



Executive Summary

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MANEUVERING THE SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: HOW THE UNITED STATES CAN PRESERVE AND PROTECT ITS LONG-TERM INTERESTS IN THE REGION

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This monograph examines how the United States should preserve and protect its long-term interests in the Middle East region by maneuvering carefully and strategically in the Saudi-Iranian conflict. The monograph first analyzes the history of the conflict between these two countries and shows that, while these two regional powers were rivals, they were not necessarily enemies and cooperated at times. It then traces their recent conflict back to the Iranian revolution and brings it up-to-date with their support for opposing sides in proxy wars in the region, taking part in sectarian diatribes, and the breaking of diplomatic relations. It also discusses how the former Barack Obama administration hoped for better U.S.-Iranian relations in the wake of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal that it negotiated with the other P5+1 countries (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—plus Germany), and how that did not transpire because of the attitudes of the hardliners in Iran who are wary of any rapprochement with the United States. In addition, the Saudis were distrustful of Iran, believed the nuclear deal had significant shortcomings, and were not pleased that President Obama called on both countries to learn to coexist with each other in the neighborhood. To assuage Saudi concerns and to help protect the important sea lanes between the Arabian and Red Seas, the Obama administration allowed the Saudis and other Gulf Arab states to purchase sophisticated military hardware and assisted the Saudis in their campaign against the Houthi rebels in Yemen (who follow a Shia sect of Islam) by providing air fueling, logistics, and intelligence. Now, under the current Donald Trump administration, nuance in the

dispute between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been set aside in favor of wholeheartedly backing Riyadh and isolating Iran.

Although in the short run it may make sense for the United States to side with Saudi Arabia in its conflict with Iran, U.S. policymakers need to think about the long-term consequences of such a policy. First, the high number of civilian casualties caused by errant Saudi air strikes in Yemen has tarnished the U.S. image in that country because of Washington's military assistance to Riyadh. Second, with the United States giving uncritical support to Saudi Arabia at a time when its high-ranking officials are denigrating the Shia faith gives the impression that the United States is taking sides in a religious dispute. Not only does this fly in the face of traditional U.S. foreign policy—which has avoided taking part in religious wars—it has the potential to jeopardize U.S. relations with friendly leaders of Shia background, like Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who has been a key ally in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Moreover, by siding with Sunni states like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, (both of which have a history of problematic treatment of their Shia citizens) while only focusing on Iran's ill-treatment of its citizens, the United States runs the risk of alienating the Shia in the region and making a mockery of its human rights policy. Finally, the perception of the United States siding with Sunnis over Shia also runs the risk of alienating the younger generation of Iranians who not only want better relations with the United States but who are also prideful of their Persian culture and Shia identity. Keeping these young Iranians favorably disposed to the United States should be a long-term goal of U.S. policymakers.

The monograph recommends that U.S. policy-makers should try to end the proxy wars in the region, like those in Syria and Yemen, as a first step in easing the Saudi-Iranian conflict and find areas where the United States and Iran can find common ground. It also recommends the fostering of a dialogue between Saudi Arabia (with other Gulf Cooperation Council states) and Iran where objectionable behavior on both sides could be aired and dealt with in a meaningful way. Although it is highly unlikely that Iran would give up its ballistic missile program, it could be persuaded to cease its subversive activities if the Gulf Arab states provided that the Shia in these states are treated better. The fact that the 2017 hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca occurred without any major incident between Iran and Saudi Arabia suggests that cooperation is possible. To reassure the Saudis that an easing of U.S. tensions with Iran would not make it vulnerable to a possible resurgence of Iranian aggression, the monograph recommends more joint military exercises between the United States and Saudi Arabia militaries as well as the deployment of U.S. Army's Stability Force Assistance Brigades to the Saudi kingdom for training and defensive purposes. In this way, the United States can preserve its equities in Saudi Arabia while developing some links to Iran that could be used to bolster relations with Tehran if the regime were to moderate in the future. In the long term, having friendly relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran and having both countries play a responsible

role in the Gulf, similar to that which they did in the 1970s prior to the Iranian revolution of 1979, would be in the security interests of the United States.

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