

Iran- Saudi Relations: Past Pattern, Future Outlook

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Abstract

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran which led to the emergence of a revolutionary, anti-Western, anti-establishment regime under the tutelage of Shi'ite ulema radically changed the previous state of relations with Saudi Arabia, a conservative, Sunnite, pro-West monarchy and junior partner of the defunct Pahlavi State in the security system in the Persian Gulf. The present article intends to look into the state of bilateral relations between the two countries since 1979. The article argues that the relations between these two important Muslim and regional countries have been affected by their constant rivalry in a number of fields considered critical to both of them. As analyzed here, the contest between them in all these areas have been conducted in a rather limited manner, and that both sides have exercised restraint to avoid spiraling into "unlimited contest." The "limited nature" of contest in fact allowed gradual reduction of tension between them and led to détente and even expansion of cooperation in late 1990s. The détente period came to an abrupt end in the wake of the traumatic aftershocks of 9/11, particularly the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Having looked into the afore-mentioned dominant pattern of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia since 1979, the authors posit that adoption and pursual of a positive, proactive approach by the two sides and reliance on confidence-building measures can indeed help diffuse the on-going tension and mutual suspicion and pave the way for the promotion of mutually-beneficial policies and measures. In their analysis, the two sides, despite all the differences and difficulties, enjoy the potentials to decide to explore practical ways and means on how to define shared interests, goals and objectives.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Regional Role and Rivalry, Religious Claims and Ambitions, Relations with the U.S./West, Rapprochement, Confidence-building

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Introduction

The relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, two major countries in the Persian Gulf region with significantly different, even conflicting, characteristics, interests, and objectives, and a background of rivalry and cooperation in the pre-1979 period, have confronted both countries with quite serious challenges after the advent of the Islamic Revolution in February 1979. Tehran-Riyadh relations during the past three decades have experienced rather continuous fluctuations and have been characterized with alternating periods of tension, conflict, and cooperation.

A number of constant factors can be discerned in shaping and affecting the quite complex dynamics of the relations between the two countries and hence, the respective set of approaches and policies adopted and pursued by each side - needless to say, under ever-changing circumstances in the region and on a larger scale as part of the overall foreign policy outlooks and objectives of each side - that have led to the periods of conflict and cooperation. Fact of the matter is that the very *raison d'être* of the government in both countries and their respective self-image, regional status, and political-ideological (religious) mission in the region and towards the global Islamic community [Ummat], inclusive of the particular dominant mindset of the ruling elite in either country, have been playing a catalytic role in shaping and directing policies towards each other.

The present article undertakes to look into the dynamics of the bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia since 1979. More specifically, it seeks to explore into two distinct and interrelated



questions: one, the pattern of relations between the two countries during the period under review, and two, possibilities for change in the dominant pattern in order to promote and improve the bilateral relations? In so far as a theoretical framework for the study is concerned, the authors believe that the concept of “limited contest” can in general – with some exceptions - explain the dominant pattern of Iran-Saudi bilateral relations during the period under review.

In explaining the concept of “limited contest,” it can be said that when the conflict between two sides – countries/states in the case at hand - is concerned with the second-order interests; that is, issues and goals that are prone to compromise, states/countries tend to be more flexible, in which case their relations will be defined and characterized by a state of “limited contest.” In such a situation, there exists [ample] opportunity for transition from conflict to cooperation -- and vice-versa. To the contrary, “unlimited contest” applies to the situations of conflict where critical national interests and strategic foreign policy principles and objectives are at stake, or threatened as the case might be. Under such circumstances, there is scant possibility for transition from conflict to cooperation, and states might even feel obliged to wage a war in order to safeguard their principles and interests or realize their strategic goals.

Analysis of Iran-Saudi relations in the post-1979 period is, in the authors’ view, directly related to and affected by the pre-1979 period and the peculiar relations between the two countries which were ruled by conservative, strongly pro-West and staunchly anti-Communist monarchies. In the wake of the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf at the end of 1971 and as part of then new U.S. foreign policy strategy – generally known as the Nixon Doctrine predicated on the role of local states in preserving regional security – Iran under the Shah assumed the main responsibility, with Saudi Arabia playing the junior role. Maintenance of stability in the area, inclusive in particular of preventing the spread of Soviet and pro-Soviet influence, and providing security of continued oil flow, were as a matter of fact



achieved for the bigger part of the 1970s through the rather close cooperation between Tehran and Riyadh. Despite obvious and substantial differences between the two countries, actual cooperation, in fact coordination under the overall U.S. umbrella, were the order of the day until the popular Islamic Revolution in Iran overthrew the pro-West Pahlavi State in early 1979 and established a revolutionary regime under the tutelage of the Shi'ite ulema with a pronounced radical, anti-American, and anti-establishment posture and foreign policy.

The revolutionary change in Iran radically transformed the state of relations with the outside world, including with the neighboring states and in the Persian Gulf, and for the case at hand, with Saudi Arabia, which, in the post-1979 situation, came to be seen increasingly as the lynchpin of Sunnite conservative, and pro-West status quo. The stark differences between the two countries – two previously cooperative states thrown suddenly in the new confrontational role of ideological and regional rivals - emanating from revolutionary change in one and retrenchment of status quo in the other and all that this quite rapid transformation entailed in foreign policy outlook and conduct were bound to lead to a totally new kind of bilateral relations. The subtle, low-profile religious-regional rivalry between the two capitals, which was true even in the days of close political relations and concordant regional posture while monarchy was still in power in Iran, came to the fore with full force no sooner than the revolutionary regime took over in Tehran, and continued to leave its undeniable imprint on the state and dynamism of relations.

As will be discussed in the present article, the “contest” – limited contest - between Iran and Saudi Arabia since 1979 emanates from the following five major factors.

1. Interpretation of Islam/religious-sectarian rivalry;
2. Relations with the U.S. and the West;
3. Supremacy in the Persian Gulf region;
4. Expansion of regional influence; and



5. Rivalry in OPEC.

The authors are of the view that the first two factors have played a more vital role in defining their respective foreign policy goals and priorities; that is, first, the emphasis accorded by both countries to the question of leadership of the Muslim world, making the entire Muslim world a theatre for actual contest; and second, the two countries' approach and outlook vis-à-vis relations with the West, the United States in particular. While Saudi Arabia has since its establishment as a state in 1932 pursued a consistent pro-West policy and close political, economic and military relationship with the U.S., Iran, since the 1979 Revolution, changed track and opted for an independent, actively anti-imperialist and pro-Third World foreign policy, which did in fact lead to open friction with the West proper and pro-West governments in the area. The initial intrinsic tension between the revolutionary Shi'ite Iran and its Sunni-dominated conservative, pro-West neighbors in the Persian Gulf, including in particular Saudi Arabia, was somehow ameliorated over time and as a result of changing times, but it has to be conceded that the long shadow of the two factors just mentioned have continued to be felt in various aspects of their bilateral relations, most vividly reflected in their regional contest for influence and supremacy.

The article first looks at how the relations between the two countries have evolved since 1979, and then explores the respective outlook in either country towards the other - which, in the authors' view, cumulatively account for the policies they have been pursuing in their dominant pattern of "limited contest." The authors believe that a more profound appreciation of the rationale of and interaction among the major factors involved in the bilateral relations would help portray a more realistic picture of possible future improvement. Hence, exploring the possibility of change in the dominant pattern and its parameters at a subsequent part, the article concludes with a number of suggestions aiming at the promotion of bilateral relations – albeit within the somewhat limited bounds of inevitable constraints of reality.



Three Decades of Iran-Saudi Relations

1. Immediate Post-revolutionary Stage

As already indicated in the Introduction, the revolutionary change in Iran radically transformed the state and dynamics of the country's foreign relations, including with the neighbors in the Persian Gulf. The relations with Saudi Arabia, a major Arab country in its own right, citadel of the Sunnite conservatism in the Middle East and the entire Muslim world, and also Iran's junior partner in the pre-1979 regional security arrangements, changed radically. The reverberating revolutionary messages from Iran, especially with a peculiarly Shi'ite discourse, were bound to cause serious unease among the generally traditionalist and conservative Saudis, especially among the powerful religious hierarchy with distinct and pronounced anti-Shi'ite Wahhabi outlook and orientation.

Notwithstanding such concerns, Saudis pursued a cautious, uncertain, wait-and-see policy at the outset, which was soon followed by a political good-will gesture. The dispatch of a high-ranking delegation to Iran, headed by the then Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) – with its headquarters in Jeddah - carrying a congratulatory message on the Revolution, served as the initial positive political gesture on the part of the Saudis. In his first official reaction, then Saudi King Khalid described the establishment of the Islamic government in Iran as a precursor for further proximity and understanding. Crown Prince Fahd also stated that he respected the revolutionary leadership very much. The good-will gesture and such statements helped to somewhat reduce the initial serious unease and give the unfolding relations an aura of normalcy.

Contrary to the expectations at the time, a number of factors intervened to change the situation for the worse. Political pronouncements by prominent Iranian authorities severely critical of Saudi Arabia – which in the official Iranian discourse at the time was



simply referred to as “Hejaz” [western part of the Saudi territory and as distinct from Najd, the eastern part] - and of the House of Saud – changed the atmosphere substantially. Holding of “disavowal of the polytheists” demonstrations with anti-American and anti-Israel chants by Iranian Hajj pilgrims in the course of the annual pilgrimage as of 1980 – totally unacceptable to the Saudis both in political and religious terms – were among the factors raising Saudi concerns with the revolutionary Iran. A high-profile gathering of liberation movements in Tehran in early January 1980, also attended by the representatives of the Saudi Shi’ite opposition, and the subsequent establishment in Iran of the Saudi Liberation Front, further contributed to the deterioration of bilateral relations. Two other developments helped to increase the Saudis’ concerns and suspicions about the revolutionary Iran: first, the seizure of the al-Masjid al-Haram (the Holy Mosque in Mecca) by a group of extremist Salafis of Saudi origin in November 1979 which lasted two weeks, and second, the Shi’ite uprising in July 1980 in the Sharqiya [Eastern] Province, which was fully suppressed by the Saudi government. The fact that the late Ayatollah Khomeini openly denounced the seizure as “the work of criminal American imperialism and international Zionism” (New York Times, 25 November 1979) did little to assuage the Saudi doubts. That denunciation was more than compensated by Iran’s unequivocal condemnation of the suppression of Shi’ites in the Eastern Province (Fuller, 1999). Further intensification of the then on-going political and propaganda exchanges between the two capitals, as it turned out, negatively affected the unfolding relations and appear to have convinced the Saudis to change track and opt for a confrontational approach towards the Revolution and the Islamic Republic.

2. Deterioration in Relations

The new Saudi approach towards the revolutionary Iran found its manifest reflection in the full-fledged support for the Iraqi invasion of



Iran in September 1980 – which led to the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. Despite formal declaration of neutrality in the conflict, there was little doubt that the Saudis were deeply involved in the Iraqi onslaught, as had been also manifested in the widely-reported Saddam's visit to Riyadh in summer 1980 while finalizing his plans for the military action. The establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council [properly the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf – GCC] in May 1981, with its headquarters in Riyadh, was in fact the institutional collective response by the six countries concerned to the Iranian Revolution, and more specifically to the War. While some of the GCC members pursued a more middle-of-the-road approach to the War – even though somewhat tilted towards Baghdad - Saudi Arabia, along with Kuwait, chose to side fully with Iraq and provided it with vast economic, political, military-logistical, and propaganda support.

The Saudi – and for that matter, Kuwaiti - support for the Iraqi war effort intensified especially as of summer 1982 once the tide of the War had been effectively turned and Iran went on the offensive. Despite this official policy line, King Fahd stated at the Twelfth Arab League Summit in September 1982 (Fez, Morocco): “We hate the continuity of this bloodshed. We prefer peace and mutual respect....We do not want anything for the two countries but stability, nothing except resort to reason and logic. Why should this War exist? This War is detrimental to the Islamic Ummah [community] and from which only the enemy will benefit.” (al-Fadhil, 2000) Iran's open and total denunciation of King Fahd's 8-Point Plan for Middle East, involving recognition of Israel, further added to the continuing tension between the two countries. Saudi – and also Kuwaiti – direct engagement in helping Baghdad in the course of Tanker War from 1984 onwards further deteriorated the bilateral relations, in the course of which ambassadors were recalled and the diplomatic relations were maintained only at the level of charge d'affaires.

Political efforts by both sides in 1985 towards amelioration of



the highly tense situation between the two capitals, as manifested in the exchange of visits by Foreign Ministers Saud al-Faisal and Velayati, failed, however, to make any discernible change in the state of relations. The opposing positions of the two countries on a wide range of issues, most notably the Iran-Iraq War and the Saudi's not-so-discreet pro-Iraq involvement, and also such a contentious issue as the Iranians' emphasis on holding demonstrations at the annual Hajj pilgrimage, hardly left any practical room for diffusing the fast-deteriorating spiral in the relations. The state of relations further suffered as Riyadh decided to exert further pressure on Iran through the deliberate policy of lowering the oil price through flooding the market with a much higher oil production – which the Saudis called at the time the “faire share of the market” strategy.

The deterioration in the relations between Tehran and Riyadh came to a climax at the end of July 1987 when the Saudi security forces attacked the Iranian-organized Hajj demonstrations in Mecca, in the course of which 400 pilgrims, including 274 Iranians, were killed. The incident, which came in the wake of the U.S. re-flagging of Kuwaiti tankers and direct military engagement in the Persian Gulf (Kramer, 1996) at the height of an extended diplomatic war between Iran and a number of European countries, and barely a few days after the passage of the UN Security Council resolution 598 on the Iran-Iraq War, led to a very angry political and popular protest in Iran. Iranian demonstrators attacked and ransacked the Saudi - and Kuwaiti - embassies in Tehran the following day, which left a Saudi diplomat dead. On 3 August, in the course of Friday congregational prayers in Tehran over a million Iranians called for the overthrow of the regime in Saudi Arabia (New York Times, 1987). The depth of Iranian anger and indignation at the Saudi travesty was such that the late Imam Khomeini declared in a statement that even if he were to forgive Saddam Hussein, he would never do that with the House of Saud. While the War continued and international pressure on Iran to bring the conflict to an end increased throughout the rest of 1987, the



net result of this unprecedented incident led Riyadh to unilaterally rupture political-diplomatic relations with Tehran in early 1988 – which lasted for three years, during which Iranians were deprived of the opportunity to perform annual pilgrimage – quite a difficult situation both for the ordinary people and the Islamic Republic. As will be discussed further below, resumption of diplomatic-political talks between them was due to another major development of a totally unexpected and different nature – Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait in summer 1990.

3. Rapprochement

Iran's official acceptance of the UN Security Council resolution 598 in July 1988 – almost a year after its adoption – practically ended the war with Iraq, which went into effect a month later on August 20th once a cease-fire had been brokered between the two sides. As reported then and corroborated subsequently, Saudi Arabia played a positive role in convincing a seemingly adamant Saddam Hussein to discontinue military operations and settle for a cease-fire (Picco, 1999). Admiring Iran for its acceptance of the resolution, King Fahd was reported to have stated that Saudi Arabia did not have any irresolvable problems with Iran. The end of the war appeared to have removed the Saudis’ perceptions of direct Iranian threat, and simultaneously, Iran no longer looked at Saudi Arabia as the major regional supporter of its enemy. The end of the War in summer 1988 and the smooth political transition in Iran a year later after the demise of the late Ayatollah Khomeini and election of President Hashemi Rafsanjani, on a political platform of moderation and pragmatism, helped soften the tense political atmosphere between the two countries. Once elected, President Rafsanjani embarked on a policy known as “reconstruction” of the Iranian war-ravaged economy, which was predicated, among others, on expeditious repairing of the country’s badly strained relations with the outside world, including with its neighbors in the Persian Gulf. However, the actual thaw in the relations with the Saudis did not take



place until after Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in early August 1990. Despite the bitter Iranian memories of Kuwait's full-fledged support for Iraq's war effort, Iran's declared neutrality in the course of the Iraq-Kuwait crisis and the ensuing military operations that led to Iraq's eviction from Kuwait (January-February 1991) served to change the chemistry between Iran and its neighbors in the Persian Gulf, most notably with Saudi Arabia and also with Kuwait, and much more so with the other members of the GCC.

The first high-level meeting between Iranian and Saudi officials after the rupture of relations took place between the foreign ministers on the margins of the annual session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 1990 – in the backdrop of the regional and international uproar at the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. With the Ba'athist Iraq having resumed its previous threatening posture in the Persian Gulf against its Arab brethren, the atmosphere seemed quite propitious for courting, once again, Iranian support for the preservation of the status quo. As it came to be known later, resumption of the Hajj pilgrimage for Iranians, inclusive of the two thorny issues of the number of pilgrims and the demonstrations, had constituted an important part of their talks in New York. In fact, an agreement in principle had been reached for the year 1991, which was further followed with a number of other meetings in Geneva and Muscat (Kramer, 1996). Following the Muscat meeting, a joint statement was issued on 19 March 1991, reflecting the understandings reached between the two sides, including on the restoration of relations simultaneously in Tehran and Riyadh. As stated by Saud al-Faisal after the meeting, Iran and Saudi Arabia had reached understanding on resolving all outstanding problems between them. Diplomatic relations were officially resumed a week later and embassies were re-opened in both capitals in April 1991.

4. Détente and Confidence-Building

Resumption of diplomatic relations, and in particular, resumption of



the Hajj pilgrimage for Iranians, served to diffuse the previous decade-long tension between the two countries and reduced mutual suspicions to some considerable degree. On the Saudi side, perceptible change in the overall policy towards the Shi'ite community, including granting amnesty to a number of prominent Shi'ite leaders, reflected the improving atmosphere and state of relations. The Saudis' refusal in 1996 to blaming Iran in the al-Khubar bombing incident, despite overt American pressure to the contrary, was clearly reflective of the official policy in Riyadh in favor of preserving the state of relations with Tehran and preventing a return to the days of mutual suspicion and recrimination.

Khatami's election as president on a reform platform in May 1997 helped much to continue – and in fact, strengthen - the ongoing improving trend in the relations that had begun under his predecessor's "détente" policy. As observed by an Arab commentator: "Signs which had been shown during the first six months of his government, and previously during his campaign, were supported with practical steps and measures in order to improve the Saudi-Iranian relations." (Masad, 2001: 98) The new proactive foreign policy approach contributed much to the Iranian successful hosting of 11th Summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Tehran in December 1997. Hosting of the meeting, attended by a good number of heads of state and government, including by the Saudi Crown Prince Amir Abdullah, first such summit under the Islamic Republic, did in fact reflect the success of the détente policy under Hashemi Rafsanjani and its continuation under Khatami. The meeting between President Rafsanjani and Crown Prince Abdullah in Islamabad, Pakistan, in ... had already sealed the agreement in principle for the Tehran Summit. Moreover, the fact that the meeting was held in Tehran as scheduled and was well attended at summit level, despite the meeting that had been organized some time earlier by the U.S. in Doha, Qatar, to dissuade Muslim countries to stay away, was also indicative of the changing times in the relations



between Iran and a wide range of countries which had been previously strained. Saudi Arabia and a number of other countries in the region boycotted the Doha meeting, which they judged to be pursuing the wrong approach to the Arab-Israeli peace process.

The OIC Summit, and the talks on its margins between Amir Abdullah and Iranian officials, served to raise the level of bilateral relations, which manifested itself in a number of subsequent high-level visits. In February 1998, former President Rafsanjani made a 10-day visit to Saudi Arabia – which further cemented the personal bonds between him and Amir Abdullah and came to have a strong impact in the years that followed in the relations between the two countries. In April 1999, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, and subsequently in early May Saudi Defense Minister Prince Sultan, visited Iran, as part of an almost two-year intensive diplomatic work before President Khatami's official visit to Saudi Arabia in mid-May 1999, which took place before his visit also Syria and Qatar. Khatami's meeting with King Fahd, who received him in Jeddah, was described by Saud al-Faisal as "excellent," though he hastened to add that "much work was needed to rebuild trust between the two governments." Further emphasizing the element of confidence-building for establishing solid relations, the Saudi Minister went on to draw attention to the need for settling "outstanding problems peacefully and amicably" and also that "if in the future, the two governments have the political will, there are no limits to cooperation with Iran." (BBC, 1999). The visit served to further broaden the scope of developing liaison between the two countries, in the course of which a number of agreements, mainly in the economic and trade fields, were also signed. The rapid improvement in the Tehran-Riyadh relations under Khatami has been ascribed - by an Arab commentator – also to the U.S. serious efforts in 1998-9 towards improving these relations, in the hope that Saudi Arabia would assume a mediatory role for Iran-U.S. rapprochement (Masad, 2001: 41).

The trend of improving relations culminated in the conclusion



of a security cooperation agreement in April 2001, in Tehran, which was signed by the Interior Ministers. The agreement, focusing on domestic affairs, addressed cooperation between the two sides in combating organized crime, terrorism, and drug trafficking. It paved the way for two other agreements between the two countries for commercial, economic, and cultural cooperation (Complete Texts of Iran-Saudi Security Agreements, 2001).

The fast-developing relations were, however, encumbered with two quite challenging issues: first, Saudi consistent support, within the framework of the GCC meetings and final communiqués, for the United Arab Emirates's position and claim in its dispute with Iran over the Abu Musa and Tunb Islands in the Persian Gulf. While continuing with their solid pro-UAE position in this regard, the developing Iran-Saudi relations placed a certain degree of restraint on the Saudi posture, which, unsurprisingly, caused dissatisfaction in the UAE. The second challenging issue pertained to the oil sector, where Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two major members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), have been competing for long with each other, openly and otherwise. While post-revolutionary Iran has pursued a consistent policy of preference for generally higher prices and lower OPEC total output, also for a higher share in production [OPEC quota], Saudi Arabia, enjoying a much higher production capacity and a higher share in the OPEC has an oil policy often at variance with the Iranian policy. Despite some agreements between the two countries in this field – which should be considered more of a limited, ad hoc nature - the Saudis' insistence on the pursuit of their preferred oil policy has in fact remained as an area of distinct policy difference between Tehran and Riyadh. Rather sharp differences between the two countries on the oil policy and the OPEC politics should in fact be seen and judged as part and parcel of their respective overall foreign policy, including in particular the relations with the West and the U.S.

The fast-developing relations between Tehran and Riyadh, after



almost two decades of deep mutual suspicion and escalating tension, was closely and anxiously watched by other countries. Even if envied by countries like Egypt, looked at with suspicion and a certain degree of dissatisfaction by Israel, and found disquieting by an isolated Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the unfolding liaison with prospects for further expansion bound to have reassuring impact on a wide range of countries in the Middle East, particularly in the Persian Gulf region. The U.S., then under the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton, as already alluded, could have also found such reduction of tension and expanding cooperation stabilizing to the Persian Gulf situation, and perhaps more importantly, serving to somewhat moderate Iranian posture and policies on issues and situations of priority to Washington. The election of George W. Bush in November 2000 and the ascendance of the Newcons in his administration – to be discussed below - changed the American ball game altogether.

Post-2001: Divergence and Extended Contest

The ascendance of the Newcons in the U.S., followed by the September 11 terrorist operations in the U.S. and the consequent American military action in Afghanistan in retaliation against Al-Qaida and the Taliban regime, created a totally different situation in a region. Despite obvious official U.S. concerns (Gardner, 2009: 97), Saudi Arabia was subjected to open political-propaganda pressure in the U.S. media and by powerful pressure groups given the Saudi nationality of a number of those involved in the attacks on the World Trade Center towers, and also for the known Saudi support for militant Sunnite/Salafi groups in the region (Ibrahim, 2009: 108). In early 2002 Iran also came to be designated by George Bush as part of the Axis of Evil, along with Iraq and North Korea.

The rather sudden turn for worse in the U.S. approach and policy towards Iran and Saudi Arabia – keeping in mind the differences involved – would not have per se negatively impacted the



state of their bilateral relations; cooler Saudi-American relations could have even served as a catalyst for closer ties with Tehran. But, the U.S. military intervention in Iraq in March 2003 and removal of Saddam Hussein by force, which came to have serious political-strategic ramifications for both Iran and Saudi Arabia, as Iraq's immediate neighbors, was of a different nature. While both Iran and Saudi Arabia opposed, as a matter of principle and for their own peculiar reasons, the U.S. military action in Iraq and were concerned about the developing state of insecurity across their national borders, their respective approach and subsequent policy to the post-Saddam situation and emerging political arrangement were diametrically opposed. Tehran was more than pleased to see the sudden and effective disappearance of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist regime, and more so, the emerging ruling coalition comprising of the majority Shi'ites and the Kurds – both with close, solid relations with Iran. On the contrary, the new and unfolding situation in Iraq carried ominous signs for the Saudis. They might have not been particularly fond of Saddam, especially after the Kuwaiti affair, but were hardly willing and ready to accept the total eclipse from power of the previously ruling Sunnite minority, especially so if a pro-Iranian Shi'ite-dominated coalition were to take over the reigns of power in Baghdad, which would also help enhance Iran's regional status, including through the inevitable brighter prospects for the Shi'ite communities in the bigger region.

These differing perspectives on the Iraqi theatre did in fact lead to a not-so-hidden rivalry between the two countries – which, in the eyes of some analysts in the region, could be explained in terms of an age-old history of tension over Shi'ite-Sunnite divide which has acted as an essential factor in shaping political calculations in both countries, and generally throughout the Middle East (Wehrey et al, 2009: 11). Others, however, have downplayed the extent of direct impact of sectarian orientation and outlook on the actual policies of the two countries and instead accorded a higher weight to the



influence of “national interests” - as defined by either side (al-Rashed, 2010). According to Gregory Gause (2007: 4), "Playing with a sectarian card is like playing with fire." However defined or explained, the actual contest between the two countries in the Iraqi theatre since 2003, which has been pursued by both sides in a more or less restrained manner, has forced the bilateral relations fluctuate between formal friendship and actual albeit implicit confrontation. With the rather abrupt end of the short period of “détente and confidence-building,” a host of issues - some old and others emerging – have in the post-2003 period shaped the dynamics of the bilateral relations; perpetuation of insecurity in Iraq, rising Shi’ite - and Iranian - influence in Iraq and to some extent in the Middle East, including in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia (Yamani, 2008), unfolding controversy over Iran's nuclear program, and the situations in Lebanon and Palestine. Concurrent expressions of concern by Hosny Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah of Jordan – the emergence of the so-called Shi’ite Crescent – and also of Iran's infiltration in Iraqi policy-making apparatus, did also reflect the growing and apprehension and unease in the region (Shelli, 2006).

While, as discussed, Iran’s regional position and stature were enhanced as a result of the developments in Afghanistan and Iraq, and also subsequently due to its developing nuclear program (al-Rashid, 2009), the reverse occurred for the Saudis. The overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Ba’athists in Iraq – two Sunnite regimes which had served, each in their own way, to check Iranian power and status in the region – substantially weakened the Saudi regional image, position and stature, which was also sullied with the well-funded support extended to militant and extremist “Islamist” currents and forces in the region. Pursual of such an outlook and its requisite policies by Riyadh led to some degree of marginalization in the U.S. regional policies between 2001 and 2006 – as manifested in inconsistent policies in Iraq, doubtful role in Lebanon, and decreasing focus on the Israel-Palestine conflict.



In retrospect, it appears that after a period of uncertainty, Saudi Arabia changed track and opted for an activist policy in all the regional situations considered to be of direct and critical interest to Iran - Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and also Yemen. Up to 2006 the Saudi involvement in Iraq was mostly geared to the active support and financing of anti-government insurgency and terroristic acts. As estimated by American sources, "Around 45% of foreign terrorists who targeted American troops and Iraqi citizens and security forces were sponsored by Saudi Arabia." (Bahgat, 2008) The signing of a statement [Mecca Instrument] in October 2006 by a group of Iraqi Sunnite and Shi'ite ulema -- with Saudi mediation -- condemning killing of Muslims and considering the "perpetrators of such acts as criminals" (Shelli, 2006) signified a change of approach on the part of Saudi Arabia. The Saudis' decision to establish formal diplomatic relations with the Iraqi government after the Baghdad-Washington security pact had been signed (2008) was also another indication of a more proactive approach in Iraq which had been criticized previously by fellow Arab countries or Iraqi Sunnites or other dissatisfied political groups and forces.

Lebanon has also served as another arena of contest between the two countries, especially in the wake of the 33-day Israeli war against Hezbollah (2006), turning the Lebanese scene into an arena for the confrontation between the contending forces of "resistance" and "compromise." The Saudi heavy political and financial backing of Fouad Siniora's government in the course of the war was directed at undermining pro-Syria and pro-Iran forces, most notably Hezbollah (Yamani, 2008). Saudi Arabia's full-fledged support for the March 14 Alliance, led by Sa'ad Hariri, also represents part of the anti-Hezbollah policy in Lebanon. Saudis were quite vocal in describing Hezbollah's capture of the Israeli soldier which led to the 2006 war as an "uncalculated adventurism." (Teitelbaum, 2007: 2) The same line of anti-Hezbollah posture could also be seen in the case of the Egyptian apprehension of a number of Hezbollah members in 2009;



Riyadh openly sided with Egypt and utilized its vast media in the region to challenge the legitimacy of Hezbollah's moves and activities. The Saudis' particular sensitivity with respect to Hezbollah is directly related with their own soft Shi'ite underbelly; they are more anxious about the impact of the Hezbollah as a radical, anti-establishment Arab force than about that of the Iranian Shi'ites – who are "Persian" – Ajam [non-Arab] in any event.

The question of Palestine - the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, to be more precise - which has occupied an important place in the Iranian foreign policy under the Islamic Republic has also proved a contentious issue for the Saudis. First and foremost, as stated in unambiguous terms by King Abdullah: "The question of Palestine has to be dealt with by the Arabs and not others (non-Arabs)" (Hamdan, 2007) – an indirect allusion to the Iranian activism and involvement. Secondly, given the division in Palestinian ranks and the moderate-militant dichotomy, Saudi Arabia, along with other Arab countries considered "moderate" and with close relations with the U.S. and the West, have been extremely dissatisfied with Iran's vocal support for the Gaza-based Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, which are also much closer to Hezbollah than any other Arab force or country. The particular Saudi anger at Tehran in recent years, as observed by an Arab analyst, has been due to the increasing militancy among the Palestinians – which are generally blamed on the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis - and also the fact that "Iran has succeeded in attracting Palestinian loyalty, particularly that of Hamas, whereas Riyadh's mediating efforts have failed to bear fruit." (Wehrey et al., 2009).

The Iran-Saudi contest for regional influence has also come to find a more recent manifestation in the course of the still on-going conflict between the Yemeni government and the Houthis – a Zaidi-Shi'ite group residing in the northern part of the country and critical of socio-political and economic discrimination. Both sides in the conflict accuse each other of being backed by external forces; Houthis being supported by Iran and the government backed by Saudi Arabia



and the militant Salafi currents, including Al-Qaida. The very fact that a domestic conflict in a remote part of the southern Arabian Peninsula has turned into an active arena of contest, especially from the Saudi side, points to one of the fundamental areas of Iran-Saudi differences delineated before; Shi'ite-Sunnite divide.

Iran's developing nuclear program has also come to serve as an area of disagreement – and even tension - between Tehran and Riyadh. While Saudi Arabia, like many other Islamic, developing, and non-aligned countries, has publicly supported Iran's right under the NPT to acquiring peaceful nuclear capability, but their unease, and in fact, opposition to such a development can hardly be denied – as amply underlined in numerous official pronouncements by various Saudi officials. Saudis, like the U.S., European Union and their like-minded countries, have expressed suspicion about the true nature of the Iranian program, fearing that it might have other ultimate ends in mind. Saud al-Faisal's emphasis in an exchange with the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in February 2010 on the imperative of “immediate solution for the threat posed by the Iranian nuclear program instead of a gradual solution [sanctions]" leaves little room for speculation. He ascribed the Saudi perception to the “proximity to the source of threat.” (Heydarian, 2010). Recent WikiLeaks revelations appear to lend further credence to such feelings of urgent threat.

Along the same line of thinking and especially considering the possible military action against Iranian nuclear facilities – as an option on the table for the U.S. government, both under George W. Bush and now under Barack Obama, with or without Israeli involvement – it appears that the Saudis seem to be generally disposed to the idea, even if deeply concerned about the probable catastrophic repercussions resulting from an action. On this particular point, as with the Iranian nuclear program itself, Saudi public posture and pronouncements have differed quite substantially from their private exchanges with the Western and American interlocutors. While the



Saudis, like other members of the GCC, have publicly expressed opposition to the use of the military option (al-Mottairi, 2008), it was reported even as far back as 2007 that Prince Bandar bin Sultan, former Saudi ambassador to Washington and advisor to the National Security Council, had assured then U.S. Vice-President Dick Cheney that Saudi Arabia would not oppose the resort to the military option. It has also been reported that former Saudi ambassador to Washington Prince Turki bin Faisal resigned his post in outright opposition to such an option (Mattair, 2007).

Conflicting Outlooks and Clash of Interests

The foregoing analysis of the process of development of the bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with its periods of ebb and flow and specific areas of tension and conflict, clearly points to two fundamentally differing, in fact, conflicting, outlooks; the Iranian outlook and the Saudi outlook. From the viewpoint of the post-revolutionary ruling elite in Iran, the Islamic Republic of Iran, a revolutionary Islamic state in the modern world – the first true Islamic state since the early days of Islam – carries a unique universal mission for the entire Muslim community [Ummah], and hence, deserves the mantle of leadership in the Muslim World. Viewed as such, the revolutionary Islamic state faced two sets of challenges from the very outset; the challenges emanating from within the Muslim World, and those coming from the outside.

With the Islamic Republic representing the pure Mohammedan Islam, Saudi Arabia, as the very embodiment of a reactionary, pro-West monarchy with claims to Islamic leadership, and propagating “American Islam” - a term used widely in the early years of the Islamic Revolution in referring to the Saudi outlook on Islam – represented the major source of internal threats. Later developments, in particular the Iraqi aggression against Iran in 1980 – which, as discussed, was widely believed at the time in Iran to have been fully coordinated with Saudi Arabia and did as a matter of fact enjoy full



Saudi support during the entire 8-year duration of the War – served to corroborate the prevailing view in the Islamic Republic in its early days. The U.S., and its regional corollary, Israel, and the West in general, which were considered to be fundamentally opposed to Islam as a liberating ideology and were disposed to supporting reactionary, deviant governments in the Muslim world represented the major external threats to the new revolutionary Islamic state. The substantial support extended to Iraq by the Western countries in the course of the War also served to further entrench the prevailing view in Tehran; collusion between reactionary forces within the Islamic community with the anti-Islamic and imperialist forces outside against the revolutionary Islamic state. Given the peculiar Saudi position within the Muslim World, and its continuing rivalry with Iran – the Islamic Republic - over a host of issues and areas, most notably regional and Islamic leadership as well as relations with the with the U.S. and the West, Saudi Arabia came to be seen as the actual embodiment of such a collusion, or in other words, the unification of internal and external sources of threat. It is also worth noting that some analysts, including Iranians, believe that the Islamic Republic has been, since its inception, practically more concerned with preserving its peculiar identity as a “revolutionary Islamic state,” and has interacted with other actors in the region and the international system from that particular vantage point (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2009: 67).

The Saudi outlook, in contrast, represents a totally different worldview. Saudi Arabia, as the cradle of Islam and the host to the two most revered Holy Shrines ((Mecca and Medina), considers itself as the heart of the Islamic world, and also a citadel of Arabism, and hence, deserving the mantle of leadership in both Muslim and Arab worlds. From the Saudi perspective, the Islamic Republic, with a peculiar revolutionary Shi'ite ideology, and subsequently its Shi'ite allies in the Middle East, and also more recently the radicalized Arab street, have emerged as a serious challenge to the status quo and the traditional areas of Saudi influence; Persian Gulf and the Arabian



Peninsula, the Arab world, the Muslim World, and also the international system. Despite the fact that Egypt, as the largest and most populous Arab country, used to claim the leadership of the Arab world, especially under secular, Arab nationalism of Nasser, it appears that changing times and circumstances have much ameliorated that intra-Arab rivalry to some major extent. Moreover, the seemingly inevitable imperative of collaboration among pro-status quo governments in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to maintain stability (Dawisha, 2006: 105) and confront regional crises and contain or counter other governments and forces with a radical, anti-establishment outlook, as represented by the Islamic Republic and its allies – both Shi'ite and Sunnite [e.g., Hamas] - has encouraged them to seek cooperation than rivalry. In addition to the Saudi dissatisfaction with the Islamic Republic's steadily rising regional challenge, they have also been seriously concerned about the challenge posed to them at the domestic level. The very fact the ultimate responsibility for the dossier for bilateral relations with the Islamic Republic rests with the Interior Ministry, under Prince Nayef, and not with the Foreign Ministry, shows the particular security-related sensitivity attached to the relations with Iran. Continued grappling with the challenges posed by the Islamic Republic and its regional allies in the areas considered of priority – just alluded to above – have served to take quite a substantial toll on the Saudi position, stature, and resources. But, Saudi Arabia's close liaison with the U.S. and the West in general – as also reflected in recent years in the membership in the Group of 20 (G20) – have served to strengthen its regional and international stature and accorded it a bigger maneuvering space in those areas and situations, also in such areas as facing Israel or combating terrorism.

Suggestions for the Promotion of Relations

The discussion in preceding pages has depicted a clear picture of the conflicting outlooks between Tehran and Riyadh, which has resulted



in continuing “*limited*” contest between them since 1979 in the following areas which both sides consider to be of critical priority:

1. Gaining influence and status in the Persian Gulf;
2. Expansion of influence in the Middle and North Africa;
3. Ideological/religious rivalry and claim on the leadership of the Muslim world; and
4. Position and role in the OPEC on oil matters.

The mutual threat perception in both two countries has significantly affected their respective security perceptions and has, as a result, led to a rather trend of rising prominence of military and security dimensions in their overall outlooks and policies. Iran’s attempt since late 1980s/early 1990s to rebuild and reinforce its military capability could in fact be seen in the context of the traumatic experience of the Iraqi-imposed War and the subsequent perception of threat emanating from the U.S. military forces in the area. As it happened, Saudi Arabia, though not sharing the same threat perception vis-à-vis the American presence but presumably acting on a threat perception from Iran, also pursued a policy of expansion and strengthening of military prowess, mostly in the form of procurement of advanced U.S. military hardware. According to SIPRI 2010 Yearbook, Saudi military expenditures between 1998 and 2009 rose from 17.83 to 39.25 billion dollars. Iran’s military expenditures during the period (1998-2008) increased from 1.54 to 9.17 billion dollars (SIPRI, 2010) – without any sign of letting up. In September 2010 it was revealed that the Obama Administration was in the process of finalizing the largest arm sales deal with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, in which Saudi share was around 67 billion dollars. Given the state of relations in the region, particularly in the Middle East, it is generally believed that the deal had a peculiarly Iranian angle; it is intended to counter Iran and its rising regional stature and influence (Tepperman, 2010). If past trends are any indication, reliance on military strengthening under conditions of mutual threat perception does in fact serve to enhance the existing [threat] perceptions and tend to lead to more costly arms race by the



parties directly involved, and for the bigger region surrounding them or other parties interacting with them.

As was discussed earlier, following a rather long period of tense and conflictual relations between the two countries (1979-1997) during which both sides had exhausted utilization of all possible means and methods, short of resort to direct armed conflict, against each other and towards realizing their respective goals, they finally came to a point to recognize mutual confidence-building as a prerequisite for normalizing their relations. The change in their respective outlook and the consequent confidence-building measures did in fact result in quite a significant improvement in the bilateral relations, which, due to the cumulative impact of a host of factors and developments at national, regional and international levels, were derailed, once again, and the then on-going track came to halt, and still worse, were reversed before the foundations of new state of relations could be firmly consolidated.

The rather sharp fluctuations in the state of relations between Tehran and Riyadh, emanated as they have from conflicting outlooks based on differing worldviews and divergent interests and objectives, appear to have led some analysts and politicians – Iranian, Saudi and others – to believe that the two countries find each other so far apart on critical issues that renders establishment – and more importantly, maintenance – of firm, stable and sustainable bilateral relations practically impossible. To them – the pessimists, so to speak - the future of relations between the two countries will, most probably, be a repetition of the past trends, where mutual suspicion, destructive rivalry, and an inexorable trend of costly arms build-up and arms race geared to mutual containment – with all they entail – will continue to be the order of the day for the two countries.

Another group of analysts and politicians – both Iranian and otherwise, whether to be labeled realists or optimists – tend to believe that the very pattern of limited contest between the two countries over the past three decades presents a pattern that provides for the



possibility of movement towards diffusion of tension and promotion of cooperation – as happened in late 1990s. The present authors, needless to say, belong to the latter group. In their analysis, since the pattern of “limited contest,” even if engaged in for a rather long period and in a sustained manner, does not cover conflict critical national interests and principal national goals and priorities – which as discussed would fall under the alternative pattern of “unlimited contest” - can be relied on for the promotion of cooperation on second-order goals and objectives, if not in the short-term, but certainly in the mid-term. The authors also believe that ideational changes in both countries and developments at regional and international levels appear to have contributed to the emergence of propitious grounds that, if grasped and utilized properly, would help usher a positive shift in their respective attitudes towards each other. In line with the widely accepted definition of lasting peaceful coexistence, the foundational basis for such a change, is to be found in the principles of mutual respect and non-interference in each other's domestic affairs, which if respected and complied with – by the parties involved - would lead to a discernible reduction in mutual suspicion, adoption of confidence-building measures, and ultimately to the expansion of cooperation in various fields. The practical experience in bilateral relations, which commenced under Hashemi and was continued with more vigor under Khatami, demonstrates the real potentials for positive change towards a less conflictual and more cooperative pattern of relations.

Even a cursory look at over three decades of the actual conduct of Iran and Saudi Arabia - two major nations in the Muslim world and also two regional powers in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East who can potentially play a substantial role in promoting regional security and stability and serve the collective, larger interests of the Islamic community – would point to a sad record of destructive, costly contest with equally negative consequences and repercussions for their own national interests, the bigger region surrounding them,



and in fact, the entire Muslim world. Reasonably speaking, from either side, the inevitable conclusion would be that the past pattern of behavior and relations – except, of course, for the short 1999-2002 period – should not continue, and instead a different outlook, approach, and requisite policies need to be pursued. The question would then pose itself: How?

We have already indicated that change in the past pattern of relations is possible. What is needed, at the practical level, is for the two sides to decide to change track, which, more often than not, takes the form of taking practical steps towards in that direction. This despite the fact that under the current circumstances the prevalence of heavily securitized outlooks and policies geared towards containing or undermining the other have severely constrained real possibilities for meaningful change. Indications are that from the Saudi perspective, given Iran's peculiar political-religious structure as well as on-going political developments and change in the regional outlook recent years, normalization and expansion of relations with Iran at the present juncture seems a tall order. In this respect, the Saudis point to the golden era of relations between the two countries during the latter years of Hashemi and earlier years of Khatami – discussed in some detail in preceding pages. It is interesting to note that from Tehran's vantage point, even during the “golden era” of extended cooperation, Saudi Arabia had engaged in certain activities, both formally and otherwise, that ran counter to the spirit of the expanding relations at the time.

Whatever the veracity of such claims and counter-claims – which is beyond the point at hand - there is little doubt that such an atmosphere hardly provides a fertile ground for the expansion of bilateral relations, let alone extended cooperation. We are convinced, however, that continued emphasis on such perceptions and outlooks and the policies emanating from them, and the consequent obvious lack of movement in the direction of change and promotion of relations, will inevitably lead to the continued loss of precious possibilities and capacities and also prove costly to both sides, as



witnessed in the past. A glance at the history of mutual relations between the two countries, given their major differences in many respects, both before and after the Islamic Revolution, shows that realization of their respective national priorities and regional goals would depend on cooperation – albeit within the bounds of “limited contest.”

An objective approach to the question of future bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia – which the present authors claim to follow – calls, by definition, for defining goals and objectives in realistic terms; that is, based on the realities on the ground, equally important and even more so, to be pursued through realistic policies and measures. The first, and in fact, the most fundamental conclusion, to derive from such an assertion is for both sides to recognize each other’s independent identity with all its foundational, constitutive and attendant features and characteristics. Each side, it is to be recognized and conceded, is what it is, and even more importantly, will continue to preserve its peculiar, defining characteristics. Normalization of relations and even extended cooperation are not supposed to – nor can they be expected to – result in the negligence of or change in such characteristics. And both sides will continue to define their respective critical national interests and foreign policy objectives on their own, within their particular national features and parameters. The difference, however, will be in that the two sides will decide – and this is a matter of all too important political will -- to explore ways and means despite being different on how to define shared interests, goals and objectives, to be extended, preferably if possible, at a later stage to defining shared conceptions and aspirations.

If the two countries managed in the past to reach agreement, through confidence-building policies and measures, on important issues and situations, including in the security field, logically, they can still resuscitate that trend. In our view, there still exists possibilities for actual cooperation between the two countries on a wide range of



regional situations such as Iraq and the Persian Gulf, as well as in Lebanon, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Yemen, and also on such critical issues as terrorism, not only directly at the bilateral level, but also through available regional and international/multilateral mechanisms and processes.

The two countries' traditional sectarian rivalry – even if implicit and indirect - and its corollary, claim on the leadership of the Muslim world, as discussed earlier in the article, have served as an important area of disagreement and tension, not only at the bilateral level, but also to some degree throughout the region and in a sense at the level of the entire Islamic community. While it is conceded that the two societies - the two countries – cannot and will not set aside their respective history, culture, and particular beliefs in order to make cooperation between two the rival, neighboring states possible, we believe that a realistic, proactive – and inevitably pragmatic - approach on the part of both of them in this critical and extremely sensitive area, along the general framework defined above, would allow them to maintain their peculiar identity and still play their respective paramount role as the leaders of the Shi'ite and Sunnite communities in the Muslim world. This proactive approach would facilitate confidence-building at the religious – ideological – level, promote mutual sectarian respect and tolerance, and gradually pave the grounds for joint efforts towards convergence of views on more fundamental issues as relates to the understanding of Islam and its application in the modern world. Adoption and pursual of such an approach by them would as well help diffuse sectarian tensions in the bigger region and across the Muslim world and will serve create a more conducive atmosphere for the peaceful resolution of outstanding inter-state and intra-state problems within the Islamic community [Ummah]. Given the experience since the Islamic Revolution, the authors believe that practical movement in this direction requires the positive, proactive approach – and actual cooperation – of both countries.

With the foregoing in mind, in the authors' view, the following



specific suggestions, among others, can help promote confidence-building between the two sides, and lead to reduced tension and a less-charged atmosphere towards facilitating actual cooperation.

- Creation of sustainable institutional mechanisms for the liaison and exchange of views between the two countries at different levels and in various fields, especially in political, religious, and security fields;

- Imperative of special emphasis on sustainable exchange of views and cooperation between the ulema and religious thinkers of both countries;

- Creation of deliberative mechanisms for convergence of views and promotion of cooperation on traditional areas of regional rivalry (Persian Gulf, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Afghanistan, Yemen) and areas of shared concern (terrorism, regional security, etc.);

- Exercise of restraint towards each other as a matter of principle, including with regard to domestic and regional issues of respective or shared concern;

- Adoption of a proactive approach with a view to changing traditional areas of rivalry into potential areas of mutual understanding, cooperation and synergy;

- Devising of joint mechanisms for exploring, at an institutional level, possible areas for cooperation and synergy.

- As alluded to in earlier parts of the article, promotion of dialogue and understanding between the two countries, gradual reduction of mutual suspicion and tension, and removal of the consequent mutually damaging and costly rivalry between the two countries, would benefit them directly at the national level in various fields and areas. It would as well help the promotion of security and stability in the Persian Gulf region and Iraq – as the most important areas of immediate and critical concern to both countries – and also in such other critical situations as in Lebanon, Palestine, Afghanistan and Yemen. Development of a cooperative attitude between the two countries would also help them in their combat against extremism



and facilitate their collaboration on other regional and international issues, whether on oil matters in OPEC, on the wide array of issues in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), or on multilateral issues at the United Nations. It is not a folly into imagination that to assert that better relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia will be to everybody's benefit across the board.

Conclusions

The present article has looked into the state and dynamics of bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia since the Islamic Revolution in February 1979. The discussion here has demonstrated that the relations between these two important countries in the Persian Gulf, the Greater Middle East, and in a larger sense, in the Muslim world, have been affected by their constant rivalry/contest in a number of fields considered critical to both of them; religious rivalry over interpretation of Islam [Shi'ite-Sunni dichotomy]; supremacy in the Persian Gulf; expansion of regional influence; relations with the U.S. and the West; and rivalry in OPEC. As analyzed here, the contest between them in all these areas have been conducted in a rather limited manner – except perhaps for a short period in the earlier years, especially during Iran-Iraq War. The central point underlined by the authors in this regard is that both sides have exercised restraint to avoid spiraling into “unlimited contest” – where critical national interests of the first order are involved and countries/states might even choose to go to war to safeguard them.

The discussion in this article shows that, despite quite serious differences between the two countries on a host of issues and situations and quite hectic conditions at times, the very limited nature of contest did in fact allow gradual reduction of tension between them in the course of and after the Kuwaiti crisis in the early 1990s and led to *détente* and even expansion of cooperative relations later in the decade under the pro-reform administration of Khatami. The period of *détente*, however, was brought to an abrupt end in the wake



of the traumatic aftershocks of 9/11, particularly the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan in October 2001 and of Iraq in March 2003 – the latter in particular proved extremely complicating for Iran and Saudi Arabia and set their immediate foreign policy agendas there on a direct collision course. Other factors, mostly of national character, including the still unfolding nuclear program of Iran, have intervened in more recent years to maintain and even exacerbate the state of mutual suspicion and tension between the two countries.

Having looked into the afore-mentioned dominant pattern of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia since 1979, and specifically having analyzed periods of ebb and flow in the state of relations, the authors tend to believe that there exist real, substantial potential for resuscitation of détente in these bilateral relations and emergence of cooperative liaison between them. Considering themselves optimistic realists, the authors posit that adoption and pursual of a positive, proactive approach by the two sides and reliance on confidence-building measures can indeed help diffuse the on-going tension and mutual suspicion and pave the way for the promotion of mutually-beneficial policies and measures. In their analysis, objectivity and realism require that both sides resolve to recognize and respect each other's independent identity and its fundamental and constitutive elements and characteristics, as well as national interests and concerns defined on that basis. However, what makes all the difference will be that the two sides, despite all the differences, decide to explore practical ways and means on how to define shared interests, goals and objectives, to be extended, preferably if possible, at a later stage to defining shared conceptions and aspirations. And this is a matter of all too important political will. The article ends on a positive note: when there is a will there is a way.

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