

The Flaws of the Proliferation Cascade Scenario: Iran-Saudi Relations in Perspective

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Abstract

This paper argues spiral arms race in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is spurious and highly unlikely to lead to further stability. There is substantial evidence to suggest that the threat of arms race and the so-called “proliferation cascade” is a bogus excuse to thwart Iran’s nuclear deal with the “P5+1” group. Our central argument is that the notion that arms race intensifies regional rivalries may seem reasonable on its face, but it fails to match reality. Arguably, an arms race does not currently exist between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The situation can be more accurately described as a one-sided arms buildup where Saudi Arabia has out-spent Iran by colossal amounts while Iran has worked to compete with Saudi Arabia without a corresponding increase in military spending. While it is possible in theory that improved efficiency in the procurement of arms could result in real military capability gains—often disguised by stable military expenditure—there isn’t ample evidence to support the idea that this is indeed the case.

Keywords: Arms race, military expenditure, nuclear deal, military capability, military strategy, domestic threat.

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Introduction

The unraveling of the Arab Spring uprisings and the ensuing promise of peaceful democratic change have been accompanied or followed by one of the most significant developments in the non-Arab Middle East region—that is, the possible rapprochement between Iran and the United States. If the nuclear deal between Iran and Western powers evolves into a steady normalization of relations between them, it could potentially bolster Iran’s geopolitical and geo-economic status in the region, a development which holds drastic implications for US allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. While Israel is afraid of Iran’s emerging economic and political powers as a major challenge to the

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former's hegemony, Saudi Arabia deems the rapprochement between Iran and the West crucial not only to Iran's rising political stature but also to the resurgence of sectarian competition in the region.

As a key regional competitor of Saudi Arabia, Iran figures prominently in Saudi security interests and concerns. The same is true when it comes to Iran's regional geostrategic considerations, especially considering the political uncertainties in the context of the post-Arab Spring uprisings. The Saudi's concerns and fears about Iran's heightened role in regional affairs are partly justified and partly overstated. Iran's influence in neighboring Shia-majority countries, such as Iraq and Bahrain, poses a destabilizing challenge to Saudi Arabia's minority Shi'ites who live mostly in the north eastern part of the country.

Nevertheless, just as the Saudi's fear of Iran's Shia revolutionary meddling in the region is somewhat overstated, so is its concern regarding Iran's nuclear program, given that Iran's capacity to build a nuclear bomb has been dramatically reduced according to the July 14, 2015, nuclear deal signed between the P5+1 group (China, England, France, Russia, and the United States, plus Germany) and Iran. The nuclear accord manifestly stipulates that Iran must destroy 98 percent of its enriched uranium, all its 5-20 percent enriched uranium, remove and store two-thirds of its centrifuges (including all advanced centrifuges), terminate its enrichment activities at its Fordow nuclear facility and make inoperable the key operations of its Arak reactor, which could have been used to generate plutonium. This should be perceived as a dramatic reduction of the potential threat of a nuclear Iran for the region.

It is regularly argued that improving relations with Saudi Arabia entails significant implications for unstable locations throughout the region, specifically: Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria. The penetration of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS—known as “Dae'sh” locally) has created a common threat to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, linking, in a rather unprecedented way, the Iraqi and Syrian crises. It is important to note, as Kamran Bokhari argues (2015), that Dae'sh capitalizes on Saudi Arabia's geo-sectarian strategy to advance its jihadist goals. Dae'sh is fueling speculation that Riyadh and the jihadists are on the same page insofar as fighting Shia is concerned.

Yet Saudi Arabia cannot afford to alienate Arab Shias and push

them toward a welcoming Iran. To Stop Dae'sh attacks on the Shia, Bokhari (2015) continues, Saudi authorities must crack down on Salafists who assist Dae'sh's operations in the kingdom. Dae'sh seeks to drive a wedge between the kingdom and its Salafist establishment, a political strategy that may explain why it is essential to understand that although Dae'sh is targeting Shias, they are using them as instruments to obtain the real prize: Saudi Arabia.

Although, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been at odds over regional issues for decades—including: energy politics, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the U.S. presence in the region, and the external meddling in the fractious political environments of Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria—they both realize that festering distrust and sectarian and ideological competition between them could be detrimental to the region's stability (Monshipouri and Keynoush, 2008). In both Yemen and Syria—the site of the latest and most perilous arena of competition and conflict between the two countries, with Iran supporting Houthis in Yemen and the Assad regime in Syria, as well as the Shi'a Hezbollah pitted against Saudi-backed Sunni Muslim insurgents—lingering sectarian and geopolitical impediments have had destabilizing consequences for the region at large. Precisely for this reason, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have much to gain from ratcheting down the intense sectarian nature of their competition. The sectarianization of the region will no doubt continue to undermine the long-term interests of both countries and the broader region.

Pursuing common regional interests may be an effective first step in expanding regional cooperation on such issues as finding a mutually acceptable solution to the Syrian crisis. Iran's President Hassan Rouhani also hopes that the improvement of relations with one of the key regional U.S. allies would have a positive impact on possible future Iran-U.S. rapprochement (Monshipouri and Dorraj, 2013). Moreover, Rouhani's election demonstrated that a critical mass in the country was weary of ideological extremes and ideology-based policies, and that most Iranians were looking for a common ground based on pragmatism and Iran's survival as a country and culture (Hunter, 2014:257-258).

In the meantime, experts remind us that the United States will become self-sufficient in energy by 2030, as new drilling technologies, alternative fuels, and curtailing local consumption will dramatically reduce the need

to import oil (BP Energy Outlook, 2015). A key ramification of this oil independence policy might very well be that the United States cuts down on its military commitments in the Persian Gulf region. This policy is bound to undermine the Saudis' strategic status, especially as the Obama administration and future US administrations may pivotally turn their attention to Asia. The Obama administration has been unwilling to take a leadership role in the non-oil producing Arab countries, in part because of the failed interventionist policies of George W. Bush and also due to the fact that its own key foreign policy priorities lie in Asia. In short, the Obama administration has been leery of making substantive investments, choosing instead retrenchment and selective commitments over overt engagements (Gerges, 2013:321-322).

The Israelis will face an emerging power broker, namely Iran, in the Persian Gulf region. Under such circumstances, the Saudis will do well if they reconsider their hostile relations with their neighbor to the east: Iran. The consistent exaggeration of Iranian power in the region needs further examination given that evidence flies directly counter to claims by Iran's Arab neighbors that Tehran is bent on outspending them in military hardware and technology. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), for instance, finds that the Arab states of the Persian Gulf have "an overwhelming advantage over Iran in both military spending and access to modern arms" (Chomsky, 2015).

It is in this context that the Saudi Arms race merits further examination. From a security perspective, a spiraling arms race in the region is highly unlikely to lead to further stability. We aim to demonstrate that there is substantial evidence to suggest that the threat of an arms race and the so-called "proliferation cascade" in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a spurious excuse to thwart Iran's nuclear deal with the P5+1 group. Our central argument is that arms races by their nature intensify regional rivalries that may seem reasonable on their face, but fail to match reality. We also argue that it is equally important to acknowledge limits on US-Iran reconciliation, given that conservatives in Iran, while unable to stop the nuclear deal, would resist improved ties with America (Hunter, 2014:273). That said, US foreign policy needs recalibrating if it desires a non-military solution to the region's problems. Perhaps fostering Saudi-Iran rapprochement is the best place to start.

In the sections that follow, we first define what is meant by an arms race. We then expose the spurious assumptions behind the arms race

scenario, as allegedly precipitated by the Iranian nuclear deal. Our focus subsequently shifts to a comparison of the military expenditures of Iran and Saudi Arabia. A discussion of the real military and strategic capabilities will follow to shed light on the Saudis' motivations for arming. Finally, our analysis turns to the risks and rewards of the arms race, both internally and from an external standpoint.

The Arms Race Defined

In order to determine if Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in an arms race with each other in a regional struggle for dominance, it is first necessary to define what this paper means when it refers to an arms race for the sake of clarity. In this case an arms race will be considered “the participation of two or more nation-states in apparently competitive or interactive increases in quantity or quality of war material and/or persons under arms” (Smith, 1980). This definition will be utilized because it encompasses the core facets of an arms race that most political scientists can agree upon.

It is important to note that this definition factors in not only increases in real military capabilities but also intent, as “not all military spending constitutes arms racing . . . only those coupled with hostile or competitive foreign policy statements” (Smith, 1980). For Iran and Saudi Arabia to be considered as engaged in an arms race, real military capability building must also be coupled with evidence that they are triggered in direct response to the other's actions.

Iran's military spending, as experts illustrate, is in fact “a fraction of Saudi Arabia's and far below the spending of the United Arab Emirates. Altogether, the Gulf Cooperation Council states—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—outspend Iran on arms by a factor of eight—an imbalance that goes back decades” (Chomsky, 2015). In fact, three countries—Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—account for more than half of all military expenditures in the region, with Saudi Arabia's average military expenditures (as percentage of GDP) at 30 percent, Turkey at 13 percent, and Israel at 12 percent (Cammett, Diwan, Richards, and Waterbury, 2015:357-359). For example, from 2006 to 2012, Saudi Arabia spent 8.2 percent of its GDP on military expenditures, while Iran's expenditures stood at 2.8 percent (Cammett, Diwan, Richards, and Waterbury, 2015:358).

A Phony or Real Arms Race?

Political analysts and observers have thrown around the idea that Saudi Arabia is engaged, or will soon be engaged, in a Persian Gulf arms race against its regional rival Iran. A cursory glance at the headlines of major news agencies reveals this anxiety, giving the impression that an arms race is the open secret about Saudi-Iranian relations. Yet to characterize the security situation between the Saudis and Iranians as an arms race would be to misunderstand the actual situation on the ground. While the Saudi defense budget has continued to show growth year after year, Iran's defense budget remained stagnant by comparison. It is worth noting that tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran over regional influence are very real, and deserve serious consideration to prevent being blindsided by an unforeseen consequence of diplomacy with Iran.

Is there or will there be a Saudi-Iranian arms race? What will be the consequences of a Saudi-Iranian arms race? What then are the current and historic motivations behind Saudi defense spending? This paper argues that while the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is very real, an arms race does not currently exist between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The situation can be better described as a one-sided arms buildup where Saudi Arabia has out-purchased Iran by astronomical amounts while a comparatively quiet Iran has worked to compete with Saudi Arabia without a corresponding increase in military spending. In order to maintain stability in the Persian Gulf Region, the United States should recognize that while the situation is not truly an arms race, the perpetuation of the narrative that an arms race exists is in itself a product of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, created as a means of damaging Iran's nuclear deal prospects by pressuring Saudi Arabia's allies in the West. In understanding this dynamic, the United States should sidestep potential landmines hidden in its foreign policy dealings across the MENA region. While Iran will be factored into this study, the focus will be primarily upon the Saudis as the primary instigators.

In terms of quantitative analysis, the Saudi and Iranian Defense Reports compiled by Business Monitor International for Q1 and Q2 of the 2015 fiscal year provide the opportunity for conducting a comprehensive comparison between the two nations not only in the realm of military expenditures, but also in real manpower and strategic resources, factors which weigh heavily in security policy but may often

be overlooked in favor of defense spending. This will explain what is happening in both Iran and Saudi Arabia, and how the balance of power does not support the notion that an arms race is underway.

Comparison of Military Expenditures

In order to satisfy the first criteria of an arms race, military expenditure, a commonly used indicator of military capabilities, will be examined. According to the estimate of Iranian defense spending by Business Monitor International, Iranian defense spending has held steady at 2.2% of its GDP from 2011 to the present. In pure terms however, Iranian defense spending has actually fallen from its highest point of \$12.2 billion USD in 2012 to an estimated \$9.4 billion in 2014, corresponding to a weakened Iranian economy under the pressure of international sanctions (*Iran Defense and Security Report*, 2015). This time period also corresponds with the heightened threat Iran faced from a potential attack on its nuclear facilities to the gradual improvement of security conditions as it engaged in negotiations with world powers.

During this same time period, Saudi Arabia has spent an average of 7.5% of its national GDP on the military, reaching peak levels of \$59.1 billion USD in 2014. This places Saudi Arabia into the top 5 countries by military expenditure, behind only great powers like the United States, China, Russia, and the United Kingdom. As a comparison, Saudi defense spending per capita dwarfs the Iranian spending per capita with the Saudis spending roughly \$1,600 per person across the last four years and Iranian spending holding at \$70 at its peak, to roughly \$32 in 2014 (*Saudi Defense and Security Report*, 2015).

Based upon these numbers alone, it is abundantly clear that Saudi Arabia has Iran considerably outspent, yet there is insufficient evidence to suggest that each nation's military expenditures have significantly grown in relation to each other. Saudi Arabia consistently maintains spending at high levels, while Iran also maintains a consistent military spending as a percentage of its GDP. While there have been major fluctuations in defense spending over the past several years, there have been no major shifts in spending patterns beyond regular adjustment for the growth or shrinkage of GDP. An increase in military budget alone falls short of determining if it were done as a response to the other party. These relatively steady numbers merely suggest that perhaps no correlative relationship exists.

Comparison of Real Military and Strategic Capabilities

Military spending alone however, cannot provide the entirety of the picture. The balance of power must also be examined in real terms, in the number of troops each nation has fielded, and in the quality and quantity of its armaments. While Saudi Arabia vastly outspends Iran, the Iranian military maintains a force of around 565,000 men under arms, a number that has remained steady since 2005 with only a minor reduction of a few thousand during that time period (*Iran Defense and Security Report 1*, 2015). The Saudi Armed Forces number only 249,000, yet this number is a major increase from its 2005 level, which numbered at 216,000 (*Saudi Defense and Security Report*, 2015). For all of Saudi Arabia's military spending, the advantage that Iran holds in population and numbers translates into distinct advantages for Iran, explaining to a certain degree the cautiousness of the Saudi Regime toward Iran—its sheer size grants it geopolitical influence that cannot be bought with money.

Thus far the comparison has demonstrated the balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia, yet there has been little evidence of a growing arms race of any real significance. An examination into the way that the defense budgets have been spent fails to reveal anything significant or worthy of attention either. Shortly after an agreement on the Iranian nuclear deal was reached, Saudi Arabia concluded a \$1.9 billion deal to purchase helicopters from the United States for its navy, as well as another \$2 billion contract to obtain Patriot air defense missile systems (*Saudi Arabia Defense and Security Report*, 2015). These were contracts that raised the attention of the media, but these purchases have been occurring regularly over the past decade and mark no drastic departure from Saudi defense procurement.

On Iran's part, its relatively meager defense budget has not been able to obtain weapons capable of dramatically altering the security balance short of a nuclear weapon. The sale of the S-300 missiles to Iran by Russia during the nuclear deal negotiations in early 2015 stands out as a sign of a potential arms race escalation between Saudi Arabia and Iran (MacFarquhar, 2015). Unlike the Saudi example, the ability for Iran to spend their defense budget on advanced foreign weaponry does mark a departure from past years, where previously Iran was limited in its foreign arms suppliers. The easing of arms

sanctions by Russia is a clear cut example where the same amount of money spent by Iran on defense could potentially result in higher yields. Yet there has not been a cascade of foreign arms rushing into Iran, and cases like the S-300 does not necessarily translate into wider upgrades for the rest of the Iranian military.

The overall conclusion is that while it is possible in theory that improved efficiency in the procurement of arms could result in real military capability gains, disguised by stable military expenditures, there is simply not enough data to support the idea that this is the case. Neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia has achieved any buildup of real military power that deviates significantly from their pre-nuclear negotiations norm, something that the military expenditure analysis also indicated. Each nation may still be trying to modernize its military capabilities to the best possible degree in anticipation of its rival, but each continues to do so with the budget that they have, largely independent of the spending and procurement of the other.

Saudi Motivations

The data thus far falls short of supporting the idea that an arms race exists in reality, but there has been a great deal of rhetoric from Saudi Arabia and US pundits hinting at the existence of one. The motivation for doing so can be distilled down to a very simple set of principles, the rejection of diplomacy with Iran on its nuclear program, and furthering Saudi national interests.

An interview conducted with a Saudi official by the BBC illustrates how closely linked the nuclear deal has been to the arms race narrative: Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former head of Saudi Intelligence, warns the BBC that any rights given to Iran regarding uranium enrichment would also be expected by Saudi Arabia (Usher, 2015). Statements by Saudi officials hinting at a nuclear arms race with Iran should the nuclear deal proceed are based almost entirely upon one assumption: the idea that Saudi Arabia will embark on a path toward acquiring nuclear weapons should the passage of the Iranian nuclear deal, the effective enforcement and domestic focus of which the Saudis are particularly dubious of, become final. Viewed in this light, combating the Iranian nuclear deal by promoting the arms race narrative is a means of advancing Saudi national interest.

The Risks and Rewards of the Arms Race

Saudi Arabia and Iran have not demonstrated that they are currently engaged in a military buildup beyond their regular arms development models; however, Saudi Arabia has perpetuated the idea that it will soon engage in an arms race to outdo and counter Iran. This arms race does not exist in a quantifiable form; it is merely a creation of rhetoric, ideas, and belligerent posturing. Interestingly enough, the consequences of threatening an arms race, alongside actual high military expenditure, creates effects not dissimilar from an actual arms race.

First, an arms race between Iran and Saudi Arabia places pressure upon Saudi allies in the West, such as the United States, to take Saudi concerns seriously. The outbreak of an actual conventional arms race amongst the Arab states of the Persian Gulf sparked by Saudi-Iranian conflict could lead to a potential powder keg in the region. Similarly, Smith argues in his piece “Arms Race Instability and War” that many arms races have historically tended toward destabilizing outcomes that ultimately resolves in outright war. When states begin to participate in arms races against an opponent, it is more likely that each side will only continue to grow in strength until one or the other concludes that open conflict is the only path out of an unsustainable and unwinnable security dilemma. If Saudi Arabia knows that the United States must intervene to prevent this, they could effectively utilize the threat of instability to galvanize its allies into providing assistance.

Although the rhetoric issued by Saudi Arabia should be taken seriously, there also exists a high chance of a major backlash. According to Christopher Hobbs and Matthew Moran, there are substantial economic reasons why Saudi Arabia would not choose to engage in a nuclear race. If Saudi Arabia were to try and out-compete Iran at the pursuit of nuclear weapons, it might expect to see international investment dip substantially as its hostile actions makes external support untenable. Erratic actions may also force its protectors to reconsider the rationale behind an alliance in the first place. The political signals a state sends out during the process of preparing for an arms race is so destabilizing that its costs may well exceed potential benefits (Hobbs and Moran, 2012).

On the matter of business, David Sorenson argues that Saudi Arabia utilizes its oil wealth to purchase arms as a means of securing political support in the United States while US companies grow

dependent on the promise of a Saudi-enforced regional order. Over the years, arms contracts, such as the most recent arms deal between Raytheon and the House of Al Saud, have provided US military industries with a significant and reliable source of income whose special interests prevent them from being easily cut. The size of the Saudi security state has a momentum of its own, making cutbacks to defense spending a difficult prospect for the foreseeable future. Across the MENA region, the sale of US arms to authoritarian states has generated profit, but in doing so US corporations have been integrated into positive feedback loops of arms, repression, and war.

Domestic Threat Factors

Iran, while frequently framed as Saudi Arabia's primary geopolitical foe, may not in actuality be the primary threat to Saudi national security. Rather the greatest threat comes from internal dissent from within. Saudi Arabia currently contends with the threat of Islamic extremists spilling over from conflicts to its north, Shia unrest in Bahrain and its eastern provinces, the Houthi rebellion in Yemen, and of course the threat that its own people may rise up against the regime as was done in Egypt or Tunisia during the Arab Spring uprisings. As Gregory F. Gause III (2014: 185-189) states Saudi Arabia is a "militarily weak state that seeks to preserve its independence by preventing the emergence of regional hegemony" with the primary goal of its foreign policy to "safeguard the stability of the domestic Al Saud regime." Saudi Arabia views its foreign policy as a means of promoting its royal family. This almost necessarily indicates that domestic opposition to the royal family may be more likely to occur than the premise of invading troops. Saudi Arabia's military spending numbers are said to be inflated because it must take into account the large number of forces necessary to repress the populace, diluting the actual capabilities of the military in fighting other armies.

While Gause's assertion of Saudi Arabia's status (2014:189) as a "weak state" might not seem intuitive given Saudi Arabia's massive security expenditures, a deeper examination of the internal organization of the Saudi security apparatus may lend further understanding to why Saudi Arabia has good reason to worry about the efficacy of its forces. Stephanie Cronin explains in "Tribes, Coups and Princes: Building a Modern Army in Saudi Arabia," that the Saudi military was never transformed into a national and professional institution in the same vein as, for example, the

Egyptian military was. The organization of the Saudi army has, and continues to be, based upon tribal and personal loyalty ties to the Saudi royal family. As a result of this nepotism, the Saudi military is plagued by a limited level of competency amongst its military leadership which may be incapable effectively of utilizing its arsenal of modern weapons in a real war. In the absence of a truly professional officer corps, Saudi defense may not correlate with actual combat success.

Conclusion

The idea that Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in an arms race that threatens to unravel the security of the MENA region, unless the United States takes tougher actions toward Iran has been widely proliferated in popular media, yet the available evidence reveals no such competition. The rift between Iran and Saudi Arabia in military spending is so wide that Iran cannot in reality be considered part of the competition. Furthermore, the example of a few high profile weapons deals provides inconclusive evidence of an arms race. This paper began trying to find hidden patterns in the data that would reveal the existence of an ongoing crisis. What it discovered instead is that the arms race narrative is one based largely on divisive rhetoric perpetuated by parties with a vested interest in scuttling the ongoing nuclear negotiations with Iran.

The fact that a real arms race does not currently exist is not a reason, however, to dismiss all of the concerns raised by vital US allies. The Persian Gulf region is extremely important to US strategic interests. Maintaining security in the Persian Gulf depends on both Iran and Saudi Arabia. The myth of the Saudi-Iranian arms race has thus far been employed as essentially a cautionary tale, but the conflicting interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran mean that such an arms race has every reason to exist. When Iran gazes toward Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf, Iran may notice the gaping hole in military spending between itself and its neighbors, tilting the military balance firmly in favor of Saudi Arabia. Conversely when Saudi Arabia confronts Iran, they may be unnerved by their much larger foe, and see military technology paid for by petro-dollars as the only means of compensating for the deficit. The worst case scenario would be if both powers decided that their only security guarantee would have to lie with nuclear arms. ❖

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