



Iran's rivalry with Saudi Arabia

A story of conflict between the Gulf wars

Reviewed by

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Revolutions are bittersweet moments in history that change a society mostly by bloodshed. As the word indicates, there is something like a rotation involved. But whether a movement opened up into a spiral of progress or regressed even further than the old regime is a judgment that can only be made from a historical distance. Since nobody likes to wait, there are two common understandings. If a revolt is successful, it is considered a revolution. If not, it was a putsch or *coup d'etat*. If the revolutionaries gained power, they became conservatives or radicals: securing power is a far more delicate business than getting to it.

All this is true in Iran, about which Henner Fürtig rightly warns that the time is not yet ripe for a fair and balanced analysis. Thus, Fürtig, an Arabist historian educated at the Leipzig University, discusses mainly two topics: the bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the dozen years after the Islamic revolution and the main areas of rivalry between the two countries.

The outcome is very topical. One who knows the Middle East will ask right away about the third party in that game of nations. But Iraq, the old Mesopotamian Bridge between Saudi Arabia and Iran, is not Fürtig's focal point. The country was exhausted after eight years of the first Gulf war against Iran. Moreover, Iraq had to withdraw from Kuwait and was not regarded as a major player after its defeat by the U.S.-led coalition in the second Gulf war.



A German area map of 1939. Berlin was much involved in Iran at those times as well.

Surprise Revolution

However, the first Gulf war weakened Iran too. Its rivalry with Saudi Arabia would have been fairly unspectacular and certainly not a subject for such a book, if not for something unique that occurred in Iran during 1979: an Islamic revolution and the establishment of an Islamic Republic. This was a fateful year in history. At the beginning, Reza Shah Pahlavi fled Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini returned, and at the year's end the Soviets invaded Afghanistan.

These developments took most Americans by surprise, but the invasion didn't surprise their president. In September of that year, Jimmy Carter foresaw a growing Soviet involvement in Kabul and the prospect of an "evolutionary intervention." Nevertheless, his attention was more occupied by the Kremlin in the process of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT).

Meanwhile, the Islamic revolution went on. Soon Carter had lost not only an important radar station that was supposed to monitor the SALT results, but his most important ally in the region too. Tehran, on the other hand, was obsessed by the idea of exporting its revolution to the neighboring countries. As Furtig points out, the first targets were the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula - and Lebanon as an immediate neighbor of Israel.

Not only did the Arabs and the Iranians control the world's main oil reserves, the new Iranian instigators widened many conflicts. In November, they seized the American embassy in Tehran, and their followers stormed the *Great Mosque of Mecca*. The process stretched beyond bilateral matters with the taking of embassy hostages.

Besieged Mecca

In Mecca, the Saudi guards quashed the upheaval, but the Iranian agitators became permanently embedded among pilgrims in the holy city. They not only distributed Islamist booklets and videos on how to revolutionize other countries, but they organized clashes with Saudi guards. They did it with Khomeini's blessing. He appealed to Iranian pilgrims, saying that "the other pilgrims must realize that the goal of the Iranian Muslims is to establish an Islamic government under the banner of Islam and under the guidance of the Holy Quran and the Prophet of Islam so that our Muslim brothers will come to know that our only goal is Islam and we only think about the establishment of a just Islamic government" (p. 24).

What were the main points in the Iranian rivalry with Saudi Arabia? Fürtig cites the monthly journal *Pasdaran*. The so-called *Revolutionary Guards* declared there that Saudi Arabia has so intermixed with the West that it can hardly be called independent. The entire resources of oil in Saudi Arabia are controlled by American trusts; and while the people there live in poverty, misery and ignorance, and one day's oil income of the country can cause a fundamental change in their situation, the government executes the West-dictated policies and strives to stabilize the economic situation of western industrialized countries, which are the main exploiters of today's world (p. 25).

Thus, the Saudis were confronted with many previously unknown problems within a very short period of time.

Globalizing Islamic Revolution

Fürtig underlines the limits of Iranian efforts to globalize the Islamic revolution: old rivalries between Iranians and Arabs, differences among the Shiite minority and the Sunni majority of Islam, and the complex triangular relations of power between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. On the Arabian Peninsula, he concludes, there was little or no receptivity to any kind of Shia-inspired revolutionary movement.

Nevertheless, the Saudi government remained extremely wary of permanent efforts by the Iranian leadership to export the revolution. Khomeini stated several times that Islam and monarchy were mutually exclusive and that monarchy is foreign to Islam. For him the faith in Saudi Arabia was nothing but degenerate; he called it "American Islam." This labeling, concludes Fürtig, was symptomatic of Khomeini's hatred of both superpowers, but especially of the United States.

On the Shia/Wahhabi dichotomy, Fürtig explains how some Iranians tried to portray the Wahhabis as a renegade sect. Ayatollah Montazeri, for many years considered to be Khomeini's successor, asked rhetorically if the Wahhabis were true Muslims. In a series on Radio Tehran in 1985, he declared:

"Wahhabism was originally established by mercenaries of foreigners whose main objective was to divert Muslims and to encourage them to fight each other This sect is neither committed to Islam nor to the Quran; it is rather interested in eliminating Islam and its history. Therefore Shiites as well as Sunnis are rejecting them" (p. 41).

Principles Of Foreign Policy

Clearly, Tehran's foreign policy was based on a fluctuating ideology. The radical elements in the *Anjoman-e Ruhaniyun*, as Fürtig writes (p. 124), the organization of the radical supporters of the radical line of Imam Khomeini, even demanded the application of the following principles of foreign policy that originated from the Islamic revolution:

- *independence from both the East and the West, identification of the United States as the main enemy,
- *struggle against the superpowers and against Zionism,
- *support for all "oppressed" peoples,
- *and liberation of Jerusalem.

Hostility towards the Saudi government was always a given, regardless of some changes or moderation of this policy.

Riyadh, Baghdad, Tehran

If for Tehran the Saudis were a lost sect, the Iraqis were nothing but an infidel and East-bloc-dependent counterpart. Fürtig writes about the Saudi Arabian attempts to mediate in the first Gulf war and about the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Although Iraq fell completely out of the picture, the final words about the triangular relationship between Riyadh, Baghdad and Tehran have not yet been spoken. With the revolution in Iran arose a great hope for many Muslims for a better life. They remain without convincing answers. The same is true with regard to the Arab enrichment from oil royalties. None of the three rivals has succeeded in solving profound problems on the search for their way into a regional modernity.

Fürtig provides us with lots of evidence and insightful arguments. And food for thought. He concludes that Iran's future behavior will definitely be influenced by the actions of the West, particularly the United States. Western capitals might be right to criticize, for instance, Iran's human-rights record or to fight terrorism organized by Iranian radicals, but they will only strengthen the position of those elements within the Iranian establishment in the long run if they continue an undifferentiated policy of containment.

As a result of the heterogeneity of its governmental system, with the continuing influence of three parallel power centers, Iran will, as in the past, seek both to normalize ties with its most important neighbors and to cultivate and maintain its options for subversion and agitation. Unless, of course, a bittersweet moment occurs in the near future that changes the Iranian society again, this time for the better.

Henner Fürtig: *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, with a Foreword by Anoushiravan Ehteshami. Reading, PA: Ithaca Press, 2002. xviii + 288 pages, including index. \$49.59, hardcover.

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