IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA
TAMING A CHAOTIC CONFLICT
Ibrahim Fraihat
For the victims of an enmity they played no role in creating
This is a thorough account of one of the most important interstate rivalries in recent decades, one that has done much damage in the wider Middle East and Islamic World. This book stands out for not only providing a lucid analysis of the drivers of conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but also for offering concrete suggestions for reducing tensions between those two regional powers.

**Toby Matthiesen, University of Oxford**

In this eminently fair and balanced assessment of the intractable conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Ibrahim Fraihat is in the unenviable position of trying to make sense of a nonsensical hostility between two ruling regimes that are wasting their respective nations’ resources and endangering an entire volatile region. By modestly subtitling his deeply informed and balanced intervention just ‘Taming a Chaotic Conflict’, Fraihat signals the working of a judicious mind that has wisely abandoned the search for ‘root causes’ and gently teaches us to be humble and human in our expectations. A superb strategic intervention on how to prevent a colossal calamity from happening.

**Hamid Dabashi, Columbia University**

This is exactly the book we need right now! Whereas much has been already been written about the causes and developments of the Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry, we have precious little knowledge about how this conflict can be peacefully managed and ultimately resolved. Fraihat combines his own personal experiences of participation in dialogue efforts over the years with the scholarly insights of the large body of research on conflict resolution, in order to shed light on this. The book gives us a solid basis for analysing the prospects and challenges for how to transform the current destructive relationship between these two regional powers into more constructive interactions, a transformation that would radically change the Middle East region, and thereby the world.

**Isak Svensson, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University**
Remarkable for its lucidity, fieldwork and command of the literature, this is a timely and authoritative study of the Middle East’s most consequential bilateral relationship. Ibrahim Fraihat wisely jettisons timeworn primordialist tropes about the intractability and immutability of the Saudi–Iranian rivalry and focuses instead on how tensions between the two powers can be regulated and managed through wiser statecraft, grassroots activism and domestic reforms. What sets this magisterial book apart from others on this topic is that it moves beyond diagnosis and analysis to propose creative policy recommendations.

Frederic Wehrey, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

In a climate of rising hostility across the Persian Gulf where diplomatic engagement appears distant, Ibrahim Fraihat’s book is a welcome and timely contribution and, more importantly, offers a degree of hope. While many see the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in zero-sum ways, Fraihat argues that rapprochement is possible, in a radical and welcome departure from other literature on the topic. Drawing on first-hand attempts to facilitate conflict reconciliation, this rich and insightful tome is essential reading for policy makers, peace-builders, academics and anyone wishing to better understand the politics of the region.

Simon Mabon, Lancaster University

Ibrahim Fraihat is not a newcomer to the field and has already distinguished himself with a strong body of work on Saudi Arabia, Iran and also KSA–IRI relations, so it is very good news to see him distil his considerable contributions in a new project on managing the conflict between Tehran and Riyadh. It is clear in this book that Fraihat comes closest to shining light on the way forward. I think we all need to take note of this outstanding research and learn from it, for both scholarly and practical reasons.

Anoush Ehteshami, Durham University

A timely and well-informed analysis of one of the Middle East’s most enduring and consequential rivalries. Fraihat offers an insider’s perspective into the Iran–Saudi conflict along with practical suggestions for de-escalation through the lens of conflict resolution. A must for anyone seeking to understand the origins and manifestations of the regional ‘cold war’ between Saudi Arabia and Iran – and potential strategies for ending it.

Justin Gengler – Social and Economic Survey Research Institute, Qatar University
Iran and Saudi Arabia
Taming a Chaotic Conflict

Ibrahim Fraihat

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Preface

When my Omani friend Abdullah Baabood, former Gulf Studies Professor at the University of Cambridge and Qatar University, expressed his very balanced and well-informed scholarly views of the Iran–Saudi conflict in a track two workshop held in Doha, he was told by a Saudi participant that he was ‘betraying the Gulf cause and supporting Iran’. When the workshop ended, an Iranian participant came to him and said, ‘I did not know you work for an American agenda.’ That one statement could elicit such opposite reactions demonstrates the extent to which the Iran–Saudi relationship remains a hotly contested issue in the Gulf.

Researching the tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with a commitment to taking a critical, objective and constructive approach, has therefore proven to be particularly challenging. Because this book is focused on objective analysis of the conflict and finding constructive solutions to it, it will likely be challenged by both parties, since this approach does not tend to be promoted by governments or media in the region. Indeed, such divergence in opinions is a common phenomenon in conflicts of deep polarisation, which lead in turn to assertions that one is ‘either with us or against us’. Though critical of both the policies of the two parties that propagated the conflict and of its recent escalation, I make every effort to provide alternative and constructive solutions to the destructive polices both parties are promoting for their own countries as well as for the entire region.

At first, I struggled with how to label the Iran–Saudi relationship, whether it is a conflict, dispute, rivalry, or, as my friend Gregory Gause likes to call it, a cold war. Ultimately, I have decided primarily to use the term ‘conflict’, given particularly that diplomatic relations were severed between the two countries in 2016 and that the relationship has only worsened since the
Donald Trump administration fuelled the conflict after the Riyadh summit in May 2017. Despite our primary use of this term, others are occasionally employed depending on the context.

I next had to decide which country’s name to use first, since this is such a sensitive topic. I resolved this by using an alphabetical order, ‘Iran–Saudi’, for simplicity. However, it should be noted that this order changes when I use the names of capital cities, as it then becomes the ‘Riyadh–Tehran’ conflict.

Another semantic issue, which has often inflamed passions, is whether to label the Gulf Arabian or Persian. Indeed, the Iranian government would discredit a scholar’s argument simply for using the term ‘Arabian Gulf’, regardless of the content of the monograph. Similarly, Saudi Arabia would treat a monograph as biased for the use of ‘Persian Gulf’. Therefore, I use the term ‘the Gulf’ consistently throughout the entire book to refer to the Arabian/Persian Gulf.

I tell my conflict resolution students that the first step in resolving any conflict is to accurately define the main issues of that conflict. However, when I tried to do this in the track two workshops held over a span of three years in Doha, it became clear that that was easier said than done. I tried to press both Iranians and participants from the Arab side of the Gulf to agree at least on what the core issues of the conflict are (i.e. security, Sunni–Shia sectarianism, Arab–Persian nationalism, leadership of the Muslim Ummah), but both parties strongly resisted, insisting instead on their own versions of the conflict narrative. For this reason, I dedicate the first part of this book mainly to discussion of the conflict issues to understand how they affect the conflict and the potential for its resolution.

As is the case with most conflicts, defining the starting point of the Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict was an additional challenge. It became clear to me that parties politicise the starting points of the conflict to suit their agendas and support their narratives. President Obama, for example, clearly framed the conflict as essentially primordial to distance his administration from any role in exacerbating it. Saudi interlocutors, on the other hand, often consider the Islamic revolution in Tehran in 1979, and along with it the goal of exporting the revolution, the starting point of this conflict. However, Iran proactively acted on expanding its influence in the
region mainly after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, after the balance of power in the region had decidedly changed. I had to take into account all of these starting points, giving them the importance they deserve, yet assess them away from politicisations or instrumentalisation of certain timelines.
I was extremely fortunate to be invited by numerous organisations to serve as participant, speaker and co-organiser in over a dozen track two workshops dedicated to discussing the conflict between Iran and its Gulf neighbours and exploring approaches to its resolution. I am very grateful to the organisations that made this possible, including but not limited to Georgetown University’s Center for Regional and International Studies in Qatar, the Gulf Studies Program at Qatar University, the European Iran Research Group, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and the Center of Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CAPRO).

These workshops included, among others, former policymakers, regional and international scholars, opinion leaders and political activists. Held in different parts of the world, all workshops took place under the Chatham House Rule, which means that information can be used in publications with no attribution to participants. These workshops therefore gave me a unique opportunity to have access to high-quality analysis of conflict dynamics and the potential for its resolution. The primary data that I gathered over the past four years from these workshops became the backbone of this research, as it helped me shape my arguments, analysis and conclusions. Extraordinary interactions with former policymakers, scholars and activists happened in these meetings that contributed to uncovering important dynamics affecting our understanding of this conflict.

The experience of bringing participants from Iran, the Gulf and other parts of the world spurred a three-layer process of learning for me. First, what participants say in the media is said mainly for the media and the public, rather than to convince the other party to engage in a meaningful resolution
approach to the conflict. Second, what is said in these workshops is delivered not only to the other party in the conflict, but, equally importantly, to their compatriots who return with them to Iran or the other Gulf states. As a result, participants want to show their peers that they were very tough on their adversaries, especially since some participants were linked to senior policymakers. But there is the third layer of learning, which is what I call the ‘pure and innocent analysis’, and that is what is learned during lunch time, coffee breaks and other one-on-one conversations. Analysis of these conversations, which tend to be far from being politicised or intended to send messages to adversaries or to peers, is extremely useful. In these fora, participants share what they really think could affect the conflict in terms of exacerbation or resolution.

There are many people to thank for their generous support which made this book possible. I owe much to my friend Jamal Khashoggi – may his soul rest in peace – for educating me immensely about this conflict and also about his track two activities with Iranians. He was a fierce critique of Iranian foreign policy in the Arab world, but believed that peace with Iran could be achieved if built on justice, mutual respect and non-interference in domestic affairs. Jamal and I shared panels, debated on TV shows and discussed tough subjects one-on-one. He loved his country, Saudi Arabia, with no limits, but refused to appease political authorities, considering himself an ‘honest advisor’ who told policymakers what he thought was right for them and their country rather than relaying what they wanted to hear. Sadly, however, he ended up paying with his life for his free and honest speech. I hope publishing his quotes in this book will contribute to his vision of achieving a just peace in this region. I am sure Jamal would have been happy to receive an autographed copy of this book.

My heartfelt appreciation goes to all scholars, former policymakers and activists from Iran, the Gulf region, and from Europe and the United States who gave me ample time to discuss the conflict with them. Their views were essential for me to make sense of a very chaotic conflict, where the causes, issues and dynamics are all interrelated. I would not have been able to synthesise and draw conclusions without their thorough understanding of the conflict. I list all their names in the Bibliography of this book, hoping they take this message as a special thank you to each one of them for their generosity of time and analysis.
I owe my deep gratitude to the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (DI) for being an ideal place for the production of scholarly, original and local knowledge. Supported by its sister research centre, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), the Institute has built a vibrant environment that nurtures intellectual debate and advanced scholarly research. I particularly appreciate DI and ACRPS continuously running scholarly activities throughout the year in order to advance their emphasis on interdisciplinary social sciences and Arab contribution of knowledge production. I am also grateful to the DI research office and its director, Raed Habayeb, for continuous support and for making this research possible.

I cannot begin to express my thanks to Courtney Freer for helping with copy-editing and research support. She gave illuminating feedback and challenged me to further research and develop certain areas of the book. It has been a great pleasure to work with her and for that I am deeply grateful. I appreciate the feedback offered by Shahram Akbarzadeh, convener of the Middle East Studies Forum at Deakin University, Australia, who read the first draft and gave insightful comments and suggestions to improve certain areas of the book.

I am extremely grateful to Adela Rauchova, Commissioning Editor at Edinburgh University Press, for her leadership and sound management. In particular, I would like to sincerely thank her for her unwavering guidance and persistent support that made the publication of this book possible.

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Finally, I owe a very important debt to my lovely family. My wife, Abeer, and my children, Lana, Leena, Dina and Tayem, were very patient, supportive and caring throughout the process of drafting this book. I would not have been able to complete this research without their generous support. I am blessed to have them in my life. I particularly enjoyed the enabling educational environment my children created, with them reading and preparing for their schools while I was writing this book. My nine-year-old son, Tayem, would always tell me that he and I should author a book together. I hope that by acknowledging his words, inspiration and encouragement here this will satisfy his great ambitions.
Introduction

‘If the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is resolved, then half of the Middle East conflicts will disappear,’ said one participant in a track two dialogue workshop organised to discuss the Iran–Saudi conflict and the prospects for its resolution. These comments motivated me to further research scholarly literature to learn what types of solutions are offered to effectively move this conflict towards a resolution. My research revealed a plethora of excellent books and articles that thoroughly analyse this conflict, its history, driving mechanisms, dynamics, and its impact on the overall region. Nonetheless, scholarly literature that rigorously assesses potential solutions is notably absent and, where such material exists, it looks solely at what governments can do to resolve the conflict, or the track one approach. Furthermore, the existing literature tends to examine this conflict from an area studies perspective, rather than through the lens of conflict resolution, the approach this book is taking.

This book 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, this book takes a conflict resolution approach in order to assess how the conflict can be managed and effectively resolved, rather than simply examining what actions the two countries are currently undertaking. 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 together with conflict
resolution and peace studies to present a coherent understanding of the drivers of the conflict and how it could be effectively resolved.

With these three goals in mind, the book’s main argument is that the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is resolvable yet must be properly managed first; indeed, better managed and regulated conflicts are better suited for resolution. At present, the Iran–Saudi conflict is a zero-sum chaotic conflict that is heavily burdened by deep mistrust, lack of communication and clear ground rules, confusion about driving issues, and uncertainty about each party’s decision-making process. Under such circumstances, resolution becomes particularly elusive and the build-up of a conflict management strategy is a necessity.

Why is it a chaotic conflict? The Iran–Saudi rivalry started decades ago and has reached an unprecedented level of escalation, although policymakers and the scholarly community remain divided about the core drivers of this conflict. Sectarianism, security, competition over global leadership, geopolitics and even nationalism all appear to affect the conflict, with little distinction as to what ultimately drives the patterns of engagement and confrontation. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is confused about the proper strategy to respond to Iran, resorting on one hand to a regional proxy conflict approach in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain, and on the other to an overarching alliance with the United States and several other players. Iran’s opaque decision-making process further fuels this confusion about the correct approach for resolving conflict. As Robert Mason puts it, ‘factionalism has been a part of Iranian politics from the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran’.3 Certainly, it is difficult to know who makes the decisions on the conflict with Saudi Arabia, whether conservatives, moderates, the Supreme Leader, Revolutionary Guard, or the President, and it is therefore unclear with whom third-party intervention teams could engage to change the course of action. The mixed messages coming from both parties (sometimes offering an olive branch and dialogue while at other times talking about controlling four Arab capitals) only add to the chaos of the conflict. Actions like cutting diplomatic relations, refusing to engage through other channels of communications, and an absence of clear ground rules to regulate engagement make this conflict deeply chaotic, and resolution increasingly elusive.

Contrary to the zero-sum approach currently being propagated by both parties of the conflict, this book takes a critical but constructive approach in explaining how each party can reform its conflict strategies and reach an outcome that corresponds with critical needs, interests and concerns. To do
so, the book proposes a model built on three pillars: accurate definition of the real issues of this conflict; installation of a conflict management system that aims to contain escalation and regulate conflict; and institution of an integrated resolution approach of track one, track two and grassroots that addresses the underlying causes and conditions of the conflict. Figure I.2 explains this model.

**Pillar 1: Issues Driving the Conflict**

It is first critical to understand what the driving issues are behind the Iran–Saudi conflict. Indeed,

> [o]ne notable feature of many disputes is that the parties involved often disagree on what the conflict is ‘really’ about, one side defining the issues as being a set of (to them) salient problems, the other claiming the actual core issues are something completely different.⁴

In addition to their own biases, each party defines the main issues of the conflict based on its own perception, interest and needs. Different understandings of the real issues driving a rift become a major hindrance to the parties’ engagement in meaningful conflict management and resolution strategies and thus makes escalation more likely. Indeed, the lack of an accurate understanding of the real issues driving a conflict leads to the reproduction of poor resolution strategies.
After decades, the primary parties of the Iran–Saudi conflict still disagree about what is fundamentally driving their conflict. While Saudi Arabia claims that sectarianism is the key factor, Iran promotes the narrative that the conflict essentially concerns the preservation of its national and regional security. Nevertheless, what both parties refuse to acknowledge is that this conflict is, at least in part, about regime legitimacy and the desire of governments of both states to take a leading role in the Muslim world. When I asked the participants in a joint Iran–Gulf track two workshop about the fundamental issues of the conflict, I received answers ranging from national and regional security, Iran’s hegemonic behaviour in the region, Sunni–Shia sectarianism, Arab–Persian nationalism, American–Israeli alliance against Iran, and geopolitics and leadership in the Muslim world. The first pillar, therefore, will critically identify the key issues driving this conflict and what role each plays, as well as how each affects conflict management and resolution efforts.

This book takes the view that the major issue driving the Iran–Saudi conflict is security. Security is of course of critical importance for both parties, and, if both feel that their security is guaranteed, the conflict will be substantially downgraded. What makes this conflict particularly complex is the clash of security needs and perceived ‘encirclement’ of both parties. Iran feels constantly threatened by the United States and Israel, as well as encircled by American military bases and areas of influence in, for example, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Turkey and Afghanistan. Iran responds, in turn, by expanding its own areas of influence in Arab countries and in the process leads Saudi Arabia to feel encircled – as Iran’s primary rival and ally of the United States – in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are caught up in this security dilemma and mistakenly have adopted a strategy of escalation to resolve it.

A key factor exacerbating this dilemma is the drive for security and survival of the two regimes in Tehran and Riyadh. That is, escalation conveniently serves the agendas of both regimes, and thus they feel no rush to change the course of action. By standing up to the ‘Great Satan’, Iran’s regime is internally legitimising its revolutionary rhetoric, distracting the attention of the Iranian people from its inability to deliver on the economic level, and validating its expansionist foreign policy in the neighbouring Arab countries.
Meanwhile, standing up to the ‘expansionist Shia aggressor, Iran’, is serving the Saudi regime by silencing any domestic calls for political reform and keeping a united internal front under the regime’s reign.

Many of the other conflict issues, including sectarianism, leadership and influence, are rooted in this security dilemma. They will continue to thrive in the absence of a suitable security scheme that addresses the needs of both parties. Contrary to President Obama’s sectarian characterisation of this conflict as rooted in antagonisms that ‘date back millennia’, this conflict is not originally or essentially sectarian. Indeed, Shia-majority Iran supported Sunni-Palestinian Hamas and sided with Christian Armenia against Shia-majority Azerbaijan. By the same token, Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia supported the Shia Imamate in the 1960s in Yemen and the predominantly Christian March 14th alliance in Lebanon. However, the politicisation of sectarianism by both parties to mobilise support for their political agendas has served as a reinforcing mechanism for Iranian–Saudi animosity, thus furthering conflict escalation. In this case, sectarianism is an enabling factor rather than a cause of the rivalry. Nonetheless, the extensive and varied use of sectarianism by the governments, the mainstream media, major figures on social media, the clergy and even think tanks on both sides has turned sectarianism into a cause for further escalation of the conflict.

Resulting from the politicisation of sectarianism, both sides of the conflict have come to stand for their own sect. Iran appointed itself as the leader of the Shia world by assuming responsibility for protecting the Shia in Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon. Likewise, Saudi Arabia appointed itself as the leader of the Sunni world that would stand up to Iran and prevent the ‘Shia-isation’ in the Arab and Muslim majority countries.

**Pillar 2: Conflict Management**

One of this book’s major arguments is that better-managed and regulated conflicts are better suited for resolution. Conflict regulation ‘refers to the rules that govern the contending parties’ conduct in a dispute’. Unilaterally imposing certain rules cannot be considered regulating the conflict, however. Instead, the goal is to establish what Louis Kriesberg calls authentic regulations that ‘exists insofar as the contending parties recognize each other’s legitimacy and regard the rules governing their conflict as legitimate’.

A dangerous aspect of the Iran–Saudi conflict is its lack of an effective conflict management system that clearly outlines the ‘rules of the game’ and regulates the parties’ conflict behaviour. Allowing the conflict to continue without a restraining mechanism will cause deeper damage through the sustained use of proxies in the region, which could potentially lead to a direct war between Riyadh and Tehran in the future. An effective conflict management system should include the following four components.

First, crisis management tools. Such tools would entail responding to the evolving tension by taking actions like establishing a Riyadh–Tehran hotline, exchanging senior government visits, and forming technical committees to research win-win resolutions to the primary issues at hand. One important factor that prevented the escalation of the US–USSR Cold War into an actual war was the crisis management system that involved, for instance, a direct hotline between Moscow and Washington, DC and regular exchange of senior government visits.

Second, dialogue. There is deep mistrust as well as a lack of political will to build relations across the conflict, combined with barely concealed hatred and even violence (though still carried out via proxies in the region) between both sides. Only through open dialogue can these escalatory dynamics be altered. Dialogue is not meant to necessarily resolve a conflict, but instead should serve as a mechanism to remove misperceptions, develop certain understandings, build a working trust, and open channels of communication between Riyadh and Tehran. Unfortunately, in January 2016, Saudi Arabia formally severed diplomatic relations with Iran and thus shut down the official communication channels that could help in a better management of the conflict.

Third, confidence-building measures. The goal of such measures is not to make Iran and Saudi Arabia like each other or address the underlying causes and conditions of this conflict. Rather, it is meant to take a series of small actions that will help build confidence and prepare Iran and Saudi Arabia to engage in formal negotiations that address the causes and issues of the conflict. While both dialogue and confidence-building measures aim to build a working relationship, the first is mostly about talking and clearing perceptions, while the latter is about taking action.

Fourth, peace zones or a Middle East non-aligned movement in a reversed conflict resolution process. When Iran and Saudi Arabia disagree on means
of resolving the core conflict issues (e.g. security and sectarianism), they can engage in conflict management exercises that aim to isolate certain issues (e.g. oil prices, Gulf maritime trade) and even countries (e.g. Oman, Bahrain) from the conflict. Riyadh and Tehran agreeing to avoid escalation in these domains would be an effective conflict-management strategy, which could help in a later formal resolution process. Regional players may choose to take things into their own hands and distance themselves from the conflict if Riyadh and Tehran fail to agree on a containment strategy, and in this case, may resort to establishing a non-aligned movement for this conflict.

In fact, the seeds for this movement exist already. Oman has historically resisted pressure from both sides to join the conflict. Especially after the May 2017 Gulf crisis, Kuwait and Qatar started to demonstrate signals of avoiding being polarised by either of the parties. Jordan occasionally expresses similar interests, such as its Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh making calls from Tehran for dialogue. Tired of historically being a battleground for two powerful rivals, Lebanon is constantly raising slogans like ‘self-distancing’ (al-naa‘i be-naafṣ).

**Pillar 3: Conflict Resolution**

Building on the establishment of clear regulations and sound management of the conflict, this book makes the argument that an effective resolution strategy should meet two requirements: addressing the underlying causes and conditions of the conflict; and taking an integrated approach to resolution by supplementing official (track one) peacemaking efforts with the activation of the currently unused but hugely potential track two and grassroots levels.

*Addressing the underlying causes of the conflict*

Solutions should stem from conflict causes, though they rarely drive international peacemaking efforts, as mediators are generally lured by promises of deals, concessions and compromises while often leaving the underlying causes that produced conflicts intact. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia, like many others, understand that addressing the underlying causes of the conflict will improve their relationship, yet the more difficult challenge is defining what these causes are (security, sectarianisms, leadership, etc.), and it is even more difficult to determine how to satisfy them. Hence, the major cause of the aggressive Iran–Saudi rivalry could be seen in the imbalance of power.
created as a result of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. This imbalance had enormous security implications not only for the two parties but also for the entire Middle East.

A sustainable balance of regional order must be restored in order for the rivalry to come to an end; neither party seems aware of how best to do this, however. Instead, both sides have sought to restore the balance by engaging in an aggressive arms race and the spread of civil and proxy wars in the region that will only worsen affairs. This conflict started in Iraq and can be resolved from Iraq as well. Because Iraq was considered to have shifted its position from the Arab side to that of Iran, Saudi Arabia was left in a vulnerable position and triggered Iran’s appetite for regional expansion. The solution to the imbalance in the regional order is a democratic, independent, sovereign Iraq, free from the influence of Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States. Iraq must take a neutral position in this conflict to preserve its own national interest since it could otherwise risk becoming a battleground for regional and international conflicts. Iraq’s inability to detach from the Iran–Saudi rivalry has been one reason for its prolonged civil strife since 2003. Given its ethnic and religious mosaic, Iraq can become a unifying rather than a dividing force. Iraq becoming the meeting point will be the core interest of all parties and most importantly Baghdad itself.

Saudi Arabia seeking to rebalance regional power by strengthening its alliance with the United States is not a sustainable strategy, although Riyadh felt abandoned and vulnerable under the Obama administration. The Trump administration has made matters worse, as the entire region, not just Saudi Arabia and Iran, has slid into probably the most acute security crisis in decades. The national security of Saudi Arabia, for example, has become a bargaining chip for President Trump, who frequently and publicly asks Riyadh to pay for its protection from Iran and to help stem the tide of Iranian expansionism. Of course, the United States is a key player that can become a stabilising force, but if Saudi Arabia continues to leave its national security subject to the changes in American administrations and different policies that Washington may embrace (e.g. the pivot to Asia), it would be a strategic mistake.

Another approach to rebalancing the regional order is through the creation of a security framework that involves West Asia and North Africa (WANA). Involving key players like Turkey and Pakistan, which have vital
national interest, in regional stability and the region’s security architecture can create a more balanced regional order that prevents one party from becoming hegemonic.

Meanwhile, strategies employed by Iran and Saudi Arabia to rebalance the region have in fact exacerbated the crisis of imbalance of the regional order. The strategies are counterproductive and must be substantially reformed if the objectives of either side are to be achieved. Neither running an aggressive arms race nor turning this conflict into a sectarian issue will give Saudi Arabia the security it needs. By the same token, expansionism and building militias throughout the region will not give Iran the security and acceptance in the Middle East that it seeks. As has been said, ‘Iran has legitimate needs in the region that it is pursuing in illegitimate ways.’ The way to achieve these objectives and others is by instead instituting new policies in three main areas: domestic politics, sectarian policies and soft power strategies.

The current political system of Saudi Arabia does not support the country playing a powerful role to strategically balance the regional order with Iran. Deep political and constitutional reforms thus must be introduced. Building hard power to balance with Iran can always help in the short-term but ultimately cannot guarantee Riyadh’s security. For example, Israel is generally believed to possess nuclear capabilities and the unquestionable support of the United States, yet it remains insecure in the region; the cause of its security problem is not a lack of advanced military might but its occupation of the Palestinian territories. To feel secure, Israel will have to end its occupation and resolve its conflict with the Palestinians. Likewise, what will make Riyadh feel secure, however, is not purchasing additional arms, but a new social contract that fixes the relationship between the society and state. A new social contract that will enable Saudi Arabia to counter Iranian expansion should be built on a partnership between state and society where accountability and transparency are protected, along with fighting corruption, instituting acceptable levels of power sharing, and ensuring that citizenship is the basis for individuals’ access to the Kingdom’s resources. As Jamal Khashoggi often stated, Saudi Arabia missed an opportunity to support the political reform in the region that the Arab Spring demanded, and instead resorted to leading and supporting counter-revolutions that maintained old regime structures. Reformed Arab political systems, however, would have provided a viable and sustainable means to stop Iranian expansion in the region; certainly,
Arab youth did not revolt against their corrupt political systems to embrace Iranian theocracy.

Iran is also ripe for domestic reform and, perhaps most urgently, economic reform. To win its cold war with Saudi Arabia, Iran is using a similar strategy that led to the collapse of the USSR in its cold war with the United States. That is, Iran is heavily investing in building its hard power (mainly its missiles programme and nuclear projects) and arming militias abroad, while ignoring what the ordinary Iranian citizen needs: a strong economy that delivers jobs and caters to their livelihoods. Driven by economic factors, the 2017–18 protests in dozens of Iranian cities that turned to raising slogans against the regime and its interventionist foreign policy sends a reliable signal to the Iranian leadership that domestic reform is long overdue.

Politicisation of sectarianism by both Iran and Saudi Arabia must be changed. Iran should refrain from appointing itself the representative of the Shia community in the Arab world, as these Shia are citizens of their own countries rather than part of a transnational coherent Shia whole. Iran’s policy of ‘supporting the oppressed’ remains unconvincing, since it has supported revolutions in Yemen and Bahrain yet continued to back Syria’s Shia Alawite regime, dubbing the revolution an ‘external conspiracy’. As Shahram Akbarzadeh has argued, Iran’s patronage of Shia groups in the region has turned Iran into a ‘reluctant Shia Power’. Using Arab Shias as a ‘sandbag defence’ – in the words of one Iraqi Shia leader – is in fact exacerbating their plight and deepening their grievances. Such a contradiction in Iran’s foreign policy only serves its rival Saudi Arabia’s propaganda campaign – that conflict is essentially sectarian, a narrative which has led to recruitment to Sunni extremist groups like ISIS that Iran claims it is fighting in the region. In this case, Iran’s misuse of its sectarian foreign policy is actually multiplying the enemies that it claims to be fighting.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, should be careful of the potential ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ in terms of the treatment of its own Shia minority. Perceiving Shia Saudis as a fifth column loyal to Iran has led to their unequal treatment, a policy that may lead segments of this population to become truly loyal to Iran or at least sympathetic to its message. In particular, the Wahhabi Saudi clergy has seriously alienated their fellow Shia citizens when ‘every week during Friday prayers we are being called infidels’, as one Shia
Saudi told me. By the same token, the alienation is exacerbated when Shia students are expected to learn a Sunni Hanbali curriculum, with its strict interpretation against Shia Muslims, in order to pass their classes. The problem with being Shia in Saudi Arabia is not just about political economy or identity politics, but also about religious belief, as Toby Matthiesen explains.\textsuperscript{9} Alienation of the Shia population significantly weakens Saudi Arabia’s domestic political front as it pushes a segment of its society to identify with Iran or its message. A solidly built Saudi internal political system is as important as its arms race strategy in confronting Iran, if not even more so.

In their pursuit of hard power to impact the regional order, Iran and Saudi Arabia have ignored the strength of soft power. Iran’s image in the Arab countries has never been worse. One major reason for the deterioration of its soft power in Arab countries is its association with the brutal civil war in Syria. Iran gained the world’s sympathy when Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against them during the 1980–8 war. Iran’s backing of the Assad regime, which allegedly used the same chemical weapons that Iran suffered from against his own people, has left little sympathy for Tehran as a ‘victim of chemical weapons’, at least in many Arab countries. Iran must understand that it cannot pursue partnerships with the Arab world by force and with this type of image; thus, fundamental reform of its soft power is needed for it to be accepted in the region as a partner.

Saudi Arabia is equally in need of reforming its soft power strategy if it wants to contain Iranian intervention and find a constructive resolution to the conflict. To develop soft power effectively, Saudi Arabia needs to rid itself of the enormous burden of being associated with the brand of Wahhabism, especially since this has been (at least to a certain extent) associated with jihadi Salafi terrorism worldwide. Saudi Arabia cannot win the battle of global public opinion with this type of image. Another factor that has seriously damaged Saudi Arabia’s image is its war in Yemen, which has caused one of the world’s worst man-made humanitarian disasters in recent history. Saudi Arabia will have to work for decades to repair the damage to its image caused by this war. Moreover, genuinely reforming Saudi Arabia’s soft power requires the Kingdom to crack down on rampant corruption that has seriously damaged its bureaucratic system, deepened mistrust between the public and their government, and made it difficult for Riyadh to market itself abroad. The Saudi
campaign to ‘fight corruption’ that resulted in the arrest of dozens of shaykhs and former ministers – in what came to be known as the Ritz-Carlton hotel-prison – and forcing them to surrender major parts of their wealth to the state increased suspicions about the way the Kingdom is being run.

Integrating official peacemaking, track two intervention, and bottom-up grassroots peacebuilding

Though track two and grassroots efforts remain of critical importance to achieving peace in the Gulf region, government-led peacemaking can be more effective in terms of sustainability, especially if aided by what is called track two intervention as well as a bottom-up grassroots-exercised peacebuilding.

As both parties have been unable to resolve the conflict on their own, third party intervention is both necessary and timely for Riyadh and Tehran to engage in peacemaking. Theoretically, powerful party mediation would be most effective in resolving this and other conflicts. As one Saudi official explained to me, ‘We need a powerful mediator who can oversee the dialogue and guarantee the implementation of the results if mediation is to work with Iran.’ In this case, countries like the United States, United Kingdom and France would fit the criteria to mediate and ‘guarantee implementation’. The problem, however, is that these ‘powerful countries’ are parties to the conflict as well, especially the United States, and it is in the American interest, at least under the Trump administration, to keep the conflict unresolved so as to continue to build an alliance with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States to counter Iranian influence, and make additional gains, whether arms sales or general geopolitical gains, in the Middle East and North Africa.

A third-party approach to mediating this conflict is represented by regional powers like Turkey and Pakistan. A peaceful resolution to this conflict is in the strategic interest of these regional powers. Historically, Turks, Arabs and Iranians have shaped the politics and stability of the region. Resolving the conflict would save Turkey the risk of proxy wars escalating on its southern borders. The biggest security challenge to Turkey in its contemporary history has been the Syria war, where Iran and Saudi Arabia indirectly clash. With intervention, Turkey can contribute to rebalancing the regional order, whose disorder was a key cause of this conflict in the first place. Likewise, a nuclear Pakistan can help restore balance with serious intervention in the peacebuilding between
Iran and Saudi Arabia. A sectarian conflict between Riyadh and Tehran poses a serious structural security threat to Pakistan, as the country has historically suffered from sectarian tensions. Rising sectarianism between Iran and Saudi Arabia could reflect on various levels in Pakistan, including through its army, which contains both Sunni and Shia generals. Pakistan has strategic interests with both countries, and the most difficult decision that Islamabad will have to make is to be forced to choose between them. Therefore, investing in peace between its two powerful rivals is undoubtedly in its strategic security interest.

Since official peacemaking efforts have not yet yielded tangible outcomes, the track two approach should be used, particularly because it can play a complementary role to track one processes and often do what governments cannot. Track two is generally led by what John Paul Lederach calls ‘middle-range actors’, who are positioned in such a way that ‘they are connected to, and often have the trust of, both top-level and grassroots actors’.10 As Jamal Khashoggi, who conducted numerous track two activities with Iranian counterparts, told me,

there is something to be said about the potential benefits of track two diplomacy between the two countries. Track two is great for public relations and won’t cost the government anything. Who knows, it might sow the seeds for some real change in the future.11

Track two peacebuilding can provide a variety of benefits when governments are unable or unwilling to come to the negotiating table. Government officials are constantly under media pressure, especially as the rivalry has become increasingly public. This environment is not conducive to creative thinking and innovative conflict resolution. However,

among the varied goals of track two are to provide a safe, off-the-record venue for dialogue; to create the conditions necessary for formal agreements to ‘take hold’; increase communication, understanding and trust among polarized groups; break-down the stereotypes and dehumanizing cognitions that permit the partisans to wage the conflict destructively; and to develop consensus-based proposals that can be transferred to the track one processes.12

Particularly because Iran and Saudi Arabia officially severed diplomatic relations in January 2016, leaving only unofficial communications in place,
channels of communications like those offered by track two negotiations become particularly relevant. Unfortunately, track two efforts have not reached their full potential in the Gulf due to the centrality of the political systems of both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Put simply, socially influential individuals are not allowed to freely engage in conflict resolution with the other side. However, the present situation provides an opportunity for the two governments to use unconventional approaches and ease their tight control on what non-official prominent society leaders can do. The potential for track two participants to have an impact on the situation is real and can be seen on multiple levels, including in developing personal relationships among participants themselves, returning home and changing the contours of the debate in their societies (especially through their writings), and even influencing their own governments since they are known by them.

Historically, decisions about war and peace in the Gulf have been made by leaders with a top-down approach, without the involvement of their own people. A bottom-up approach to peacebuilding in the Gulf, however, must be incorporated into governments’ planning and overall handling of their conflicts. There is a huge trust deficit between the people of Iran and their neighbours in the Gulf as people-to-people interaction is almost non-existent. For example, there are no student and faculty exchange programmes, no joint institutions, and even tourism is extremely limited. The media is playing a destructive role on both sides. It is very rare to find Saudis who speak the Persian language and vice versa. Stereotypes and the dynamics of polarisation and mistrust guide the formation of perceptions on both sides. Under these circumstances, governments will find it difficult to proceed with peace and reconciliation between the two countries even if they want to do so, simply because their populations are not supportive. Bottom-up peacebuilding in the Gulf will help address the change and transformation needed in the relationship between the two peoples. Successful people-to-people programmes will form a kind of social incubator for any future government-brokered solutions as peace agreements need support on the ground to survive. Peace between Iran and its Gulf neighbours will begin with people themselves living this peace, not with governments whose actions are more constrained.
Rapprochement is Possible

Despite what seems to be a bleak situation with slim prospects for resolution, rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia remains a possibility. By ‘rapprochement’ we refer to scaling back on levels of hostilities, disengagement from escalation and destructive policies in the region, and co-existence between the two states despite their continued differences. Rapprochement does not necessarily imply full reconciliation or elimination of competitive behaviour; instead, it aims primarily to reform relationships from hostilities to co-existence. As Gregory Gause puts it,

the recent past tells us that it is not impossible to imagine a Saudi–Iranian rapprochement. This would not be an alliance. The two sides have too many contrary interests. It would not even be the shotgun marriage that characterized relations during the time of the Shah, when Cold War dynamics and a common antipathy toward leftist Arab nationalism brought Riyadh and Tehran together. A rapprochement would simply be an agreement to lower the temperature of their mutual condemnations and to act with self-restraint in order to limit the regional spillover consequences of the Syrian and Iraqi domestic conflicts.¹³

Achieving a reasonable level of rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran depends first on the political will of both parties. Unless both parties are convinced that rapprochement will yield better outcomes for their security and national interests, it will be difficult to force them to reconcile; rapprochement requires initial concessions on both sides so that they can reap fruitful outcomes later. Political will thus becomes necessary. As Frederic Wehrey argues,

Saudi Arabia and Iran are capable of dialling back and tempering sectarianism. We saw this play out in Lebanon in the aftermath of the 2006 war. We are seeing it again now in Bahrain, where Iran (and Hezbollah) have lowered the tenor of their criticism of Saudi policies.¹⁴

Furthermore, ‘both countries pursued détente in the 1990s after the Iran-Iraq War and Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, culminating in the signing of a security pact in 2001’.¹⁵ If political will does not exist, it is geography that will ultimately force the parties to reconcile. The parties can procrastinate,
manoeuvre and manipulate for the foreseeable future, but the fact that they are living in one area and will remain neighbours with mutual needs and common interests necessitates at least a degree of cooperation.

History also tells us that rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran is theoretically possible. In fact, the two countries have a history of friendlier relations: ’As recently as the early 2000s their bilateral relationship was not nearly as conflictual, as both Tehran and Riyadh pursued more normal diplomatic relations with each other even as they jostled for influence in the region.’16 It is true that their ancient history had crisis and tensions, but for most of that history they managed to co-exist and collaborate, damaging arguments that the rivalry is essentially sectarian and therefore primordial in nature.

History and geography also tell us that countries like Germany and France had worse relationships yet eventually managed to work together, at least for a limited period, through one uniting framework, the European Union. It is unrealistic to expect Iran to join the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), but the expectation of Germany and France cooperating would have likewise been low a few decades ago.

Another reason that makes rapprochement possible is that both Iran and Saudi Arabia have reached what Zartman calls the ’mutually hurting stalemate’.17 The conflict has most likely ripened and, since 2003, both parties have invested in the conflict with no achievable outcomes in sight. Yemen has become for Saudi Arabia what Vietnam was for the United States and Afghanistan for the former USSR. The Saudi challenge in Yemen is not solely in winning the war militarily but also ensuring post-war stability and neutralising the security threat on its southern borders. By the same token, Iran has bled for many years in Syria and Iraq, which continues to exert tremendous pressure on its economy.

Domestic pressure in both Iran and Saudi Arabia has also contributed to the stalemate that Riyadh and Tehran are currently experiencing, and this situation may force both countries to scale back or avoid antagonism. In this regard, Iran has survived two uprisings in the last decade, in 2009 and 2017–18, which should serve as credible indicators regarding domestic pressure in the country, while also raising questions about its long-term ability to continue to fund armed militias in the Arab countries. It is no coincidence that the protesters in 2017–18 raised economic demands first before turning
to political slogans against the regime, and even against the Supreme Leader, as well as condemning intervention in regional crises and civil wars. This pressure has led some voices in Iran to come to terms with the need to prioritise domestic demands. As Rouzbeh Parsi argues, ‘the political elite in Tehran is slowly and reluctantly coming to grips with being a post-revolutionary state. The society has been way ahead of it for quite some time.’

Saudi Arabia’s domestic economic challenges are equally threatening to the survival of the regime; in 2017, dozens of princes, former ministers and other business tycoons were arrested in what they called a fighting corruption campaign, and forced to surrender significant amounts of their wealth to the state. Furthermore, dozens of clerics and intellectuals were arrested in September 2017 to neutralise dissent from the Islamic sphere. Despite these measures, domestic political pressure and demands for reform are mounting, leading the state to engage in what would have been seen as taboo only a couple of years before, including, but not limited to, lifting the ban on women driving and diminishing the state-linked clergy’s influence on politics. Coupling the current damaging stalemate that the two countries experience with a way out or an ‘enticing opportunity’ may help them confidently proceed to rapprochement.

Finally, the conflict behaviour of the parties tells us that both of them are willing to make compromises and reach agreements even with their worst enemies. Iran was able to reach a nuclear deal with what it calls the ‘Great Satan’ – the United States – on its nuclear project, which has always been defined as part of its national pride, national security and sovereignty. By the same token, in 2002, Saudi Arabia presented the Arab Peace Initiative to Israel – for a century considered the Arabs’ central enemy – for a comprehensive solution and full normalisation. It would be ironic if the two parties are willing to engage in ‘deals’ and ‘normalization’ with their distant enemies yet remain unwilling to reconcile as neighbours with shared vital needs and interests in the Gulf region.

Notes

1. Workshop organised by Georgetown University’s Center for Regional and International Studies in Qatar as part of a series of Iran–GCC dialogue activities. Workshop held under Chatham House Rule where information can be shared but identities of speakers are undisclosed. Doha, January 2016.
6. Ibid. p. 104.
7. Saudi journalist, author, opinion leader and *Washington Post* columnist, Jamal paid with his life for continuing to speak out; he was cruelly murdered at the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018 by agents of the government of Saudi Arabia.
11. Author's interview and discussion, Doha, November 2015.