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BRIEF

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Knowledge in Dialogue

The Role of Academic Exchange in Mitigating Conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia

by Jan Hanrath

Introduction

The Middle East, and West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula in particular, is marked by geostrategic rivalries, ongoing military conflicts and mutual distrust. Biases and misperceptions are manifested in reciprocal negative images and stereotypes. Think tanks, universities and individual academics could play an important role in producing and providing knowledge and in creating a better understanding of the Other. This increased mutual awareness may contribute to conflict mitigation and resolution. Academic cooperation has the potential to become a

Executive Summary

In the context of the current highly conflictual relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, academic cooperation has the potential to become a bridge builder by decoupling scientific fields of common interest from political pressures. Think tanks, universities and individual academics could play an important role in producing and providing knowledge, and in creating a better understanding of “the Other”. This increased mutual awareness may contribute to conflict mitigation and resolution.

CARPO and the EastWest Institute initiated a meeting with experts from Saudi Arabia and Iran as part of their ‘Iran-Saudi Dialogue Initiative’, to discuss knowledge production and knowledge dialogue in the current divisive and conflictive context, and to explore the potential of academic exchanges and scientific cooperation in defusing such tensions. The participants discussed general conditions and approaches of academic dialogues, as well as concrete steps that can be envisioned even in times of heightened conflict. All participants agreed that an increase of knowledge on its own does not automatically lead to more understanding. Different forms of knowledge need to be understood and applied, and existing gaps between the various forms bridged.

bridge builder in divisive and conflictive contexts by decoupling scientific fields of common interest from political pressures.

Despite rising tensions and increased mistrust amongst actors in the region, CARPO and the EastWest Institute (EWI) organized a workshop in autumn 2018 to discuss knowledge production and knowledge dialogue in the Middle East, and to explore the potential of academic exchange and scientific cooperation in the context of conflict. This meeting was part of an ongoing 'Iran-Saudi Dialogue Initiative', begun in 2015.

The workshop brought together distinguished academics and experts from Saudi Arabia, Iran and Europe to engage in in-depth, interactive discussions on research and educational systems, as well as knowledge production about the Other. The main aim of the workshop was to identify how academic exchange and scientific cooperation can contribute to mitigating conflict and opening up channels of mutual interaction. A key question was what role academia and individual scientists can play to improve relationships in the short and long term between antagonistic countries.

Science and knowledge production in an international context

International scientific exchanges and joint research projects with participants from different cultural and academic backgrounds are generally challenging endeavors. This especially holds true in contexts of political rivalry and even outright conflict, such as is found in

the Middle East today. However, in any context, academia has the potential to enter the political world of bi- or multilateral relations and diplomacy. With this understanding, the workshop opened with a roundtable discussion focusing on the potential role of science in international relations and international policy-making. Science and diplomacy can interact on three different levels. On the first level, science can provide advice to inform and support foreign policy objectives: "Science in diplomacy". In fields such as climate change, pandemics (e.g. Zika virus or SARS) or nuclear non-proliferation, science can inform international policy-making by providing the latest research findings or statistics on the respective topics. On the second level, governments and other international actors can facilitate international scientific cooperation: "Diplomacy for science". Often, approval on an official state level, which can prove particularly difficult in a conflictive context, is necessary to make any scientific cooperation possible. The third level, of particular relevance for this workshop, is scientific cooperation in order to improve international relations: "Science for diplomacy". On this third level, scientific exchanges and collaborations can link countries when official diplomatic relations are stalled. As a trust building measure, academic cooperation has the potential to improve relations between different countries, even in times of conflict. Especially following a phase of heightened conflict, such exchanges have particular potential in working towards reconciliation; but also in the midst of the most problematic phase of conflict, academic collaboration can be a way to mitigate and de-escalate conflict. Given the current situation between Iran and

Saudi Arabia, the activities and approaches that were discussed throughout the workshop mainly belonged to the third category, science for diplomacy.

All participants agreed that academia provides a comparably neutral and apolitical field for dialogue; additionally, that scientific cooperation can open channels which, in the long term, also send positive signals into other, more political domains. However, it was also noted that it is wrong to presume that academia and scientific research always play a positive role. In the past, scientific research and individual academics have served the most horrific goals, as well as provided the theoretical basis for racist policies and genocide. Knowledge can also be used as a tool against the respective Other, while academic research without a necessary degree of neutrality also has the potential to broaden gaps between countries and to reinforce existing enemy images. Aware of these aspects, the workshop aimed at exploring ways in which academia and research can positively contribute to solve global or regional issues and help mitigate conflict between adversaries.

To enable open discussions and a variety of perspectives, a broad working definition of academic dialogue was chosen: Any activity that brings together actors of higher education and research, be it from universities, think tanks or other research institutions, be it senior academics, researchers or students, to engage in interaction across national borders, formal or informal, short-term or long-term, were considered as academic dialogue and scientific cooperation.

Educational systems and internationalization in Iran and Saudi Arabia

In both Iran and Saudi Arabia it is increasingly important for universities and research institutions to gain international acceptance and to avoid academic isolation. With international competition among institutions of higher education on the rise, both countries aim to achieve internationalization and to attract foreign students and researchers. These efforts include revisions of curricula, developing appropriate organizational structures and increasing institutional accessibility. Participants from both countries praised internationalization as a way to broaden the horizon of their own students, increase knowledge of other contexts, and learn from other educational systems. Not least, enrolling foreign students is also financially advantageous. For many universities, especially in Saudi Arabia, Western, rather than regional, counterparts are the more relevant and serve as an orientation and benchmark.

At the same time, skepticism vis-à-vis Western academic and theoretical concepts is prevalent, particularly in the humanities. Workshop participants questioned how far the educational systems are ready and willing to welcome new knowledge, query existing dogmas, and accept the resulting ambiguity. As one Iranian participant explained, the Iranian system is very proud of its self-sufficiency, often to the point of skepticism towards any foreign knowledge. A strong belief in the quality of their own research and capabilities could be one reason for such; additionally, there is also a fear of political

meddling and cultural interference from outside influences. Such perspectives need to be taken into consideration in the pacing of academic internationalization, so as to not estrange any segments of society, and the political establishment in particular.

To look beyond the domestic context also includes providing students with opportunities to study outside the country. Saudi Arabia in particular implements extensive exchange programs, every year sending thousands of students abroad to attain degrees at Western universities. Iran also engages in international exchange; for example, through the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and other similar programs. However, the two countries differ in their approach to exchange programs: Saudi Arabia prefers long-term stays abroad, often from BA studies through PhD degrees; while Iran favors rather short-term exchanges. From both countries – although to a differing degree – there is an underlying concern that brain drain may be a detrimental consequence of students studying abroad. Thus, both countries try to minimize the danger, e.g. by offering incentives to return.

One interrelated trend can be seen in both Saudi Arabia and Iran: regional studies have become more popular in the past few years. There is an increased belief that regional connectivity is of particular relevance. Knowledge of neighboring countries, in particular those with a difficult relationship on a political level, is viewed with utmost importance. In both countries, institutes have recently been established with the aim to research and increase knowledge of the respective Other country.

Applying different forms of knowledge in dialogue

Not least with regard to Saudi-Iranian relations, the group established that learning more about the respective Other is key to improved mutual understanding. Academia was seen as an essential and comparably easy platform from which to start dialogue. However, more knowledge does not automatically lead to more understanding, and simply increasing information and the number of exchanges is not sufficient to mitigate existing conflicts. Echoing discussions from previous workshops, the participants agreed that there are different forms of knowledge and that any dialogue needs to take into consideration the manifold dimensions of knowledge creation and exchange.

Participants from both countries acknowledged the necessity to engage in various forms of knowledge to ensure successful dialogues. Borrowing terms from psychology and linguistics, one participant stressed the difference between implicit and explicit knowledge. While the former describes unspoken resources such as common sense or tacit knowledge, the latter is readily articulated and thus easily explained to others. Implicit knowledge has a clear emotional component and is more than what is acquired by just acknowledging facts and figures about the respective Other. The gap between these two forms of knowledge has to be recognized and bridged. Other participants described other forms of knowledge: the more rational vs. the emotional nature of certain knowledge; general or specific knowledge; or common sense vs. acquired knowledge. What all these attempts to categorize knowledge held

in common was the perceived need to go beyond mere academic knowledge related to a given research field and to take a broader approach. To truly increase understanding of the Other and to amend negative perceptions, the other side's sentiments have to be taken into consideration. Thus cultural context, personal experiences and existing attitudes and perceptions need to be included in a broader knowledge dialogue.

Face to face meetings are necessary. As one participant stated, some things cannot be learnt from text books. Exposure to the respective other context remains the gold standard to enhance true understanding. In the best case, knowledge is co-produced via participants in dialogue activities. Such co-creation of knowledge avoids the imposition of research priorities and concepts on the respective Other and focuses on the production of new knowledge through scientific cooperation and collaborative learning processes.

All too often existing prejudices and negative stereotypes impede unbiased exchanges and may be even reinforced by poorly implemented dialogues. As one participant argued, we cannot simply put existing assumptions aside, but on the contrary, we should work with them and even try to use them in a positive way. We must not shy away from discussing differences. Most dialogues, the participant continued, start with a focus on commonalities, and to know about these shared aspects is important. But it is the differences that need attention and efforts in bridge building: it is all about conflict transformation rather than resolution. This means that dialogue is not primarily about ending all conflict, which can also be at times a driver

of social change, but rather to transform conflict in a way that lessens its destructive or even violent character.

Beyond the academic realm, perceptions of the Other are shaped by public discourses. Participants from both countries mentioned the particular role of the media in transmitting academic findings to a broader public, and in particular to political decision makers. In both countries, media outlets – from traditional to social media – play a key role in portraying the respective Other and in shaping perceptions. All too often this is done in a very negative way, thus furthering conflict instead of building bridges. One Saudi participant held that the mainstream media in Saudi Arabia is very populist, using a lot of verbal aggression and thus shaping a very negative image of Iran. While high quality research on Iran exists in Saudi Arabia, it often remains inside the research institution and confined to a small circle of elites. It was agreed that research needs to be translated into non-academic speak to be comprehensible outside an academic context. Thus universities and think tanks should have a strong media arm in order to reach out and explain to broader audiences. A Saudi and an Iranian participant each gave examples of how they try to use media appearances to translate academic discourses for public debate in an attempt to change the overall context in which potential exchanges could take place. In both countries, the political and societal contexts do not make it easy to engage in dialogues with the respective other side. Often the societal will for cooperation is lacking, and prejudice and negative stereotypes prevail. Anti-Arab or anti-Persian sentiments exist in both countries. Thus it is essential to

be aware of the perceptions and sentiments on the respective other side and to find influential supporters for dialogue.

How to engage in dialogue

Even though all were aware of the challenges of such endeavors, participants from both countries expressed sincere interest in engaging in reciprocal academic exchanges and scientific cooperation, followed by lively and constructive discussions on how to best start and implement cooperation. The participants were eager to learn more about past experiences and case studies from the Cold War, conflicts in European countries and other contexts to provide valuable, comparative insights for contemporary political rivalry in the Middle East.

There are numerous examples of academic exchanges and scientific cooperation, also in times of heightened conflict, and from such cases a rough systematic overview of different approaches and contexts can be derived. One approach is academic exchange and cooperation which takes place in highly political and security relevant contexts; for example, between nuclear scientists during the Cold War. These exchanges served both sides as confidence-building measures, as well as to increase the prestige of each country's scientists, and often had a high visibility profile. A different approach involves examples that were and are focused strictly on academic and apolitical fields. True to the "ivory tower" nature of academia, they pursued a rather low visibility approach. Somewhere in between the above two types of exchange is the more policy-oriented cooperation

that focuses on problem solving, in which a joint interest in tackling certain challenges is key for joint activities and exchange. Workshop participants agreed that more systematic research on good practices and successful exchanges, both past and present, is needed in order to design more fruitful activities for the future. Past experiences show that regardless of the level and approach, the following principles can be decisive for success or failure:

- 1) Continuity: Having the same group of participants over sequential meetings is an important condition for success. Trust needs to be built over time. Getting to know each other throughout several workshops contributes to that trust.
- 2) Thorough preparation: Successful exchanges need good preparation and appropriate planning. Even in times of peace, hastily implemented dialogues may result in confusion, misunderstanding and failure: This is even more so in conflictive contexts.
- 3) Institutional backing: From student exchanges to academic workshops and joint research projects, lack of adequate institutional backing for such activities severely restrict any chance for success. Particularly in exchanges between conflicting countries, support from universities, research institutions and political actors is mandatory. Participants from both Iran and Saudi Arabia confirmed that this would be a key aspect of any exchange activity.
- 4) Qualified implementers and moderators: Any exchange needs qualified personnel to implement the activities and

to avoid misunderstandings and failure. These implementers need to be aware of relevant challenges and pitfalls, and highly knowledgeable of the contexts of all participants.

Experts from both sides agreed that focusing on research fields of joint interest would be most promising, fitting well with the approach of knowledge co-creation. The domain that was mentioned time and again as having the most potential was the field of environmental studies and all research on climate change related issues, a complex problem that is currently causing tremendous challenges for both countries. Scarce water resources and desertification, sand and dust storms, and a decreasing biodiversity are just a few of the many border-crossing environmental problems the Middle East faces today. These are challenges that no country can deal with alone. Several experts called for inclusion of the private sector in environmental research. Especially in the Saudi context, large companies are equipped with major research departments and qualified personnel generating relevant data. Other fields that were mentioned included joint research on health issues in general, and pandemics in particular, as well as on catastrophe reaction capabilities.

The role of religion, and of individual clerics, in academic activities proved a controversial topic. From both countries there were proponents and sceptics of approaches that would include religious actors. Some argued that inclusion of religious figures would be added value, not only for the actual research but also to communicate and circulate the research findings, and to reach out to conservative audiences. Others held that such inclusion would complicate any dialogue,

as well as citing the declining role and influence of clerics. In the end, as one Saudi participant phrased it, influential people are needed to promote dialogue – whether they are religious or not is secondary.

To reach a broader audience and to also generate broad support for dialogue, participants from Iran and Saudi Arabia called for the inclusion of new actors and the application of new approaches. There was agreement that think tanks and other research institutions should be given an important role in academic exchanges. Again, the private sector was mentioned as a potential partner. One participant went as far as proposing more top-down initiatives, including security establishment actors and think tanks connected to the defense ministries, stating security elites usually have the final say in more political fields of exchange.

In general, there was a consensus that exchange activities and cooperation between both countries should look for a low profile approach, refrain from high visibility, focus on less politicized issues and avoid attendance of high-level officials.

In the final session, participants discussed possible ways ahead and how to practically begin cooperation and exchange. It was agreed that it is necessary to start now, rather than wait until an improved situation makes cooperation easier. Thus, it is necessary to find ways of dialogue and exchange today, in the current tense context. A low profile approach with little visibility and a focus on less politicized issues was seen as the most promising approach. Potential areas of exchange include summer schools and student exchanges.

Face-to-face meetings between people are still of utmost importance and key to mutual understanding and increasing both implicit and explicit knowledge. Since direct exchanges between both countries might be difficult to initiate at the moment within either country, it was suggested that exchange activities and face-to-face meetings could take place abroad, either via diaspora actors or through exchange activities located in third countries. Taking up the latter idea, one participant proposed a joint summer school in a country of the region that both sides could easily access. This academic event could be facilitated by a third party, address issues relevant for both sides and thus pragmatically begin a co-creation of knowledge.

Alongside face-to-face meetings, various options for exchange that utilize communication technologies and provide virtual meetings were discussed. Blogs, online seminars, and joint work on websites dedicated to particular fields of research were mentioned in this regard.

Participants, representing research institutions from Iran and Saudi Arabia, discussed very concrete steps of how to engage in cooperation. Ideas ranged from co-authoring articles to publishing already existing papers on the respective other's website, from signing a memorandum of understanding to facilitating media appearances and actual visits to the other country. Both sides felt that such options would be possible, given a thorough preparation. However, technical aspects, such as the provision of visas, would need to be taken into consideration. Both sides agreed to follow up on the ideas discussed and to stay in touch.

In closing, the participants offered a positive summary of the workshop. They agreed that one value of the event was being an initial form of academic dialogue. Many expressed a cautious optimism that actual steps towards more dialogue would be undertaken and appealed to the organizers to follow up on the various issues discussed.

Recommendations

Start now! While academic exchanges and scientific cooperation are more difficult in the context of ongoing conflict, we must not wait until "the right moment" comes. Universities, think tanks and individual academics should be encouraged to find ways of interaction beginning now, even if tensions remain high.

Develop the courage to address differences. Existing assumptions, negative images and prejudices must not be ignored. In order to mitigate conflicts and to transform them in a constructive way, differences need to be taken seriously and addressed in dialogue activities. Increasing implicit as well as explicit knowledge may help to develop more accurate understanding of the respective Other.

Focus on issues of joint interest. By focusing on research fields of common interest and fostering the co-creation of knowledge, enduring channels of exchange can be opened. In times of heightened conflict, the focus should be on low-profile approaches with minimal visibility in less politicized fields. Joint research on environmental issues seems to be most promising in this regard.

Prioritize face-to-face meetings during academic exchanges and scientific cooperation.

While all technologies for virtual meetings and online cooperation should be explored and used, face-to-face meetings between participants are fundamental and the basis for building trust and successful cooperation.

Provide visas. To make any exchange and physical meetings between Saudi Arabia and Iran possible, responsible authorities in both countries must provide potential participants with visas to travel to and in the respective other country.

Secure third party support. Given a context marked by geostrategic rivalries, ongoing military conflicts and deep rooted reciprocal distrust among regional actors, third party support for exchange activities remains necessary. Actors such as the European Union, funding organizations in European countries, or universities outside the region should support academic exchanges and scientific cooperation to increase trust and mitigate conflict.

About the author

Jan Hanrath is co-founder and CEO of CARPO. He studied political science, European law and psychology (focus on intercultural communication) at the University Duisburg-Essen. He is currently writing his PhD thesis on German public diplomacy in the Middle East. His research fields include public diplomacy, democracy and civil society promotion, peace and conflict studies, and migration and integration. In the past he has worked as a researcher and coordinator in projects on Islam and integration, migration and conflict, political transformation in the Middle East, and academic exchange.

Contact: hanrath@carpo-bonn.org

About CARPO

CARPO was founded in 2014 by Germany-based academics trained in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and Social Anthropology. Its work is situated at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange with a focus on implementing projects in close cooperation and partnership with stakeholders in the Orient. The researchers in CARPO's network believe that a prosperous and peaceful future for the region can best be achieved through inclusive policy making and economic investment that engages the creative and resourceful potential of all relevant actors. Therefore, CARPO opens enduring channels for interactive knowledge transfer between academics, citizens, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers.

About EastWest Institute

The EastWest Institute (EWI) is an independent NGO focused on conflict resolution. EWI has a 35-year track record of convening power, trust building and back channel diplomacy to develop sustainable solutions for today's major political, economic and security issues around the world. Recognized as an "honest broker," EWI's success is predicated on providing a platform where political, military and business leaders find common ground and solutions to international conflicts. EWI's Middle East and North Africa Program provides a platform for dialogue between regional rivals and engages major stakeholders in an attempt to find common ground in tackling root causes behind the rise of ISIS. Headquartered in New York City, EWI has offices in Brussels, Moscow, San Francisco and Washington D.C.

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CARPO – Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient e.V.
Kaiser-Friedrich-Str. 13
53113 Bonn
Email: info@carpo-bonn.org
www.carpo-bonn.org