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# Cultural Exchange and the Prospects for Inter-Societal Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran

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## Introduction

Saudi Arabia and Iran have had a contentious relationship over the past decades that has fluctuated between proxy-conflict to careful talks and rapprochement in the last few years. Disagreement between the two regional heavy-weights centers on geopolitical rivalry, security concerns, a clash of

## Executive Summary

Stimson Europe and CARPO hosted a workshop in August 2022 that discussed the potential of cultural diplomacy and cultural exchange between Iran and Saudi Arabia. While the two countries share a rich history of cultural relations, their present-day cultural exchange is minimal due to obstacles related to politics and security interests. Despite the many challenges, participants of the workshop emphasized the importance of cultural diplomacy and exchange in contributing to better relations by increasing mutual understanding and creating a mindset that the Other is not a threat to one's core identity, while at the same time not discarding the political and social context. The workshop focused on four areas as case studies to explore avenues of future cultural relations: literature and translation, documentary filmmaking, the media, and religious diplomacy. During the workshop, participants came up with different recommendations and ideas for politicians and civil society actors to foster cultural relations between the two countries.

national and regional identities and ideologies, and a misunderstanding of each other's culture. But despite this, the two countries have historically had cultural relations. Both important players in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran have shaped and have been shaped by each other, as well as other neighboring states. Encounters in the context of the Hajj pilgrimage or a shared literary tradition, including stories such as the lore of Majnun and Layla, are just a few examples of their centuries long exchange, which have prevailed even in times of political difficulties. Yet in recent times, cultural relations have stalled and have been obstructed by political tensions.

In this context, Stimson Europe and CARPO hosted a workshop in August 2022 that discussed the potential of cultural diplomacy and cultural exchange between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The workshop was part of the ongoing 'Iran-Saudi Dialogue Initiative', a track-2 initiative which began in 2015. It brought together distinguished Saudi and Iranian experts from the field of literature, media, religious diplomacy, and documentary filmmaking, in addition to several European experts. The participants discussed the definition of cultural diplomacy and cultural exchange, the challenges of these two in the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the opportunities that cultural relations offer for future Iran-Saudi exchange and cooperation.

## Cultural Diplomacy and Exchange

Culture is often assumed to play a positive role in creating ties between people from different societies, since it offers a way to learn and understand the realities of the Other and

can even help to form a common ground for other exchange activities. Cultural relations can take on different forms, from cultural diplomacy on the public policy level of states to cultural exchange at the people-to-people level. While states can use cultural diplomacy to increase their positive image abroad and to serve certain foreign policy interests, cultural exchange is more focused on the level of the individual and civil society.

The main difference between cultural diplomacy and cultural exchange thus relates to the degree to which the state is involved. As such, cultural diplomacy is a deliberate intervention with intended goals, while cultural exchange is something that takes place at the societal level, independent from state involvement. While cultural diplomacy is always planned and has a clear aim, cultural exchange can at times be spontaneous and happen unintentionally. Yet, there is no clear-cut definition of the exact border between the two, with grey areas where the two overlap; for example, cultural exchange initiatives that are supported by state financing.

Furthermore, caution should be exercised regarding the assumption that culture only plays a positive role. Culture can also be instrumentalized to support polarizing discourses. But here again, there is a grey area when it comes to definitions, because what one might perceive as instrumentalization, or 'propaganda', might be intended as positive cultural diplomacy by the one who is implementing it. Also, the target group of cultural diplomacy is not always clearly defined. While society in the other state is usually the recipient, at times diaspora groups or even the state's own society are the target.

Similarly, there is no clear, agreed upon definition of culture itself. Culture can be defined narrowly as referring only to high and popular culture; but it can also be seen broadly to include sports and religious traditions. A further complication is the question of what represents a country's culture. Especially in heterogeneous contexts, the culture presented by the state might be only its most dominant one.

Given the challenges in defining key concepts when it comes to cultural relations, it is difficult to set clear benchmarks of successful cultural diplomacy and exchange. Participants also pointed out during the workshop that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy and cultural exchange is difficult to measure.

## **Cultural Exchange between Iran and Saudi Arabia**

The workshop pointed to a lack of both cultural diplomacy and cultural exchange in the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia, which, despite the two being close neighbors, have been obstructed by contentious relations, security concerns, and a deep mistrust towards each other at the political level. When it comes to cultural exchange, one participant mentioned that the lack of mutual understanding between the two countries is to a large extent caused by the lack of places where Iranians and Saudis can meet, both physically and virtually. Too often the focus of interaction between the two countries is on differences rather than the shared cultural and religious roots and heritage.

Another central issue to the lack of cultural exchange is language. Although Arabic is

one of the official languages in Iran for its religious role and it is spoken by the Iranian Arabs in Khuzestan, there are not many Iranians who use Arabic on a daily level. Similarly, there is a lack of people in Saudi Arabia who have a workable command of Persian and can function as a bridge between the two cultures. In the case of literature, for example, this means that translation is primarily conducted through a third language, such as English or French, making it prone to errors. Languages can also be instrumentalized to serve a certain political purpose. In the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia, it has regularly been used polemically in the media, as one participant noted. The tendency to only display certain aspects of relations or cultures also plays into this.

In addition, participants mentioned the lack of academic exchange between Iran and Saudi Arabia, a factor that played an important role in the social integration of Europe after the Second World War. Overall, neither the Iranian nor the Saudi state show a deep interest in actively fostering cultural relations, whether this be exchange or diplomacy. The active role of the states would be needed here to enable societal activities in this field and to overcome a tendency to shy away from such exchange because of fear of judgment.

As a result, the current situation between the two countries was described by one expert as a deadlock resulting from mistrust, and any form of communication is mainly focused on security concerns. Existing exchange on the societal level is mostly confined to the private sphere, or in the case of politics, as in the current talks, in high-level, closed-door settings. This contrasts with the

rich history of shared cultural development between the two countries.

## **Avenues for Cooperation: Cultural Relations and ‘Contact-Zones’**

Despite the many challenges, participants emphasized the importance of culture in contributing to better relations between the two countries by enhancing mutual understanding.

Increasing cultural relations can further support dialogues between Iran and Saudi Arabia that focus on other topics. One of the Iranian participants referred to the importance of having cultural dialogues between Iran and Saudi Arabia next to the political and security talks. As such, cultural relations feed into security interests. When cultural relations between two societies deepen, it becomes harder for politicians to ignore the interests of the other state and frame the discourse polemically. The image of the second party as the (unknown) Other can be reshaped.

Cultural relations ideally create a setting in which each other’s cultures are respected and shared, which in the long-term can create a mindset that the Other is not a threat to one’s core identity. Cultural relations can therefore also continue at a time when political entities disagree, and in extreme cases even be the only existing link between societies. Here, participants mentioned the example of the Cold War, when, despite political disengagement between the West and the Soviet Union, cultural exchange still formed a channel between isolated communities.

All the factors mentioned above point towards the relevance of making political decision-makers aware of the importance of culture. This is crucial since, as participants mentioned, cultural relations should not be detached from the political and social context they take place in. Otherwise, they risk becoming a bubble that only includes a limited section of both societies, rather than affecting the larger public. Further, without basic political will, any form of cultural relations is difficult to realize.

Integrating culture into a strategy for better relations between the two countries and their societies requires a long-term approach. Potential areas for cultural exchange and diplomacy are many. Iran and Saudi Arabia are both actively involved in the World Cup 2022 in Qatar, an event around which cultural exchange could take place. Other examples that might foster cultural exchange and diplomacy include expanding and encouraging tourism and regional expansion of businesses.

Based on these considerations, the workshop focused on four cultural fields as case studies to explore avenues of future relations: literature and translation, documentary filmmaking, the media, and religious diplomacy.

### ***Literature and Translation***

Literature in both Iran and in Saudi Arabia is a respected and widespread form of cultural expression. In both countries, it forms a means of unifying people as well as an avenue for subcultures and minorities to share their discourses of identity. However, current literary exchange between Saudi Arabia and

Iran is minimal, especially when compared to its ancient past. Participants pointed to the rich tradition of exchange and translation in, for example, the Abbasid period.

One participant referred to the fact that while historical Persian literature is much loved and read in Saudi Arabia, modern Iranian literature is perceived as politicized and thus not widespread in the Kingdom. Another participant mentioned that the Arabic literature that is currently being translated to Persian is mostly politically and/or religiously motivated. Less politicized literature, such as the extensive amount of translated poetry, come mostly from Arabic-speaking countries other than Saudi Arabia.

It is also important to be aware of the process behind translation. In Saudi Arabia, the translator plays an important role in initiating what is being translated, as individual translators can suggest a translation to the Ministry of Culture and apply for funding. The lacking knowledge of Persian potentially forms an explanation of why these suggestions do not often include Iranian works, and if they do, are translated through a third language. In the Iranian case, works to be translated are mostly chosen by state institutions that sponsor literary translation directly, which often leads to political motivations overshadowing the process. While there is a high number of books being translated into Persian each year, there are hardly any books from Saudi Arabia among them. Most of the Arab-Persian translations take place outside of both countries, mainly in Iraq and Lebanon.

Yet the field of literature and translation is a promising field of cultural diplomacy and

exchange, since the availability of works from the other country in one's own language can be a bridge at the Other's culture, giving space to its many different layers. Through the inclusion of Iran and Saudi Arabia in each other's book fairs and other literary events, translation might be fostered. The suggestion was made for the creation of a literary prize focusing specifically on translation between Persian and Arabic. Other ways of promoting translation would be an increase of funds or covering the literary production from each other's countries in cultural news. This process can have a top-down as well as a bottom-up dimension, both of similar importance.

### *Documentary Filmmaking*

Documentary filmmaking, like literature, can display everyday scenes of life and offer the outsider a view into that specific society. During the workshop, one Iranian participant shared the experience of working with a Saudi counterpart in developing a documentary film portraying everyday life in both countries. Such projects emphasize cultural differences but also display cultural communalities. In this way they offer a channel of authentic voices from one context into another, especially in settings where a direct exchange is difficult. Although it must be noted that the idea of authenticity is debatable; one participant during the workshop questioned if there can ever be an authentic voice speaking for all citizens of a country.

Documentaries can have the positive effect of creating empathy and showing aspects of everyday life. But, as participants pointed out, they can also show a distorted picture of reality and can never replace

real people-to-people exchange. During the workshop, it became apparent that cooperation in this field is especially difficult since channels for collaborative work are rare to non-existent. Cooperation in this field thus can and should be enhanced, and the state could play an important role as advocate.

### **Media**

Media, in its ideal form, has more of an informing role on developments within a society, although it can also act as a means of disinformation. Yet, as one Iranian participant noted, media can also be part of cultural relations through its portrayals of the Other. It is thus highly relevant how language is used by journalists, since moderate and nuanced language can support the de-escalation of regional tensions.

While documentary filmmaking is seen as a bottom-up form of expression, where authentic voices find their way to the public, media in both countries is rather considered as a top-down process. One suggested initiative by a participant was the creation of a platform where both nuanced media and documentary films, as well as other cultural activities, could be shared in both Persian and in Arabic. Participants also mentioned topics on which Iranian and Saudi journalists could easily publish jointly or feature each other in their respective country, such as sports, shared challenges concerning the environment and the pandemic, and of course cultural themes.

### **Religion**

Religion has played a central role in the cultural diplomacy of both countries. Religion,

while for some not strictly considered as 'culture', is part of culture: It is a form of spirituality and strongly related to cultural and identity formation in both Iran and Saudi Arabia. One Saudi participant described how Saudi Arabia has strongly focused on religion in its cultural diplomacy efforts to other countries in the last few years. Clerics play an important role on social media, often reaching beyond their national audience and in doing so potentially fostering cultural exchange.

It is important to note that in recent years, Saudi Arabia has started to shift away from more traditional religious perspectives as part of its national identity to more moderate interpretations of Islam. This is also visible in the cultural diplomacy and exchange currently taking place. Yet, according to another participant, building trust through religion is a delicate process and needs to be done through the right actors. It also needs to be neutral from the political discourse, something that is especially difficult between Iran and Saudi Arabia due to their sectarian divide.

Iranians, according to one participant, have in the past few years had positive experiences performing the Hajj in Saudi Arabia. These experiences are reflected upon and shared positively within Iran, which has an impact on relations at the individual level and is an important part of cultural exchange between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Some participants also shared that religious figures from both sides meeting in Mecca offer ground for political exchange. In recent years, religious meetings have also included visits from political figures. Religious authorities taking part in such exchanges can, because of their roles as

intermediates in their home countries, share cultural thoughts from the other country within their own societies.

Religion in cultural diplomacy and cultural exchange has many forms, from emphasizing the role of religious minorities to advocating a common empathy towards one another based on religious values. All these aspects point towards the importance of religion and religious leaders for cultural relations, especially between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This can range from acknowledging the other cultures' religious holidays to enabling religious tourism. What was emphasized by all participants is that aspects such as common empathy for each other's spirituality and a departure from the sectarian divide/discourse are needed for religion to take on a bridging role. Otherwise, religion risks having the reverse effect; namely, becoming a tool of separation and othering.

## Key Takeaways and Recommendations

The workshop participants developed different recommendations and ideas for political decision-makers in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Europe, as well as for NGOs and civil society actors, on how to foster cultural relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

- **Multi-faceted and socially embedded engagement.** Cultural relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia should be embedded in the social and political contexts of both countries and not conducted as a primarily elite-driven endeavor. Furthermore, initiatives fostering cultural relations should be intertwined with other initiatives taking place in bilateral relations, such as political and security dialogues, and not viewed as a stand-alone effort.
- **Role of entrepreneurs.** The economic potentials of cultural relations should be highlighted and utilized as an incentive to initiate broadened cultural exchange. Here, the development of the tourism sector, building on the long history of pilgrimage and religious tourism, can serve as a promising example. Highly important religious and historical sites are located in both Iran and Saudi Arabia, alongside natural landscapes and ancient cities and villages, all which could attract tourists.
- **Role of third parties.** European governments, NGOs and cultural organizations are welcomed in both Iran and Saudi Arabia and viewed as eligible enablers of dialogue initiatives and cultural exchanges. Their role can be to provide a secure and confidential setting and other logistics needed for Iranians and Saudis to meet (in-person or virtually) and share experiences, insights and ideas.
- **Participation in each other's cultural events.** Cultural output from each country could be introduced to the other through festivals and cultural events. In the case of literature, translation of publications from the other country could feature in book fairs, and be encouraged through literary or translation awards. As to documentary films, these could similarly be shown in film festivals or highlighted in media outlets in the other country.
- **Documentary films as an engine of inter-societal empathy.** As a tool to enhance inter-societal understanding and empathy between Iranians and Saudis,

the field of documentary films is a very promising genre of cultural productions. A well-nuanced balance of authenticity and storytelling in documentary films bears the potential to stimulate interest, create shared understanding and, ultimately, humanize a perceived enemy. Other forms of the creative arts, such as theater, visual arts, or music, could also be explored in this respect.

- **Nuanced and moderate language in the media.** Media and its language towards the Other are key factors in shaping sentiments about the other society. Therefore, media outlets and individuals working in the field should be encouraged to use inclusive, non-violent language when talking about the other country, and to write portrayals without prejudice. Featuring authors of the other country or cooperating on pieces might also support this aim.
- **Historical and cultural heritage as a unifying factor.** The history of the region should be reconsidered through a modern lens that creates a sense of unity rather than being used as a source of division. This can, for example, be done by referring to glorified historical figures shared between the Arab world and Iran, such as the polymath Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and the grammarian Sibawayh.
- **Provide space for needs of minorities and underrepresented groups in cultural relations.** Groups such as youth, religious and ethnic minorities, and female stakeholders continue to be underrepresented in the fields of cultural diplomacy and people-to-people exchange. The inclusion of their perspectives and narratives is of paramount importance to thoroughly mirror the societies of both Iran and Saudi Arabia.

## About the Authors

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Stimson Europe, founded in 2021 as the first overseas branch of The Stimson Center, is home to the Center's MENA Program. Stimson's MENA Program focuses on finding common ground between regional rivals and conflicting parties through expert and political leader dialogue and policy development, as well as providing consultancy and advice on regional dynamics to a wide range of stakeholders. The program continues and expands work previously conducted at the EastWest Institute (EWI) and builds on the Stimson Center's long history of track 2 and track 1.5 dialogues and other senior level engagements.

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