

A: The Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran (Dr Glen Rangwala)

The course

Iran and Saudi Arabia have much in common. They are both major powers – the two largest countries by area – of the eastern Middle East. They are significant oil producers, and have two of the largest oil reserves in the world. Islam plays an important role in political and social arenas, with an embedded role for the clerical class in public affairs in both countries. Both are countries within which the rights of women have been significantly curtailed over many decades by their governments. The governments of each country that have suffered severe crises of legitimacy in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. And both are frequently held up as extreme versions of politics in external commentary about contemporary global affairs.

And yet these are countries that have become fierce rivals across the Persian Gulf, each portraying the other's government as illegitimate. They have had no diplomatic relations since 2016, and sponsor rival groups in civil conflicts elsewhere in the Middle East. Both accuse the other of sponsoring and directing groups that seek to undermine regional and international security. The prospect of a direct war between them in the near future is far from implausible.

This rivalry is often traced to long-standing cultural, ethnic and religious differences. Iran's population is predominantly Shi'a Muslim, and mostly identify ethno-linguistically as Persian (Farsi); Saudi Arabia's is mostly Sunni Muslim, and identify as Arab. The Iranian state presents itself as the heir of a largely continuous civilisation and empire that has existed for over 2,500 years, while Saudi Arabia is a 20th Century creation from a nomadic and tribally organised population. Iran and Saudi Arabia present the two major sides to the region, and in different ways exemplify the politics of the Middle East today.

The lecture series will compare the two countries that between them have shared a region, but which remain palpably distinct in their governing institutions and external political orientation. Students can expect to come away from this course with a good grasp of the modern history of these two countries, and to understand their political systems, particularly in so far as they have been changing over the past decade. They should also be able to draw comparisons. What explains the long experience of authoritarianism that has dominated both countries' modern histories? Does religion play a similar role in garnering political legitimacy? To what extent do they face similar economic and social challenges? What explains their diverging and often mutually hostile orientations in foreign policy?

Lectures

Lecture 1: State formation within an imperial order (Michaelmas week 1)

The first lecture will set up both countries in an historical context, looking at the origins of the modern states, and their diverging political pathways from the early twentieth century onwards. Monarchies were established in each in the same year (1926), in alliance with but not under the rule of European powers. Both countries encountered the sharp difficulties of navigating between facing external domination and cultivating internal legitimacy over the course of the subsequent decades. Iran however experienced mass protests, leading to revolution in 1979, subsequent turmoil and the creation of an Islamic Republic, while Saudi Arabia's political system has remained, on the face of it, undisrupted by the sort of political changes seen elsewhere in the region. The lecture will also set out some of the broad themes that this course is intended to convey.

Lecture 2: Rule and religion
(Michaelmas week 2)

This lecture will address how systems of government have been established in Iran since the 1979 Revolution and Saudi Arabia since the death of its founder-king in 1953. It will look in particular at the multiple roles of religion in politics and public life. Both countries have accorded a prominent role to the clerical class, but in different ways, and with delimited authority. The lecture will then explore how the role of religion has changed in recent years, looking at the shifting balance of power in Iran and the extent to which electoral politics shapes this balance, and the ascent of a new political generation in Saudi Arabia.

Lecture 3: State domination and social relations
(Michaelmas week 3)

This lecture turns the topic around and looks at politics from the perspective of those systematically excluded from position of political authority. This includes religious minorities but its central focus is the politics of gender. Authors who write on these themes insist on the centrality of gender relations in understanding national politics. The lecture will look at how the state's regulation of women's social roles, the family, and sexuality has been crucial in determining how state-society relations have developed. It will also look at how women's growing social and economic roles have posed challenges for the ruling system, and the variety of attempts to incorporate or offset their political agency.

Lecture 4: Oil and the politics of foreign policy
(Michaelmas week 4)

The international roles of Iran and Saudi Arabia cannot be understood outside of their status as major oil producers and exporters. This lecture first goes back historically to give an account that sets up the international history of both countries through the prism of outside interests in their resources, and then aims to show how this in turn has affected national politics within both countries. It introduces rentierism as a framework for thinking about legitimacy in oil-rich states, and how oil wealth makes both countries vulnerable –

economically and politically – to factors outside their control. It then turns to how these factors shape the international status of the two countries.

Lecture 5: The reformists and the revolutionaries (Michaelmas week 5)

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia contain significant numbers of individuals and groups who oppose the current ruling system, and who seek to displace it. This lecture will survey such groups, but will focus more centrally on those who straddle the boundary between having a role within the ruling system and advocating fundamental changes to it. With Iran, the ‘Green Movement’ (2009-10) and the presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013-21) provides a key focus, looking at their limits to their influence and the frustrations that come from those limitations. With Saudi Arabia, the contrasting focuses will be the so-called ‘Islamoliberals’ (2003-11) and the rise of Muhammad bin Salman, crown prince since 2017.

Lecture 6: Rivalry, crisis and the potential for change (Michaelmas week 6)

The final lecture looks to the contemporary national and international dilemmas of both countries, and the potential for political change. It looks to how the COVID-19 pandemic exposes the level of popular mistrust in both governments, and looks to the extent that reform can take place within the existing systems of government. It also explores the frequently antagonistic relations between the two countries, and particularly how their varying relations with the US affect the potential for accommodation. This lecture will be oriented around thinking about the future of both countries: are their domestic and foreign policies becoming more militant, or are there restraining factors from within that chart the way to a different sort of future?

Essay questions and reading lists

In the reading lists below, **[OL]** means the text can be found on-line (including through electronic access to journals); some of them will only be available from within the university network. **[M]** means that an individual chapter from a longer text should be available on the library’s Moodle page by the start of the course. If specific pieces are not available electronically as listed below, please do contact the lecturer. If there are problems in connecting to the relevant Moodle site, then speak to the library.

Although these reading lists are long, you are really not expected to read everything on them. Key items are starred, but beyond that you should have a broad coverage of the themes that make up the topic. There are few notes below to give you a sense of what those themes are, and what specifically to look for within particular texts.

Background reading

It is crucial for this option to have a good understanding of the modern history of both countries, before you dive into the specific reading for each of the essay questions. That specific reading will only make sense against a general background understanding. To start off the reading – preferably over the vacation – it is worthwhile to look at a couple of more general texts that will give you a sense of the politics, society and political culture of the two countries. You may find that these two texts can be read at a relatively leisurely pace, without feeling an obligation to take notes. Neither is strictly academic in tone (Mottahedeh though is a serious academic historian); Lacey, a journalist, gives a lively and well-rounded account of the country and its people.

* Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (new edn: Oxford: Oneworld, 2000 / 2008; originally published with the better subtitle, *Learning and Power in Modern Iran*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1986).

Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia* (London: Penguin, 2010).

Moving on from there, you should try to plough through a modern history of each country. In the case of Iran, the texts by Keddie and Ansari are usefully complementary: Keddie provides the straight historical account, while Ansari is the thematic exploration of Iranian nationalism from the eighteenth century. For Saudi Arabia, Madawi Al-Rasheed's *History* is concise and careful.

Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 2nd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). (chapter 7 on **[M]**)

Ali Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), via: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139020978> [**OL - ebook**]

* Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 2010) [**OL - ebook**]

Finally, in the preparatory reading section, two good books that don't fit anywhere else in to this course but which give a broader perspective on the relevant country are as follows. Kurzman gives a celebrated account of how to under the origins of the Iranian revolution of 1979. Somewhat differently, Menoret looks at Saudi Arabia from the perspective of its disengaged urban youth.

Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Harvard University Press, 2004). (conclusion on **[M]**, but, really, try to find the time to read the whole thing)

Pascal Menoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Essay 1: How, since 1979, have the governments of Saudi Arabia and Iran tried to cultivate popular legitimacy, and how successful have these attempts been?

The question invites you understand the different paths taken by Iran and Saudi Arabia after 1979 in creating stable and legitimate forms of government. Note that the second essay is going to be about foreign policy, so perhaps steer off that topic for the first essay as much as possible.

On the general **character and structures of government**, for *Iran*, the most sustained arguments are those made by Martin (see especially chapter VII), on the immediate period of consolidation, and Brumberg (chapters 6-8) on the longer term development. The short piece by Ghobadzadeh & Rahim is mostly introductory, but does take you up to near-contemporary events; Schwartz & Gözl is a nice example of how the idea of the revolution continues to take a role in contemporary Iranian politics. On *Saudi Arabia*, the recommendations on the political system as it has developed are a range of texts, in pairs: Kostiner and Steinberg give accounts of two of the social foundations of the state, tribes and clerics; Glosmeyer and the Al-Rasheeds give contrasting interpretations of governmental structures; and the first two chapters (by Gause and Al-Rasheed) in the recent collection *Salman's Legacy* give differing accounts of the significance of succession, with Ulrichsen & Sheline providing an update.

To understand government stability and legitimacy, it's also important to understand how **opposition** is mobilised. On *Iran's* Green Movement, various articles and primary documents relating to it are collected in the Hashemi/Postel volume: do look at the introduction, and then dip in to the various pieces in there, especially Part II. For something more focused, Behraves's article is the one at which to look, while Sherrill, Milani and Shahi & Abdoh-Tabrizi provide different takes on what has happened since. Quite differently, Asef Bayat's book gives another perspective on who have been left out of the process of revolutionary consolidation: it's all worth reading, but those pressed for time should certainly read chapter 3. Lecture 2 will provide updates on the aftermath of the 2021 presidential election in Iran. For *Saudi Arabia*, opposition is often most visible along lines of religion, with Lacroix and Jones focused on a Sunni Muslim *salafi* movement and Matthiesen looking at protest from the Shi'a religious minority (a more extensive treatment is his excellent book, *The Other Saudis*, while there is a helpful contrast with Alamer's chapter in Al-Rasheed's collection, *Salman's Legacy*). Al-Rasheed's *Muted Modernists* (see especially the introduction and chapter 6) focuses closely on how 'moderate' opposition is expressed through clerical discourse within the country; the Iranian parallel is brought out through the book by Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (particularly chapters 1 and 4). Pan & Siegel provide a different way to understand the interplay of dissent and repression. A different approach to understanding dissent is Okruhlik's exploration of how oil wealth divides as well as unites the political community, which is helpfully complemented by Hertog in the collection

Salman's Legacy (updating his argument from another splendid volume, *Princes, Brokers and Bureaucrats*).

Finally in this section, it is useful to think about the effect of the governments on **gender politics**. On **Saudi Arabia**, Al-Rasheed's *Most Masculine State* is an excellent starting point, especially chapter 1. Doajji's chapter on Saudi feminism in the *Salman's Legacy* collection adds well to this book, and the article by Le Renard gives a more nuanced perspective (those interested in going further could usefully turn to her later book, *A Society of Young Women*, 2014). The **Iran** reading is broader, and here the introductory collection by Povey and Rostami-Povey provides a helpful range of information and arguments. The five short pieces in the MEI retrospective (mentioned above) provide a briefer alternative. Sedghi and Paidar both provide rich and complementary accounts of women's political agency: Sedghi is the historical narrative, Paidar's is thematically organised, and although it's now quite old, is still very much worth reading: see especially chapter 6.

Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000). [**OL - ebook**]

* Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). (chapter 6 on [**M**])

Naser Ghobadzadeh and Lily Zubaidah Rahim, 'Electoral theocracy and hybrid sovereignty in Iran', *Contemporary Politics*, 22/4 (2016), pp.450-468. [**OL**]

Kevin L. Schwartz and Olmo Gözl, 'Going to War with the Coronavirus and Maintaining the State of Resistance in Iran', *Middle East Report Online*, September 2020, at: <https://merip.org/2020/09/going-to-war-with-the-coronavirus-and-maintaining-the-state-of-resistance-in-iran/> [**OL**]

Joseph Kostiner, 'Transforming dualities: tribe and state formation in Saudi Arabia', in Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner, eds, *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1990) [**M**]

Guido Steinberg, 'The Wahhabi ulama and the Saudi state: 1745 to the present', in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman, eds., *Saudi Arabia in the Balance* (London: Hurst & Co., 2005), pp.11-34.

Madawi Al-Rasheed and Loulouwa Al-Rasheed, 'The politics of encapsulation: Saudi policy towards tribal and religious opposition', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 32 (1), 1996, 96–120. [**OL**]

Iris Glosemeyer, 'Checks, balances and transformation in the Saudi political system', in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman, eds., *Saudi Arabia in the Balance* (London: Hurst & Co., 2005), pp.214-233 [**M**]

Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer, and Stéphane Lacroix, eds., *Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political, Economic and Religious Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Introduction.

* Madawi Al-Rasheed, ed., *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia* (London: Hurst, 2018) – chapters 1 (Gause), 2 (Al-Rasheed), 3 (Hertog), 4 (Alamer) and 5 (Doaiji)

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen & Annelie R. Sheline, 'Mohammed bin Salman and Religious Authority and Reform in Saudi Arabia', Baker Institute for Public Policy (September 2019), at <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/mbs-political-religious-authority-saudi-arabia/>

--

* Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (eds), *The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran's Future* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2010).

Maysam Behraves, 'Iran's reform movement: the enduring relevance of an alternative discourse', *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 23/2 (2014), pp.262–278, at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/dome.12050/pdf> [OL]

Clifton W. Sherrill, 'Why Hassan Rouhani won Iran's 2013 presidential election', *Middle East Policy*, vol.21/2 (2014), pp.64–75. [OL]

Abbas Milani, 'Iran's paradoxical regime', *Journal of Democracy*, vol.26/2 (April 2015), pp.52-60. [OL]

Afshin Shahi & Ehsan Abdoh-Tabrizi, 'Iran's 2019–2020 demonstrations: the changing dynamics of political protests in Iran', *Asian Affairs*, vol.51/1 (February 2020), pp.1-41, at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03068374.2020.1712889>

Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). (chapter 3 on [M])

Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and its Discontents: Political Thought and Reform in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) [OL]

* Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011) [chapter 1 on M].

Toby Jones, 'Religious revivalism and its challenge to the Saudi regime', in Mohammed Ayoob and Hasan Kosebalaban, eds, *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2009), pp.109-120 [M].

Toby Matthiesen, 'A "Saudi Spring?" The Shi'a protest movement in the Eastern Province 2011-12', *Middle East Journal*, vol. 66/4 (August 2012), pp. 629-659 [OL].

Jennifer Pan and Alexandra A. Siegel, 'How Saudi Crackdowns Fail to Silence Online Dissent', *American Political Science Review*, vol.114/1 (2020), pp.109–125 [**OL**].

Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists: The Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia* (London: Hurst, 2015)

* Gwenn Okruhlik, 'Rentier wealth, unruly law, and the rise of opposition: the political economy of oil states', *Comparative Politics*, vol.31/3 (1999), pp.295-315. [**OL**]

--

* Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Amélie Le Renard, "'Only for women:'" women, the state, and reform in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Journal*, vol.62/4 (2008), pp.610-29. [**OL**]

Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey, eds., *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran* (London: Routledge, 2013).

Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). (chapter 6 on [**M**])

Essay 2: What explains the contrasting approaches of Saudi Arabia and Iran to foreign policy since 2003?

Much of the reading for the first essay will be relevant for this topic too, but it should be supplemented with reading specifically about foreign policy. Due to the rapidly changing nature of both countries' foreign policies, a few new reading suggestions may be offered in lecture 6.

Due to the stridency of its foreign policy pronouncements since 1979, the literature on Iranian foreign relations is huge. Akbarzadeh/Barry is a good starting point, as it gives a broad overview of how to think of the major features of Iran's foreign policy. After that, browsing the Ehteshami/Zweiri collection would be helpful: the pieces by Ramazani and the last piece by the editors are particularly recommended. The books by Takeyh and Ansari are focused on relations with US, with different perspectives; Ansari is considerably more sensible than its title makes it sound. The Akbarzadeh 2015 article provides a useful corrective to the focus exclusively on the US when thinking about Iranian foreign policy.

The 2015 deal at Vienna over Iran's nuclear programme seemed at the time to have been a milestone in Iran's foreign relations, but the US withdrawal from the agreement in 2018

casts into doubt whether it will be a turning point, as negotiations about a potential return to the agreement under the new US administration are still ongoing. See the short pieces by Ansari (again), Terhalle and Khalaji for different aspects of the agreement. Ostovar gives an account of a particular issue of international tension, Iranian support for political groups in other countries.

On Saudi Arabia, the close relationship with the US is perhaps the most enduring feature of its foreign policy. Korany/Fattah provide a useful starting point for this discussion, illustrating the tensions with the government's domestic stance. Bronson and Vitalis give two different takes on this relationship. On the changing scope of Saudi foreign policy, Karim provides a useful starting point, and the pieces by Rynhold/Yaari and Matthiesen are helpful illustrations of different sides of this. These changes are often considered in terms of a more confrontational foreign policy towards Iran, post-2015 Yemen and Qatar. For this, it's worth looking at Mabon's (especially chapter 7; use the newer edition, obviously) and Keynoush's (especially chapter 11) books: they share the same main title, but their approaches are contrasting. Gause's short piece can be contrasted with both. Ahmadian's article provides a short account focused on the Trump administration's role while the final section of the article by Fulton sets up the role of China in this antagonistic relationship. Mabon's article focuses on how Saudi Arabia steers the US in respect of its Iran policy.

* Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, 'State identity in Iranian foreign policy', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.43/4 (2016), pp.613-629 [OL]

Anoush Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, eds., *Iran's Foreign Policy from Khatami to Ahmadinejad* (Brighton: Sussex University Press, 2011). (chapter 1 on [M])

Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). (chapter 9 on [M])

Ali Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Conflict in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2006). (chapter 6 on [M])

Shahram Akbarzadeh, 'Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: ideology and Realpolitik in Iranian foreign policy', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol.69/1 (2015), pp.88-103 [OL]

Ali Ansari, 'The end of the beginning? The July 2015 Iranian nuclear deal', *RUSI Journal*, vol.160/4 (2015), pp.24-29. [OL]

Maximilian Terhalle, 'Why revolutionary states yield: International sanctions, regime survival and the security dilemma: The case of the Islamic Republic of Iran', *International Politics* (September 2015), vol. 52/5, pp.594–608. [OL]

Mehdi Khalaji, 'Great expectations: Iran after the deal', *The Washington Quarterly*, vol.38/3 (2015), pp.61-77. [OL]

- Afshon Ostovar, 'The grand strategy of militant clients: Iran's way of war', *Security Studies*, vol.28 (2019), pp.159-88. [OL]
- * Bahgat Korany and Moataz Fattah, 'Irreconcilable role-partners? Saudi foreign policy between the Ulama and the US', in Bahgat Korany and Ali Hillal Dessouki, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Arab States* (Cairo: American University of Cairo, 2008), pp.343-396.
- Rachel Bronson, *Thicker than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)
- Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (London: Verso, 2009)
- Umer Karim, 'The evolution of Saudi foreign policy and the role of decision-making processes and actors', *The International Spectator*, vol.52/2 (2017), pp.71-88. [OL]
- Jonathan Rynhold and Michal Yaari, 'The quiet revolution in Saudi-Israeli relations', *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 26/2 (2021), pp.260-268, at:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629395.2019.1699267>
- Toby Matthiesen, 'The domestic sources of Saudi foreign policy: Islamists and the state in the wake of the Arab Uprisings', *Brookings Working Paper* (August 2015) [OL], at:
https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Saudi-Arabia_Matthiesen-FINALE.pdf
- Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: IB Tauris, new edition, 2016).
- Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- Gregory Gause, 'Saudi Arabia and sectarianism in Middle East International Relations', POMEPS memo (March 2020), at:
<https://pomeps.org/saudi-arabia-and-sectarianism-in-middle-east-international-relations>
- Hassan Ahmadian, 'Iran and Saudi Arabia in the age of Trump', *Survival*, vol.60/2 (2018), pp. 133-150. [OL]
- Jonathan Fulton, 'Situating Saudi Arabia in China's Belt and Road Initiative', *Asian Politics and Policy*, vol. 12/3 (2020), pp. 362-83, at:
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/aspp.12549>
- * Simon Mabon, 'Muting the trumpets of sabotage: Saudi Arabia, the US and the quest to securitize Iran', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.45/5 (2018), pp.742-59. [OL]