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Center for Applied Research  
in Partnership with the Orient



05

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# Victimized by Geopolitics

## Iranian and Saudi Perspectives on the Refugee Crisis

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### Introduction

The facts and figures created by the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan are devastating. More than eleven million people – almost half of Syria's pre-war population – have been displaced in and outside Syria.<sup>1</sup> About four million Iraqis are currently displaced, and this figure is expected to rise as the battle to liberate Mosul from the so-called "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL) unfolds.<sup>2</sup> As of

<sup>1</sup> Mercy Corps: "Quick facts: What you need to know about the Syria crisis" 13/10/2016. URL: [www.mercycorps.org/articles/iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria-turkey/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis](http://www.mercycorps.org/articles/iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria-turkey/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis) (23/10/2016).

<sup>2</sup> Yayhya, Maha: "Refugees in the Making of an Arab Regional Disorder", Carnegie Middle East Center 09/11/2015. URL: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/11/09/refugees-and-making-of-arab-regional-disorder-pub-61901> (23/10/2016).

### Executive Summary

Intensified tensions between regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran are seen by observers as a catalyst of the wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan. These four countries have turned into the main 'departure contexts' of refugees in West and Central Asia, creating the worst global refugee crisis since World War Two. Both Riyadh and Tehran can exert formidable influence in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan. It is therefore of utmost importance to gain deeper understanding about how both assess the ongoing humanitarian crises and how they think these war-hit contexts could eventually be stabilized. Such insights are a prerequisite for effective Western engagement with Iran and Saudi Arabia.

CARPO and the EastWest Institute initiated a 'track 2' dialogue meeting between policy experts from Iran and Saudi Arabia, in which their varying perspectives on ways the humanitarian needs of refugees in the above mentioned countries could be addressed were exchanged. It became evidently clear that views from Tehran and Riyadh on the refugee crisis are inseparable from their respective geopolitical goals, and therefore compound the points of contention.

August 2016, Yemen counts more than 3.15 million as internally displaced persons (IDPs), meaning every ninth Yemeni.<sup>3</sup> Afghanistan counts 1.2 million as IDPs, with more than 2.6 million people having fled the country.<sup>4</sup> Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan are thus seen as the four main 'departure contexts' of refugees in West and Central Asia.

This poses an unprecedented challenge to several 'transit' and 'host countries' in the region, such as Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iran; as well as a number of 'host countries' in Eastern and Western Europe, particularly Germany, Austria, France, UK, Belgium, Macedonia, Hungary and Serbia. Ongoing wars, the threat posed by terrorist groups, and humanitarian crises (albeit of varying degrees) are the root causes of the influx of refugees to third countries of the region itself and into Europe. With the unforeseen influx of refugees in 2015, European countries have realized in an unparalleled manner that conflicts in West and Central Asia can no longer be viewed as crises 'elsewhere'.

The 'Balkan route' has been closed and the influx of refugees into the EU has been significantly reduced in 2016. But refugees are seeking alternative routes into Europe, mainly through the Mediterranean Sea, thus continuing the humanitarian catastrophe on a different front. It is in the European Union and its member states' interest to address the plight of these refugees through better cooperation with and between the two most

influential regional actors, in addition to the already existing coordination with Turkey.

As the regional rivalry and enmity between Iran and Saudi Arabia is often viewed as a core dimension of the manifold conflicts in the Middle East all the way to Central Asia, it is of utmost importance to a) gain insight into how the ongoing crises are viewed in Tehran and Riyadh, b) identify current and potential future points of contention, and c) explore avenues of cooperation. To this end, CARPO and the EastWest Institute (EWI) brought together policy and security experts from Iran and Saudi Arabia, alongside European experts, in the framework of CARPO and EWI's "Iran-Saudi Track 2 Dialogue Initiative". The meeting was held in spring 2016 in a confidential setting.

## Perceptions, Policies and Numbers

Given the fundamental role perceptions play for discourses, narratives, and ultimately policy formulation, Saudi and Iranian experts were asked in this track 2 forum to present and share their respective discourses and perceptions. Importantly, this entailed conceptual views on the word 'refugee'.

### *The Saudi perspective*

As one Saudi expert explained, the use of the word 'refugee' is largely avoided in Saudi Arabia. Other colleagues from Saudi Arabia

<sup>3</sup> UNOCHA: "Yemen" 08/2016. URL: <http://www.unocha.org/yemen> (19/10/2016).

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International: "Afghanistan: Number of people internally displaced by conflict doubled to 1.2 million in just three years" 31/05/2016. URL: [www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/05/afghanistan-internally-displaced](http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/05/afghanistan-internally-displaced) (23/10/2016).

weighed in and outlined the historic Arab ‘trauma’ with the Palestinian *nakba* and the flow of refugees it generated. Hence, in the view of Saudis and other Arab nations, the concept of refugee brings back the collective memory of 1948 and the plight of the Palestinians thereafter.

Thus, Syrians or Yemenis who have fled or migrated to Saudi Arabia are not seen as refugees but as ‘visitors’ or even ‘residents’. According to the Saudi participants, they are granted access to health care and education. Furthermore, due to family links of migrants predating the regional wars, many Syrians and Yemenis are integrated into Saudi Arabia’s society upon their arrival. Thus, no camps or centers to register refugees exist. This is given as the reason why exact numbers of Syrians, Iraqis or Yemenis which Saudi Arabia has received in the past years is hard to determine.

Another Saudi participant noted that the only time in recent history when Saudi Arabia received refugees, that were referred to as such, was during and after the 1991 Gulf War when Iraqi refugees fled to the Kingdom and were placed in a camp at Rafha.

Saudi participants referred to official UN figures that suggest Saudi Arabia has not taken in any refugees as misleading. As described by a former Saudi diplomat, those who fled Syria or Yemen are viewed as “our Arab brothers and sisters in distress”, who are “our guests, not just refugees”. According to this participant, approximately 2.5 million Syrians live in Saudi Arabia – albeit, many of which had migrated to the Kingdom long before the war in Syria broke out. An estimated

500,000 Syrians came to Saudi Arabia after 2011. A total of 140,000 Syrian children are enrolled in free public schools, and approximately 285,000 Yemeni pupils and students. This is why the Saudi participants insisted that Saudi Arabia, although not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, is acting responsibly with regards to people seeking refuge in the Kingdom.

### *The Iranian perspective*

Iran, in contrast to many other Middle Eastern countries, is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. According to the Iranian participants, the term ‘refugee’ (*mohaajer*) in Iran is closely linked to the situation of Afghan migrants and refugees in the country. The number of officially registered Afghan refugees is estimated at 960,000. However, it is broadly believed that far more than two million Afghans live in Iran, often without a defined legal status ensuring them citizen rights.

An Iranian participant explained that due to economic development in Afghan cities such as Herat, which lies close to Iran’s border, the number of voluntarily returning Afghan migrants is on the rise. However, in the wake of the influx of refugees into Europe, an estimated 300,000 Afghan refugees who used to reside in Iran are now in Turkey. As such, Iran remains not only a ‘host country’ but is also increasingly becoming a ‘transit country’ for Afghan refugees.

Afghans in Iran are taken care of in a joint program of the government in Tehran and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). On numerous occasions in the past, UN representatives have demanded a rise in the

budget of their work in Iran, another Iranian participant explained, adding “the border policies are tied to counter-narcotics and counter-trafficking programs and therefore highly securitized”. In such a context, priorities lie on security issues rather than humanitarian aid.

An Iranian academic stated that the most positive news as regards the situation of Afghan refugees in Iran is approved legislation ensuring children of Afghan immigrants (even those without legal papers) access to public schools and universities. “This was overdue in order to integrate the second generation of Afghan refugees in Iran”, the migration and minorities expert added. This legislation is backed by a *fatwa*, issued by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, postulating the right to education for Afghan children. Iranian participants also mentioned growing public solidarity for Afghans: There is now a broad-based demand from ordinary Iranian citizens for better living conditions for Afghan refugees and migrants.

In a similar vein to their Saudi counterparts, Iranian interlocutors often complain that the international community does not acknowledge how much Iran is doing to host more than two million Afghan refugees. Iranian conference participants, as well as policy-makers in Tehran, have expressed interest in working more closely with European states and the European Union as an institution to improve the living conditions of refugees, both in the region and in Europe.

It was concluded by the Iranian participants that while much remains to be done to ensure

basic citizen rights for Afghans in Iran, the latest developments and new legislation are on a positive track.

## Areas of Conflict and Asymmetric Threat Perceptions

There is a scathing lack of convergence between Iran and Saudi Arabia in how the regional conflicts are seen. It became apparent in the discussions that threat perceptions vis-à-vis the respective ‘Other’ differ to a high degree. Saudi Arabia considers Iran to be a major geopolitical threat: to its territory (it feels encircled by Iranian presence); its own regional influence (or ‘soft power’); and the uncontested role the Kingdom has played as the key ally to Western countries, particularly the United States. Hence, Riyadh’s foreign policy priority is to limit Iran’s influence in the region – particularly in Syria and Yemen.

Iran, in contrast, does not view Saudi Arabia as a threat. Rather, as was expressed by the Iranian participants, Tehran is sensing a boost in its self-confidence as a regional power after the nuclear agreement, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with world powers (or the P5+1) was reached in 2015. An Iranian security expert held that Iran sees ISIL and Al-Qaeda affiliates as the main threat (alongside a Western presence) to regional security and stability. For Saudi Arabia however, ISIL is merely a symptom of decades of oppression of Sunni populations by the Iranian-backed governments in Damascus and Baghdad. This is also why Riyadh deems governments in Damascus and Baghdad, as well as their supporters in

Tehran, as primarily responsible for the refugee crisis – not terrorist groups such as ISIL and Al-Qaeda.

### ***Syria: A zero-sum context for now***

Without any doubt, there are very few (if any) shared views between Iran and Saudi Arabia on the ongoing war in Syria. Both perceive the influence and interference of the other as the main root cause for the conflict.

Iranian participants outlined why Tehran sees Syria as imperative to its interests in the region. For decades Syria has been and still is Iran's closest Arab ally and a main transit point for and link to the Lebanese Shia group Hizballah. It is remembered and held in high regard in Iran, one Iranian expert explained, that the late Hafiz al-Assad "was the only Arab leader who did not support Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran". Therefore, loyalty is an important factor in Iran's position toward Bashar al-Assad. At the same time, however, another expert maintained that it is not necessarily "all about the person of Bashar al-Assad". Any "Iran-friendly government" that would be able to "restore stability in Syria" would be acceptable to Tehran. A neutral Syria, however, does not seem to be an option.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, is one of the main supporters of the various Syrian opposition groups and has explicitly ruled out any role for Bashar al-Assad in the process of settling the conflict and in the future of Syria. Iran names Saudi Arabia, as well as Qatar and Turkey, as the main financial supporters of militant jihadi groups such as ISIL, al-Qaeda offshoots and other armed groups.

Both sides do agree that the bloodshed must come to an end. Yet, a lack of vision and willingness to explore avenues of cooperation for conflict-resolution is all too apparent. Positions are too divergent. All conference participants agreed that any prospect for the Syrian crisis to be resolved via initiatives from Tehran and Riyadh is very remote. Unless a deal between the US and Russia is reached, major shifts in the crisis are unlikely.

There was also disagreement over where exactly conflict resolution for the war in Syria could begin. Both sides see the need for the formation of a transitional government. But while Iran views Assad as a key actor in such a process (and beyond), Saudi Arabia insists on Assad's departure. Western officials, such as US Secretary of State John Kerry take a middle ground between Saudi and Iranian positions, having recently stated Assad may have a limited role in the transition phase, but not for a future government in Syria. Turkey, having settled its diplomatic dispute with Russia, also weighs in on the option of keeping Assad for a transitional period.

### ***Yemen: Visions of an inclusive government***

The discussions on Yemen, too, were driven by geopolitical logic and therefore had many similar points of contention as on Syria, although both sides agreed on the necessity of an inclusive government and power sharing in Yemen. According to the Saudi participants, the Houthis are acceptable as a political group, but only "as long as it lays its arms down". For Saudi Arabia, it is imperative to avoid state collapse in Yemen, as further instability would present a big security threat to the Kingdom. This perspective

was challenged by the view that Saudi Arabia wants neither a strong nor independent Yemen: Riyadh's interests may be better served with its southern neighbor being more dependent on Saudi Arabia. However, as a Saudi expert put it, "no one in Riyadh is happy with the destruction in Yemen". He insisted that there was "no appetite for this war", but Iranian influence in Yemen and the prospects of the Houthis evolving into a "Yemeni Hizballah" forced Saudi Arabia "to act decisively".

European experts highlighted the dire situation of the Yemeni population. Around 21 million people – 80% of the population – are in need of humanitarian assistance, and no less than 14 million people are food insecure. The Saudi participants insisted that the Kingdom is aware of its responsibilities and are already allocating funds for the reconstruction of Yemen in addition to its current provision of relief services to the people. One Saudi expert highlighted that Saudi Arabia has also sent financial support to Djibouti where some Yemenis have sought refuge from the ongoing war.

What also became clear throughout the discussion is that Yemen is of much higher importance to Saudi Arabia than it is for Iran. After all, the Kingdom shares a 1770 km southern border with Yemen. For Iran, safe transfer routes for trade ships in the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Oman area are of strategic importance. Symbolic and financial support for the Houthis, a group Iran believes has been oppressed by the Yemeni political order, is not as resolute as Iran's support for Hizballah

in Lebanon or the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs, or *Hashd al-Sha'bi*) in Iraq. Hence, as the conflicting views are not as entrenched as regards Syria, the conference participants deemed it possible for Iran and Saudi Arabia to develop together a formula to end the Yemeni war.

### ***Afghanistan: Where shared views exist***

Throughout the discussions, Afghanistan appeared as a country where both Iran and Saudi Arabia have two shared goals: a) supporting the central government, and b) tackling the challenge of drug smuggling. The Afghan government is facing daunting political, economic and social challenges: the threat posed by the Taliban as well as by ISIL, the lack of economic and infrastructural development, and the need for urgent counter-narcotic measures. According to an Iranian expert, out of a total population of 33.8 million,<sup>5</sup> almost two million Afghans are drug addicts.

Another Iranian participant noted that there is a historic precedent for constructive cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia on Afghanistan. Both countries played a crucial role in identifying and installing Hamid Karzai as Afghanistan's president in 2001. This US-led initiative would have not borne fruit, everyone agreed, without the significant support of both regional powers. Ethnic divisions in Afghanistan between the Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek and other minorities could have become much worse at that time if regional powers had had the appetite to instigate tensions.

<sup>5</sup> Countrymeters: "Afghanistan Population" 18/10/2016. URL: <http://countrymeters.info/en/Afghanistan> (18/10/2016).

However, the current context may be different: a Western analyst wondered whether Saudi Arabia now had any incentives to cooperate with Iran for the economic development of Afghanistan. Referencing the discussion on Yemen, one Iranian academic pointed out “Afghanistan is to Iran what Yemen is to Saudi Arabia”; namely, a neighboring country of one power with less geostrategic relevance for the regional rival.

Given the dire economic hardship the population of Afghanistan continues to endure, any joint effort by regional powers in cooperation with the EU and its member states would significantly help in stabilizing the country and reducing the number of Afghans seeking refuge in Iran, Turkey and Europe.

EWI’s “Afghanistan Reconnected Process” has identified Iran’s re-emergence as a regional player. This is seen as a vital opportunity for Iran’s further engagement in Afghanistan’s economic development and regional integration process. Iran’s stake in Afghanistan’s economic reintegration is obvious, given its proximity. Improvements in infrastructural development and trade between the two countries are already underway. In particular, the India-backed development of Iran’s Chabahar port aims to improve Afghanistan’s landlocked access to the sea, providing an alternative to Pakistan’s Gwadar port, and to open up Afghan trade to new markets. Railway lines are being constructed between the two countries as well, as is energy transmission infrastructure. Iran’s potential as a broker in Afghanistan’s peace process should be considered as well, as fears of ISIL’s growth in Afghanistan have pushed Iran to formalize relationships with the Taliban via a recently

named official representative to Tehran. Saudi Arabia’s role in Afghanistan has been less defined. However, recent overtures, including King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud’s invitation to Afghanistan’s Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah for an official state visit to Riyadh, indicate that the Kingdom wants its say in the Afghan peace process as well as in private sector investments in Afghanistan’s energy sector.

### *Iraq: No disintegration and no influence of the ‘Other’*

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are willing to prevent territorial disintegration in Iraq. However, Saudi Arabia wants to counter Iranian political, economic and cultural influence over Baghdad. Iran viewed the re-opening of Saudi Arabia’s diplomatic mission in Baghdad in January 2016 with high skepticism. Far from welcoming new avenues of diplomatic communication, one Iranian participant raised the concern that Riyadh seeks to instigate tension and anti-Iranian sentiment in Iraq. For example, Iran blames the recent episodes of Kurdish unrest in Iran’s Kurdistan and Kermanshah provinces on Saudi Arabia, as an attempt to create internal conflict in Iran by training and sending Kurds from the Kingdom’s consulate in Erbil to the border area to instigate armed combat. Regardless of whether or not this accusation is valid, it serves as an example of how current regional policies of Riyadh are viewed in Tehran.

Both regional powers are anxious regarding post-ISIL Iraq. Experts and observers worldwide fear further tension and division in the country, to the degree that operations to oust ISIL from Mosul had been delayed. In

addition to Iran and Saudi Arabia, Turkey is also a key player as it tries to prevent Kurdish forces, particularly those parties opposed to Turkey's regional aims, becoming too strong in Iraq.

While disagreements over the situation in Iraq do not run as deep as in Syria, it is apparent that Riyadh and Tehran are far from developing a convergent position on the future of Iraq. Saudi participants made clear numerous times that they view post-Saddam Iraq as the root cause of all conflicts in the region, and that they had counselled against the US invasion. While Iran may not have welcomed the presence of US troops in its neighboring country, it certainly welcomed the fall of its arch enemy Saddam Hussein. Iran has managed to significantly expand its influence in post-Saddam Iraq – much to the dismay of Saudi Arabia.

Apart from economic development and infrastructural reconstruction, Iraq will need the help of regional and global powers to install a strong central military and security apparatus that no longer depends on non-state forces and militant actors such as the PMU. While defeating ISIL must certainly be the number one priority for the Iraqi government, preventing exacerbated ethnic and sectarian conflict after clearing major cities of ISIL will be the main challenge in the upcoming months (and arguably, years).

## Competition over Reconstruction

Throughout the discussions on strategies to end the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan

and Yemen, it became clear that not only do conflicting viewpoints on the current and future political order of these countries exist between Tehran and Riyadh, there is an additional level of contention regarding the strategies to reconstruct and rebuild these severely destroyed countries. Saudi participants clearly stated that they do not see any role for Iran in helping to rebuild infrastructure in Yemen, just as the Iranian side did not welcome Saudi funding for the reconstruction of Syria. The international community must begin to develop sensitive post-conflict road maps that anticipate and preempt counterproductive tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia in regards to implementing reconstruction measures for Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen.

## Key Insights and Recommendations

- 1) **The current refugee crisis will have long-term geopolitical, economic and social implications for Europe. Therefore, it is in the EU's strategic interest to initiate a constructive dialogue with and between Riyadh and Tehran** – the two regional rivals that can significantly influence the main 'departure contexts' of Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan. Such a dialogue should address the humanitarian needs of refugees and IDPs and encourage cooperation in responding to those needs.
- 2) **When exploring strategies to develop political responses with Saudi Arabia and Iran to the refugee crisis, it is essential to thoroughly understand the perceptions and discourses in both countries.** It is



also important to develop better knowledge of how Tehran and Riyadh have dealt with their own refugees from Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan.

- 3) **When engaging Iran and Saudi Arabia on regional conflicts, it is helpful to keep in mind that Afghanistan is to Iran what Yemen is to Saudi Arabia.** The backyard of the one state is of less relevance to the other. Therefore, successful conflict resolution in these countries could help reduce geopolitical rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh. The EU should capitalize on these similarities when developing avenues for cooperation in humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan and Yemen, the two contexts where Iranian and Saudi positions are more reconcilable than in Syria and Iraq.
- 4) **The EU and its member states should encourage cooperation with and between Saudi Arabia and Iran on economic and infrastructural development and reconstruction in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen.** Post-conflict competition between Tehran and Riyadh over geopolitical influence via aid should be discouraged from the start, with the focus rather on the humanitarian assistance of people in distress.
- 5) **Europe should engage Iran and Saudi Arabia on the scenarios for post-ISIL Syria and Iraq.** ISIL may eventually be defeated militarily, but the root causes of its emergence will likely prevail while social and economic hardship persists. Coordinated humanitarian and developmental efforts between the regional powers will be as important as bilateral considerations of a joint security framework in West and Central Asia. A framework that serves not only national but also human security.

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## 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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