

IRAN-SAUDI ARABIA

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Iran and Saudi Arabia have recently broken off diplomatic relations following an assault by mobsters on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran. The assault, in itself, is said to have been triggered by the execution of a Shi'a cleric in Saudi Arabia, who preached against the Saudi government. What is there to read between the lines in this diplomatic saga?

True enough Iran's record in protecting foreign embassies on its soil is anything to boast about. The US in 1979, the UK in 2011 and now the Saudis in 2016 have experienced the wrath of Iranian populist revolutionary politics. Iran, on its part, divided between its less radical forces nowadays represented in President Rohani's government, and the more extremist factions grouped under the banner of *the principled*, always eager and ready to take matters into their own hands, is caught in the minefield of its own complicated and volatile domestic politics. However, those considerations aside, there may be more laying beneath the surface of the rupture in Riyadh-Tehran relations.

The strategic weight of both countries is well-known to observers and policy makers. Iran has enormous natural resources much greater than its current state of economy would suggest. It is a large country of nearly 80 million people, overlooking one of the most significant waterways in the world, the Straits of Hormoz, through which Middle Eastern oil has to travel before it can reach the wider world. It has a rich history and, though unconventional, it charts one of the most vibrant political discourses in the region.

Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, is home to the two holiest shrines in Islam and ranks as the world's largest exporter of petroleum with over seven million barrels a day. It is the largest West Asian country and with the political waning of Baghdad and Damascus it has gained increasing significance amongst the Arabs and the wider world.

The rivalry between the Shi'a-dominated Iran and the Sunni-controlled Saudi Arabia is going through an intense phase hitherto unseen. Both countries are robustly and uncompromisingly vying for greater influence in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Bahrain. Since the Iranian revolution of 1979 the Saudis have noticed a tangible shift of strategic weight in their favour as Washington has detached itself from Tehran and has tilted more towards Riyadh. The shift opened up huge opportunities for economic development in Saudi Arabia and the littoral states of the Persian Gulf.

Now, however, in the post-nuclear agreement era policy makers in Riyadh are wondering if there is a new shift, this time away from the Saudis and more in tune with the Iranians. An indigenous nuclear infra-structure with home-grown capacity for missile production, a secular population – albeit under a religious government - eager to de-radicalise and normalise relations with the West, in possession of oil and gas resources that can match those of any other country, Iran may appear as a very tempting new centre of strategic significance for the West in particular the United States. To encourage an Iran that would not seek the destruction of Israel, would not seek regional hegemony, would continue to observe the terms of the nuclear agreement even after its expiry date, would desist from aiding opponents of Washington, would agree to scale down its missile production and lastly would work with the US towards a settlement in Syria may seem more alluring to the White House than the current strategic configuration in the region.

Of course, were there such strategic shift to take place one would expect a price to be have to paid by the West. That price would depend largely on the attitude of the next US administration.