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Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate, light-colored floral or mandala-like pattern is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the text area.

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

ASIA MAIOR

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

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“RIVALRY AND RECONCILIATION: CHARTING THE MIDDLE EAST’S POWER
DYNAMICS BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA”

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Ibrahim Fraihat, *Iran and Saudi Arabia: Taming a Chaotic Conflict*, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, 248 pp. (ISBN 978-1474466189).

Simon Mabon, *The Struggle for Supremacy in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran*, Cambridge University Press, 2023, 268 pp. (ISBN 978-1108473361).

In 2023, an intriguing development occurred in the diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as they reestablished formal ties following seven years of estrangement. This reconciliation was facilitated through a mediation process brokered by China and appeared to stem from a series of track two diplomatic dialogues. In this latest backdrop of interesting events of conflict and conciliation unfolding between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the scholarly works of Simon Mabon and Ibrahim Fraihat are not only timely but essential to understand the dynamics of rival relationship between the two countries.

While the main focus of Mabon’s “The Struggle for Supremacy in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran” is to understand the multifaceted impact of the rivalry spanning decades between Saudi Arabia and Iran on both local and regional politics throughout the Middle East, Fraihat’s “Iran and Saudi Arabia: Taming a Chaotic Conflict” attempts to fill the gap in the majority of available literature on Saudi Arabia and Iran which usually focuses on conflicts, by exploring conflict resolution approaches to the existing cold war.

Mabon’s book offers a comprehensive exploration of the Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry’s impact on regional and local politics in the Middle East. Mabon’s scholarship in its seven chapters provides exhaustive detail on various aspects, including regional security, identity politics, and sectarianism across five case study countries: Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Rather than simplifying the narrative of sectarian proxy relationships, the research delves into the complex ways in which regional actors shape local politics and vice versa. Utilizing interviews with officials, activists, scholars, and journalists, alongside other sources, the book offers evidence-based insights into the impact of the rivalry on regional politics. Analyzing historical trajectories and contemporary developments, Mabon argues that while the Saudi-Iranian rivalry significantly shapes regional politics, its parameters are not solely determined by Riyadh and Tehran

but are also influenced by local contestations across political, social, economic, and religious domains.

In the chapter, 'States, Sects, and Order', the author provides insights through a multifaceted approach, incorporating geopolitical strategies, religious considerations, ideological differences, socioeconomic factors, and societal dynamics to understand the evolving nature of the rivalry across temporal and spatial dimensions. The fluidity of capital movement across domestic and transnational spheres underscores the complexity of Iran-Saudi regional dynamics.

The subsequent chapter traces the historical trajectory of the Saudi-Iran rivalry, delineating key periods marked by shifting dynamics, from engagement to heightened tensions. It challenges the notion of 'ancient hatreds' by contextualizing the rivalry within contemporary political crises and global power dynamics. The chapter highlights the complex interplay of global forces and domestic politics in shaping the rivalry, reflecting its evolution as a product of evolving contingencies.

The following chapter delves into the complex dynamics of Iraqi politics within the broader context of regional power struggles. It explores the significant event of the US drone strike in January 2020, targeting Iranian General Qassim Suleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, further escalating tensions in the region. Despite internal divisions and external pressures, Iraq has emerged as a mediator between regional powers, signaling a shift in transnational power dynamics. The analysis also examines strategies employed by Saudi Arabia and Iran to assert influence in Iraq, with Iran relying on religious and cultural capital, while Saudi Arabia increasingly utilizes economic and cultural influence. This reflects the evolving dynamics of power within the region and highlights the ongoing struggle for dominance between regional powers. Overall, the chapter provides valuable insights into the intricate web of political, social, and economic factors shaping Iraqi politics.

Similarly, the book offers a comprehensive analysis of Bahrain's political landscape within the context of regional power struggles, exploring its evolution from a shared political community to a contested territory controlled by Sunni rulers. It examines how Bahrain's geographical location and demographic composition have made it a battleground for competing interests, resulting in a complex interplay of economic, political, and religious capital. Furthermore, the chapter critically investigates narratives propagated by the ruling Al-Khalifa family regarding Iranian involvement in domestic unrest, encouraging a more nuanced understanding of Bahrain's socio-political dynamics.

The subsequent chapters discuss Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, each providing valuable insights into the complexities of regional dynamics and the Saudi-Iran rivalry's impact on these countries. The conclusion discusses the challenges of improving relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, influ-

enced by economic factors and shifting international dynamics. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the rivalry in the broader context of regional politics and stresses the urgent need for diplomatic solutions to mitigate further harm inflicted by conflicts involving Saudi Arabia and Iran.

As a specialist consulted by international organizations about conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction in the Arab world, Fraihat in his book deals with the recommendations made in Mabon's book on diplomatic solutions to attain regional stability. Across four chapters, Fraihat attempts to fill a gap in the literature by doing three things: first, unlike the majority of the available literature that focuses on an understanding of the conflict, he takes a conflict resolution approach to assess how the conflict can be managed and effectively resolved. Second, while discussion generally revolves around what each government can do to resolve the conflict – also known as track one – this book takes an integrated approach to the resolution, arguing that effective peacebuilding in this conflict needs to be applied on three levels: government, track two, and grassroots. Third, while the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is generally treated in the literature as a subject for area studies, this book takes an interdisciplinary approach by bringing area studies into dialogue with conflict resolution and peace studies to present a coherent understanding of the drivers of the conflict and how it could be effectively resolved.

Fraihat's book offers a critical examination of the entrenched conflict between the two regional powers, reframing it within the context of contemporary geopolitical dynamics. The author's analysis is sharp and dissects the complex web of motivations and historical narratives that have fueled the rivalry for over four decades. Rather than succumbing to the prevailing pessimism surrounding the conflict, Fraihat boldly explores avenues for potential resolution. The book aptly critiques the futile diplomatic efforts and scholarly discourse that have failed to stem the tide of violence and instability unleashed by the Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict. It emphasizes the staggering human cost of proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and Iraq, where countless lives have been sacrificed amidst a backdrop of geopolitical maneuvering and opportunistic arms deals.

Fraihat challenges the conventional wisdom that views reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia as an unattainable goal. Drawing on historical precedents such as the Franco-German reconciliation post-World War II, he highlights instances of tentative cooperation between the two adversaries, suggesting that such gestures could pave the way for broader rapprochement.

Central to Fraihat's thesis is the recognition of security as the primary driver of conflict. He argues persuasively that addressing the immediate security concerns of both parties is essential for laying the groundwork for constructive dialogue. By reframing the conflict narrative away from sectarianism and geopolitical power plays, Fraihat advocates for a prag-

matic approach that prioritizes confidence-building measures and crisis management.

The author's proposed conflict resolution framework is ambitious yet pragmatic. He advocates for the establishment of a crisis management system that includes direct communication channels, technical coordination committees, and confidence-building measures. Through incremental steps aimed at de-escalation and trust-building, Fraihat envisions a pathway toward eventual reconciliation.

Critically, Fraihat challenges the entrenched narratives perpetuated by both sides, debunking the simplistic sectarian interpretations of the conflict. He exposes how leaders in Tehran and Riyadh have instrumentalized sectarian tensions to bolster their domestic and regional legitimacy, perpetuating a dangerous cycle of escalation. Fraihat's analysis also sheds light on the broader geopolitical dimensions of the conflict, particularly the role of external factors such as the United States and Israel. He argues provocatively that these powers have exploited tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia to advance their interests, further complicating efforts at resolution.

While acknowledging the controversial nature of his proposals, Fraihat remains steadfast in his belief that a forward-looking dialogue is essential for breaking the deadlock in the conflict resolution process. His book serves as a rallying cry for diplomats, policymakers, and scholars to rethink entrenched assumptions and explore new pathways toward peace in the Middle East.

Overall, the two books complement each other, offering insights into conflicts and exploring various approaches to resolve them. Both authors express hope for inevitable political change, yet they also harbor apprehensions about its scope and direction. This sentiment is evident from the thorough analysis presented in the books, drawing from a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including well-known scholarly works by both Iranian and non-Iranian authors, published both within and outside Iran. With its timely relevance, these books offer valuable insights for students, researchers, academics, policymakers, diplomats, and anyone interested in understanding the cycles of rivalry and reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia.