


# The Iran-Saudi Cyber Conflict

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## ABSTRACT

Cyber conflict is a factor in modern politics. There is often a synergy between historical political issues and current cyber conflicts. Saudi Arabia and Iran have a long-standing mutual animosity that is now being expressed via cyber operations. This study provides a context for current cyber conflicts between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran. The political history of both countries is briefly explored. Then specific cyber incidents are examined within that existing political conflict. The current state of affairs between Saudi Arabia and Iran can best be described as a cyber cold war. This study provides both current cyber incidents as well as the political and historical context in which these incidents occur. The history of the modern states of Iran and Saudi Arabia provide a context for the political strife between the two countries.

## KEYWORDS

Cyber War, Iran, Middle East, Saudi Arabia

## INTRODUCTION

The political situation between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been tenuous for some time. Both nations vie for dominance in the Middle East, making them naturally in conflict. As the two nations compete, this sometimes is expressed in kinetic conflicts, such as the civil war in Yemen. The Houthi movement, officially named Ansar Allah, is one faction in the Yemeni civil war (Lackner, 2019). The Houthi's are supported by the nation of Iran. The government of Yemen is led by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, and is supported by Saudi Arabia (Hill, 2017). Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi has been president of Yemen since 2012, though that position is rejected by the Houthi's.

The Yemeni civil war is indicative of the regional friction between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While such conflicts are a substantial concern for regional peace and stability, there are other issues that can also impact the region. Cyber conflict is much more readily engaged in by nation states. This is primarily due to the fact that there is less risk involved in a cyber attack than in a kinetic attack (Easttom, 2018). This current study explores the cyber conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the current cyber conflict, it is important to understand the political history of the region. This includes both the history of Saudi Arabia and Iran. The geographical, political, and religions histories of both nations impact the current situation in the region. The modern aspect of cyber conflict does not occur in a vacuum and must instead be viewed in historical and political context.

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The Gulf Cooperation Council is a group of Arab monarchies consisting of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, formed in 1981 (Al-Mawali, 2015). The group was formed for economic reasons. Saudi Arabia has always taken a leading role in the Gulf Cooperation Council. One of the goals was to have a common currency by 2010, but it did not reach that goal. Other goals include establishing scientific research centers, encouraging the private sector, and generally increasing ties among member nations (Abboud, 2016). Achieving a common defense force was also a goal of the council, but one that has not been achieved (Yasein, 2019). While the council has not achieved all of its goals, it has facilitated cooperative projects throughout the member nations. These projects have included economic initiatives, technological projects, and improvements to healthcare. With these advances, one could argue that the political motivations behind forming the council are less important than the progress it has achieved.

To some extent, the council was also established as a counterbalance to Iran's political influence in the region. Iran has continued extending its influence by supporting groups such as Hezbollah, and expanding its involvement in Syria (Wastnidge, 2017). Ibish (2016) views the conflict in Syria as a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Whether that view of the Syrian war is accurate or not, there is no doubt that Iran has at least sold arms to factions in Syria. It is clear that Iran wishes to have a strong influence on Syria, to the point of introducing military forces in Syria (Bucala, 2017). The leadership of Iran would probably view their involvement in Syria as supporting a kindred cause. This is in fact how the United States viewed its involvement in South Vietnam. However, from the perspective of the council, Iran's involvement in Syria serves primarily to enhance Iran's influence throughout the region.

The issue is one of competing ideologies and goals. Clearly both Iran and Saudi Arabia are both Muslim nations. However, Iran is largely Shia Muslim, while Saudi Arabia is a primarily Sunni Muslim country. Throughout the middle of the 20th century, Saudi Arabia viewed itself as the leader of the Muslim world. This view is supported by Saudi Arabia being home to Mecca and the birthplace of Islam. However, the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran set up a truly theocratic Islamic government (Parvaz, 2014). Furthermore, Iran has the explicit goal of exporting its theocratic model to other nations. This serves as a direct threat to the power of the Monarchy in Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf Cooperation Council states. While there are issues regarding economics and oil that fuel the conflict, it is not unreasonable to assume that one of the primary driving forces in the rivalry between the Gulf Council and Iran is the theocratic threat to the power of the monarchies in the council. While the council has accomplished other, quite laudable goals (Khoja, Rawaf, Qidwai, Rawaf, Nanji, & Hamad, 2017; Al-Othman, et al., 2015; Salahuddin, & Gow, 2014), protecting the power of the monarchy is the primary purpose.

The Yemeni civil war has been a small regional conflict, but one which has involved international forces. Yemen has been engaged in a civil war since 2015. The war began between the internationally recognized Yemeni government, and the Houthi armed movement. Both of these groups claim to be the official government of Yemen. The Houthi's are based in the mountainous region bordering with Saudi Arabia. The Houthi leader, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi was killed in 2004 during a government crackdown following anti-government protests. That conflict continued and has been repeatedly heating up since that time. In retrospect the killing of Houthi actually encouraged the growth of the anti-government faction, rather than subduing it.

For many years the Houthi's used civil disobedience, including protests and boycotts. For example, in 2012, the Houthi's boycotted the election because it had only one candidate (Hokayem & Roberts, 2016). In mid-2014 this led to several weeks of street protests. These protests escalated to use of force between the Houthi and the Yemen army (Hall, 2017). In September of 2014 the Houthi seized control of the Yemeni capital. There was a proposal for peace that included splitting the nation into six federal regions. In January 2015, the Houthi seized the presidential compound and led to the resignation of President Abdrabbuh Mansu Hadi and his ministers. The next month, Hadi escaped and declared the Houthi takeover as illegitimate (Hamidi, 2015). This incident is only one of several that indicate the

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