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Narratives of power politics in the Iran–Saudi relationship: The view from Tehran

Banafsheh Keynoush and Edward Wastnidge

There are two important sides to understanding relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia: the view from Tehran, and the view from Riyadh. The present chapter explores narratives that shape Tehran's understanding of the role that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia plays in shaping ties with Iran. The chapter is divided into four thematic topics, to review narratives of key issues and concerns that partly shape Iran's policies towards Saudi Arabia. The thematic topics that are selected here are not inclusive of the entire spectrum of debates inside Iran about Saudi Arabia.¹ But they represent major ongoing debates on the following key themes: (i) current elite views and discourses in Iran about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy choices; (ii) the role of religion in shaping the Iranian–Saudi partnership; (iii) Tehran's understanding of Riyadh's role in building regional security; (iv) Iran's views about collective regional security arrangements.

This thematic approach to understanding Iran's views about Saudi Arabia is unique in several aspects. It builds on the findings of critical research published by major authors in the field who examine in detail the history of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, map out alterations in the balance of power between the two countries and reject sectarian politics as a key driver of the ties but reaffirm its role as only a motivator of foreign policy behaviour.² But it parts ways with previous research to offer a glimpse at the narrative of power politics in Iran's ties with Saudi Arabia. To justify this approach, the authors make several key arguments. Firstly, the Iranian discourse about Saudi Arabia has hardly been explored in research and academia. Part of the reason could be the daily coverage of news on the issue of the Iranian–Saudi relationship, which is rarely nuanced. Secondly, there are language and cultural barriers involved in understanding what Tehran says or means about Saudi Arabia. As a result, present analyses of Iranian–Saudi relations err on offering generalised statements or summarising the stakes involved in soundbites.

From a theoretical standpoint, however, it is crucial to analyse local viewpoints of the Saudi–Iranian relationship, by exploring narratives not

purely from a polemic standpoint but to shed light on how power is exercised through narratives of this relationship in the thematic areas under interrogation here. The narratives of one country towards another carry power in international politics, and in the wielding of actual power, as they influence or directly impact state-level decision-making.³ As a result, it is imperative as detached scholars observing interstate elite discussions to understand how these narratives influence the exercise of power in one state towards another. While in realist or neo-realist international relations theory a so-called master narrative often shapes our understanding of how states interact,⁴ critical constructivist and post-structuralist research tends to focus on the exercise of power itself. The realist account of power must at times go hand in hand with the narratives told about it, which is the goal of this chapter. As important as narratives are in the shaping of the understanding of one country towards another, to date there is only one published book on the role of media narratives in the Iranian–Saudi relationship in the 1980s.⁵ Since then, new literature has emerged that focuses on the role of narratives in shaping conflicts, threat perceptions and conceptions of order in the Middle East.⁶

By shifting the centre of debate in this chapter to scholarly observations of power narratives, the authors avoid emphasising the agency of narrators by offering international relations concepts or theories to better understand how narratology influences the exercise of power between two states.⁷ Supplementary to this analysis is the framing of strategic narratives that shape the Iranian perspectives on Saudi Arabia,⁸ and through which states, in this case Iran, seek to articulate a worldview through systemic, identity and issue-led narratives. Strategic narratives can also be seen as tools which states use to extend their influence. They are ‘about both states and the system itself’,⁹ cutting to the core of how a country like Iran wants to be perceived when it comes to its ties with Saudi Arabia, and the kind of order the Iranians seek in this critical relationship with an Arab neighbour. It goes without saying that Iran thus expounds a particular narrative which provides subsequent justification for its foreign policy course with regards Saudi Arabia.

The ability to wield power through narratives is divided here among the four different thematic topics outlined above to explore how it constructs a reality about Iran’s understanding of Saudi Arabia. However imperfect the endeavour might be, it represents a uniquely contextual framework to better understand the spectrum of issues that define the contentious relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The chapter aims to specifically highlight how the rivalry with Saudi Arabia has been articulated through examining public policy debates emanating from Tehran on this topic. We argue that the rivalry as understood from the Islamic Republic of Iran’s perspective

defies the now clichéd explanations of immutable sectarian conflict often found in policy-oriented works, although in much of the policy world sectarianism is described as a driver of the Saudi–Iranian relationship.¹⁰ While identity considerations, ranging from religious to national and indeed revolutionary issues, can be observed in Tehran’s broader foreign policy including in its relations with Riyadh, it is our contention that *realpolitik*, with its attendant focus on practical, national interests, and its considerations including the role of external powers, namely, the US, predominates in Iran’s strategic calculus towards its regional neighbour.

While our contention does not dismiss the role of identities, including ideology, in shaping the Iranian–Saudi relationship, it is argued here that pragmatism dominates the influence of ideology in foreign policy-making. As a result, the question of Iran’s relations with Saudi Arabia is intimately tied to both states’ relations with the US, given that there is no other external power in the Persian Gulf capable of exerting power as the US. The restraints that this places on Iran’s and Saudi Arabia’s ability to act independently, and the impact this has on regional security, is overwhelming, and is manifested through frequent tensions between Iran and the US, and Iran and Saudi Arabia. The ultimate goal of the Islamic Republic, to see an end to the US military presence in and security influence over Middle Eastern affairs, while quite one-sided in its vision and currently far from achievable, is viewed by Tehran as the best guarantee to ensure security. It is by letting the regional states develop modalities to re-balance the distribution of power in the Middle East that peace can be restored.¹¹

This chapter primarily focuses on developments in Iranian–Saudi relations after the Arab Uprisings in 2011. This is a period in which relations between the two states have arguably reached their lowest ebb since the Iranian Revolution and so provides us with a critical time period in which to analyse the relationship. It is also a period that marks a revival of revolutionary Iran’s aspirations to influence the Arab world by exploring opportunities presented through the uprisings. The uprisings led to the overthrow of several Arab leaders, and to demands by the public for reforms in the Arab world. In much of the Western analyses of Iranian foreign policy, limited consideration is given to the varied and lively debates that take place within the Iranian academic, policy and media circles on this topic. This chapter’s broader aim is to examine how Iran’s perspective on the issue of relations with Saudi Arabia since the uprisings, and whether a relationship that is often couched by analysts in terms of a hostile and intractable regional rivalry, is viewed at all times as such by key figures in Iran.

In the following sections, firstly, elite views and discourses in Iran about Saudi Arabia are explored. Next, religion is addressed through a focus on Iran’s role in global Shiism, and contentious issues that have destabilised

the relationship as a result, as well as prospects that the religious sphere provides for potential rapprochement. Thirdly, Iran's perspective on Saudi Arabia's regional security role is explored including its regional military operations and coalition-building efforts. Finally, Iran's own multilateral outlook and proposals for building a regional security system that includes Saudi Arabia is examined.

Elite views and discourses in Iran about how regional power shifts impact ties with Saudi Arabia

Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia emerge at different junctures of their mutual history and often ease out, with the exception being in recent years when they have persisted. As a result, Iran is divided over the issue of how to view the challenge from Saudi Arabia. Following the uprisings in the Arab world in 2011, the Islamic Republic opted to see them as opportunities to promote an 'Islamic awakening' that would expedite the withdrawal of US military presence in the Middle East, and allow Tehran to position itself as a model for revolutionary emulation in the rest of the Arab world. Regardless of the fact that the narrative ignored Iran's own Green Movement in 2009, which led to calls for re-elections, it built on the revolution's early worldview of expanding its influence in the Arab world. Boldly, led by its conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during the Green Movement, Tehran even coined the phrase the 'Persian Spring' – in contrast to the labelling of the uprisings as an 'Arab Spring' – to emphasise that Iran's power was on the rise because of the uprisings in the Arab world.

However, much to Iran's disappointment, very few Arabs participating in the uprisings wanted an Iranian-style revolution, although they wanted more independent governments, and many were opposed to Iran's support of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria in the wake of the uprisings. Iranian pundits justified Tehran's support for President al-Assad by claiming that it was needed to defuse US regional plots, aided by the American media, aiming to divide not just Syria but also Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries into smaller states that were more easily controlled and dominated over for resource extraction purposes. Furthermore, they asserted that the US never backed its allies in the Middle East, except for Israel, which implied that Iran was a better partner than the US for regional states given Iran's refusal to back away from protecting its allies.¹² Saudi Arabia along with Iran, according to these pundits, were anxious to prevent the region's disintegration but in different ways. Iran backed Damascus against all odds, while the Kingdom proposed to enlarge the Riyadh-based Gulf Cooperation

Council (GCC) to build a stronger union of Gulf Arab states, and to include Jordan and Morocco, although this never happened.¹³

After the uprisings, a threatening front eventually emerged in countries in the Arab world that were prone to conflict and suffered from weak governments, including in Syria and Iraq, in the form of Daesh in 2014–2018. Iran immediately saw an existential threat in this emerging regional trend, including being encircled by armed Arab terrorists, and conspiratorially, conservative Iranian media suggested that the US may have backed the Islamic State (IS) with the knowledge of GCC countries in order to weaken Tehran's grip on power.¹⁴ In response, Iran's rivalry with Saudi Arabia entered a new stage which raised the security stakes between the two countries especially in regional countries facing conflicts.¹⁵ Still, some pundits in Iran lament the lack of interest among the Iranian elite towards Saudi Arabia after the uprisings, and criticise Iran's foreign ministry for not having enough good diplomats who speak Arabic or are sympathetic to Arab concerns. In general, Iranian diplomats are apathetic towards Saudi Arabia specifically, and generally towards the Arab world, which reflects historic attitudes held by Iranians towards their Arab neighbours and a lack of desire to learn Arabic. They even blame this lack for the escalation of tensions with Riyadh in recent years.¹⁶ More specifically, Iran's political elite recognises that living with Saudi Arabia as a neighbour is unavoidable, regardless of the outcome of the Arab Uprisings. Whether Iran likes it or not, it remains a close neighbour in the Arab world. Iran's elite also frequently expresses concern over US policies that potentially divide Tehran and Riyadh, given Washington's enmity with Tehran and treatment of Riyadh as an ally. Additionally, Tehran is a steadfast believer that this US policy inevitably weakens not just Iran, but also Saudi Arabia, by overstretching the two regional states' resources in efforts to combat rather than work with each other.

These concerns by Iran are expressed through anti-colonial grievances directed at the US. Driven by its revolutionary visions, and in lieu of normal US–Iranian relations in the past forty years, Tehran sees undeniable evidence that Washington aims to keep Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia co-dependent on the US. This trend is observed in Tehran when the US demands, for example, that Saudi Arabia drop the price of oil despite knowing that the measure robs Riyadh of needed oil revenues. Meanwhile, Tehran is possibly observing that if the US is moving in the direction of energy independence, and pushing a global drive to reduce oil prices, it serves to hurt Saudi Arabia which remains largely dependent on oil.¹⁷ In this process, demonising Iran, irrespective of the fact that Tehran's actions are perceived by some regional states to be threatening, serves to increase this co-dependency on Washington, and leads to a vicious cycle that weakens

both Tehran and Riyadh. For example, among Iran's elite, the common view is that Washington extracts the Kingdom's rich energy and financial resources by insisting on an anti-Iran strategy.¹⁸ The same common view holds that talks of war with Iran in policy circles in Washington are structured primarily to increase Iranophobic views in the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia. It could also explain why the US does not engage in any actual war with Iran because the gain is not as big as pursuing the current policy, nor do the Saudis readily wish to engage in such a war.¹⁹

The way Iran sees it, in recent years, President Donald J. Trump's calling on Gulf Arab countries to "pay the bill" for their security, and US persistency across both Republican and Democratic administrations to sell arms to Saudi Arabia, is what Washington needs most rather than a war with Iran. The evidence is in the frequent large-sum contracts of arms sales to Saudi Arabia. This is money that could otherwise go to improving the Saudi economy as well as Iran's economy, if Riyadh and Tehran were to work together rather than against each other. Meanwhile, promoting Iranophobia increases revenues for the US, and simultaneously reduces costs for the US military, while still serving the purpose of containing Iran.²⁰ Additionally, in Iran's view, the frequent calls by US-based policy pundits about the need to redraw the map of the Middle East specifically since 9/11 and the Arab Uprisings only point to grander American designs to divide and conquer the Middle East specifically by over-emphasising and exacerbating the region's ethnic, tribal and sectarian divides that perpetuate the religious and political rifts among the regional states. Even if arguments for redrawing the Middle East map are not seriously taken in the US, Iran tends to see it as a conspiracy in the making.²¹

In contrast to the American view of keeping Saudi Arabia close to itself to protect the Kingdom from Iran, Tehran-based pundits worry that the Kingdom faces a precipitous decline in years ahead if it continues to devote all its energy to investing in its ties with the US at the cost of ignoring Iran. Saudi oil wealth could work against it in this regard, the way Iran sees it, if the Kingdom continued to invest in a partnership with Washington and believed that by so doing, it could take on a leadership role in the Middle East when, in truth, America's only real ally in the Middle East is Israel. Quite the contrary, investing in relations with Washington could only serve to divide Iran and Saudi Arabia, accentuate Iran's so-called pariah status and engage the Kingdom in conflict or potential war against its neighbour.²² Subsequently, and for the most part, Iran's elite tend to dismiss Saudi Arabia as an equal power. They argue that Iran is far more powerful than Saudi Arabia, given that it does not depend on the US for its protection. From a military standpoint, Tehran likes to point out its superior missile and cyber capabilities, and naval and deterrent power, and Saudi

vulnerabilities to outside attacks. The Kingdom, despite being equipped with advanced Western arms, lacks real capacity to confront Iran's better organised military, according to the Iranian narrative.²³ This dismissive view of the Kingdom has led Tehran to go as far as to suggest that the US needs Iran's help, not Saudi Arabia's, in order to contain terrorism in the Middle East.²⁴

The role of religion in the Iranian discourse about Saudi Arabia

Tehran has long promoted the notion that Wahhabism, the unitarian faith that helped build the Saudi state, is a threat. This is despite Saudi efforts in recent years – notably under the direction of Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud – to present itself as a modernising and tolerant religious state. Simultaneously, Tehran builds a narrative of Iran as a defender of the Shiite faith, and of all oppressed Muslims worldwide despite the fact that a large majority of Sunni Muslims do not follow Iran's ideational influence, posing problems in relations with Saudi Arabia given the Kingdom's relatively large Shiite minority. The fear of a potential Shiite 'fifth column' at Tehran's beck and call has arguably helped drive the securitisation of Saudi Shiites²⁵ – and Shiite minorities across the region – particularly since the Arab Uprisings. This chafes with Iran's desire to support what it sees as oppressed communities, such as minority Arab Shia, which in turn can significantly affect political ties with Riyadh, as seen in the case of the execution of the prominent Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr in early 2016.

Commenting on the execution at the time, Iran's president Hassan Rouhani claimed that such an act was in line with a Saudi 'policy of sectarianism ... which has led to instability in the region'.²⁶ Still, Rouhani toned down his statement when the execution led to protests outside the Saudi embassy in Tehran and its consulate in Mashhad, with the embassy compound being attacked and set ablaze, a move described by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as 'a very bad and wrong measure',²⁷ and by Rouhani as 'by no means justifiable and, above all, [it] is considered as an insult to the system and mars the image of the Islamic Republic of Iran'.²⁸ However, like any politician, Rouhani also sought to widen the issue by shifting the blame on Saudi policies in the region, accusing Riyadh of attempting to 'fan Shi'i-Sunni strife and create an Iranophobic atmosphere in the world's public opinion'.²⁹

Saudi Arabia, which itself has charged Iran of promoting sectarianism and terrorism in its efforts to spread influence in the Middle East, subsequently severed its diplomatic ties, and at the time of writing they are yet to be restored. This development compounded an already fragile relationship

that had been eroded by the deaths of several hundred Iranian pilgrims in an accident during the hajj in 2015. Ayatollah Khamenei unequivocally placed responsibility for the incident on the shoulders of the Saudi rulers,³⁰ while Rouhani emphasised the wider picture noting: ‘if the only problem with the Saudi government was the Mina (hajj) incident, we may have been able to find a solution for that and put it on the right track.’³¹ The statement suggested that Iran remained open to talks with Saudi Arabia, more so because it had always resumed its ties with the Kingdom after they broke up three times throughout history over hajj issues.³²

However, there were few venues for real engagement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. As the pre-eminent international organisation dealing with world Muslim affairs, the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (formerly ‘Conference’) (OIC) has also been an arena in which the vicissitudes of the Iranian–Saudi relationship have been laid bare. Based in Jeddah and largely funded by Saudi Arabia,³³ the OIC does not present itself as an obvious place for cooperative endeavours involving Tehran and Riyadh. Indeed, it has been a site of disagreement and sectarian alignments,³⁴ with the 1980s especially a time of particular challenge due to competing leadership ambitions within the organisation, Saudi support for Iraq during the war with Iran (1980–1988) and a hajj stampede that led to the death of hundreds of Iranian pilgrims in 1987.³⁵ Conversely, the OIC has also been a site of cooperation, seen in Saudi Arabia’s support for Iran’s hosting of the organisation’s chairmanship which coincided with the start of the presidency of Mohammad Khatami in 1997. The reformist Khatami was able to assert Iran’s regional position in a way that put his country at the forefront of a notable public relations success by rotationally hosting the OIC, while making no references to an Iranian desire for leadership in the organisation.³⁶

Generally, to advance its foreign policy goals, Tehran values its participation in Islamic organisations as venues to also promote constructive engagement and receive public endorsement as an important Islamic country. But repeatedly, Iran perceives Saudi intransigence, seen in the denial of visas for Iranian representatives attending the Mecca OIC summit in 2019,³⁷ and again in Jeddah in 2020, as barring Tehran’s access to religious-based regional platforms. At other times, Saudi officials delayed issuing visas to Iranian officials, which Iran took as a step designed to prevent its participation in regional events.³⁸

Since the Arab Uprisings, Iran has increasingly supported communities across the Arab world that oppose Saudi Arabia’s regional role, with one Iranian lawmaker going so far as to say that Tehran controlled four Arab capitals in 2014.³⁹ Iran has supported the aims of the Houthis in Yemen, in a ‘low-cost’ move to counter Saudi Arabia in the southern Arabian

Peninsula.⁴⁰ Tehran's support for Iraqi Shia has frequently led to divided regional loyalties among Iraqi Shiite and Sunni communities. Moreover, Tehran has backed Islamic groups regardless of sect that have emerged across the Middle East since the Arab Uprisings, including in North Africa and Egypt, not to mention Bahraini and Kuwaiti Shia. In these efforts, Iran's policies are driven by ideological undertones, but they seek to expand security for the Iranian state, by preventing the Arab Sunni governments that surround it from forming one front against the Islamic Republic. Iran likes to frame its intentions through adopting religious rhetoric that insists on protecting the oppressed masses regardless of sect, and to build a utopian Muslim *umma*. It also frequently uses the narrative of Islamic unity by pitting Muslims against the West, and against Israel, as it knows that this language has currency across the Middle East among many communities. Along the way, it calls terrorist groups led mostly by Arab citizens, such as al-Qaeda or Daesh, 'takfiris', while refuting Saudi narratives around Iran's financial and armed support for sub-state actors in the region.

The place of religion in the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia is viewed by some as a domain in which their rivalry is particularly acute.⁴¹ Following Iran's revolution, both states were destined to compete in their offering of rival visions for the role of Islam in political life and in the affairs of the Muslim *umma*. For Tehran, religion should serve to unite the Islamic *umma* regardless of sect. But strategically, it is critically important to empower the Shiite communities, in line with the core ideal of building a powerful Iranian Shiite-led Islamic state capable of exporting its worldview through a clearly defined, regional and system-level strategic narrative. In the 1980s, Iran actively exported the Islamic Revolution. It also expanded its religious outreach activities across the Shia and Sunni worlds, drawing on its position as something of a Shiite metropole in a demonstration of its growing soft power.⁴² Along the way, it sought to build local loyalties through charitable activities as well as the funding of schools, Islamic and cultural centres, hospitals, roads and other infrastructure in Muslim-populated countries. This, in combination with the repression of the Iraqi Shia until the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003, meant that Iranian centres of religious learning, most notably Qom, came to rival and in some cases overtake the traditional Shiite centre of Najaf in Iraq, though the balance has been redressed somewhat in recent years.⁴³

Still, Iran's transnational religious linkages provide legitimacy for its activities in the region seen in its application of a religious overlay through active military engagements in Iraq and Syria, or the channelling of Shiite shrine defenders to these conflict zones from other Shiite communities in the region and beyond.⁴⁴ This gives Iran a significant role among Shiite communities that it can utilise to enhance its standing among its co-religionists.⁴⁵

It does not, however, mean that religion alone drives Iranian foreign policy, but that it only serves an instrumental purpose to exercise the sort of power that becomes of more acute relevance when Tehran's ties are strained with Saudi Arabia. This reality frequently reflects in the nuanced discussions about sectarianism in Iran. As a general rule of thumb, Tehran rejects that its policies are sectarian, and prefers the world to think that it is the Saudi state that fuels sectarianism.⁴⁶ At a more nuanced level, however, many in Iran recognise the futility of name calling. Instead of fixing the problems between Tehran and Riyadh, it also builds unneeded tensions between Arab Shia with largely Sunni communities, and defeats the goal of building a unified Muslim *umma*.⁴⁷ This also leads to retribution attacks that have increased since the Arab Uprisings against Iranians working in the Arab world, including in recent years, the assassination of Iranian diplomats and cultural attachés in Yemen and Lebanon, the killing of Iranian border guards and the murder of Iranian technicians working in Iraq, not to mention the murder of Arab politicians or reporters who are critical of Iran's regional policies.⁴⁸ In addition, it builds resentment among some Arabs, including both Shiite and Sunni, towards Iran's religious and regional agenda.

As a result of these trends, some Iranian pundits and policymakers lamented the fact that Tehran's diplomatic stance towards Saudi Arabia was increasingly more ideological in the second term of the Rouhani presidency, and specifically criticised Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's lack of sufficient understanding about the Arab world, which they also blamed for the poor relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as the rest of the Arab world. Part of the ideological polemic on Saudi Arabia is designed to counter international pressures on Iran. This can be achieved through re-directing criticism at the Kingdom instead of at Tehran. This policy allows Iran to build up its 'resistance diplomacy' designed to counter pressures, but regardless they have ideological undertones.⁴⁹ More importantly, Tehran has had difficulties in restoring ties with the Arab world at large, despite its calls for building an Islamic *umma* through Iranian and Arab cooperation. In a similar vein, it has failed to convince Saudi Arabia that the 'resistance' foreign policy, trying to defend oppressed Muslims against the US, is non-reactionary and non-ideological. Reacting to this failure, Iranian commentators frequently fall back on old arguments, blaming only 'Arab reactionary' leaders for the region's problems including the lack of Muslim unity.⁵⁰

Iran's views about the Saudi security build-up in the Middle East

For many in Iran, Saudi Arabia pursues a regional security policy of coalition-building in part to contain the Iranian influence in the Gulf and

the Middle East. It does so by maximising Saudi military and financial capacities to convert them into influence and the exercise of power over other Arab and Muslim countries willing to join the Saudi-led collective security arrangements. As a result, Tehran fears that by breaking away from its traditionally reserved foreign policy, Riyadh will make the Iranian threat look larger than what it actually might be, in order to allow Saudi Arabia to build stronger coalitions in the region.⁵¹

To date, Saudi Arabia has embarked on the building of several major coalitions. In December 2015, the Kingdom built a military coalition to lead the war in Yemen, and it also set up the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition. In March 2016, Saudi Arabia conducted drills dubbed ‘Northern Thunder’ which was considered the second-largest military operation since Desert Storm that repelled the Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991. In 2017, the Kingdom supported US measures to create an ‘Arab NATO’ – using the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a model – to create a similar body in the Gulf. Riyadh also backed a surge in US military forces in the Persian Gulf in 2019, and expanded naval drills with the US in Gulf waters in 2020. Iran appears dismissive of these coalitions, and refuses to recognise the Saudi-led narrative that it is engaged in proactive diplomacy to build collective security. Perceiving threat, Tehran prefers to point out that Saudi Arabia is unable to enter into a war with it despite these coalitions. However, there is concern that Saudi Arabia might harbour ambitions beyond its own border in response to alleged Iranian regional provocations, despite the fact that the Kingdom is not historically considered a hegemonic power.⁵²

Yet, from Tehran’s perspective, the securitisation of the Persian Gulf by Saudi Arabia, justified by Riyadh in part to uphold freedom of navigation in the waterway, aims to demonise Iran.⁵³ Tehran naturally refutes this demonisation, and does not accept the narrative that some of its actions, including halting vessels, are potentially destabilising the region. This is despite Iran’s assertions that it does so to ensure its own security and ability to export oil under a punitive international sanctions regime led by the US. Furthermore, it believed that US military goals in the Gulf aimed to advance then president Trump’s plans to emerge as a powerful world leader. In the process, the US aims to legitimise punitive measures against Iran on a regional and global scale.⁵⁴

As a result, Tehran may think that it cannot allow Saudi coalition-building measures to go unanswered, especially if they threaten to militarise the Persian Gulf and cause fears of impending war. Some voices in Tehran urge firmer diplomatic steps to weaken the resolve of regional countries to join the Saudi-led coalitions, citing the refusal of states such as Oman, Kuwait and Qatar in following the Saudi lead.⁵⁵ Iran’s vows to leverage its

power over the Strait of Hormuz are also partly designed as pre-emptive measures to discourage war, by pointing out its disruptive consequences and its own capability to respond to threats. The notion of Iran's closing of the strait, so often reported in the media, is actually more nuanced than outright blocking; rather, it is dependent on the acts of other powers. As such, in April 2019, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, the chief of the general staff of Iran's armed forces, noted that the security of the waterway was the responsibility of Iran's armed forces, and that 'This does not mean closing the Strait of Hormuz. We do not intend to close the Strait of Hormuz unless the enmity of the enemies reaches a point where there is no other choice ... we are able to do so, and the enemies know this.'⁵⁶

In addition, Tehran is concerned that these Saudi measures could lead to the referral of Iran, over its support for the Houthis and disruption of Gulf navigation, to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Furthermore, the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen could trigger a new arms race in the Gulf, unify Arabs more forcefully against Iran, revive the GCC and invite more external military actors into the region, tightening the rope around Iran's neck and potentially increasing the chances of war breaking out. Under these scenarios, there are voices in Iran that caution against reaching out to Saudi Arabia, insisting that it is best to work with the international community to contain the Kingdom. Yet, another view is that Saudi Arabia does not wish to run a military campaign against Iran through these coalitions, and that Tehran must work out ways to resolve tensions with the Kingdom. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has repeatedly dismissed Saudi ability to attack Iran, while Iranian politicians declare readiness to protect the Kingdom in case of an attack.⁵⁷

Iran's views on multilateral regional security arrangements

There are two interlinked strands to Iran's views on regional security which have important implications for its relations with Saudi Arabia. These centre firstly around Iran as a hub in the 'Axis of Resistance', and, secondly, in the emphasis Iran places on multilateral 'region-first' solutions to security in the Middle East.⁵⁸ Both allow Tehran to enjoy a level of independence in the conduct of its foreign policy. The former gives Iran significant reach in the Middle East through its long-standing alliances and networks, and has a strong ideational slant. The latter primarily serves to build an aspirational agenda for the conduct of Iran's foreign diplomacy in the form of a more traditionally understood regional security architecture.

The 'Axis of Resistance', originally centred on the alliance between Hezbollah, Iran and Syria,⁵⁹ focused on containing Israeli, and by extension

US, aims in the region. While it only crystallised in the global public consciousness in the years following the Arab Uprisings, it is an intrinsic part of a wider counter-hegemonic narrative against the West and its allies that has characterised Tehran's regional security outlook since the revolution. As Saad notes, the fact that Iran acts as the lynchpin of this axis is 'not only due to its regional power status, but also to its identity as a specific kind of regional power, which derives its sense of ontological security from this political identity'.⁶⁰ The Islamic Republic acts as something of a middle-ranking power globally, while seeking to maintain its position as a major power within the Middle East, drawing on its religious and ideational power to sustain its alliance network. While much debate centres around groups within the axis serving as so-called proxies due in part to the well-known provision of Iranian funding,⁶¹ a fact that is not denied by Iran nor such groups, the reality is a more complex alliance network that affords considerable agency to its constituent parts.⁶² Where this has important corollaries for the Iranian-Saudi relationship is in the developments in regional politics since the Arab Uprisings. What semblance there was of regional order was supplanted with widespread regional instability and subsequent interventions in a number of theatres as a result of the uprisings. The Iranian narrative of the 'Axis of Resistance' as an alliance that draws on strong ideational and religious ties is one that is intrinsically tied to its own national security concerns, helping the Islamic Republic maintain a defensive posture in the region ever since the uprisings.

Iranian-Saudi relations were tested throughout the summer of 2019, when a series of attacks against oil tankers, including Saudi and Emirati vessels, took place in the Gulf of Oman. As noted previously, Iran has highlighted its control over the Strait of Hormuz as a key bargaining chip if it were unable to export its oil, stressing that the Persian Gulf had to be a secure waterway for all or for no country at all. This led pundits in Iran to openly speculate that the attacks were indeed Iran's doing.⁶³ Saudi accusations of Iranian complicity in the attacks, as well as in the response to the September 2019 Houthi-claimed drone attacks on the Saudi Aramco oil facility, were met with short shrift from Tehran. For Iran, the resultant increase in extra-regional interest in securing the supply of Middle Eastern oil, seen in the form of increased Western military support for Saudi Arabia, provided an opportunity to again emphasise a region-first alternative. This found its articulation in President Rouhani's proposal for securing the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz under the banner of a 'Hormuz Peace Endeavor' (HOPE), or 'Coalition for Hope'. Utilising the UN General Assembly to broadcast this initiative to a global audience,⁶⁴ Rouhani's vision for HOPE was aimed squarely at regional states and sought to ensure energy security, freedom of navigation and free transfer of oil and

other resources through the Strait of Hormuz. Noting that such a coalition would require UN supervision, Rouhani expressed Tehran's desire to have the US excluded from such an initiative, remarking that 'stability in the Middle East should be sought inside the region rather than outside of it'.⁶⁵ Pundits in Iran have also insisted on expanding bilateral talks with Saudi Arabia through HOPE, to build a regional security forum, a non-aggression pact and Gulf naval force convergence, while also expanding ties with the smaller Gulf states to ensure they do not fully back Saudi Arabia in future regional arrangements.⁶⁶

Tehran sees space for Saudi Arabia in such initiatives, provided that external (i.e. US) powers are excluded, but such potential for cooperation remains a hypothetical ideal not least because there is no guarantee that including Iran in multilateral security arrangements will alter its position vis-à-vis the Arab world. From Tehran's standpoint, this hypothetical ideal would be viable if the region moves towards an era with a less overt US presence, something that despite US troop drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan is still far from reality given continued American military presence in bases across the region.

To date, several proposals for collective regional security in the Persian Gulf have failed, including those put forward after the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), and the Gulf War (1990–1991), in part because the US was unwilling to grant Iran a major regional role, and also because of fears that such proposals would empower Iran to expand its regional influence further. Since 2014, with the escalation of regional conflicts, other ideas for regional collaboration have been explored based on models such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which was the precursor of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Created with the 1975 Helsinki Accords, the CSCE allowed NATO members and the signatories of the Warsaw Pact to engage in talks about their security concerns.

Instead, the region is dividing over the issue of regional security. In Iraq, the notion of the country being explicitly part of the 'Axis of Resistance' has been problematic, due to the continued US presence in Iraq and influence over Iraqi leaders. From Iran's standpoint, however, its Iraqi allies, particularly the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs), *are* part of the resistance axis and play a key role in Iran's continued engagement with political and military groups in both Iraq and Syria. Here we see a re-purposing of the axis to contain the wider extremist or 'takfiri' threat to Iran and its allies, thus forming part of Tehran's very own 'War on Terror' narrative.⁶⁷ Hence, this network of alliances forms part of Tehran's own strategic depth projection in the region, something that it sees as vital for its security.⁶⁸

Iran is keen to utilise the potentialities of more traditional forms of international organisation such as the UN to promote its own visions for peace and dialogue, as seen first with Khatami's promotion of 'Dialogue among Civilizations', and Rouhani's early attempts to combat extremism through his 'World Against Violence and Extremism' (WAVE) initiative in 2013, which also aimed to deescalate tensions in the Persian Gulf. In recent years, Tehran has emphasised its preference for an inclusive, regional security architecture. Foreign Minister Zarif was particularly clear in calling for regional solutions to common security problems. Writing in the *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* in 2016, he highlighted the necessity for a regional dialogue forum under UN supervision, citing the success of UN Security Council Resolution 598 that helped draw an end to the Iran–Iraq War, and argued that such a forum could form the basis for 'more formal nonaggression and security cooperation arrangements'.⁶⁹ However, it should be noted that while the resolution did lead to advisory meetings among regional states, it did not materialise into any collective steps.

In general, the Iranian foreign minister's calls were met with mistrust across the Persian Gulf due to the suspicion and mistrust that has fed into Saudi narratives about Iran's regional intentions, and Iran's regional behaviour including attempts to export a revolutionary agenda abroad. Ayatollah Khamenei insists that demonising Iran has marginalised its efforts to build regional security.⁷⁰ Iranian pundits also argue that it is necessary to establish that security cannot be achieved through the US, as any association with US policies is costly for all regional actors. Furthermore, Tehran insists that it must be allowed to use its exceptional capacities as a powerful regional state to share its values with neighbouring Arab countries.⁷¹ On the other end of the spectrum, some voices in Iran argue that joint regional security must account for Gulf geopolitical realities that help rid Tehran of its conspiratorial worldview especially towards Saudi Arabia and the US.⁷² Encouragingly, this narrative goes to show that in Tehran, some debates aim to de-link ideology from the pursuit of national security interests.

Conclusion

The Iranian–Saudi relationship, presented in this chapter largely from the perspective of Tehran, provides a unique insight into one of the most significant geopolitical rivalries of modern times. The vicissitudes of this relationship have a major impact on the domestic and international politics of the Middle East and beyond. Studying the nature of this rivalry since the Arab Uprisings sheds important light on the worldview of the Islamic Republic as it faces a number of perceived and real hostile threats in the regional and

international environment. In response to changes in the regional environment, Tehran and Riyadh concluded that they must each separately consolidate their spheres of influence in the region, which was frequently achieved by undermining each other in an effort to shift the blame for regional instability. The battle for regional influence was thus articulated through competing narratives as much as it was through material means.

What the presentation of elite-level narratives from Iranian political and academic figures in this chapter reflects is broadly in line with the Islamic Republic's foreign policy outlook, emphasising the pernicious motives of the US and its allies, but it also showcases an often ignored nuance and breadth of debate. This sense of malign intent on the part of the US is channelled through policies that, in Tehran's eyes, aim to divide Muslims and wreak havoc on its ability to have mutually beneficial relations with the Kingdom. There are, however, numerous critics of Tehran's stance vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia, particularly in terms of both a lack of interest and sufficient diplomatic nous when dealing with Riyadh. Other voices frame relations in terms of the damaging effect the US–Saudi relationship has on Riyadh's ability to act independently, and many of these discourses feed into a general picture of viewing Saudi Arabia as an unequal partner in the region.

The religious sphere has also been a site of contention, particularly when certain, religiously informed identity narratives are deployed. Arguably a geopoliticisation of identity has taken place within the rivalry, often expressed through instrumentalisation of religion to provide additional depth and justification for certain policy stances. Tehran utilises well-established, religiously grounded themes of fighting oppression and standing up to the Saudi-led, extremist or 'takfiri' threat. The narrative expounded by Tehran is deployed to provide a deterrent against perceived Saudi hegemonic desires, but is also lamented by some who seek to emphasise a less ideologically driven stance towards Saudi Arabia.

The overarching perception of Saudi–US ties, the opposing views on various Middle East conflicts and perceived sectarianising discourses against Iran and regional Shiite communities have important corollaries for Iran's view towards the Saudi security build-up in the region. The Saudi security posture is perceived in hostile terms by Iran. Saudi Arabia's increasingly assertive foreign policy in the region is based around coalitions with allied states and Western partners, such as proposals to form a so-called Arab NATO. Tehran refutes the Saudi narrative around their utility and instead emphasises Saudi Arabia's comparative weakness, starkly illustrated by its dependence on the US. Though there is a sense of Iran being subject to containment through such measures, there are voices in Iran that cite the very nature of these coalitions as justifying the need for greater dialogue with

Saudi Arabia to avoid miscalculations in an increasingly fraught regional environment.

Iran challenges the hostile forces arranged against it through its cultivation of alliances across the Middle East and in its predilection for suggesting multilateral security solutions. The ‘Axis of Resistance’ provides a different kind of multilateral alliance network that has a strong ideational slant that at its core is concerned with defending Iran and its allies. Its re-purposing in recent years to focus largely on containing the ‘takfiri’ threat is built on a narrative that sees Iran and the Shiite communities it supports as being victims of sectarianism. In a different way, Iran’s proclivity for promoting multilateral, region-first security arrangements for the Middle East is also reflective of its wish to see a region rid of US military presence, which would allow space for rapprochement with Saudi Arabia.

This chapter has focused on the view from Tehran regarding its relationship with Saudi Arabia. Focusing on the Iranian perspective has highlighted some core themes regarding the nature of discourse about the rivalry, the narration of religious identity and the vexed question of regional security. While the US continues to loom large over the relationship, the view from the Islamic Republic, while not homogenous, is broadly sceptical of the chances for rapprochement with Saudi Arabia while the status quo remains.

Notes

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