

Iran and Saudi Arabia: Regional rivalry

Oxford Analytica Conference Call
Tuesday, 4 October, 15:00 UK time



© Oxford Analytica 2016. All rights reserved.

No duplication of this document is permitted without written consent of Oxford Analytica.

Contact us: www.oxan.com/about/contacts or

call +44 1865 261 600 or in North America 1 800 965 766

Iran and Saudi Arabia: Regional rivalry

A war of words between Iran and Saudi Arabia broke out on the eve of the annual hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei described the Saudi royal family as "puny Satans", accusing the kingdom of murdering injured Iranian pilgrims after the fatal hajj stampede last year. In response, the senior Saudi cleric charged that Iranians were not Muslims at all -- and other officials on both sides weighed in. There have been no diplomatic relations between the two states since January, and Iranian pilgrims could not join the hajj this year.

The conflict is not just rhetorical -- the two countries are engaged in active proxy wars in Syria and Yemen, as well as a bitter fight for influence in Lebanon. But could it become more direct? There are indications of escalation: Iran accuses Saudi Arabia of supporting Sunni separatists within its borders, while Saudi Arabia has asked the UN Security Council to condemn Iran for arming the Huthis in Yemen.

Feeling the lack of US support since the Iran nuclear deal, what unilateral steps might Saudi Arabia take to preserve its security? And how might Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) seek to pre-empt them?

This rivalry raises a broad swathe of regional questions:

- What would be the warning signs of a direct military confrontation?
- How does the issue play out in Saudi royal family politics?
- Is Yemen a genuine proxy conflict -- can Iran control the Huthis?
- Could the common enmity towards Islamic State group (ISG) prompt a rapprochement?
- Has the new Iran-Russia alliance changed the balance of power?
- Can Turkey remain neutral in this confrontation?
- How could the conflict be affected by the outcome of the US presidential election?

Chair

Paul Maidment, Director of Analysis and Managing Editor, Oxford Analytica

Paul Maidment joined Oxford Analytica in December 2014 as the Director of Analysis and Managing Editor of the Oxford Analytica Daily Brief.

He is an award-winning journalist who founded the New York-based digital editorial consultancy Bystander Media in 2010. A pioneer in combining digital and print journalism, he was previously Editor of Forbes.com and Executive Editor of Forbes, transforming a magazine website into the leading online destination for business, finance and up-scale lifestyle. Before joining Forbes in 2001, Paul was the founding Editor of the Financial Times' award-winning web site FT.com and Assistant Editor of the newspaper. His early career as an editor and foreign correspondent encompassed The Economist, the Asian Wall Street Journal and the BBC in the U.K. the U.S. and Asia — a depth of journalistic experience and breadth of media that gives him a unique perspective on the changes transforming publishing and the world economy. Paul was inducted into the Digital Hall of Fame in New York in 2010.

Panellists

Gerald Butt , Region Head, Middle East, Oxford Analytica and a former BBC Middle East correspondent.

A consultant on the politics and energy of the Middle East; born and brought up in the Middle East and in the 1980s and 1990s was BBC Middle East correspondent, based in Beirut and then Jerusalem. Since then has been editor of Middle East Economic Survey (MEES) and Middle East International (MEI). Butt is the author of several books on the region and is a frequent contributor of analysis articles to BBC News Online.

Sune Haugbolle, Associate Professor, Roskilde University and former Research Fellow, University of Oxford

Sune holds BA and MA degrees in Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies from Copenhagen University and a D.Phil. in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Oxford. He has published widely on culture and politics in the contemporary Middle East and is the author of *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge UP 2010) and co-editor of *The Politics of Violence, Truth and Reconciliation in the Arab Middle East* (Routledge 2009), and *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East: Rhetoric of the Image* (Indiana University Press 2013). He currently directs a research group on Secular Ideology in the Middle East and is Review Editor for the *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*.

Edmund Herzig, Soudavar Professor of Persian Studies, Faculty of Oriental Studies and Fellow, University of Oxford

Region Head: Middle East, Oxford Analytica; previously, Senior Research Fellow at Chatham House; research interests include history of Iran, Afghanistan, Caucasus and Central Asia; history, national identity and the state in modern Iran; recent publications include "Iran and the World in the Safavid Age" (2012), edited with Willem Floor; *The Transformation of Tajikistan: The Sources of Statehood* (2013), edited with John Heathershaw.