

Salman should take new path on Iran

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Saudi Arabia's new leader King Salman bin Abdulaziz is rapidly re-energising his country's stagnant foreign policy with the aim of making the kingdom once again the centre of decision-making in the Islamic world.

The only problem is that he may be heading in the wrong direction – that is, the same direction as his predecessors – if he is obsessed with trying to build a Sunni alliance of countries against Shia Iran. Instead, he should be making peace with Iran so the two countries can jointly tackling the far more threatening Sunni extremist group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis).

Nearly a dozen Arab and other Muslim heads of state have visited Riyadh to confer with King Salman since he acceded to the throne in January at the age of 80 after the death of the 90-year-old King Abdullah. Considered to be more dynamic than his predecessors, the new king has been greeted with hope by both Saudis and their neighbours. The visitors have included the leaders of Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkey – a list that shows how even the somnolent kingdom is still powerful and influential. With Isis controlling a third of Iraq and a third of Syria, wars raging across the region, floods of refugees and the emergence of Libya and Yemen as two new failed states, the Saudis are up to their necks in problems that need to be addressed.

The Arabs need to work with the Iranians in Iraq to defeat Isis, no matter how resistant they may be to doing so. Both want Isis defeated and Iraq stable. However, at a news conference this month the Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal accused Iran of “[taking over](#)” Iraq, after Iranian generals helped in the Iraqi army's attack on Tikrit as it tried to seize the city back from Isis.

The Saudis are in a position to unite Muslim states against Isis and build an Arab alliance that could eventually take over the leadership reins from the US-led coalition against the extremist group.

Muslim leadership is desperately needed to deal with a problem that comes from within the Islamic world. Isis is determined to eliminate not just Shias and members of all ethnic and religious minorities, but even Sunnis who do not abide by their interpretation of Islam.

Yet by refusing to work with Iran, Saudi Arabia is widening the Sunni-Shia divide that could prove destabilising for all the Gulf states and provide Isis with inroads.

Isis is an equal threat to all Arab states and Iran. The Saudis must put away centuries of prejudice and make up with Iran, which has attempted to improve relations with the Arab Gulf countries. It is time the Saudis paid a visit to Iran. Equally pressing for the Saudis is the crisis in Yemen as the country plunges into sectarianism and political and economic collapse. The ousting of the government of Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, the takeover of the capital Sanaa by the rebel Houthis and the marginalisation of other ethnic and tribal groups mean joint Saudi and Iranian mediation and conflict resolution are necessary.

Instead, the two countries are supporting rival factions in Yemen and creating a new arena of conflict. The Saudis accuse Iran of supporting the Houthis, who follow a branch of Shia Islam. The Houthis accuse the Saudis of trying to divide the country by backing Salafi and militant Sunni groups.

A former minister from the previous Yemeni government who is now in exile, bewailed to me in a private email the lack of a western response to the crisis. He told me the west's main concern in Yemen was terrorism, so it ignored the developing political crisis.

Saudi Arabia should be looking at the wider instability lapping at its borders and sacrifice parochial fights with Iran to mediate an end to the civil war in Yemen and put pressure on the tribal factions in Libya to do the same. That could pave the way for building a larger alliance jointly to help Iraq and Syria. King Salman must re-energise Saudi foreign policy, but it must be towards healing old wounds and not creating new ones.