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A Saudi-Iranian Dialogue On Regional Security

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Prince Turki al Faisal and Ambassador Hossein Mousavian

by Turki al Faisal and Hossein Mousavian

With tensions between regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia at the brink, a rare dialogue recently took place between two former senior Saudi and Iranian officials. Hosted by the Center for Strategic Studies at the Joint Special Operations University in Tampa, Florida, former Saudi Ambassador to the United States and Director General of Saudi Arabia's intelligence agency Prince Turki al Faisal debated Ambassador Hossein Mousavian, a former spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiators and chairman of the foreign policy committee of Iran's National Security Council. The lively discussion touched on each country's view of its security environment and the broader issues affecting the Iran-Saudi relationship. LobeLog has obtained the full transcript of the conversation, and the following is an abbreviated excerpt covering the key points.

Turki al Faisal: Let me start by saying that I tell my audiences wherever I speak that the Arabian Peninsula is attached to the Asian continent. And if we could somehow break that attachment and sail into the oceans and lay anchor somewhere near Norway or Sweden, we wouldn't have any problems around the world. But unfortunately we can't do that because geography is permanent. And of course the priorities for us are security, development, and looking to the future. These are the three aspects of Saudi Arabia's contact and its strategic behavior with, not only its neighbors—as I said geography is permanent—but also with far-off countries like yours. Hence the strategic relationship that we develop for many years with the United States not only serves our purposes but I hope also serves the purposes of the United States. We also have similar arrangements with the European countries, with Arab countries, and with Asian and other countries around the world.

Hossein Mousavian: Before the revolution 1979 in Iran, the Shah was gendarme of the region, and Iran and the US had strategic relations. And practically the Shah was ruling the Persian Gulf. After the revolution the dispute between Iran and the US started.

Since almost 40 years, the US accusation against Iran is threefold: Iran is the source of instability, Iran is the source of terrorism, and Iran is the source of exporting the revolution, extremism. This is practically the main grievances of our Saudi neighbor and we have heard a lot of times, even in many speeches from Prince Turki.

I think the first dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia is about security and stability. Frankly speaking, there is no doubt that both want stability. But on the strategy and tactics, we have key differences between the two countries. The Saudis are looking for a security mechanism under the leadership, or dominance, or hegemony of the US in the

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region. Iranians are looking for a security structure for a regional cooperation system between regional countries, including definitely the important neighbor, Saudi Arabia. This is two very different strategies. And they have been in confrontation for 40 years.

Iranians say that Qatar, a Saudi ally for decades, a US ally for decades, with no major Shia or Alawite or Iranian influence, and with a Wahhabi religious system, publicly says that Saudi Arabia is after hegemony and violating their independence and sovereignty.

Syria and Iraq, to be frank, are the most complicated issues between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudis say Assad is a dictator, minority rule, and so on. Iranians say, we have many dictators in the region, and we have minority rule in other countries like Bahrain. The Iranian presence in Syria has been one of the key differences between Tehran and Riyadh. Iranians say, there is no legal government other than the Assad government. Even up to today, the government of Assad, internationally, is the legal government, recognized by the United Nations, and they have an ambassador at the UN. Whether you like it or not this is another issue. They have been attacked with tens of thousands of terrorists from all over the world. They have officially invited Iran to go and to help them. Iran is in Syria based on legal, official, invitation of a legal government to fight terrorism.

When we are coming to Iraq, this is exactly the same. As the US has been officially invited by the Iraqi government to go to Iraq to fight terrorism. The US narrative, its reason to be in Iraq, is because the Iraqi government has invited the US. The Iraqi government also has invited Iran to go to Iraq, like Americans, to help Iraqis fight the Islamic State and terrorists to defend their integrity. This intervention is read by Saudi Arabia as an intervention in Arab affairs, with hegemonic intentions or hegemonic policies. And it is read by Iranians as requests by official governments to fight terrorism.

The other issue is differences about Yemen. Iran has opposed the military invasion of Yemen. And I think we all would agree that the Saudi understanding was that they would be able to resolve Yemen in two, three months, maximum, if not weeks. But this is years. The worst humanitarian disaster has been created. And Saudis are blaming Iranians for supporting Houthis. And they justify their military intervention because Iran is backing the Houthis. And to be fair, security wise, Yemen is the backyard of Saudi Arabia. And Saudi Arabia has the right to be very much concerned about its security. I think Prince Turki would agree with me that the Houthis, the Zaydis, have been ruling Yemen for 1,000 years. Since the Egyptian invasion of 1962, they were removed from power and from the early 1960s they were an ally of Saudi Arabia, not Iran. They were the good friends of Saudi Arabia, an ally of Saudi Arabia, and even Abdullah Saleh was an ally of Saddam during the war against Iran.

From the time the Saudis attacked Yemen, the Houthis came to Iran and Iranians have been supporting the Houthis. However, the big difference is whether the military invasion was correct or not. Iranians insist that this was completely a big mistake, creating such a disastrous situation. And Yemen has a political solution, not a military solution.

The other issue is about Libya. Iranians interpret the NATO, American, Saudi, GCC attack on Libya as a big mistake. In Libya, like Qatar, Iran never really had influence or interference, over there was a Sunni government, the overwhelming majority are Sunni. And when NATO, GCC attacked Libya, it is left with a mess and a haven for terrorists.

The second problem is ideological. Shia/Sunni differences are realities. However, the overwhelming majority of the Sunni world is not in a fight with Shia. But some Wahhabi muftis are the extremely enemy of Shia. Even some of them have issued fatwas [according to which] any Sunni killing a Shia would go to heaven. Therefore, this is actually the second issue between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which we cannot neglect.

The third Iranian dispute with Saudi Arabia is about Saudi support for war on Iran and the disintegration of Iran. Whether you would agree or not, Iranians are really convinced that since the revolution, Saudi Arabia has been after the disintegration of Iran through sanctions, pressure, and if possible, war. Just some months after the revolution, before the Syrian crisis, even before the creation of Hezbollah, before the Libyan crisis, before the Yemen crisis, before everything, Saddam invaded Iran and all GCC countries supported Saddam's invasion of Iran. And Saddam officially announced that a province, Khuzestan, is part of Iraq. A clear disintegration of Iran. And this war had hundreds of thousands of injured and killed. Hundreds of billions of dollars of damages.

Moderator: I want to make sure we have time for more questions. Just as a recap of some of the points you made, you mentioned first that the regional order, and you said that the absence of the US was actually an aspect that Iran was seeking.

Hossein Mousavian: No, I said that the Iranian regional strategy is based on a regional cooperation system between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and other GCC members, to maintain peace and stability and to have good relations from this regional cooperation system with all five major powers, in order to have a balance. First to have regional cooperation, in order to have real engagement with a big neighbor like Saudi Arabia and also Iraq, which is also big and very powerful. They have today a problem but it will be resolved.

Turki al Faisal: Thank you. I respect what Dr. Mousavian mentioned. I'm going to quote Iranian officials, not Dr. Mousavian or myself. This is a statement by Khomeini in 1979, after he succeeded in overthrowing the Shah. And I'm quoting: "Iranian officials have to know that the Iranian Islamic Revolution is not limited to Iranian borders. Our revolution is the starting point of a worldwide revolution under the banner of the Hidden Imam, al-Mahdi, may god speed up his reappearance in our time." As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, Khomeini in 1987 said: "God almighty considers al-Saud of this era and al-Saud of all eras, oppressors and unqualified for guidance. And God does not want to guide them."

Other officials talking about Iranian activity in the Arab world. Ahmad Vahidi, former defense minister, September 9, 2013: "Syria is at the forefront of resistance and Iran supports those who support it." Brigadier General Hossein Salami, commander of the IRGC air force, February 2, 2014: "Iranian security borders expanded to the Mediterranean, attempts by Iran's enemies have failed."

Alireza Zakani, member of the parliament for Tehran, October 7, 2014: "The Yemeni revolution will not be confined to Yemen alone. It will extend following its success into Saudi territories. The Yemeni-Saudi vast borders will help accelerate its reach into the depths of Saudi land." Ali Younesi, advisor to the president on ethnic and religious minority affairs, March 10, 2015: "Iran today has become an empire like it used to be through history. And its capital is now Baghdad, which is the center of our revolution and our culture and our identity today, as it has been in the past."

I can go on and on with such statements, that somehow contradict Professor Mousavian's contention that Iran has no inimical attitudes or ambitions, not only to Saudi Arabia, but to the Arab world. These are just some of the statements that I prepared for this encounter, and there are others, and the commander has a full account of all of them on his digital storage computer. And as far as Saudi Arabia's support for Saddam Hussein in the war with Iran, we have to put history in perspective. When Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980, the late King Fahd advised him to stop the fight and withdraw from Iran. Unfortunately, Saddam did not accept King Fahd's advice. When the tide turned against Saddam and Khomeini declared that nothing was going to stop Iranian forces from liberating Baghdad from Saddam, that is the time that Saudi Arabia and other countries, including the United States, provided support to Saddam Hussein. We never encouraged

Saddam Hussein to invade Iran, but when the reverse happened, when there was an Iranian invasion of Iraqi territory, that's when Saudi Arabia intervened and provided support.

Saudi Arabia has three basic principles with Iran: One, geography, they're there, we're there. We have to work and accept their presence. Two, we share a religion, we share a God, we share a book, the Quran, and we share a Prophet. And that is something that is never going to change. And the third thing that we have permanently with Iran is that over the centuries, people from Arabia have moved and settled in Iran. People from Iran have come and settled in Arabia. So we have all of these links that bind us to the people of Iran. And it is unfortunate that the leadership in Iran does not take into consideration these things and wants to expand its influence, as I mentioned, in a way that even their officials are boasting about. This is what the difference is between Saudi Arabia and Iran. And I hope that people like Professor Mousavian and others who want to have good relations with Saudi Arabia, will come to the fore and be decisive decision-makers in Iran. There are still the people who make these statements that I quoted you.

Hossein Mousavian: First of all, I should say I fully agree with the last three points Prince Turki mentioned about the commonalities between Iran and Saudi Arabia. These are 100 percent true and correct. About the quotes the Prince read, I think we can find a lot of more quotes from different Iranians in the same line as the Prince read. But if you want, indeed I can help his research center to prepare tons of similar quotes from Saudi Arabia against Iran about war, regime change, everything. The rhetoric wars have been continuing between Iran and Saudi, Iran, and the US for 40 years.

But one thing is very different during the last years. The US has always been after regime change. The Israelis also, yes. But Saudi Arabia recently, publicly, is calling for regime change in Iran. This is a big difference. We can find the same quotes from Saudi Arabia against Iran. Last year, Mohammad bin Salman publicly, officially said, "we would take war inside Iran." He said this publicly. And Prince Turki himself even attended a meeting with Mojahedin-e Khalq—Iranians call the group munafiqin-e khalq—a terrorist group who before the revolution killed many American generals in Iran. And after the revolution 17,000 Iranians have been assassinated by this terrorist group. They have assassinated the president, prime minister, parliamentarians, at least 1,000 officials, and 17,000 ordinary people. And the Prince himself, in the conference in Paris, said, "we are supporting you to bring regime change in Iran." Therefore, such statements are there. I mean this is not really the issue.

Moderator: What about the internal stuff though because I think we can keep going back and forth.

Hossein Mousavian: Iran after the revolution always has had these demonstrations. I'm really surprised how this time it was so exaggerated outside because during the demonstrations I myself was in Iran. The first such demonstration we had in 1998 in Iran, in different cities. Exactly with the same slogans and with the same violence. The second one was about disputed elections in 2009, the big ones. From 1998 to 2018, we have had such demonstrations, for 20 years. But at the same time there are pro demonstrations.

And if the Prince wants, he can also bring tons of statements, like Foreign Minister Zarif up to Foreign Minister Velayati in the 1990s, calling for regional cooperation, peace with Saudi Arabia. You can find a lot of such statements.

But about your question, internal problems impacting the bilateral relationship between Iran and Saudi, I would say for 40 years Iranians are used to sanctions and pressures. For 40 years, we have continuously had economic problems, nonstop. Iranians are really used to sanctions and pressures, and they have been able to live for over 40 years and become

even stronger, as the Prince said, with more influence in the region. More sanctions, more pressures, have made Iranians stronger and more influential in the region. This is the reality. This is the fact.

But Saudi Arabia I think is facing for the first time serious economic problems. They have never had economic problems. Now due to the drop in oil prices, and the very heavy cost of Saudi military, political interventions in the region, they have shortages, they have economic problems. Therefore, to be fair, Iran and Saudi Arabia, both have economic problems, both have corruption problems. However, demonstrations in Iran have been going on for years and years and years, I promise you, it would continue. But this is not something to endanger the stability of the country. You can be sure. If anyone carefully looks at just within two weeks, you will see millions of people come out onto the streets in the country. Then you will really see that the people are after defending the integrity of their country.

Turki al Faisal: Well I think we continue to disagree on certain issues. But also I think it's very important to clarify things that Professor mentioned about Yemen. Yemen went through what was misnamed as the Arab Spring in 2011, which led to civil war in Yemen. And efforts to bring peace to that were led by Saudi Arabia, with the other GCC countries, in constructing a road map that would bring peace to Yemen, and full political, and economic and social cohesion in Yemen. And that was buttressed by United Nations resolutions and so on. The legitimate government that came out of that process was overthrown by a military campaign led by the Houthis.

Just one example. After the sacking of the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the consulate in Mashhad two years ago by Iranian mobs, with the police standing by and doing absolutely nothing to stop them, not one word of apology came from Iran, not one word. And these are embassies. You know what embassies mean. Your embassy was hijacked by the revolution in 1979, 1980. That is just one indication where in Iran there are differences. I mentioned President Rouhani's statements on the reasons why there were these demonstrations in Iran. They differ 180 degrees from the statements that were made by the Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Moderator: You mentioned a couple steps. What specific steps do you think would ease the tensions between the two countries.

Turki al Faisal: I'm not speaking for the government, but I think if we were to stop the propaganda, whether it is in the newspaper, or television and so on. Iran has over a 100 radio and television stations, broadcasting vicious and very inflammatory language, not just at Saudi Arabia, but at other Arab countries in the Gulf, Bahrain included, Kuwait, you name it. That's something that should be stopped on both sides. That would give everybody a rest as to the inflammatory remarks that come out from any source whatsoever. That would be a step in the right direction. I think equally in the international arena for example, we've seen op-eds written by Mr. Zarif accusing Saudi Arabia not only of promoting al-Qaeda and the Islamic State and other terrorist groups, but saying that they all originated in Saudi Arabia. And responses from our foreign minister of course, accusing Iran of similar issues. That should stop. That would be helpful in overcoming the public rhetoric that inflames people and makes them stand in a pugilistic stance rather than an embracing stance. These are two steps I think that can be very helpful. And then you can work from there to other steps that can bring the two countries together.

Hossein Mousavian: What Prince Turki said about stopping propaganda, this would be extremely important and helpful. The second step I would suggest is to revive the joint security committee between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In the forty years of relations after 1979, we had only 10 years of good relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, from 1996 to 2005. And this was because Rafsanjani sent me as his special envoy. Privately I sat with

late Crown Prince Emir Abdullah for four nights in Jeddah, I discussed with him in his house, and we agreed on a comprehensive plan of action for improving Iran-Saudi relations. Six months later, the late Emir Abdullah came to Tehran, foreign ministers were meeting, there were consulate and cultural relations, and even Saudis and Iranians were giving visas for investment, work permit. A year later, based on this agreement, Rouhani, who at that time was secretary of the National Security Council, went to Riyadh and sat with late Emir Nayef, and they signed a security pact for bilateral relations, removing every mutual concern for internal interferences or violating the sovereignty of each country. Interfering in internal affairs and anxieties over sovereignty are two big concerns of Saudis and Iranians.

The third is the role of the US. I know Saudis don't like President Obama, but rather than going to war for a nuclear crisis, he used diplomacy and managed the nuclear dilemma with diplomacy rather than war. But more, President Obama suggested that Iran and Saudi Arabia share the region. I don't believe this would be a good idea, because the region contains other countries as well. But the idea of sharing the region between regional countries is good.

Therefore I would suggest stopping propaganda, immediate bilateral negotiations, and meetings between Iran and Saudi Arabia, first reviving the security pact. I believe what President Trump is doing is fueling confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The United States should play a role for peace between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Because all other countries already are a mess in this region. We have stable countries: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. If these three countries become a mess, nobody would be able to manage this. It's impossible. Regime change, either in Saudi Arabia or Turkey or in Iran would be a disaster, that would be the end of this region. The US is practically the dominating power in the region. It should play a constructive role to bring together Iran, GCC, Saudi Arabia.

I see a huge potential for Iran-Saudi bilateral dialogue to resolve the crisis in Yemen. In Syria we have too many key players, but in Yemen we have Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Iran. First of all, I really suggest to the Prince and Americans not to exaggerate the Iranian role in Yemen because you would discredit yourself. If you say Houthis are proxies of Iran, if Saudi Arabia with such a powerful army and the United States with the number one army in the world, are two years attacking Yemen and they can't solve it because of a proxy group of Iran, this means your weakness. This means the power of Iran. You don't know that you are making such propaganda for Iran. This is not true.

Turki al Faisal: This is the essence of the difference between the Saudi position and the Iranian position. It is that Professor Mousavian says that Saudi Arabia and Iran should sit together and decide the future of Yemen. Saudi Arabia is against that. It's against the very principle of allowing others to interfere in the affairs of states. It should be Yemenis who decide their future. Not Saudi Arabia and Iran. And definitely not the United States. And the same thing in Syria. It should be the Syrians who decide their future. Not the Iranians, the Saudis, the Russians, and the Iranians, and so on. And that's the difference in attitude and the difference in conception of what the roles are. But we objected to President Obama's famous statement and his interview that Iran and Saudi Arabia should share the Middle East. Who are you President Obama to say who shares the Middle East? You don't own it. You haven't bought the Middle East in order to say Iran and Saudi Arabia should share it. That's the difference in the conception, the whole philosophy, that Iran gives itself the right to consider that it has proprietary rights over other people's territories, whereas Saudi Arabia does not.

Question: Ambassador Mousavian, you made the point that more sanctions and more pressure had only made Iran stronger internally and increased its influence. Does that mean that today Iran would welcome more sanctions and pressure?

Hossein Mousavian: There are two schools of thoughts in Iran. One school of thought is against sanctions, for development in Iran and solving the economic problems. The second school of thought, they really believe sanctions and pressures are in the long-term interests of Iran. I fully disagree with this narrative. But they say look, you have 40 years of American pressure, sanctions, coercion, propaganda, covert war from military to economic to political, everything—against Iran. At the same time, you have 40 years of *carte blanche* U.S. support for U.S. allies in the region: military, money, technology, everything. And look at the region today. The U.S. allies either have collapsed, like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia. Or U.S. ally countries are in a mess or vulnerable. And Iran is the most powerful state in the region. This is one.

Second, they say, before the revolution, we had to import everything from A to Z. But because of U.S. sanctions, U.S. pressures, we are the only country in the region that is independent on security matters. We are dependent on neither the U.S. nor Russia. We can build from tanks to submarines to jet fighters, we are totally now independent. We are the only country in this region independent in terms of conventional arms, but the others have to buy from other countries. The industries argue that the pressures have let Iran become self-sufficient. Let our neighbors spend money for weapons, at the end they will become destabilized, weaker, and we would get more powerful. The current president and the foreign minister belong to the school of thought for lessening tensions with the US, making good relations with the regional countries, and preventing sanctions and pressures.

The Prince knows better than me, there are hundreds of articles documented in the Western media, European, American, official statements by Europe, by Americans, that Saudi Arabia is the main financial, ideological funder of Wahhabism, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, the Taliban, Jabhat al-Nusra, all of which have the same ideology. And it was Vice President Joe Biden who said that the U.S. problem with its own allies is that they are sending money and tons of weapons to terrorist groups to bring regime change in Syria. There was another documented report saying Saudi Arabia has invested \$110 billion in past decades for education Wahhabism, sectarianism in the region. It was Obama, the U.S. president who made such a statement in an interview with *The Atlantic*, blaming Saudi Arabia for exporting this extremism.

But, Prince, if you believe the U.S. president is nobody to say Iran and the US should share the region, who is Saudi Arabia's leader to say Assad must go? Everyone knows that from 2011 to 2015, the Saudis were saying that Assad must go. It was the Iranian foreign minister who was educating Saudis and Americans that it is not for you to say who should go, who should stay. It is for the Syrian nation to decide.

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MUNIR AHMAD KAKAR

Whenever history of bloodshed, mayhem and atrocities that have been perpetrated in the M.E would be written no wonder it would reach the inevitable conclusion that “It takes two to tango.” Both the despotic Ayatollahs of Iran and autocratic monarchs of Saudi Arabia would almost be equally held responsible. The fires of sectarianism that these two opposing countries have lit will continue to burn the region squandering precious resources simply to involve themselves in worst human right violations. Given their political structure and the divine legitimacy they claim the attempt to reconcile are bound to prove futile. Saudi monarchy minus Wahhabism is equal to naught and the same equation substituting Shism there will hold true for Iran also. Upholding sectarianism is a political imperative which will militate against reconciliation. Common people and in the region will be bearing the brunt of the cataclysmic follies both are determined to perpetuate.



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YK

Howl at each other, insult each other but at the end of the day never fail to sit and dialogue because even after every shooting war the warring parties will still sit on a round table to iron out issues. All what was said by both side revealed that the most important ingredient lacking between them is regular dialogue. And dialogue doesn't indicate all differences will fissile out but at least there will be a legal mechanism for resolving their differences. On a final note, it is most important to avoid the interference by extra regional bodies.



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Ad hominem arguments are used to escape the truth. And the truth was told by the mass uprisings and demonstrations, about a month ago . One of the most oft repeated and very revealing slogans was the following:

“While the nation is begging , the Lord (i.e. Khamanae) is claiming Godliness.” (mardum gadaii maikunand, Agha Khudaii maikunad) .

I follow the assessments by many Iranian economists, they are all predicting a total downfall. A “revolution” that came to help the “downtrodden,” has robbed them of the little that they had before. That is the assessment of the Iranian scholars.



APRIL 23, 2018 ([HTTPS://LOBELOG.COM/A-SAUDI-IRANIAN-DIALOGUE-ON-REGIONAL-SECURITY/#COMMENT-665941](https://lobelog.com/a-saudi-iranian-dialogue-on-regional-security/#comment-665941))

MONTY AHWAZI

Of course the opinions are always respected. But it is disingenuous for a gentleman who's from Afghanistan, living in Saudi and working for MbS in Saudi has suddenly become an expert on Iran's state of economy and/or on its internal affairs!

One thing is very clear and well known that the Saudis are supporting various terrorist groups fighting against the legitimate government of Al-Assad in Syria and Iran is fighting the terrorists in support of Assad's government and as a good cause for the rest of the world.



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The economic situation in Iran is far worse than during the Shah. After forty years , the revolution that claimed the abolition of poverty as its quintessential task, is in utter failure. The revolution also claimed the highest moral ground vis a vis the Sunnis , but thousands upon thousands Afghans, even from Iranian prisons , have been forced and coerced through Shia religiosity, to go and fight in Syria, to keep the Assad regime in power. Iran has neither kept itself on a high moral plateau, nor has it been at the service of its own people. People's wrath will soon change the Iranian political scene.

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