



BOOK
REVIEW

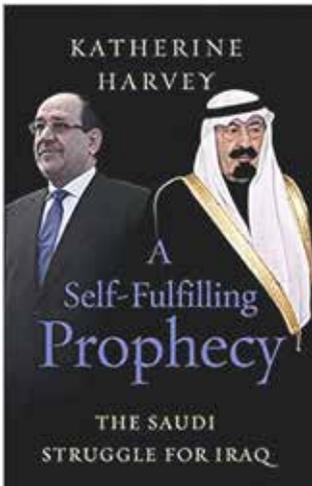
A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy
By Muhamed Almaliky

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Did Saudi Arabia miss a huge opportunity at an early engagement with Iraq?

A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: The Saudi Struggle for Iraq. *By Katherine Harvey. C. Hurst (Publishers) Limited, London, 2021. 320 pp.*



After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in the spring of 2003 that culminated in Shiite Islamists coming to power in Iraq, Iraq's relations with the Arab World became strained. The fallout took place during the height of Shiite-Sunni tension in the region, and was assumed to have pushed Iraq further onto Iran's side. The country that stood out in its persistent refusal to engage with Iraq for most of the past eighteen years was Saudi Arabia.

Although Saudi Arabia severed its relations with Iraq in 1990 in the wake of

the 1991 Gulf War, the monarchy seemed to have preferred keeping a weak Saddam over empowering the Shiites of Iraq, and by extension Iran. For this reason, the royal family voiced a strong objection to the 2003 war with the conviction that a Shiite-ruled country could disturb the balance of power in the region in favor of Iran, which would exploit the political vacuum in Iraq to advance its decreed expansionist agenda in the Gulf region and beyond.

Additionally, in the views of the Saudis and Sunni Arabs in general, Shiite political ascension in Iraq would constitute an unprecedented anomaly in the history of the Arab World: none of the twenty-two Arab states comprising the League of Arab States is ruled or has been ruled by Shiites for centuries. Indeed, Shiites comprise an average of only 11 percent of Arab Muslims and an average of 17 percent of the entire Muslim population worldwide. Even the only two Arab states in the Arab World with a Shiite majority, Iraq and Bahrain, both have been ruled by Sunni minorities since their inception in the early and late 20th century respectively.

The concern for the Saudis was that U.S. involvement in a Saddam-ousted Iraq could lead to a Shiite takeover. Their demographic majority could mean that elections would naturally turn out in their favor. That worry materialized in the January 2005 elections when the Iraqi Shiites competed under one electoral list and won the majority of votes, propelling them to power that they have held onto ever since. Suddenly, the Saudis felt they had a new political reality on their northwestern borders to contend with. The obvious policy choices for them were either to accept the new Shiite regime in Iraq or undermine it.

Over the subsequent few years, they trod both directions but worked more to subvert the Iraqi Shiite-led government than to accept it. That policy proved counterproductive to Saudi interests, not only because their efforts to overturn events in Iraq failed, but their refusal to establish an early presence in Iraq, by default, gave way to the interference of Iran. Judged by this outcome many observers and analysts of the region now think that that policy was decisively erroneous.

In her book *A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: The Saudi Struggle for Iraq*, Katherine Harvey discusses at length the Iraqi-Saudi relationship post the 2003 Iraq war and concludes that King Abdullah Al-Saud's refusal to engage with Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki helped push Iraq further into Iran's embrace. She invokes American sociologist Robert Merton's popular notion of "self-fulfilling prophecy" to explain the consequences of the Saudi policy toward Iraq. By creating an enemy-image of

Shiite-led Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, Riyadh helped make an unnecessary adversary of Iraq while the latter started reciprocating with similar attitudes in later years.

The Faults in Saudi-Iraqi Relations

The long-standing animosity between Shiism and Wahhabism, the Islamic Sunni subset embraced by most Saudis including the royal family, dates back to the mid 18th century. Wahhabi scholars went to the extent of calling Shiites heretical. This tension was further inflamed by the 1979 revolution in Iran and the subsequent establishment of Shiite clerical rule that called for exporting Shiite revolutionary fervor beyond Iran's borders. That call resonated profoundly with Shiite Islamists of southern Iraq, and was readily heeded by the Iraqi Al-Dawa Islamic Party (founded in the late 1950s by the late Mohammed Baqir Al-Sadr, a Shiite intellectual and political thought leader) which supported a form of Islamic rule that challenged the secular nationalism of Saddam's Baath party at the time.

Those developments and traveling ideologies prompted an eight-year war between Iraq and Iran in 1980 in which Iraq invaded the latter to prevent the export of the Iranian Revolution's ideas to the country. In the later years of the war, Saudi Arabia would come to the aid of Iraq when Iranian forces advanced to the depths of Iraqi cities and towns. Ever since, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been locked in a regional conflict amounting to a cold war fought via regional co-religionist proxies.

The 1980s also witnessed the growth of

Shiite opposition to Saddam Hussein in the south of Iraq. Facing persecution by the regime, Shiite Islamic leaders scurried to Iran where they consolidated their presence, formed militias, and received training, finance, and organizational support from the Iranian Quds Force, the subsidiary of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in charge of foreign operations.

Iranians tried to mold the Iraqi Shiite leaders in their image, and even force them to pledge allegiance to their form of rule. This pressure caused a schism within the top ranks of Al-Dawa party. Party chiefs such as Ibrahim Al-Jaafari and Nouri Al-Maliki did not yield to Iranian coercion and consequently left Iran to settle somewhere else. Later statements by Al-Maliki and others underscored the tension between the Iraqis and Iranians during those formative years. Although Baqir Al-Sadr, the founding father of contemporary Iraq's Shiite political thought, was sympathetic to the Iranian revolution and a student of Khomeini's himself, his vision of Islamic rule in Iraq differed from that of his mentor. He rather envisioned a political system whereby governance would be dictated by the collective wish of Muslims (*Wilayat Al-Umma*) as opposed to the Iranian version, *Wilayat Al-Faqih*, which vests most powers in the highest jurists.

The split within Al-Dawa gave birth to the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). SCIRI subsequently formed the military wing, Badr brigade, which operated under the command of Quds forces in launching attacks on Iraqi territories and siding with Iran during the war. After the

fall of Saddam, both groups, Dawa and SCIRI, returned to Iraq to form the United Alliance (UIA) alongside other internal Shiite groups. UIA, in various reincarnations, has dominated the government ever since, with the first three prime ministers hailing from the original Dawa branch while SCIRI controls key parts of the security forces and other critical posts.

Mirroring Back the Role of Enemy

The nuances of Iraqi Shiite politics and their implications are the subject of Harvey's book. The book makes its central point in the notion that the Iraqi-Iranian alliance was not an inevitable outcome. Rather, the absence of Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arabs in Iraq in the face of grave political and security challenges created a convenient space which the Iranians exploited to advance their agenda in an Arab country and beyond. King Abdullah's fixation on the Shiite-Sunni divide and the trauma left by the Iraq-Iran war made him resistant to engaging with Iraq's Shiites. Consequently, by painting Iraqi Shiites in an enemy image, the king inadvertently converted them to a real enemy. In other words, Iraqi Shiites did not start off as natural adversaries of the kingdom but, by being treated as such, they eventually mirrored that image and started acting on it.

Al-Maliki's attitude and behavior, for instance, radically shifted after the 2010 elections. During his first term, Al-Maliki approached the Saudi issue from a position of confidence: he was vetted and supported by the Americans; his victory over the Iran-backed militias of Muqtada Al-Sadr in the 2008 Battle of Basra, and

his overall non-sectarian approach to governance, were cases in point. In the period between 2006 and 2010, he may have genuinely wanted to balance Iran's influence with that of Sunni Arabs, Saudis being key.

Leading up to the 2010 elections, Al-Maliki saw that Sunni Iraqis would not join his newly formed political bloc and King Abdullah was not sparing any efforts to deprive him of a second term by supporting his rival Ayad Allawi. When Al-Maliki lost the elections, he was faced with the choice of conceding to Allawi or pursuing another path in order to retain power. That second path entailed he would have to lean on Iran to secure a second term. It also meant returning to the all-Shiite bloc he had tried to split from in an attempt to chart his own course as amply explained throughout the book.

The 2010 elections' ultimate outcome implied that Al-Maliki now had to concede more to Iran's demands; he would lose the reason to be sect-neutral and he would fight to remain politically viable. All of that deprived him of the independence he had enjoyed during his first term. Moreover, 2010-2011 saw the withdrawal of the U.S. forces (his backers), the resurgence of Sunni attacks, and the war in neighboring Syria during which he perceived the Saudi stand on removing Al-Assad to imply that he would be toppled as well. He began acting with obvious paranoia: arresting Sunnis on suspicion, conspiring to remove key Sunni political stakeholders, and cracking down on Sunni protesters in Hawija in 2013. Al-Maliki's animosity toward Saudi Arabia became

more salient in 2013-2014 leading up to ISIS's incursion in mid-2014, in which Iran was seen as leading the first efforts to combat ISIS whereas Saudi Arabia was explicitly accused by Al-Maliki of having somehow supported it.

The idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy, then, addresses exactly this point. The concept was first coined by Merton in 1948, who described it as a form of cognitive bias where an individual lives up to an erroneous image drawn about them by another, leading to an unnecessary hostility between the two. Applying psycho-social observation to international relations, Harvey explains how Saudi Arabia missed an opportunity with far-reaching consequences by abstaining from leading an early engagement with Iraqi Shiites and the post-2003 Shiite-dominant government of Iraq by needlessly portraying them as the enemy.

The author bases her argument mainly on the premise that Iraqi Shiites are different from those of Iran, and that the diversity of their religious and political thought could have produced a more favorable outcome. Harvey highlights three points of distinction that separate Iraqi Shiites from the Shiites of Iran. First, the Shiites of Iraq are ethnically Arab; thus, they share this identity with the rest of the Sunni Arab World. She points to statements made by several Iraqi Shiite leaders, among them Al-Maliki and Al-Hakim asserting their Arab identity in hopes that their words would find a resonance among their fellow Arab statesmen.

Second, Iraqi Shiite Islamists did not

necessarily seek to duplicate Iran's political model in Iraq, as evidenced by the 2005 constitution. The Iraqi constitution espouses a classical democracy whereas Iran's constitution declares it an Islamic state where public affairs are regulated by Islamic laws under the guidance of the jurists. And third, the first three Shiite prime ministers are known to have refused to capitulate to Iran in prior years. Additionally, she points out that the estrangement that ensued between Iraq and Saudi Arabia was not for the lack of efforts on the part of the Iraqis, nor was it based on an initial desire to let Iran have unrivaled influence in their country. Rather, Shiites became alarmed and reversed course only after seeing King Abdullah undermine their rule in the period leading to 2010 elections.

"The Logic of Enmity"

Harvey anchors her analysis of the Iraqi-Saudi dynamic on theoretical concepts rooted in the international relations' schools of realism and constructivism as well as cognitive and political psychology. She refers to Stephen Walt's factors undergirding state alliance such as aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capability, and intention to explain how the Saudi king perceived Iran's threat. Also, her research points her to the work of the constructivists Alexander Wendt and Michael Barnett on the critical role identity plays in how threats are perceived among states. In this sense, Iran—and by extension Iraq—was singled out as the "other" when ascribing political identities to countries in the region.

Therefore, in her final analysis, all three

critical factors of threat perception aligned to alarm the king: a different identity, greater power, and aggressive intention. But in mistakenly lumping Iraq and Iran into one political camp based on sect alone, the king ignored other identity characteristics that Iraq shares with Sunni Arabs such as ethnicity, tribal ties, culture, and language while projecting sectarian identity as the sole defining political feature. Consequently, by placing Iraq in an enemy image, he would interpret all its moves and actions as hostile, forcing Iraq to ultimately mirror back that image.

What Harvey describes as the "logic of enmity" surrounding the Iraq-Saudi relations during the ten-years of King Abdullah's rule was further compounded by the way foreign policy decisions were made in Saudi Arabia. In this regard, she alludes to the three classifications of foreign-policy-making by Margaret Hermann, namely: the predominant actor, single coherent group, and fragmented multiple-actor, and singles out the predominant type to describe King Abdullah's style of conducting foreign policy. It seems as though King Abdullah was notorious for concentrating foreign policy decision-making in his own office, and he especially monopolized Saudi-Iraq policy and rejected all opposing views from within the upper echelon of the royal family as well as from foreign allies such as the Americans and other Sunni Arab leaders, who were in favor of opening to Iraq.

Still, Harvey does not overlook personal relations as another determining variable of foreign policy in the region, where local customs sometimes prioritize personal

ties and trust over deliberated policy decisions. She highlights a particular incident that took place between King Abdullah and Prime Minister Al-Maliki in 2006 which appeared to have created bad blood between the two leaders for their entire reigns. The incident revolves around a visit by Al-Maliki to Saudi Arabia upon assuming his post as the first constitutionally elected Shiite prime minister of Iraq after Saddam Hussein. King Abdullah, in what appeared to have been a gesture of goodwill at the time, offered Al-Maliki a lavish reception only to backtrack and reverse course drastically afterwards.

It was speculated that the reason for this decision was that Al-Maliki failed to fulfill promises he had made to the king during his visit. Even though the author, despite noticeable efforts, was not able to pinpoint the nature of those failed promises nor why they were so consequential in sealing the fate of Iraqi-Saudi relations for at least a decade, the incident testifies to the fragile grounds on which those relations stood. It underscores the skepticism harbored by the king toward normalizing relations with the Shiite regime, rendering any wrong move by the Iraqis grave enough to break them. After that incident, the king resorted to his old notion of calling Al-Maliki and his government “untrusted Iranian agents”.

Could It Have Been Any Different?

The question left unanswered by Harvey is: had it not been for King Abdullah’s intransigence on one side, and Al-Maliki’s novelty on the other, could matters between the two countries have been different? Other political events

suggest that when the Saudis interfered in other troubled countries in the region, they often lacked the strategy, power, and networks to have any meaningful impact. On the other hand, had the Iraqis and Saudis actually engaged with one another, to what extent would the former have benefited from a Saudi presence against Iran and would have Saudi engagement been sufficient to neutralize it—even if Iraqis were indeed serious about re-engaging with Sunni Arabs?

Iraq’s political landscape is too complex to explain or predict what might have been. It remains true that an early engagement by Saudi Arabia and other key Arab states like Egypt would have been positive for Iraq’s overall trajectory, at least symbolically. Regardless of whether this missed opportunity would have shaped events differently or not, engagement would have at least provided Iraq with other options.

Besides its recounting and analysis of the Saudi-Iraqi relations, the book provides detailed accounts of the most critical events, policies, and decisions that shaped post-Saddam Iraq. Complex events are summarized and presented in little over 250 pages. Harvey details the role and positions of key political parties and actors internally and externally influencing the political landscape and disentangled some of the complexities and ambiguities surrounding Iraq after Saddam Hussein, especially around the issue of Shiite politics. In this sense, the book serves as a quick reference for researchers on Iraq’s history after the fall of the autocratic leader.

By providing these details, the author attempts to offer ample context in which post-Saddam Iraqi politics played out and to which the Saudis and other Sunni Arabs were apparently oblivious. The curious question is whether this oblivion was deliberate or not; this, the book does not answer, pointing out the ambiguities and silence surrounding foreign-policy-making in Saudi Arabia. Even after King Abdullah's death in 2015, Saudi officials would balk on providing useful answers. The speculation around broken promises by Al-Maliki to the king may not be given much credence in Western analysis but, in the local context, it could be quite consequential. Personal politics is rooted in the very nature of tribal norms and customs of the Arab gulf monarchies and sheikhdoms. But it is not all personal; the speed in which that overture broke down between King Abdullah and Al-Maliki highlights the magnitude of suspicion the Saudis had toward Shiites ruling in Iraq and their hesitation to readily accept it, where the burden of proof also fell on the Iraqis

to demonstrate to the Saudis that they were indeed different.

In the world of politics, identity politics can be put aside to allow for interests to rule and shape relations. This was not the case in the Iraqi-Saudi relationship. The current Saudi king and his active crown prince may be trying to reverse some of the damage done but it might be too late in post-ISIS Iraq, where Iran seems to have cemented its presence. However, the ongoing efforts remain worthwhile, especially in the context of rising discontent over unruly militias supported by Iran. It is important to note that even though the book is heavy on blaming the Saudi side, Iraqi Shiites had their own share of missteps that allowed Iran to interfere.

Although Saudi Arabia might have correctly prophesied that Iran and Iraq would find partners in one another, the kingdom did not strive enough to change that prophecy. However, that opportunity still exists. 