

# *The Middle East Unraveling*

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Review of Kim Ghattas, *Black Waves: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry that Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East* (Henry Holt & Co., 2020)

Kim Ghattas has written the best new book on the Middle East in years. “Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Forty-Year Rivalry That Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East” is a superbly researched narrative of how the two Gulf States have sought to export their own extreme versions of Islam throughout the Muslim world and, in so doing, have corrupted the culture and politics of the Middle East toward intolerance and sectarian violence.

Ghattas argues that 1979 was the pivotal year for the Middle East. First, the Ayatollah Khomeini led the Iranian Revolution to victory, ousting the Shah and creating a unique Shiite theocratic state eager to export the revolution throughout the Middle East. Then, the takeover of the Great Mosque of Mecca prompted the Saudi royal family to revert to the harshest policies of the Wahhabi kingdom, outflanking its religious critics and leading the war against Shiite extremism.

The ensuing clash between the two states has shaped the world of Islam for the four decades since. Ghattas’s book recounts how politicians and intellectuals who espoused moderation and tolerance—like Rafiq Hariri in Lebanon or Salman Taseer

and Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan—were systematically murdered by extremists in order to stifle their voices. Groups like Hezbollah and the Taliban emerged with Iranian or Saudi financing to promote said extreme sectarian violence.

Pakistan, with a large Shiite minority, is a crucial battlefield in this rivalry. Zia ul-Huq, the Sunni dictator of Pakistan, was a religious fanatic close to the Saudi leadership. The Wahhabi clerical establishment in the kingdom enthusiastically backed the war. In fact, the kingdom encouraged—and often paid for—35,000 Arabs to use the war as their training field, who then returned home determined to fight the jihad. Osama bin Laden is, of course, the most famous of the Arab Afghans. Pakistan was put firmly on the way to self-radicalization. Even after Zia was mysteriously assassinated in 1988, the country was further polarized and inflamed.

Ghattas does an extraordinary job of weaving events across the region into a tapestry that explains the descent into hell. The region was far more open, tolerant and moderate a half century ago. “Black Wave” explains how this has evaporated.

Ghattas reveals a few key facts that are generally not given the attention they deserve. For example, Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein made a very rare foreign trip to meet Saudi King Fahd in Taif on Aug. 6, 1980. Saddam almost never left Iraq. The trip was covered only briefly in the media. Ghattas suggests that it was almost certainly a summit to preview the coming Iraqi invasion of Iran the next month. The Iran-Iraq war was the bloodiest conventional conflict since Korea. It hastened the Iranian Revolution and promoted sectarianism. The Saudis became the financier of the war, just as they were in the Afghan war, as then-Governor of Riyadh Prince Salman was a key figure in the funding of extremist groups.

"Black Wave" also recounts the effort by Saudi leader Abdullah and Iranian President Rafsanjani to deescalate the rivalry in the late 1990s. Abdullah was even prepared to ignore the Iranian-backed truck bombing of the U.S. Air Force barracks in Khobar in June 1996 to reach an accommodation with Tehran. In the end, deescalation failed—hastened by 9/11 and the Bush administration's disastrous invasion of Iraq.

The book highlights the one big difference between the two rivals: their respective skill at managing their proxies and allies. On the one hand, Iran runs a tight ship. Its generals, like the late Qassem Soleimani—himself a product of the Iran-Iraq war—are experts at working with Hezbollah and other such groups to put their enemies under siege with carefully managed violence. The Saudis, on the other hand, are poor managers. Time and again, they have lost control of their proxies including bin Laden and the Taliban. They spent a fortune on the rebels in Syria only to have them hijacked by al-Qaeda. Even in their own war in Yemen, they have proved to be inept at

managing conflict and incapable of developing strategies to defeat the Iranian-backed Houthis.

Thus, the rivalry is unbalanced and has tilted increasingly in Tehran's favor despite American assistance to Riyadh. The Iranians have made substantial progress in advancing their cause in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen assisted all too often by mistakes by the Americans.

Since the book's publication, the coronavirus has not stopped the rivalry from dividing the Middle East into hostile camps; if anything, it is accelerating the process. The Saudis blame Iran for infecting the region. The war in Yemen is out of control. Iraq and Pakistan are vulnerable to infection-driven sectarian divisions that will make already-weak health infrastructures even less capable. The Saudis have imposed rigorous means to stop the infection including halting the usual pilgrimage to Mecca. The annual *hajj* is unlikely to take place this summer. But they have not lifted the blockade of Yemen, which keeps food and medicine from millions of Yemenis.

The Iranian government has mismanaged the virus infection terribly. But imposing more sanctions has not broken Tehran's determination to export its militant Shiite Islam. Several experts [have argued](#) that the U.S. is missing an opportunity to influence the Iranian people by not lifting the sanctions when the pandemic is killing so many innocents in Iran.

Born in Lebanon, Ghattas brings a refreshing eye to the conflict and turbulence in the region. She reports for the BBC and was a member of the traveling press corps with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

“Black Wave” should be read by everyone thinking about the future of American policy in the Islamic world. The Saudis have never pursued a more sectarian foreign policy than they have under King Salman and his reckless son Mohammed bin Salman. Trump’s blank-check endorsement of the Saudis is only reinforcing their worse instincts. It’s time for a fundamental reappraisal of our policy toward the region.

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