

Middle East May elections: Iran-Saudi proxy confrontation



How will rising tensions between Riyadh and Tehran play out
Iraqi and Lebanese polls?

Tuesday, 17 April, 15.00 UK time

Middle East May elections: Iran-Saudi proxy confrontation

How will rising tensions between Riyadh and Tehran play out in upcoming Iraqi and Lebanese polls?

With US President Donald Trump appointing new Iran ‘hawks’ to high office, Saudi Arabia -- whose Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman recently said the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic was “worse than Hitler” -- is feeling emboldened in its regional programme to roll back Tehran’s influence.

This could play out in the countries where the two regional hegemony have long battled for influence, including Lebanon and Iraq, where parliamentary elections are due on May 6 and May 12, respectively. At the same time, Trump needs to decide whether to kill the Iran nuclear deal at last, and the situations in Yemen and Gaza are heating up.

In the wake of those crucial announcements, an Oxford Analytica expert team will answer your questions on the outlook for the polls – and on how Tehran and Riyadh might react.

- Will the two countries’ respective proxies in Beirut remain loyal?
- Could the electoral law introducing proportional representation give more space to reformist, non-aligned parties?
- How will Baghdad’s rival Shia factions move towards or away from Tehran as the date approaches, and in the post-elections bargaining?
- What might be the role of the Iran-backed Popular Mobilisation Units in future Iraqi politics?
- Will Riyadh seek to influence the Iraqi elections directly, or is it relying on promises of financial aid and resurgent nationalism among Arabs?
- How will Iranian moderates and hardliners react to the increased international pressure -- and who will win out?
- Is there a chance that heightened tensions could lead to violence?

Share your thoughts on the above and raise anything else that concerns or excites you about the upcoming elections in our client conference call on Tuesday, April 17, 15:00 UK, 10.00 EDT.

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

Justin Alexander, Middle East economist and analyst, Qatar National Bank

Justin has been working on the Middle East for two decades, based in the region for half that time, including in Jordan, Iraq, Palestine and Qatar. He has worked as an economic advisor in Qatar's ministry of finance, a senior economist at the region's largest bank (QNB) and in a variety of roles in Iraq, including supporting constitutional dialogue and reconciliation, with the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq, and advocating for the cancellation of Saddam-era debts. He has also covered the region's political risks and economics for the Economist Intelligence Unit. He is currently based in the US, consulting on a broad range of Middle East issues. Across these various roles he has looked for ways to support sustainable economic development, flourishing businesses, good governance, conflict resolution and a vibrant civil society. He graduated from Balliol College, Oxford.

Sune Haugbolle, Associate Professor, RUC, Roskilde University

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.

Sanam Vakil, Professorial Lecturer, Middle East Studies Department, Johns Hopkins University SAIS (Europe)

Sanam Vakil is the James Anderson professorial lecturer in the Middle East Studies department at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS Europe) in Bologna. She is also an Associate Fellow

at Chatham House's Middle East North Africa Programme where she leads the Iran Forum project focusing on future trends in Iran's domestic and foreign policy. Sanam provides research, commentary and political risk analysis for companies and organizations working in the Middle East.

She is the author of *Action and Reaction: Women and Politics in Iran*, (Bloomsbury 2013). She publishes analysis for a variety of media and academic outlets including *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Washington Quarterly*, *The Financial Times* and *Washington Post*. Sanam appears regularly on BBC TV and radio, NBC, CBS, ITV, CNN, and Al Jazeera.