

Op-ed: Seyed Hossein Mousavian

## **Saudi Arabia and Iran must work together**

The Middle East is facing a total collapse. An ideology of terror is spreading, and dysfunctional Arab governments do not offer their people dignified alternatives to extremism. The decay is embedded in two smoldering crises: the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, which has made millions refugees and contributed to regional instability for decades; and the conflict between Saudi Arabia, a leading Sunni power, and Iran, a leading Shia power, which has entangled civil war and sectarianism in the region.

The collapse of the Middle East is dangerous for Europe, since the ideology of terror does not know borders and millions are fleeing the collapse. Therefore, there is an urgent need to provide a mechanism for regional cooperation, which re-establishes regional security. The United Nations has sufficient instruments available to defuse the conflict in Palestine. In the Persian Gulf, on the other hand, a regional security system must be created that is modeled after the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the integration Europe has experienced since the end of World War II.

The vessel that can initiate this process already exists: the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1), the grouping that diplomatically resolved the Iran nuclear dispute through negotiations. The foreign ministers of the P5+1 could negotiate with the foreign ministers of Iran, the six countries of the "Gulf Cooperation Council" (GCC), and Iraq on a new security architecture for the Persian Gulf.

One of their first decisions should be to reinstate the [security pact](#) between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which had been operative until 2005. This was an agreement that demonstrated that good, neighborly relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran are possible. I myself was involved in negotiating rapprochement between Tehran and Riyadh and making this security pact a reality. In mid-1996, then-Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani instructed me in his penultimate year to hold talks with the Saudi government. Prince Turki al Faisal coordinated my first meeting with then-Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah in Casablanca, Morocco. A short while after, I negotiated with Crown Prince Abdallah in his private palace in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. In open, frank, and sincere discussions, we reviewed all bilateral issues that had been between us. We refused to quarrel, rather we wanted to find solutions. We managed to agree to a comprehensive bilateral package for cooperation in the fields of politics, security, and economics.

After that, I negotiated with then-Saudi Interior Minister Nayef bin Abdulaziz Al Saud on security issues. Then I brought the package to King Fahd, who agreed, and in Tehran to Supreme Leader [Revolutionsführer] Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Rafsanjani, who agreed also. Later, Hassan Rouhani, the then-the secretary of the National

Security Council, travelled to Jeddah to sign the Security Pact with Prince Nayef, the then-interior minister. Immediately, the pact was filled with life, and a Joint Security Committee was set up. As a result, Saudi Arabia and Iran experienced from 1996 to 2005, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president, the best era in their bilateral relations since the 1979 Iranian revolution. Their relations were even better than in the time of the Shah in some respects.

More than a decade later, we should take up fostering this cooperation again. In Iran, the conditions are favorable. As in 1996, Ayatollah Khamenei and Rouhani, who is president today, are leading Iran. In Saudi Arabia, a similar approach as pursued by then-Crown Prince Abdullah is needed. He had negotiated flexibly, based on principles and not on maximalist positions.

The stability that would be created by the revival of this agreement from 1996 would be in the interests of Saudi Arabia. The fact is that it is not Iran or Shia Muslims who threaten Saudi Arabia and claim ownership of the holy places of Islam, Mecca and Medina, but an ideology of terror led by ISIS, which has its origin in Wahhabi Islam—which should not be equated with mainstream Sunni Islam. The stability and integrity of Saudi Arabia and other neighboring Arab countries of Iran in Persian Gulf is an indispensable part of Iran's security and stability. Therefore, Saudi Arabia should have an interest in cooperating with Iran. It is the time for Riyadh and Tehran to cooperate on the establishment of a regional security structure in the Persian Gulf, focusing on issues of common interest, fighting together against common threats, and saving the Middle East from a total collapse. The way forward should be based on cooperation, not confrontation.

*The author was from 1990 till 1997 Iranian ambassador in Bonn, head of foreign relation committee of National Security Council from 1997-2005 and spokesperson of Iran nuclear team in 2003-2005. Since 2009 he is a visiting professor at Princeton University.*