

DISCUSSION

Round table seminar on Arab–Iranian relations*

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Introduction

Ziad Hafez

General Secretary of the Arab National Congress

Welcome to this seminar convened by the Centre for Arab Unity Studies to discuss the topic of Arab–Iranian relations. This seminar is one of the centre's attempts at greater openness towards our neighbouring countries. I believe that, with regard to the centre's aims, we are striving to establish a historic bloc composed of the Arab nation, Iran and Turkey that is based on equal relations and not rivalries as well as integration and not supervision. Moreover, I believe that these discussions are very necessary. This is, firstly, in order to eliminate points of misunderstanding and, secondly, to define the common issues on which we can work. Today, we have a special paper prepared by Talal Atrissi. So I will let him present this paper and the main points on which he wishes to focus.

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Working paper on Arab–Iranian relations

Talal Atrissi

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The invitation to discuss the reality of Arab–Iranian relations and their future comes at a time of unprecedented regional and international circumstances. This is in comparison with the centre's previous activities and conferences on the same topic since there has been a change in circumstances, tensions, violence and instability either within the Arab countries themselves, between these countries and Iran or between the United States and Syria.

For many years, the discussion on these relations has faced the challenge of 'terminology'. When we speak of Arab–Iranian relations, it is assumed that we are faced with two sides: the Arabs on one side and the Iranians on the other. However, the reality is quite the

reverse. If Iran represents one side, then the Arabs do not represent such a side. Their problems with Iran differ and vary, and in fact not all Arabs have problems with Iran. Whenever meetings take place between the Iranians and an Arab party, this is in a bilateral form with a specific Arab country in order to discuss specific issues. The Arab League, which is supposed to represent the Arab side, has no role in the discussion of these relations. At this stage, we can observe that the Arab tension with Iran comes mainly from Saudi Arabia and is not an overall Arab tension. For example, when Saudi Arabia called for the breaking of relations with Iran, the only Arab countries joining it were Bahrain (the sole Gulf state), Sudan and Somalia. Even the Arab League did not meet to adopt a similar position. This kind of problem must be taken into consideration when discussing the facts of Arab–Iranian relations and their future.

The international situation

The administration of President Barack Obama was committed to not becoming involved in new wars in the Middle East. This followed the setbacks suffered by the United States during its occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and its failure to prevent Iran from continuing with its nuclear programme as well as Israel's failure to destroy the resistance movements in Lebanon (during the war of July 2006) and Palestine (during the recurrent attacks on Gaza in 2008, 2012 and 2014). This adherence to non-intervention was accompanied by an announcement by the Obama administration that it was moving its strategic priorities to calmer waters in order to confront the mighty future power of China.¹

The 'optimistic' belief prevailed that this American disengagement would grant more opportunities for cooperation between the region's powers (the Arabs, Turkey and Iran). Nevertheless, the opposite of this happened as the conflicts and confrontations worsened, caused by ambitions to expand influence, the fear of declining regional roles or the desire to revive alliances. There is no doubt that the USA helped to support and encourage these conflicts and confrontations. This was, firstly, because its choice to replace its strategic priorities did not mean that it had left the Middle East and was not concerned with events there and, secondly, because it was incapable of leaving the countries of the region to manage their own people and nations by themselves.

Russia moved from its defensive and hesitant position of dealing with the 'Arab Spring' and its repercussions towards a combative position in the Syrian crisis. Similarly, Russia's relations with Tehran were strengthened during their political dealings over this crisis and Russia's direct military intervention. Any reading of the regional and international situation, even the relations of the region's countries with one another, can no longer ignore this Russian presence, its military bases on the Syrian coast and its direct involvement in the war against terrorist organizations in Syria as well as how that has affected the regional forces benefitting from this intervention (Syria and Iran) and those disadvantaged by it (Saudi Arabia and Turkey).

It is noticeable that Russia has not committed itself and its policy to this 'alliance' with Syria and Iran. Rather, it intended to cooperate with the major forces among the other countries of the region. Hence, it left the doors open for relations and dialogue with Saudi Arabia while, at the same time, it broke off relations with Turkey, applying threats and direct pressure (after Turkish forces shot down a Russian warplane on

November 24, 2015). What may be noted about Russia's complex role is that while it has a role in spearheading the axis fighting to prevent the fall of Syria, it is moving towards a Turkish–Saudi–US axis and preparing to extend its dialogue and cooperation with the parties of the other axis, including Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This makes it possible for Russia to fulfil the role of a mediator between the opposite parties.

Iran's nuclear agreement with the West

The nuclear agreement between Iran and the West was reached after 12 years of negotiations and a series of harsh international sanctions on Iran. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia stood opposed to this agreement which was considered an historical achievement by Obama and a historical mistake by Benjamin Netanyahu. For Israel, the problem was allowing Iran to continue the enrichment which could produce a nuclear weapon at some point and so Israel demanded a complete end to Iran's nuclear programme. For Saudi Arabia, the problem was not the nuclear issue but the breaking of the political and economic chains on Iran and the recognition of its influence in the region at a time when Saudi Arabia was engaged in a conflict with Iran over this influence and role. Saudi fears were also connected to the USA's replacement of alliances with its strategic priorities, namely its move towards an alliance with Iran and away from Riyadh. This feeling of frustration at American policy was perhaps one of the causes of tension in Saudi regional policy.

Some analysts thought that the Iranian nuclear agreement could offer the opportunity to take a first step towards a new security order in the Gulf region which might improve relations between Iran and the Arab Gulf states and help limit American military engagement:

For over three decades, the question of who controls the Persian Gulf has formed the basis for America's massive military build-up in the region. At the heart of the region's security dilemma is a clash of visions: Iran seeks the departure of U.S. forces so it can exert what it sees as its rightful authority over the region, while the Gulf Arab states want the United States to balance Iranian power. (Wehrey and Sokolsky 2015)

Furthermore, the Iranian nuclear agreement with the West poses the issue of Iranian–American relations and how these might have an effect on the USA's other allies (specifically Saudi Arabia) as well as on Iranian–Arab relations in general.

It is clear that there was overwhelming pessimism among Washington's allies on reading the possible consequences of this agreement. In their view, the mutual understanding between Iran and the USA would make the two parties more prepared to coordinate and cooperate in order to solve other issues in the region. Similarly, the agreement would pave the way for Iran and other Western powers to implement trade, oil and economic treaties and contracts. This would push Iran gradually to withdraw its hostile discourse towards the USA. Consequently, the USA would come to recognize Iran's influence and its peaceful nuclear programme. This scenario assumes that Iran would return to being an ally of the USA, just as it was during the era of the shah, at the expense of Washington's allies, particularly Saudi Arabia.

In fact, what really happened following the nuclear agreement was contrary to this hypothetical scenario, both with regard to the Iranian leadership's position towards the USA and the USA's policies and attempts to impose new sanctions on Iran due to its

use of ballistic missiles. The American nuclear agreement with Iran does not mean the latter has been given free rein in the region. It is clear from the conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain and Palestine that the USA has not withdrawn its interest in these areas where there is a clash with Iran's role and influence. For his part, the Supreme Leader of Iran neither refrained from attacking the USA before and after the signing of the nuclear agreement nor from inviting Iran to close its doors culturally and economically to the USA.

Following the nuclear agreement, Iran will maintain its former alliances with both Syria and China, on the one hand, and with the resistance movements in Lebanon and Palestine, on the other hand (as well as reviving its relationship with Hamas). Thus, Iran can face the USA through either negotiations or confrontation and clashes. This confirms the fact that there is still a lack of trust between Tehran and Washington. Washington's acceptance of Iran's nuclear programme was not to turn an enemy into a friend but to neutralize a nuclear Iran and curb its ambitions, confirming through severe restrictions that it does not possess any nuclear weapons in the future.

Therefore, the agreement with Iran on its nuclear programme absolutely does not mean that Iran will normalize its relations with the USA, or change its policies, or renounce its influence in the region and its alliances and friendships with Syria and China. All the indications since the announcement of this agreement permit us to say that the scenario for an Iranian–American clash is more likely to continue in the next stage while Iran's cooperation with Russia and China will increase. That is evident through the Iranian–Russian coordination on the political solution in Syria and especially on Russian military intervention after Vladimir Putin's historical visit to Tehran and his lengthy meeting with the Supreme Leader in July 2015.

The idea of future Arab–Iranian relations should not be built on the basis that the USA will give Iran free rein in the region but rather be based on the ongoing clash between the two sides. Moreover, we must point out in this respect the noticeable development in the Iranian vision for the future of the region after its diplomatic success in realizing its nuclear achievement. Hesam al-Din Ashna, an advisor to President Rouhani, has called for the formation of a 'powerful region' instead of the conflict over who is the most powerful in the region.²

The change in Saudi policy

The Saudi leadership was replaced after the death of King Abdullah, with the new leadership renouncing its former policy which was based on 'supporting allies without direct involvement and holding reconciliations between the various countries'. The new leaders moved to engaging in war directly and forming military alliances (as in the war on Yemen). This is such that we may consider it a 'new Saudi Arabia' with which we have not been previously acquainted in terms of its involvement and action on more than one front.

The war on Yemen was an additional cause of Saudi Arabia's disagreement and tension with Iran. The Iranian leadership had sided with the Ansar Allah movement (the Houthis). Iran has continually accused Saudi Arabia of aggression against the Yemeni people whereas Saudi Arabia has repeatedly accused Iran of interfering in Yemeni affairs by supporting the Houthis. This war broke out a few days before the signing of

the Iranian nuclear agreement with the West. Hence, some analysts regard it as a Saudi attempt to disturb this agreement or to obstruct it by highlighting Iran's involvement in Yemen, especially as Saudi Arabia viewed the war as a means to 'eradicate the Iranian influence in Yemen which threatens the Kingdom and the two holy places (Mecca and Medina)'. Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations with Iran (after a fire in its embassy in Tehran) and also opened the door for direct and indirect communication with Israel in order to confront Iran (their common enemy). There were open meetings between Saudis and Israelis in international forums and incitement against Iran. In this conflict and rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the terminology of sectarianism (Sunnis and Shi'a) prevailed over the language of politics and geopolitics such that the USA began using this terminology in the manner of the Arab Sunni governments.

More serious than that was Israel's entry inside the lines of sectarian division. Israel's political, security and media leadership released statements asserting that the problem of instability in the Middle East was not due to the existence of Israel but due to sectarian and partisan conflicts. Israel also called for the formation of what it termed 'the alliance of those harmed' by the Iranian nuclear deal with the West, namely Israel and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, it called for the formation of an Israeli-Gulf Arab front to confront the influence of Iran in the Middle East.

This was expressed clearly by the King of Bahrain who called for Israel to protect the Gulf states from Iran. In the framework of this 'facilitation' for an open relationship with Israel and its strategic necessity for the Gulf states in order to confront Iran, the *Al-Akhbar* cited that *Jerusalem Post* newspaper revealed that the king of Bahrain Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa had confirmed that 'Israel is able to defend not only itself but the voices of moderation and the moderate Arab states in the region'. The paper pointed out that, in a meeting in Bahrain with Rabbi Marc Schneier, president of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding in New York, the king emphasized that the balance of powers in the Middle East between the moderates and extremists depends on Israel. The king called for 'expanding the confrontation against Hezbollah as much as possible in the Arab world', adding that the Arab League must adopt a position to destroy the terrorist organization (this happened later on). The rabbi confirmed that the king had also emphasized that 'it is just a matter of time before some Arab countries begin opening diplomatic channels with Israel'. Schneier also thought that 'the shared enmity held by the Gulf states and Israel towards Hezbollah and its Iranian sponsors must be seized as an opportunity to establish alliances with these countries which have previously been hostile to the Jewish state' (*Al-Akhbar* March 7, 2016).

Saudi Arabia went further in attacking the allies of Iran to the extent of calling Hezbollah a terrorist organization, despite its symbolism as a resistance movement against Israel. In the Arab League, Bahrain also retracted its solidarity with Lebanon against Israel. Saudi Arabia attracted the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to its policy on Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Similarly, it attracted the Arab League to the same position as well as al-Azhar which repeated the same positions of the Arab League (notably this happened with the election of Ahmad Aboul Gheit, foreign minister under the Mubarak regime, as the league's secretary general). Moreover, Saudi Arabia increased production of its oil and lowered its price to less than US\$40/barrel, an action which Iran and Russia regarded as a weapon directed against them. In any reading of the causes of tension, discussion of the issues in the conflict or assessment of the future of Arab-Iranian relations,

we must question Saudi Arabia's primary role in influencing the future of these relations, on the one hand, and Arab policies towards Iran, on the other.

The Syrian crisis

The conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran was not only over events in Yemen. This dispute has continued since the start of the crisis in Syria in 2011 and the outbreak of the uprising in Bahrain at the same time which was also supported by Iran. Saudi Arabia and Iran have exerted unusual efforts to deal with the Syrian crisis which continues to be the theatre for a complicated network of regional and international interactions. When these began, Sergei Larov, Russian foreign minister, said 'The crisis in Syria will threaten the future of the new world order.'

Among the Arab countries, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were at the forefront of the plan to remove the Syrian regime, and Turkey was the other regional power together with them. Qatar led a campaign to oust Syria from the Arab League, cut off relations with it and close its embassies. Saudi Arabia and Qatar openly provided weapons to the jihadist groups (the third generation of al-Qaeda) which flocked to Syria from all over the world to overthrow the 'infidel regime' just as their predecessors (the first generation of al-Qaeda) had fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet army in the early 1980s. Those groups later controlled large areas of Syrian territory, becoming a key part of the Syrian crisis, especially with the announcement of the so-called 'caliphate state'. This turned into a serious threat to the unity of Syria and regional and international alliances aimed to confront it.

In contrast, Iran stood on the side of the regime. Iran considered its removal as a blow to the axis of resistance since Syria was the connecting link in this axis and provided the strategic depth for the resistance in Lebanon. Therefore, Iran offered Syria all kinds of support fearing its overthrow by the other axis or the dominance of radical *takfiri* (excommunication) currents over Syria. This Iranian position towards the regime in Syria contributed to opening the way for sectarian and ethnic incitement against it (using 'derogatory' references such as Shi'i, 'fire worshippers', Persians). It also allowed extensive media focus to cast doubts on Iran's role in the region and its desire to expand and extend its influence.

The dispute was summed up by the argument over the future of the Syrian president. While Saudi Arabia stipulated the president's departure as a condition for resolving the crisis, Iran advocated that the president remain and stated 'It is the Syrian people who will decide the future of their country'. The crisis in Syria and the war taking place on its land turned into a complex regional and international equation. This was particularly the case after Russia also became a direct party in this crisis following its military intervention on the side of the regime and its allies (Iran and Hezbollah).

Five years since the war began in Syria and five years since the failure of the plan to overthrow the regime and to achieve complete victory against the armed groups, the first signs of the political solution are appearing on the horizon (the Geneva 3 peace talks). This raises the following questions about a framework for the discussion of Arab-Iranian relations:

- Are events in Syria a result of the former tension in Arab-Iranian relations? Is the desire to remove President Assad 'a strategic strike aimed at Iran'?

- Or are events in Syria and Iran's role in this crisis one of the reasons for the inflaming of tensions and the dispute in these relations?
- Is the political solution in Syria (which grants joint American–Russian supervision) the introduction to a settlement for other crises with regard to the areas of struggle and contact (Arab–Saudi and Iranian) in Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain and Lebanon?

Plans for division

The countries of the Arab community and their Muslim neighbours are witnessing an unprecedented state of tension, armed conflicts and instability. This has been a continual state for some years since the so-called Arab Spring inasmuch as the security and political scene has come to provoke anxiety and fears about the fragmentation of the Arab societies and also the division of their countries. This is especially as certain Western research centres, Western leaders and researchers have proposed plans to divide both Syria and Iraq, for example, along sectarian and ethnic bases under the pretext of solving the conflicts there. Others have stated that this is the end of the 'Sykes–Picot' configuration and the maps of the region are being redrawn.

This unprecedented situation has arisen from the decline and collapse of the Arab Spring. Researchers disagree over how to describe it and define its aims after it opened the doors to bloody internal conflicts in every Arab country as well as opening the region's doors to regional, foreign and international meddling and ambitions. Examples include plans for the division of Iraq into three sectarian statelets or the division of Syria (with a statelet for the Kurds in the north) similar to the division of Sudan. Hence, it has become necessary to ask questions about the interests of the regional powers, or their fears (Iran and Turkey) about these hypothetical plans for division and how the Arabs should handle them.

The 'caliphate state'

The 'caliphate state' has become part of the scene of political, sectarian and strategic conflict, rivalry and threats. The project of the *takfiri* organization ISIS – an acronym for the 'Islamic state in Iraq and Syria' – turned into a 'caliphate state' which threatens the fabric of the many diverse Arab societies. More serious than all this is the change in priorities which this project poses for itself. The 'caliphate state', the killing of its rivals and enemies (the closest enemy before the enemy furthest away), the fight to survive and expand, these have become the most necessary tasks above anything else and above any other threat, such as the Zionist threat, or threats of poverty, unemployment, underdevelopment and illiteracy.

The rise of these extremist Islamist and *takfiri* groups has contributed to further complicating the conflicts in the region. These groups became key players in the local and regional scenes, having occupied extensive areas of Arab land in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. This is such that this control has been reinforced by the ideas and plans about division which we have mentioned. The rival forces have exchanged accusations about their relationship with ISIS. Whereas Saudi Arabia considers it a Syrian or Iranian product, the media calls the rebels Saudi and Qatari. Iran suspects Saudi Arabia, together with Turkey

of supporting ISIS, arming and supplying it with the fighters who go to Syria in accordance with these two countries' strategy to overthrow the regime.

The presence of ISIS and its spread into Iraq (its occupation of Mosul), Syria (the caliphate's base in Raqqa) and Yemen (its control of Hadhramaut) has further complicated Arab–Iranian relations. Instead of all the powers unifying to confront the common threat represented by this organization, three different rival alliances have been formed to oppose it. The first is the international alliance led by the USA which is composed of more than eight countries. Over a year-and-a-half have passed without this alliance having dealt ISIS any real blow. Rather, the USA has faced accusations that it has helped ISIS in several regions and also ignored listening and surveillance equipment about the open military movements of ISIS and its leaders. This has led to the belief that the USA has no serious intention of destroying this organization. The second alliance is the Syrian–Iranian–Russian alliance with Hezbollah (3+1). This alliance has succeeded in directing heavy attacks against ISIS, the al-Nusra Front and other groups in Syria. This has been sufficient to greatly change the balance of power on the battleground after September 2015 since Russia joined in directly with a hundred rocket strike operations by its warplanes on ISIS locations which is now in retreat. The third alliance is the 'Islamic alliance' announced by Saudi Arabia, formed of 35 Muslim countries to fight terrorism. However, in reality this alliance has still not seen the light of day. Despite the fact these three alliances agree on fighting terrorism, they nevertheless do not cooperate with each other to achieve this goal. This makes fighting this terrorism one of the most important issues in the discussion of Arab–Iranian relations in the near future.

The Turkish model

Turkey has directly entered the region's crises, particularly the Syrian conflict. Turkey bet on a regional role for the Muslim Brotherhood after it came to power in Egypt and Tunisia which would allow Turkey to be a leader or authority for the Brotherhood. However, this plan came to a dead end after the Brotherhood's failed experiment and the failure to overthrow the regime in Syria. This compelled the Turkish leadership to strengthen its demand for President Assad's departure. At this time, Turkey faced several accusations from Russia and even Western parties that it was supporting and sending arms to the terrorist fighters of ISIS after Turkey had strongly opposed Russian rocket attacks on the strongholds of ISIS, al-Nusra and other *takfiri* forces. Iran was at great odds with Turkey over Turkey's position towards the Syrian regime, the nature of its intervention in the Syrian crisis and its relationship with the terrorist groups.

Nonetheless, in discussing Arab–Iranian relations, we must note the following in the Turkish political 'model':

- Turkey disagreed with Saudi Arabia over its position towards the Muslim Brotherhood and the regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt which Saudi Arabia supported and Turkey considered illegitimate. Despite this, Erdoğan favours 'strategic cooperation' with Saudi Arabia to confront the influence of Iran and the Russians in Syria.
- Turkey disagreed with Iran over its position on the Syrian regime and President Assad as well as its cooperation with the Russians against ISIS. Nonetheless, Turkey continued

to maintain relations with Iran and did not cease communications and visits between the two parties. Ahmet Davutoğlu went to Tehran in early March 2016 to discuss with Iranian officials the role of mediator in order to reform Saudi–Iranian relations as well as to request their support for the same role to remove tension in the Saudi–Russian relationship. Moreover, Davutoğlu talked about ‘peace in Syria’, respect for the unity of Syrian territory and increasing trade between their two countries to approximately US\$30 billion in the coming years.

Whatever is said about the reasons for this visit, Turkey’s fears about a Kurdish region on its borders, the economic loss after Russia’s boycott against it or Turkey’s assessment of Iran’s position after the nuclear agreement, we must consider Turkey’s ability to overcome all these complications and disputes. Turkey has moved without any hesitation to develop its relationship with Tehran and in this relationship it has kept itself neutral from the crisis between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as the Saudi war on Yemen. This model must be kept in mind when considering Arab–Iranian relations and their development.

Reading the reality and future of Arab–Iranian relations assumes that we consider all the regional and international changes as well as the changing policies of the countries in the region, their aspirations and fears and the challenges facing them. Furthermore, the desire for these relations assumes that we notice the dangers of Israel’s calculation on the continuation of conflict and fragmentation as well as on the alliances with ‘those harmed’, the normalization of relations with the Arabs to confront Iran and what this would entail with regard to lowering the prioritization of the Palestinian cause, obscuring the Palestinian people’s intifada and their ongoing struggle.

The regional situation

The preceding discussion of regional and international changes, shared threats and fears among the Arabs and the search for common opportunities and interests allows us to ask and debate the following points and questions.

The causes of tension and issues of disagreement

- What are the actual reasons (strategic, political and security) for the tension in Arab–Iranian relations?
- Who are the regional and international powers that have a positive or negative influence on these relationships?
- What is required from both parties in order to reassure the opposing party or parties? How do we determine the nature of the common strategic threat?
- Is there an Arab–Iranian problem, or are we facing a Gulf–Iranian or a Saudi–Iranian problem?
- Is the arrangement of Saudi–Iranian relations the first step to removing tension in Arab–Iranian relations?

The parties in the dialogue

- Who is/are the Arab party/parties which ought to sit at the table for dialogue and negotiation with Iran to discuss these relations?
- Can the Arab League undertake this role in its current state (the absence of Syria, the dominance of Saudi Arabia)?
- Is the dialogue of religious institutions (al-Azhar and Qom), for example, the best way to a road map to improve these relations?
- Must we resort to regional or international mediators to organize these relations, such as Russia or Turkey or other countries?

Priorities for building trust and developing relations

- What are the priorities for cooperation which may contribute to being a cornerstone for building trust and developing these relations?
- Achieving a political solution in Syria?
- Fighting terrorism (ISIS)?
- Supporting the Palestinian cause and the resistance?
- The unity of Syria and Iraq's territories?
- The shared economic interests after the lifting of sanctions on Iran?
- Common Arab–Iranian security in the Gulf, to replace American strategic priorities in the Middle East?
- The formation of 'the powerful region' of Arabs, Iran and Turkey?

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COMMENTARY

Arab–Iranian relations: between the preoccupations of the past and aspirations of political idealism (with particular reference to Egyptian–Iranian relations)

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The Islamic Republic of Iran is the product of the great Islamic revolution of 1979 against the shah, the firm ally of the Americans and Israelis. It is a state and a revolution: a state which has founded its system according to the religious authority of the jurists, one of many independent judgements in Shi'i Islamic political thinking.

It is a revolution against the imperial or monarchical system of rule that prevailed in Sunni Islamic thinking. The revolution was also against America's regional system in the central Arab–Islamic region, in general, and the Arab–Persian Gulf region, in particular, that it described as the 'Great Satan' (the USA) and with it the 'Little Satan' (Israel). The Islamic Republic of Iran holds a particular position that Israel is historically doomed to cease existing. This position is based on the dominant fundamentalist position

of the ruling political class under the Supreme Leader of the Iranian revolution, its founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and the leader after him, Sayyid Ali Khamenei.

The embodiments of the revolutionary understanding that have merged into the Iranian state include the occurrence of a kind of convergence and cross-fertilization between the Iranian 'revolution-state' and the followers of Shi'ism across the central Islamic world, from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan to the Gulf peninsular belt in the countries of the GCC, especially Kuwait, Bahrain and the eastern regions of Saudi Arabia.

The 'revolution-state', therefore, found itself facing a reality surrounded by three branches:

- An alliance system made up of the USA and the GCC countries, especially during the three Gulf wars (1980–88, 1990–91, 2003–11) in which the 'revolution-state' lost militarily during the first and subsequently benefitted indirectly from the second and third.
- A political vacuum left behind by the Russian intervention in Afghanistan. This ended in a completely disastrous failure that paved the way for the major collapse of the Soviet Union, then the Afghan–Pakistani chaos, the events of the US war to overthrow the Taliban regime, the total military occupation afterwards, the partial occupation in Obama's second term and the American withdrawal from Iraq. However, the political vacuum in Muslim Southeast Asia, the Caucasus and around the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan does not tempt the Islamic republic into direct action other than to maintain the appropriate minimum of its strategic and security interests along the lines of contact between the political and demographic geography where American dominance and Russian penetration is slow.
- What the Islamic republic is, and has been, tempted by is realizing the strategic benefit and geopolitical advantage which is the general and perhaps complete vacuum that has extended across the Arab Gulf region for exactly the last two decades. No one has been able to fill it other than two powers from outside the Arab region, namely Turkey and Israel. Therefore, the rarely visited republic must reveal its revolutionary face and the demographic area available to it within the complex mix of the population of the Gulf coast, the Arab peninsula, Syria and Lebanon and above all Iraq. Iraq has been suffering a loss of place and status after its three wars, especially after the US occupation led by the 'madmen' of the White House and the American political collective in Spring 2003.

If we examine the issue generally from the viewpoint of ideo-political idealism, we find the following:

- (1) An effective belt has been formed from the four major regional countries in the central Arab–Islamic region: Egypt, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia or perhaps the GCC led by Saudi Arabia. These are the building blocks in the four pillars of the natural regional structure. Inevitably, between them they have complementary roles in order to serve the Arab–Islamic nation at its central heart. It may be appropriate to think in the future about establishing a common economic region (the reality of what is imagined) to share the benefits among all the peoples in the region, with a push from the four major regional powers. This may mean building a regional system, or rather a new regional system. Why not?

- (2) The precondition for the efficacy of this imagined regional system is the exclusion of foreign interference by the big global powers outside the region, especially the USA. This should also include China, India and Russia (most of the BRICS countries – (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) except for what is based on their members' common interests with the region.
 - Here we note that the USA has played an effective role in obstructing plans for regional integration in the east Asia region. It has done this through its interference of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the group of countries of Asia and the Indian Ocean, and plans for partnership across the Pacific Ocean with the American leadership itself, but excluding China. As well as this, there is the partnership between the USA and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and between ASEAN and the European Union. In order to undermine the plan intended for east Asian integration, the USA actively and effectively interfered with all the parties one by one. Its intention was to provoke and magnify the disputes between the main Asian countries (China/Japan, China/India, China/Taiwan), especially those between China and its neighbours in the south and east China seas, including the disputes between China and Vietnam and China and the Philippines. This also included the disputes between Japan and Russia over the Kuril Islands and between China and Russia over land in the Asian-Islamic belt in Central Asia (which had previously been part of the Soviet Union).
 - Therefore, we should absorb the clear lesson from this and avoid the effects of foreign penetration in the current stage of American hegemony. This is as well as the projects which may follow to expand the influence of alternative new powers in light of the anticipated multipolarity.
- (3) The strategic belt contiguous with the cultural central Arab-Islamic region is Africa, both east and west. This is in addition to the exchange of interests with countries in the BRICS group, if this continues and is activated.
- (4) Following the USA's exit from the sphere of influence in the region, it is necessary to curb Israel and not merely contain it. This aims to impose a just plan to settle the Palestinian issue by using all the means available. That includes supporting the resistance to the occupation and the ongoing Israeli aggression.
 - From the ideo-political standpoint, as well as the ethical, there is a definitive need to build a cultural region that is free of Zionism. Whenever it is mentioned without Zionism then it is without racism. The United Nations General Assembly rightly asserted in 1974 that Zionism is considered a form of racism (although this resolution was later revoked in 1991 under pressure from Israel and the USA).
 - As for the actual situation on the ground, is this a binational state for Arab Palestinians and Jews without racial discrimination? Or is this an intractable two state? This will be determined by the developments in the balance of powers which will be to the benefit of the Arab-Islamic cultural project united with eastern Christianity in accordance with the cultural orientation of modern humanity.
 - That is the overall choice which emerges from the ethical-ideo-political idealism based on the foundations of cultural identity, sharing common interests and benefits, resisting foreign penetration, especially from the USA, and stopping Zionism until it ends. This historical choice supports the dialectical changes based on and expected from the birth (or should we say the 'generation') of a

new multipolar, or perhaps non-polar, world order, on the way to the real democratization of international relations. This is surely an order that is the antithesis of the present unipolarity.

- However, history does not always proceed according to plan. Rather, it is full of unexpected twists. Nevertheless, we turn to address the cultural and revolutionary Arab-Islamic powers which are united with eastern Christianity against political Judaism, namely Zionism as racism. We turn to these powers so that they can defeat the twists of a blind and unclear history and take it towards the path of the clear and ethical ideal. This they must do as much as possible in light of the conditional necessity of history with its interactive relationship between the objectivity of the being and the subjectivity of the person – if this is the true expression connecting historical inevitability and the human will.

The revolutionary cultural forces must oversee other forces (the reality or the status quo), undertaking the role sometimes of an honest advisor, a guide at other times and resisting the elements of the possible absolute power. These forces, to which we place our hopes, are Arabism and a harmonious Islam, as we have mentioned more than once. These are the forces of dynamic leadership among the most aware and sound elites in Arab countries from Egypt to Morocco to the east and the Gulf, from Iran, which combines the revolutionary vessel with the framework of the cultural state, and from Turkey, the son of history and geography that is rooted in the region itself.

All must realize the enormity of a historical task burdened with obstacles. In doing so, they can oppose the blind current of pragmatic history with a leadership guided by the plans of ethical-ideo-political idealism. Thus, history will be able to see.

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Round table discussion

Amin Hoteit, Lebanese political analyst

There are at least three Arab groups today with a position on Iran. The first group identifies with the Iranian policy which calls for making powerful or effective strategic alliances that are not subject to revision or examination in the foreseeable future. Contrary to this, there is a second group that is openly in disagreement with its enemy Iran. The third group is in a grey category and develops its position towards Iran according to circumstances and the level of pressure from one group or another. Therefore, in its dealings with Arabs, Iran is faced with three types of Arab groups and not just one.

As for the factors influencing the relationship, the Arabs are not free to build their relationships or ties to Iran, especially those in the second and third groups. If the first group which wishes to be a strategic ally/allies with Iran possesses the ability to decide independently and with free will, then it would build this relationship. I do not believe that the other groups possess this freedom. Hence, there are significant influencing factors and forces in the relations with Iran and these include regional as well as international forces. The question raised in this discussion is whether the dealings between the second and third groups and Iran should be aimed directly at the Arab party, or through an indirect approach via influential forces. For example: we have a relationship

with the USA so that it allows the Gulf states to have relations with Europe. Or, we get closer to Iran by ignoring the relationship with the forces influencing it.

I believe that any thoughts of a direct relationship between Iran and the parties of the second and third group without taking into consideration the influential forces, would be a waste of time. Therefore, to the extent that Iran's relationship with the influential forces is reconciled, we can talk about the possibility of determining the first and second groups' relations with Iran.

With regard to the nature of the relationship and its types, several questions arise in the fields of international relations and strategy building. First, is the relationship to which we aspire in this framework an integrated relationship in the context of building a Middle East for its people, opposite to a Middle East for the West or the a colony of the West? This is a fundamental question because if we specify the nature of this relationship with regard to building a Middle East for its people, this reverses matters. The second question is whether this a belligerent and dismissive relationship; in other words, a relationship of conflict between a group of Arabs and Iran; not only in the strategic space but also a conflict in actuality? The third question is, is the relationship one of positive coordination that distributes roles in the region in a way that does not put the other in a difficult position but allows them to benefit from the other's work?

Nevin Massad, Professor, Department of Economy and Political Science, Cairo University

First, one of the main reasons for tension in Arab–Iranian relations right now is sectarian tension (Sunni–Shi'a). The paper places the responsibility for this sectarian tension on Saudi Arabia but in reality no one is innocent of fanning it. This calamity which has afflicted us is linked to the American occupation of Iraq in 2003. It is true that Saddam Hussein was not democratic, but it is also true that he was not sectarian. The Americans' 'most-wanted list of 55 individuals' included a large number of his Shi'i deputies. After that, we began to hear of sectarian quotas, killings over identity and clashes. The snowball effect grew and moved to Yemen, then from Yemen to Syria and from Syria to other parts of the Arab world. Therefore, no one is innocent of igniting sectarian tension and this is the key issue that we ought to be concerned with today.

Second, there is the subject of the Iranian nuclear dossier. In his paper, Dr Atrissi discusses this as though it were removed from its context and surroundings. Why do the countries of the Gulf, mainly Saudi Arabia, not enquire about the nuclear weapons of India or Pakistan? This is because India and Pakistan are not perceived as a direct threat to the Gulf countries. However, when Iran states that it controls four Arab capitals, does this not call for concern? When there are calls to remove the Al Saud family from the guardianship of the holy places – and I am not defending anyone and, of course, do not favour Saudi Arabia – does this also not call for concern? When Iran interferes in Yemen which represents an integral part of Saudi national security, should this not be considered a threat? Saudi Arabia is concerned about Iran's nuclear weapon and is justified in this.

Third, the current Saudi leadership has an ambitious plan for the leadership of the Arab region. There are many statements related to this and here Saudi Arabia has been put in confrontation with Iran. This differs from the policy followed by King

Abdullah which is obvious in Saudi Arabia's role in Yemen and its role in Syria. In fact, there is an ambitious Saudi leadership that wants to expand and, as a result, is conflicting with Iran's role.

I see these as the three main issues. As for the struggle over influence, the paper asks us to talk about Arab–Iranian relations but it actually speaks specifically about Saudi–Iranian relations and omitted other countries. Egypt is absent, of course, and there is a decline in the Egyptian role which we are aware of. However, I would like to cite, as one example, that when the Egyptian revolution began on January 25, 2011, Sayyid Ali Khamenei immediately hastened to say that this revolution had been inspired by the model of the Iranian revolution. This was illogical. We, in Egypt, queried this statement. The revolution of Iran was in 1979. Events in Egypt took place in 2011. Egypt is an ancient, long-established and important country in the region with its own history of revolutions. It is impossible for us to see the Egyptian revolution as a product of the revolution of Iran. I would like to add that this is a sensitive point for not only Egypt but for any other country and there are justifications for this.

Abdul Hussain Shaban, Iraqi analyst, legal expert and university professor

We cannot discuss Arab–Iranian relations in isolation from Arab–Turkish relations. I can expand the scope further as there are four communities living in this region: the Arab community, the Iranian community, the Turkish community and the Kurdish community (although the Kurdish community is absent from any dialogues because it does not have its own state).

If we want to understand Arab–Iranian relations, we cannot ignore history. It forms an image of the present and also gives us an image of the future, whether by benefitting from its lessons and warnings, or producing new ideas to overcome the trials and tragedies which Arab–Iranian relations are facing. Historically, there was a struggle between the Persians struggle and the Safavids to establish borders. This struggle involved conflict, wars, occupation and attempts to control Iraq. Settlements were made and agreements were signed in this respect, including the issue of the Altaluk border. In accordance with international law, the Altaluk border is the closest point in the middle of the river's course towards the sea and, when the sea level falls with the tides, part of the river flows historically into Iran. A hundred years later, the agreement of March 6, 1975 was signed in which the former Iraqi regime offered huge concessions of water and land to the Shah of Iran. The Shatt al-Arab is now on the Iranian side by virtue of this treaty. Very regrettably, major concessions were made and the former Iraqi president who signed this agreement was also the one who discarded it, instead of taking certain measures by which a later settlement could be made to amend it. This led directly to war. The disputes and the retrieval of rights could have been solved using peaceful means, negotiation and arbitration by resorting to mediation by international organizations, since war was not justified at all. This was an enormous mistake on the part of Iraq. It rendered a service to Zionist imperialism. Iran rightfully defended its lands and resisted the aggression that lasted from 1980 until 1982. In 1982, Iran liberated its lands but also made a huge mistake by reversing the scenario from a war that had begun as an offensive attack by Iraq and defensive nationalism by Iran, continued for eight more years, from 1982 to 1988. By virtue of the change in the configuration of the battle

maps and battlefields, the conflict gradually turned into an offensive war of aggression by both sides, and subsequently, became an offensive war of aggression by Iran and a war of nationalist defence by Iraq.

Iran has its plan against imperialism, part of which we respect. This is the part against Zionism that upholds the liberation of Palestine and supports the peoples of the region. However, the latter part of the Iranian plan interferes, in one way or another, in internal Arab affairs and creates tensions. The first part of the plan is sectarian or partisan and there is another aspect to it that relates to Iranian nationalist geo-strategy and interests in the region.

The former Iraqi regime was not sectarian, as shown by Dr Massad, but some of its policies were sectarian. This is especially true as half a million Iraqis were forced to emigrate to Iran under the pretext of their 'Iranian affiliation' and that they were 'a fifth column'. This attack gave rise to the sectarian struggle which later ensued and to which the American occupation of Iraq was dedicated, especially with the distorted form created by Paul Bremer and the Iraqi transitional governing council, and not only with regard to Iraq; it was also intended to be spread across the countries of the region with Syria today being the best evidence of that. This is in addition to the plans for division that began many years before with Bernard Lewis and still persist today.

Mustafa El-Labbad, Al Sharq Centre for Regional and Strategic Studies, Egypt

In reality, when talking about Arab–Iranian relations, despite all the good feelings of most of us here present, these relations have nevertheless been dominated by a belligerent character. Therefore, the effort demanded of us all is more than double.

Dialogue alone will not solve problems, not between Arabs and Iran or Arabs and Turkey, or between any other two communities. Dialogue is, however, required at this present moment to relieve the congestion that exists in the Arab world between the Arabs and Iran. Here I disagree with Dr Atrissi that the problem is only Saudi–Iranian since it is bigger than that. Taking as an example the popularity of the Lebanese resistance in the region in 2006 and then in 2016, we notice a big difference. This is not attributable to the effectiveness of the Saudi or Gulf media but rather to other factors.

The fact is that there is a key point absent from the conversation, perhaps from the paper which is the balance of powers in the region. Iran is a historical neighbour and an historical entity which has not descended on the region with darkness like the Israeli occupation. Nonetheless, the imbalance in the powers in the region – and this is absent from the paper and the conversation – increases this rival neighbour's appetite for playing bigger roles. Consequently, the main point is that if we now begin a dialogue on the issues in the region as explained by Dr Atrissi, we will carry on a discussion with Iran about issues related to Arab lands, either in Iraq, or Syria, or Yemen, disregarding the political and ideological core of the subject. This does not imply that there is an Iranian 'plot' but it is a reality that is necessitated by the current balance of power.

On the other side of the spectrum are the regional and international forces with negative and positive influences on these relations? I believe that, internationally, the USA is among the forces of negative influence because it has no interest in an Arab–Iranian rapprochement in any form. Nevertheless, there are other international forces that do have an interest in this rapprochement for the sake of their own interests and these forces may be

Russia and China within certain limits. Israel is at the forefront of the regional countries with a negative influence on the Arab–Iranian rapprochement. However, this matter does not only depend on these countries since I believe that both India and Pakistan do not either have a direct interest in an Arab–Iranian rapprochement.

The final question is a whether there can be settlement in Saudi–Iranian relations that would facilitate the removal of tension between Arabs and Iranians. I do not think that Saudi Arabia will now enter into a dialogue with Iran and this is not because it is intrinsically a Sunni–Shi'i issue or that such reasoning is foolish and backward but rather because it would also position the Arabs in their dialogue as losers from the outset. If we apply this foolish reasoning used by the Gulf to Iran, particularly that the Iranian Arabs are actually among the Shi'i Muslims while the Iranian Sunni Muslims are the Kurds and the Baluchis.

Furthermore, I do not believe that Saudi Arabia has any interest in a dialogue with Iran. This is because it needs to prevent Iran from reaping the fruits of the nuclear agreement by legitimizing its presence in the region. Sabotaging Iran is to prevent the normalization of relations with the Arab countries from succeeding and the benefits from being reaped. Therefore, I do not believe that Saudi Arabia will enter a dialogue whatever the talking points and whatever the framework are because the issue is ultimately political. The sectarian escalation and the discussion cover other geopolitical considerations.

Hassan Nafaa, Professor of Political Science, Cairo University

My personal opinion is that it is not possible to understand Arab–Iranian relations at the current stage in isolation from what is happening in the region as a whole. Therefore, isolating the causes which have led to our present state of tension between Iran and the Arabs in general, and Iran and the Saudi Arabia in particular, is impossible if we do not take into account the conflicts, or aspects of cooperation or changes in alliances which are occurring in the Middle East.

I believe that the principal problem which has led to this deterioration in relations is linked to the decline in the Arab regional system. At one time, there was an attempt to build an integrated Arab system. There was a main current that wanted to pull this Arab region towards a degree of coordination and integration or unity, whatever it may be referred to. However, this current was unsuccessful to the extent that it became the 'sick man' of the region. The Arab nation now reminds me of the reality of the state of the Ottoman caliphate directly before the First World War. As a result, it is this declining state of the Arab nation which is enticing the three powerful countries in the region, namely Iran, Turkey and Israel, to interfere in the Arab nation and thus inherit the legacy of this sick man. This is the essence of the conflict.

Historically, some of the conflicts in the region were nationalist. A type of Persian nationalism exists now but under the banner of radical Islam in contrast to Saudi Islam which is in reality Wahhabi Islam. However, in contrast, there is another type of radical Sunni Islam opposed to Saudi Wahhabi Islam as well as to the model imposed by Iran with regard to the leadership of the Muslim world. The fight for this leadership is sectarian since there is an Iranian model, a Saudi Wahhabi model, a model now proposed by ISIS (*Da'ish*) and other extreme *takfiri* groups. The latter has established a so-called 'state' and become one of the main players although they are not spoken of as such by anyone. The

entry of the Kurds has come in the midst of this chaos and they have also become a major player. Hence, it is no longer possible to talk about arrangements for the region without taking the Kurds into consideration.

I think that Israel is the party benefitting the most from all the conflicts taking place in the region (likewise, the Kurds in one way or another if events go in a certain direction), even if these are nationalist (Iranian, Arab, neo-Ottoman). Israel is tempted by all this and has a key interest given that it is battling with all the various sides. It is benefitting because there are, in fact, multifaceted plans to divide up the region. There are plans for a division proposed by American intellectuals and by Zionist diplomats, as shown by the plan of Oded Yinon. It is my opinion that if this tendency continues, it will eventually lead to Israel becoming the major power in the region and not Iran or Turkey. Indeed, Israel would become the main conductor of the interactions taking place in the region. We are talking about Arab–Iranian relations and today there is serious talk about a hidden Saudi–Israeli alliance or even a Kurdish–Israeli alliance sometimes under the pretext of fighting terrorism. This, however, would be an alliance against Iran that would claim Iran as becoming the primary enemy in the region.

Abbas Assi, Lebanese researcher

I have a question about the American withdrawal from the region. To what extent did this withdrawal push the Saudi regime to use a sectarian discourse in order to strengthen its popularity within Saudi Arabia, given that the USA's role was to protect this regime during its presence in the region, especially as this sectarianism accompanied the coming to power of the second and third generations in Saudi Arabia? (By the second and third generations I mean the new rulers among the grandchildren who are searching for legitimacy and popularity within the Saudi sphere.)

Maan Bashur, Lebanese, former Secretary General of the Arab Nationalist Congress for the period 2003 – 2006, and head of the International Arab Center for Communication and Solidarity

After September 11, 2001, a conference was held in Beirut to distinguish between resistance and terrorism in light of the American retaliation against terrorism. That day was the eve of the war against Afghanistan. A meeting held on the margins of the conference of the management of the al-Quds International Institute. Those attending included Sayyid Mohtashami who, at that time, was Deputy President of the institute's Council of Guardians. During that meeting, it was clear that the plan was taking off in Afghanistan and moving to Iraq, then to Syria and Iran. At that meeting, I mentioned that I hoped Sayyid Mohtashami would alert our brothers and sisters in Iran to this plan. I told him that if the Islamic republic did not take a clear position on confronting the aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq and that this would be interpreted by Arabs and Muslims as a purely sectarian position. This is because people would believe that Iran's caution was for sectarian reasons. I think that we have been paying the price for this ambiguity since that time. I am of the school that believed, and still believes, that Arab–Iranian relations must be in the best state, and likewise Arab–Turkish relations and Arab–Kurdish relations. This is because, with the integration of our powers, we can build an

independent region able to boost development and other activities. However, I believe that the real way to deal with this must be a greater degree of openness. I think that before we talk about a Saudi–Iranian dialogue, the dialogue must begin on the level of the Arab, Iranian and Turkish elites. This should be done by forming a think and action tank composed of a group of Iranian individuals close to decision-making centres in Iran as well as Arab individuals to put forward all main concerns.

The sectarian conflict is one of the results of the deterioration of relations. This is evidenced by the fact that these countries had an excellent relationship with the Shah of Iran who was Shi'i, Sufi and Iranian. The problem is political and I am completely sure that if the Islamic republic in Iran had a different position towards the Arab–Zionist conflict and the resistance, there would not have been these attacks against it. But that in itself would not be sufficient. This position must be strengthened. Just as we were telling our colleagues in Iraq, it is not enough that we are facing America, we must also strengthen Iraq in order to confront this war. Moreover, we will say to our colleagues in Syria, it is not enough for Syria to oppose an international conspiracy; we must also strengthen Syria to confront this plot by openness ... by dialogue. Therefore, I believe that what is required is a dialogue and review by all the parties of all mistakes committed. I say, as a man proud to be one of the first to stand up for the Islamic revolution in Iran that the Iranian leadership has to learn two very important lessons. The first is to abandon its negative position towards Arabism. If nationalism in Iran is fragmenting, then the Arabism in our countries with its link to Islam is a unifying factor. The second lesson is the issue of Iraq because, as some of our colleagues have said, this has led us to catastrophe. We will never be able to escape from it unless we succeed in creating a collaborative, reconciliatory and participatory formula that respects all groups of Iraqi society, Arab and Kurd, Sunni and Shi'i, nationalist and Islamist, because Iraq will not rise unless there is mutual understanding between its people. Any other plan to solve the problem in Iraq will, I believe, take us from one predicament to another. The same applies to the political solution in Syria which, I believe, must be the goal and with the participation of all the Syrian powers not associated with the American and Zionist project.

Hosam Matar, Researcher and writer specializing in international relations and regional conflicts in the Middle East

Arabs today do not have only one position but at least three towards Iran. There are those countries that see Iran as an enemy, other countries as a rival with which there can be mutual understanding, and countries that have woven either an alliance or partnership with Iran. The same can be found with regard to the political forces. There are political forces that are either against, competing or allied with Iran as well as civil society and other organizations and associations. The problem for the countries against Iran is neither religious nor even geopolitical. Rather, their problem with Iran is related to the political attitude towards the Arab–Israeli conflict and American domination. Each one of these country's position is different. For example, there are countries whose problem with the Iranian position is neither religious nor socio-political but relates to the Palestinian issue, while other countries are in geostrategic rivalry with Iran but accept the Iranian position from a religious standpoint.

When we discuss the issue of tension and Arab–Iranian relations, we must do so within this framework. Keeping in mind the diverse powers at play and their positions as well as the three types already mentioned, can help in answering why Egypt’s relationship with Iran is tense. Is it because there is a religious dispute, geostrategic rivalry, and economic rivalry or because of issues related to the revolution and Iran’s position towards America and Israel? This question must be addressed to each and every one of the countries concerned in order to know where the intersections and differences lie.

Secondly, I completely agree with Dr El-Labbad that the starting point of this dispute is the tension over the shift in the balance of power within the region. This shift began to occur in 2002. It explains the escalation in tension with Iran that began from 2002 specifically coming from the American and Gulf stances. This was caused by the region witnessing the rise of the axis of resistance led by Iran and the decline and fall of the axis of America and its allies. It also explains why the 2006 war on Lebanon took place as well as a series of other events. If the issue is not sectarian, it is related to the changes taking place in the balance of powers. However, I disagree with Dr El-Labbad’s statement that the conflict is not only between Saudi Arabia and Iran and that the change in the Arab people’s position towards the resistance is not linked to the Saudi media and what Saudi Arabia is doing! If we accept that the tension is a result of a change in the balance of powers, and we agree that 2002 and 2003 saw a change in the balance of power to the benefit of Iran, then it would be of no benefit to Iran incite sectarian elements and provoke Sunnis and Arabs against them for changes to occur in the balance of power. This is illogical. Rather, logic dictates that the Saudis found that the main tool to regain the balance was to use the most effective weapon they have perfected, which is to stoke sectarian conflict within the region to besiege Iran. This plan had begun before and is being consolidated today. The big problem today is in Gulf–Iranian relations, particularly Saudi relations. The Gulf holds its financial sway amid the decline and silence of the Arab nation and it is Saudi Arabia that is defining the Arab world’s choices about the relationship with Iran. Other countries are either silently neutral or complying because they are under material, financial and political pressure from Saudi Arabia.

I return to the point put forward by Dr Massad. She criticized Dr Atrissi’s paper because it states that the sectarian problem is with Saudi Arabia. It is true that the Iranians sometimes make mistakes of a sectarian nature. However, sectarianism is not a part of the Iranian strategy. This is an essential difference between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia’s strategy is founded on igniting a sectarian war and sectarian discord.

The BBC Arabic channel’s documentary ‘Freedom to Broadcast Hate’ (BBC Arabic 2014) investigated the television channels that incite sectarianism in the Arab world. The programme examined six satellite channels: three Sunni and three Shi’i. The results showed that the three Sunni channels were supported officially by Gulf countries and were broadcast either from the Gulf or from Egypt. As for the three Shi’i channels broadcasting this hatred, one was broadcast from London, one from Washington and one from Iraq which was hidden and had to be traced. The BBC stated that Iran had no relationship to these three satellite channels. We can also examine the Carnegie Endowment’s analysis of around 1.5 million tweets which came to the following conclusion: most of sectarian tweets originated from Saudi Arabia. More importantly, the majority of the sectarian tweets against Shi’as came from Saudi elites which others re-tweeted. The Shi’a tweets against Sunnis did not originate from Shi’a elites. No accounts were found belonging to

any individual Shi'a elite who was disseminating a sectarian discourse. The rest of the accounts sent re-tweets and it was clear that these belonged to ordinary individuals. Therefore, this proves that there is a sectarian policy in Saudi Arabia, and there is a very big difference between the Iranian position and the Saudi position (Siegal 2015).

Issam Namaan, Lebanese political writer and former Minister of the Lebanese Ministry of Communications

Following the ratification of the Iranian nuclear agreement between Iran and the six big powers and the violent conflict in and against Syria, the role of both Iran and Turkey in the conflicts of the west Asian countries is apparent. The importance of Syria in Arab–Iranian relations has also come to the fore. That is because Syria constitutes a common political, geopolitical and security part of the critical issues that are ruining the countries of the region, from the coasts of the Mediterranean westwards to the mountains of Afghanistan eastwards. These countries are affected by the repercussions and the challenges they include for the Arab nations, Iran, Turkey and Israel as well as Europe and America.

- Syria and Palestine: Syria has a strategic position in the heart of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Palestine has been and continues to be a key nationalist issue in the culture of Syria, for both its people and government, throughout its modern history. Moreover, it has represented a territorial issue which has been a prominent priority in different decades. The main nationalist goal of the forces active in these lands is to resist the occupation led by Israel and move from a state of division towards unity. Similarly, Palestine and Syria represent a strategic need for Iran as will be explained later.
- Syria and the Kurdish issue: in their attempt to reorganize the situation in the region, Britain and France gave the Kurds the right to a state in the Treaty of Sèvres of 1920. This land would necessarily intersect with that of Turkey, defeated in the First World War, as well as with the Armenian's aspirations for an independent state. Syria was positioned at approximately a central geographical point between the Kurdish areas present in Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Hence, it was inevitable that the Kurds, Syrians and others would have a role in the conflicts that erupted with the governments in the various regions where they were present.
- Syria and terrorism: terrorism in its primary form, namely al-Qaeda, began its attacks in various regions in the world but its first resounding blow was in the USA on September 11, 2001. Terrorism in its secondary form, namely ISIS, started its very powerful attack in Syria and then Iraq. It currently occupies large areas of both countries and has taken Raqqa in Syria to be the capital of its so-called 'caliphate state'.
- Syria and the issue of natural resources: inside Syria and in its waters, there is an abundance of gas and oil. However, parallel to the existence of these rich natural resources, there is the significant strategic fact that Syria is an obligatory passageway for oil and gas lines to extend from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf as well as from Iraq (and perhaps later also from Iran) to the coasts of the Mediterranean and Turkey and from there to Europe. This strategic fact seems to be hidden at the present time because of the violent conflict in Syria.

- Syria and America's role as the organizer of the conflict of regional players: in all the conflicts produced by the issues and challenges previously mentioned, there has been the key role played by the USA as an organizing force, on the one hand, and as a dominating force, on the other. Consequently, Syria, with its strategic central geographical location, remains the permanent area for the conflicts of regional players and the interference of the USA as the organizer of the power relations between them and as the main dominant player trying to protect its interests as well as the security of Israel.

The importance of Syria and its role in the current regional conflicts has grown after the signing of the nuclear agreement. Iran, free of the blockade and economic and trade sanctions and reclaiming its frozen assets, has returned to play a bigger role and is seeking to exercise greater influence in the countries of the region. The importance of Syria is evident here as a result of the close relationship of Iran, and likewise Russia, to the five key issues mentioned above. It is also a result of Syria's central location and role in the conflicts resulting from these issues, especially those connected to the Arab–Israeli conflict and terrorism.

Iran is concerned with Palestine due to ideological considerations, mainly religious, as well as political considerations. Iran's need for Syria and its role as an ally grew after the emergence and worsening of three extremely serious challenges. The first was Iran's concern about the effects of Israel's reaction to the nuclear agreement. Israel's anxiety, justified or contrived, might push it to aim a devastating heavy missile attack against Iran. Hence, Tehran decided to build a missile deterrent that would form an effective strategic equivalent to Israel's nuclear weapons. More importantly, Iran thinks that the effectiveness of its ballistic missile would be assured with the availability of launch bases from a position close to Israel, hence the significance of Syria in Iran's deterrent strategy.

The second challenge is the radical *takfiri* terrorism threatening the deep internal social fabric in Iran and Syria. Both these countries are pluralistic societies that include a variety of religions, sects, schools of thought and ethnicities. This terrorism, which resorts to blind violence as its method for killing, threatens all the countries of the region with a diverse makeup. If ISIS is able to take root in Syria and Iraq, it will be close to Iran, and thus Russia, thereby threatening their political unity and relationships with neighbouring states.

The third challenge is Iran's concern, and likewise Syria's, about any possibility that would lead to developments in Syria and Iran as well as Yemen, Turkey and Occupied Palestine blending together a new political and security order in the Arab world. This would include Egypt, Saudi Arabia and some of the Gulf countries. It would limit the influence of Iran as well as the efficacy of the axis of opposition and resistance composed of Iran, Syria and Arab resistance forces (Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and Hamas) in their confrontation with the USA and Israel in the region.

Ahmad Milli, Hezbollah Political Wing leader

Everyone agrees on the fact that Iran is a part of the region's geo-strategy. The West engages with Iran as a part of the region in international politics and strategies. After the American involvement in Vietnam, the Nixon Doctrine was applied to the region in the 'twin pillars' policy, the two pillars being Iran and Saudi Arabia. The practical

application of the doctrine took place in Oman with the Dhofar rebellion and simply translated into the entry of the Iranian army during the era of the shah into Dhofar where it destroyed the leftist revolt that had been troubling the monarchies. How is Iran of more value to the West and how is it of more value to us Arabs? In 1978, Israel invaded and occupied part of Lebanon up to the borders of the Litani River. This was the balance of local powers to the points of power we possessed as the liberation organization in 1978 and the occupation remained. The Israeli invasion was repeated in 1982 and the extent of the occupation was greater as Israel went into Beirut and occupied 40% of Lebanon's territory. Israel reached Mdeirej and blocked the Beirut to Damascus highway and the liberation organization left, causing the weakening of a critical power that was at the time the resistance. We ask ourselves the question why did the resistance not succeed in 1978? Why did it succeed in 1982 despite the fact that the domination and penetration were stronger? What I read and repeat now is that it was the entry of the spirit of Iran, and I do not say Iran, which changed the equation in Lebanon.

On the sectarian issue, I will tell a story to illustrate this. In 1988, there were problems and disputes in Lebanon. Françoise Chebbo, correspondent for *Le Monde*, visited the region when supporters in Dahiya were carrying pictures of Khomeini and the Iranian flag. She asked me irritably, 'Why are they with Iran?' My reply to her was 'We are not with Iran, Iran is with us'. She asked how and I replied:

You have known the region for decades, at the time of Nasser and the Shah of Iran, the Shi'i Shah of Iran. Did you ever hear of a demonstration in Lebanon coming out in support of the shah, or of any marches or demonstrations supporting Abdel Nasser?

On the plan for fragmentation, Dr Nafaa has shed light on the Israeli plans. I am saying that the matter began before 1982, in 1965 or 1966, at the peak of the nationalist rise. Abba Eban wrote 'There is not one Arab community. There is a Sunni community, a Shi'a community, a Maronite community and a Coptic community'. The most dangerous thing now would be for there to be plans for a real fragmentation and this is no longer theoretical.

Muhammad Sadiq al-Husseini, Iranian political analyst

The problem between Arabs and Iran is a political one. It was never anything else. There is one side that believes in resistance and another side which believes in compromise. In the era of Nasser and the Shah of Iran, the scene was reversed. Nasser represented the resistance and the shah chose compromise. Nasser used to say that this Arab nation extends from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf and he had no problem in saying this. This changed when there came to be a political problem with the shah who began acting directly against the Arab nation, wanting to eradicate resistance movements, and Nasser then called it the Arab Gulf. The problem is, therefore, political and not geographical or a problem of political geography.

Excommunication (*takfir*) has never caused wars. From the first day of the call to Islam when the prophet was still alive, some of his followers made accusations of *takfir*. What were the wars of apostasy? These wars were only because tribes refused to swear an oath of loyalty and pay alms, turning against the divine revelation. Sunni and Shi'a did not enter into it, these wars happened because of the issue of superiority. *Takfir* was not one of the reasons for the war but politics and authority were. At the

conquest of Mecca, Abu Sufyan said to Muhammad ‘Your sovereignty has become so great,’ to which al-Abbas replied, ‘This is not sovereignty, Abu Sufyan, it is divine revelation and prophethood.’ We have not come to fight you over sovereignty. Arabs and Iranians, and all these peoples and communities, are quarrelling over sovereignty, who will dominate and who will be controlled. If Iran or the Arab countries produce any movements or policies for domination over other countries, this must be fought by us all. Therefore, we as a group are in an Arab–Iranian dialogue. They say that Iran is interfering in Arab affairs. If Iran intervenes in the affairs of the Lebanese resistance, or the Egyptian or Saudi resistance, it has not interfered in Saudi affairs. For example, if Iran intervenes in Saudi affairs, not wanting a monarchy but wanting it to be a republic, this is interference. If Iran was not pleased with the Ba’ath Party and wanted to bring about a new party, this too is interference. However, when Iran defends Palestine in Syria, this is not interference. It is completely just as Saudi Arabia would be right to defend Palestine in Lebanon, Gaza and Arabism in Syria. Yes, it must defend Syria if it is facing any foreign attack. I am addressing a remark here to Maan Bashur: If Arabism attributes its meaning to European nationalism, a problem will arise among the Arabs and Islam since it is against the prophet’s saying that ‘whoever speaks Arabic is an Arab’. I regard myself as an Arab and an Iranian, and not a Persian (a free Arab Iranian Muslim defending humanity everywhere). Therefore, I name myself from the geography of the resistance and the history of the martyrs. What are the borders and who drew them for us, how and when did this happen. It happened when we were careless and it is not our doing. So I cry for the martyrs of Yemen, I cry for the martyrs of Iraq, for Bahrain, for the Arab Gulf, Najd and the Hijaz (of course, not for Saudi Arabia because it was a family that seized power there and we have nothing to do with it, not the Arabs, nor anyone). In every place, I cry for Nasser. We stayed in the streets for three days because of Nasser’s death.

Our task is how this Arab–Iranian bloc of Muslims together with Christians can all become one powerful bloc, corresponding with the idea of the great Egyptian strategist Gamal Hamdan when he indicated that If the Arabs, Iranians and Turks were to unite and create a power triangle, the map of the entire world would be changed. We are at the heart of the world, we destroy kings and appoint others as successors. Just as Sayyid Ali Khamenei would have to bear arms and expel the terrorists from the streets of Tehran if he did not stand with Syria. We did not stand with Syria because it is Alawite, or because it is Ba’athist, or because it is a specific system. We stand with it because it is Syria and if the western beasts who use Wahhabism control it, then all the countries around us would fall apart. Hezbollah would be gone, the resistance everywhere would be gone, Egypt would collapse and nothing would remain in the region. We are fighting in Syria in defence of the Arab and Muslim community and we come to fight with our hearts. Whether Hezbollah, Iran or anyone goes to fight, be they Syrian nationalist or Arab Christian, everyone is fighting in defence of this existence that is threatened by a Western imperialist attack. If I want to have a heart to heart Arab–Iranian dialogue and I want to save this community, then I believe that all these intellectual, ideological, religious, sectarian plans ... we will put them behind us. Every free person whatever he believes in can leave it in another place and go to the *husayniya*, to the mosque, with Abu Hanifah, with Ja’far al-Sadiq, wherever he wants to go, let him go. In politics, we have this saying, ‘Our creed is resistance, and their creed is compromise.’ (Two years ago, Sayyid Hassan Khomeini

wanted to deliver a speech to the public but Iran did not allow him to do this. This is the grandson of Khomeini – this is sectarianism! They shouted slogans at him, continuing until they were satisfied that he would not speak because his position was ambiguous. They told him, ‘Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah is the heir of Ruhollah [Khomeini], not you’. He left and was not able to give a speech in the presence of Khamenei and all the leaders of the community because they believe that Hassan Nasrallah is resisting the slogan, ‘Not Gaza, not Lebanon, my spirit is a sacrifice for Iran.’) If they leave, then whatever happens, to hell with Iran if it is not with the resistance and to hell with it a thousand times if it is not with Sayyid Nasrallah and to hell with it a thousand times if it is not with the resistance of the Arabs, with Arabism and with Islam which is liberating Palestine and making us proud.

I am saying to you, Maan Bashur, you say it is right for Iranians to be proud of their nationalism and you mean the Persians. The Iranians are not proud of their nationalism, they are proud of the trio of modernity, religion and Iran. This has existed since long ago and is not related to Islam, Shi’ism or Sunnism. We are Iranians in a country of civilization. At present, I am not happy as, unfortunately, there is no equality. Yes, I am happy for Iran because it is ascending but I also hope there is a good balance in the region for the Arabs. I also hope for the Turks to rise and become a ‘triangle’ which can defeat the world and give the real picture of this region because the peoples of the region are equal. Unfortunately, however, our Arab rulers have stamped on us and silenced us. We do not have what we are due and we cannot change the king or president of a republic by dreams alone.

Maan Bashur

I am struck that what you said is the complete opposite to what I meant, Muhammad Sadiq. I want to clarify this because this statement is serious.

I said that I understand Islam is necessary in Iran because there are numerous communities, whereas we consider that Arabism integrated with Islam is the element of unity for the Arabs. In Iran, there is a collection of different national communities, at least from my viewpoint. Secondly, I hope that we are being accurate. Throughout my whole life, I have only ever written words of praise for the Persians when I hear others attacking the Sufi Persians. I do not accept this onslaught because the Persians are an essential component in Iran and they are a part of our Muslim community. Lastly, Dr Mohtadi was present and perhaps also Sadiq al-Husseini at the last forum on Arab–Iranian relations. I recall a reformist delegate protested against the Iranian researchers who presented their papers in Arabic. Sayyid Khosrowshahi replied to her saying, ‘I am Azeri, not Persian’ and because of Islam we accepted Persian the language of Iran, but the language of Islam is Arabic and it is above Persian. From that time, I have always distinguished the fact that in Iran there are those who cling to the relationship with Arabism. There are ethnic disputes which we do not agree on. Our task is to strengthen the call for openness to Iranians, Turks and Kurds among the Arabs, to strengthen the call for openness to Arabs and others among Iranians and to do the same in Turkey. I believe that this is our message and our task. I hope that Sadiq al-Husseini has not forgotten that we were on Iranian television together. The former Iranian president’s visit to Baghdad during the American occupation was clearly criticized. Sadiq said, ‘This is something the Iranian president should not do

under the American occupation in Baghdad.’ However, I always feel that this line of discourse that refuses hostility to Iran and refuses subordination to Iran and others always confronts an issue with both sides; some accuse you because you are Iranian and others accuse you of being against Iran, and the truth resides in neither.

Mohammad Ali Mohtadi, Iranian researcher

In relation to assessing positions, our fellow participants have spoken at length and everyone has looked at the positions from their own perspectives. I believe that these conversations are complementary, although some of the participants spoke about what the press reports say on Iranian intervention in the Arab countries or Iranian influence and the like.

I would like, at this point, to confirm that Iran is neither looking for influence in the region nor is it entering as a competitor to any Arab or non-Arab state in order to spread its regional influence. Inasmuch as Iran is exercising its main policy of supporting the Palestinian cause and the resistance, from whichever side it is coming from, it disregards the criteria of nationalism and sectarianism. Likewise, Iran is confronting Zionist imperialist domination and is always acting to attain independence and independent development.

It was often said that Iran’s support for the resistance in Lebanon or Palestine is aimed at obtaining the ‘credentials’ to use pressure in the dialogue with the West. However, everyone has seen that in its negotiations with the big powers (5+1), Iran prevented any negotiation on regional issues. The Iranian negotiators always confirmed that they were not charged with discussing any regional topic outside the framework of the nuclear issue. Likewise, the negotiations were restricted to the framework of the nuclear issue only because Iran does not regard the resistance as a credential. Those in the resistance are friends and allies and they are not political credentials to be used for bargaining.

As for the accusation that Iran is interfering in Yemen or Bahrain, this is a big lie and an attempt by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to justify their suppression of the popular revolts that erupted in both countries in 2011 and are ongoing. Iran has no role in Yemen or Bahrain. If Iran had any influence in these countries, this influence has an intellectual and cultural character. It does not strike through the use of suppression or military force.

Iran’s main policy on Iraq is to maintain Iraq’s unity, both that of its land and people, by encouraging the national, religious and sectarian components of harmony and coexistence. Iraq is an important Arab state and a neighbour of Iran. Hence, there are historical, popular and cultural relations and what happens in Iraq has an effect on Iran domestically and on Iranian national security. Therefore, it is in Iran’s interest for Iraq to be united and secure. After the appearance of the *takfiri* and terrorist current represented by ISIS, Iran helped Iraq to combat *takfiri* terrorism. Were it not for this Iranian support, today the capital, Baghdad, and the city of Erbil in the Kurdish region would be in the grip of ISIS.

What is to be done?

- All countries must act to fight terrorism and free themselves of it. This goal cannot be achieved through military operations alone. There are also intellectual, cultural and economic aspects to combating this terrorism. Islamic scholars, religious and research centres have a big role in removing the religious cover from the heads of the *takfiri* currents in order to weaken the intellectual roots of *takfiri* terrorism. Then its financial

channels should be closed in order for military operations to be better and effective in destroying terrorism.

- In view of the developments that have taken place regionally up to now, it is clear that Saudi Arabia is the only state carrying out reckless policies in the region. The decision-makers in the country must be helped to realize the grave dangers of these policies. There are attempts by the enemies of the Muslim community to drag Iran into a clash with Saudi Arabia. The truth is that Iran has up to now exercised maximum self-control despite the multiple and ongoing provocations. This policy is interpreted in Gulf circles as weakness and they talk a lot about 'Iran, the paper tiger' and so on. However, Iran is continuing its wise policy and is convinced of it because Saudi Arabia is an important state in the Islamic system and its collapse, as a result of these foolish domestic and foreign policies, would not be in the interest of the Muslim community.
- The Arab League is experiencing difficult circumstances. There are those who believe the league is dying because its decisions have been appropriated by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This is only because of the decline of Egypt's regional role as the biggest and most important Arab and regional country. Therefore, Egypt must be helped to seriously regain the regional role it played on the critical issues of the Arab world and the Islamic world, and at the forefront of these are the issues of Palestine and the fight against terrorism.

Egypt is currently showing encouraging stances towards many of the regional crises, especially the crises in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. We must work with Egypt to develop these positions in proportion with its large political, intellectual and human capacities.

Ziad Hafez

Many of the observations I have made were dealt with by Dr Atrissi in his paper including, for example, the point about which are the Arab parties. This is a methodological point at the start of his paper and I believe that the question of what we should do is more important.

All the observations which have been raised intersect with and complement others but, disregarding the methodological issues that we have discussed, in my opinion, the problem of Arab–Iranian relations relates to political direction and political disagreement. There are certain issues that must be dealt with quickly and objectively at least from this discussion so that we can produce a conclusion.

Aside from the numerous opinions expressed on all the issues, the issue of Iraq and Yemen I believe are both currently urgent and pressing. I also believe that the Iraqi issue has priority and here I differ with Dr Atrissi. The Syrian issue is not the starting point. There is a problem that Iran has an essential role in Iraq, so how do we deal with this? Disregarding the distribution of responsibilities and tasks, the question remains of how we can get out of the Iraqi tunnel; this road to catastrophe that has empowered all the members of the axis of resistance. Look at what the Iranians are doing.

The crisis began in Iraq and I hope that the crisis will end there as well. I hope that in the remaining part of the discussion we will focus on this subject and how we assess this point so that we can really make an escape.

Nevin Massad

The role of the sectarian factor in the current scene has been spoken about. It is as if we are talking about Sunni and Shi'a elements of doctrine. This is not mentioned in Dr Atrissi's paper and not of course by me and not by those taking turns to speak. What I mean is that the use of doctrine to achieve political aims is not a position of Sunni against Shi'a but rather that doctrine is being used for political aims. When Iran intervenes in Yemen, it is interfering in a sectarian way and this is a sectarian strategy. In response to Hosam Matar, I am not talking about people on Twitter and Facebook, but about a strategy used by Iran when it intervenes for the victory of the Wifaq party in Bahrain, for example. This is a strategic intervention for a sectarian reason. Policy is used to employ doctrine only. Ayad Allawi is a Shi'a but he identifies with the American plan, Nouri al-Maliki is Shi'a but he identifies with the Iranian plan, Muqtada al-Sadr is Shi'a but his vision is Arab. No intelligent person would put all the Shi'a into one basket, but there are political plans in which doctrine is used. The discussion about Syria's usefulness, was this strategic or doctrinal, or something else?

Secondly, the diagnosis of the entire conflict as based on the position towards Israel (my creed is resistance, their creed is compromise) is not right. I do not imagine that anyone in the Arab National Congress and those sitting with us at the table has any other position than that of rejecting Israel and the Israeli entity. Dr El-Labbad stated that pictures of Hassan Nasrallah were raised in 2006 when he was the leader of the Shi'a Hezbollah but he lost his support after that. It is very easy for us to say that there is a conspiracy against Syria that aims to destroy it. By the same logic I could say that there is a conspiracy to destroy Iraq. Did Saddam Hussein not get a green light from the USA to invade Kuwait? Was Iraq not occupied by the USA? I could say the same thing. Yes, there is a conspiracy but there is also a political act, an idea that Syria is protecting the eastern front. I am sure that the survival of Assad's regime in a united Syria is only one opinion. At the same time, there is the notion that Syria is the target and not Iraq. There has to be one criterion or measure to judge these matters. There is a conspiracy targeting the entire region, Iraq before Syria. Therefore, we are talking about Iraq as the key not Syria because what happened to Iraq preceded what happened to Syria (and the tug-of-war of events that followed).

On the idea that Iran will not arrive at a mutual understanding with Riyadh, I think in fact that Saudi Arabia wants to look for a way out for itself to save face. If Saudi Arabia can talk with the Houthis when they are their main enemies in Yemen, then I imagine it is searching for a way out. We are trying to create this way out for it, not by intending to solve the problem with Iran but by intending to relieve the congestion.

Amin Hoteit

There is some misunderstanding. Sometimes we jump ahead but reach a logical conclusion that differs from what we wanted. We must distinguish between the subject of the conflict and the tools of the conflict. On the issue currently existing between Iran and the Arabs, there are the three groups which I have specified. The nationalist or sectarian issue, or call it what you wish, is the entry point in the conflict. But that is not where the conflict lies; the conflict is between the two plans. Iran adopted its plan after the revolution. It found that its political geography allowed it to launch a plan. This plan was clear

and it implemented it shamelessly. It said no east and no west and worked to build a strategic space that would lead to building a Middle East independent of hegemony. In this, it clashed with two factors, a regional factor, mainly the Gulf, and an international one that was generally strategic.

In reply to Dr Massad, when I talked about independent decisions, I did not mean general sovereign decisions. I meant precisely the decision of relations with Iran. I said there was a group of Arab nations that made an independent decision to set up a strategic alliance with Iran. Another group whose interests intersected with the interests of American hegemony (the Gulf) went for animosity with Iran. The third group is divided – and I insist on this – according to the level of pressure put on them that includes countries like Mauritania, for example. How has Mauritania been harmed by Iran? What is Iran's interest there? How did Iran go against it for it to respond to a request from Saudi Arabia or Djibouti or others? In building a relationship with Iran, one group has yielded to pressures and deviated such that if matters were left to it, it would go in another direction.

Another issue in relation to the Arab nations is that the main problem now is that some of the Arabs are incapable of establishing an alliance of powers or a rivalry of powers between them and Iran, or are unable to rise to the power which Iran has reached. I assert that the flagrant disturbance in the balance in powers is also one of the causes of the conflict. They asked for coexistence among the weak (stripping Iran of the resources of its power, either its power for alliances or for itself). I agree that Iran is not an angelic system innocent of mistakes but nor is any other state. The countries adopting their policy are starting from two standpoints: firstly, their political geography which prepares them to occupy a location, and secondly, their authority which they are able to exercise independently or not in making decisions. All these state's policies are built on these two standpoints, geography, representing the self, and will, representing independent decisions.

Abdul Hussain Shaban

We need to define the real problems facing us. There are a number of them which we must discuss frankly and also cordially, such as the issues of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Hezbollah, Bahrain, the Emirati-Iranian dispute about islands and the quadripartite dialogue on the issue of nationalism, especially Kurdish.

With regard to Shi'ism, I think that there are two misconceptions to consider on this subject. On the one hand, some want to give a foreign, non-Arab character to the Shi'as (in order to attribute them to another nationality). I believe that this is a great mistake, especially as the overwhelming majority of them are Arab. This is the first thing to be understood. The second is that the Shi'a are looked at as a united, tight, cohesive bloc. I do not believe that to be the case at all and neither can anyone claim to be speaking on behalf of or representing Shi'ism. I have said this time and time again; any one and every one, starting from Sayyid al-Sistani and ending with the most senior or junior scholar can talk to the people who follow him according to their doctrinal understanding. The Shi'a belong to different currents, parties and forces. They include communists, believers, atheists and unbelievers as well as nationalist Arabs, Ba'athists and the Ba'ath Party whose membership is 68% Shi'a. Where do we put these people? Do we list them in the column under Iran? Do we put them in a non-Arab framework? This issue is one we must stop to consider and it requires time for it to be studied further.

The second issue is that the Shi'a, specifically those in Iraq, are sometimes compared to the Shi'a in Lebanon. There is a fundamental difference between the nature of the Shi'a in Iraq and the Shi'a in Lebanon. The Shi'a in Lebanon are part of the societal entity of Hezbollah and Hezbollah is involved in all aspects.

Muhammad Sadiq al-Husseini

I would like to make an observation on methodology. You have not mentioned Palestine among the disputed issues. This is a key issue of contention between Iran and the Arab regimes, with each seeing a way to deal with, understand and liberate or not liberate Palestine. Consequently, whenever Iran approaches the subject of Gaza, it is regarded as interfering in Egyptian or Arab national security. Moreover, it is monitoring Arab national security in other areas in the Mandeb Strait. Wherever you go in the Arab world, Arab national security goes with you. This is a point on methodology that you have not dealt with.

Talal Atrissi (response)

We must thank everyone for presenting their different and varying opinions, some of which are additions to the paper and some of which were not dealt with in it. On re-reading and the three points, we see that some of the questions raised here were dealt with and while some others were not. For example, how can the Turks succeed in having good and positive relations with Iran despite their dispute with Iran over the important and essential matter of Iran in Syria (the position towards the Syrian regime)? I have put the 'Turkish model' between inverted commas. Why do the Arabs differ with Iran over Iraq and Syria when they cannot succeed in organizing their argument or cooperating in other areas where they have a common interest? The Turks and the Iranians both have an interest in developing economic trade cooperation. This is one of the openings to cooperation and the alleviation of tension.

Of course, it is natural that the debate has delved into tangential issues (details of the situation in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and other countries). How the debate must address these is another important matter. However, in my paper I was very economical because when I was commissioned to write a paper for this roundtable discussion. I said at the outset that I had tried to control all my inclinations and opinions in order to present an objective paper that could be the object of debate and to ensure a balanced approach. Therefore, I was not biased against Saudi Arabia. I am defending this viewpoint and regard it as correct that discussing Arab-Iranian relations today is a different matter to what it was seven or ten years ago when Qatar was closer to Iran than Saudi Arabia. If I were to discuss relations at that time, I would have put Qatar with Iran, or perhaps I would have put Abdullah Ali Saleh (Yemen) with Saudi Arabia. Each reading will differ. Therefore, I am of the opinion that relations should be discussed within the framework of regional and international interactions. I have tried to say this in my paper. Firstly, I said the international situation is tense and that today we are discussing relations that are different to what they were in the past. For 25 years there had not been such a tense situation, or wars, explosions and accusations. I also mentioned that the issue Iran faces today in the dispute is Saudi Arabia. I spoke about the Russian position in the region which is a new and international situation. I also discussed the nuclear agreement and their repercussions which is a regional

situation. I mentioned the change in Saudi leadership, the Syrian crisis, the rise of ISIS and the ‘caliphate state’. All these are variables and complications. I am reading Arab–Iranian relations through these complications and these regional and international interactions and changes. Hence, even at the end of the paper I asked, for example, whether there was an Arab–Iranian problem, or a Gulf–Iranian or a Saudi–Iranian problem? This question is still open and I am still not decided on whether I am personally convinced today that there is a Saudi–Iranian problem. But I have left the question open because I know it is likely that someone will disagree with me and say that the problem is not Saudi or Iranian. If conflict is possible, then the sectarian issue must be priority in any debate. So I wondered how could a discussion be initiated and with whom? Could it be with al-Azhar, Qom and Najaf, or not? Nonetheless, the prevailing opinion is that the region is suffering above all from a geostrategic conflict of interests in which religion and sectarianism is used and exploited. That being so, the dialogue must also take place around other points including interests, fears and threats.

I propose the idea that the Americans today are fighting from the rear and partially withdrawing from the region. Is this an opportunity for our countries to cooperate? One of the reasons for this change in the balance of power is the American withdrawal. Everyone has become able to do what they want. Each individual believes that today he has the opportunity to advance and seize or consolidate his interests. This may be an opportunity for mutual understanding between these powers. For Saudi Arabia there is concern. My opinion is that perhaps solving the Syrian crisis is the introduction to solving all the other crises. But this does not mean that if one crisis is solved, we will not hope for the Syrian crisis to be also resolved. If mutual understanding on Iraq can be reached, this would, of course, be a major step to improving relations, and the same applies to Yemen.

Notes

1. Obama explained the details of his ‘doctrine’ in Goldberg (2016).
2. In a statement made at the opening of the conference for Arab–Iranian cultural dialogue organized by the Iranian Cultural Consulate in Beirut in cooperation with the Lebanese University, March 1, 2016.

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