

***Saudi Arabia & Iran: Friends or Foes.* Kaynoush,
Banafsheh. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 280.**

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The US influence on the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran plays a role so inherent that it becomes impossible to analyze their ties outside its jurisdiction. There has evolved a need to look over their ties without the constant partaking of the US as a potent force. This perspective, as a basis for a profound analysis, has been used by Banafsheh Kaynoush in her book titled, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?* The theme of this book revolves around the troubled ties between the two countries and the strategic importance of their relationship for the Middle Eastern region. It uses historical and chronological patterns of discourse to analyse the bilateral relations. In order to fully grasp the core of their rapport, it is pertinent to look towards the various power shifts that these civilizations went through.

Intrinsically, according to the Balance of Power Theory, both Iran and Saudi Arabia are on a perfectly destined trajectory. Securing their respective strategic interests have been as important as gauging their weaknesses. The book presents a sequential analysis of how the relations between the two countries have evolved over the time. The writer takes the reader through the historical course of events from ‘Nixonian Twin Pillars’ to the contemporary falling of these two countries. However, an incredibly balanced and objective approach has been utilized to navigate through the events that transpired leading to the current state of affairs between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Upon further observation, the points of friction between the two become more prominent which have been aptly described by the author in the first chapter. The ambiguity of the decision-making process in both countries and prevalence of mistrust in the general masses have also been pointed out as the reasons for the lack of trust within the two states. The role of the leaders is also quite significant as the monarchs in both countries have always remained under the heavy influence of external factors in play.

The other major aspect of this turbulent phenomenon is the theological factor. The dichotomy of Shia and Sunni ideologies, translated into these

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two states and societies, is perhaps the most exhaustively discussed factor while critically appraising their mutual relationship.

Interestingly enough, Banafsheh uses this factor as merely a singular variable in the entire equation. She retains her opinion that the Shia-Sunni factor is a farce of sorts that masks the political and economic yearnings that the two establishments hold dear. But no matter how uniquely you may look at this factor, its importance is clearer when it is looked at collectively alongside the political interests, foreign policy decisions and the bigger power play of regional countries. Iran's ideological disposition is quite evidently linked to Shia Islam which is considered as a deviation from the 'original' philosophy of Islam as supposedly followed by the Saudi regime and society. These two ideologies being at odds with one another have been sufficiently exploited by the external forces and the repercussions have echoed all over the world. The author stresses the point that being the hub of pilgrimage: Saudi Arabia assumes a responsibility more collective than Iran which causes it to become more restricted in its policies towards Iran. Thus, there exists only a responsive and reactive external policy which gives Iran free reign to adopt a more elaborate way of dealing with the Saudi kingdom and its allies.

The book takes on the religious aspect of the Iran-Saudi ties from the dawn of the 20th century to the current era but is of the view that this aspect in isolation is not substantial enough to have a well-rounded impact on their ties. Iran's position in the gulf, with respect to other states and especially Saudi Arabia, has always been complicated. The reason, however, is not its *Shi'ite* population entirely. In fact, it is the highly advanced nature of Persian culture and society which is contrasting to the lack of diversification in its adjacent societies. This combined with Iran's fortified political system made it quite inaccessible to foreign policy overtures. However while these historic accounts are quite informative and useful to a keen researcher, the author has delved unnecessarily deeper into world history instead of concentrating on the Iran-Saudi ties. The general discourse of the book focuses on the factor that the *Sunni* and *Shia* ideologies do not drive their respective foreign policies any more than their Arab-Persian identities.

It has been generally argued that the similar systems of the state governments, for instance monarchies in both Iran and Saudi Arabia, had a better rapport with one another. As the Islamic revolution upended Shah's

regime in Iran, the entire regional dynamics were deeply affected. In this chapter, the author contradicts her own musings regarding the role of religion in Saudi-Iran ties. She established that the religious ideologies played a much lesser role than it is normally believed so in the analytical and political circles. However, in this chapter, there seems to be a deviation from the previously formulated opinion. She reiterates here that reinforcement of the religious ideology in Iran's political institutions was more of an anti-thesis to the regime in Saudi Arabia with its monarchical system and *Wahhabi* identity. Both regimes in their social laws and treatment of *Sunni Shia* minorities have been known to play ideological favorites. This sad reality has been quite frequently exploited by the external forces at play in the region to fulfill their own interests. The Yemen war, presence of Hezbollah and the side-taking in the Syrian conflict have all been casted under the light of sectarian disparities which categorically refutes the author's claims that religion is not central to this rivalry.

In the last chapters, the author thoroughly explains this relationship in the light of contemporary events both within and outside the Middle East. Afghanistan proved to be the litmus test in this scenario as it not only revealed the actual stance of both Riyadh and Tehran on the US strategy to combat terrorism but it also clarified to their respective leaderships that Washington can ally on a need based strategy with any country at any time. It is also evident by its partnership with Islamabad on the War on Terror (WoT). However, Saudi Arabia quite promptly adjusted its expectations. Tehran remained on the fence watching US-Pakistan and Saudi-Pakistan ties prosper, apprehensively. The chapter further focuses on how the ups and downs in the policies of United States were effective in playing a role in widening the gap between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The book concludes on a note of hope for betterment in their mutual ties and also attempts quite effectively to suggest policy proposals to mend the broken diplomatic relationship of the two countries. Apart from political and strategic suggestions, the author also stressed the importance of intelligence sharing between the two states. The absolute lack of the exchange of information leads to the assumptions of enmity between both states which results in grave regional conflicts through indirect means. Perhaps, the only point of pride for both states regarding their mutual rivalry is the avoidance of a full-scale direct conflict between the two countries. All other means of provocation have been quite effectively deployed by both

states. The book is helpful for learning the historical aspect of the Iran-Saudi rivalry for those who are trying to catch up on history. Its narrative disposition also keeps the readers engaged sufficiently. However, the major goal that the book itself defines initially seems to remain essentially unfulfilled, i.e., analysis of Saudi-Iran ties without the US involvement. Perhaps, the goal itself was not realistic or practical, to begin with. A force as potent as United States cannot merely be a dependent variable of study while learning about country rivalries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia or even Pakistan and India. The US involvement can be found at the heart of any major conflict currently or previously rampant all over the globe and the rivalry of Iran and Saudi Arabia can only be understood in this context.