

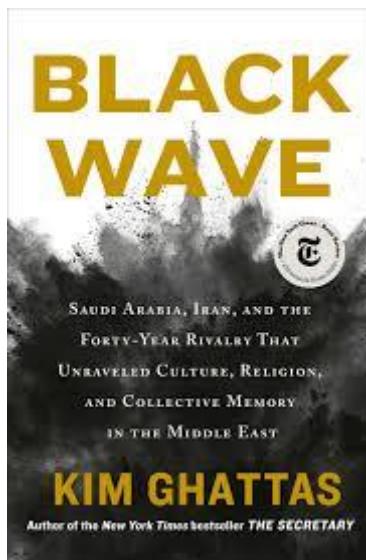
Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry That Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East

Kim Ghattas

New York, NY: Henry Holt and Co., 2020

ISBN: 978-1-250-13120-1

378 pp.



At the time of writing, the Middle East seems to be not far from an even more intense phase of mayhem and misery. Most eyes are on the continued Israeli onslaught on Gaza but bombing continues in Yemen and generations of people are facing up to blighted lives in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. Meanwhile, open warfare between Israel and Hezbollah on the border with Lebanon threatens even more violence. The issues involved are complex and reasons for conflict are overdetermined. How should understanding the situation be approached? According to Kim Ghattas (or maybe her editor), the 40 years of rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is influential in shaping contemporary political and socio-cultural structures in the region. That aspect of her overall argument is not very persuasive but there are benefits from reading the book. It is, as one might expect from a journalist, made quite easy to read and certainly the text is dense with telling details and it encompasses a wide range of people – it is curious and somewhat disappointing that the numerous footnotes are presented at the end of the book and are not directly linked to the text; indeed, the relevant text is highlighted from the original page and the explanatory material follows. Presumably this must appeal to some readers but it is not very helpful in trying to determine how well supported the text itself is. Since the book is aimed at a general audience, who might be expected to be put off by a forest of footnotes, perhaps this is a suitable approach.

Ghattas ranges from Egypt in the west to Pakistan in the east but rarely mentions the United Arab Emirates, for example, as well as most of the Gulf States. The actions of outside states, the USA in particular, are strangely absent. Instead, the story begins in 1979 with the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which is considered the seminal event in the contemporary age (she claims, for example, that before this, Sunni-Shia relations were generally quiescent (p.334)). This event sparked into life the longstanding desire within the Iranian state to control the holy sites of Islam, which have fallen under the management of the House of Saud (who

named the country after themselves) with a measure of fortune that can appear to some people to be incongruent with the sacred nature of the duty they have assumed. Further, they have encouraged the rise of a brand of Islam that is antithetical to that material according to the ruling elites of Iran. If there is one thing to be learned from the book, it is that there are innumerable sub-divisions of Islamic practices just as much as there are a similarly large number of ethnic minority people, people with their own preferred linguistic and culinary preferences and so forth. Some of these people are not practicing Muslims at all but come from other religious traditions. Historically, states had been mostly tolerant of this diversity and, consequently, people had tended to find their own niches in local economies. However, the 1979 revolution marked a sea change in this policy and increasingly intolerance became the norm, leading to different forms of contestation and accommodation.

Ghattas's approach is to move from one country to another in each different chapter and lead with the story of an individual. Generally, the person selected is presented in an attractive light as an individual with a specific identity and agency, whose life is inevitably going to be ruined by an inevitable intolerant turn to politics. The first person is then compared to the bad people or rotten institutions which bring about their downfall and the concluding state of mind and emotion is what a shame it all is and what a waste of human potential it represents. Poets, dancers, philosophers and philanthropists are all treated as if butterflies upon the wheel as men, overwhelmingly, do bad things for their own purposes. This is all information that is quite well deployed but it is much better at explaining what happened rather than why it might have happened. That technological progress has taken place in the years since 1979 is just about discernible as those who used to listen to cassette tapes of religious sermons by their favourite clerics now can access them via the internet. There is no consideration of what such changes might mean for politics and the way it is conducted. There is precious little consideration of oil, apart from the fact that it enables both Saudi and Iranian elites to fund their various projects at home and abroad. The role of international agents is also curiously absent, not just that of the USA but also of Russia and China. A reader of this book alone would have been surprised to learn about the collapse of the Soviet system. This is not to criticise Ghattas for writing one thing and not another but to indicate that insufficient effort has been put into trying to understand what has happened and why. As a result, it all appears to be, as the saying goes, one damned thing after another. This is rather a bleak view and if translated to the current day, would suggest that the misery will continue without cease because that is just what happens these days. Even in the rather brief conclusion, when one might have hoped that author would demonstrate some insights into the obviously substantial amount of research she has conducted, we just get more of the same.

Overall, then, there is a lot to learn from this book and it feels (notwithstanding the citations issue) as if it is a credible work that can be trusted in its details. However, its claim that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry helps explain the last four decades of Middle Eastern politics fails to reach the level required.

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