

Arab-Iranian Relations Since the Arab Uprisings

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Chapter 1

Why Studying Arab–Iranian Relations Matters

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1 Why Studying Arab–Iranian Relations Matters

Introduction

Arab–Iranian relations have various layers to them. Ranging from the legacies of the past, historical memories, colonial rule, cultural rivalry, ethnic and sectarian differences, state-building and modernisation, international developments, the global political economy, and regional and international power politics. Relations between Iran and the Arab World have been complex for centuries now. Different efforts to improve ties from both sides have occurred, but with limited results. The main areas of dispute between the Arab World and Iran, which are primarily discussed in contemporary academic circles, stem from a perceived geostrategic rivalry, coupled with Arab concerns about Iranian interference and control over the domestic affairs of Arab states. Meanwhile, the Iranian regime claims that it only seeks to establish its natural or innate role as a regional power by virtue of geography and history. Many Arab and Gulf political elites have labelled Iran’s regional efforts “meddling” and “destabilising”.

It is essential to appraise the current condition of Arab–Iranian relations at this juncture. In modern times, it is difficult for one to look at a newspaper or website, and not read a story on Arab–Iranian relations. This could be about Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan, the Palestinian conflict, or Iran’s nuclear deal, otherwise known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which was initially signed by the P5+1.

Discussing regional politics or Middle Eastern politics without referring to or devoid of mention of Iranian–Arab interactions is nearly impossible. Moreover, today, the issues that involve the Arabs and Iranians are amongst the world’s most pressing political issues. They dominate regional political dynamics. Having established that their importance cannot be overestimated, one must not ignore the volume of misinformation, manipulation, prejudice, and propaganda involved in the discourse on Arab–Iranian relations and their foreign policies, within the most common backdrop of sectarianism. Such negative, biased, and faulty attitudes or rhetoric are not just by “outsiders” but also by Iranians and Arabs themselves. Apart from politicising specific issues (domestic, regional, or international) for immediate or short-term political gain, what is striking is the utter lack of mutual understanding between Arabs

and Iranians. There is no consensus or agreement, even on matters of mutual interest. Cooperation and compromise are ignored, while confrontation and conflict are preferred.

In the contemporary world, many Arabs, and some Arab governments, perceive Iran as an aggressor that is spreading its influence in the Arab World through the pursuit of a nationalistic and/or sectarian agenda, with the larger aim of the revival or resurgence of a Persian empire like that of the Safavids or Sassanians. All of this, they believe, will be at the expense of the Sunnis and/or the Arabs. Many Arabs and Arab governments claim that “Iran is occupying four Arab capitals” – namely Baghdad, Sanaa, Beirut, and Damascus. This rhetoric usually originates from Arabs unhappy with Iran’s increasing influence and role in the region. However, this rhetoric or narrative also comes from the Iranian side. Thus, it reinforces Arab insecurities and fuels their narrative. The reality on the ground, and the political situation, show that this claim does not hold water irrespective of its origin. While Iran has been more influential in the four Arab capitals in recent times than before (prior to the US-led Iraq invasion in 2003 and the Arab Uprising of 2011), such claims of Iran being in control cannot be backed up with evidence.

For a seasoned Iran observer, it is clear that Iran cannot be seen as an occupier, nor is it even the primary player in these countries – Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. The most efficient way of describing Iran’s role in these conflicts, or within these countries, is that it is one among many important actors in these countries.

Nevertheless, the fact that Iranians and Arabs propagate such rhetoric is very telling. It is a pressing manifestation of the deep-running mistrust and animosities between the Iranians and the Arabs. More significantly, it reveals the astonishing levels of prejudice and mutual resentment between the two, preventing them from arriving at agreements regarding the essential things. The mutual “bad faith” prevents the Iranians and Arabs from cooperating on mutual benefits and interest issues. Instead, the ill-will and animosity make the Arabs and Iranians act in a manner that becomes counterproductive and detrimental to both parties.

The mutual perceptions of Iranians and Arabs are crucial to understanding how the two groups conduct politics and diplomacy with each other. To understand the mutual perceptions of the Arabs and Iranians, one must understand and appreciate their common history, and their historical memories. A portion of this historical memory is shared. However, a portion of it is intertwined with biases, prejudice, and conflicting narratives.

While the merits of historical events, history, and its significance are usually discussed and generally restricted to scholarly debates, historical memory transcends these delimitations. What is different is the varying degrees of historical memory based on historical facts and those based on tales, folklore, beliefs, and legends that are devoid of evidence to back up the narratives. Nevertheless, historical memory is strong, and carved into the national population’s consciousness, so that debating or questioning it becomes a fruitless task.

While history can be debated, proved, and disproved, historical memory is generally taken for granted. These powerful historical memories are formed by intertwining the simplicity of “historical truths” with the stark dissimilarity between the complexity of mutual interactions between Arabs and Iranians that have spanned across the millennia. The element of simplicity makes these historical memories more potent than the factual history itself, in creating awareness of the other player and self-awareness. To demonstrate this tendency of “bad faith”, one must study, analyse and appraise critical historical developments.

What Went Wrong in Arab–Iranian Relations

During the 7th and 8th centuries, the conquering of vast territories by the Arab armies led to the creation of a novel world order in the region of the Middle East – one which brought together the wealthiest and most sophisticated parts that spanned across the three continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa (Frankopan, 2015). The Middle East thus became a main source of attraction for ambitious merchants. This was a pivotal moment in the Gulf region, transforming it into a transnational space. The mercantile activities and opportunities made many people from the land of Persia move towards Arabia. Thus, the long-standing relations between the Arabs and Persians – or modern-day Iranians – commenced.

There is a tendency to oversimplify the Arab–Iranian tensions as a mere Sunni–Shia conflict. Sometimes even as a Saudi–Iran conflict. While these factors exist, reducing Arab–Iranian tensions to just these issues is folly. Saudi–Iran relations intertwine between certain confluent factors: identity, ideology, and interests. The Saudi–Iran strife has essentially transformed the region into a Middle Eastern chessboard. Despite modernisation, and the advent of nation-states, historical residuals still play a significant role in these relations. Al-Aloosy argues that Saudi Arabia’s unification, and the global dependence on oil, introduced a novel conservative player to the Middle Eastern region. Hence, the Saudi state was well-positioned to compete with the “well-established, imperial Iran” (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

Nevertheless, many scholars and analysts do make the mistake of underestimating the rich, profound nature of interactions between Iran and Arabia. These ties run deep and have existed since long before the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was formed, and the advent of oil production. Many scholars and analysts fall into the trap of oversimplifying the causes of conflict, and their mutual history. By compartmentalising information, and conducting studies across limited and structured time frames, one can quickly gloss over the complexity of the nature of Arab–Iranian relations – something that spans millennia. The root causes of the complexity of the relationship are ignored and underrated. Instead, their history is oversimplified. This helps to further the vested interests and political agenda of those promoting these narratives. What is lost is a rich, deep, holistic, and comprehensive understanding of the nature

of Arab–Iranian relations. The lack of honest exploration limits the pool of knowledge and, in a way, promotes biases.

It is easy to limit and condense the analysis of modern Arab–Iranian interactions to the contemporary age and disregard the long-standing history of these peoples and their lands. Mere analysis of these relations in the background of a global power struggle involving superpowers such as the United States of America or the West, and the re-emergence of Russia, is lacklustre. Nevertheless, another reductionist and limiting way of looking at Arab–Iranian dynamics is through the prism of sectarianism. A mere reduction of these historical ties to politics, primarily driven by considerations of the Shia Iran and Sunni Arabs, is again imprudent. This sectarian angle dominates discourse and is a primary driver of policymaking in contemporary times.

Arab–Iranian relations have had a fair number of highs and lows. Over the centuries, negative conceptions backed with suspicion, rivalry, and resentment have guided the trajectory of Arab–Iranian relations. The relationship is founded on rendering a shared history, which becomes a source of conflict and misunderstanding. It feeds into the negative narratives mutually propagated by the Arab and Iranian societies. The interactions and exchanges fail to appreciate the benefits of cooperation, based on shared interests and mutual understanding. It is often observed that Arabs appraise Iranians, and vice versa, through the prism of cultural, sectarian, and political rivalry. These rivalries are deep-rooted in three monumental historical events. Consequently, Arabs and Iranians neglect identifying their mutual interests, and thus fail to resolve conflict.

In 2020, the author of this book, Mahjoob Zweiri, discussed three key historical developments that played a defining role in shaping mutual Arab–Iranian relations, in his publication “Arab-Iranian relations: What Went Wrong, and Why?”. Each of these developments corresponds to major themes of the relationship – sectarian, cultural, and political. The fall of the age-old Sassanian Empire into the hands of the Arab Muslim army was a political development. The replacement by the Persian Pahlavi of the Arabic script was a cultural development. The sectarian development was the conversion of the Safavid to Shia Islam. The three events were marked as critical developments that represented the beginnings of new eras in Arab–Iranian relations. These new eras had different themes of interaction between the Iranians and the Arabs. The aftermath of these interactions is evident, even in contemporary Arab–Iranian interactions. Despite their shared geography and history, Iranians and Arabs still lack deep understanding when it comes to each other. Hence, honest and open dialogue is absent, and their relations remain frosty.

The above-mentioned publication discussed how a famous Iranian *qari*’ named Saeed Toosi posted in 2019 a Qur’an recitation video on his account on Instagram. While this video could have easily gotten lost in the sheer volume of content online, it struck a chord with many. To an Iran expert, the video of his recitation captures the complexity and essence of the shared historical memory of relations between Arabs and Iranians. In the location of a historical place

near the city of Baghdad – the ruins of the capital of the foregone Sassanian Empire, Ctesiphon – Saeed Toosi recited verses from the Qur’an (44:25–28) that spoke highly of the gardens, springs, noble sites, and crops that were left behind to be inherited by another people.

This video exemplifies how shared historical memory plays a crucial role in contemporary Arab–Iranian relations. Toosi chose the site where the throne of the Sassanian Empire once stood, and chose verses loaded with moral and spiritual lessons. It is a beautiful recitation by an Iranian *qari’* to a layman. But to a mind aware of the story of the conquest of the capital of Ctesiphon by the Arab Muslim army, wherein the army commander Sa’d b. Abi Waqqas recited the same verses as he reached the Ayyān-e Kasrā, where the Sassanian throne is located; the recitation means so much more. The commander’s recitation of these very verses has been recorded by various Arab historiographers such as al-Tabari in his “History of the Prophets and Kings” (Juynboll, 1989). This historic recitation was featured in the climax of the 1981 movie, *Al Qadisiyya* (produced by an Iraqi and Egyptian), in an attempt to further the narrative of Arab nationalists regarding the fall of the Sassanian Empire. Interestingly, the picture was also released on 1 June 1981, soon after the onset of the Iran–Iraq War, which commenced on 22 September 1980 (IMDb).

Toosi’s post becomes an exceptional paradigm for the analysis of Arab–Iranian relations. One can interpret Toosi’s video in two diametrically different ways. The first one is a celebration of the Muslim victory over the Sassanian Empire and the Arab Muslim expansion into Persia. The other interpretation is that Toosi is lamenting the collapse of the Sassanian Empire into the hands of the Arab Muslims. He is commemorating the Persian defeat while also making a symbolic celebration of Baghdad’s “re-conquest” (Zweiri and Zahirovic, 2020).

Considering that Toosi’s selection of verses was deliberate and not merely coincidental, the first interpretation opines that Toosi, who is an Iranian Muslim, is rejoicing in the historical event whereby Ctesiphon was captured by Muslims. This event marked the commencement of the Islamic era in Persian history. Meanwhile, the other interpretation suggests that Toosi may have been attempting to take revenge on the Arabs, who he feels have shattered one of the greatest Persian empires that was ever to exist. In a way, implying that the state of Iraq was, is, and will remain one of Persian inheritance. The contrasting interpretations paint a powerful and complex image of Arab–Iranian relations. It reveals the nuances and nature of Arab–Iranian history, mutual perceptions, and contemporary relations. This complexity, the contrasting historical narratives, and the shared historical memory persist to the present day. These memories become the root causes of the complicated nature of Arab–Iranian relations. It runs deep and is ingrained into the Iranian and Arab psyches.

Thus, a comprehensive and rich understanding of the present condition of relations between the two – Arabs and Iranians – is only possible by going beyond the headlines, and oversimplified causal explanations. One must delve into the historical journey of Arabia and Persia to recognise the valuable

lessons history can teach us. My 2020 joint publication studied the Arab–Iranian interactions over the past 14 centuries, to identify and critically analyse the most noteworthy events that have defined the trajectory of the relations between Arabs and Iranians. Through such an approach, one can better understand the contemporary Arab–Iranian interactions, issues, and conflicts.

Before we delve into the three historical developments, it is essential to take note of the nature of the available writings on Arab–Iranian relations. There is a general tendency to focus on a specific period or aspect of the communications and exchanges between Arabs and Iranians. Only three works have analysed and holistically studied Arab–Iranian relations. The first attempt was a collection of papers which were presented at the seminar “Arab-Iranian Relations: Present Trends and Future Prospects”, organised by the Centre for Arab Unity Studies, and hosted by Qatar University in 1995. They analysed historical factors of Arab–Iranian relations and studied the future significance of these relations. The second research effort that provides a holistic analysis of the ties between Arabs and Iranians is a publication by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies titled “Arab-Iranian relations is Arabs and Iran: Revision of History and Politics” (2011) (Zweiri and Zahirovic, 2020).

Abdallah’s book, *Political Iranian Incentives in the Arab Gulf Region* provides insight into one of the main points of conflict between the Arab countries and Iran: the historical civilisation clashes in the region and their power struggle. The book highlights the Arab understanding of the Iranian political presence and agenda in the Gulf, and it portrays Iran as a power-motivated state, acting through its Persian nationalist and Shi’ite religious identities to meet its expansionist goals (Abdallah, 2012). Another effort was our research paper titled “The Arabs and Iranians: What Went Wrong? And Why?” (Zweiri and Zahirovic, 2020), published in the *Sociology of Islam*.

Thus, the lack of holistic understanding regarding Arab–Iranian relations is evident. The subject is underexplored, neglected, and understudied in the academic world. Despite the significance, it has almost exclusively considered the spiralling political issues Iran faces regionally and globally. Research on relations between the Arabs and Iranians has, since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Arab Uprisings that commenced in 2011, circled the narrative of “exporting revolution” and Iran gaining control or “occupying four Arab capitals” – Beirut, Baghdad, Damascus, and Sanaa. Studies have revolved around Iran’s influence in Syria, Yemen, and other Arab states, and the discontent of the Arabian Gulf governments with Iran’s growing influence in the Middle Eastern region.

The Pivotal Historical Developments in Arab–Iranian Relations

Three events hold more significance than others in the millennia-long interactions between Arabs and Iranians. A student or an observer of Arab–Iranian relations must not overlook these three critical historical events over the last 15 centuries: firstly, the Iranian adoption of the Arabic script. The Arabic script

replaced the Persian Pahlavi script. Secondly, the conquest of Iran or the Sassanian Empire by the Muslim Arabs. Lastly, converting Iran's Safavids, or Sunni majority, into Shi'ism. These events reveal various layers of the complexities of Arab–Iranian relations today. This provides a historical mapping of the root causes of the present animosity and attitude of choosing conflict and confrontation over cooperation. These events have had a significant impact on the subsequent dynamics of Arab–Iranian exchanges. Their ramifications have persisted even in the contemporary era of the nation-state system. Essentially these historical developments have shaped the Arab–Iranian relations of the present. These three events represent the onset of new eras of interactions, wherein the nature of these interactions has different themes and waves. These events affect the perceptions of Arabs and Iranians regarding themselves and each other. In turn, this affects their modern-day interactions as well.

The First Historical Development, the Collapse of the Sassanian Empire into the Hands of the Arab Muslim Conquerors

We can begin by considering the condition of Arab–Iranian relations before Islam. During the Sassanian period (226–651 CE), the Arabs who were settled in the Sassanian state's proximity were obligatorily under the state's direct control and influence.

Bahrain and Qatif were considered as Sassanian protectorates, and the Sassanian involvement in Yemen was considered an intervention (Zarrinkub, 1975). He also points out that the Lakhmid Arabs of Al-Hira were Sassanian vassals and clients. Inscriptions and reliefs found at the archaeological site of Naqsh-e Rostam, which list parts of Yemen and Arabia as tributaries of the Achaemenid Empire, end up as testimonies of the enduring Iranian influence over the Arabs (Zarrinkoub, 2017). In Persepolis, various reliefs illustrate Arabs as Achaemenid subjects. The Arabs are depicted as people who were leading camels while adorned in their traditional attires, and travelling with gifts for the Achaemenid Emperor Darius (Dandamayev, 1986). While some may call these reliefs an oversimplified and insignificant factor, the reliefs can accurately depict the power disparities between the Iranians and Arabs of those times. It was a patron–client relationship between the Sassanian Empire and the Arab tribes. However, with the onset of Islam, and the subsequent ascent of the Arab-Islamic Empire, the nature of the Arab–Iranian relationship primarily altered.

The unexpectedly swift collapse of the Sassanian Empire into the hands of the Arab Muslim armies has been a subject of constant debate amongst the scholarly. One factor that caused the quick Arab victory was the Sassanian Empire's exhaustion from its feuds with the Byzantine Empire – its main rival. The Byzantines and Sassanians “bled each other to death... over three centuries of” skirmishes and outright war. The Arab Muslim victory was hence hardly surprising (Armajani, 1972). Meanwhile, Zarrinkoub (2017: 17) cites

various internal drawbacks of the Sassanian state – the constantly changing rulers (eight rulers in a matter of just 4 years), corruption amongst the religious class, an empty treasury, a broken economy, and religiously inspired fatalism. Katouzian (2009: 65–66) cites the “lack of will to uphold or support the disintegrating and unpopular state” on the part of the Iranian or Sassanian society, as a reason for the Arab victory. The society supposedly chose to stay neutral or even support the state’s collapse (Katouzian, 2009).

Another interesting aspect is the lack of resistance from the Iranian population to the invading Muslim force, as pointed out by Khesroshahi (2015). This, along with “the power of their faith, the manifest goals of religion in their historical mission, and their confidence in triumph and victory”, led to an unquestionable Muslim victory (Khesroshahi, 2015). The fall of the Sassanian Empire turned a new page in Arab–Iranian relations. The subsequent growth of the newly established Islamic Caliphate and the Arab Umayyad Empire further altered the nature of these relations. As opposed to the rapid conquest, the Islamisation process was in fact unrushed and took over two and a half centuries for its completion (Katouzian, 2009). Conversion to Islam was nevertheless faster in Iranian Jewish and Christian populations, due to the commonality between Islam and their Abrahamic traditions. Meanwhile, this was not the case with the Zoroastrian majority (Katouzian, 2009).

Apart from the “People of the Book”, craftsmen and artisans converted very early on, as their vocations did not have deep connections with the Zoroastrian religion. They were interested in the advantages they could attain through conversion to Islam (Zarrinkoub, 2017). Conversion to Islam was observed to be generally on a voluntary basis. Arabs were hesitant to promote mass conversions, as they benefited from the poll taxes called *jizya*, which the Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians were supposed to pay in order to be protected (Katouzian, 2009 and Zarrinkoub, 1975). Despite the collection of *jizya* from non-Muslims who resided in the Islamic state being the principal and practical norm, swathes of Persians who converted to Islam were still taxed throughout the Umayyad rule.

As Ad-Duri points out, this was a clear violation of Islamic teachings. The new Muslims or the new Muslim converts were called *mawali* or clients. They were not exclusively Persian and represented Muslims who were discriminated against along ethnic or tribal lines. Thus, Ad-Duri (2015: 5) explains that such demeaning of non-Arabs was due to the favouring of some tribal perceptions by the Umayyads over Islamic teachings. These Islamic teachings required time to materialise and mature in society (Ad-Duri, 2015).

Conversely, in his “Two Centuries of Silence”, Zarrinkoub (2017: 65) describes the rule of the Umayyads as being premised on the idea of the superiority of the Arab populations over the ‘*ajam* (those whose mother tongue was not Arabic). This, he says, manifested itself in the “cruelty and coercion of every type” that the *mawalis* had to face. The Umayyad state’s attitudes and policies towards the non-Arabs, Iranians in particular, contributed to the ascent of the Abbasid dynasty, and the fall of the Umayyad. Iranian participation

in and contribution to the rise and flourishing of the Abbasid revolution led to greater Iranian involvement in the larger affairs of the state. Prominent Iranian families rose to power (Ad-Duri, 2015: 6). Thus, the early period of the Abbasid era saw an increase in Arab–Iranian cooperation.

The once primarily excluded Iranian Muslims were seemingly incorporated into the Islamic state, and its society, and their contribution to the new Islamic civilisation and culture was increasing. Nevertheless, the Abbasid period witnessed uninterrupted streams of rebellions that some argue had an ethnic Iranian agenda. Various Iranian dynasties such as the Tahirids, Saffarids, and Samanids strived for increasing levels of independence, as they regained autonomy in varying degrees from the central government, which was situated in Baghdad.

The Buwayhids (334–447 AH) were the first Iranian dynasty to attain independence (to a certain degree) since the Sassanian Empire’s fall. These political developments were coupled with increasing cultural and social struggles, which were further exemplified through the advent of the Shu’ubiyya movement (Ad-Duri, 2015). According to Enderwitz (2012), the Shu’ubiyya movement can be defined as a question of scholarly debate, one that ranged from the demands for equality between non-Arabs and Arabs inspired by Islam to expressing Iranian nationalist feelings, with a tone of anti-Arab sentiment. Despite the Arab Muslim conquest over the Sassanian Empire, and the Islamisation of the Iranian people, the nationalistic sentiments and consciousness of the Iranians endured. As time passed, these sentiments transformed into anti-Arab sentiment, even among those who had converted to Islam.

Second, the Dropping of the Pahlavi Script and Adopting of the Arabic One

A significant ramification on the cultural front of the Arab Conquest was abandoning the Pahlavi script and its replacement with the Arabic one. The Arabic language significantly impacted the Persian language in written script and lexical additions. As Edward Browne (1909: 8), a British scholar of Iran, points out in his work “A Literary History of Persia: From the Earliest Times Until Firdawsi”, Arabic’s impact on the Persian language was profound and marks a changeover from the Middle Persian language to the Modern Persian language, which is presently spoken and written in contemporary Iran. The former Middle Persian language, also called the Pahlavi, was written using the Pahlavi script. It was the language that was officially used by the Sassanian Empire. Its script remained current for over a century after the Arab Sassanian conquest. This was particularly so in terms of coinage. Browne explained that this transition occurred around the early 10th century (Browne, 1909). He argues that it was characterised by the growing inclusion of Arabic lexical elements in the Persian language, and the more significant switch from the Pahlavi script to the Arabic alphabet.

Elwell-Sutton (1986) opines that pinpointing the exact time of this transition from Pahlavi to Arabic is challenging. Browne (1909) dates the transition to the beginning of the 10th century, the period of the oldest existing Persian

manuscript that was written in Arabic script. However, Elwell-Sutton (1986) argues for a much earlier abandoning of the Pahlavi script but refrains from suggesting an alternative dating (Elwell-Sutton, 1986). The principal tenet of his argument is that the rules and regulations of writing Persian in Arabic must have been established prior to the evidence that is cited by Browne; in other words, before the earliest surviving manuscripts were even produced. Irrespective of the exact dating of the transition from Pahlavi to Arabic script, there is a broad acceptance that the written form of the Persian language, using or incorporating Arabic characters, commenced during the Samanid dynasty (Ad-Duri, 2015: 9).

After the collapse of the Sassanian Empire into the hands of the Arabs, and the irreversible Iranian conversion to Islam, the replacement of the Pahlavi script by the Arabic one constitutes a further ground-breaking event of permanent significance. The Arab military's conquest, Iran's Islamisation, and the 16th-century conversion to Shi'ism have been discussed in detail in academic circles. However, the shift to the Arabic script from Pahlavi has mainly been ignored, as Bausani attributes the largely unnoticed and overlooked switch from the Pahlavi script to the fact that a minimal number of scribes had familiarity with the Pahlavi script, while the vast majority of the population were illiterates. Prior to the Islamic era, the Pahlavi script and literal production were limited to a small group of ruling elites who were attached to the Zoroastrian priest class and the Sassanian administration (Bausani, 1971).

With the crumbling of the Sassanian Empire and the fall in the influence of the Zoroastrian priest class, Islam spread widely. This widespread Islamisation impacted the Iranian people and created novel elite classes. The new elite included Arab military leaders, settlers, and mawlis (who were primarily non-Arab, mostly constituted of Persians who had converted to Islam). The mawlis are generally credited with the adaptation and acceptance of the incorporation of the Arabic script by abandoning the old Pahlavi script. The use of the old script of Pahlavi was limited to the shrinking number of Zoroastrian priests, who continued to use the old script for religious purposes. However, one can argue that even with the adoption of the Arabic script, Iranians continued to distinguish their script, to a considerable degree, from the script used by the Arabs. They achieved this by creating distinct lettering in the 10th century, called the ta'liq script. The latter was particularly developed to cater to the prerequisites of the Persian language. Iranians thus formed novel lettering styles and calligraphic techniques, which, as Al-e Ahmad points out, restructured the Arabic script (Pistor-Hatam, 2007). Such a functionally adapted and visually distinct Arabic script for writing Persian and its developments continue to have a significant distinguishing purpose.

Despite adopting the Arabic script, Iranians ensured their distinctness by creating and utilising a different lettering style. This new script was called the Farsi script. Although the Iranians do not exclusively use it, it remains a powerful symbol of the desired Iranian distinction. Thus, it is noted that the Arabic language, along with its script, also had an enduring effect on the Persian culture and language.

At this juncture, one must note that since the transition to the Arabic script, unrelenting calls for a return to the old Pahlavi script never occurred. As Pistor-Hatam (2007: 568) points out, thoughtful discussions regarding replacing the Arabic script with Latin occurred in the late Qajar period (the late 19th century) among Iranian nationalists. Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzade, an advocate of cleansing the Persian language of non-Persian loanwords, including the Arabic language and others, was the first to call for the Arabic script's reform, and a complete switch to the Latin alphabet (Kia, 1998). Despite the decision's enormous symbolic significance, which Iranian nationalists from the subsequent Pahlavi period and Qajar were conscious of, all labours to replace the Arabic script ultimately failed.

Nevertheless, Iranians refused to be ultimately Arabised. They restricted Arab influence to the script change and the borrowing of Arabic lexical items. An exemplar of the Iranian dedication to preserving the Persian language as their national consciousness expression, is Firdawsi's 10th-century *Shahnameh*, in which he sticks to the use of an almost pure Persian language without borrowing from Arabic and by speaking of the Iranian glories of the past, meanwhile expressing grief over the passing of the last Sassanian king. His work reveals the fundamental Iranian outlook towards the Arabs. In his work, he refers to Arabs as "lizard eaters".

Zare and Zamani discuss how the Arabic language and civilisation were introduced to the Iranian public. The initial introduction ultimately shapes the general Iranian understanding of the Arab World. This introduction happened through religious books in middle schools. It set the Iranian scope of understanding Arab–Iranian relations through religious and sectarian identities. Initially, the Arabic language and culture were introduced through the religious context of Shi'ism, maintaining the goal of a better understanding of Islam through the Qur'an and religious texts. Strengthening the Persian language was also a stated objective (Zare and Zamani, 2020).

Together, they provide valuable insights into an influential factor in the Iranian understanding of Arabs and Arab–Iranian relations. From an early age at school, the Iranians' connection to Arabs and Arabic civilisation is portrayed through a religious, sectarian lens (only Shi'ite religious books are provided). Iranians learn Arabic to understand themselves better and strengthen their own identities and religious positions, not with the idea of understanding the other (Arabs) through their language, to bridge the gap or enhance greater mutual understanding. These books significantly shape these Iranian students' outlooks, opinions, and social and individual identities.

Third, the 16th-Century Saffavid Conversion to Shi'ism

Borrowing from the sectarian attitudes of modern times, one can argue that the country, Iran, was a Sunni powerhouse that highly tolerated various schools of jurisprudence and theology for most of Iran's Islamic history. The Sunni legacy of Iran is totally undervalued and overlooked in contemporary

discourses. It can be best attributed to the vast contributions of the Sunni Iranian scholars to the orthodox Sunni school of thought, particularly in the fields of Prophetic tradition, and the critical explanation or interpretation of the Qur'an. Shi'ism was formerly largely unknown in Iran, particularly in the Zaydi sect. In the early 16th century, Shi'ism became the dominant sect in Iran. After conquering Tabriz, and having established the Safavid state, the leader of a Sunni Sufi brotherhood, Shah Ismail, declared Shi'ism as the state creed (Ad-Duri 2015: 11). Thus commenced the forced state-sponsored conversion of Iran's Sunni majority to the novel sect – the Safavi variety of Twelver Shi'ism. As Iran had an insufficient number of Shia scholars prior to establishing the Safavi state, large numbers of Shia scholars were brought in from Lebanon and Iraq. This was to ensure the mass conversions and enforcement of the new state creed. Interestingly, most of these scholars brought in to spread Shi'ism in Iran were Arabs.

The new ruler, Shah Ismail, declared the state creed as Shi'ism, chiefly due to motivations stemming from political considerations. Since Shah Ismail's main rival was the Sunni Ottoman Empire, he viewed the spread of Shi'ism as a politico-cultural tool that would diminish the Ottoman influence in Iran. Shah Ismail had ambitions to curb Ottoman influence by employing Shia Arabs and state force. Thus, he created a Shia majority in Iran for the first time in history. Iranians became increasingly associated with Shi'ism, and Iran became a bastion of Shia Islam. This change in Iran's state creed moved Iranian Muslims from having a Sunni majority, thus, increasing the differences between the Shia majority Iranians and the predominantly Sunni majority Arabs. This led to the creation of a new dimension of Arab–Iranian relations – sectarianism.

Although it was the Arab Shia who was tasked with the Iranian population's conversion to Shi'ism, this is largely overlooked in the current discourse on the sectarian aspects of Arab–Iranian relations. Shi'ism largely remained an Arab affair until the early 16th century. Plausibly, one would assume Shi'ism acted as a bridge between Iran and the Arab World. However, that was not the case. In fact, even within the Shi'a populations, divides along ethnic lines have occurred. Traditionally, Shia scholarship's most influential centre has been Najaf, which is largely dominated by Arabs. Later, Qom, where Iranians predominated, emerged as a solid rival to the Arab-dominated group of Najaf. The Najaf–Qom rivalry further emerged as a facet of the rivalry between the Arabs and Iranians within the same sect of Shi'ism.

Perceptions and Politics: A Result of Historical Memory

Having systematically discussed the three key historical developments identified: the collapse of the Sassanian Empire into the hands of the Arab Muslim rulers, the abandoning of the Pahlavi script while adopting the Arabic script, and the Safavid conversion to Shi'ism – these are the most substantial developments in Arab–Iranian relations in the past 14 centuries – we will now analyse how these developments and their shared past have created mutual perceptions

that further create historical memory – an influential factor in contemporary interactions and foreign policy.

The Sassanian Empire's fall was a truly momentous incident that changed Arab–Iranian interactions in many ways. Interestingly, with the Arabs taking control of Iran, this was the first time that Iranians and Arabs had become part of a single empire, wherein each group contributed to creating a common and novel Islamic civilisation in their own style. Although both parties follow Islam, internal divisions and sectarian divides have furthered ancient Arab–Iranian rivalries, despite them sharing faith in the same religion. Today, the animosities have simply taken different expressions of rivalries. Historical evidence shows that from the beginning of Islamic history, Iranians refused to be dominated and subjugated by Arabs. Rather, Iranians maintained their persistence in gaining autonomy and independence from the Arabs.

Politically, numerous insurgencies and semi-autonomous Iranian dynasties were brought to power by the creation of the Safavid state. This was essentially Iranian independence's ultimate expression, whereby they won back sovereignty. This is evidence of the Iranian population's self-awareness as a nation distinct from the Arabs. Such non-Arab–Iranian self-awareness has manifested itself in Iran's cultural expression, through literature and art. Iranian self-image's prime example is *Shahnameh* – an image of Iran as a civilisation with a glorious long history vastly superior to the supposedly primitive, unrefined, and uncivilised Arabs.

There was a similarity in religion in Arab–Iranian relations, and since the Safavid times, similarity in their sect (Shi'ism). However, contrary to common expectations, the commonalities and similarities in the religion and sect did not bridge the gaps between the Iranians and Arabs. Instead, this became yet another aspect of the contest. Iranians used the sect, and their version of it, to further express their distinctiveness from the Arabs. The conflict-prone Arab–Iranian relations persisted into current times. Even while religious and sectarian divisions did not play a significant role, the relations remained hostile. The Pahlavi Dynasty replaced the Qajars in 1925. The Pahlavis were not reliant on Shi'ism's religious legitimacy, as the Safavids had been. Instead, the Pahlavis chose to reinforce their legitimacy through the revival of pre-Islamic imperial Iranian history.

Interestingly, the name that was chosen – Pahlavi – was not the family name. Instead, it was the official language of the Sassanian Empire. Later on, the conflict between the Arab states and Iran's Shah led to conflict and war. This culminated in the post-1979 Islamic Republic of Iran. Thus, one can argue that rivalry and conflict are long-lasting characteristics of the natural *modus operandi* in Arab–Iranian relations, historically and contemporarily. The general state of strains between Iran and Arabs has created and bolstered extremely negative mutual perceptions, which tend to guide the trajectories of their interactions, diplomacy, and foreign policy.

To date, the historical developments have shaped mutual perceptions and underpinned relations between the Arabs and Iranians. In the post-Arab

Uprisings era, the state of Arab–Iranian relations can be best described as one mired in complexities and complications. Deep-running mutual mistrust and open animosity also become facets of this relationship. In fact, one may argue that the relations between Arabs and Iranians have hit an all-time low in the present.

Contemporary Arab–Iranian Relations: Factors and Facets

Following on from the historical milestones in Arab–Iranian relations, it is essential for this book to concentrate on contemporary Arab–Iranian relations. In the introduction, we established clear conceptual frameworks for the terminologies used throughout the book. By moving beyond gross generalisations, we have broken down the widely used terminologies that commonly surface in the discourse of Arab–Iranian relations. This chapter will establish a clear base for future studies and endeavours that entail interactions and relations between the Arabs and the Iranians.

In order to establish such a comprehensive, stable academic foundation, one must identify, appraise, and analyse the existing issues, time periods, the emergence of sectarianism, Arab–Persian relations during early Islamic history (as we already have in the earlier part of this chapter), and Arab–Iranian relations during early modern history, all within the framework of Arab–Iranian relations.

In this chapter, the focus will be on how the debates and discussions around Arab–Iranian relations have increased post the 1979 Islamic Revolution that was experienced in Iran. This period becomes of extreme importance, due to three main reasons. These reasons have been listed below:

The first reason is the emergence of sectarianism, as we know it today, and the influence of sectarianism in the Middle Eastern region. The second reason is the debate regarding the formation and existence of a religious state. After the 1979 revolution, Iran became a theocracy. Thus, the difference between the Arab states which are monarchies, and the state of Iran which is a theocratic republic, became starker. The third reason can be identified as the role of the Middle Eastern region in the concept and practice of political Islam. Iran's link with political Islam has been at the centre of debates in many governments. Iran's support for the Palestinian cause in the Arab–Israeli conflict, American foreign policy in the Middle Eastern region, and the conflict between the United States and Iran all become factors here.

The First Reason – Sectarianism

Sectarianism is “an action carried out on membership of a sect, denomination, or other group or rigidly following the doctrines of a sect or other group” (Oxford). Sectarianism is complex and multi-layered. Sectarianism comes into play when members of dissimilar or numerous denominations within a particular faith display prejudice and bigotry towards one another. Examples include

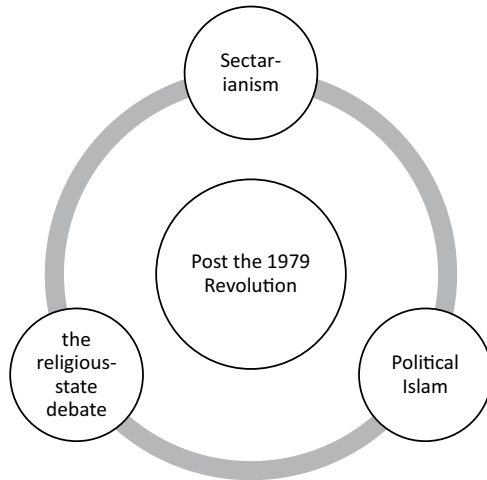


Figure 1.1 The factors and facets in Arab–Iranian relations post the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.

the Shia and Sunni within the Islamic religion, Reform and Orthodox within Judaism, and Catholics and Protestants within Christianity. Sectarianism can manifest itself in various forms and at various societal levels. At the individual and group levels, it is manifested through attitudes, behaviour, and language used. For instance, derogatory statements are made about the perceived “other” in the group. This creates unpleasantness. It may manifest itself through conscious or unconscious discrimination against certain groups at the institutional level. This is visible during recruitment, promotion, or granting incentives and other benefits. At the cultural level, the sectarian mentality is manifested through various practices better understood by certain parts of one’s cultural heritage.

Cultural practices that aggravate the sectarian divisions, such as customary music, folklore, dances, festivals, etc., make matters worse. Other manifestations of sectarianism and sectarian mentality are name-calling, passing comments, making jokes about the “other”, chants, songs, verbal abuse, physical violence, domestic violence, discrimination, intimidation, graffiti, murder, etc., and ultimately wars. It is possible that people of all faith, and even atheists, can have specific perspectives which promote religious intolerance, and thus sectarianism. Similarly, all people can become victims of discrimination and bigotry. Sectarianism is fixed within a framework of tolerance, human rights, and social justice. Sectarian behaviour and attitudes very often evolve into a matter of an individual’s identity, rather than personal faith. It involves a certain amount of stereotyping of people (Youth Work Essentials).

The Sunni–Shia relations between Iraq and Iran have brought to this a transnational dimension. Since Shi’ism became Iran’s state religion with the coming of the Safavid dynasty to power in 1501, there has been a unique development – a symbiotic relationship between the Iranian state and Shi’ism.

Consequently, outside the state of Iran, where many Shias live as political and/or demographic minorities ruled by predominantly Sunni governments and Sunni rulers, the subject of Shi'ism tends to be often intermingled with bilateral relations with Iran. Moreover, the question of the transnational loyalties of Shias to Iran has negatively affected the relations between the Sunni governments and the Shia citizens. Some argue that the state of Iran's relations with Shias the world over is one of a "kin-state policy". Nevertheless, despite all efforts to position itself as the global patron of the Shia, Iran has always lacked the monopoly of expanding transnational influence over the Gulf Shias. The networks around the Iraqi *marja'iyya* – the highest level of Twelver Shia authority – have historically been the reason for this.

This lack of monopoly can be attributed to the city of Najaf. Since the mid-19th century, Najaf, a city in the southern part of contemporary Iraq, has slowly and steadily emerged as the main centre for imparting Shi'i religious education. It was deposed by the Iranian city of Qom after repression in the 1970s of the Shi'i religious seminaries by different Iraqi regimes. However, it remains the location of the most widely followed transnational *marja'*. Many of the *marja'* are not Iraqi citizens; some even have Iranian citizenship, for instance, Al Sistani. Najaf developed into a transnational hub that attracts professors and students of different nationalities. Although impacted by state policies, it has historically never been under the single control of any particular state. The city of Najaf's relations with the Iranian state has oscillated between hostility and cooperation. In 1906, Najaf-based Iranian scholars constituted a solid opposition to Iran's Shah during the Constitutional Revolution in Iran. However, Najaf's relations with the contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran are based on a gentlemen's agreement; one that identifies and accepts that most Najaf scholars do not support the *vilāyat-i faqīh*, or the clerical government doctrine, which was formulated by Ruhollah Khomeini.¹

Prior to the 1970s, most of the senior Shi'i clerics of the Gulf used to go to Najaf for education. To the present day, it is widely acknowledged that most of the Gulf Shia scholars follow the Najaf-based rulings rather than the rulings and teachings of the Qom-based scholars. In this manner, the politics of Iraq's Shi'i religious seminaries have historically affected Shi'i politics in the Gulf monarchies. Moreover, it is important to note that the first historical occurrences of the politicised Shi'i sectarianism had emerged as a part of the politicisation of the Shi'i identity in the state of Iraq. This resulted from the rise of the Shi'i Islamic political movements in Iraq (Louër, 2020). This helps us to understand the facet of sectarianism from a deeper perspective. The Najaf–Qom dimensions also reveal the complexities of sectarianism and make one understand that it is not a mere Sunni–Shia issue. It also involves deep-rooted sub-sects, which increase the convulsions of sectarianism.

In simple terms, Gulf sectarianism is rooted in how the Sunni and Shia groups have been incorporated into nation-states and the latter's formation. The modern states resulting from Sunni tribal coalitions generally tend to have a more pronounced Sunni–Shia divide between the rulers and the citizens – a

divide between the conquered and the conquerors, according to Laurence Louër. Since historical memory and history generally make identifying the Shia with the “national project promoted by the rulers” difficult, it obstructs the more significant process of national development and construction, and the formation of national identity. Although the Shia most often are not a part of the ruling elite in the state of Kuwait, they still do view the Sunni rulers as their protectors and allies. They do not view the Sunni rulers as groups that create a restrictive nation, based on sectarian or ethnonational closure. They have also been able to safeguard their position in the national narrative. However, this is not the case in many other Gulf states, and Middle Eastern countries in general.

Circumstantial factors also gain significance. As state and non-state actors target Shia populations or minorities, this becomes a hotspot for transnational factors. Louër argues that relations with Iran have an impact on how Sunni rulers appraise and view their Shia citizens. The Iraqi *marjaʿiyya* has also historically been impactful in the politicisation of the Shiʿi identity in the Gulf region. This was radicalised and catalysed by Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979.

The Second Reason – The Debates Surrounding the Formation and Concept of a Religious State

Political philosopher Bikhu Parekh told the Guardian in 2001, “Religion provides a valuable counterweight to the state, nurturing values and sensibilities which it neglects. Just as we need opposition parties to check the government of the day, we need powerful non-state institutions to check the state”. He argued that religion must not be left to “scowl and sulk in enmity”, away from the public realm. Instead, it must be welcomed in and subjected to the latter’s political and educational discipline (Sulaiman, 2001). Meanwhile, those who argue against religion having a role in state affairs say that governments use religion as a tool or a cover to control the actions and minds of their populations. They feel these governments hide their sinister oppressive policies behind religion. They opine that religion does not have a role in public life. Critics say that religious leaders corrupt religious integrity and good governance, when they adopt political roles.

In the Middle East, there are many times when religion and politics seem to be intertwined. However, Gulf states often try to create a separation between the two. In many cases, such as in that of Saudi Arabia and Iran, religion or the particular sect of the religion that they follow, provides religious legitimacy for those in power. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the state itself was founded on the basis of the religious legitimacy that was provided by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (c.1703–1792) to the Saud family. Wahabbism is a Sunni fundamentalist and revivalist movement, which is associated with the reformist doctrines of the Hanbali tradition from the 18th-century Arabian Islamic preacher, activist, scholar, and theologian Abd al-Wahhab (Bokhari, 2013 and Wage-makers, 2021).

In the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, debates and discussions in the academic world have revolved around Iran being a “theocratic republic” (CIA, n.d.). Francis Fukuyama describes Iran’s constitution as a “hybrid” of democratic and theocratic elements (Fukuyama, 2009). Like other Muslim states, Iran upholds religious laws and relies upon religious magistrates to interpret various aspects of the law. As per Iran’s constitution, all penal, civil, economic, financial, cultural, administrative, political, military, cultural, and other laws must be founded upon Islamic values, laws, and regulations (ICL, n.d.). Iran’s constitution was excessively revised to match International Constitutional Law standards.

The state of Iran is guided by a religious ruler or the Supreme Leader (as he is called in Iran). Iran also has many religious officials in key governmental positions. Iran’s “Supreme Leader” is the head of state. He is an Islamic law scholar, otherwise called a *faqih*,² and has more powers bestowed upon him than the elected president or head of state of Iran. The Supreme Leader directly assigns the heads of various governmental departments and profiles, such as the director of the national television and radio network, the commanders of the armed forces, the chief justice of Iran, the attorney general through the appointment of the chief justice, heads of various robust economic and religious foundations, the special tribunals, and the members of the supreme national security council. The latter deals with foreign affairs and defence.

Thus, all in all, the Supreme Leader controls almost all the activities of the state on different fronts and at various levels (Abrahamian, 2008). Meanwhile, the Supreme Leader gets elected by the “Assembly of Experts”. This group comprises Islamic scholars who are competent in interpreting the Sharia – majtahids (Abdoh et al., 2006). Moreover, the Guardian Council is bestowed with the power to reject parliamentary bills. They can also reject or approve presidential candidates, parliamentary candidates, and candidates for the Assembly of Experts. This council also supervises elections and can control and investigate them. Of the twelve Guardian Council members, six are *faqih* and can approve or reject all the parliamentary bills, irrespective of the *faqih*’s belief in the bill, following Islamic customs, Sharia, and/or other laws. The remaining six members are lawyers who are appointed by the chief justice. The latter, in turn, is appointed by the Supreme Leader, and is always a cleric.

Wadhahi and Shenan studied different aspects of Iranian foreign policy goals, to understand the effect of Iranian religious identity on its decision-making. Its religious and civilisational identity heavily influences Iran’s foreign policies. According to the Iranian constitution, its foreign policy goals should enable the following: building, maintaining, and supporting relations with other countries in manners that serve Iranian Interests. To protect Iranian national security and territory. To build and unite the Muslim world. To spread Islamic principles, counter universal arrogance, and protect Islamic lands and their interests. Iran perceives and projects itself as a religious-political actor, as both internal and external actions of Iran reflect its religious identity.

Internally, that is exemplified in the leverage and ruling of *Welayat Al Faqih*, and the class of clerics. Externally, through the combat of imperialists under the banner “Islam is the solution”. Iran has constantly presented itself as “the kind brother”, seeking to “defend Islam and Muslims in all international settings”. Iran’s policies towards the Islamic World represent a duality, as they view it as alternating between pragmatic realism and religious constructivism, instead of as a religious entity (Wadhahi and Shenan, 2021). They provide insights regarding Iranian self-representation as a religious-political entity. Accordingly, it appears that Iran has set itself up as a parental figure or the religion’s leader/spokesman that has the right to speak in the name of religion, and protect the religion’s followers. This, Shenan and Wadhahi argue, represents Iranian constructivist interests in the spreading and supporting of morals and religious brotherhood.

While certain risks surround the association of religion and state, one must understand that some advantages also exist. For numerous people worldwide, religious identification is an essential part of their national and communal identities. Some may express these identities through constitutional recognition. The desire to acknowledge and protect societal and religious diversity may also cause constitutional designers to provide special recognition to different religious groups. Institutional establishment or religious recognition, along with religious law and privileges, could be detrimental to the rights of dissenters, religious minorities, and people without religion. This will also pique the tensions between an “out group” and an “in-group” (Ahmed, 2014).

Over many years, politics and religion have played major roles in Arab–Iranian relations. This was true prior to the contemporary period, as well. For instance, the Arab Conquest of Iran had both religious and political aspects. Similarly, the Saffavid conversion to Shia again had both a political and religious aspect. Thus, politics and religion become the cornerstones of the debate, in the discourse and relations between Arabs and Iranians. This could be with the exception of the Pahlavi time – during the period 1921–1978. While the related debates existed, there was an attempt to keep away from this tendency during this period. Nevertheless, throughout history, religion and politics have remained at the centre of the debate between Arabs and Iranians.

Iran has made a conscious decision, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, that it has a part to play as a role model of the Muslim world. The republic fashioned itself as the *Umm al Qura* of the Islamic world. In this manner, Iran makes ignoring Tehran and the Islamic Republic difficult. Through their rhetoric, discourse, and different policies – such as assuming a pro-Palestine policy, and defending and protecting oppressed minorities or Shia minorities – they have tried to solidify this image and position. These policies, in a way, became implementations of this new positioning that Iran has given itself. This means that Iran will be playing a more important and inevitable role in the Arab World and on Arabic platforms, a fact that will not go down well with the Arabs. All major events in Arab–Iranian relations, even during contemporary times, can be perceived in relation to religion and politics.

Having discussed politics and religion being central factors in the relations between Arabs and Iranians, one must also understand how these factors have become the cornerstones of Arab–Iranian relations. These relations are dominated by history and perception. Here, one must also understand the role of different aspects of identity, interests, image, and perception. These are elements which have the potential to become inflammatory in any society. These elements interact with different societies in unique ways.

The Third Reason – Political Islam

Political Islam is essentially any interpretation of the Islamic religion as a source of political action and identity. It could refer to a wide range of groups and individuals who advocate society and state formation as per their understanding or interpretation of Islamic principles.

The West has three unstated assumptions that have inspired the discussions and debates regarding political Islam since 9/11. They are one, that like Islam itself, political Islam is also monolithic; two, that the intermingling of politics and religion is a feature that is unique to Islam; and three, that political Islam is fundamentally violent. These assumptions, Mohammed Ayoob argues, are false. He explains that while one can argue that there are several variations of transnational political Islam, these transnational manifestations constitute a small portion of political Islam. “Islamism” or “political Islam” must be defined as a political ideology rather than a theological or religious construct (Ayoob, 2004).

According to Graham Fuller, adherents of Islamism believe that “Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world and implemented in some fashion” (2003). Ayoob argues that such a gross generalisation will not help explain the political activities accepted in the name of Islam. Instead, he recommends a definition by the political scientist Guilian Denoex, which he believes is analytically more helpful. Denoex explains Islamism as

a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups, and organizations that pursue political objectives. It provides political responses to today’s societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition.

(2002)

Ayoob explains that the reappropriation of the past and the “invention of tradition”,³ along the lines of an assumed “mythical golden age” become the crux of Islam’s instrumentalisation. When tradition is invented, it helps in the de-historicisation of Islam, and its further separation from numerous contexts within which it has thrived over the past 1400 years of its existence. Such decontextualisation of the religion of Islam allows the Islamists to ignore economic, political, and social settings and contexts within which old Muslim communities existed.

The decontextualisation of Islam becomes a powerful ideological tool for Islamists. One that they can use to cleanse the Muslim societies or Ummah of the “accretions” and “impurities” that are inevitable aspects of history. Islamists view these impurities as the reason for the decline of Islam and Muslims. Nevertheless, context finds a way of its own to reassert itself when these abstract theories are put into practice. This is why no two Islamisms are equal. They are unique as their operational contexts determine them (Ayoob, 2004). What works in Turkey may not work in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, what works in Lebanon will not work in Iran. The Muslim world is extremely diverse – in terms of geography, culture, political systems, socioeconomic characteristics, and intellectual development trajectories.⁴ Thus, the manifestations of political Islam will also be different (Ayoob, 2004).

Some consider Iran as being a state that is ruled by an ideological-revolutionary regime. One that has an ideologically military force that is an indoctrinated military force. This military force is identified as the Revolutionary Guards. Under the latter’s authority, in 2008, the *Basij* paramilitary force was founded. The Supreme Leader rules, using his divine mandate, which is considered to be justified by the rule of the jurisprudence *Velaayat-e Faghih*. Iran is said to have reached a point wherein political power is more personalised than ever before, by virtue of the Supreme Leader’s ruling. In fact, politics has been sacralised in the hands of the Supreme Leader, who is considered a representative of Allah and sometimes the “Hidden Imam on earth” (Boroujerdi, 2011).

Islamist political thinkers of the modern age conceived the term “Islamic state” to resolve the existence of sovereign states (as per Europe’s nation-state model), with their romanticised vision of an Islamic polity, as per their interpretation of the religion. Practically speaking, the preoccupation of the Political Islamists with an Islamic state has been a more significant attempt to Islamise the already-existing Muslim states. Paul Cliteur speaks of the nature of religious radicalism in the context of religion and state. He argues that rethinking the classical models of religion and state is required. He discerns five models: multiculturalism, state church, theocracy, political atheism, and the religiously secular or neutral state. He rejects theocracy and political atheism, as he feels that the two violate the fundamental philosophies of a liberal-democratic society. He argues that the religion-state debate focuses on comparing the religiously neutral state and multiculturalism. Cliteur says that under the then-existing conditions of religious radicalism, multiculturalism may cause cracks in society, instead of giving a mutual foundation for social cohesion on a national level. He argues that a religiously neutral state or a secular state has superior prospects. He adds that theocracy is a philosophy that opposes political atheism.

In this case, a particular religion is favoured over other existing religions. Moreover, other religions are subjugated, by utilising force and the law. He argues that the theocratic state model radicalises the inherent tendency in the religion-state model, such as in Iran and Saudi Arabia (Cliteur, 2012). A significant portion of the constitutional design processes must consider the issue

of religion-state relations. In Muslim-majority countries, important constitutional designs exist. Similar is the case in societies that have experienced tensions between secular and religious authorities, and in religiously diverse societies.

The Four Stages of Arab–Iranian Relations Since the 1979 Revolution

At this juncture, as we have established the conceptual frameworks of sectarianism, political Islam, and the religious-state debate, in this chapter, we will now appraise Arab–Iranian relations during four specific stages defined by specific periods.

The first stage is identified as being from 1980 to 1990. This stage looks at the implications of the Iran–Iraq War. The main terminology used in the discourse was “exporting revolution” from Iran. The second stage is identified as being from 1991 to 2002. This stage comprises the betterment of Arab–Iranian ties, due to Iran’s support for Kuwait post the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The third stage, from 2000 to 2010, will look into sectarianism, the American invasion of Iraq, and Iran’s support for the Shia Iraqi government, and the subsequent improvement of Iran’s regional positioning. In this manner, we will set the stage for this book’s primary focus, which is the fourth stage – 2011–2021. The intention of this book is not to judge Iranians or Arabs. Instead, it is to investigate Iran’s activities in the larger Middle East region, and the reasons that facilitated these activities. In addition, this book will look into how the internal Arab politics have contributed to these activities. Through studying Arab–Iranian relations, one can understand the points mentioned above.

For the purpose of this chapter, we will first define and delineate the specific stages that are being considered. Once established, the three identified

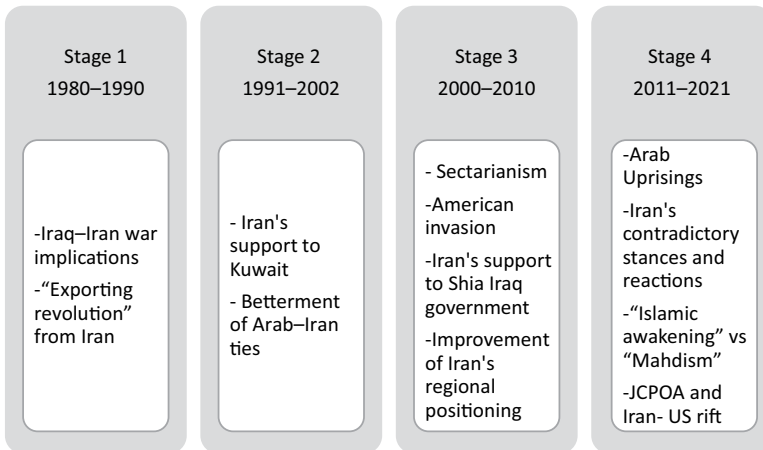


Figure 1.2 The stages of the Arab–Iranian relations since the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran.

factors/facets – sectarianism, the role of the Middle East in political Islam, and the religious-state debate – in Arab–Iranian relations will be considered at each of the stages. In this manner, a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of Arab–Iranian relations can be achieved.

Meanwhile, one must understand that the intention of this book is not to blame or accuse Iranians or Arabs, but to discuss and deliberate on Iran’s activities, policies, and actions in the region. Through detailed, comprehensive, and holistic study of these stages, according to the three identified facets, one can better understand Arab–Iranian relations.

The First Stage: 1980–1990

When the Islamic Revolution of Iran occurred in 1979, it was followed by a large-scale “Islamisation” of Iranian society. The latter led to certain unique developments concerning the religious aspects of life in Iranian societies. Since the Islamic Revolution, social scientists have engaged in many lively debates regarding the nature and essence of such developments. The implications of these developments on the larger Middle East region, and the Islamic societies residing in the region, have also been deliberated and discussed. However, Abdolmohammad Kazemipur and Ali Rezaei argue that this debate has largely been limited to examining the various theoretical possibilities, devoid of solid references backed with empirical evidence.

Kazemipur and Rezaei attempt to address the gaps in the literature by studying religious sentiments through empirical data, collected from a nationwide survey on attitudes and values in Iran, by exploring the nature and magnitude of religious groups in Iran of different genders and ages. They also examined religiosity during the period between 1975 and 2001. They found that Iran’s theocratic regime has transformed the nature of faith. This was marked by an evident shift from the religion practised being an “organised” one, to a more “personalised” one, which emphasises beliefs and not practices. Theocracy of Iran, according to them, places more emphasis on beliefs and practices that have a purely social or individual nature, but are still systematised through non-governmental and civic bodies.

Discussing the effects of religion on secularisation and “de-secularisation”, they argue that any viewpoint on the survival or demise of religion in society, will undermine the fact that religion is not simply a social institution. It is also a cultural resource institution, from which individuals seek affirmations, with sensitivity to their sociopolitical circumstances, and their understanding of these existing circumstances (Kazemipur and Rezaei, 2003). In this manner, Iran has made its brand of Islam and Shi’ism more unique, and distinct from that of the Arabs. Thus, increasing the distinctness from the Arab World, and also further widening the sectarian gaps between the predominantly Sunni Arab World and the Shia Iran.

Post the 1979 revolution, according to the Arab scholar Mahafazah, four major principles were outlined in Iranian foreign policy: self-dependency, the

upholding of Islam, refusal to join a military alliance imposed by the west in the Middle East, and supporting the Islamic resistance movements in the region, particularly the Palestinian resistance. These principles, Mahafazah opines, position Iran as an ideological entity that sought to fight regional and international corruption with its practice and transmission of divine Islamic jurisdiction and Islamic governance.

Under Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, the new regime in Iran seemed to be distrustful and warlike towards most nations. They considered these nations enemies of Iran, and labelled them enemies of Islam. This labelling was done on three levels: firstly, the Imperialists: USA “the Great Satan”, its allies, and Soviet Russia; secondly, the Jews and Zionists: for attempting to change Islamic scripture, spreading false ideology, and planning to rule the world. At this point, Iran had begun to call for the destruction of missionary centres in Iran which were preaching a different religion from Islam; thirdly, the moderate Islamic governments (or certain Arab governments), for taking moderate stances regarding the United States and the Arab–Israeli struggle. Iran considered these governments guilty of not upholding Islamic rights and practices, and the cause of the Palestinians. These governments were considered possible targets of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mahafazah paints a picture of Iran’s ideological identity and ambitions, by explaining how, when Khomeini received a congratulations letter from Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein welcoming the new Iranian regime, Khomeini publicly replied with offensive remarks, calling Saddam a Kafir (disbeliever). Furthermore, Khomeini also called for the toppling of the Iraqi government through an Islamic Revolution and tried to forge an alliance with Iraqi Shi’ites, who made up half of the population (Mahafazah, 2013).

Another example of Iran’s form of adoption of a religious entity that acted in terms of its constructivist interests can be seen during the Iran–Iraq War, when Khomeini painted the ongoing struggle as a fight between the Islamic Revolution and Arab Secular Nationalism (between ideologies). Also, Iran declared it would one day free Jerusalem, by passing through Karbala (a city in Iraq that holds high religious value for Shi’ites). The Arab populations were generally relieved at the success of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the new Iranian state, considering the Shah’s pro-Israel and anti-Arab stances. As for the Arab governments, the reactions were split. States cooperating with the west (mostly Gulf states) worried about the revolutionary spillover, while anti-imperialist states like Syria, Algeria, Libya, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) sympathised with the new Iranian government. Iran found a great opportunity in Lebanon, and allied with the Ba’athist Hafez al-Assad to extend its influence to the eastern Mediterranean area. Iran provided financial support to the Shia population in Iran/Syria.

Mahafazah provides a valuable insight into the early functioning of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which set the foundations for Iranian politics, and has continued to influence Iranian foreign policies, the conduct of diplomacy, and international relations to this day. Mahafazah explains that the early Islamic

Republic acted in completely constructivist terms. It sought to portray itself as the new-found legitimate Islamic state, acting in favour of Islamic interests against those who oppose the religion, and for the development of Muslims worldwide – “Ummah”. An exciting aspect is that if Khomeini had considered acting in realist terms for the sake of his new state’s interests and regional power, he would have considered allying with one of the regions’ most extraordinary powers at the time, Iraq, which would have also eased its way into being accepted by many other Arab states as a possible non-threatening ally. Instead, Khomeini firmly stuck to his ideological beliefs that he could and would not partner with a secular, non-Islamic leader like Saddam, which further alienated Iran in the region. However, Iran would soon come to contradict itself, as it allied with the secularist, socialist, and pan-Arabist Ba’athist regime in Syria, both against Iraq, and in general relational terms.

Alhamdani provides an illuminating insight into Iran’s internal demographic and social situation. This highlights the fact that the large minority populations (around 41–43% of the total Iranian population) have held separatist ideologies since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. He studies the multi-nationalistic, ethnic, and religious ethnic and religious minorities in Iran, to understand how these different identities affect Iranian officials’ political mentality and course of action. He argues that Iran’s demographic buildup is an essential issue in its internal politics, which Arab academics and decision-makers should study for situations of possible political pressure against Iran.

Since the 1979 revolution, Persian nationalism has been the dominating nationalism in Iran’s social and political spheres. All the existing ethnic minorities, mainly the Azerbaijani, Kurdish, and Arab minorities, make up around 41–43% of the total Iranian population, and pose a real security threat to the autonomy of the state’s lands and borders, due to prevalent separatist ideologies. The lack of homogeneity in its demography increases the sectarian conflicts within Iran. This increases its vulnerabilities in Arab–Iranian relations, as well. Rival governments may easily disrupt Iran’s domestic stability, by manipulating the ethnic and religious minorities in Iran. There is “mistrust” among these minorities towards the government, as they are deprived of their rights to learn and speak their languages, and to have their identities recognised. According to Alhamdani, Iran continues to practise policies of oppression, starvation, and restrictions on development projects in the minorities’ areas.

Explaining the case of the Azerbaijanis, Alhamdani suggests that the Arabs’ support for the Azerbaijani separatist movement could have been a virtual point of political pressure on the Iranian government. He argues that the Arabs could have also looked into supporting the Ahwazi Arabs of Iran in the Khuzestan province, who have been facing increased racial discrimination due to their Arab origins, as they are prohibited from having Arabic names, learning Arabic, and are sometimes excluded from employment and political rights. As a result of this long-term discrimination, many Ahwazis are learning about and converting to Sunni Islam, which has heightened the Iranian sense of fear of a possible rebellion, change in religious demographics, and internal

instability, and has led to increased crackdowns and oppression. These populations, which have faced discrimination and pressure to conform, pose a severe threat to internal stability and security (Alhamdani, 2009).

Since the Iranian Revolution, Iraq has had a noteworthy influence on the relations between Arabs and Iranians. The Iran–Iraq War, which commenced with Iraq’s Saddam Hussein invading Iran in September 1980, and ended in a stalemate in 1988, formalised the nature of interaction and association between the two countries. As per the Arab World, Iraq was guarding its “eastern gate”, and restraining Iran’s support for Shias globally. Iran believed the war was an effort to destroy the 1979 revolution and said that as long as their Arab neighbours supported Iraq, they would also be considered adversaries of Iran (Zweiri, *Arab–Iranian Relations: New Realities*). In fact, the war paved the way for lasting and far-reaching regional dynamics. It was the nascent Islamic Republic of Iran’s first major international military test. It was an existential battle for the Iranian leadership, as it came just a year into the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The war claimed a minimum of one million lives. However, the difficulties, in a way, forged a greater sense of nationalism amongst its population.

A vital aspect of the Iran–Iraq War was Iran’s ability to mobilise the Shi’ite opposition groups in Iraq. Although Tehran did extend its support to other opposition groups, such as the Kurds, Tehran primarily concentrated on inciting a Shi’ite insurgency movement within the state of Iraq. They encouraged widespread defections within the Iraqi military, and attempted to cause a rebellion among Iraq’s majority Shi’ite population. However, Iran’s efforts were more or less in vain. Iran did not then possess the mobilisation capacities that it today possesses. Nevertheless, Iran’s new-found revolutionary fervour was instrumental in the republic’s ability to counter Iraq, an adversary which possessed superior technological competences, and many international backers, such as the US, its Western allies, and the Gulf Arab states. The fighters and opposition groups that Iran supported were greatly divided and required battlefield experience. The global community labelling them fundamentalist Shi’ite Islamist terrorists did not help. The Ba’ath regime’s impressive capacity to co-opt, repress, and insulate its fighters and armed forces from mass defections did not help Iran’s cause either (Alaaldin, 2020). Thus, Arab–Iranian relations during this period were tumultuous and hostile.

Another issue the Gulf Arab states had with Iran was that they believed Iran was trying to export the Islamic Revolution that occurred in Iran in 1979 to other regional states. The Arab governments were upset about Iran’s alleged efforts to export revolution to other states in the Middle East, as this would shake the foundations of their governments and regimes. Moreover, it would detrimentally affect the regional balance, structure, and stability. The Arab governments feared the spilling over of the Iranian Revolution. More than the Sunni–Shia sectarian divide, it was a matter of regional stability, domestic stability, and maintaining power.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have a conservative system that has its origins in paternalistic conservatism. According to Binhuwaidin,

there were four sources of threat to the security of the Gulf region from the 1950s to the 1990s: Nasserism (the political doctrine which was advocated by Gamal Abdel Nasser’s revolutionary regime in Egypt, which called for a neo-Arab state system), the Marxist or Leftist ideology (which wanted to alter the status quo in the region, and within the existing Gulf governments), the destabilising role of the Al-Qaeda construct, and finally, the attempts to export the Iranian Revolution’s military doctrine to the Gulf states, as a model that the Gulf region could emulate. The latter was unacceptable to the Gulf or Arab countries. They did not appreciate any efforts to replace the moderate traditional attitudes towards Islam in the Gulf, with the more radical ideology advocated by the Iranian Revolution, or the new Iranian regime (masterminded by Khomeini) (Binhuwaidin, 2015).

As the term “exporting revolution” gained momentum, it upset more and more Arab states and increased the rifts between Arabs and Iranians. Iran’s efforts to mobilise the Shia population in Iran during the Iran–Iraq War made Arab states view Iran as a more dangerous neighbour. The Arab states felt that the mobilisation efforts, and the attempts to “export revolution” would be detrimental to Arab societies and the status quo in the Gulf region and the larger Middle East. Thus, they began to perceive Iran as a direct danger to regional security during this period.

The Second Stage: 1991–2000

From 1979 to 1997, Arab countries like the GCC states, Jordan, and Egypt had various concerns regarding Iran. Firstly, there was a strong regional perception that Iran provided support to Shia minorities in other Arab countries, which they considered a direct interference on the part of Iran. Secondly, the Iranian regime continually criticised the strong associations between the United States and some Arab countries. Thirdly, Iran had border disputes with Arab states. A major example was the sovereignty dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over the three islands: Abu Musa and the two Tunbs. There was an ongoing debate about the cultural political identity of the Gulf, whether it should be called the “Arabian Gulf” or not.

Iranian foreign policies underwent a significant transformation in the late 1990s. The election of a reformist candidate generated newer, more pragmatic, and more lenient foreign policies, instead of strict, ideological ones. This allowed Iranian foreign relations to improve and develop, with different nations in numerous political and economic spheres, mainly affecting Iranian–GCC relations. Hashem explains that the death of Khomeini represented the beginning of Iran’s state transformation from an authoritarian ideological state to a more lenient pragmatist state, which was highlighted with the election of reformist president Mohammad Khatami in 1998. During his presidency, Iran’s foreign policies favoured guidance through “pragmatism” rather than “ideology”, which led to stronger foreign relations with numerous countries, including Russia, numerous European and Arab states, and especially the GCC region.

Under Khatami's governance, Iranian–Saudi relations improved significantly, through common economic and political interests. The betterment of the relations culminated in the signing of a security agreement between them in Tehran. With the exception of Iran–UAE relations, as tensions often rose over claims to the islands in the Strait of Hormuz, Abu Musa, and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, Iranian–GCC relations also generally improved. After the invasion of the state of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein, Iran realised that the Gulf states no longer accepted the Ba'athist regime in Iraq. Iran sided with the Gulf Arab states in challenging the invasion of Kuwait. Iran used this to remind the Arab states that they had made a mistake by backing Iraq in the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s. Furthermore, Iran expressed solidarity with Kuwait, by supporting most of the resolutions against Iraq.

There was however a real conflict of interest between the Iranians and Arabs, which was visible within the new internationally backed Iraqi government that replaced Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime. Then the state of affairs in Iraq presented a possibility for rising tensions between the primary "political" Shia actors – Muqtada al-Sadr and Grand Ayatollah Sistani. Sistani was from an Iranian background, while al-Sadr was of Arab descent. The looming danger was that their narrowly defined nationalistic sentiments could drive dangerous divisions within the polity and society. While al-Sadr incited the Shia community to struggle against the Americans in Iraq, Sistani attempted to pacify them, and uphold the new government in Iraq (Zweiri, *Arab–Iranian Relations: New Realities*).

Iran is not always motivated by empowering or upholding its beliefs and norms. The new Iranian foreign policies under the reformist Khatami showed how Iran prioritises its political and economic interests both locally and regionally, which led it to bring down the barriers and hurdles it had built up. Iran was hence willing to reach out for cooperation with neighbouring and international states (Hashem, 2012).

The beginning of this period witnessed the revival of historical animosities between Arabs and Iranians. Abdallah explains the different motivations that empowered Iranian foreign interests and decision-making, especially in the Arab Gulf region, by portraying historical and modern civilisational relations between modern-day Iran and the Arabs. Arab–Iranian relations were again viewed through the lens of historical animosity between both nations. The Arab states considered Iran both a sectarian and a nationalist actor. For the Arabs, the Shi'ite and Persian identities had become interlinked, and often synonymous. The primary reason for this was the Iranian utilisation of history, to shape public opinion and support foreign policies (including idolising pre-Islamic Persia, the Persian civilisation, and figures like Cyrus the Great). Arab apprehension towards the possibility of an Iranian ally was immense, mainly as many believed Iran was interested in avenging their great Persian civilisation, which the Arab conquerors had destroyed. To the Arabs, Iran has always been a source of threat to Arab power and security, from the time of the Safavids, the Qajar, and now the Iranian state. There is a wide-scale belief that all these Iranian entities have always dreamed of controlling the Arab Gulf (Abdallah, 2012).

Iran also overcame some ideological differences with the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood by focusing on shared beliefs, interests, and enemies. An Arabic book “*Al-īkhwān Wa-īrān: Khārij Al-maḍhab Dākhl A-’s-siyasa*” told how Islamic political movements were able to cross political and sectarian borders, to work together for the sake of increasing their effectiveness and power, as it studies the case of Shi’ite Iran and the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood (the Palestinian case). Ikhwanis and Iranians worked more closely, due to a common ideological background, and common political realities: both believe in the unity of all Muslims, the prevalence of Islamic law over anything else, and the universality of Islam. Both consider Zionists and Jews as their top enemies and hold strong animosity towards secularisation and westernisation. Moreover, both have a historical fundamentalist view of how government/society should function (according to the prophet’s example, and the righteous after him). However, this example is specific to the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood and Iran and cannot be seen mirrored in many other Sunni movements in the region.

Nevertheless, as the authors point out, one must note that most Arabs do not accept Shi’ite Iran as an example of a flourishing Islamic government, due to its sectarian nature. Iran was thus able to ignore some ideological differences and focus on shared beliefs and strategic goals, when working with different political and religious actors. The case of Iran’s cooperation with the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood (Hamas) showcases how Iran can, if it wishes, build bridges of common religious identity and interests, if its political interests require such cooperation.

While some scholars argue that holding a common Islamic background and goals provoked increased cooperation, one can argue that Iran does not favour an ideologically similar ally over a politically strategic one, as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is not regarded with the same respect, nor is it considered a potential ally. This can suggest that Iran does favour its interests over its ideologies, as ideologically it would be closer to supporting the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood over the secular, socialist Ba’ath regime in Syria. However, since Syria has presented itself as a valuable regional ally in the past few decades, Iran has favoured a powerful ally over an ideological ally (*Al-īkhwān Wa-īrān: Khārij Al-maḍhab Dākhl A-’s-siyasa (The Muslim Brotherhood and Iran: Outside the Ideology and Inside the Politics)*, 2015).

The Third Stage: 2000–2010

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 caused two primary causes of conflict and tension for Arab–Iranian relations. The first one being security. Naturally, Iran was apprehensive about having 160,000 US troops so close to its national borders. On the other hand, the GCC was nervous about Iran’s nuclear ambitions, and the effect of related activities on the stability of the GCC states. The main cause of concern was political and social issues, which included the emergence of a novel political elite class in Iraq, and the subsequent re-emergence of the argument surrounding citizenship and identity. The latter was becoming

a real challenge for the newly formed Gulf states. The rising regional Shia aspirations, which drew inspiration from Iran, were also a concern for the GCC. This concern led to the beginning of Sunni militancy initiatives, which were usually tied to the Al-Qaeda construct, the viewing of Shias as arch enemies that facilitated the Iraqi invasion by the United States.

Iran expressed support for the new government in Iraq. Tehran contributed over \$100 million to the rebuilding of Iraqi infrastructure. Moreover, Tehran built and maintained strong ties with the new ruling elites of Iraq. Iran worked with secular and religious Iraqis, to show the larger region that Iraq had no intention of creating sectarian divisions, and overemphasising the importance of the Shia element in Iraq. Iran maintained strong ties with the secular Shia group, the Iraqi National Congress, led by Ahmad Chalabi, and with the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Iran also maintained connections with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. In turn, the new Iraqi elites gave priority to Iraq's relations with Iran. The isolation furthered what the new ruling class of Iraq felt from its Arab neighbours. This, in a way, made Iraq a permanent arena for the Arab–Iranian conflict. The historical background of Iraq's politicians, and their political and religious aspirations have worsened matters. Most of the ruling elite came home from exile, established strong ties with Iran, and have not had much contact or many ties with the Arab World except for with Kuwait, which has long had resilient ties with the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

Since 2003, two significant developments have affected the region at large. Firstly, the Salafi Jihad school emerged as an integral threat to Gulf security. This resulted from the cooperation of certain GCC states with the international US-led coalition in the invasion of Iraq. Secondly, there was a substantial change in the way Shias are perceived in the region. While Shias were presented as threats to security in the 1980s, the new Shia government in Iraq was now an ally of the United States. However, this change was not readily accepted by the GCC governments. They viewed the new Shia government as a new security challenge, owing to the sectarian aspects of the development. A Shia-led government, directed and influenced by Iran, is considered a significant threat in the Arab World. Thus, as Iran's role in Iraq increased, the mistrust between the Arabs and the Iranians increased. The rise of the Shias in the western regions of the Arab World or, in other words, the problem of a "broad Shi'ite revival" – for instance, in Morocco – was a source of great worry for the Arab and Gulf governments; particularly as it would alter the status quo and affect the regional stability (Zweiri and König, 2008).

This period saw the Islamic Republic of Iran using sectarianism in different ways. Even a soft power form of sectarianism was used. Apart from this, in 2003, when the Americans invaded Iraq under Saddam Hussein's rule, things further changed on the ground. Iran extended support to the new Shia Iraqi government. This was a significant development. This period also saw the improvement of Iran's regional positioning and image, particularly with regard to the Arab governments.

While examining the strategic aspects of Iran's interests in the Arab and Gulf region, Mohamad Rabi' discusses Iran as the centre for Shi'ism, and its agenda of spreading its ideology. He highlights Iran's relations with different Arab states, and its hegemonic interest in growing its influence in the region. Iran's foreign policy shifted from a radical one to a more compromising, lenient, and pragmatic one in the early 21st century. This was a conscious decision to pursue its different national, foreign policy, ideological, political, and economic interests, by enabling cooperation with the Arab states, specifically those in the Gulf. Mohamad Rabi' explains Iran's foreign policies and regional politics in its competition with other major forces, mainly Israel and Turkey, over regional influence and power. In addition to the agenda of expanding its influence to meet its political ambitions, Iran also sought to function as the centre and leader of Shi'ism regionally and globally. Iran has attempted to export Shi'ism to the wider region for the past few decades. In addition to that, Iran supported Shi'ite minorities in neighbouring Arab countries, which caused a shift in loyalties to Iran instead of their own countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq).

Nevertheless, other developments in this period, such as Iran's support for the Palestinians, improved ties with its Arab neighbours. Thus, there was a shift in Iran's foreign policy from stern and uncompromising to a more lenient and pragmatic foreign policy in the early 21st century (Rabi', 2014).

We can see that Iran has tried to balance prioritising its political interests, and its ideological ambitions. Rabi' argues that Iran has been functioning as the leader of Shi'ism worldwide, by overseeing the exporting of Shi'ism to neighbouring countries, and supporting international Shi'ite minorities. Iran's shift in foreign policy in the early 21st century helped Tehran benefit from international and regional trade and cooperation with non-Shi'ite or non-religious states.

In 2009, the Islamic Republic confronted the Green Movement (Torbat, 2011). This movement essentially challenged the pillars of the republic or the foundations of the Islamic Iranian Revolution of 1979, which had led to the formation of the Republic and the overthrow of the Shah of Iran. Why does studying the Green Movement become relevant when considering the Arab Uprisings? This is because the same Iranian Republic that supported the Arab Uprisings and the related popular demonstrations in some Arab states, such as Tunisia, crushed the popular protests that were a part of the Green Movement in Iran. (Kurzman, 2012; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2011). Iran's reaction to the Green Movement, when compared to its initial reactions to the Arab Uprisings, is sufficient to help us understand the contrasting and contradictory positions that Iran assumed during the Arab Uprisings. During the onset of the Arab Uprisings in late 2010, Iran welcomed and hailed the uprisings as a phase of "Islamic awakening", and felt that they would overthrow the US-backed regimes in the affected countries. However, with more countries such as Syria facing the wave of Arab Uprisings, Iran shifted its views., thus assuming a more contradictory approach – an approach that included separate

reactions for separate countries, depending on Iran’s relations with the governments in these countries (The Arab Uprisings in Iranian Politics, 2013).

The Green Movement was crushed, to maintain or preserve power for the Islamic Republic of Iran, in the same way that Iran supported the Assad regime in Syria, and sent troops to put down the popular demonstrations in Syria (Piotrowski, 2011). Iran even praised the Assad regime in Syria for the manner in which the Assad regime handled the uprisings in Syria – crushing and putting down the protests (Reuters Staff, 2012). In both of these cases – the Green Movement and Syria – Iran put its own interests first. Crushing the Green Movement was important for the Islamic Republic to remain in power. Crushing the protests in Syria was important, as the Assad government was a friend of Iran.

Iran even criticised and blamed foreign Western agents for orchestrating such a movement in Iran to topple the Islamic Republic (Iran and the Arab Uprising, 2011). This conspiracy theory was propagated by the Iranian media. “American agents” were blamed by Tehran for the Green Movement. Thus, they indirectly stated that it was not a genuine popular uprising that occurred in 2009 in Iran. Rather it was a foreign incited movement to push for regime change in Iran.

During this period, Iran attempted to further Shi’ism through soft power – an exciting development indeed. Iran increased its soft power, so as to influence Arab and foreign public opinion, by spreading its Shi’ite ideology, primarily through cinema and drama. Iran increasingly used global missionary activities and cultural centres, to spread Shi’ism and its influence, both in the Arab World and internationally. Iran utilised soft power to spread its Shi’ite ideology in the Arab region and globally. As a facet of cultural exchange, Tehran established numerous cultural and Islamic centres in other countries. These centres actively engaged with the communities concerned, by holding attractive cultural and educational events, hosting artistic and entertaining exhibitions, providing Persian lessons, and translating Persian religious and cultural works into the language of that community. They also increased their philanthropic activities, to strengthen Iranian cultural and religious relations with different populations, especially the Islamic populations. Iran also became involved in directly spreading Shi’ism, by sending religious missionaries to various parts of the world, and establishing Shi’ite mosques and religious centres in foreign lands. In 2007, Iran spent about 11.6 billion Iranian Tomans (equivalent to about 123,000 USD) on foreign missionaries and religious campaigns.

Another Iranian soft power tool was Iranian cinema. The latter left a significant impact on Arab public opinion regarding Iran. Samah Abdelhay, in his book *Al-quwa A-’ḍakya Fy A-’s-siyāsa Al-khārijya: Dirāsa Fy Adawāt A-’s-siyāsa Al-khārijya Al-īrānya* (*Smart Power in Foreign Policy: Studies on Iranian Foreign Policy Tools*) describes how before the Arab Uprisings, many Arabs considered Iran (along with Hezbollah) an actual axis of resistance against Israel and the west. This was not only due to Iran’s political and military actions. The kind of dramas, in film work and in theatre, which it developed and released,

also had a lot to do with such perceptions. When it comes to influencing the Arab World, Iran not only relies on its physical military or political power. It also relies on soft power by utilising its cinematic works to shape Arab perceptions about Iranian civilisation and culture, and to spread its Islamic Shi'ite and revolutionary ideologies in a positive light.

Iranian cinema was not just aimed at a national audience. It began competing with international cinematic works to leave long-lasting imprints through its cultural and intellectual messages. Through the medium of cinema, which the government increasingly funded, Iran glamorised Iranian ideology, culture, and civilisation. The government saw it as a reliable foreign policy tool for increasing its goodwill and influence regionally and globally, by promoting its popularity among the Muslim populations of Arab countries. The movies and artwork appealed to the shared Muslim religious identity, and portrayed Iran as an ally of the Arab World (Abdelhay, 2014). Politically and ideologically, shows were often translated into Arabic, and aired on various Arabic channels, primarily Lebanese and Syrian channels. Ideological and political propaganda was promoted through entertainment.

The primary exercising of soft power has been through increased global missionary activities, new cultural centres, and numerous types of cinema and media work. All of this makes Iranian culture, the Shi'ite religion, and the Iranian government more appealing to people, as they start to normalise interacting with Iran on a more personal level, and it had already been relatively successful in the Arab World before the Arab revolts, in portraying Iran as the anti-imperialist, free state.

Essentially, Iran was making efforts to render itself a more relevant actor in the politics of the Arab World. Iran's attribution of the Arab Uprisings, that began in Tunisia in 2011, and spread across the Arab World, to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 – Iran said the latter was the inspiration behind the Arab Uprisings – was a means to assume responsibility for the uprisings. This was so as to increase Iran's relevance and foothold in the Arab World. In other words, Iran did not want to be “irrelevant” any more (Moussavi, 2012). Iran's responses to the Arab Uprisings also led to a power shift in the Middle East (Rafati, 2012). Some even spoke of the establishment of an Iranian monopolism in the larger Middle East and the Arab World (al-Jazeera, 2017).

The Fourth Stage: 2011–2021 – A Brief Introduction to the Focus of the Book

The role and influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran on the contemporary regional politics of the Middle East became more explicit and more controversial with the commencement of the Arab Uprisings. Iran's regional role rose to the forefront of Middle Eastern politics, and many scholars argued that Iran was at the winning end of the regional developments. Meanwhile, many argued that Iran was not merely influencing the domestic politics of other Arab countries, but rather that Tehran was the principal player or architect of the changing regional dynamics. These developments included Iraq's Ba'ath regime's

collapse in 2003, the survival of Syria’s Bashar al-Assad regime, the fall of Lebanon into the hands of Hezbollah in 2008, and the rise of the Houthis in Yemen.

Over the years, Iran has slowly mastered mobilisation and proxy techniques. Nevertheless, with such large claims and arguments, it is essential to study, analyse, and realistically appraise Iran’s competences as a regional power, and its capacity to support and influence actors across its borders. Undoubtedly, Iran was attempting to drive and influence political struggles elsewhere, where weak regimes struggled to retain power. It is, however, too early to call Iran the major player or factor behind the incitation of the chaos that engulfed many parts of the Middle East. Instead, one could utilise the framework of Iran’s impact in developing a “regional cold war”, wherein Iran and Saudi Arabia constitute the leading players. More than a military confrontation, it is one with a political context in the larger region (Zweiri, 2016). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has attempted to pursue a foreign policy approach that entails “unbalancing” and “relative autonomy”. This was particularly true in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 incident, which revealed the areas of friction between the United States and its long-standing Middle Eastern ally – Saudi Arabia. It put Riyadh in a difficult spot, to balance its policies towards the larger Middle East region, while simultaneously supporting the US “War on Terror”. Any Saudi “disobedience” was heavily criticised and received with much anger (Nonneman).

This book focuses on the period from 2011 to 2021, in order to study Arab–Iranian relations. The Arab Uprisings were a wave of popular uprisings that commenced in Tunisia in 2011 and later spread elsewhere. It was called the Arab Spring by certain politicians and media. The term found a place in the Arab minds, probably because the word “spring” inspires certain positive connotations. For this reason, this book will stick to using the term “Arab Uprisings” instead of “Arab Spring” or “Arab Awakening”, as the intention of the book is to remain neutral to the developments, and provide a comprehensive, unbiased, holistic analysis of the state of affairs concerning Arab–Iranian relations. Iran considered the Arab Uprisings an important event in the region, and saw that it should have a role in it. To achieve this objective, it adopted different approaches to each revolution. It started with enthusiastic support for the early revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, as it considered them indigenous, anti-imperialist movements, that would remove the corrupt Western puppet presidents and regimes, in addition to “Islamic awakenings”. Meanwhile, it ultimately rejected the Syrian Revolution, claiming it was a western conspiracy to topple the strong and legitimate resistant regime (Al-Smadi, 2016b).

Iran chose to hold contrasting positions on the various Arab Uprisings. Iran stood by the popular uprisings in the case of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. They called for the overthrow of dictatorial regimes in these countries, by promoting the people’s revolutionary will. Meanwhile, in the case of Syria, wherein the Assad regime is a close ally, Iran supported the regime. These contrasting stances reveal a disparity in Iran’s rhetoric and narrative of supporting indigenous revolutions of the oppressed.

Furthermore, this shows how Iran prioritises its realist interests over ideological and moral grounds. The Islamic Republic has repeatedly used different ideologies to justify its varying stances, for instance, calling it “the Islamic Awakening” to support Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings, while opting for the term “Mahdism” for the fight against the Syrian uprising (Al-Smadi, 2016b).

Some have considered Iran as having three different responses to the Arab Uprisings, against the backdrop of the larger Iranian relations with the United States, the international community, and global sanctions. The first response being Iran’s ability to show flexibility when it comes to negotiations, and its efforts in seeking to diffuse and deflect from the global sanctions. The second response is to consider it as the ability to push back and resist the novel constraints that Iran was facing in the region. This was usually done using anti-West and anti-oppression anthems. The last response is for it to be considered as acceptance of the new reality, and to live with it, while also stressing the various benefits of self-determination, self-reliance, and efforts not to be sidetracked from its stated principles (Chubin, 2012).

Regardless of the stance that one chooses to take, the uprisings were a milestone that must not be overlooked in the study of Arab–Iranian relations, modern Arab history, or the Middle East as a whole. It was a milestone development because the questions raised by the popular uprisings were more valuable than the available answers. Questions regarding attitudes, beliefs, and reactions to the developments, and the cause of the same, were also crucial. Thus, the standpoint of Iran becomes essential. The significance of Iran in Middle Eastern politics, and the Arab Uprisings, is not merely due to its geographical proximity, but also since Iran was a country that marked the 20th century with a revolution that brought to its knees a monarchy that was once called the most tyrannical of all, and which served, during its time, the interests of the United States (Zweiri, 2012).

The Arab Uprisings have had significant domestic and regional implications across the Arab World, and the larger Middle Eastern region. In fact, intra-regional alliances and international alliances, along with the various dynamics they brought to the table, became important (Khoury, 2013). Iran continued to project its soft and hard power strategies during and after the Arab Uprisings, in an attempt to increase its political presence, and influence in the Arab World. This naturally caused significant issues between the Arab states and the Islamic Republic of Iran. As mentioned previously, the Arab Uprisings were viewed as an extension of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. In fact, the Supreme Leader called the uprisings “divine blessings” (Fulton, 2011).

Thus, Iran’s reactions, strategies, and relations with the different Arab revolutions primarily highlight its pragmatic interests. These interests have guided Iranian foreign policy towards these uprisings. The Iranian reactions to the popular uprisings can be best understood in its strategic national interests, in increasing its regional influence. National interests here are threefold: firstly, the multiple interests being pursued by decision-makers, which include domestic interests, international interests, and sometimes a narrow elite-based

interest; secondly, the “state”/“national” label covers various groups, intertwining dynamics, and interests; and thirdly, the inexplicable intertwining of domestic, regional, and international factors or developments which may or may not be unforeseen (Nonneman).

While the developments related to the Arab Uprisings have increased Tehran’s regional role, these uprisings also possess the potential to increase the usual concerns regarding the intentions behind Iran’s involvement in politics of the Arab region. Although a well-crafted active diplomacy will avoid any actions that might imply Tehran’s involvement in the internal affairs of the Arab states, it has the potential to damage not only bilateral relations with the respective Arab states, but also incite the nationalistic feelings of these particular Arab societies, in a manner that would not be favourable to the Islamic Republic of Iran (Barzegar, 2011).

Tehran saw the power void caused by the declining United States’s regional role, and the vulnerability of weaker Arab states, as an opportunity to increase its regional presence and influence (Al-Jazeera, 2015). For this purpose, Iran chose to uphold governments that would ally with it, and support revolutions that could create new allying governments. Thus, depending on potential mutual interests, and existing diplomatic relations, Iran adopted contradictory stances towards various Arab Uprisings.

Having established a comprehensive historical framework for Arab–Iranian relations, and a conceptual understanding of the primary facets of the relationship – sectarianism, the role of the Middle East in political Islam, and the religious-state debate – we can now move on to the next chapter. It will look into the first reaction of the Islamic Republic of Iran when the unexpected wave of Arab Uprisings swept across the Middle East.

Notes

- 1 The *vilāyat-i faqīh*, or the clerical government doctrine, is at the core of the Shia Twelve-Imams political thought of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This political system relies on a Faqih (a jurist) to lead the Shia governance in the absence of the Hidden Imam. However, since the 19th century, people question the accountability of the Faqih, and whether he is to be considered an absolute or conditional form of power in the government (Mavani, 2011).
- 2 According to article 109 of the constitution, among the “essential qualifications and conditions for the Leader” are “scholarship, as required for performing the functions of mufti in different fields of fiqh” Chapter 8 – “The Leader or Leadership Council” in the “Wayback Machine Constitution of Iran”.
- 3 The term “invention of tradition” has been borrowed from Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- 4 “It is intellectually imprudent and historically misguided to discuss the relationships between Islam and politics as if there were one Islam, timeless and eternal” said Olivier Roy in his article “The Failure of Political Islam”, translated by Carol Volk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. v.