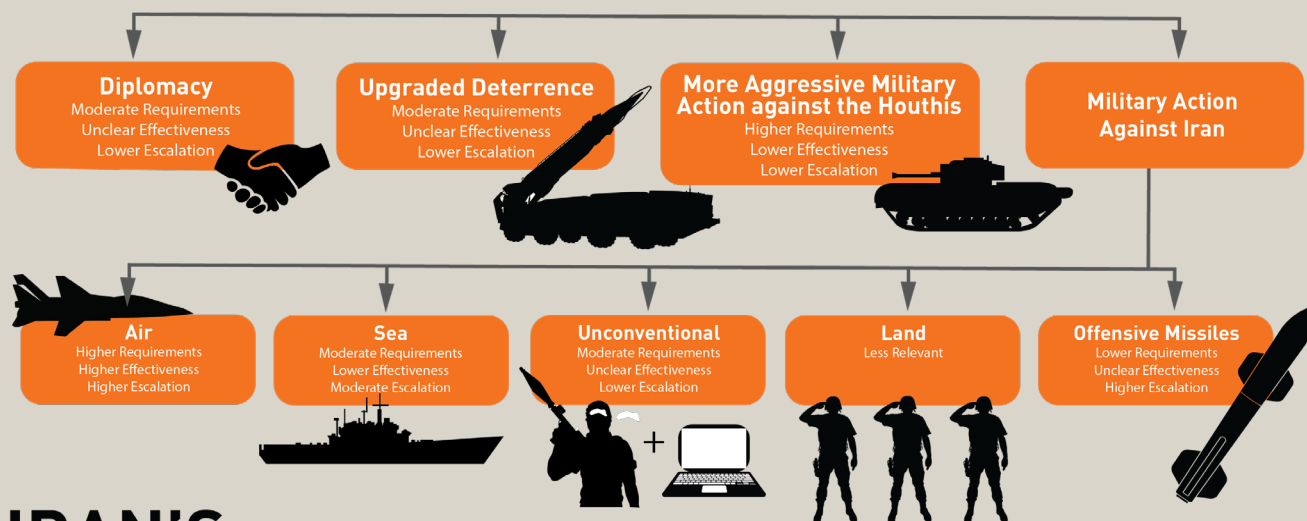
A direct war between Saudi Arabia and Iran is also very unlikely, the argument goes, because Saudi Arabia does not have the capabilities to engage in a military confrontation with Iran. Both the Saudis and the Iranians realize that they have more to lose than gain from a direct clash. That is why these two adversaries have preferred throughout their four-decade-long struggle to manage their rivalry by competing through proxies instead of battling head-to-head.

Last but not least, America's massive military presence in the Gulf will continue to help deter war between Saudi Arabia and

4. This argument is based on the author's discussions with 15 senior U.S. officials and analysts with Middle East responsibilities in the Department of Defense, Department of State, and National Security Council in January, February and March 2018. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, they all spoke on the condition of anonymity.

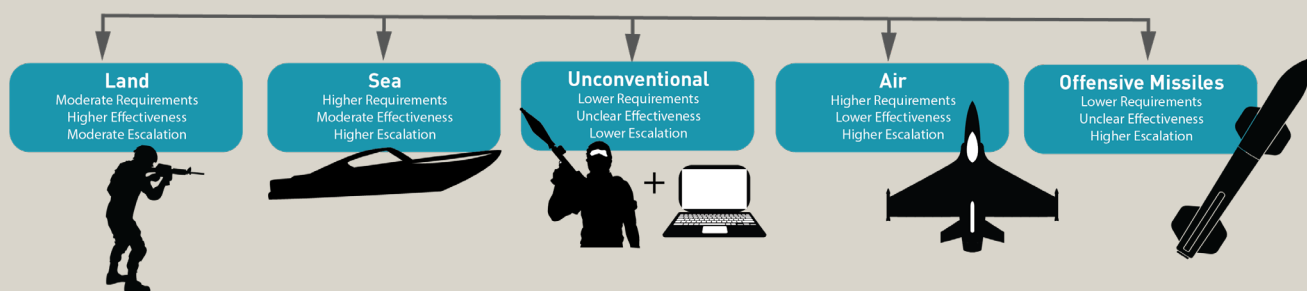
SAUDI ARABIA'S

RESPONSE OPTIONS TO DEADLY HOUTHI MISSILE STRIKE



IRAN'S

RESPONSE OPTIONS TO AN ATTACK BY SAUDI ARABIA



Source: Middle East Institute

generally known to be rational vis-a-vis Washington, to start dismissing U.S. deterrence, at least during times of peace.

However, this complacency about the reduced likelihood of war between Saudi Arabia and Iran might be mistaken for four reasons. First, it is based mainly on Iran's calculations and fails to appreciate Riyadh's evolving national security considerations, which might lead it under certain circumstances to initiate military action against Iran.

Second, it is insufficiently sensitive to leadership transitions in Riyadh and Washington. Crown Prince Mohammed sees Iran as a mortal adversary whose hand is everywhere in the region, and he is committed to countering Iran more than any past Saudi official.⁵ President Trump

5. It is unlikely that Crown Prince Mohammed will suddenly pick a reckless fight with Iran. However, in an effort to strengthen Saudi deterrence, he could pursue actions—beyond the Yemen campaign—that might put the Iranians on notice. For example, he could launch more aggressive and Iran-focused live-fire drills. He could leak Saudi government war games specifically designed to address the Iranian threat. He could emphasize more offensive weapons in future Saudi military acquisitions that suggest the possibility of a surprise attack. He could host members of the exiled Iranian opposition. He could deny Iranians access to the hajj, the annual Islamic

has unveiled an anti-Iran policy that is—at least theoretically—more aggressive than any of its predecessors, and he has assembled a cabinet whose core members have staunchly anti-Iran views and have repeatedly advocated tough measures against Iran, including regime change.

Third, it incorrectly judges Saudi Arabia's understanding of its own military capabilities. The assumption is that Saudi Arabia will restrain itself because it realizes it does not have the necessary means to engage in a direct war with Iran. But the history of domestic and interstate conflict is full of examples of actors going to war either knowing fully that they do not have the requisite military capabilities or believing that they do, when in reality they do not. The Saudi campaign against the Houthis is one example of this: though the Saudis knew they did not have the capabilities to engage in a ground war in Yemen, they launched a war anyway.

Fourth, it assesses war between Saudi Arabia and Iran as a result of deliberate and well-thought-out decisions by either side, when in reality it is more likely to erupt following accidents and escalatory actions. Riyadh and Tehran may not want war, but might stumble into one anyway.

In summary, while an Iran-Saudi Arabia war is still quite unlikely, it is now more likely than ever before.

SAUDI ARABIA'S POLITICAL- STRATEGIC GOALS

Should the Yemen-centric scenario described above materialize, Crown Prince Mohammed would have several response options. Each of them would have attendant benefits, costs and risks that he and his colleagues would have to weigh.

He could respond in Yemen and step up the campaign against the Houthis by launching a limited ground invasion with the aim of forcing the Houthis to concede. Or he could opt for closer diplomatic coordination with the U.S. and friendly European powers to, among other goals, increase economic sanctions against Iran. Alternatively, he could entertain covert approaches inside Iran including sabotage and cyber warfare, independently or in coordination with the U.S. Or he could just absorb the hit and significantly upgrade general Saudi deterrence to prevent another Houthi attack and signal firmness to Tehran. These options could be pursued separately or in conjunction.

But if the crown prince deems that these options have been exhausted or are ineffective, he might consider direct military action against Iran. If that is the case, it would be imperative for him and his advisors to do two things: identify the political-strategic goals of the use of force, and game out the second, third and

pilgrimage to Mecca, or severely restrict their entry. He could decide to clamp down harder on pro-Iran Shiites in Saudi Arabia's Eastern province and push Gulf allies with Shiite communities to do the same.

perhaps fourth moves in the likely event that the confrontation with Iran does not yield immediate concessions.

A minimalist objective would be to get Tehran to use its influence and presence in Yemen to discontinue the Houthis' lobbing of missiles across the Yemeni border into Saudi Arabia. A more ambitious objective would be to pressure Iran to stop arming the Houthis and get out of Yemen altogether. While many in Riyadh certainly harbor other wishes, such as driving Iran out of other parts of the Arab world or even seeking regime change in Tehran, such goals are well beyond Saudi Arabia's capacities and could not be part of a realistic goal-setting process.⁶

SAUDI ARABIA'S MILITARY STRATEGY

As Crown Prince Mohammed considers the most appropriate military strategy to achieve Saudi Arabia's political-strategic objective, he must accept the reality that his country cannot afford a long war with Iran for at least five reasons.⁷

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6. Rationality is often the first casualty of war. What objectives, military strategies, and tactics ought to be chosen by Iran and Saudi Arabia will, more often than not, be discarded. This is in part due to incompetence, but also because of domestic political pressures and bureaucratic considerations.
 7. The argument against Saudi Arabia's inability to wage warfare over a long period of time is worth considering, but is ultimately unconvincing. Revolution, which Saudi Arabia seems to be trying to enact from above, can endow the state with enhanced war-making capacities by creating

First, as wealthy as Saudi Arabia is, with an estimated GDP in 2016 of \$646 billion compared to Iran's \$412 billion, it will need every penny to finance Saudi Vision 2030. The costs of the Yemen war for Saudi Arabia have already been significant,⁸ so the last thing the kingdom needs is additional economic pressure from a long war with Iran. It is not that Iran does not care about the costs of war to its own economy—it does now more than ever in light of recent anti-government demonstrations calling for better economic management—but its eight-year war with Iraq showed that it can tolerate serious economic pain for a long period of time.

Second, open-ended wars can have politically destabilizing effects on governments. It is true that war oftentimes helps new leaders consolidate power

modern bureaucracies, greater societal cohesion and mobilization, and stronger economies. The revolutions in France, Russia and China, and more recently in Mexico, Cuba, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Vietnam and Iran, attest to some aspects of this post-revolutionary theory. However, it would be a stretch to make inferences regarding Saudi Arabia's post-revolutionary military trajectory based on these historical cases for at least three reasons. First, no two cases are the same. What worked in France in the 18th century or in Bolivia in the 20th, for example, might not work in Saudi Arabia in the 21st. Second, Saudi Arabia's revolution is still in its nascent stages and has a long way to go to have the positive effects described above. Third, what Saudi Arabia is experiencing is not a comprehensive social revolution, but rather a correctionist course from the top that will preserve, rightly or wrongly, many elements of the ancien regime.

8. Reuters estimates that Saudi Arabia has been spending \$175 million per month since early 2015. This means that costs so far could exceed \$6.8 billion. Andrew Torchia, "Cost no barrier to Saudi Arabia's Yemen intervention," Reuters, March 31, 2015.



Photo: ABDULLAH AL-QADRY/AFP/Getty Images

by eliminating political opposition and pushing citizens to rally around the flag; this happened with Iran's new revolutionary leaders at the onset of the Iran-Iraq War. But in the case of Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy, these advantages are almost irrelevant. The crown prince has already cemented his grip on power and he faces no meaningful domestic opposition to his rule. Should he engage in a long war with Iran, in addition to his war in Yemen, the pressures of national leadership and war management will be great for a young leader who already has much on his plate. It is one thing to rule during times of peace, but another altogether during times of war—in this case, two wars.

Third, the longer the war lasts, the more sectarian the tone is likely to get, both in Riyadh and Tehran. That is because, if the Iran-Iraq War is any indication, religious discourse by the Saudi and Iranian leaderships would most probably be used to sustain popular support for the war. That would be especially damaging for Crown Prince Mohammed, who is trying to reign in the influence of the Saudi clergy. Should he seek their help to maintain political stability and public support for the war, or should they by default become more influential as a result of a perceived holy war, the promotion of religious tolerance and societal openness that the crown prince has worked so hard for would quickly vanish. And so would the promises he made to the majority of

Saudi youth, which could ruin his historic moment and weaken his domestic standing.

Fourth, a long war would inevitably exhaust the Saudi armed forces and play to some of the strengths and advantages of the Iranians, which include manpower, geography, strategic depth, war experience, and greater cost-tolerance. In the war with Iraq, each year about half a million Iranian males reached the conscription age of 18. The Iraqis were not even close to fielding such numbers. The Saudis would be even farther. None of this means that Riyadh cannot sustain a long war, but the fact that modern Saudi Arabia—beyond the initial unification battles of the 1920s and the very brief al-

Khafji battle in Saudi Arabia during Desert Storm—has not been involved in a major interstate war leaves a big question mark. While this does not suggest that Iran could once again sustain mass casualties as it did in its war with Iraq, it does put Tehran at an advantage.

Fifth, a long war would provide the Iranians with greater operational flexibility and specifically the opportunity to plan for comprehensive asymmetric warfare directed at the Saudis. The IRGC has strong asymmetric warfare capabilities and is now in a much better position to wage such warfare given its expanded physical presence in the region. Tehran would also have more time to consider various land-attack options either directly



Photo: ATTA KENARE/AFP/Getty Images

or through proxies deployed in countries that border the kingdom, including Yemen's Houthis in the south, Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units in the north, and Bahraini militants in the east.

Because Iran has several general advantages over Saudi Arabia at war, Riyadh has to put a very high premium on military strategy and demonstrate strategic excellence to have a better chance of success, whether in a short- or long-term conflict. The Wehrmacht, for example, was a superb military machine, endowed with tactical effectiveness that was the envy of its enemies, but the Allies' militaries won the war in large part because they received better advice from their leaderships on strategy and operations.

Saudi Arabia's best chance of achieving its political-strategic objective, as stated above, while trying to avoid a broader, open-ended war, is through a military strategy that focuses on speed, precision, and directed firepower, most of which happen to be assets of the Saudi military. This strategy can be termed "shock and awe lite."

The "shock" effect would be to demonstrate Riyadh's credibility and willingness to break with past defensive/passive strategies. Like Egypt's limited-war strategy against Israel in 1973, Saudi Arabia's military strategy against Iran would be based on an explicit acknowledgement of the limits of its capacity to engage in a general war with Tehran.

The "lite" aspect would be choosing targets that are significant enough to send a strong message to and maybe elicit a limited response from Tehran, but not too strategic enough to trigger a massive escalation and downward spiral into war.⁹

The Saudi use of force would have to be concomitant with or immediately followed by deft Saudi diplomacy that would clearly communicate to Tehran a willingness to negotiate rather than engage in open-ended warfare, and that would enunciate Riyadh's political objectives. Saudi military strategy would essentially seek to escalate to de-escalate.¹⁰

Of course, that all sounds great on paper. In reality, even limited escalation carries multiple risks and is not guaranteed to succeed. If violence begets violence, then escalation, more often than not, also begets escalation. The Saudis could send every signal to the Iranians that they are disinterested in general war, but it might just not be enough because of the distrust between the two parties. That is what happened with Iraq in its war with Iran:

9. This diverges from the American doctrine of shock and awe, which typically seeks to apply overwhelming force as quickly as possible to an adversary in order to disarm or incapacitate him. Desert Storm is one example.

10. There is a large body of scholarship and analysis on the topic of conventional and unconventional escalation, both during and after the Cold War. For a good discussion of escalation in more modern times, see Forrest E. Morgan et al, Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the Twenty-First Century, RAND, 2008. For a recent treatment of the concept of "escalate to de-escalate," see Olga Oliker and Andrey Baklistkiy, "The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian De-Escalation: A Dangerous Solution to a Nonexistent Problem," War on the Rocks, February 20, 2018.

Iraq voluntarily halted its advance within a week and announced its willingness to negotiate an agreement precisely to avoid general war, even though it could have gone deeper into Iranian territory. Iraq's invasion was limited in scope and its minimalist intentions were telegraphed to Iran, and yet Iran lashed out at Iraq and had no interest in entertaining moderation.

In a war scenario in which the precipitating factor is Yemen, the Iranians could similarly refuse to concede, or in typical Iranian fashion, play the role of victim and claim that they have no Yemeni chips to give up in the first place.

SAUDI ARABIA'S TACTICS AND CAPABILITIES

If a "litter" version of shock and awe is probably the best way to go for Saudi Arabia, then it comes down to how Riyadh could execute such a military strategy in a way that minimizes risk and maximizes the chances of success.

Geography and the operational requirements of the above military strategy, along with the clear qualitative edge of the Saudi air force, all suggest that Saudi striker aircraft would be the military instrument of choice. The Saudi navy is inexperienced and technically incapable of delivering a precise, long-range blow against specific targets inside Iran. The Saudi army has no relevant offensive capabilities in this geographical

context, although it would take up a defensive role should Iran entertain land warfare directly or through proxies. And Riyadh's relatively small Chinese-supplied missile force serves the purpose of general deterrence, more than anything else, given its poor accuracy. Saudi Arabia could try to respond covertly inside Iran, but there are limits to this option. Beyond allegedly funding mosques in Iranian provinces with Arab inhabitants like Khuzestan, Riyadh has not developed a clandestine intelligence infrastructure or network within Iran that could be relied on in the event of a confrontation with Iran.

So, if this were to be executed from the air, targeting—and the right kind of targeting—becomes absolutely crucial. Would Saudi Arabia bomb a value target, i.e., civilian, industrial or economic infrastructure, or a force target, i.e., a military asset? Targeting must be consistent with Saudi Arabia's political-strategic objectives and military strategy—and those suggest a counterforce operation.

A countervalue operation is, on the ladder of escalation, near the top, which is not where Saudi Arabia wants to be. Rather, Saudi Arabia should be focused on meeting its political objectives: forcing a rapid negotiation with Iran on Yemen, while avoiding setting off alarm bells in Tehran. Tehran might prepare for general war anyway, regardless of the nature of the Saudi strike, but the chances of this happening are much higher if Riyadh attacks an oil refinery, a port or a population center. If Riyadh does go after

strategic Iranian infrastructure, could it afford to absorb a symmetric blow by Iran against its own vulnerable oil facilities or power grid?

This was one of Saddam's many critical mistakes in his war against Iran. By invading Iran—which is significantly escalatory, regardless of the fact that it was a limited invasion—he made it impossible for Khomeini to agree to negotiate, which went against Saddam's actual political objectives. The Iraqi dictator had dreams of regional hegemony, but his campaign against Iran had a narrower objective: not to defeat or occupy Iran, but rather to stop its attempts to topple the Ba'athist regime, and ideally, to force Iran to make sovereignty concessions on the strategic Shatt al-Arab waterway and a relatively small portion of Khuzestan. Saddam ended up provoking the Iranians to the point of no return and steering them to general war, which could have led to his defeat had Iraq not been rescued by the arms of Western powers and the funds of other Gulf states.

The Saudis should also recall that Saddam's bombing of value targets in Iran later in the war did not achieve its desired effects. He went after Kharg Island's refineries and pipelines. He attacked export zones, electricity grids, cities and oil shipping facilities. But the Iranian leadership did not budge, despite the fact that the intense bombardment of 1988 killed thousands and forced nearly a million Iranians to flee their capital. On the contrary, with every Iraqi bomb dropped,

Tehran became more determined to keep fighting. There is no reason why Iran would not do the same with Saudi Arabia.

By going after a military target, Saudi Arabia would be signaling to Iran its displeasure with specific aspects of its policies but also its interest in controlling escalation. And the more specific the target, the clearer the message. There are numerous military targets the Saudis might go after, whether on land or at sea. But given that it is the Houthis' missiles that Riyadh is most worried about in Yemen, the Saudi air force might target one or several Iranian ballistic missile bases, production facilities, or mobile launchers to get their point across as distinctly as possible. The symbolism of such a strike would not be lost on the leadership in Tehran.

It certainly will not be easy for Riyadh to balance between avoiding general war with Iran and achieving the wanted effects of an airstrike. Obviously, much will depend on Tehran's perception and reaction. Too strong a Saudi attack risks uncontrollable escalation. Too weak risks failure and the tainting of Saudi credibility in the regional power struggle with Iran.

The Saudi air campaign against the Houthis provides clues about Saudi capability, but these clues are imperfect at best. First of all, one should be careful about making comparisons between a sustained air campaign against the Houthis with hundreds of sorties, which is what Riyadh has been waging, and one or two air strikes against Iran, unless the

war drags. Saudi Arabia is continuously hunting for Scuds in Yemen to destroy. In Iran, it would have to engage its one or two military targets and fly back home safely.

On the surface, the air war in Yemen does not inspire much confidence, given the ongoing military stalemate and the extensive devastation and loss of life caused by the aerial bombing—more than 2,000 civilian deaths, according to U.N. investigators.¹¹ But that does not mean that the Saudi air force's military performance has been abysmal. Most, but certainly not all, of the Houthis' tactical and ballistic missiles have been destroyed. Saudi pilots have also been able to hit Houthi leadership locations, garrisons, weapons depots, lines of communication, seaports and airfields. Again, the human cost for the Yemeni people has been enormous, mostly because of inaccurate targeting by the Saudi air force and partly because of Houthi tactics of mingling with the civilian population.

The Saudi air force would have to face a much more challenging military environment in any sorties into Iran. Depending on the military target the Saudis choose and its location, obstacles could come in the form of formidable stationary and mobile air defenses that rely on both interceptor aircraft—American F-14s, F-4s, and F-5s, Russian Mig-29s, and

French Mirage F1s—and a dense network of surface-to-air missiles including the Russian S-300 system.

However, Iran's decades-old, U.S.-supplied platforms, vintage Soviet-era aircraft, and more recently procured Chinese-manufactured jets are no match against the much more modern Saudi air force,¹² although they certainly could frustrate Saudi operations through ambush tactics, among others. During the Iran-Iraq War, the Iranian air force responded quickly to initial Iraqi airstrikes and did reasonably well in air-to-air combat, but that is partly because the Iraqi air force made a number of rookie mistakes including miscalculating the fuel requirements for a return from strikes deep in Iran. Today's Saudi air force is also far more capable than yesterday's Iraqi air force, and would certainly pose a more formidable challenge for the Iranians, whose fleet has not received significant upgrades since the 1980s.

Saudi Arabia would most probably resort to its American F-15 Eagle or Eurofighter Typhoon planes to conduct its airstrike. Both fighters, which are equipped with precision-guided munitions, could fulfill the operational requirements of the mission, given their superior air-to-surface and air-to-air capabilities. There are also several things the Saudis could do to

11. Angus McDowall, Phil Stewart, and David Rohde, "Yemen's guerilla war tests military ambitions of big-spending Saudis," Reuters, April 19, 2016.

12. The imbalance in aerial capabilities in favor of the Saudis could be reduced after 2020, when the international trade restrictions under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action ease. Iran then would be able to upgrade its fleet and possibly purchase Su-30 fighters from Russia and J-10 multirole fighters from China.

make things easier for themselves. First, they can pick a military target that is more vulnerable and not too deep inside Iranian territory. A closer target to Saudi Arabia and the waters of the Gulf could eliminate the need for air refueling, although this would come with the disadvantage of the planes carrying fewer/lighter bombs. Second, the Saudi pilots could reduce their operational risks by attacking with standoff munitions fired from outside Iranian airspace, which allows the planes to avoid air defenses, although it is unclear if those munitions would have the necessary range to hit targets inside Iran.

A surgical strike of the kind described above, even if the Saudis reduce its operational complexity, would still require skill, if not brilliance, in execution. It also would require impeccable military intelligence. The Saudis have never done

this before in Iran. There is no question that with U.S. support, including planning, logistics, and intelligence, the Saudis are much better positioned to succeed. But those chances do not go down to zero if Washington, for whatever reason, does not initially intervene or offer help. The Saudi air force is by far the most competent service in the Saudi military—arguably the fourth most capable in the region after those of Israel, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. It has developed its own set of targets in Iran since the Iran-Iraq War, and could upgrade its coordinates through commercial geospatial tools and technologies. In terms of planning, this type of operation would not be something completely out of the blue for Saudi pilots. In fact, it is the one they have studied and prepared for the most.



Photo: ATTA KENARE/AFP/Getty Images

IRAN'S POLITICAL-STRATEGIC GOALS

Similar to Saudi Arabia's calculus, Iran would have to decide before racing to retaliation and possibly escalation what the use of force could help it accomplish strategically. Following an attack, the impulse to shoot first and ask questions later would be immense, but it is also possible that leaders in Tehran might hold fire until strategic goals are better identified.¹³

The Iranians could also be understandably uncertain about Saudi Arabia's ultimate intentions, and whether these were coordinated with Washington. Iran's leaders often entertain conspiracy theories about the U.S., which they call "the Great Satan." Such doubts and fears about Riyadh's intentions could lead Iran to extremes.

If Iran's decision-makers indeed manage not to rush to immediate escalation but rather consider the strategic purpose of retaliatory military force, they might converge on three political-strategic objectives.

First, restoring deterrence to preserve national security, and specifically, to prevent another Saudi attack. Deterrence

is the sine qua non of Iran's national defense strategy. Any cracks in Iran's deterrence system, which it has worked so hard to erect, would make the country more vulnerable in the eyes of its leaders. Such restoration of deterrence might also be seen by Tehran as vital for national cohesion and domestic political stability.

Second, improving Iran's geostrategic position in the Middle East. The Iranians could decide to use the Saudi attack as an excuse to further pursue their regional interests. Iran has aspirations in the region that go well beyond a direct fight with the Saudis. A military response against Saudi Arabia is likely to be viewed by the Iranians from a broader prism. Iran would be looking at the Middle Eastern chessboard and trying to figure out how its own pieces could prosper or decline as a result of a direct confrontation with Saudi Arabia.¹⁴

Third, weakening Saudi Arabia. Although some leaders in Tehran might not be keen on a direct military conflict with Saudi Arabia, there is no doubt that the kingdom is a competitor that stands in the way of many of Iran's designs in the Middle East. That Saudi Arabia has also embarked on a major reform course could also propel it into further strategic significance. In a zero-sum game, if the Iranians could sabotage Riyadh's—and specifically Crown Prince Mohammed's—Saudi Vision 2030, or at least make it a little bit more difficult for the Saudi leadership to pursue, it would be a net gain for Tehran.

13. That said, the Iranians are perfectly capable of totally ignoring the lessons of their war with Iraq and they could easily formulate war aims vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia that are neither achievable nor commensurate with their military capabilities. Religious-based sensitivities toward Saudi Arabia among the more hard-line Revolutionary Guards and clergymen could throw strategic prudence out the window.

14. International Crisis Group, "[Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East](#)," Middle East Report No. 184, April 13, 2018.

Of course, neither Iran nor the world would benefit from the collapse of the Saudi ruling family because the alternative is most likely unbridled Sunni extremism. But Iran would certainly be comfortable with a Saudi Arabia that cannot meet its huge potential and is sufficiently and permanently weak.

IRAN'S MILITARY STRATEGY

A military strategy of low-level, asymmetric attrition would best serve the aforementioned political-strategic objectives. A low-level response would avoid giving the U.S. or other Western powers reasons to intervene on the side of Saudi Arabia, while an asymmetric response reflects Iran's relative weakness conventionally and its adeptness at waging unconventional warfare. Attrition would entail that Iran would not seek to destroy or defeat Saudi Arabia's military forces but rather to break the resolve of and inflict high costs on the Saudis.

Such a military strategy would allow Tehran to maintain the narrative of being the victim and Saudi Arabia the aggressor. Winning in the international court of public opinion might offer little, but at a time of increasing international concerns over Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, it would be strategically advantageous to increase Saudi Arabia's reputational costs. Iran might recall that its fortunes in its war with Iraq started to decline the moment it switched from defender to invader on

July 12, 1982, after rejecting a U.N. Security Council resolution calling for a cease-fire and a withdrawal of the warring forces to the international border.¹⁵

Iran's military strategy would seek to build up pressure against Saudi Arabia in an attempt to cause economic deterioration and political turmoil in Riyadh. There would be no need for grand offensives, either by air, land or sea. Instead, the Iranians would opt for classic Maoist guerilla warfare across the region and count on the Saudis to struggle in adapting to the long-term imposition of costs. Attrition, which puts limited but constant pressure on the opponent's economy and military forces, is an enemy of the Saudis.

IRAN'S TACTICS AND CAPABILITIES

Iran would have several tactical options to choose from that could satisfy its political-strategic objectives and meet the requirements of its military strategy. Once again, the trick would be to respond credibly while avoiding uncontrollable escalation that would most likely lead to general war and to U.S. and Western intervention. The Iranians could strike in the air, at sea, on the ground, or in cyberspace. Each option has its risks, pros, and cons.

15. It is true that throughout the war, there was very little international sympathy for Iran—except for Syria, Libya and maybe North Korea, who cheered for and aided Tehran—but after 1982, whatever small amount that had existed quickly vanished.



Photo: Mohsen Shandiz/Corbis via Getty Images

If Tehran employs its air force to strike targets inside Saudi Arabia, in a tit-for-tat fashion, the operational challenges would be significant. Iran's air force is old, but that does not make it impotent. In fact, Iran's pilots outperformed their better-equipped Iraqi counterparts through most of the Iran-Iraq War and came close to establishing air superiority over the border. It was not until the Iraqis started receiving French Mirages and advanced Soviet jets in the later stages of the war that the balance started to tilt slightly in favor of the Iraqi air force.

But before we crown the Iranian pilots as masters of the skies, the truth is that they did not engage, and neither did the Iraqis, in much air-to-air combat. The air battles in the Iran-Iraq War were primarily an exercise of countervalue strikes by each air force.

There are three main operational problems with Iran using air power against Saudi Arabia in this context. First, the Iranian air force does not have the capabilities to attack military targets in Saudi Arabia with power and precision. Thus, it would most likely have to go for countervalue strikes, which are easier to conduct. However, those could be counterproductive because they would instantly raise the level of escalation. It is highly unlikely that Washington would watch Iran bomb Saudi oil facilities or power grids and do nothing about it. It is even more unlikely that the Saudis would not respond in kind after such attacks and go after Iran's economic-strategic targets.

Second, the Saudi air force is a different, and far more dangerous, kettle of fish than the Iraqi air force. Prior to their initial airstrike, the Saudis would no doubt task



their interceptor aircraft to protect the Saudi skies should Iran decide to retaliate by air. This mission would be aided by Saudi Arabia's newly improved E-3A Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft, whose advanced radars provide real situational awareness and help detect enemy jets well before they reach Saudi airspace.

While it is wrong to predict the outcome of a dogfight between the Iranians and the Saudis purely on the basis of capabilities—which clearly favor the Saudis—it is fair to say that the Iranians would be operating with serious technical handicaps. But from the very limited past engagements between the Saudi and Iranian air forces during the Iran-Iraq War, we can assess that the Saudis did better. In May 1984, after seeing its ships get bombed by Iranian, American-

made F-4 jets, the Saudis responded by establishing a no-fly zone in the northern Gulf called the Fahd Line. Tehran ignored the Saudi threat and a couple of weeks later an American AWACS detected two Iranian jets crossing the line. Saudi pilots engaged and destroyed one of the enemy's planes. Iran responded by scrambling dozens of aircraft but quickly backed down, apparently fearing a losing dogfight with a more powerful Saudi air force backed by American jets. From then on, the Iranians never again crossed the Fahd Line. During the 1991 Gulf War, the Saudis did not engage in much air-to-air combat with the Iraqis either—their focus was air defense patrol—but when they did, they came out on top partly because of better performance but also because of amateurish flying by Iraq's pilots.

Third, no Iranian jet in the country's air force is equipped with standoff munitions, which means that the planes would have to fly over Saudi airspace to fire at their targets. This also means that they would have to evade some considerable Saudi air defenses. It is not impossible, but it is something the Iranians have never executed before. In the Iran-Iraq War, for example, Iraq's air defenses were relatively easy to evade.

Iran's naval response option is slightly better than the air force option, but it also presents some serious problems. Despite its technical limitations and command divisions—there is the regular navy and then the elite navy belonging to the IRGC; they do not trust each other and rarely coordinate—Iran's navy is larger and more varied than Saudi Arabia's and could inflict considerable damage on the Saudi navy and win in a head-to-head contest.

Iran's naval force is experienced and tactically proficient, and has learned quite a bit from the “tanker war” during the Iran-Iraq War and in more recent years from roaming the waters of the Gulf and harassing adversaries.¹⁶ It has gotten dangerously close to provoking the American naval forces several times. Iran fought much better than Iraq at sea, displaying such unequivocal naval superiority that the only way the Iraqis could credibly fight back was by using their planes against Iranian vessels. Iran made the most of its navy during the Iran-

Iraq War, and one deadly weapon that it continues to possess made its adversaries particularly nervous: the Chinese-made, Silkworm anti-ship missile.

While the Iranian navy might have significant advantages over the Saudi navy, it is no match for the maritime juggernaut that is the U.S. Fifth Fleet, along with Britain's naval assets, all stationed in Bahrain. Should Iran choose to respond to Saudi Arabia's airstrike by attacking at sea, it would have to think long and hard about how to do that without engaging or provoking superior U.S. and British naval forces.

Based on history, such engagement would not bode well for the Iranians. In September 1987, the Iranians planned to launch a massive naval assault against the Saudi fleet, but aborted the mission at the last minute either due to bad weather or for other reasons still not entirely clear. When they tried to do so again shortly after, the Americans and the Saudis were ready for it. U.S. naval forces crushed Operation Hazz—the IRGC's boldest and largest naval operation in the Iran-Iraq War. Large naval attacks by Iran ceased after that massive defeat.

Next is the option of using Iran's missile arsenal, the biggest in the Middle East. Iran could fire one or more ballistic missiles at Saudi Arabia in response to Riyadh's airstrike, but such missiles might not be precise enough to engage specific military targets. Even though Iran has been aggressively developing its missiles in recent years and focusing

16. Ronald O'Rourke, “The Tanker War,” Proceedings Magazine, May 1988, Vol. 5, No. 1, p 1,023. U.S. Naval Institute.

more on enhanced precision rather than range,¹⁷ it is not clear that it has reached a point where it could conduct surgical attacks. And if the missiles do land in Saudi population centers, deliberately or accidentally, Tehran can expect Riyadh to go to extremes, triggering general war and U.S. intervention.

But that does not mean that Iran would be less likely to use its missile arsenal. It could opt for something in the middle, neither precise nor totally indiscriminate, to avoid massive escalation. It comes back to the issue of targeting, and the Iranians would have to choose their Saudi targets carefully: away from population centers, but with sufficient strategic value.

Iran could also resort to ground tactics either directly or by proxy, or both. The idea would be to mount limited but regular cross-border operations against Saudi Arabia from the north where the Iraqi PMU could be involved, and from the south where the Yemeni Houthis could increase the scope, tempo and lethality of their attacks and incursions.

The IRGC has come a long way since its battle days with Iraq in the 1980s, displaying much better tactical effectiveness recently against Sunni extremists and rebels in Iraq and Syria. But that certainly does not make them a tactical force to be reckoned with and there is no evidence that all the issues they had in the past—including failure to master the technique of maintaining

resupplies of men and arms and to coordinate plans and operations with the regular army—have been corrected. Iran's leaders have also been less than transparent with their own people about their losses in Iraqi and Syrian campaigns, but we do know that they have suffered hundreds of casualties, and Hezbollah, their most powerful and reliable ally, itself has lost more men in Syria than in its entire 36-year struggle with Israel.

Furthermore, the capabilities of the Saudi armed forces, including those of the Saudi National Guard, are obviously greater than those of ISIS or the Free Syrian Army. They would pose a more potent challenge to the Iranians and their proxies. Of course, the Iranians or their proxies could seek to exhaust Saudi troops and harass border towns from both the southern and northern borders of the kingdom rather than overrun and secure Saudi territory, as the Iraqis tried to do in the battle of al-Khafji in January 1991.¹⁸

This form of military harassment is achievable and probably sustainable from the Iranian point of view. However, any attempts to launch a full-scale invasion of Saudi Arabia, even if limited, would be a completely different matter. The moment the Iranians or their proxies turn from saboteurs to invaders is when the Saudis gain, at least theoretically, an advantage, in no small part because of the favorable geography of the open desert.

17. Bilal Y. Saab and Michael Elleman, "Precision Fire: A Strategic Assessment of Iran's Conventional Missile Program," Atlantic Council, September 14, 2016.

18. Paul W. Westermeyer, "U.S. Marines in Battle: al-Khafji," p. 28, January-February 1991.

The Saudi air force, relying not only on high-performance aircraft but also on attack helicopters and other assets, would have a field day shooting at vulnerable enemy formations in the open desert terrain. The Saudis are also considering purchasing American-made light-attack aircraft equipped with targeting sensor packages and precision-guided munitions, which would be an ideal weapons-system for countering in-country insurgencies and limited ground operations. If there is anything that was learned from the Iran-Iraq War, it is that the belligerents were much better at defending than taking territory. This lesson would be even more pronounced in the Saudi case.¹⁹

Finally, Iran could resort to large-scale terrorism and cyberattacks against Saudi Arabia's oil and economic facilities, perhaps as a supplement to other military tactics. Tehran could step up its efforts to create, or re-create, a Saudi Hezbollah, and further stir the sectarian pot in Saudi Arabia's Eastern province.²⁰ In its war with

19. Moving many men through Iraq would embarrass Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi and likely cause a diplomatic crisis with Baghdad, especially at a time when the Iraqi and Saudi leaderships are exploring opportunities to strengthen bilateral relations. Doing this would therefore require prudence and secrecy on the part of the Iranians. But the larger the force the Iranians would mobilize, the harder it would be to hide it. Small size is not necessarily a problem, however, because in this operational context of hit-and-run and insurgency, quality may be more important than quantity.

20. It should be noted here though that the Iranian fifth column in the Eastern province is a myth. While there are some in that region who have sympathies for Iran, the allegation that they form a large group and an organized threat is unproven. The more serious security threat to the kingdom has always

Iraq, Iran waged terrorism against not only the Iraqis but also the Kuwaitis, Bahrainis, and others, sometimes succeeding, other times failing. Terrorism and cyberwarfare are perhaps better tactics because they are less escalatory compared to other kinetic tools, and they allow Iran to maintain plausible deniability.

DILEMMAS OF RIYADH, TEHRAN, AND WASHINGTON

There are no winners or easy decisions in a military conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. There is also no plausible quick end to such a war, unless the U.S. immediately intervenes.

A military confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran does not necessarily have to be viewed as an imminent storm hovering over the Middle East, threatening to upend its order at a moment's notice. But it must not be treated cavalierly either. It should command respect and inspire concern because it could cause tremendous harm to an already volatile Middle East and possibly to the global economy.

come from Sunni fanatics and entities like al-Qaeda, who actually did fight the Saudi authorities viciously in 2004–06, not from Saudi Shiites. More recently, ISIS conducted terrorist acts in Saudi Arabia too, but nothing of the scope and lethality of al-Qaeda's insurgency in the past. Shiite resentment in Saudi Arabia is real and based on unequal opportunity and treatment by Riyadh, but it is not synonymous with mass allegiance to Iran.

Because these two regional heavyweights have both state and non-state allies and can take advantage of the loyalties of a large number of Sunnis and Shiites in the region and around the world, a military confrontation between them could easily spread and inflame sectarian tensions across the Arab world and possibly parts of Africa, the South Caucasus and South Asia. Once those emotions flare up and lead to communal fighting, putting that genie back in the bottle will be an enormous challenge.

On the surface, Iran seems to have an upper hand in a direct military confrontation with Saudi Arabia. This has less to do with Iran's military capabilities, which are inferior

conventionally, and more with a set of attributes that include combat experience, geography, manpower, strategic depth and greater cost tolerance. In addition, with an ideology of constant struggle and glorification of martyrdom, and with an IRGC looking for any excuse to fight perceived "oppressors," the Iranian regime seems built for war.

That said, none of this gives Iran any decisive advantages in a contest with Saudi Arabia. Iran would still have to consider serious trade-offs, operate with various constraints, and deal with a number of real challenges at every step of its decision-making process. Balancing between immediate conventional retaliation against Saudi Arabia and uncontrollable escalation that might lead to U.S. intervention would be absolutely

crucial. But it also would be especially difficult. It is one thing for Iran to fight Saudi Arabia, but the moment the U.S. steps in, it would be an entirely different ball game.

Then there is Iran's home front. It is true that Iran survived eight years of war with Iraq almost alone, but that does not guarantee it could do the same today. Then, Iran's leaders were able to mobilize society against a clear and present danger in Saddam, who invaded the country. Escalated conflict with Saudi Arabia might be a more difficult proposition to sell to the Iranian people, especially at a time of bad economic conditions and recurring popular protests against the regime.

Iran would also have to weigh the ramifications of war with Saudi Arabia on its broader interests and agenda in the region. Iran sacrificed a lot to carve itself a sphere of influence in the region that stretches from Beirut to Baghdad, with a foothold in Yemen. Iran's main interest is the consolidation of those gains. An escalated conflict with the Saudis might risk serious Iranian overreach, militarily, politically and economically.

Saudi Arabia would have to struggle with some tough choices of its own as well. At a time when Crown Prince Mohammed is trying to project an image of himself as a responsible and reformist Saudi leader, initiating war with Iran would very much run counter to that goal. A military conflict with Iran would also be a major distraction from his top priority of domestic modernization and

pose a serious challenge to the success of Saudi Vision 2030, on which the crown prince's credibility rests.

Furthermore, while it is easy to start a war with Iran, it is anything but to finish it—an important reason why Washington has been reluctant to pursue that option throughout its tense relationship with Iran. Crown Prince Mohammed would have to think hard about the capabilities of the Saudi military and the resilience of Saudi society before embarking on such a risky course. The Saudi military is as impressive as it gets on paper, but it is still a work in progress. It has certainly come a long way since the days of Desert Storm, but its inexperience in combat brings into question its potential performance and capabilities in a war with as resourceful an enemy as Iran.²¹

On the other hand, could the crown prince afford to tolerate more and deadlier Houthi attacks against Saudi Arabia and not address the source of these attacks, which lies in Tehran? Crown Prince Mohammed has to weigh the costs of accepting the status quo and of using force against Iran, with all its risks and likely consequences. It will not be an easy decision for a young leader who lacks experience, has a loaded domestic agenda, and is at war in Yemen.

21. Inexperience, however, does not equal ineffectiveness. The truth is that we do not know how Saudi Arabia would perform. There are many other variables that affect military effectiveness that were not discussed in this paper, including national cohesion, patriotism, bravery, morale and others. It is impossible to tell how high or low the Saudis would score on these indices.

The U.S. and its allies have every interest in averting a military conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. But Washington would also have some difficult decisions to make, and possibly some juggling to do. It is obvious that in any war dynamic between Iran and Saudi Arabia, U.S. military intervention or support would be the ultimate exogenous factor for both Riyadh and Tehran.²²

Every American president since Franklin Roosevelt has committed to ensuring the safety and security of Saudi Arabia.²³ Even Barack Obama, who lacked any affinity with the Saudis, reaffirmed “the policy of the United States to use all elements of our power to secure our core interests in the Gulf region, and to deter and confront external aggression against our allies and our partners.”²⁴ When Iraq invaded Kuwait and threatened Saudi Arabia in 1991, Washington assembled the most powerful

22. During the Iran-Iraq War, the superpowers largely stayed out until the tanker war because neither the U.S. nor the Soviet Union cared for Iran or Iraq. In fact, Washington's policy was to see the belligerents bleed each other to death. Unlike Iraq, Iran was internationally isolated throughout the conflict. But would Russia intervene on the side of Iran should war with Saudi Arabia and the U.S. take place? An answer is beyond the scope of this paper, but Moscow might have different thoughts today for two reasons: First, its geostrategic position in the Middle East is much stronger than what it was during the Cold War. Second, there is some kind of partnership between Moscow and Tehran in Syria. It is uneasy, for sure, but it is there. However, the relationship does not mean that the Russians would risk fighting a war with the United States to save the Iranians.

23. Zack Beauchamp, “[Beyond oil: the US-Saudi alliance, explained](#),” Vox, January 6, 2016.

24. The White House, [Statements By President Obama and His Majesty King Salman of Saudi Arabia](#), April 21, 2016.

coalition in history to act decisively against Saddam and thus protect the kingdom. There is no compelling reason why the U.S. would not do the same today if Iran overtly attacks Saudi Arabia—which was the first destination of President Trump's inaugural international trip. That is precisely why CENTCOM is stationed in the region: to act quickly and authoritatively against threats to U.S. interests and the security of America's partners.

But given that Khamenei will probably not be rolling his tanks into Saudi Arabia and seeking to capture territory, how would Washington react to Iranian violence against the kingdom that falls short of outright, conventional aggression? If the Iranians play their cards right and manage to avoid conventional escalation following a Saudi attack, could Riyadh still count on Washington to intervene?

When Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak fell from power following Cairo's popular uprising in 2011, the optic in the region was that Washington had not attempted to save its longstanding partner. This was inaccurate; Mubarak's own military colleagues dumped him after determining that he was long past his sell-by date, and there was nothing U.S. policy could reasonably have done at that point to "save" him. Nevertheless, Gulf political elites, and especially the Saudis, were unsettled by the U.S.'s nonintervention and heavily criticized Obama. The optic remains: in a potential confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, or in the case of covert threats to the stability of the

Saudi regime, these elites are uncertain whether Washington would remain on the sidelines or come to their rescue.

On one hand, the U.S. prefers to avoid war with Iran, assuming that Tehran does not blatantly cross red lines concerning its nuclear program, the safety of American troops in the region, freedom of navigation in the Gulf, and the regime survival of U.S. regional partners. On the other hand, the extent to which Washington can tolerate subtle Iranian aggression against the kingdom that falls below the threshold of conventional warfare but that could still upend Saudi stability is unclear.

But the search for clarity does not have to be purely an American exercise. Indeed, it should not. Nonetheless, the reality is that Washington does not consult with its Arab partners on scenarios and contingencies that might lead to crisis and war. All talk and strategy is centered on deterrence, but should deterrence fail, what happens next? There is no joint planning when it comes to mutual threats beyond transnational terrorism. U.S. and Saudi interests would be well served by a meaningful and broad dialogue that touches on some of these difficult matters from both perspectives. Needless to say, it is better to have that kind of conversation before a military crisis with Iran erupts.

During his recently concluded U.S. tour, it is highly doubtful that Crown Prince Mohammed or any of his attending colleagues conducted a conversation with American officials about joint planning against Iran in Yemen or elsewhere.

Instead, Trump's talk of how much Saudi Arabia was going to spend on U.S. arms and, as a result, how many American jobs it was going to create, strongly hints at the principle topic of conversation. If leaders in Tehran watched the press conference in the Oval Office, they probably laughed, or at least breathed a sigh of relief, that nothing serious came out of U.S.-Saudi talks.

NATO might not be the best model for partner consultation, but the types of interactions that happen regularly between American and European officials and militaries within the alliance are more meaningful and predictable than the ones that take place between American and Arab Gulf officials and militaries. The more open and multidimensional the dialogue between the United States and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf partners becomes, the more efficient the collective force posture, and the stronger the collective deterrent.

If the U.S. were ever to draw down in the Middle East—and that day may come sooner rather than later—forming closer political and military relationships with partners that go beyond selling hardware will become a must.



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