

Intelligence in Public Media

Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Forty-Year Rivalry that Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East

Kim Ghattas (Henry Holt and Company, 2020), 377, map, notes, index.

Reviewed by Brent M. Geary

In the assessment of journalist Kim Ghattas, in 1979 the world changed in profound and wildly destructive ways, sparking decades of turmoil in the Muslim world and beyond, that we still struggle to contain and even understand. She makes a compelling case, one that policymakers, intelligence officers, military commanders, and informed citizens should become more familiar with as we continue to manage the fallout from a Middle Eastern rivalry that continues unabated and threatens global peace and security. That rivalry, between Saudi Arabia and Iran, is the focal point of Ghattas's book *Black Wave*, a sweeping history of the past 40 years in which she explains how a political rivalry across the Persian (or Arabian) Gulf morphed into something more sinister and more far reaching than Riyadh or Tehran could have anticipated or probably intended. It sparked an arms race of intolerance between Sunni and Shia extremism that became the driving force behind decades of war, terrorism, famine, and the deaths and displacement of untold millions.

Raise your hand if you have ever heard someone say of the Middle East, "those people have been fighting each other for centuries," implying that the hatreds there are ancient and unyielding. To her great credit, Ghattas informs—or reminds—readers that this is not true, at least with regard to the sectarian conflict within Islam. Rather, Muslim leaders in the late 20th century consciously chose to upend a relatively peaceful, live-and-let-live status quo between sects that had been the rule rather than the exception for generations, and they did so to preserve or enhance their own political power. Before 1979, Sunnis and Shias lived next to each other, worked together, played together and even intermarried regularly. That, to Ghattas, is the *annus horribilis*, the horrible year that featured three cataclysmic events, gave new life to ancient grievances, and created others from whole cloth. In her introduction, Ghattas writes of how she interviewed people from North Africa to Pakistan, "across four decades and seven countries," and how seemingly "everyone had a story about how 1979 had wrecked their

lives, their marriage, their education, including those born after that year."⁽³⁾

Probably the best known of the three events—among Western readers, anyway—is the Islamic Revolution in Iran that ejected the secular, pro-American monarch Mohammed Reza Shah from his throne and brought to power the extremist Shia cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his "Islamic Republic." Khomeini quickly turned the traditional role of Shia clerics in Iran on its head, converting them almost overnight from the shah's spiritual advisers and go-betweens with the masses to earthly rulers claiming direct contact with the divine. At several points in the book, Ghattas describes the damage the Islamic regime did to the human rights of Iranian women, minorities, and political opponents. She is less interested in the consequences of Khomeini's revolution in Iran, however, than in the reaction to it across the region, especially in her home country of Lebanon and in Saudi Arabia, and the dominoes that began to fall as a result.

The second major event of 1979, to which Ghattas gives equal weight, was the violent occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, by militant Sunni extremists led by Juhayman al-Otaibi, a veteran of the Saudi security services who called for the overthrow of the Saudi royal family. This was a calamity for the ruling Saudis, who proved unable to protect the holiest site in Islam and were eventually forced to hire French commandos to assist in its recapture. Otaibi and his men condemned the ostentatious wealth of the Saudi royals and what they deemed to be the decline of Islamic values in the kingdom. These men were devotees of what is known as Wahhabism, the fundamentalist Saudi strain of Sunni Islam closely linked to the ideologies of terrorist groups such as al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Ghattas briefly recounts the centuries-old ties between the ruling al-Saud family and that of the 18th century cleric Muhammad ibn Abdelwahhab, essentially a power-sharing agreement in the Arabian Peninsula. To

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Ghattas—and numerous experts on the region—the occupation of the Grand Mosque, following closely behind the Iranian Revolution, led the Saudi royal family to embrace anew puritanical Wahhabism to bolster its religious legitimacy and stave off further challenges from radicals such as Otaibi. Ghattas highlights how some of the same radical clerics who had inspired Otaibi—and later Usama bin Ladin, among others—led to the entrenchment of Wahhabi tenets across Saudi society, from school textbooks promoting intolerance of different religious beliefs to the rolling back of human rights for women and minorities, much like what had happened in Iran.

And Iran was very much on the minds of the ruling Saudi elites. Khomeini was a strident critic of the al-Sauds and called for their ouster over Iranian radio stations broadcasting across the Arab world, and exportation of the Islamic revolution became a central theme of Iranian foreign policy. Under rhetorical assault from the new rulers in Tehran, the Saudis began to promote abroad their own version of Islamism to protect and even expand their influence. To undermine potential threats across the Muslim world, as Ghattas recounts, the Saudis have spent billions to build mosques and religious schools overseas and to endow religious charities, all of which adhere closely to fundamentalist Wahhabi beliefs that regard the Shias as unbelievers. The Iranians have done much the same in countries with high numbers of Shias such as Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, promoting Iran and its leaders as the true vanguard of Islam against all its enemies, including the Saudis. This religious-political rivalry has spawned what Ghattas calls the unraveling of culture, religion, and collective memory across the region.

The third catastrophe of 1979, in Ghattas's assessment, was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December. The call to arms that resulted led militant Islamists to travel to Afghanistan to join the fight against the spread of atheistic communism. The headquarters for the so-called *jihad* against the Soviets was in Pakistan, whose ruler, the Islamist President Zia ul-Haq, accepted support from both the United States and Saudi Arabia in housing, arming, and training Afghan freedom fighters, or *mujahedeen*. For Ghattas, this situation created the perfect breeding ground for radical Islamism and, eventually, global terrorism. Among the foreign fighters who traveled to wage jihad were the Saudi, bin Ladin, the Egyptian, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and other founding members of al-Qa'ida, who

learned military tactics and formed a network of like-minded jihadists indoctrinated in Sunni extremism.

Above and beyond their desire to thwart Soviet expansionism, the Saudis also supported President Zia because of his efforts to make Pakistan more Islamic—and more Sunni. In the process, Zia empowered radical Sunni clerics in exchange for their support of his government, clerics funded by Saudi largess as part of their effort to promote Wahhabism (and support for the Saudi royal family worldwide) against Iranian efforts to the contrary. The result was a rapid decline in the treatment of women and minorities (including Shias) in Pakistan and, in the summer of 1987, what Ghattas called “the first premeditated, state-sponsored attack by one sectarian militia against another sect in modern times.” In July, after months of agitation by Pakistani Shias who resented having their towns used as launching pads for attacks into nearby Afghanistan, Zia ordered Sunni militants to crack down on those opposed to his policies. The result was the destruction of some 14 Shia villages and the deaths of 52 Shias and 120 Sunnis. (161) Human Rights Watch estimates that tens of thousands of sectarian killings have occurred in Pakistan since then. It is ironic, writes Ghattas, when one considers that Pakistan's founding father, Mohammad Jinnah, was a Shia Muslim. (148)

Ghattas spends the latter half of her book describing how radical Sunni and Shia militias, governments, and terrorist groups have proliferated since the 1980s across the region, often functioning with the direct support or acquiescence of either Riyadh or Tehran. Take, for example, the rise of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Ghattas—among many others—argues that Saudi-financed religious schools known as *madrassas* in western Pakistan were the incubators for the Taliban and other militant Sunni groups in the region. Recall that Saudi Arabia was one of the only governments that recognized the Taliban as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan before the 9/11 attacks. On the other side of the coin is Lebanese Hezbollah, essentially the rulers of southern Lebanon for over three decades and one of the most dangerous terrorist organizations in the world. Hezbollah, made up of Lebanese Shias, is a close partner of Iran's security services, which helped to create the organization in the midst of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90). People living under Hezbollah control are forced to endure social and legal restrictions and ideological indoctrination that were foreign to Lebanon before Iran exerted its influence there.

One of the strengths of Ghattas's work is her illustrations of the ways in which societies have been transformed by this Saudi-Iranian sectarian rivalry. The civil war in Iraq (2011–17) between Sunni and Shia Arabs, for example, and the current struggles for control in Syria and Yemen are largely proxy wars between Riyadh and Tehran, conflicts which Ghattas explores mostly in relation to their rivalry. Other societal changes are less obvious but still detrimental to the quality of life across the region, especially among women and minorities. In Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, for example, women were working as news anchors on national television programs before 1979, even appearing without the Islamic *hijab* head-coverings. People growing up there in recent years could not imagine that. Likewise, Ghattas highlights many individuals across the region who have spoken out against the sectarianism and puritanical restrictions over the years, calling them the “progressive thinkers who represent the vibrant, pluralistic world that persists beneath the black wave.”(3) By shining a light on these courageous few, she undermines another familiar trope in the West that no moderate voices are fighting against extremism in Islamic societies. Regrettably, many of the people

Ghattas highlights, such as her friend, the late *Washington Post* columnist and prominent critic of the Saudi royal family, Jamal Khashoggi, have paid a heavy price for their opposition.

While other journalists and scholars have written about specific aspects of this story, to this reviewer's knowledge, none have attempted the kind of sweeping examination of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and its impact on the Middle East—and beyond—as has Ghattas. Her achievement is significant and should be required reading for anyone who seeks to better understand how we got here, particularly those whose duties or responsibilities necessitate it. Intelligence officers, in particular, will find nuanced explorations of the roots of many of the regions' current conflicts, but also glimpses of the deeply-held hopes for a better future among some of the people who live there.

For readers with an interest in this topic, this reviewer highly recommends a Public Broadcasting System documentary about the same topic from 2018 entitled “Frontline—Bitter Rivals: Iran and Saudi Arabia,” to which Ghattas contributed.



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