

Review Feature - Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, APR 27 2014

The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East

By: Nadia von Maltzahn

London, I.B.Tauris, 2013

Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East

By: Simon Mabon

London, I.B.Tauris, 2013

Iran's relationship with its neighbours in the Middle East has been a complex affair since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Following that event, Iran endured a long war with Iraq in the 1980s, and a concurrent reimagining of its regional role from a US ally to an anti-US, anti-Israel, revisionist state. Iran's path since the 1980s has placed it at odds with the bulk of states in the region, who do not subscribe to Iran's pan-Islamic philosophy or its aspirations to regional hegemony. The books reviewed here document Iran's relations with two of its neighbours – Syria and Saudi Arabia – two nations that are of pivotal importance in the region today.

Nadia von Maltzahn's *The Syria-Iran Axis* takes a historical view on the relationship between both nations. One of this book's refreshing elements is that it takes things back to the 1970s, Iran's imperial era, when concerted diplomatic efforts between Iran and Syria began. Many readers will benefit from the scope of this analysis to better understand why Iran supports Syria as strongly as it does today, despite the atrocities of the Assad regime, and the notable differences between the two nations.

Von Maltzahn's investigation identifies the roots of the alliance in three major areas: Firstly, in building links between the Shia communities in both nations. Secondly, in a mutual benefit for both nations, though especially for Syria, of emerging from regional isolation. Thirdly, in a strategic rapport over the Israel-Palestine issue. Iran's support of the Palestinian cause allowed the Syrian regime to justify closer public relations with Iran, which helped transform the 'odd couple' into an 'Axis of Resistance' in the region against imperialism and Zionism.

From that basis, von Maltzahn explores the role of culture in foreign policy, tracing the government-led cultural diplomacy between the two nations via such instances as the exchange of students and tourism. The book is also forgiving to those without a background in the area, providing a generous contextual chapter. The investigation provides an alternative angle to the commonly strategic analyses of relations between nations. For those seeking to understand the depth of the ties between Iran and Syria, von Maltzahn delivers a worthwhile read.

Yet, the book lacks substantive insight into the current state of relations, especially since the Syrian uprising, an omission that might prove frustrating for some readers. Iran's steadfast support for Syria through the post-2011 crisis is often mystifying for many, and additional analysis on this would have been welcome. Indeed, the book teaches that, in the Syria-Iran relationship, Iran has been the driver while Syria has been largely passive. But it misses an opportunity to investigate why staying so closely allied to the Assad regime benefits Iran's regional soft politics today.

Simon Mabon's *Saudi Arabia and Iran* also deals with soft power territory. Yet, in this case it is a story of a deep rivalry, rather than the rapport of Iran and Syria. Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia have always been troubled. From

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the days of the Shah of Iran, both nations have sought regional leadership positions, setting them at odds. While their relationship was troubled prior to 1979, it has deteriorated significantly since then. Mabon identifies the roots of the rivalry in incompatible identities and ideologies. Iran's emergence as a revolutionary Islamic state with a pan-Islamist ideology was a material threat to Saudi Arabia and its ruling dynasty. The emergence of a competitor for Islamic leadership drove Saudi Arabia's strategy to block Iran's growth in the region, and Iran reciprocated with similar tactics.

Mabon devotes significant space to looking inside each nation, exposing the roots of the incompatibilities between both nations by examining religious, ethnic, and historical angles. The analysis leads masterfully to the final chapter of the book, which details what Mabon refers to as the 'internal-external security dilemma' between both nations. The dilemma is the result of ideological competition, but also, importantly, of geopolitical competition. In exploring this rivalry, Mabon's efforts to document the identity incongruence between both nations, carried out in earlier chapters, pays off by offering a multi-layered account. It rounds out an impressive work that leaves the reader with a strong and nuanced understanding of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and how it affects the internal and foreign policies of both nations.

Mabon's conclusion is largely devoted to outlining ways that both nations can begin to overcome their differences, while admitting the difficulty of any such rapprochement occurring. After all, the scope of the issues that divide the two nations is extremely polarising. Saudi support for the US, together with an advanced security and economic relationship, resembles the relationship that the US had with Iran during the era of the Shah. Therefore, Tehran sees Riyadh as something of a US imperial outpost. And, of course, the regional power keg of the Iranian nuclear programme has led to deep security fears within Saudi Arabia and suspicion that they, too, will proliferate. As diplomacy continues between Iran and the P-5+1, diplomats would do themselves a service by picking up Mabon's book.

About the author:

Dr Stephen McGlinchey is the Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of E-International Relations and Senior Lecturer of International Relations at UWE Bristol. His publications include *Foundations of International Relations* (Bloomsbury 2022), *International Relations* (2017), *International Relations Theory* (2017) and *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran* (Routledge 2021, 2014). You can find him on twitter @mcglincheyst or LinkedIn.