

## Good news America: Saudi vies for Great Satan status in Iran



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Persian-Arab enmity goes back centuries; Iranian-American hostility is only a few decades old



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei speaks during a ceremony at Imam Hossein University in Tehran on Wednesday

It's not quite the Great Satan — at least, not yet. But it's an enemy that the Iranian regime and the people can unite against.

Now that Iran's Islamic government is close to a nuclear deal with the US and other world powers, the traditional "death to America" slogan is losing its lustre but the loathing of [Saudi Arabia](#) is gaining appeal.

Though this is happening by accident more than design, driven by a stand-off in Yemen between Iranian and Saudi proxies, it is blissfully convenient for Iran's rulers.

Iranians never learnt to hate America despite their leaders' best efforts to whip up resentment. It certainly won't grow easier to convince them of devious American plots if a nuclear accord is signed.

When it comes to Saudi Arabia, however, Shia Iranians are happy to bash their Sunni neighbour. Persian-Arab enmity goes back centuries; Iranian-American hostility is only a few decades old. "People in Iran love Americans,

and Saudi Arabia is the one country that everyone hates,” one political analyst tells me. “If it’s not the Great Satan it’s only because it’s not that important.”

Indeed, in my own meetings in Iran, there are sometimes awkward moments: someone casually drops a disparaging remark about Arabs then realises I come from Lebanon and reassures me Iranians love the Lebanese but less so Gulf countries. In Lebanon, of course, Iran has Hizbollah, its most prized proxy.

I heard Saudi leaders denounced as “immature children” who bomb fellow Muslims in [Yemen](#) and join hands with jihadi terrorists in Syria and Iraq. It’s impossible to convince anyone that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis), which threatens the Saudi regime possibly even more than it threatens Iran, is not a Saudi creation. The notion that Saudi Arabia should reject an Iranian role in the affairs of other Arab states also meets with incredulity. A common language (Arabic) doesn’t give one country the right to claim authority over another, say Iranian officials.

Politicians in Tehran tell me that the anti-Saudi mood reminds them of the 1980s Iran-Iraq war, when Arab states supported Iraq’s Saddam Hussein against an Islamic regime bent on exporting its revolution.

“Even if we forgive Saddam, we cannot forgive the sins of al-Sauds,” vowed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic, in 1988. Relations never fully recovered, though they became more cordial after Khomeini’s death in 1989.

The bitterness is equally deep and irrational on the other side. In Gulf countries, popular opinion appears consumed by an anti-Iranian and anti-Shia narrative. In an increasingly jingoistic media, the Saudi-led bombing campaign in Yemen to dislodge the Iran-backed Houthi rebels is [celebrated](#) as a welcome defiance of Iran’s expansionist designs.

In Tehran, Saudi Arabia’s military intervention to check the Islamic Republic’s influence in the Arab world seems to have rattled leaders, spurring the anti-Riyadh campaign. At the same time, Iranian officials are contemptuous of the Yemen bombing, deeming it a failure since it has yet to weaken the Houthis.

Even though Yemen leads the Iranian anti-Saudi narrative, the issue has limited strategic importance for the Islamic Republic. Of far greater concern is the question of Saudi plans for Syria.

Led by Riyadh, Arab states have backed Syria’s rebels. Iran and Hizbollah, meanwhile, have invested heavily to prop up the regime of Bashar al-Assad. “Yemen has forced us and Hizbollah to be more vigilant in Syria. We know that after Yemen the Saudis will escalate in Syria,” says a person close to the regime. “Syria and Lebanon are Iran’s red lines.”

Perhaps the greatest irony in what I heard in Iran is that Tehran is looking to Washington to bridge the widening rift with Saudi Arabia.

“We found out that we can sit at the table with the Americans and trust each other for the first time since the Islamic revolution,” says the person close to the regime. “The Saudis won’t talk to us but the Americans can be the mediators.”

Distinguishing friends from foes in the Middle East is becoming a lot more confusing.

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