

*Viewpoints*  
*No. 40*

# Iran's Rouhani Puts U.S.- Saudi Ties to the Test

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The opening of a dialogue between the United States and Iran has stirred deep-seated fears in Saudi Arabia that the Obama administration may be headed for a “grand bargain” with Tehran at the Saudis’ expense, raising further doubts about Saudi dependence on Washington for its security. The Saudis have already sensed flagging U.S. support in their confrontation with Iran over Iraq and Syria as they wage a bitter battle with the Iranians for Arab and Muslim world leadership.

*October 2013*

*Middle East Program*





Saudi Arabia's worst nightmare may be coming true – the end of the 34-year-long freeze in relations between its keystone of security, the United States, and its principal rival, Iran.

The ruling House of Saud will look upon President Obama's historic phone call on September 27 to President Hassan Rouhani as a sure sign of a coming and much-feared American tilt toward Iran. This would occur at the Saudis' expense at a moment of intense Saudi-Iranian competition for religious and political leadership of both the Arab and Muslim worlds.

The Obama administration thus faces a tough diplomatic task ahead in convincing the increasingly nervous Saudis that its declared objective of stopping Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons is not a slippery slope toward a “grand bargain” ending in acknowledgement of Iranian hegemony in the Persian Gulf and beyond.

American fidelity to its Arab allies – not to say perfidy – has always been a big question mark for the Saudis, and Obama's quick abandonment of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 only served to confirm these fears.

In fact, the Saudi view of the U.S. track record in the Middle East since President George W. Bush's “freedom agenda” to promote democracy and then his 2003 decision to invade Iraq amounts to a long indictment of American missteps and misjudgments for which Saudi Arabia has paid the cost and Iran collected the dividends. The U.S. invasion of Iraq resulted, in the words of Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, in a pro-Iranian Shiite government that “handed Iraq to Iran on a silver platter.”

To this day, Saudi King Abdullah has refused to allow Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on Saudi soil because he regards him as an Iranian agent. He has also ignored U.S. entreaties to open a Saudi embassy in Baghdad. The Saudis regard Washington's acceptance of, and backing for, the Maliki government as the start of Washington's slippage toward Iran.

Then came the 2011 “Arab Spring” in the name of democracy, which the Obama administration tried awkwardly to embrace along with the Muslim Brotherhood and similar Islamic groups that won elections in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco. Worst yet, it touched off unresolved civil wars in Yemen and Syria. The Saudis have never forgotten, or forgiven, that the Brotherhood backed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein during the 1990-91 Gulf War after the Saudis had offered thousands of Brotherhood members a place of refuge from persecution in Egypt and Syria.

The bitter Syrian civil war has become the latest bone of contention in the fraying U.S.-Saudi relationship. Since Iran and its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, are backing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Saudi Arabia is backing his overthrow, Syria has become another test of American fidelity.

Encouraged by Obama's repeated calls for al-Assad to give up power, King Abdullah took the lead in rallying Arab support for the arming of the Syrian opposition. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, both also U.S. friends, joined Saudi Arabia in the campaign to unseat al-Assad, all three assuming that the Obama administration would eventually back them up.

That key assumption proved false. At first, the Obama administration actively opposed sending potentially game-changing anti-aircraft missiles to the Syrian opposition. It feared such missiles, credited with turning the tide of war against Soviet occupation forces in Afghanistan, might fall into the hands of anti-American and anti-Israeli Islamic extremists.

Then, as the civil war dragged on, such extremists did indeed come to the fore. This caused Obama to pull back from deeper military involvement. This has left Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies out on a dangerous limb, exposed to retaliation from al-Assad and his Iranian and Lebanese backers.

The problem now for Saudi Arabia is how to protect itself from the fallout of a U.S.-Iranian thaw and possible long-term rapprochement. In the mid-2000s, King Abdullah sought to diversify the kingdom's foreign friends away from Washington, taking his first trip abroad as king to China in January 2006. The Chinese had provided Saudi Arabia with medium-range DF-3 missiles, capable even of carrying nuclear warhead to protect it from Iran in the late 1980s. The IHS Jane's Intelligence Review reported in July 2013 that China has sent more missiles and helped the Saudis build a second launching site with its Chinese missiles aimed at both Iran and Israel.

The Saudis know, however, that China is no substitute for the United States when it comes to ability, or political readiness, to project military power in the Middle East. So, the kingdom is in the process of purchasing \$60 billion worth of all kinds of U.S. weaponry, including 84 more F-15s and an updated missile defense system. This has locked Saudi Arabia into the American security umbrella for decades to come.

Saudi Arabia and the United States also work together extremely closely on combating al-Qaeda terrorism inside the kingdom and in neighboring Yemen. The two governments share a "fusion center," which tracks terrorist threats hour by hour, and the Saudis have allowed the United States to operate a secret facility for launching killer drones across their border into Yemen.

Two former American-educated Saudi ambassadors to Washington, Princes Bandar bin Sultan and Turki al-Faisal, both came to the same conclusion after decades of dealing with Saudi foreign policy: like it or not, "the only game in town" for the Saudis was the United States.

Whether this attitude will survive a U.S.-Iranian opening remains to be seen. The Saudi leadership has become used to coping with serious differences with Washington over the years. Its strategy has been to isolate and prevent them from upending the overall close security relationship.

The answer to the future U.S.-Saudi relationship may lie partly in what happens next in the Saudi-Iranian one. Iran's Rouhani is also expected to seek better relations with Saudi Arabia

and its gulf Arab allies after eight years of extreme tension under the provocative policies of the outgoing president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The Saudis had fairly cooperative ties to the Iranian government during the presidency of Ali Akbar Rafsanjani from 1989 to 1997. So there is at least a precedent for a decent Saudi-Iranian working relationship.

Still, their differences loom large. Both have made major commitments to opposing sides in the Syrian civil war, in Iraq and Lebanon. In Bahrain, where the Shiite majority is in open rebellion against the Sunni royal al-Khalifa family, the Iranian media has taken the Shiite side while Saudi Arabia has sent soldiers and billions of dollars to bolster the Sunni Bahraini monarchy.

The underlying Saudi-Iranian conflict remains the same as well. Ever since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Shiite Iran has challenged Sunni Saudi Arabia's claim to Muslim and Arab leadership by virtue of being the birthplace of Islam and the custodian of its holiest sites. The episodic Sunni-Shiite feud, dating from the early years of Islam, has now re-emerged as a defining issue in the power struggles underway in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria.

The Obama administration might end up becoming part of the resolution to this Saudi-Iranian rivalry if it can assure Saudi Arabia of an Iran without nuclear weapons and a negotiated solution to the Syrian civil war that ends al-Assad's rule. But the U.S. record so far of bungled Middle East interventions is not likely to inspire much Saudi confidence.



*The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.*

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