



## Iran's Information Interventionism and Threats to Saudi State Sovereignty

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Saudi Arabia continues to receive criticism by states (including its closest allies), intergovernmental organizations (of which it is a founding member state), and non-governmental organizations (which it supports in quantitative and qualitative terms) for various reasons including accusations of imprisoning political dissidents. The various reports published, often rely on a narrative that assumes guilt, quoting anonymous sources with unverified credibility claiming access to intelligence, policymakers, and interest groups in Saudi Arabia. The international community should look towards the events that occurred on September 30<sup>th</sup> that highlight a fundamental security challenge facing the Kingdom at home, which is the direct support and coordination of groups and individuals by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to destabilize Saudi Arabia and instate a climate of fear among the nation's citizens. This was not the first time Iran sought to attack Saudi Arabia using hard power directly. One can cite countless attempted attacks and missile strikes from Yemen and oil field attacks on Aramco facilities, yet is it more complex to quantitatively assess attempted Iranian attacks on Saudi Arabia using soft power tools such as supporting destabilizing voices on social media. While the international community is often in agreement on the threats posed by the Iranian regime sponsoring terrorism and conducting direct attacks, instigating political dissent has yet to be accepted in international bodies due to its being masked under the umbrella of freedom of speech. The events of September 30<sup>th</sup> should act as a reference point for the International community on the presence of Iranian cells in Saudi Arabia. While conventional threats remain important, an under-discussed topic is the deployment of political dissent and religiously motivated grievances by Iranian cells as soft power strategies to destabilize Saudi Arabia.

The operation, which infiltrated an Iran-backed terror cell in Saudi Arabia, seized IEDs, small arms, kilos of gunpowder, and various rifles and pistols. Among those detained are three individuals that received direct training from the IRGC to conduct covert operations of which the command and control come directly from Tehran. It is no secret that Iranian foreign policy is deeply rooted in proxy forces and sponsoring terrorists to conduct operations with minimal cost and maximum effect of nations seeking to stabilize and consolidate power. In terms of the projection of power by proxies, support comes in the form of delegation (proxies are held on a tight state leash and under the state's effective control), orchestration (proxies are on a somewhat looser leash but share common ideational bonds with the state as well as receive funding or tools by Iran) and sanctioning or passive support (which is more qualitative than quantitative), the tools of which can be both kinetic and non-kinetic. While conventional threats remain important, hard power is not the only tool at a nation's disposal to project its power and

influence on the global arena. In fact, in the modern field of increasing grey-zone hybrid conflict, soft power, and informational campaigns can be deployed with minimal resources, yet act as destabilizing catalysts in the targeted nation. Akin to a cancerous cell inhabiting a body, if these cells of soft power or foreign-planted voices of destabilization are not addressed early, Iran stands most to gain in its desire to spread the Green Revolution, regionally and globally. In the event of September 30<sup>th</sup>, the civilian cost of the terror cell remaining unnoticed by the Saudi security forces would have been devastating. Similarly, Iranian infiltration of the Saudi civil society spaces creates unprecedented challenges in balancing and addressing legitimate international human rights concerns and maintaining the state's integrity in addressing Iranian-planted voices to fuel political instability, also operating in varying degrees as Iranian proxies.

Iran is increasingly [operating](#) in the soft power support space of proxies in adherence to preexisting notions of understandings of state sovereignty and acts of war, while minimizing kinetic maneuvers that are legally and boldly [defined by](#) international laws and norms. The international community must adequately address, define, and assess interferences in a country's political processes, for example looking at Iranian actors instigating protests, political dissent, and social media campaigns as state sovereignty violations. The international arena operates on fundamentals of non-interference based on agreed-upon laws and norms, which give certain sovereign powers the right to exercise domestic policies and a system of governance. The current laws of war do not constitute state-sponsored dissemination of propaganda as acts of war. However, the ability for highly personalized and targeted information campaigns represents an international and transnational threat, as state-sponsored political protests, particularly in the cyber domain, can mobilize individuals or groups to instigate violence and political unrest.

The Iranian state has leveraged the following in its infiltration of digital political and civil society spaces to fuel international condemnation of Saudi Arabia:

- Advantages:
  - Plausible deniability/attribution challenges
  - Legal loopholes
  - A grey area – does not meet the threshold of war
  - Low-cost
  - Volume
  - Flexible/efficient
- Goals:
  - Weaken Saudi and its ties to allies.
  - Diminish trust by Western institutions towards Saudi Arabia.
  - Reduce the power sphere of influence of Saudi Arabia.
  - Position itself as a friend of choice on matters pertaining to human rights at the expense of Saudi Arabia.
- Methods:
  - Influence campaigns
  - Deception



- Paramilitary organizations and proxies acting in cyber and social media domains
- Creation of artificial grievances towards individual leaders/government actors in Saudi Arabia and funding them

Looking towards a case study of Iranian activity in developing a successful proxy to act on its behalf in a host nation, Hezbollah serves as a critical example of a combination of both hard and soft power deployment in Tehran's efforts to export the revolution. Hezbollah's infiltration in Lebanon's political sphere has been facilitated due to a power vacuum created by Syria's forced-withdrawal and Iran's subsequent rapid attempts to take a more direct role in supervising and directing Hezbollah. Among the weaponry and training tools at Hezbollah's disposal from Tehran are political narrative, political "branding" tools, information campaigns by protestors, and media organizations, which have contributed to Hezbollah's rise as an Iranian political party operating in a foreign land to fulfil its strategic objectives. For Hezbollah to rise the way it did, the Iranian-backed organization deployed strategies of allocating social welfare, which serves as a contention point amongst internally competing groups in Lebanon. Such groups rallied grassroots support amongst their respective communities and mobilized out-group support to strengthen electoral power and reward their constituents with political concessions reaped through increased parliamentary representation. Hezbollah gradually became increasingly engaged in the Lebanese political sphere – focusing efforts on mobilizing support to influence policy and state affairs and engaging in less frequent militant operations both domestically and regionally. The development of Hezbollah from an armed group of loosely connected individuals into a pillar in the policymaking arena of the internal and external affairs of the Lebanese state demonstrates the impact and effects soft power support and political branding mobilization deployed by the state of Iran towards a foreign country to seize control of the country's political process. This example highlights the significant risk that Iranian political infiltration poses to other neighboring nations.

Bahrain serves as a specific example of Iran targeting the civil society of a Gulf country specifically, in order to infiltrate its political process. Iran offers [direct and indirect support](#) to Saraya Al Ashtar and the military wing of Hezbollah in Bahrain, for both the purpose of destabilizing the political process (vis-à-vis instigating and fuelling debate based on grievances) and offering tools to deploy terror attacks. Iranian mobilization of informational warfare bots masked as civil society [have been identified](#) by US companies such as Alphabet (Google parent company). Moreover, it utilizes Facebook to deploy advanced back-end data analytics measures to counter state-sponsored informational campaigns. Therefore, despite the international community not yet recognizing the threat that Saudi Arabia and other neighboring countries face concerning this matter, progress has been made in multinational corporations taking measures to support state sovereignty vis-à-vis increased investment in countering and exposing foreign interference in a nations political structure.

The Iranian policy of supporting ideological movements masked as political dissent empowers a diverse array of actors with asymmetrical rhetorical and international recognition capabilities,



which by nature makes attribution (identifying individuals responsible for an event) difficult. Despite claims of operating under the best intentions, non-governmental institutions and media houses that name and shame nations for the "illegal" detention of political dissidents lack a comprehensive approach in their efforts to understand grey-zone areas of operations deployed by the Iranian regime to destabilize the political arena and overshadow legitimate and home-grown efforts to advance human rights in all its forms. Iranian infiltration of the state's plans towards necessary reform by amplifying criticism of Saudi Arabia's detaining of individuals for crimes against the state, has fuelled illegitimate condemnation, and encouraged the international community to ignore the significant progress that the Kingdom has made, thus further hindering its ability to continue on the same path. The wheel of reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia led by the Crown Prince encompasses development and modernization in all government institutions and human rights. Recent measures under royal decree and legal text emphasizes gender equality and the promotion of women's rights in all aspects of Saudi society, and the re-iteration of an independent judiciary for a fair legal process. Despite its path towards continuing to develop the country's strategic objective on addressing all areas of advancing the social contract between citizens and the government, media houses and NGOs are seeking to block Saudi Arabia from entering the UN Human Rights Council, even as the Kingdom honors the organization's mission statement at home and globally. Among the donations toward the UN bodies in aspects concerned with Human Rights and the betterment of global society as a whole through the World Food Program and UN body's concerned with poverty alleviation; Saudi Arabia has also created domestic organs such as The King Salman Relief Fund to aid the global arena in accomplishing the United Nations Sustainability Goals.. Saudi Arabia has also created domestic organs such as the King Salman Relief Fund to aid the global arena in accomplishing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Denying Saudi Arabia entrance into any national or international organizations concerned with human rights ultimately decreases the organ's ability both quantitatively and qualitatively to achieve its near- and long-term objectives. Saudi Arabia's countering violent extremism (CVE) policy is based on various disciplines and issues, including diplomacy, development assistance, criminology, psychology, sociology, and political science. Saudi Arabia's Etidal Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology connects best-practices in CVE theory in practice through international and regional collaboration, research, and education. This comprehensive Saudi policy towards CVE of rehabilitation, re-education, psychological counseling, and reintegration addresses the global challenge of associated with the spread of extremist ideologies in the digital age.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Human Rights Commission offers insights into the Saudi judicial system's legal structure on matters pertaining to human rights. The commission [addresses concerns](#) on the Saudi judicial process and outlines the fundamentals of Islamic Shari'a, which prohibits the degradation of human dignity and stresses respect for human rights regarding legal clauses and royal decrees. For example, "A person under arrest shall not be subjected to any bodily or moral harm, nor torture or degrading treatment." Article (3) highlights the continuous reforms undertaken to modernize all aspects of government, including addressing human rights issues, and particularly the death penalty. The common misconception that Saudi's death penalty is widespread is based on falsified information. The



death penalty in the Kingdom is only imposed for the most severe crimes and under strict conditions. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Human Rights Commission offers a detailed examination of when and how the death penalty is used. The recognition of the reforms undertaken by Saudi Arabia in the development of comprehensive human rights policies has improved the Kingdom's ranking from the "Tier 3" to "Tier 2 Watchlist" per the US State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report. However, criticism over the detention of political dissidents remains criticized despite the aforementioned concerns on Iranian tools of exporting its revolution.

In essence, this article serves as a reference point towards the emerging challenges that Saudi Arabia and the international community will continue to face as grey-zone state competition continues to increase. International organizations, and in particular, the United Nations and its various subsidiary organs, were created to ensure global stability post-WWII, where concerns were kinetic, and new domains of warfare had yet to emerge. Following the conclusion of the Cold War and the shift in global dynamics towards a hybrid combination of bipolar competition (US-China) and multipolar global and regional medium power competition (such as the UK, Germany, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia), the field of operating in the international arena has become increasingly anarchic. Therefore, for states to advance their strategic objectives based on the new structure of the global system, new competition areas and tools available for power projection have also emerged. On the one hand, international organizations such as the UNHRC must continue to advance their efforts in the betterment of civilization as a whole and hold those that violate fundamental rights accountable, areas such as foreign infiltration of civil society and espionage make attribution increasingly tricky due to plausible deniability.

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