

Saudi Arabia and Iran: An Improbable Detente?

Interview with Jamal Khashoggi and Hossein Mousavian

Nora Müller (NM): It is not a new phenomenon that Saudi Arabia and Iran eye each other with suspicion and compete for regional hegemony in the Middle East. What is the history of this rivalry? What are its main root-causes?

Hossein Mousavian (HM): Ever since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, a number of factors have fueled the tensions between Tehran and Riyadh, especially the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980. In invading Iran, Saddam Hussein sought to disintegrate the Islamic Republic - and inflicted tremendous suffering on the Iranian people. The fact that Saudi Arabia was Saddam Hussein's main regional supporter during the Iran-Iraq War led to a sharp deterioration in Saudi-Iranian relations. Moreover, at the height of the nuclear conflict, Saudi Arabia sought to push the US and its Western allies towards a more coercive policy vis-à-vis Iran. And last but certainly not least: Tehran has been viewing Riyadh's support for Sunni extremists in the Middle East and beyond, but also the ideological affinity between Saudi Wahhabism and radical Salafi movements with great concern.

Jamal Khashoggi (JK): Let's set the record straight here. Rather than nurturing and sponsoring extremist organizations, Riyadh has always been at the helm when it comes to fighting Jihadist terrorism. But with all the mutual finger-pointing and accusations, we should not forget that there were also brighter moments in Saudi-Iranian relations. During the Shah era, the two countries were quite close on many issues, especially in their joint effort to form a line of defense against the Soviet Union and the spread of Communism. After the Islamic Revolution, however, the nature of the relationship changed. Yet, despite the character of the new regime in Tehran, Saudi Arabia did its best to maintain good relations with Iran, and it worked quite well under the presidencies of Ali Akbar Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami.

NM: So when did the relationship turn sour?

JK: After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Iran developed an appetite for regional hegemony, and hence keeping up a good relationship was no longer possible. From a Saudi perspective, Iran literally started taking over Iraq. Since the beginning of the so-called "Arab Spring", Tehran has also increased its footprint in Syria which we consider the heartland of the Arab Levant. Without Iranian support, Bashar Al Assad would have been forced to step down long ago. And the Iranian backing of the Houthis in Yemen is just another example of Tehran's expansionist policies in the region. To cut a long story short: our main problem with Iran is its interference in Arab affairs which is a major source of instability all over the Middle East.

HM: I beg to differ. Let's not forget one thing: The collapse of the Middle East as we know it and the unprecedented instability we are witnessing today mainly result from the Arab world's long-standing structural problems. With all due respect, but you cannot blame Iran for dictatorship, bad governance and corruption in many of the Arab countries. Iran had nothing to do with the collapse of the Mubarak regime in Egypt or Ben Ali's rule in Tunisia. Tehran did not interfere in Libya either – unlike NATO and its Arab allies who removed Muammar Gaddafi from power. As a matter of fact, it was the fall of Gaddafi that triggered Libya's disintegration. By contrast, Iran has been lending its support to Damascus and Baghdad and thus, has prevented the collapse of two Arab states.

NM: Rather than discussing about who is to be blamed for what, let's talk about how Saudi Arabia and Iran define their roles in the region.

JK: I find it intriguing that Iran styles itself as a progressive, revolutionary republic. But in Syria, it props up a brutal dictatorship. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, is an absolute monarchy, but it stands with the people in Syria and Yemen.

HM: Come on! If Saudi Arabia sides with the people, why does Riyadh support a minority government in Bahrain? The issue for Saudi Arabia is not democracy. For all intents and purposes, the Kingdom is anything but a democratic country. Its policy in Syria and Yemen is all about rolling back Iran's influence in the region.

NM: Both of you have mainly referred to regional geopolitics when talking about the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. What role do sectarian sentiments play? To what extent is the Sunni-Shia conflict instrumentalized for political purposes?

JK: In my opinion, sectarian sentiments are used as a tool to fuel the emotional heat of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. But one thing is clear: if it wasn't for Iran's expansionist policies, there would be no sectarianism.

HM: The genie of sectarian hatred is out of the bottle – no matter what its root-causes are. Therefore, the problem of sectarianism is real, and we have to take it seriously. Sunnis and Shiites have coexisted in the region for centuries – with ups and downs. However, the current level of tension is unprecedented. Terrorist groups such as ISIL and Al Qaeda seek to escalate the situation even further by committing deliberate acts of sectarian violence and atrocities against religious minorities. Whoever is interested in stability and peace in the Middle East, should stop fanning the flames of sectarianism.

NM: So one of the keys to regional stability in the Middle East lies in toning down the inflammatory sectarian rhetoric?

HM: This is a very important issue, but not the only one. The Middle East is on the verge of collapse. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is certainly a destabilizing factor. But even more detrimental are poverty, pervasive bad governance, corruption, dictatorship and a blatant lack of political participation. These are the elements which form a perfect breeding-

ground for extremism. Ultimately, the manifold crises of the Middle East stem from political inertia and socio-economic deficiencies.

JK: Hossein is right in one aspect of his analysis. When we talk about the keys to regional stability, we first of all have to understand what creates instability. Yes, poverty and bad governance are destabilizing factors. But so is Iran's meddling in the domestic affairs of Arab countries. Let me give you an example: Not long ago, Tehran announced the assassination of a major army general in Aleppo. The really crucial question is: what was this general doing there? Iranians are in Syria, fighting Syrians. From a Saudi point of view, this behavior is a provocation. And if things turn even nastier, Saudi Arabia and Iran could...

NM: ... end up in an outright war?

JK: An open confrontation would be in nobody's interest, but things are really bad in the Middle East and have deteriorated even further after the Russian intervention in Syria.

NM: **There are indeed very few silver linings on the horizon of an ever more unstable Middle East. The nuclear deal between Iran and the E3+3 was seen as one of those rare rays of hope. Some policy-makers and pundits hoped that the agreement could open a window of opportunity for cooperation between Iran and other actors in the region. A false hope?**

JK: The nuclear deal has not changed the situation on the ground. What determines the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran are Tehran's regional ambitions, its interference in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

HM: In my opinion, the nuclear deal has increased the chances for peace and stability in the region. In all likelihood, it has prevented a possible military confrontation over the nuclear conflict. And it is a living proof of the power of diplomacy – against all odds.

NM: **Given the obvious level of distrust between Riyadh and Tehran, what are possible confidence-building measures?**

HM: Saudi Arabia and Iran have to negotiate and eventually compromise on what should be their shared primary goal: regional stability. To this end, establishing a security structure in the Gulf region is key. We need a regional framework based on fundamental principles guiding the relations between the participating states. Even if it looks fairly unrealistic today, I firmly believe that Iran and the GCC countries will be able to establish a regional cooperation system at some point. The Helsinki Accords could serve as a source of inspiration.

In my opinion, peaceful settlement of disputes, free elections and majority-rule in combination with the protection of minority rights should be at the heart of such a

declaration of principles. The principles should be accepted by all parties, and there should be no double standards in the application of the principles.

JK: This is a very idealistic way to deal with the problems. The situation is much more complicated. It will be very difficult to bring all the major regional actors to the negotiating table and discuss the future of the Middle East. Take the ISSG*, for example. It is certainly a first step in the right direction, but success is far from being guaranteed. In order to bridge the gap between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the most effective confidence-building measure would be for Tehran to end its military and financial support for Bashar Al Assad and to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem when it comes to Syria.

NM: So what should a solution for Syria look like?

HM: From an Iranian point of view, key elements of a solution for Syria include a broad-based concerted effort by regional and international actors to eradicate ISIL, Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups on Syrian soil, a ceasefire between the government and opposition groups and the establishment of a comprehensive national dialogue encompassing the entire Syrian political spectrum followed by national reconciliation. Of course, the role of Bashar Al Assad remains a contentious issue – but I do not think it is an irresolvable one. We need to leave it to the Syrian people to decide about its president and constitution. That is why Tehran supports free elections under UN auspices as an indispensable part of any post-conflict transition process. And one more point: in order to fight ISIL effectively, we need to find a solution to the Syrian conflict first.

JK: I agree with Hossein when it comes to finding a solution to the Syrian crisis as a precondition for an effective fight against ISIL. And yes: the Syrian people crave for democracy. I think we should listen to them. Hossein proposed majority-rule as a key element of a post-conflict order in Syria and possibly other regional countries. In theory, this sounds very convincing. But reality is different, especially in Syria where a majority of Syrians is desperate to change the current system and eventually elect a new president. Yet, Tehran is reluctant to address these grievances. Its only interest is keeping Bashar Al Assad in power.

But what would Syria look like if Bashar Al Assad were to stay? Fake elections, political prisoners and Iranian alongside Russian military installations. For Saudi Arabia, such a scenario would be very hard to swallow. I am convinced that Syria will eventually follow the path of democracy, but of course it is very difficult to predict when this will happen. But regardless of what form of government the Syrians will choose: Riyadh's main interest is to pull Syria from Iran's orbit.

NM: In Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran pursue diametrically opposed objectives. Where do Saudi and Iranian interests actually converge?

HM: Regional stability is a “common good” for all of us, and it should be in our shared interest to pursue this objective with all our might. But some of us are still too entrenched in their zero-sum mentality in order to come to this recognition.

JK: I believe there are a number of areas where Saudi and Iranian interests overlap – ranging from trade and commerce to the fight against extremism. In principle, Saudis and Iranians could cooperate in a lot of fields – if only there was political will to opt for detente.

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