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Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella

A large, intricate mandala pattern in a light orange color is positioned on the right side of the cover, partially overlapping the text area. It features concentric circles of geometric and floral motifs.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN: THE STRUGGLE TO SHAPE THE MIDDLE EAST

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Edward Wastnidge and Simon Mabon (eds.), *Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle to Shape Middle East*, Manchester University Press, 2022, pp. 200 (ISBN 978-1-5261-5083-7).

If one single phenomenon marked the last 40 years of Middle Eastern politics, it would be the long-standing rivalry between the two regional powerhouses of Saudi Arabia and Iran. This fact became even more apparent in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, as the Saudi-Iranian competition spilled over into a vast geography stretching from Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to Yemen with devastating consequences.

In an academic attempt to capture this multi-casual and multi-faceted rivalry, Edward Wastnidge and Simon Mabon have assembled a body of research in an edited book titled «Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Struggle to Shape Middle East». The editors are prominent scholars working on this topic. Wastnidge is Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Studies at the Open University, and Mabon is Chair of International Politics at Lancaster University.

The book is organized around eight chapters in addition to the introduction and a concluding chapter. The first two chapters are devoted to the analysis of how the two main actors, Saudi Arabia and Iran, view the rivalry between themselves. In the first chapter, May Darwish presents a neo-classical realist (NCR) reading of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Iran. According to Darwish, it is a combination of structural conditions at the regional level and the rise of confrontational nationalism at the domestic level that shaped Saudi Arabia's framing of Iran as a foe. The second chapter turns to Tehran as the authors, Banafsheh Keynoush and Edward Wastnidge, delve into elite narratives and debates in Iran about Saudi Arabia, Tehran's foreign policy towards Riyadh, and Iran's own regional security notion. The following chapter focuses on the religious aspect, most notably the role of Islam as a source of legitimacy in both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Lucia Ardovini compares how Islam, as a political tool, influences domestic and foreign policies in both states, including the dynamics of rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The remaining chapters are on country-specific case studies where this rivalry has played out. These chapter also give a time-space dimension and a context to better understand nuanced repercussions of this rivalry by nesting a significant deal of agency to local actors in Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. In Chapter 4, Rasheed Al-Rasheed delves into how Saudi-Iranian

rivalry in the region shapes the mutual perception of Sunnis and Shias in Bahrain. Given the difficulty of conducting field research in Bahrain on such a sensitive political topic, Al-Rasheed makes an important contribution to the volume with primary information collected through interviews.

In the chapter on Iraq, Stephen Royle and Simon Mabon trace the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Iraq. Iraq presents an interesting spot to examine this competition, as the country evolved from being a security threat to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, to a theatre for their regional rivalry. By contextualizing the Saudi-Iran rivalry in Iraqi politics, Royle and Mabon also set the parameters of different engagement tactics deployed by Riyadh and Tehran in Iraq.

The sixth chapter focuses on Lebanon and explores the complexity of roles played by Saudi Arabia and Iran there. The author, Hussein Kallout calls Lebanon an «irreplaceable piece» for Saudi-Iranian competition given the sectarian nature of the politics there. The author argues that the tutelary model of involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Lebanon has infused the socio-political fabric and has led to a «pronounced diminution of sovereignty» (136). Chapter 7 focuses on Syria as a country where a brutal civil conflict has been internationalized to an unprecedented degree. As the events have unfolded since 2011, external penetration including the one by Saudi Arabia and Iran became part and parcel of the conflict. Christopher Philips compares Saudi and Iranian achievements in Syria, by showing Tehran's comparative success on the ground. Philips argues that structural factors alone fall short of explaining the conflict's outcome and introduces domestic dynamics as intervening variables in explaining Saudi Arabia's inability to use its sources to its advantage.

The final case study of the volume focuses on Yemen as an arena for Saudi-Iranian rivalry. In this chapter, Maria-Louise Clausen introduces the concept of «sunk cost effect» to explain Saudi Arabia's struggle to exit the conflict in Yemen given the Kingdom's material and ideational investments in the conflict there. Clausen argues that Saudi Arabia's efforts to link the Houthis to Iran enabled Riyadh to frame this war as a part of wider Saudi-Iranian rivalry, which in return «increased Saudi reputational and material cost related to withdrawal» (157). The concluding chapter reflects on the nuanced repercussions of this particular competition across time and space.

While writing this review, the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have entered a phase of reconciliation under Iraqi mediation efforts. Yet, this particular rivalry has undoubtedly left deep marks across the region and remains quite important to understand regional politics. In this book, Wastnigde and Mabon shed light on different, complex and changing aspects of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and they certainly make an important contribution to the topic. While a detailed review of each and every chapter goes beyond the limits of this review, it is important to highlight few general overarching points in a critical manner.

Although the book does not explicitly intend to analyse them, it reveals significant long-term tendencies in the region on how the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran played out. In the sixth chapter Kalout calls Lebanon an «irreplaceable piece» where regional and international rivalries have taken place, but so do Syria, Iraq, and Yemen as this edited volume successfully shows. A historical review on the evolution of the state system reveals the highly penetrated foreign intervention patterns in the regional politics. In order to understand the *longue durée* tendencies of this particular rivalry, state formation processes, economic vulnerabilities, the multiplicity of identities and the regional roles become important common regional features. This book is certainly not sufficient to explain all these phenomena, but it is a good start for the inquiry in this sense.

Passing through separate chapters, one can easily identify different tools and techniques that both Saudi Arabia and Iran deployed to carve out a sphere of influence for themselves, while simultaneously trying to undermine each other. While Saudi engagement can be characterized as economic statecraft, i.e. economic aid to particular factions, Iran has deployed more ideological weapons, as Christopher Philips notes, «to develop an effective network of fighters – only some of which were mobilised by sect, others by being part of the anti-Western ‘Axis of Resistance’» (153). This opens an agenda for further research on the repertoires of rivalry and their effectiveness on the ground. Further, as the book reveals, Iran has been relatively more effective in gaining from the competition, particularly in Syria but also in Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon. More research on the power of ideational factors in proxy relations can be fruitful to understand the dynamics of rivalry patterns in the region.

On the theoretical front, the book adopts an eclectic framework to show the contingencies in this rivalry. In their concluding chapter the editors note that «Providing space for such theoretical, methodological and analytical eclecticism enables the deeper, more context-specific cases to come to the fore, without conforming to the orthodox approaches of more Euro/Western-centric analysis of the politics and international relations of the Middle East» (173). The eclectic approach is prevalent in the overall outlook of the book. Yet, a significant number of chapters recognizes explicitly the utility of a NCR framework to incorporate domestic variables into the analysis. Darwish and Philips are the overt supporters of this view and follow a more explicit framework borrowed from the NCR approach. Clausen also highlights the importance of domestic factors to analyse the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

May Darwish introduces the notions of «confrontational nationalism» in Saudi Arabia as an intervening variable, namely, an «imperfect transmission belt», to shape threat perception towards Iran. Darwish’s analysis present an important yet neglected attempt to integrate ideational factors in foreign policymaking in the Gulf region. As a natural part of NCR, domestic variables are considered causes of sub-optimal decision-making in foreign

policy, even though structural factors are prioritized in the analysis. Moreover, the chapter does not provide theoretical tools to study «change»; i.e., the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, while domestic factors (Saudi nationalism) are intact. Indeed, a role theory-inspired framework would bridge the gap between structure and agency while incorporating material and ideational elements in explaining the Saudi dimension of this rivalry. In addition, such an approach would provide analytical and methodological tools to examine the change in the competition dynamics.

In the final review, the book provides a contextualized reading of the Saudi- Iranian rivalry since the Arab Uprisings in the region. The chapters are well designed to show the time and space dimension of this competition as well as other case specific contingencies. The editors and authors are also quite competent to show the agency of local actors and groups, which sometimes get uncredited in academic works. As good research is supposed to do, the book asks more questions than those it answers. There is little doubt that the content of this edited volume will provide several insights for further investigation on this topic.