

Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy, Hiro, Dilip. London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd, 2018, 460.

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The Middle Eastern region challenges simple depictions and the difficulties that exist here are, in fact, susceptible to simple solutions. The reader comes away from this book with an elevated sense for the complications underlying the politics in the Islamic world - a domain where geopolitics and religion decussate in competition for power among various regimes. The former American President, Richard Nixon, once said, "The Cold War isn't thawing; it is burning with a deadly heat." While he was describing the relationship between the US and the former Soviet Union (USSR), given present times, the statement can aptly describe the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The author makes all efforts in this narration of the Middle Eastern conflicts revolving around the Saudi-Iranian strife. In his most recent book, Dilip Hiro offers a rich examination of the hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which dates back to the early twentieth century. In the sixteen chapters, he chronicles the lineage of the rivalry and highlights the key moments in almost a century of animosity. It is teeming with rich historical accounts, packed with anecdotes. In the epilogue, the author talks about recent regional events circa 2018, including the intricacies of America's relations with the Saudi Kingdom, Iran and Israel under President Trump. In the remaining fifteen chapters, the book offers a thorough outline of the orbits of Iran and Saudi Arabia relationship as well as the Shia and Sunni vertexes of the cold war in the Islamic world.

In the course of the book, the author couples together fact and anecdote as he narrates how both regional and global events took place. Asserting that the 'common factor' between Riyadh and Tehran is "their claim to exceptionalism" (p. 3). The author specifies the disparity in which Iran has a "recorded chronicle dating back six millennia" (p. 4), which dates back

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before the arrival of Islam, whereas the first state in Saudi Arabia is tracked back to 1744 - around three centuries ago. Largely due to the vast oil reserves in both countries, the author maintains, the US “acquired pre-eminent influence” (p. 24) in both countries. For almost twenty-five years, both Iran and Saudi Arabia were part of the Washington clique - immersed in the war against the USSR. Together, Saudi Arabia and Iran became the “pillars” (p. 52) of the Nixon Doctrine in the Gulf region.

He goes on to describe the events which took place when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 and the US and its allies waged a war in retaliation. While these events were taking place, Hiro states that Saudi Arabia and Iran started a “race to influence the Muslim world” (p. 143). This race not only involved religion and geopolitics but also encompassed domestic struggles within both dominions that were repressed with shifting degrees of brutality.

The author admirably contextualises each event with regional politics. For example, the competition over ‘black gold’ and the withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He blames the US most for its persistent association with the Saudi royal family and its hostile approach towards Iran. However, while the author is condemnatory of all the US policies in the region, the book’s major bandit is the Saudi regime, which Hiro represents as a repressive theocracy. At the same time, he has a bullish notion of the Iranian government, deriding the narrative promulgated by the US that it is the world’s chief sponsor of terrorism. In conclusion, the author lays the blame on President Trump for “fuelling” the cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran and for his unflinching support of Israel. From this book, it is abundantly clear that Hiro feels that the Middle East would be much better off if the American influence were reduced, if not entirely removed from the region.

Hiro believes that the cold war between the Saudis and Iranians will continue in the foreseeable future. Any plans to introduce democracy in the Gulf Region are most likely prone to failure. As long as oil reserves exist, the US will continue to be involved in the Middle East for economic purposes. Another take away from the book is that the Sunni-Shia strife will continue to strain the Muslim world. Another interesting aspect of this book is that there is an underlying tone that suggests that with the rise of power of Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, Saudi Arabia is increasingly tilted

towards totalitarianism. Jamal Khashoggi murder seems evidence of this notion.

However, even though the conclusion brings to light the domestic changes in the Kingdom and provides current insights into the regional dynamics, the macro-analysis is missing. Even though the reader ends up with a comprehensive knowledge of events, the book falls short of providing analytical and deductive patterns that can only be garnered through careful scholarly study.

Notwithstanding, the author brings this contemporary cold war to life which is where the true strength of the book lies. It is a well-written, comprehensive narrative which provides a solid historical base. Moreover, given the exacerbated animosity between the two countries which has resulted in proxy wars all over the region - Yemen and Syria to name a few places - coupled with the US-Iran feud, this book is a timely read and a must-have for someone not versed in the rivalry that has driven an entire region into chaos.