



## THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN SAUDI - IRANIAN CONFRONTATION

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### **Abstract**

*Culture is regarded as a good source to bring nations close to one another. Saudi Arabia and Iran are two important Muslim powers but their relationship has never been good throughout the history due to many factors. The factors that contribute to their worse relationship are cultural, economic, political, and sectarian. The Iranian revolution of 1979 escalated the tension as it challenged the hegemony of Saudi Arabia that was derived from Wahhabi sect by the Saudi Arabian rulers. Wahhabism is a Sunni sect in Muslims that has affected about all aspects of life not only in Saudi Arabia but in the entire Middle Eastern region too. The revolution of 1979 in Iran replaced the old monarchy and Khomeini introduced his own version of Islam like Wahhabism of Abd al Wahhab. Both Wahhabism and Khomeinism affected the cultures of Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively. In this paper, the role of culture in Saudi-Iranian relations has been highlighted.*

**Keywords:** confrontation, rivalry, culture, extremism, Wahhabism, Khomeinism

### **1. Introduction and Background of the Study**

Iran and Saudi Arabia are two leaders of Muslim countries. Iran is a Persian speaking country that leads the Shiite Muslims while Saudi Arabia is an Arabic speaking country that leads the Sunni Muslims. Their competition for the hegemony of Middle East is very old. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the Arabs conquered Persia and the Persian people became adopted Sunni faith. They remained Sunnis until the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the Safawid dynasty got the rule. The Safawids were Shiites by faith and they established Twelver Shiism (the largest group of Shiite Muslims). The Persian people changed their faith to Shiism. It created differences between the Ottomans and the Safawids (Vassiliev, 2013).



In the beginning, the differences were not taken serious by the Ottomans because the Ottomans had no interest in sectarianism. Another reason, which controlled their differences, was the religious faith of the Ottomans. The Ottomans followed Sufism (also called Barelvi group of Sunni Hanafi Muslims in India and Pakistan), which is regarded near to Shiaism. The Ottomans had great admiration for Ali (RA) and the Shiite Muslims liked that admiration, so they tolerated each other for some time (Winter, 2010). The situation changed when Shah Ismail introduced Imamia Shiism in his court. He persecuted many Sunni Muslims that angered the ottoman rulers (Gallagher, 2004). The tribes of eastern Anatolia declared Shah Ismail as their imam and revolted against the Ottomans. The revolt was met iron handed and was defeated in the battle of Caldiran in 1512. Despite that war, the Ottomans said nothing to the Shiites and gave them great respect. In fact, it was the policy of the ottomans to respect and tolerate other sects (Zarinebaf-Shahr, 1997). There was complete religious harmony until the birth of Wahhabism in 1744. Abd al Wahab was the founder of Wahhabi sect and his followers were known as Wahhabis. In the beginning Wahhabis were expelled from different places and they settled where they found the life comfortable for their sect. the good times of Wahhbism started when Abd al Wahab succeeded in convincing Emir Ibne Saud. In 1802, the Wahhabis declared war against the Shiites and attacked Karbala. More than 5000 Shiites were brutally killed, the tomb of Ali (RA) was attacked and the Wahhabis took everything they could carry (Kamil, 2020).

Wahhabi sect was in fact an anti-Shiite group that declared almost all rituals of Shiites un-Islamic. In 1818, the Ottomans attacked the Ottomans and defeated them. It was revived by Feisal I but was destroyed by Rashidiyah of Northern Arabia in the late decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Blanchard, 2015). Abdur Rahman bin Feisal al Saud ran away and took shelter with the Bedouin tribes and after spending some years in Rub Al-Khali he reached Kuwait and remained there until 1902. Abdul Aziz, the son of Abdur Rahman bin Feisal al Saud was a natural warrior and leader. He decided to retake the lost glory and succeeded in retaking Riyadh in 1902. This was the foundation of modern Saudi Arabia (Al-Rasheed, 2010). Wahhabism was declared the official sect of Saudi Arabia (Choksy & Choksy, 2015).

The relation between Iran and Saudi Arabia was not bad. Both were the allies of the West and US. The political system of Saudi Arabia was based on the principles derived from the Wahhabism while the Shah of Iran was a secular minded person and had no big interest in sectarian extremism. It was in 1979 when Ayatollah Khomeini led a successful revolution and the rule of the Shah was removed. The 2500 years old monarchy was replaced by Islamic Sharia based on the principles of Fiqa Jafariya (Jurisprudence written by Imam Jafar Sadiq) (Daneshvar, 2016). The new ideology of Iranian government was the negation of Wahhabism. Iran started propaganda for the promotion of Khomenism that challenged the ideology of Wahhabism (Safran, 1991). It was the beginning of full confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia.



## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Idealism was a popular theory for the study of international relations but the beginning of WWII proved fatal for it. The beginning of the WWII was the end of Idealist theory in international relations because most of the assumptions of Idealist theory were practically rejected. A new theory for the study of international relations called Realism Theory was introduced. Hans Morgenthau was the one of the main supporters of the Theory of Realism. The Realists believe that the Realist Theory bitterly explains the foreign policy prescriptions and state behavior. There is no central authority in international political system and state is the legitimate representative of the collective will of the people. The main objective of the state is to increase its power relative to others (Bell, 2017).

In most of the available works about confrontations among the countries, the researchers use the Theory of Realism. For the study of Saudi-Iranian relations, the theories of realism, neorealism and balance of power seem applicable. In Saudi-Iranian confrontation, the gain of power by one power is taken as the loss of the other. Saudi Arabia is the ally of the US and other countries of the west while Iran has developed strong friendship with China and Russia in order to the balance power in the region. In this research, the researcher has tried to explain Saudi-Iranian confrontation in the light of the Theory of Realism and Balance of Power.

## **3. Impact of Wahhabism on Saudi Arabian Culture**

The people live in Saudi Arabia consisted of tribes who had been living in Arabian Peninsula for thousands of years. The head of a tribe was called Sheikh and most of the people of tribe obeyed the orders of the Sheikh. The Arab society was based on strong tribal system and tribal relations were greatly admired by the Arabs. The main source of income of the Arabs was animals. The Arabs preferred to live only in those places where water grass was available for their sheep and other animals. For search of water and grass, the tribes moved from one place to another. The main wish of every tribe was to get the possession of the pastures and that possession was the main source conflict (Rubin, 2015).

The introduction of Islam replaced the old system. Muhammad (SAW) introduced a new divine religion Islam and the old social, political, and economic system of Arabia was challenged. In a very short span of time, Islam was extended to almost all parts of Arabia. After the demise of Muhammad (SAW), the four pious caliphs established the institutions in Islamic state. The divine laws of Islam became famous all over the world (Hawting, 2002). The Umayyads, Abbasids, and then the Ottomans ruled Arabia. The Ummayds and the Abbasids were Arabic while the Ottomans were Turks so the Ottomans had great impact on the Arabian culture (Masters, 2013).

The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire gave independence to many countries. It was on September 23, 1932 when the warring tribes of Arabian Peninsula united and became one nation,



called the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Arabic was declared the official language and Quran as its constitution. The basic laws of the kingdom were derived from the principles of Hambali school of thought as explained by Abdul Wahhab Najdi. The followers of Abdul Wahhab Najdi are called Wahhabis (Bowen, 2014). In Wahhabism there was a very little room for the local customs, usages, and norms and were declared un-Islamic and some of the customs were fully banned. The great Arabian culture was attacked (Blanchard, 2007).

Wahhabism was an anti-Sufism philosophy. The expansion of Wahhabism put limitation on the activities of Sufis. In 1941 Abul Abbas Dandarawi was forcibly expelled from Saudi Arabia. He had dispute with Abdal Aziz Al-Saud over the celebration of Mawlid al-Nabi. Sufism was banned in Hejaz and most of the Sufis faced harsh treatment from the Wahhabis. Many well-known Sufis were either expelled or banned in the country. There was no room for Sufism in Wahhabism (Sedgwick, 1997). Sufism was an internal part of Arabian culture and from birth to death; the customs of Arabia were mixed in Sufism. Wahhabis directly attacked the great Arabian culture by banning all kinds of customs associated with Sufism.

On the name of purification in Islam, the Saudi authorities successfully supply Wahhabism to other countries of the world too by training Imams, constructing mosques, and propagation of mass media and publication of Wahhabi literature. Since the last two decades, Saudi Arabia has spent \$87 billion for the propagation of Wahhabism (Cho, 2010). Wahhabism has rapidly been mixing in the social, political, and cultural life of Sunni Muslims throughout the world. Wahhabism continues to expand to the extent that it has succeeded in providing new forums to contemporary terrorism (Baroni, 2006). The Wahhabi minded terrorists never miss a chance to attack Shiites in any country of the world. Even shrines of saints and Shiite clerics are attacked by Al-Qaeda, Boku Haram, Al-Shabab, ISIS, and other Wahhabi minded terrorists. It can be said that attacks on Shiites has become a part of the culture of Wahhabi minded terrorist groups.

#### **4. Impact of Khomeinism on Iranian Culture**

The pre-Islamic era Persian civilization was very rich. Its impact is obvious in all walks of life of all ancient Persian dynasties in all central Asian countries (Asim, 2022). The old name of Iran was Persia and its culture was known as Persian culture. In 1935, the Shah of Iran requested the international community to change its name from Persia to Iran. it was fact that Persia was the old name of Iran but majority of people of Iran liked to be known as Iranians instead of Persians. The Arabs, Turks, British, and the Russians attacked Iran, which affected the culture, and different changes were introduced to (Maqsood, 2015). The modernization of Iranian culture began in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Pahlavi rulers. Christoph Werner, Bianca Devos and some other contributors found that the government never enforced the new changes in the Iranian culture forcibly but multiple actors worked for it inside and outside the government (Stebbins, 2016).

Iran had very good relations with the West during the reign of Shah but the revolution of 1969 not



only changed the system of Iran but also the astonished the whole world. It was one of the greatest revolutions the world had ever seen. Ayatollah Khomeini led the revolution (Adib-Moghaddam, 2014). In multi-linguistic countries, the names of the people bitterly reflect the culture of the people. In Iran, the Persian era names were mixed with Arabic names after the conquest of the Arabs. The Iranian revolution of 1979 further added Islamic words to the names but that time the names of great Shiites clerics (Habibi, 1992). A sociolinguistic change took place in addresses also. Address marking solidarity and plain speech became very popular in post-revolutionary Iran. The social class structure of pre-revolutionary period also started decline (Keshavarz, 1988).

It is a fact that Iran is an important Middle Eastern country but its culture is completely different from Arabian culture. As compared to Arabian culture, Iranian culture is very close to South Asian and central Asian culture. It is a mixture of individualism with strong family ties. Power and position is regarded as symbols of respect in the pre-revolutionary Iran (Javidan & Datmalchian, 2003). The era 1980-83 is called the era of Cultural Revolution in Iran. The religious rulers of Iran wanted to insert Khomeinism in the minds of the youths in universities in a very well organized manner. They succeeded to an extent in their mission but the sudden rise of student politics in 1997 disappointed the policy makers. Under Ahamdi Nejad the Iranian clerics expected the complete success of their mission but student politics did not decline (Razavi, 2009).

Popular uprisings, social riots and other threats can endanger the existing systems of the countries. The policy makers of Iran have better knowledge of this truth. Since 1979, the Iranian government has been using different institutions and groups to control the minds of people and avoid such danger. By social manipulation, the Iranian authorities control the minds of masses. It is in fact the engineering of minds. For this purpose propaganda is a useful tool of the Iranian government (Glokar, 2016). The main objective of such effort is to control the minds of people and insert Khomeinism, an anti-Wahhabism version of Shiite sect of Islam. Ervand Abrahamian is of the view that Khomeinism is not simply a religious crusade gripped with spiritualism, theological dogma and scriptural texts but a political movement expressing socio-economic grievances of masses (Abrahamian, 1993).

## **5. The Post-Revolution Iranian Culture and Saudi –Iranian Relations**

The new government after the successful revolution in 1979 was Islamic but of Shiite sect. In fact, it was the birth of Khomeinism, an anti-Wahhabi ideology. In the beginning, most of the Islamic countries gave welcome to the new Iranian government including Saudi Arabia. The Iranians did not respond the welcome positively because Khomeinism was the opposite of the ideologies of most of the countries of Middle East. The KSA recognized the new Iranian government because of the political situation of the region (Koury & McDonald, 1982). The cordial recognition of KSA was responded with harsh propaganda by Iran by supplying the germs of revolution to the other countries of the region. Iran declared the rulers of Saudi Arabia as illegal occupants of the holy places of Muslims (Safran, 1991).



The good gesture of Saudi Arabian government was a kind of defensive realism while the Iranian government responded negatively. The new revolutionary Iranian government adopted the policy of offensive realism in relations with Saudi Arabia. As Saudi Arabia uses Wahhabism as a tool to attract the people of Sunni world in general and Saudi Arabia in particular, the Iranian government utilizes Khomeinism to attract and motivate the youth of Shiite world. The Iranians made strong propaganda against the rulers of KSA and declared the rule of Ale Saud as illegal and un-Islamic. The Iranians succeeded in attracting the Shiites but totally failed to attract the Sunnis (Nasar, 2007). The Iranians followed the same pattern that was followed by Saudi Arabia when Wahhabism was declared as the official sect of the kingdom. Before the introduction of Wahhabi sect, the relations between Sunnis and Shiites were normal despite of small differences but Wahhabism polluted the minds of Sunnis against the Shiites and it became a part of the culture of Sunnis in general and Wahhabis in particular to treat the Shiites as un-Islamic.

Nationalism is also regarded as an inseparable part of a culture. The social base of Saudi Arabian culture arises from Arab nationalism. Race is a good source of unity for the Arab people in Middle East and North Africa. Islam forbids racism but the Arabs declare themselves superior over the Iranians because of their Sami Race. The Iranians belong to Aryan race and Persian nationalism is an important part of the Persian culture (Bartkoski, Lynch, Witt & Rudolph, 2018). Revolutionary government of Iran polluted the great Persian culture and extremist ideas were inserted in the minds of the Iranians against the rulers of Saudi Arabia and made extremist culture a tool to attract the Shiite people. The post 1979 revolutionary government of Iran challenged Wahhabism by the ideology of Khomeinism. Since that, both Iran and Saudi Arabia spend millions of dollars for the propagation of their ideologies to counter each other in Middle East and other Muslim countries. The defeat of Saddam by the Americans was a big setback to the Arabian culture in the region. Saddam was a Sunni dictator and everything in Iraq was Arabic during his era. In the post Saddam, era Iraq is completely different. It can be said that Iraq is no more a part of the Arab world. it has now joined Shiite Persian world. The new Iraqi establishment is Shiite or Kurd. A very small and weak share of the government is given to the Sunni population. The Arab cultural identity of Iraq is replaced by political identity. The influence of Saudi Arabia in Iraq and the region has been reduced with the defeat of Saddam Hussein and the influence of Iran has increased (Williams, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

Culture is an important aspect in Saudi-Iranian relations. The Saudi Arabians belong to the Sami race while the Iranians belong to the Aryan race. The Saudi Arabians and the Iranians claim superiority over each other. Saudi Arabia polluted the Arabian Culture with Wahhabism while the 1979 Iranian revolution inserted extremist Khomeinism with great Persian Culture. Khomeinism is countering Wahhabism in the region and Muslim world. The amalgamation of Wahhabism and Khomeinism with Arabian and Persian cultures has deteriorated the Saudi-Iranian relations to an alarming extent. The role of culture is very important in international relations. It is important



equally in conflict and cooperation. In Saudi-Iranian relations, both the sides have been using confrontation culture as a source of conflict. Culture is also a source for conflict resolution but in Saudi-Iranian conflict, the role of culture is negative instead of solving the dispute. The attitude, behavior, and history of a nation can bitterly be understood by studying its culture (Marsella, 2005). Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have polluted their cultures to the extent with such extremist ideas that it looks very difficult to clean the minds of the common people from the extremist ideas of Wahhabism and Khomeinism. Opposing each other has become a part of Iranian and Saudi Arabian cultures. In some areas, the hardcore followers of Wahhabi and Khomeini do not hesitate to declare one another non-believers.



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