

yale journal of international af

Beyond sectarian politics: Saudi- Iranian relations in prospect.

By Masoud Movahed

Iran's historic nuclear deal with six major world powers was hailed by all parties involved in the negotiating table. But this deal has also raised the question of how Iran's relations with its neighbors—especially Saudi Arabia—would evolve next. In the past few

weeks, Saudi Arabia has joined Israel as a voice of opposition to a deal between Iran and the West. As Thomas Friedman accurately observed, now that Iran has established its own relationship with the United States, it has set the Arab states of the Persian Gulf “on edge”. But the common trend in analyzing the Saudi-Iranian relationship in the West is usually rooted in sectarian politics. That is, the longstanding malaise in the two states’ relations is reduced to the binary of a Shia-Sunni divide. Iran and Saudi Arabia are nemesis, many assume, because of the two states’ fidelity to sectarian politics.

It is true that sectarianism is endemic to the politics of the region, given in part to the fact that Iran and Saudi Arabia, as the two pillars of power configuration, claim the leadership of the Islamic world. However, what is often omitted in the analyses is the influence of outsiders, namely the United States, which has had a far greater impact on Iran and Saudi Arabia’s bilateral relationship. For instance, from 1996 to 2001, while the Saudis were supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan, Iran’s reformist President Mohammad Khatami cooperated with the U.S. to topple the Taliban and played a key role in the formation of a national unity government.

Despite the wide divergence of foreign policy between Iran and Saudi Arabia towards Afghanistan, Iran's relation with Saudi Arabia was in its halcyon days. Suffice it to say, Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia is by and large geared towards Iran's relationship with the United States. To understand why, a bit of history is instructive.

While the two states initiated diplomatic relations in 1928, it was only in 1966 and 1968 when King Faisal and Mohammad Reza Shah respectively visited each other in their home countries. During the tenure of President Richard Nixon, Iran acquired the sobriquet of “gendarme” of the region ensuring the security of the oil-rich Persian Gulf. Not only did the U.S. designate Iran as a kind of local police, but also as a buffer state blocking the spread of communism in a key strategic region where any disruption in oil supply could distort the global economy. A convergence of interest in the region (such as combating Jamal Abdul Nasser's Pan Arabism) and the need for collective-security provided enough incentive for the Saudis to cooperate with Iran.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979, with its nationalist fervor, drastically altered the equation. With the emergence of a new government in Iran after the revolution,

the Saudis viewed Iran as both an ideological and a political rival. The new Iran had become enormously inspiring to the nations across the region, which could potentially leave the Kingdom's stability in flames. To contain the ever-growing popularity of the 1979 revolution, Saudi Arabia poured its petrodollars into Saddam Hussein's pocket as he went to war with Iran throughout the 1980s. However, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 evinced a new phase in the reconciliation between Iran and neighboring Arab states. Although Saudi Arabia and Kuwait had blatantly offered financial support to Saddam during the war—amounting to more than \$30 billion—Iran strongly condemned the Iraqi invasion.

In the aftermath of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, President Hashemi Rafsanjani, one the most influential figures in Iran, called for healing past wounds with Saudi Arabia. He traveled to Riyadh, meeting King Fahad and embarking on a plan for heightened economic and security cooperation. Rafsanjani's impeccable record in the 1979 Revolution as well as his influential character in Iran offered the Saudi royal family a chance for rapprochement. As a result, the two states' relations started to warm up after a decade of

intermittent rhetorical wars.

With the 1997 election of Mohammad Khatami, Iran's reformist president, and his "conciliatory foreign policy", especially his policy of "eradicating tensions", seriously contributed to ameliorating past wounds. For the first time since 1979, King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, who at the time was the crowned prince, traveled to Tehran to participate in the Organization Islamic Cooperation (OIC) conference. The zenith of this détente was marked by Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2001 as they signed an agreement ensuring security in the Persian Gulf. Agreements as such are unprecedented even during the Shah who was construed to be the police of the region.

During Khatami's presidency, Iran cooperated with the US on major developments in the region, not only seriously condemning the criminal attacks of 9/11, but also cooperating to topple the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Bush administration rewarded Iran's cooperation in 2002 by giving it the appellation of "axis of evil". The election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, at least in part, was a response to President Bush's hostile policies against Iran despite the supportive role that Iran played in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Post-Saddam Iraq marked a fertile ground for a new phase of rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Under Ahmadinejad, Iran's tensions with the West increased drastically. The ever-growing belligerent rhetoric exchanged between Iran and the West, especially the United States, left the Saudis with no option but to scale down engagement. This is a further testament that whenever Iran and the U.S. demonstrate policies of engagement, the Saudis invariably do the same.

The election of Hasan Rohani as president of Iran is a rare opportunity for Iran and the U.S. to put the issues concerned on the table and hold dialogue. The recent deal on the nuclear issue demonstrates that dialogue is effective to resolve disputes in the Middle East. Rohani showed his commitment to engage the world with constructive interaction with the last nuclear deal. He has also showed his willingness to engage Iran's neighbors, especially the Arab States of the Persian Gulf, based on mutual interests and respect. Rohani signaled this in one of his very first press conferences, stating that Saudi Arabia and Iran are not just neighbors but "brothers". He also recently encouraged political leaders to steer away and end "unhealthy rivalries". Many

experts interpreted this statement as a harbinger to end the unhealthy rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In the last nuclear deal, however, Saudi Arabia did not seem to welcome improvement in the relations between Iran and the West, especially the United States. The reason it did not do so is that if Iran, given its geopolitical superiority, continues to establish constructive relations with the United States, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf become less relevant as U.S. allies. Saudi Arabia opposes the U.S. to engage Iran because it fears the kingdom would lose its regional standing. This fear goes beyond the nuclear program or sectarian differences. But the Saudis should recognize that a long-term agreement on Iran's nuclear issue will solidify the regional stability in the Persian Gulf. A reconciliation between Iran and the United States will not only harm the status of Saudi Arabia as a regional power, but can conceivably promote further engagement of Iran with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf on the number of important issues such as energy and security. The experience of President Khatami shows that regional cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia is possible only in light of improving U.S.-Iranian relations. Above all else, Iran's engagement with Saudi

Arabia will ameliorate the sectarian divide in the region, which has been fueled by the Syrian conflict.

About the Author

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