



# Determinants of Saudi Arabia - Iran Diplomatic Relationship

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**Abstract:** Though the modern day of Saudi Arabia and Iran represent a different geographical area from the generic Arab-Persian picture, the relationship between the two countries can be traced back to the ancient time. In this long period of engagement, sometimes, their bilateral relations have been strained over several geopolitical issues. At times, it has been in a state of healthy mood and witnessed a high level diplomatic engagement characterized by conviviality. Meanwhile, in other instances, their relation has been strained and resort to military solutions. In this respect, be it the current rapprochement or the preceding chains of hostility and detent, are a reflection of multiple factors such as ethno-linguistic and sectarian impulses, competing geopolitical ambitions, ideological cleavage and the alliance system, competing hegemony for leadership in the Islamic World, the incidents of Haji and the United States' Middle East foreign policy. This entailed that structural problems have often affected the diplomatic relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

**Key Terms:** Diplomacy, Foreign Relation, Conflict, Confrontation, Saudi Arabia

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran have crossed ups and downs in different historical timelines. The first phase of encounter between the Arabs and Persians was characterized by rivalry, which was expressed in the form of conquest and counter-conquest. The first wave of conquest can be evidenced by the expansion of the Sassanids into the land of the Arabs in the sixth century. The Sassanid was the last ruling dynasty of Persia that was established by Ardashir (224–239 A.D.). The expansion was part of a strategic move to dislodge the Aksumites who were an ally of the Romans in the Red Sea Regions. The former had long been dominating the area for strategic reason of preventing the Persians access to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Exploiting the local Arab resentment against the Aksumites, the Sassanids stepped into South Arabia during the reign of Khusrau I (r. 501–579). This eventually marked the annexation of South Arabia into the Persian Empire. In length of time, however, the Arabs were not comfortable with their second masters and made a serious of unsuccessful revolts. The anti-Persian revolt eventually got momentum with the rise of

Islam in Hijaz in the first two decades of the seventh century. Islam as a religion revolutionized the Arabs in a way to acquire leadership, ideology and courage to defend any external domination.

Although the counter conquest against the Persian Empire was started during the life time of Prophet Mohammed, the first decisive liberation campaign was made during the first caliph of Islam. At this time the Arabs expelled the Sasanids from today's Yemen, Oman, and Bahrain. And even the client and buffer state of Hira was also overrun by the Muslim Arabs in 633 A.D. After liberating the land of the Arabs, the second Caliph of Islam, Umar (634-44), ordered for the penetration of the Muslim army into the Persian Empire. The unfortunate last and weakest king of the Sassanids, Yazdgerd III confronted the revolutionary Muslim Arab Army at the battle of *Qadisiyya* in January 6, 638 where the Muslim Arabs got the upper hand. But, the Persians surrendered at Nihawand of Media Province in 642 which eventually marked the demise and incorporation of the Persian Empire into the new Islamic Caliphate (Wiesehofer, 2011).

The second phase of the Arab-Persian relationship was characterized by a period of political dominance and resistance to Arab linguistic and cultural assimilation. After the conquest of Persia, many cities rose in rebellion against the Arab rulers and attacked garrisons. The caliph sent to Persia reinforcements to quell rebellions and imposed Sharia as the rule of the new Islamic caliphate. The suppression of the rebellion in the province of Bukharia was a case in point. In the process of violence, however, scriptures of Zoroastrianism were burned down and many priests were executed. Although the spread of Islam was gradual in Persia, many embraced the new religion, including the Sassanid elites, and even gained positions of authority in the new Caliphate system. Despite effective Islamization in Persia, the project of Arabization in the land of Persia was less effective. The Arabs were forced to adopt the Persian language as the second language of Islam. When Persian was used as the language of proselytization, the new generations of Persians, including children of the Sasanian elites, converted to the religion of Islam. This has helped the Persians keep much of their language and culture intact. It is, therefore, safe to conclude that Islamization more effectively integrated the Persians into the new Islamic order than Arabization.<sup>1</sup>

The third phase of Arab-Persian relations epitomized the emancipation and revival of the Iranian heritage from Arab political hegemony in the territory of the older Persian Empire. The establishment of the Safavid Empire (1501–1779) and the collapse of the Caliphate system in Baghdad were concomitant in the history of Islam. The Safavid was an indigenous Persian Islamic Empire which claimed the restoration of the pre-Islamic heritage within the framework of Shia Islam. This was exemplified by the restoration of Persian dynastic and cultural traditions. The empire was originally established by a Shia religious group at the expense of the extermination of the dominant Sunni Muslims in Iran. Twelver Shiites rejected the first three caliphs of Islam and honored the twelve imams as the direct descendants of Prophet Mohammed. Although the Orthodoxy of Twelver Shism forbids the formation of state Shism in the absence of the hidden Imam, the Empire at the worst was established as a military state. The Safavid Empire achieved territorial and cultural progress during the reign of Shah Abbas I (1588–1629). The period also witnessed religious controversy between Sufism and

<sup>1</sup> Arab Conquests and Sasanian Iran History Today

literalist Twelver Shia scholars over the interpretation of Sharia. It was during this period that the mourning rituals for the Karabala incident replaced the Sufi dhikr ritual and the cult of Sufi saints. Nonetheless, the mysticism once resurrected by Mulla Sadra has immense implications for the current Iranian leaders. Finally, following the death of Nadir Kahan, the Qajar tribe under the leadership of Aqa Muhammad stepped into the politics of Iran and founded a new dynasty, the Qajar (1779–1925) (Kamrava, 2013).

The fourth phase of the Saudi-Iran relationship related to the birth of the two states as modern nations. The modern history of Iran began with the end of the Qajar dynasty in 1925 and the subsequent establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty under the leadership of Reza Shah. Saudi Arabia also evolved as a modern nation state from the womb of the old Ottoman Empire in 1932. The very nature of their collaboration attributed to being adherents of similar orientations in terms of critical policies. Their foreign and security policies in particular were largely British-centric within a multipolar world order. More importantly, they relied on the British Residency in the Persian Gulf to ensure stability along their borders<sup>2</sup>. A low level of observed interactions between them in the 1920s hinted that their bilateral relations was not as such significant. For instance, when the Persian envoys visited the Holy place of Mecca at Ibn Saud's invitation in 1925, their point of discussion was the status of Iranian pilgrims and Shia inhabitants in Madinah and Qatif, not their bilateral relation or beyond.

The first formal Saudi-Iran diplomatic ties began after the treaty of friendship was signed in 1929 (Ibid.). On that occasion, the Pahlavi and Al-Saud dynasties agreed that “inviolable peace and sincere and durable friendship will reign”<sup>3</sup>. Since then and throughout the period of the Shah Dynasty, the relationship between the two states has been characterized by intermittent tension and cooperation. Among others, the two countries had uneasy relations over the question of Iranian territorial claim over Arab-speaking Khuzestan and Bahrain, differences over the religious practices of haji, and Iranian refusal to join an oil embargo against Israel and the United States. Combating the spread of communism and ultra-nationalism, the establishment of Islamic multilateral organizations like the Islamic World Congress, the Muslim World League, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference were some of the areas of cooperation between the two states.<sup>4</sup> So far, we have discussed briefly the ups and downs of Arab-Saudi-Iranian relations through layers of time in history; the next section deals with the determinants that have shaped and influenced the Saudi-Iran relationship since the onset.

## 2. Determinants of Iran-Saudi/Arab Relations

Since the conquest of the great Persian Empire by the new Islamic caliphate in 642 GC, Iran has become part and parcel of the Islamic civilization. The conquest laid the foundation for Arab-Iranian relations and served as a source of conflict and cooperation through layers of time. As inheritors of the great Islamic empires,

<sup>2</sup> Banafsheh, K. (2016). *Saudi Arabia and Iran Friends or Foes?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/insight-215-iran-saudi-ties-can-history-project>

<sup>4</sup> Saudi-Iranian Relations, 1932–1982, Free Online Library (thefreelibrary.com)



therefore, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been affected by historical, geopolitical, and structural factors (Alikhani and Zakerian, 2016).

## 2.1 Ethno-linguistic and sectarian impulses

Although Islamic civilization in one way or another was influenced by great men of Arab and Iranian origins, ethnic and religious differences have provided a background of tension to Arab-Iranian relations. Among others, ethno-linguistic and sectarian issues are informed by four important factors. Firstly, Iran's persistent attempt to revitalize its pre-Islamic cultural and historical roots, though effectively Islamized. Secondly, competition to claim ownership of Islamic civilization as both contribute to political, administrative, and scientific advancements. Thirdly, both use religious sectarianism as an instrument of foreign policy in national and regional conflicts. The presence of indigenous minority Shia and Sunni religious groups in both countries has many times triggered conflict at national and regional levels (Ibid.).

More than Saudi Arabia, Iran is greatly worried about internal destabilization due to external ethnic incitement. The Persians constitute only 51 percent of Iran's 65 million people, and the remaining others belong to Kurds, Azeris, Arabs, Baluchs, and other ethnic groups. This ethno-linguistic diversity makes Iran more vulnerable to outside penetration. Nonetheless, the Iranians skillfully controlled this ethnic resentment by coopting ethnic minorities from the peripheries to the center. The appointment of the former defense minister, Ali Shamkhani, a man of Arab origin, was a case in point. Beyond this, Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader himself, belongs to the Azeri ethnic group. At a critical juncture of heightened tension between the two nations, Iran at times accused Saudi Arabia of inciting Arab and Sunni Baluch ethnic groups (Wehrey et al., 2009).

In the sectarian dimension, the two states instrumentalized the Sunni-Shia dichotomy for internal and regional conflicts. Saudi Arabia portrayed itself as the defender of Sunni-Wahhabi ideology, while Iran portrayed itself as the guardian of Shia Islamic creed. In addition, Saudi Arabia has introduced the Shia as a heretical minority with the motive of exploiting the majority of the Sunni world. Iran, on the other hand, urged the Muslim world to resist the United States and Israel, along with their regional partners. Internally, Saudi politicians tacitly use sectarianism in the form of anti-Shia<sup>5</sup> invective using the platform of the Salafi clerics, while Iran downplays the role of sectarianism for domestic political utility (Diansaei, 2018; Wehrey et al., 2009). Despite a long history of sectarianism, the regional dimension in the Middle East is a recent phenomenon that is primarily linked with the U.S. intervention in the region and the Arab Spring in 2011. Iran has instrumentalized sectarianism for the regional balance of power. In this regard, the support provided by Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Arab Spring in Bahrain, and the Zaidi Shia minority (Houthis) in Yemen were cases in point. The Saudis, for their part, supported Sunni militias in Iraq and Syria and governments in Bahrain and Yemen (Ibid).

<sup>5</sup> According to the CIA World Fact Book's latest edition (2023), the native Shia population in Saudi Arabia constitutes ten to twelve percent of the total population. The same source informs us that the indigenous Sunnis in Iran constitute five to ten percent.

## 2.2 Competing geopolitical ambitions

The rise of nationalism since the early 1930s, with its ethnocentric character in Iran and the Arab world, has been a source of tension between the two countries. Although the tone of Arab nationalism differs across layers of time, it is still a powerful political tool to influence Saudi relations with non-Arab nations. The Arab League in Cairo and the Gulf Cooperation Council in Riyadh are important platforms of Arab nationalism. As one of the leaders of Arab nationalism, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states supported the 'irredentist' movement of the Arabs in the Khuzestan Province of Iran. The Saudis also supported the buffer Arab states' claim over the Persian islands, such as Abu Musa and the lesser and greater Tunbs. Beyond this, the unsuccessful attempt by the Arabs to change the historic name of the Persian Gulf into the Arabian Gulf was a case in point. The claim of Iran over Bahrain was rejected by the Americans and the United Arab Emirates during the reign of the Shah. The Shah officially gave up his claim over Bahrain in 1971. The recent military intervention of Saudi Arabia and other Arab states was not only to defend the Sunni minority government in Bahrain but also to deter any possible Iranian expansion in the region (Hunter, 2010; Behzad, 2018).

## 2.3 Implications of ideological cleavage and the Alliance system

Ideological disparity and diverging patterns of alliances have highly influenced Saudi-Iran relations. Iran had amicable relations with Arab countries, with which it shared a similar ideology and alliance system. In this regard, Iran's good relations with Saudi Arabia during the time of the Shah were noticeable, but it had hostile relations with pro-Soviet radical Arabs like Egypt. After the Islamic Revolution, Iran shifted its ideological orientation against the west and downplayed religious affinity as the basis of its foreign policy in the Arab world. What has mattered to Iran since the revolution is the relationship of Arab countries with the West. Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East is dictated by the relations of Arab states with the west, especially with the US. This is to mean that any Arab country that has a strong alliance with the West will no longer be a friend of Iran. The conflict with Saudi Arabia is not far from this, as it is considered by many Iranians a proxy that has 'rented its security'<sup>6</sup> to the US. One of the Iranian officials in Ethiopia argues that the transition of Saudi Arabia from 'rented' to collective security is a precondition for effective normalization with Iran. This Iranian notion urges Saudi Arabia to withdraw from the orbit of the US security alliance (Wehrey et al., 2009; Hunter, 2010).

## 2.4 Competing hegemony for leadership in the Islamic World

Competing ambitions for regional hegemony in the Middle East have seriously affected the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia to this date. Although the competition for regional hegemony between Saudi Arabia and Iran dated back to the time of the Shah, it intensified after the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent downfall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 (Abassi and Haider, 2021). One of the areas of hegemonic competition is the leadership of the Islamic world. Iran, after the revolution, redefined its identity with Islam in contrast to the previous Persian-centric nationalism. As a result, the Iranian leadership articulates their claim over the role of the Islamic republic in the Muslim world as the land of 'Umal al-Qura"—meaning "the

<sup>6</sup> A lecture given by the ambassador of Iran to Ethiopia was held at IFA in March 2023.

mother of all cities"—and portrays the supreme leader as "Amirolmo'menin"—meaning "commander of the faithful". This collides with the similar claim of the Saudi king as Khâdim al-Arameyn ash-Sharifeyn, meaning "custodian of the two holy mosques" (DGAP, 2017; Hunter, 2010).

## 2.5 Haji as a venue of tension and rapprochement

The difference in interpreting the purpose of haji between Saudi Arabia and Iran highly influences the relations between the two nations as a source of tension and cooperation. The Iranians, with their reductionist approach, define the purpose of Haji only as a venue of interaction for Muslims worldwide, where they get the chance to meet, discuss challenges facing them, and come up with solutions. The Saudis neither agree with the interpretation of the purpose of Haji as a social avenue nor do they accept Iran's denial of a religious value. It was this divergent understanding of the purpose of Haji that led to sporadic conflict between the two states. These are epitomized by restrictions on access, quotas for Iranian pilgrims, their mistreatment, and agitations against the Saudi government. At the same time, much of the rapprochement between the two states was celebrated by inviting Iranian leaders for pilgrimage and relaxing restrictions on Iranian pilgrims (Hunter, 2010; Wehrey et al., 2009).

The first Saudi-Iranian crisis related to Haji happened in 1943 when an Iranian pilgrim desecrated the sanctuary of Kaba and the Saudi government executed the Iranian national. In response to this, the Shah government broke relations with Saudi Arabia. The second hajj-related conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran occurred in 1981 when Iranian pilgrims chanted political slogans against the Saudi authorities in Mecca and Medina. In response to this, Iranian officials accused the Saudi authorities of discriminating against Iranian pilgrims. The third conflict occurred in 1987 when Iranian pilgrims clashed with Saudi police, and the subsequent stampede claimed the lives of 400 people, out of whom more than 200 were Iranians. In response to this, the Iranian government boycotted the haji from 1988 to 1990. The last Haji-related conflict happened in 2015 following a stampede that led to the deaths of hundreds of Iranians. The government of Iran accused the government of Saudi Arabia of mismanagement and threatened legal action.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the venue of the haj is also an arena of cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Since the first rapprochement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia in 1991, many Iranian leaders have paid haji visits as a symbol of their cooperation. The visits of Iranian leaders like Mohammed Khatami and Ahmadinejad were cases in point. The Saudis, on their part, relaxed restrictions on Iranian pilgrims considering the reengagements with Iran (Hunter, 2010; Wehrey et al., 2009).

## 2.6 The US Policy in the Middle East

The US, during the time of the Shah, followed a strategy of "two pillars," relying on Saudi Arabia and Iran to maintain the status quo and regional stability in the Persian Gulf. Iran was a pro-Western state with strong military capabilities. Although Saudi Arabia was antagonistic with Iran, it has strategic importance to fulfilling US Middle East policy, principally deterring Soviet expansion in the region and maintaining its

<sup>7</sup> Timeline of Iran-Saudi Relations | Wilson Center

energy security in the region. The US exploited their hostilities for its regional policy in the Middle East based on power balance calculations. This policy of the US in the long run had consequences for the Saudi-Iran relation. When the war broke out between the Arabs (including Saudi Arabia) and Israel in 1973, Iran bred hostility from Saudi Arabia and other Arab states by refusing to join the oil embargo against Israel and the west. The US was, therefore, forced to replace Israel in place of Saudi Arabia in its "two pillar" policy. The policy was once again threatened when Iran declared an Islamic revolution following the removal of the Shah in 1979. This consequently created policy confusion in the government of Jimmy Carter in selecting a reliable ally for its regional balance. The US failed to follow a coherent policy due to divergent views in the inner circle of the US government. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski argued that Iraq was the only regional power replacing the Shah as a regional ally, while Secretary of State Cyrus Vance advocated a revolutionary Iran and restoring relations with Saudi Arabia. Differently, however, the US government restored relations with Saudi Arabia, and the latter helped Iraq launch a war against Iran. This severely affected the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Rahman, 2010; Hunter, 2010).

The post-Cold War period witnessed the emergence of America as a superpower and the expansion of the American presence in the Gulf region. This was more effective after the invasion of Kuwait (1990–91) by Saddam Hussien. Despite opposition from many non-state actors in the Middle East, the US military presence in many Gulf monarchies has become a reality. The US began to follow a two-pronged policy of clipping or containment and initiating Arab-Israel peace. The policy of clipping or containment" was directed against anti-Israel and American forces like Iran, Syria, and Iraq, while the peace initiative was directed in relation to the Arab-Israel (referring to Egypt and Palestine) conflict during the 1990s. This policy was made possible with the support of some pliant states like Saudi Arabia (Ibid.).

Since the 1990s, the United States has pursued a colonial strategy of sowing disunity among Middle Eastern countries. This has deprived leaders of the capacity to carry out their national will and objectives without the approval of the US. The Arab governments' lack of freedom in foreign policy engendered discontent, resentment, violence, and extremism among the people of the Middle East. Although the US portrayed Iran as a threat to the Arabs in the region and international peace due to its nuclear program, the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia was relatively improved with the coming of Hashmi Rafsanjani and Mohammed Khatami as presidents of Iran from 1991 to 2005 (Rahman, 2010). Although the details will be given in the next section, however, the recent rapprochement signed between Iran and Saudi Arabia on March 10, 2023, seems to contradict this backdrop.

### 3. Conclusion

The historical relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be traced back to ancient times. For a long period of time their relationship has been affected by a wide range of internal and external factors. More importantly, these multiple sets of determinant factors are deeply related to structural problems. Therefore, the exiting diplomatic hurdles between the two countries needs solutions that solve the root causes of their structural problem.



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