

## International

## As Iran-Saudi Arabia 'Cold War' heats up, what next?

## Experts believe risk of direct military clash is low

**TEHRAN:** From a Yemeni missile attack to the resignation of Lebanon's prime minister, the "Cold War" between Middle East rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran has been heating up. Experts believe the risk of a direct military clash is low, but why have tensions escalated now and how will the crisis evolve? AFP looks at five questions on the Riyadh-Tehran rivalry and its implications.

#### What are the origins of the rivalry?

Sunni powerhouse Saudi Arabia and Iran, the predominant Shiite power, have a long-standing rivalry based as much in geostrategic interests as religious differences. Facing off across the Gulf, the two energy-rich powers have for decades stood on opposing sides of conflicts in the Middle East. The Iranian revolution of 1979 and the advent of the Islamic Republic - with its fiercely anti-American slant - were perceived as a double threat to the conservative Sunni monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, allied with the United States.

Saudi Arabia was a key financial backer of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein during his 1980-1988 war with Iran. With Iraq weakened following the 1991 Gulf War, Saudi Arabia and Iran became "the two main regional powers", said Clement Therme, a researcher at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

#### How have tensions escalated recently?

The latest round of tensions began when Riyadh and Tehran broke off diplomatic relations in January 2016, after Iranians stormed Saudi Arabia's embassy and consulate in response to the execution of a prominent Shiite cleric. That followed the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and six world powers, which Riyadh feared was a step towards ending Iran's international isolation. Rhetoric between the two grew increasingly belligerent, including over Saudi Arabia's Gulf neighbor Qatar. Riyadh and several of its Sunni allies broke off diplomatic relations with Qatar in June 2017, accusing Doha of support for extremism and links with Iran, claims that it denies.

On the first weekend of November, the animosity reached new heights. First, the Saudi-supported prime minister of Lebanon, Saad Hariri, in a broadcast from Riyadh announced

his resignation, blaming Iran's "grip" on his country via Shiite movement Hezbollah. Several hours later, Saudi Arabia said its air defenses near Riyadh intercepted and destroyed a missile fired from Yemen, where a Saudi-led coalition is battling Iran-backed Shiite rebels.

That set off a fierce war of words between Riyadh and Tehran, with Saudi Arabia's powerful Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman accusing Iran of "direct military aggression". Tehran denied any involvement in the missile attack, with President Hassan Rouhani warning that Iranian "might" would fend off any challenge.

#### Why now?

"The main cause of the current tensions is related to the proxy confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia," Therme



### How will the crisis evolve?

said, pointing to wars in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Recent months have seen changes in these confrontations that appear to have brought the tensions to a head. In Iraq and Syria, the increasingly successful campaign against the Islamic State group has changed the situation on the ground. Offensives in both countries have forced the jihadists from nearly all the territory they seized in mid-2014.

As the threat from a common enemy "has imploded, tensions between these historic adversaries have escalated",

said Max Abrahms, professor of political science at Northeastern University in Boston. As Iraq looks to a post-IS era, Riyadh has been taking steps to build stronger ties with the country's Shiite-dominated government. A flurry of visits between the two countries this year saw talk of a warming of ties, including a trip by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to Riyadh in late October.

In Syria, meanwhile, the Iran-backed government of President Bashar al-Assad has over the past year managed to reassert control over large parts of the country by defeating, among others, rebel groups backed by Riyadh. "The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has become the organising principle for Mideast alliances, reminiscent of how the Cold War divided countries along US and Soviet lines," Abrahms said. Analysts said the election as US president a year ago of Donald Trump has also contributed to the rise in tensions. Trump's open hostility towards Tehran has "released anti-Iranian energies in the Arabian Peninsula" and emboldened Riyadh, Therme said.

#### How important is the Sunni-Shiite divide?

The Sunni-Shiite divide between Saudi Arabia and Tehran is a crucial factor in conflicts between the two countries. Religious tensions have heightened since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq that brought the majority Shiites to power in Baghdad instead of Saddam's Sunni-dominated regime. The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, which saw Iran support the demands of sizeable Shiite minorities in Gulf monarchies, was another turning point, Therme said. "Arab states appeared vulnerable and Iran was then defined as the main threat to regional stability," he said. Iran has even called into doubt the suitability of the Saudi royal family to serve as custodians of Makkah and Madinah, the holiest cities in Islam - especially after a stampede at the annual hajj pilgrimage in 2015 left hundreds of Iranians dead.

#### How will the crisis evolve?

While the increase in tensions has raised serious concerns, few expect an outright military confrontation. "A broader regional conflict remains unlikely," said Graham Griffiths, a senior analyst at consulting firm Control Risks,



This file handout photo provided by the Iranian news agency IRNA and taken on July 17, 1982 shows Iranian soldiers fighting in the trenches battlefield of Ahvaz, during the Ramadan offensive of the Iran-Iraq War, also called the first Gulf War. —AFP

saying Riyadh would instead look to use the latest missile incident to push for further sanctions against Tehran. Therme agreed that both sides would steer clear of open conflict. "Iran has experience of the war with Iraq... and Saudi Arabia is bogged down in Yemen, after failing to define the future of the Syrian revolution... and counter Iran's influence in Iraq," he said. —AFP

## US Supreme Court to launch e-filing

**WASHINGTON:** Surely but slowly, the Supreme Court is entering the 21st century. The court is making new legal filings available online starting today, years behind the rest of the federal court system. Can livestreamed audio of arguments and even televised sessions be far behind? Yes, they can. But advocates of court openness will take what they can get for now, especially because the Supreme Court will not charge for documents. The federal courts' PACER system does charge fees.

"Though the Supreme Court has moved glacially to join the rest of the judiciary in permitting online filing, that's better than not at all, and the institution should be commended for creating an e-filing system that, unlike PACER, will be free and easily accessible to the public," said Gabe Roth, executive director of Fix the Court.

Over the years, the justices have at times shown a glancing familiarity with technology. Some carry computer tablets with high court briefs loaded on them. But notes between justices are routinely sent on paper, definitely not by email. Chief Justice John Roberts himself noted a few years back that the court stuck with pneumatic tubes to transmit newly released opinions from the courtroom to reporters waiting one floor below until 1971, long after their heyday. Roberts said that it's appropriate for courts "to be late to the harvest of American ingenuity" because their primary role is to resolve disputes fairly.

Many Supreme Court legal briefs already are available online and for free from several sources. Scotusblog.com obtains and posts many of them, along with opinions. The Justice Department has an easily accessible archive of its extensive high court filings on its website, and the American Bar Association posts briefs in the 70 to 80 cases the court agrees to hear each term. But the public may not know to look elsewhere. When the justices issued their highly anticipated decision upholding President Barack Obama's health care overhaul in 2012, the court's website was overwhelmed.

It, too, has recently been overhauled to make it friendlier to the public. The Supreme Court updates come amid criticism of the PACER system as outmoded and unfair. "The PACER system used by the lower federal courts is hopelessly outdated and cumbersome. And, to add insult to injury, the PACER system charges people fees to access court records that should be made freely available," said Deepak Gupta, the lead attorney in a class-action lawsuit challenging PACER fees.

The judiciary says the fees provide the only money to pay for the system. The cost to users was just one among several reasons the court opted not to join the PACER system, court spokeswoman Kathy Arberg said. "The court elected to design its system in-house so that it would have the capability to customize and continuously update to meet the distinctive needs of the court and counsel," Arberg said.

Until now, lawyers have not been required to submit their filings to the court electronically. Beginning Monday, those documents should appear quickly on the court's website. People who can't afford to pay court costs will be allowed to file paper copies, which Supreme Court employees will scan and post online. Not everything is changing. Lawyers still will be required to submit up to 40 paper copies of every brief, and the court's color-coding system to distinguish types of briefs also will remain. There's no timetable for electronic filings to supplant paper as the official court record. —AP

## Tiny Texas town turns inward in wake of mass shooting

**SUTHERLAND SPRINGS:** The people of Sutherland Springs have not held news conferences, they haven't made appearances on network morning television shows, and while they've been polite to the media, they're not exactly forthcoming. Instead, this rural community is turning to the one thing that has buoyed them in good times, and sustains them now: an unshakable faith in God. David Colbath, one of about 20 people who were injured but survived Devin Patrick Kelley's rampage at the First Baptist Church, held Bible study from his hospital bed.

Judy Green, a church member who avoided the carnage because she and her husband were running an errand, sought counseling at another church because of what she saw when she drove up to the building that day. Crystal Barkley, a Sutherland Springs resident who doesn't even attend the church, prayed and "stayed at home for a couple of days, collecting strength." There have been no fewer than three prayer vigils for the victims. One, held Wednesday and attended by Vice President Mike Pence, was so large that it had to be held in the neighboring town's football stadium.

Yesterday, the town gathered for church services in its community center, which is next door to the church and was part of the crime scene for several days. Residents have included reporters in impromptu prayer circles and have tried, quietly, to let the world know that it is a God-loving town, not a place of violence. "We want to be known for more than this," sighed Tambria Read, president of the local historical museum, schoolteacher and lifelong resident. "We are not a

## PM urges return of 'democratic, free' Catalonia

**BARCELONA:** Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy said yesterday he wanted to return to a "democratic and free" Catalonia as he aimed to rally support for a unified Spain on his first visit to the turbulent region since it declared independence. A day after hundreds of thousands of people marched in Barcelona to demand the release of separatist officials detained over their independence drive, Rajoy also urged businesses not to flee the wealthy northern region. "We have to recover the sensible, practical, enterprising and dynamic Catalonia... that has contributed so much to the progress of Spain and Europe," Rajoy told members of his Popular Party in Barcelona.

"We want to regain a Catalonia for everyone, democratic and free," he added. The Catalonia crisis has caused concern in the European Union as the bloc deals with Brexit and uncertainty over the fate of the region's 7.5 million people. More than 2,400 businesses have moved their legal headquarters elsewhere. Rajoy yesterday urged those businesses "not to go". Separatist lawmakers, who were dismissed by Madrid after declaring their region independence from Spain last month, insist that they were given a mandate for secession by a banned October 1 referendum.

However, pro-unity camps say that the vote was deeply flawed and largely boycotted by opponents of independence, though more than 90 percent of those who turned out backed a breakaway. Several officials have been detained over their



SUTHERLAND SPRINGS: The remains of Ricardo Rodriguez and his wife Therese arrive at the Sutherland Springs Cemetery in Texas. The two were among 26 killed during a shooting at the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs. —AFP

shoot-'em-up community."

It's difficult to put into words what happens to a place after a mass shooting, and each has its own way of dealing with the horror. In big cities like Orlando and Las Vegas, it was possible for those not directly affected to mourn and move on, to try to get back to normal as quickly as possible and mend aching hearts. Suburban sprawl and the comforts of urban life helped smooth over the raw emotion and residents could ignore the media, the outsiders coming to help, the constant reminder of loss.

In Sutherland Springs, there's been no escaping Sunday morning's shooting that left more than two dozen people dead. Every resident in town knew at least one person who was killed, and most knew several. The victims were cousins, former students, people who they laughed with not long ago at the annual Fall Festival. Eight were children. In all, the gunman fatally shot 25

people at the church. Authorities have put the official death toll at 26 because one of the victims was pregnant. "It's a good, simple community," said Rod Green, Judy's husband. Green said he got a call from the church pastor, who was out of town. "He said, 'what's going on,' and I said, 'what do you mean?'" He said, "there's been a shooting at the church. Aren't you there?"

By the time Green and his wife arrived, police and first responders were there. There were wounded people in the parking lot. The Greens tried to comfort the wounded, while ambulances crisscrossed the road outside. Helicopters landed nearby to fly the critically wounded to hospitals. "I saw a lot of stuff in Vietnam, and I never expected to see that type of thing here," he said. And now there are outsiders in Sutherland Springs, who stick out by virtue of the fact that they're asking questions during a time when people are pleading for answers from God. —AP

role in pushing for independence, which is outlawed under Spain's post civil-war constitution. The region—which accounts for a fifth of Spanish GDP—remains deeply divided on independence and Barcelona's mayor on Saturday slammed separatist lawmakers for dragging Catalonia into chaos.

A poll commissioned yesterday by the Madrid-based El Pais daily showed that less than a third of Catalans now believed independence was possible in the near future. The 28 percent of respondents who said they thought swift secession was viable was down sharply from a similar poll in October. Rajoy has used his powers as head of Spain's central government to dismiss Catalan lawmakers, suspend the region's autonomy and call for fresh regional elections on December 21. The prime minister, who attended a presentation by a party candidate at hotel in Barcelona, did not appear in public.

#### 'Independence is toxic'

Rajoy's Party Popular won only 8.5 percent in Catalonia's last election two years ago that saw pro-independence parties sweep to power. His candidate Xavier Garcia Albiol yesterday said events since the October 1 referendum showed that "independence is toxic and is destroying Catalonia." Eight ministers under Catalan ex-leader Carles Puigdemont have been detained on charges of sedition, rebellion and misuse of public funds. Two heads of pro-independence lobby groups are also behind bars. Six former parliamentarians were granted bail last week by Spain's Supreme Court on similar charges. Local police said 750,000 people turned out in Barcelona on Saturday to demand the release of detained officials. The demonstrators gathered on an avenue next to the regional parliament building waving Catalan independence flags and chanting "Freedom!" while some held up banners announcing: "SOS Democracy". Children in riding helmets climbed castells—the region's traditional human towers—as others held placards bearing caricatures of some jailed lawmakers. —AFP



BRUSSELS: Protesters hold placards during a demonstration by pro-Catalan independence supporters calling for the release of jailed separatist leaders yesterday. —AFP