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The Iran-Saudi Conflict

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The heightening of tensions between Riyadh and Tehran has become a significant factor in the regional politics of the Middle East. While the cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia is certainly not a new phenomenon, the recent execution of Sheikh Nimr by the Kingdom, the storming of the Saudi Embassy in Iran, and the end to formal diplomatic ties between the two countries signals a more dangerous chapter in the regional conflict. What are the perspectives from Iran and Saudi Arabia on the rising tensions? How do they view each other's regional intentions and foreign policies? And, what steps can be taken to mitigate the conflict? To answer these questions, we have solicited two pieces to provide us with vantage points representing how Iran and Saudi Arabia respectively view each other. Below, we are delighted to highlight **HRH Abdulmajeed Al Saud's** article on behalf of the Saudi perspective, and **Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian** and **Mehrdad Saberi's** article on the Iranian perspective. **Know Your Enemy, Embrace Your Friends: A Call for Caution in Relations with Iran**

By HRH Abdulmajeed Al Saud

Entrusted with guardianship over Islam's most holy sites, Saudi Arabia has been and

will continue to be a pivotal force in the Muslim world. Each year, the Kingdom welcomes over one million Muslim Pilgrims (Sunni, Shia, and Sufi...) across its borders,

risking its internal security and straining its infrastructure to host men, women, and children from around the world as they fulfill obligations to their faith. Fortunately, Saudi Arabia's natural resources have provided the wealth necessary to host these millions, and our leaders have worked ceaselessly to improve accommodations and to provide for the safety of these pilgrims; indeed, over one hundred thousand security officers, doctors, paramedics, nurses and volunteers are deployed each year. No other country on earth faces the same challenges on an annual basis. No other country has invested so much time and so many resources to ensure that the faithful will have the opportunity to perform a religious duty. The Kingdom does this without discrimination, and neither begrudges nor persecutes those who make the journey across its borders. The enormity of this undertaking is easy to underestimate and overlook, but its value to the faithful is enormous and real. Despite these accomplishments, the headlines tend to seek or manufacture failure, focusing only on the tragedies, rather than the sheer magnitude of the effort itself.[1] And for this, Saudis and their leaders do not brag or gloat, or try to find scapegoats when something goes wrong. Instead, the Kingdom and its leaders acknowledge that this is a mantle that we have chosen to bear and that, as much as we try, we cannot be the perfect host one hundred percent of the time, even though our annual goal is to provide a truly holy experience for every pilgrim, regardless of nationality or sect. As Prince Turki Al Faisal noted, our oversight of the Hajj is "a matter of sovereignty and privilege and service," even though it requires preparation and security for the movement of millions of people over a series of eight days (the equivalent of mobilizing for ten Super Bowls every day for week). This, I believe, epitomizes the Saudi character, for it reveals a sense of duty and loyalty to our Muslim brothers and sisters that is both real and deep, and which is truly the fabric of who we are as a people.

But why is this relevant – what bearing does it have on current events in the Middle East or within the Kingdom itself? Superficially, perhaps very little; however, viewed in light of current events that have been unfolding since the beginning of the year, appreciating Saudi Arabia's character and role in the Muslim world is, in fact, crucial to understanding the Kingdom's actions both internally and on the international stage, particularly with respect to Iran. Suddenly, it seems, Saudi Arabia is being portrayed as waging a proxy war against Iran, giving rise to claims of a "Cold War in the Desert" with Saudi Arabia and Iran battling for control of the dominant political and religious ideology in the region. Such characterizations dominate the Western media and even leading publications in political science and international affairs, with some even suggesting that armed conflict may erupt over our mutual animosity. While there is no doubt that tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran are high, and that the rhetoric on both sides is strong, viewed from the ground – from the streets of Riyadh, Bahrain, Dubai, and even Cairo and Islamabad – the reality of the current state of affairs is quite different, with the emergence of Iran as a "prodigal son" being the number one cause for concern for most of us who follow the news. Iran, we are being told, has changed, and yet despite these assurances we are struggling to understand just exactly how this change has occurred.

Indeed, recent coverage of the Islamic Republic of Iran suggests that a turning point has been reached and that a country that was once a pariah is positioned to re-enter

has been reached, and that a country that was once a pariah is positioned to be seen by the international community as an equal among its peers. Sanctions have been lifted, Iran has a deal that will – many believe – allow it to develop nuclear weapons in less than two decades, (see, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The agreement restricts Iran's efforts to enrich weapons grade uranium for the next fifteen years), and gives Iran a legitimacy that it has not possessed in years. These developments have been welcomed by some as a new chapter in the story of Iran's strained relationship with the rest of the world, but for those of us in the front lines, for those of us living and working in the Middle East at the doorstep of Iran's expansionist ambitions, Iran remains the greatest threat to regional peace and security that we have known since the end of the Cold War (but again, this is *not* a Cold War). For those of us paying attention to the facts, Iran's actions speak louder than its promises. The JCPOA has been in force for less than six months, and already Iran has fired missiles [over French and U.S. ships in the Arabian Gulf]; already, Iran has flown drones over military vessels sailing in international waters to obtain and publish photographs; already, Iran has seized American military personnel who mistakenly entered its territory and used them as propaganda. Far from indicating a "new beginning," Iran's behavior seems to us to suggest nothing more than a new, and quite dangerous, sense of bravado.

In fact, as Iran continues along its path of subversion and deceit, we in the Arab world look in both dismay and concern. How can the West be so easily duped, we wonder, and why are all of our efforts to contribute to the dialogue and abide by the rules of the international community ignored? These are the questions being asked and debated on the streets and the cafes throughout the Middle East. These are the sentiments shared by millions of Arabs, both in Saudi Arabia and around the world, all of whom wonder why the United States and the Western media have, for the most part, turned a blind eye to Iran's human rights abuses, support of terrorism throughout the world, and intent to destabilize the Middle East with its radical ideology. While we understand that sanctions could not last indefinitely, and that the Iranian people needed relief from their devastating effect, it is difficult for us not to wonder whether the pendulum has not swung too far, too fast, in the other direction as we watch President Rouhani make his tour across Europe like a long lost friend who has suddenly returned to play by the rules. Why, we wonder, is the West rewarding Iran for bad behavior, while at the same time condemning Saudi Arabia and its allies for their efforts to confront radical Islamic groups and, more importantly, to promote regional stability in times of increasing economic and political uncertainty? Iran, it seems, can commit atrocities and defy international law, but will be praised and rewarded when it complies with agreements meant to contain its bellicose ambitions.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are criticized for their "Stone-Age" political and legal systems, and censured for their efforts to quell internal threats. Iran executes dozens, and gets a pass because it agrees not to develop nuclear weapons; Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, executes forty-four Sunni terrorists and three Shia radicals following a full series of legitimate, fair and open trials and the Kingdom is condemned for its imprudence and desire to incite sectarian division across the Middle East. At no point did the Kingdom or its judiciary segregate or discriminate based on whether the alleged terrorist was a Sunni or a Shiite, but instead

discriminate based on whether the alleged terrorist was a Sunni or a Shiite, but instead it was the Iranians themselves who singled out this distinction in order to meddle in Saudi Arabia's internal affairs and promote division and violence. Quite simply, the forty-seven individuals who were executed were Saudis, *not* Iranians, thus making Iran's condemnation of the punishment completely unjustified. When the Iranian regime executes its citizens, the Saudi government does not interfere or incite protest, regardless of the religious beliefs or affiliation of those executed. Further, Iran exports radicalism, funds and arms terrorist organizations – U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry recently affirmed during a visit to the Kingdom that Iran is a chief supplier of weapons to Hezbollah – and maintains “Death to America” as a national anthem. The Iranian regime allows for attacks on foreign embassies, supports plots to assassinate foreign diplomats, and supports Bashar al-Assad, a [leader who has committed atrocities against his own people]. Guided by a constitution that calls upon its leadership to continue the Islamic revolution throughout the world, the Iranian regime uses its Revolutionary Guard to oppress its own people and to foment conflict around the region. And yet, despite these flagrant affronts to international law and diplomacy, Iran is on the verge of success of its quest for legitimacy.

In response to these developments, Saudi Arabia has above all else exercised diplomatic and political restraint. America is, after all, an old and important ally, and Saudis don't abandon relationships easily or at first offense. Make friends with a Saudi, and you're generally a friend for life. Still, however, the United States' recent apparent rapprochement with Iran cannot help but be a cause for concern, making re-affirmance of Saudi-U.S. relations more important than ever. For most Saudis, Iran's actions are well known and speak for themselves; however, the full range of Iran's transgressions must be known in order to appreciate the reasons to mistrust Iran's intentions. Failure to recognize and denounce Iran's transgressions will only further exacerbate the lack of trust felt by many Arab states towards Western powers, and particularly the U.S., following the Arab Spring and, more recently, the exclusion of all key regional players (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, etc.) in the negotiations on Iran's nuclear program. Having been shunned from talks that directly impact their security, many in the Arab world cannot help but feel skeptical about the West's commitment to the Gulf region and its allies. Indeed, despite the fact that the U.S. has supported the Saudi Arabian government's efforts against the Iranian backed Houthis in Yemen, many Arabs feel that the West does not appreciate the threat that these rebels present to Saudi security and ignores the legitimacy of our fight for the Yemeni people. Further, while Saudi Arabia is by no means immune from criticism, the Kingdom remains open to engagement with – not defiance of – the Western world, and for that reason alone, Iran's true character must be acknowledged by examining both its past and present actions.

Embassy on Fire: Iran's War on Diplomats

Any analysis of Iran's relationship with the Western world and its neighbors in the Middle East must be framed around three key features of the Iranian regime: its commitment to developing a nuclear weapons program; its support for terrorist groups and illegitimate leaders, and its desire to divide the region along sectarian lines in the effort to export its form of radical revolution to other states. Working both

independently and in conjunction with one another, these policies continue to define Iran's actions, as can be seen in most recently in the regime's complete disregard for diplomatic norms and international law when it allowed the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran and a Saudi consulate to be attacked following the execution of the Shia Saudi cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who had been accused and convicted of terrorism, inciting violence, and causing the death of Saudi policemen (Nimr was captured during a shootout between Saudi forces and Nimr's personal militia). Notwithstanding the fact that Iran's anger over Nimr's execution was completely unjustified and itself emblematic of the regime's strategy of promoting sectarian violence (which will be discussed further below), the Iranian government's failure to protect and defend the Saudi embassy from protesters illustrates the country's disdain for the Vienna Convention and other customary standards of security and protection afforded to diplomats. Although Supreme Leader Khamenei and other Iranian officials condemned the attacks, their response came only after the international community, including the U.N. Security Council, rebuked Iran for allowing such transgressions to occur. Meanwhile, the Saudi response to these direct threats and attacks upon its citizens and sovereignty has been marked by restraint and respect for international law: there were no attacks on the Iranian embassy in Riyadh, or its consulate in Jeddah, nor were there mass protests in the streets against Iranians or Shi'ites; instead, the Kingdom condemned the attacks and cut ties with Iran. No buildings burned in Saudi Arabia.

Further, it is important to recognize that the attack on the Saudi embassy was by no means an isolated event, but instead represented only the latest transgression in a decades long campaign of aggression against international interests and diplomats both within Iran and around the world. Indeed, the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and the subsequent hostage crisis in 1979 marked only the beginning of Iran's promotion of violence against foreign diplomats and officers with the Iranian regime either directly ordering or failing to act against threats to those it deemed a threat to its own legitimacy. The 2011 storming of the British embassy in Tehran, over which the Iranian government expressed "regret," exemplifies the regime's flagrant disregard for its responsibility to protect foreign diplomats and, with other hostile actions – for instance, its orchestration of a plot to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the U.S. in 2011 – serves as an unfortunate precursor to the attacks on the Saudi embassy in January. Further, through its support of terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran has aided in attacks on U.S. embassies (Beirut and Kuwait in 1983), as well as other Westerners throughout the world (Argentina, Bahrain, Pakistan, to name only a few). The purpose of this paper is not, however, to catalogue Iran's many transgressions against diplomatic protocol and international law, but rather to illustrate how the regime's consistent and systematic violations cannot and should not be overlooked. This is particularly true in light of the recent attacks on Saudi interests in Iran, where many have sought to chastise the Saudi government for being "reckless" and "inviting" Iranian retribution. Instead, as Iran's track record makes abundantly clear, the execution of Nimr al-Nimr served only as a pretext for the Iranian government to unleash its supports against Saudi interests and to continue its campaign against international law.

Sunni vs. Shia: Myth vs. Reality

Taking one step further back to examine the event that allegedly led to the attacks on the Saudi Arabian embassy, the Iranian regime's duplicity is further evidenced through its support of claims that al-Nimr was targeted by Saudi security forces and executed not because of the crimes he had committed, but purely because he was Shia. The Iranian government promoted this characterization of both al-Nimr himself and the events leading up to his trial and sentencing in order to provoke outrage against the Kingdom, and for the most part the Western media and even several governments have used this argument to contend that the Saudi government is actively persecuting its Shia citizens, and particularly those who are outspoken, which they condemn. While some of this censure of Saudi Arabia is rooted in critics' opposition to capital punishment and the royal family (which are issues outside the scope of this paper), the claim that al-Nimr was executed based on his Shia faith spawned a flurry of articles and analyses on the plight of Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia, many of which seemed determined above all else to find segregation and discrimination even before the inquiry began. While incidents of prejudice against Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia do occur – just as instances of prejudice against African-Americans and Hispanics, Jews and Muslims, and most other minorities occur in the United States – those of us living in the Kingdom know that there is neither state sponsored discrimination against Shi'ites nor widespread animosity towards Shi'ites among the majority Sunni population. Throughout the Kingdom, Shia businessmen work unhindered, leading companies and obtaining government contracts, while other Shias serve as politicians or work for the government.[2] We are, above all else, all Muslims, and the Kingdom's duty to welcome *all* Muslims serves as the cornerstone of its very legitimacy. Any attempt to oppress or discriminate against a fellow Muslim would run counter not only to our faith, but also to the validity of the state itself. Indeed, contrary to prevailing opinion, Saudi Arabia's "proxy war" with Iran stems not from the desire to establish Sunni domination and to eradicate all Shi'ites. Instead, the Kingdom's grievances with Iran are based on the Iranian regime's destabilizing actions throughout the Middle East – some of which were recounted above – and its failure to abide by international law.

Further, critics of Saudi Arabia's alleged discrimination against Shi'ites within the Kingdom consistently overlook or ignore the plight of Sunnis in Iran, who arguably are treated far worse than *any* Saudi citizen would be treated while living in the Kingdom. In fact, Sunnis constitute approximately ten percent of Iranians, with an estimated one million living in Tehran alone, where not a single Sunni mosque exists (most others tend to live in poorer regions of the country), and they are almost completely excluded from all government jobs and, moreover, lack basic civil rights within the country. Although Iranian President Rouhani has publically stated that Sunnis in Iran should be afforded equal rights, the fact remains that the regime continues to maintain a policy that allows for the systematic repression of Sunnis. Not surprisingly, Iran's status as the world's leading country for executions (on a per capita basis) has translated into the death of countless Sunnis, many of whom are sentenced for "insurrection" after converting from Shia. Although recent events have led some commentators to acknowledge "Iran's beleaguered Sunnis," the vast majority have focused solely on Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia, ignoring the fact that Iran is actively persecuting its own citizens while we in the Kingdom look on and ask, "why the double standard?"

Welcome Peaceful Overtures, But Beware of the Trojan Horse

After years of sanctions and political isolation, the Iranian regime continues to act with impunity, and yet the world seems content on appeasement. While some sanctions persist, and the U.S. has yet to take the step to declare Iran a “friend,” there is no doubt that a concerted effort to warm relations with Iran has characterized American foreign policy for the past several years. This approach, which appears to be a reaction to failed or stagnant policies of the past, purports an objective to “move forward” by allowing Iran once again to participate in international economic and political forums. Unfortunately, as a result of this new embrace of Iran, those who challenge Iran’s intentions or who allegedly act against Iranian – and, by proxy, Shi’ite – interests are criticized for inciting sectarian violence, even where Islam is not a motivating factor.

Today as ever, Saudi Arabia remains committed to welcoming *all* Muslims to the Holy Land, and we open our country to our brothers and sisters in the faith no matter where they come from, and we likewise remain committed to defeating prejudice against Shi’ites both within and outside of the Kingdom; in fact, even despite the fact that the Saudi embassy in Iran was attacked, *no* Shi’ite Iranian will be barred from the Hajj (King Abdullah even invited then Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Mecca in 2007) – we simply will not allow politics to interfere with the obligations of our faith. Likewise, on the political front, the Saudi government seeks to build coalitions and to strengthen regional security through organizations such as the Arab League, the GCC, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Such bridge building illustrates the Kingdom’s belief in promoting unity throughout the region, rather than division, as well as its vision to increase prosperity and secure peace for *all* Muslims. Iran’s track record indicates that the regime in Tehran does not share such a commitment, and that Iran remains set on destabilizing the region by funding radical Islamic groups and attacking the Saudi government.

Iran defies, while Saudi complies. Iran condemns while Saudi supports. Iran makes mischief, while Saudi makes friends. Though not apologizing for my country – we need to make a better case for our positions and values – I believe that the time has come for Iran to be called to the table and to be held to a higher standard. Compliance with the nuclear agreement simply isn’t enough when a country is exporting terrorism across the globe. The international community needs to take a harder line with Iran; continued complacency will only embolden its already defiant regime, and it is those of us in the Middle East who ultimately will pay the price.

[1] For example, Iran – and most of the Western media – strongly criticized of the Kingdom following the tragic Mina stampede in September 2015, in which over 2,000 pilgrims lost their lives. Almost immediately, the Iranian regime used this tragedy to disparage the Saudi government, calling it “irresponsible,” and allowing demonstrations through the streets of Tehran with protestors chanting “death to Al Saud.” This criticism was levied despite the fact that the Saudi government immediately launched an investigation into the incident, and has promised both accountability and reform if any Saudi officials made mistakes leading up to or during pilgrimage.

[2] In fact, Nimr’s wife at one time worked for the Saudi Ministry of Interior and had all of her medical expenses – including a trip to the United States for treatment – paid for

by the government, while Nimr's children were attending U.S. schools on a full government scholarship.

The Iran-Saudi Conflict and the End Game

By Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Mehrdad Saberi

“Iran has to choose whether it wants to live by the rules of the international system, or remain a revolutionary state committed to expansion and to defiance of international law,” Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia Adel al Jubeir stated recently in an op-ed in the *New York Times*. He further lists a whole host of allegations against Iran calling it “the single most belligerent actor in the region pursuing regional hegemony,[1]” as well as referring to Iran as “the world’s chief sponsor of terrorism.” Statements such as the aforementioned one lie at the crux of Saudi’s regional policy these days. From the all-out invasion of Yemen to funneling money to the rebels in Syria, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is intent on scuttling what it calls “Iran’s expansionist and interventionist behavior” in the region.

Against the backdrop of the “expansionist, sectarian, and hegemonic” picture of Iran that Saudi Arabia has opted to conjure up, however, comes in the historical realities that prove otherwise. As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger put it, “for nations, history plays the role that characteristics confer on human beings.”[2] Therefore, it is worth deconstructing some historical facts about Iran’s behavior as a nation-state towards its neighbors and verifying whether or not Saudi’s allegations bear any resemblance of truth.

Iran as a Nation State

Contrary to what the Saudi Foreign Minister argues, Iran has always acted as a responsible nation state within the realm of international norms and regulations. Iran does not have an aggressive policy, and it is the history that testifies to this claim—not the foreign minister of Iran. For at least the past three centuries, Iran has not waged war against any country. Even in ancient times when Iran was conquered by the Arab Empires of Abbasid and Umayyad dynasties (8th-13th CE), instead of revolting against the prevailing reign of the Arabs, Iranians opted to contribute to the prosperity of the Islamic world.

As Peter Brown of Princeton University put it, “in the western imagination, the Islamic [Abbasid] empire stands as the quintessence of an oriental power. Islam owed this crucial orientation neither to Prophet Muhammad(s) nor to the adaptable conquerors of the seventh century, but to the massive resurgence of the eastern, Persian traditions in the eight and ninth centuries; it was the luxurious Persian administration that brought the Arab war machine to a halt.”[3] Furthermore, Iran’s definition of nationhood did not come into being with arbitrary borders drawn by the British and French diplomats and the enthroning of unelected emirs and kings in the twentieth century, but in the words of Henry Kissinger, “Iran’s sense of nation state is the most coherent one amongst other countries in the region,”[4] which predates that of its surrounding countries.

The Logic behind Saudi’s Regional Policy

The foreign policy of Saudi Arabia is to a large extent reflective of regional and international developments, and therefore lacks a steady and harmonious pattern that is born out of the strategic depth of the Kingdom. Frequent shifts in their definition of friends and foes is an ample testament to this claim. For a certain period—between

friends and foes is an ample testament to this claim. For a certain period—between 1980-1988—Saddam Hussein was deemed as a strategic asset for toppling the newly established Islamic Republic during the bloody eight-year war with Iran. Once its neighbor Kuwait was invaded by the very same Iraq—thus an imminent threat at Saudi's doorstep—during the Persian Gulf War, Saddam Hussein became a formidable enemy to the Kingdom itself.

Another area where Saudi Arabia has failed to prescribe a coherent and comprehensive policy is Yemen. The Kingdom backed the Houthis in the 1960s in response to Egyptian-backed Yemeni republican nationalists. The very same Houthis, however, are now being depicted as an Iranian puppet and terrorist group—a claim upon which Saudi Arabia predicated its rationale of invading Yemen in 2009 and again in 2015.[5] Therefore, it is safe to say that the Kingdom since its existence in 1932 has not been able to formulate a coherent foreign policy that addresses its core strategic depth and interests. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a country that the Kingdom has since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 attempted to marginalize by depicting fabricated narratives about it and pressuring regional and international powers to subvert it.

Was It Iran that Inflicted War on Its Neighbors!?

The euphoria following the ouster of the Shah and the victory of the Islamic Revolution soon turned into a nightmare when Iraq in 1980 launched a devastating war against Iran, whose purpose was toppling the newly established Islamic Republic and dismembering Iran. The GCC[6] not only provided tens of billions of dollars financial support to Iraq [7] but also backed Iraq when Saddam Hussein proclaimed Khuzestan Province to be the part of Iraq's territory and called it *Arabistan*. The GCC stood on the side of an Iraq that inflicted more than \$500 billion[8] damage on Iran and which saw the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iranians perish and left hundreds of thousands either injured by chemical and biological weapons or physically disabled. One might then wonder to which realm of reason Saudis' depiction of Iran as an "aggressive" player conform—that the GCC backed Iraq's invasion of Iran is a proper vindication of the extent to which the Saudis have sought to distort Iran's history and policies.

On Intervention Allegations: Is Iran Intervening in the Domestic Affairs of Other Countries

Saudi officials have for long accused Iran of meddling in the affairs of other countries. In 2015, then Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia Prince Saudi al-Faisal reiterated Saudi's reading of Iran's policy in the region:

We see Iran involved in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, and Iraq...Iran is taking over Iraq; it promotes terrorism and occupies lands. These are not the features of countries which want peace and seek to improve relations with neighboring countries.[9]

The newly crowned King Salman of Saudi Arabia, in his remarks at the annual GCC summit in 2015, recapitulated the same allegation in which he called for the necessity of "confronting a foreign threat that aims to take over and destabilize the region and wage sectarian conflict." [10] Saudi officials have, however, fallen short of substantiating their allegations with any reliable and concrete evidence. Therefore, it is important to put into comparison areas in which Iran and Saudi have evidently intervened.

Iran's Involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria: Meddling or Upon Official Request of the Local Governments?

It is to no one's surprise that Iran played a responsible and cooperative role during the

It is to no one's surprise that Iran played a responsible and cooperative role during the US War on Terror in 2001. Iran "effectively mobilized its allies in Afghanistan, the Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek communities that together comprise half of the population, to align themselves with the U.S. forces in fighting the Taliban."^[11] The cooperation between Iran and the US extended well beyond the removal of the Taliban. In the post-Taliban era in 2001, at the Bonn Conference, Iran helped Hamid Karzai, who was supported by both the US and Iran, to assume the presidency in Afghanistan and constitute the new Afghan government. According to Ambassador James Dobbins, the American envoy to Afghanistan at the time (and the current American envoy to Afghanistan), "it was the Iranian envoy, Mohammad Javad Zarif, who convinced Younis Qanooni, a powerful Northern Alliance leader, to back Karzai."^[12]

Iraqi leaders' inclination toward strategic and close bilateral relations with Iran is not because Iraqi leaders are under the tutelage of Iran. For decades, Iran stood on the side of the people who fought Saddam's wrath and brutal dictatorship—who later came to constitute the post-Saddam government in Iraq—whereas, Saudi Arabia steadfastly tilted toward Saddam. At the present time, Iran's involvement in Iraq is based solely upon the request of the local government of Iraq as well as the Kurdistan Regional Government. In the fight against ISIS, for instance, as **attested** to by Kurdistan's President Masoud Barzani on August 26, 2014, "Iran was the first country to come to the aid of Kurdistan by providing weapons and equipment." Furthermore, Iran's role has been decisive in the recent liberation of Ramadi in which "the Iraqi military operated mainly in a supporting role alongside Iran-backed forces."^[13]

In Syria too, Iran has operated within the same realm of the strategic policy to maintain the territorial integrity of countries in the region. Iran's help to the Syrian government—which is the internationally recognized government of Syria with a representative at the United Nations—has been at the behest of the official request of the Syrian government. Iran has all along called for a cease-fire; formation of a national unity

government consisting of all factions including the opposition and the current government; laying the grounds for a transitional period; and preparing for presidential and parliamentary elections in order to restore security and stability in Syria (Iran submitted these parameters in the form of a 4-point Peace Plan to the UN in 2014). The United States has also realigned its objectives closer to that of Iran's. On January 23, 2016, in a meeting with members of Syria's opposition in Saudi Arabia, US secretary of State John Kerry **demanding** "rebels accept a set of preconditions proposed by Russia and Iran in order to participate in peace talks."

Saudi Arabia's Blatant Destabilizing Intervention in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen In Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has intervened—however upon the request of the Bahraini monarch—to quell the protests of the Shia majority of the population (some 70 percent)^[14] demanding reforms in the country.

In Egypt, the Kingdom supported the military coup in 2013 and **provided** "an \$12 billion aid package along with the UAE and Kuwait" to remove the **elected** president, Mohamed Morsi, through a military coup led by the army general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

The GCC members, among whom Saudi Arabia bears the most power, supported the intervention of Libya in 2011. No doubt the then leader, Muammar Gaddafi, was a dictator, but the country had a functioning government with relative stability and

security. Now almost five years after the toppling of Gaddafi, Libya resembles the characteristics of a failed state “with two governments (one backed by various militias and other backed by the West) and various groups loyal to tribes rather than a central government.”

Saudi Arabia began its bombing campaign in Yemen on March 26th, 2015. The objective of the war, as described by the Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, is to “protect the Yemeni people from a radical organization (Houthis) that has allied with Iran that has virtually taken over the country; to defend the legitimate government of Abed Rabbo Mansur Hadi; to go after the terrorists and extremists; and to finally open up space for political talks so that Yemen could transition into a better place to live.” However, the entirety of the Saudi claim about Iran’s involvement is hyped.

Saudi’s portrayal of Iran’s backing of the Houthis because of their Zaydi Shi’a faith is to a large extent fabricated. The Zaydi Houthis are a major force in the country (some 40 percent),^[15] which effectively ruled over Yemen for centuries until the early 1960s. There, however, exist fundamental dichotomies between Zaydi (Fiver) and Jaffari (Twelver) Shiism, which is practiced by the majority of Shi’a Muslim in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf region.^[16]

Furthermore, Zaydi Shi’ism—practiced by the Houthis—diverges with the Shi’ism practiced in Iran in terms of doctrine, political dimensions, and even religious holidays. Traditionally apathetic to propagating their beliefs in the political realm, the Houthis are not generally sympathetic toward the theory of the *Velayat-e-Faqih* (the rule of the jurist) practiced in Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. While Zaydism long had a political Imamate, Zaydism has moved away from the idea of a political imam as proper ruler of Yemen.^[17] As a matter of fact, Zaydis have more in common with their Sunni-Shafii Yemeni compatriots than they do with Iranian Shi’as.

Therefore, while the Saudi lobby and media are frantically spinning the Sunni versus Shi’a sectarian narrative—ignoring the complex tribal/class complexities of Yemeni society—the fact is that the anti-Hadi movement includes both Sunnis and Shi’as, thus debunking this false narrative.^[18] Iran’s involvement in the ongoing conflict as gravely exaggerated by the Saudis, thus, seems not to have any semblance of truth. Even the United States has thus far acknowledged that there is “no evidence that Iran controls the actions of Houthis.”^[19] US President Barak Obama, as well, testified to this claim in his interview with Thomas Freidman last year, describing Iran’s role in Yemen to be “overstated.”^[20] In consequence, Saudi’s distorted description of Iran’s role in Yemen is nothing short of propaganda and a guise for intervention in the domestic affairs of Yemen.

On Terrorism Allegations: Were the 9/11 Hijackers Iranian Citizens?

On January 19, 2016, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Juberi penned an op-ed in the *New York Times* in which he called Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism. It is important to take a minute and break down the significance of the aforementioned allegation. A Saudi citizen (which happens to be the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom) argues in an American paper that Iran sponsors terrorism.

The absurdity of this allegation comes into picture having known that 19 Al-Qaeda affiliated hijackers, amongst whom 15 were Saudi citizens, executed the single most tragic terrorist attack in the history of the United States on September 11, 2001. Osama

bin Laden, who founded Al-Qaeda, was a member of the prominent Bin Laden family in Saudi Arabia. The Taliban are another terrorist group whose members were the products of Saudi funded madrasahs in Pakistan. Saudi Arabia **was one of only three** countries in the world to recognize and support the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan until the 9/11 attacks.

ISIS is another offshoot of the radical Saudi Wahhabi ideology. A former Al-Qaeda affiliate, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi founded "The Organization of Monotheism and Jihad"[21] in the late 1990s, which then later was renamed to "The Organization of Jihad's Base in Mesopotamia or Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)" in 2004 after Zarqawi swore loyalty to Osama bin Laden.[22] After the death of Zarqawi in 2006, the group now practices its savage conduct under the self-declared caliphate entitled as "Islamic State of Iraq and Levant" (ISIL, or ISIS, or IS) led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Then it is rather preposterous and bizarre for a country with a long track record of supporting the most brutal of terrorist organizations and radical ideologies to sweep its own actions under the rug and accuse another country for such policy.

Saudi's irresponsible policies and support of terrorism have also espoused criticism from Saudi's most important international ally, the US. On Oct. 2, 2014, Biden **told** an audience at Harvard's Kennedy School: "our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria ... the Saudis, the emirates, etc., what were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad, except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world." And last but not least, US Secretary of State Hillary *Clinton* **warned** in 2009 in a leaked classified memo that *donors in Saudi Arabia* were the "*most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide.*"

Therefore, it is rather clear that Saudi's short-sighted foreign policy has resulted in nothing but chaos in the region, which then justifies its own policy by scapegoating a third country (Iran) for the quagmire that has engulfed the entire region of its own making.

The Way Forward

"Iran does not have a fight to pick with Saudi Arabia," Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif **said** in an interview last month. The same, however, cannot be said about Saudi Arabia. Mindful of Saudi's support to Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war as well as the **massacre** of 400 Iranian Hajj pilgrims by Saudi security forces in 1987, Iran, however, sought to formulate a regional security framework in the 1990s that culminated in the signing of a regional security pact with Saudi Arabia in 2001. The Saudis, however, not only did not adhere to the parameters of the agreement, but, according to leaked U.S. diplomatic cables, then King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia repeatedly exhorted the United States to "cut off the head of the snake" by launching a military strike against Iran in 2008.[23] Furthermore, the recent episode of the killing of almost **460 Iranian** pilgrims in the 2015 Mecca stampede injected more tension in the relationship, as the Saudi officials did not even apologize for the incident.

However, the current blame game cannot be the end game, and rehashing grievances

will not precipitate any positive results for either side. Iranian officials, at the highest political level, have all along demonstrated their political will to resolve outstanding problems with Saudi Arabia through dialogue and diplomatic means. Thus the leadership in Saudi Arabia should refrain from its zero-sum mentality and embrace direct talks with Iran.

As a first step, the two sides can immediately revive the Iran–Saudi security pact signed by Rouhani in 1998. After elected as the new Iranian president in 2013, Rouhani **expressed** pride in having been the signatory of the Islamic Republic's first security agreement with Saudi Arabia in 1998.

The next step should be for Tehran and Riyadh to cooperate in establishing a regional cooperation system in the Persian Gulf among Iran, Iraq, and the GCC to maintain peace and security and to cooperate on other issues such as trade, education, technology, science cultural exchange, as well as fighting terrorism and opposing all weapons of mass destruction.

The framework of the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), which refers to the nuclear agreement between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1), can be employed as a win-win agreement and a model for the aforementioned objectives to bear fruit. The JCPOA would not have been achieved without a win-win mentality exercised by all sides; a mentality that Iranians have always called for.

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[5] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/04/07/forget-what-youre-hearing-the-civil-war-in-yemen-is-not-a-sectarian-conflict/>

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