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BOOK REVIEW

SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN: FRIENDS OR FOES?

By

BANAFSHEH KEYNOUSH

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of this rivalry whose ramifications have traversed beyond the regional borders long back. One such attempt has been made by Banafsheh Keynoush, an Iranian-American researcher, who challenges conventional narratives around this rivalry by reorienting the debate away from the simplistic sectarian dichotomy of Shi'ism versus Salafism (Sunnism) and towards a deeper understanding of the complexities that shape their fraught relationship.

Mohmad Waseem Malla*



In the continuously transforming geo-political landscape of the region of West Asia, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is one of the most significant axes not only driving regional power dynamics but also around which it coalesces. As such, it has attracted significant scholarly attention over the years, which has attempted to unravel different aspects

Her 2016 book *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?* is a critique of the hegemonic reductionist paradigms that have overemphasised theological and ideological rivalries as the primary driving forces of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Instead, Keynoush argues that this competition for regional dominance is essentially shaped by the fluctuations in the regional balance of power, which are in large part due to interventions of foreign actors in local affairs, particularly the United States. Accordingly, Keynoush forces us to reconsider the prevailing

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narratives of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as a constant sectarian struggle by situating the rivalry in the context of external powers' interventions and destabilising consequences in the region, something that many in the Western world often overlooked or, to the least, trivialised.

The book is divided into four parts, comprising a total of eleven chapters, systematically outlining the historical evolution of this trans-Gulf relationship. The first two parts deal with the pre-revolutionary era and trace how diplomatic ties were formed between Al-Saud family and the Pahlavi dynasty in the early 20th century when Al-Sauds were consolidating their rule in the Arabian Peninsula, which eventually led to the formation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. Keynoush situates the Saudi-Iranian relationship within the broader imperial machinations that have shaped West Asia, highlighting how the two states navigated the complex interplay between regional aspirations and external pressures from the interwar years through the Cold War period up until the 1979 revolution in Iran that fundamentally altered regional geopolitics forever.

The subsequent chapters (chapter 7 and 8) delve into the ideological and theological underpinnings of the

rivalry in the post-revolutionary period, where the author demonstrates remarkable restraint in not allowing the sectarian narrative to dominate her analysis. This is something Keynoush could achieve given her deep understanding of the political systems of Iran and Saudi Arabia, in part because of her varied roles, including having interpreted for various Iranian presidents and government bodies along with her academic roles in both the Islamic Republic and the kingdom. Instead, the author places religion as a variable within a wider matrix of political and strategic interests. She unpacks the historical roots of Shi'ism and Salafism, but astutely refrains from attributing the current geopolitical impasse solely to these doctrinal differences. By doing so, she provides a refreshing departure from the myopic lens through which the rivalry is often viewed, emphasising that religion serves as an instrument rather than the prime mover of regional politics.

Given that Keynoush has used historical methodology to evaluate the events and incidents, it has allowed her to trace the ebbs and flows of Saudi-Iranian relations with near precision, without any haze, perhaps because of her access of varied sources. For instance, in the analysis of the Cold War period, the

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book reveals how both states found a common cause in resisting the spread of communism and how, despite their sectarian differences, they collaborated in countering pro-Nasserite and Ba'athist forces in the region. This is exemplified by their mutual opposition to the pro-Nasserite republic in Yemen in 1962, underscoring how geopolitical exigencies often superseded theological divides.

One of the book's most major contributions lies in its examination of the post-1979 era, with the revolution in Iran and its consolidation by the Shia clergy irrevocably altering the regional order. In navigating the complexities of this period, Keynoush has demonstrated how the ideological zeal of the newly established Islamic Republic, mainly with its calls for the export of revolutionary fervour to the Muslim world in general and the Gulf in particular, exacerbated tensions with the Sunni Gulf monarchies. However, the author refrains from viewing the revolution as a singular event that ruptured Saudi-Iranian relations permanently. Instead, she traces how Riyadh and Tehran have engaged in episodic détente, often driven by pragmatic considerations that seek to restore regional equilibrium.

Keynoush's discussion of the Iran-Iraq War (chapter 7) and the subsequent shifts in Saudi-Iranian relations is particularly noteworthy. The author highlights how Saudi Arabia initially sought to mediate between Iraq and Iran in the 1980s despite shrill revolutionary rhetoric from Tehran's Shia clerical regime targeting the Al-Saud family's rule before it fully backed Saddam Hussein's war effort due to its growing perceived insecurity from Iran. This serves as a critical juncture in her broader argument, demonstrating that despite deep-seated animosities, Riyadh and Tehran have both sought to recalibrate their relationship, albeit periodically, in the face of shared regional challenges.

Moreover, in her analysis of the regional geopolitical dynamics following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq (chapter 10), Keynoush offers a compelling exploration of how it impacted the balance of power in the region, whose ramifications continue to unravel and impact even today. The book contends that Tehran's entrenched influence in the post-Saddam era through both Shia political parties and militia groups, coupled with Washington's strategic blunders, exacerbated Riyadh's sense of marginalisation from regional affairs, thereby

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impacting the regional balance of power. In this context, the author argues that Saudi Arabia's initial hesitance but eventual derision of Iran's nuclear ambitions reflects the kingdom's broader anxiety over Tehran's ascendant regional stature.

In the final chapter, Keynoush turns her attention to the Levant, examining how these regional powerhouses competed for influence in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. The book underscores that there existed self-balancing mechanisms in this relationship that occasionally emerge in the region, arguing that despite their geopolitical rivalry, Riyadh and Tehran have, at times, demonstrated a capacity for strategic accommodation. As such, the author's analysis of Hezbollah's outreach to Saudi Arabia following the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war is particularly revealing, highlighting the fluidity of these regional alliances and the capacity for both these competing states to recalibrate their positions in pursuit of shared interests (p. 215). It may be noted that Keynoush's contention of strategic accommodation was demonstrated in 2023 when these two states ended their diplomatic wilderness, albeit with the assistance of China, re-establish consular relations nearly eight years after the 2016 incineration of diplomatic

compound of the kingdom in Tehran following Saudi Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr's execution on contested charges.

The book concludes with a forward-looking assessment of the prospects for regional stability, with the author arguing that regional peace will remain elusive as long as external actors, particularly the United States, continue to manipulate the regional balance of power. Keynoush advocates for a return to a more balanced partnership between Riyadh and Tehran, one that prioritises regional security and stability over ideological and theological contestation. In doing so, the book offers a hopeful vision of a future where regional stakeholders take the lead in shaping their political destinies, free from the interference of foreign powers.

Nevertheless, in sum, the book is a well-researched scholarly effort enriched with rich local references that makes it an intellectually rigorous contribution to the study of West Asian geopolitics. That the author has convincingly presented a much-needed corrective to the dominant sectarian lens through which the Saudi-Iranian relationship has often been viewed needs to be applauded. By

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grounding her analysis in a careful historical methodology and emphasising the role of external powers in shaping, rather than destabilising, regional dynamics, Keynoush provides a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of one of the region's most complex relationships. These scholarly interventions make it an important read for everyone interested in understanding one of the foremost drivers of West Asia's geopolitics—that is, Saudi-Iranian competition, rivalry or whatever name one may give it. ■

Note for readers and subscribers

We are happy to inform you that from January 2009 we have introduced the system of peer review of articles to ensure quality of publications and improve the scholarly value of our journal. We have a renowned group of scholars and academicians associated with our Centre and they are helping us in this process. We are grateful to them for their kind support and cooperation.

We would request our readers and subscribers to take note of these changes and we would, as ever, encourage them to send in research articles for publication to us. The manuscripts of research papers submitted for publication should be neatly typed in double space and the length of the papers should be ideally between 3,000-5000 words including the references. They should contain an abstract and a short introduction of the author. The authors should use Chicago Manual Style for their references. The articles can be sent to us in an electronic format, preferably Ms Word. For detailed guidelines they may send their queries to us in the following address.

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