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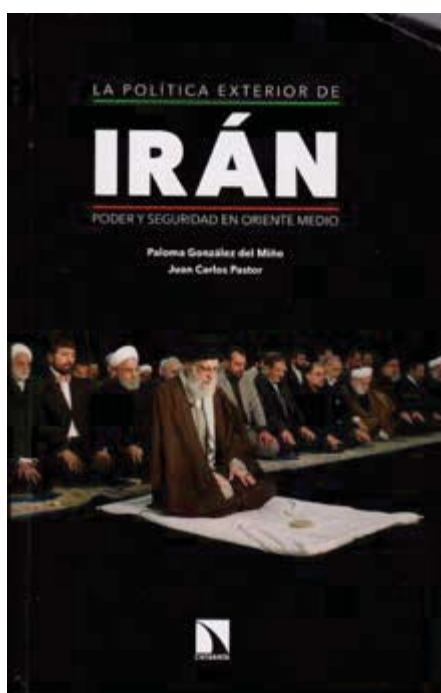
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Book review

LA POLÍTICA EXTERIOR DE IRÁN: PODER Y SEGURIDAD EN ORIENTE MEDIO [IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY: POWER AND SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST] AND EL REINO DE ARABIA SAUDÍ Y LA HEGEMONÍA DE ORIENTE MEDIO [THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA AND THE HEGEMONY OF THE MIDDLE EAST]. Paloma González del Miño, Juan Carlos Pastor Gómez, Publisher: Catarata, 2020.

ISBN 978-84-1352-020-9 (pages).



These are two complementary and highly topical works, both of which emerge from the discipline of international relations and the analysis of foreign policy as the main tool used by the two states to position themselves hegemonically in the region. Two crucial analyses for understanding one of the most exciting, and at the same time most tense, dynamics of international society in our time. *La política exterior de Irán: Poder y seguridad en Oriente Medio* by Paloma González del Miño y Juan Carlos Pastor and *El reino de Arabia Saudí y la hegemonía de Oriente Medio* by David Hernández Martínez. Published by the publisher La Catarata in 2020, these books are based on the study of a well-defined historical period from a chronological point of view. In the case of Iran, the Islamic Revolution of 1978 marks the turning point that initiated a change in the country's positioning in the region, while in Saudi Arabia, although there has been no disruptive event, its role as a regional power is the result of a policy designed and implemented by the authoritarianism of the House of Saud, suffering the ups and downs typical of the region since the creation of the modern state in 1932.

A reading of these two works reveals common elements in both countries, but at the same time reinforces the elements that differentiate them in a notable way. Iran and Saudi Arabia are fighting for hegemony in the region politically, economically and religiously, and their actions in recent decades have been aimed at positioning themselves as the Middle East's reference point, actions that make them irreconcilable enemies. In a way, both states act on the principles of the *mirror theory* where any movement by one has a reflexive, albeit rational, effect on the other.

Iran's history and its cultural and economic relevance position it as a relevant, key player in the region, making it an essential player in the future developments. Iran is the result of a historical and identity construction based on the contrast between the "Persian" and the "Arab", with a tradition and vocation as a regional power.

In these works, the author's knowledge of the object of study is demonstrated by the quantity and quality of the bibliographical sources he uses. *La política exterior de Irán: Poder y seguridad en Oriente Medio* begins with a historical analysis necessary to understand the evolution of the Persian country and its hegemonic position in the region. It leads us to understand the steps taken to achieve political change. In a well-argued way, it shows how the collectives that led the Islamic Revolution against the monarchy of Reza Pahlavi, the *Shah*, were forged as one of the most important events of the second half of the 20th century in the region. The consolidation of the Shia clergy as the elite of the new political system, appropriating an eminently popular revolution against the monarchy, represents a Copernican shift in state policy, especially in its external action. From this moment on, Iran began to promote the presence of Shia cells in states in the region, which Saudi Arabia and its allies saw as an act of destabilisation, and it also became immersed in a war against its neighbour Iraq that lasted a decade without any clear victory or defeat for either side, only attrition in economic and human terms.

El reino de Arabia Saudí y la hegemonía de Oriente Medio perfectly describes the pillars of the state: the patrimonialisation of the state by the House of Saud; the im-

portance of hydrocarbons in the functioning of the state; and its unbreakable alliance with Wahhabism, although with some tense episodes such as the siege of the Great Mosque of Máyid al Haram in 1979, its alliances with the United States and other Western powers, and its position in the Palestinian cause. These are the three inescapable elements that must be known in order to understand the idiosyncrasies of contemporary Saudi Arabia. Wahhabi precepts have had a very limited territorial dimension, but thanks to the Saudi monarchy's incorporation of these precepts as part of its foreign policy, these ideological principles have continued to grow in recent decades in different parts of the world¹. The first manifestation of the instrumentalisation of Wahhabism in Saudi foreign policy can be found in the 1980s with the support, together with the United States and Pakistan, for the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet invader, which later led to the birth of the terrorist organisation Al Qaeda and different Salafist factions.

In the case of Iran, the authors describe perfectly the different ideological tendencies that have directed the state's external action, how its actions have been modified, but always with the central element of making Iran the hegemonic power. Thus, a major analysis is made of the foreign policy of each of the different administrations since the Islamic Revolution, switching between progressive and conservative governments, and how this alternation has affected their position on the regional and international chessboard. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's external action has been more sustained over time, albeit with some modifications in recent years.

In this vein, the Arab Spring represents another turning point for both states to become the regional actor of reference. In the case of Saudi Arabia, concerns focus on four areas that affect both the internal and external spheres. The difficulty of the Saud House in imposing its political criteria and establishing its superiority over other actors; a growing hegemonic rivalry with Iran; problems of stability with traditional alliances, especially with the US, especially during the Obama administration; and the crisis with the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. For Iran, the Arab revolts were an opportunity to improve its position in the region and even expand its sphere of influence. Whereas before 2011 the country started from a position of exclusion from the international scene as a result of its nuclear programme, a new phase has begun, characterised by multilateralism and a framework of new relations with the world powers. We can say that the Arab Spring had a different impact on the two countries' external action: for Iran it was an opportunity, while for Saudi Arabia it meant internal destabilisation and external weakening.

In this context of internal and external crisis, Mohammed bin Salman is designing a new foreign policy for Saudi Arabia. The so-called *Salman Doctrine* will attempt to redress post-Arab Spring external action and put the kingdom back at the centre of the Middle East by revitalising the Saudi hegemonic role in the region. This

¹ Hernández Martínez, David (2020). *El reino de Arabia Saudí y la hegemonía de Oriente Medio*, Publisher: La Catarata, Madrid, p. 66.

doctrine is a reaction to the rising power of its main rival-enemy: Iran. To this end, they will focus their efforts on those areas where Iran has become a regional *hegemon*. David Hernández, in a succinct but enlightening way, cites some examples such as: the leadership of a military coalition in Yemen seeking to restore Abd Rabbuh Mansur al Hadi to power, countering the advance of the Iranian-backed Houthis militias; the harbouring of Lebanese president Saad Hariri who argued he would be in serious danger if he returned to Lebanon due to threats from Shia factions; the rapprochement with the Al-Sisi regimes in Egypt and the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan; the attempt to increase its economic and religious presence in those places where Sunni movements are weakened by the Shia presence such as Syria and Iraq; the new relationship with Israel, promoted by the Trump Administration, whereby the Saudi House abandons its traditional support for the Palestinian cause. In short, a new doctrine of external action marked by a reaction to the growing prominence that Iran has acquired in recent years in the region, and which introduces novelties such as direct military action.

Both states, with an almost exclusive economic dependence on hydrocarbons, shape their actions through a network of allies that reinforce their position as a regional power. While Iran invests a great deal of resources in the consolidation of a post-Saddam Hussein triangle of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, as is perfectly developed in chapter 4 of *La política exterior de Irán: Poder y seguridad en Oriente Medio*; Saudi Arabia focuses its efforts on its area of influence in the Gulf Cooperation Council, with the exception of Qatar, trying to establish itself as the reference point in the Arab and Muslim world, among other reasons for hosting and protecting the Holy Places; Yemen, as a matter of proximity; revolutionary Syria to overthrow or weaken the government of Bashar Al-Asad, Iran's main ally; and its relationship with world powers such as the United States, as well as a rapprochement with Israel, as shown in the third part of *El reino de Arabia Saudí y la hegemonía de Oriente Medio*.

Both readings conclude that the Middle East has a multipolar distribution of power due to the multitude of international actors of all kinds, with both Iran and Saudi Arabia seeking to influence the defence of their own interests. Both states have been committing political, economic and cultural resources to consolidate their power in the Middle East. This competitive relationship results in a zero-sum game, which increases and conditions the conflict dynamics in the region.

Iran's security policy responds to a scheme of opposition to US power and its main ally in the region, Israel. It therefore bases this policy on the maxim that, rather than waiting for its enemies, Iran fights them at the regional level. On the other hand, the Saudi regime has made containment of Iran a major focus of its foreign and security policy, as stated in the current Salman Doctrine, countering Iran's expansionism in the region.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are at a crossroads where the stability of the region is in their hands. Both works are essential for understanding the idiosyncrasies of the Middle East through the positioning of its two hegemonic powers, as well as for illuminating the future path of the region. The scientific rigour with which its pages are written

makes it a must-read for scholars of the Middle East, international security, foreign policy and international relations.

La política exterior de Irán: Poder y seguridad en Oriente Medio. Authors: Paloma González del Miño and Juan Carlos Pastor. Publisher: La Catarata. ISBN.978-84-1352-020-9. Number of pages: 283.

El reino de Arabia Saudí y la hegemonía de Oriente Medio by David Hernández Martínez. Publisher: La Catarata. ISBN. 978-84-1352-013-1. Number of pages: 174.

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