

A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: the Saudi Struggle for Iraq. By Katherine Harvey (London: Hurst & Co., 2021), xx + 365 pp. Price HB £35.00. ISBN: 9781787385665

For all the uncertainty and polarisation that followed the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Bush administration was determined to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime and to build a system virtually from scratch. Amongst the multiple hindrances to the titanic endeavour of stabilising the emerging political project, one proved to be crucial: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was unwilling to bring the new Iraq in from the cold. This book, beyond addressing the persistent analytical gap on Saudi-Iraqi relations, offers a compelling story that challenges long-held assumptions about the nature of Iraqi politics, and whose effects are still felt nowadays.

Dr Katherine Harvey organises the book around a powerful argument. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Iraq, for the most part of the twenty-first century, has been both driven and led to a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Saudi leadership refused to normalise relations with post-2003 Iraq in virtue of an unwavering perception whereby the Iraqi state had fallen under the control of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Carried by a profound animosity, it was King Abdullah's conviction that Iraq posed a threat to Saudi Arabia, and it ought to be framed and treated as such. However, the argument goes, there is clear evidence that suggests Nouri al-Maliki was not aligned with Iran in the first place, nor interested in turning Saudi Arabia into an enemy. It was Abdullah's decision to sideline Maliki that pushed the latter to the pro-Iranian camp, instead of the other way around.

The absence of literature problematising the bilateral relationship is quite surprising. Rather, it has often been addressed as part of broader geopolitical cleavages along sectarian lines¹, or as a space for conflict and contestation between regional rivals.² The 2003 turning point has provided the basis for many accounts focusing on regional and international developments (not least, the US-led 'war on terror'), as well as on domestic politics. For example, Wehrey's book³ refers to the emerging status quo in Iraq to explain the relations between the Saudi regime and its Shi'a nationals. A number of academic articles have commented on aspects of the Saudi-Iraqi interactions and, more recently, noted a period of warming exchanges. Nonetheless, more comprehensive attempts to unpack the relationship are long overdue. This is why the book's purpose is encouraging. In a more theoretical vein, Harvey aims to dissect the intricacies of foreign policy decision-making in admittedly opaque settings, shedding light on the thinking of key political figures, their sets of beliefs and (mis)perceptions.

The book's theoretical and empirical framework is designed to look into the minds of King Abdullah and Nouri al-Maliki, where subjectivities and different strands of information merge and result in policy decisions. As a former intelligence officer in the

1. For instance, Elizabeth Monier (ed.), *Regional Insecurity after the Arab Uprisings: narratives of security and threat* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

2. Amongst others, Simon Mabon, *Houses Built on Sand: violence, sectarianism and revolution in the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

3. Frederic M. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: from the Iraq war to the Arab uprisings* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2014).

US Navy, Harvey is well situated to conduct this kind of inquiry. Her experience surely informs her treatment of the decision-making process and the triangulation of sources required to make substantive claims. Bruce Riedel, the director of Brookings Institution's Intelligence Project, includes a foreword that endorses the book's findings. Being an early career researcher at Georgetown University, Harvey is making a good start.

The book relies on a conceptual device that has been at the centre of intellectual debates for decades: threat perception -and its impact on alignment decisions. Without devoting too much attention to ontological or epistemological considerations, Harvey articulates an eclectic model drawing on the constructivist and realist traditions in IR together with elements from political psychology. She cleverly inserts the concept of 'enemy image', which will carry a great deal of explanation. The list of chapters keeps the guiding thread not only due to their chronological order, but most importantly because they present a story of path dependence where threat perceptions, even if ill-funded, may survive new developments.

Besides filling the gap mentioned above, Harvey contributes to the empirical literature on how cognition defies purely rationalist understandings of decision-making. She allocates considerable effort to the strategies of inclusion and exclusion, through the delimitation of identitarian boundaries, that actors attempted to enact for pursuing different objectives, which ultimately fed into the Saudi stance towards Maliki and Iraq. Harvey's approach restores the agency of actors embroiled, yet often neglected, in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The diversity of socio-political actors in Iraq invited for negotiation and contestation amongst themselves, whilst interacting with regional and extra-regional powers in ways that question simplistic principal/agent or patron/client models. Furthermore, the case study sheds light on how particular decision-making structures at a given time can determine policy outcomes in authoritarian settings.

Regarding this last point, however, the book faces challenges in affording a robust and consistent explanation. Especially when it comes to Saudi Arabia, the contours behind high-level decisions are extraordinarily secretive. As Harvey is compelled to admit, this sets limits on the availability of evidence and makes it relatively tempting to jump into incomplete conclusions. There is also the analytical risk of taking policymakers' claims at face value. Diversion and deception could be at play. Moreover, Harvey's theoretical template for threat perception, despite being clear and quite intuitive, could have gone a step further. It falls short in theorising how the factors (identity, estimation of intentions, and relative power) interact and whether exists an order or hierarchy amongst them. Also, the longitudinal case study that she puts forward presumes a lack of variation in each of these variables. The transformation of the relative power distribution amongst Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia between 1979 and 2003 could have received more attention and introduced further nuance.

Overall, this is a gripping and thought-provoking book. It challenges ideas that still populate public discourse and certain academic and policy circles in a concise and accessible manner. It is a cautionary tale for policymakers in their convoluted practice, but I believe that IR and Middle East students would equally find it useful.

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