

## SPECIFIC FEATURES OF THE IRAN-SAUDI ARABIA DETENTE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE MIDDLE EAST REGION

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**Abstract.** *This article reveals the essence of the Iran-Saudi detente and analyzes its impact on the Middle East. Since signing an agreement to resume diplomatic relations in Beijing in March 2023, the relationship between the two countries has begun to thaw. It was a diplomatic breakthrough in a dispute that had influenced events and attitudes in the Middle East for more than four decades. The decision could have regional and international repercussions, as the two nations are competitors in numerous areas and on different fronts and have engaged in indirect conflict with one another. There are many uncertainties regarding how much actual progress Saudi Arabia and Iran will make in resolving their long-standing differences, but given both countries' significant influence in the Middle East and the larger Muslim world, the reconciliation could have a significant impact on a number of conflicts and crises.*

**Keywords:** *Saudi Arabia, Iran, China, US, Russia, Israel, Vision 2030, Centcom, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, détente, "look to the East" and "neighborhood policy" foreign policy initiatives.*

**Introduction.** Seven years after Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic ties with Iran, the two regional giants announced an agreement to repair ties in a joint statement released on March 10. Over the course of two years, the Iraqi, Omani, and most recently Chinese governments have played mediator roles in the deal's ups and downs. Finally, negotiations succeeded, demonstrating both parties' commitment to using diplomatic channels to resolve their differences. The reconciliation appears to

be a strategic de-escalation that serves both parties' interests, but it is not a stunning bargain. It does not fundamentally alter the strategic calculus of either party, and consequently, it is unlikely to significantly alter the regional security environment in the near future. Indeed, more continuity than change will characterize Saudi-Iranian relations.

However, it would be irresponsible to downplay the significance of this agreement in fostering mutual trust and clearing the road for further regional integration. The gradual shift toward a peaceful and cooperative security system in the Gulf, which includes Saudi-Iranian reconciliation as an inevitable phase, has been extensively studied by analysts. The most pressing issues at hand are how to fortify the accord against future threats and what can be done to make the current political climate last. However, understanding Tehran and Riyadh's motivations, the constraints the deal faces, and the potential role that spoilers can play in this process are all necessary for an adequate response.

**Methods.** Methods of factor analysis, event analysis, and comparative political analysis were used in this study. To ensure adequateness, we compared the views of scientists in the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other countries on an even playing field. To get a broader perspective, we looked into the thoughts of politicians and specialists from prominent think tanks. This essay offers a thoughtful examination of current problems and possible responses to them.

**Result and Discussions.** *What does Saudi Arabia stand to gain?* The easing of tensions with Iran is just one component of Saudi Arabia's foreign strategy aimed at advancing the country's Vision 2030 social and economic objectives. An escalation with Iran would endanger the project's funding, discourage necessary foreign investment, and jeopardize Saudi hopes of becoming a regional and global hub, notably in cloud computing, logistics, trade, and industry. The kingdom is investing billions of dollars to implement the plan.

China's mediation came at a time when the regional diplomatic and economic balance of power tilts toward Saudi Arabia. High oil prices are allowing the kingdom to advance its economic development plans and double down on its financial, "Saudi first" diplomacy to regain regional and international influence. Saudi leadership has worked to solidify the country's international standing since 2018 by revamping its process for foreign policy making, ending diplomatic confrontations, and improving the international narrative on the Saudi role in the Yemen war. The United States is moving to reduce the gap in Saudi Arabia's defense against Iran and its militias. Israel has become a de facto security partner within U.S. Central Command, and its eagerness for normalization with Saudi Arabia poses a threat to Iran. Importantly, reports on Saudi coverage of Iranian domestic unrest and its apparent private investment in Iranian opposition media provided the kingdom with a powerful bargaining card. [1]

Riyadh has not felt secure in its relationship with Washington for at least a decade. Once US dependence on Saudi oil ended, the former's role as provider of the latter's security was inevitably questioned, and their paths slowly diverged. [2] This is why Saudi Arabia is making efforts to broaden both its domestic and international horizons.

According to Simon Henderson, Riyadh has decided to work with Tehran because of the antipathy and lack of support Saudi Arabia receives from the Biden administration and Democrats in Congress. The latest grievance is apparently Washington's lackadaisical response to the news that Iran is enriching uranium to a level just short of 84 percent, a level very close to bomb-grade. [3] Prince Mohammed, anticipating that Saudi Arabia would be Tehran's target in the event of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear sites, sought to remove himself from the line of fire. He desired to move Saudi Arabia in the same direction as the United Arab Emirates, the ultimate hedgers, and concentrate on developing the Saudi economy.

Of course, the civil war in Yemen can also be one of the decisive factors for Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has no interest in spending billions of dollars to bolster its security at the cost of a constant threat from the south.

The Saudi-Iranian normalization is not a rapprochement, as many have claimed it to be. Indeed, Riyadh still views Tehran as a threat. But unlike in the past, when Riyadh tended to view Iran as an implacable, unrelenting opponent, what this normalization agreement implies is that the Saudis now see Iran as a more manageable threat. Tehran is still doing things that Riyadh does not like in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. But Riyadh also understands that the Islamic Republic's leaders face widespread protests from Iran's citizens, especially its young women. Further, this is something that could spill over into the kingdom.

While Saudi Arabia has had reason to fear Iran in the past, the kingdom has no interest in seeing the ayatollahs overthrown by a democratic opposition movement. Just as the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 by Islamist forces inspired Islamic opposition movements in neighboring Muslim states, the success of a democratic revolution in Iran could inspire the rise of democratic opposition forces in Saudi Arabia and other Arab autocracies. Saudi Arabia and other Arab autocracies, of course, have ample means to suppress internal opposition. But Riyadh would prefer to forestall the rise of such forces inside the kingdom and not have to go about the expensive, messy, and uncertain task of suppressing such forces.

[4]

*What does Iran get?* As they remain mainly isolated from the West and with little possibility of returning to the nuclear accord, it would appear that the Iranians have much to gain from a deal with Saudi Arabia. Therefore, this agreement can play a significant role in enhancing Iran's standing in the Middle East. This détente also raises the prospect of an end to Iran's period of severe isolation.

According to Henry Rome and Grant Rumley, Iran may perceive the agreement as a tacit endorsement of its current nuclear policy, warning that if Tehran doubles down on its nuclear strategy, it will further alarm Western, Arab, and Israeli officials. They also stated that, as a part of the agreement, Saudi Arabia will soften coverage of Iran International, the London-based media outlet funded by Saudis, which Tehran has depicted as the leading anti-regime instigator throughout the recent protest movement. [5]

Iranian motivation for the arrangement may be found in the country's larger strategy of decoupling from the West through the "look to the East" and "neighborhood policy" foreign policy initiatives. The former advocates for deeper ties with China and Russia, while the latter emphasizes cooperation with Iran's fifteen neighbors. However, the underlying factors that led to the Islamic Republic's systemic choice to agree to the pact are more complex, despite the fact that the deal provides President Ibrahim Raisi's administration with a diplomatic success after months of failures and deadlock on major foreign policy problems.

Also, the deal helps the Islamic Republic stabilize its gains across Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. In these hotspots in which Iran has an upper hand, toning down competition with Riyadh can help Tehran maintain the status quo. Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's March visit to the UAE and the recent hint at the potential restoration of Saudi-Syrian diplomatic relations is laying the groundwork for other Arab states to reconcile with Damascus. Though these dynamics will also open the door for Riyadh to exert influence in these places, it narrows tacit support for anti-Assad opposition groups. Tehran believes that this new dynamic will help stabilize its key regional partner in the long term. Besides, as proven in the case of Iraq where despite U.S. presence Tehran maintained its influence, the Iranians seem confident that Saudi Arabia's entrance in Syria will not endanger their interests in a strategic way.[6]

*China's strategic calculus in brokering Iran-Saudi Arabia détente.* The Iran-Saudi Arabia détente signals a sharp increase in China's influence in the Gulf region, where the U.S. has long been the dominant power broker. The détente could complicate efforts by Washington and Israel to strengthen a regional alliance to confront Iran as Tehran expands its nuclear program. This was the first time China had intervened so directly in the Gulf's political rivalries. For Beijing, it is about deepening China's engagement in the region and becoming a more significant player in Gulf security affairs, another sign of the United States' waning influence. However, the ultimate valuation of the Chinese mediation will depend on the degree to which it contributes to sustainable conflict management, if not conflict resolution. [7]

This breakthrough comes in the context of the United States prioritizing "turning eastwards" to encircle China over its presence in the Middle East. China succeeded in persuading Saudi Arabia and Iran to resolve the longest diplomatic schism in modern history, putting Beijing to the test for the first time. [8] Nonetheless, the accord mediated by China does not signal a new Middle Eastern order driven by Beijing. Overall, it appears that the Chinese are attempting to boost their influence in the region and solidify relationships with key Gulf partners by playing a significant role in the negotiations.

*Geopolitical features of the détente.* If the agreement is implemented, it might have far-reaching effects on Middle Eastern geopolitics, according to some experts. For decades, the division between Shiite and Sunni Muslims in the Middle East has been symbolized by the rift between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Nearly a decade has passed since Saudi Arabia and Iran began backing opposing sides in crises via proxy wars in countries like Syria and Yemen. In 2019, they were dangerously close to conflict after Iran was accused of firing missiles and flying drones at a Saudi oil site. The recent thaw follows indications that Riyadh and Tehran are winding down their



proxy conflicts. However, easing the security and sectarian tensions that have separated Saudi Arabia and Iran for decades and fueled their struggle for regional dominance would likely take longer to achieve when diplomatic relations are re-established. No guarantees or incentives from China exist to motivate the parties to follow through on the deal, hence, the possibility of an agreement is low.

It should be noted that Yemen is the most important file in the negotiations to improve relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran's influence in Yemen is seen as a vital asset in imposing a logistical burden on the Saudis and maintaining deterrence against Riyadh. Tehran views Yemen as a strategic asset that would ensure operational access into Saudi Arabia during a hypothetical conflict. Saudi Arabia wants an end to the Yemen war and rocket attacks on its homeland. It also does not want to be the arena of competition between the U.S. and China and wants to avoid being targeted by Iran in the event of hostilities between Iran and Israel. The "Abraham Accords" that normalized Israeli relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain and Israel's recent inclusion in Centcom have led to fears that conflict between Iran and Israel could spread to the Arabs. Based on this, the UAE declared that its relationship with Israel is not a threat to any other country and Abu Dhabi said it would not allow its territory to be used to threaten Iran. [9]

Riyadh is also dedicated to its Vision 2030, which aims to modernize and diversify the Saudi economy by cutting back on oil, creating new sources of income, and enlisting more private sector involvement. The Saudis believe that a thaw in relations with Iran could ease tensions in the area, bring an end to the conflict in Yemen, and prevent Houthi strikes against Saudi territory, especially recent developments like Neom on the Red Sea's shore.

Experts also believe that the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia can play a positive role in easing the tensions in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

However, an overly optimistic approach is not acceptable in this regard either.

Expert Joseph Bahout states that this rapprochement—not yet exactly a deal—does not mean an end to competition, tension, or even friction between KSA [the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia] and Iran, but it aims at regulating it. Until Iran and KSA openly and frontally address this issue, all local parties in Lebanon will most probably hold to their positions and to their respective candidates. [10]

Israel is one of the parties that could suffer from this deal. Aside from Yair Lapid, leader of the Israeli opposition, who branded the pact "a total and dangerous foreign policy failure of the Israeli government," the accord has also prompted severe criticism from within the prime minister's office. [11] The arrangement dealt Israel's strategic goal of uniting with Arab governments against the common danger of Iran a serious setback. However, after the détente, it is difficult to expect a cooling of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The relationship continues behind the scenes.

Although the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a negative signal for the United States, most US experts are in favor of accepting the agreement lightly. The crucial role of the US in Saudi Arabia's defense system, as well as deep economic ties, do not allow Saudi Arabia to easily leave the US orbit.

**Conclusion.** Based on the above, the following conclusions can be drawn. Even if Iran and Saudi Arabia adhere to the guidelines established in Beijing, it will be difficult to move past their rivalry. Iran's hopes for economic benefits from de-escalation with Saudi Arabia must be managed in light of the increasing severity of U.S.-led sanctions on business ties with Iran. It will also need to limit the negative effects of the revolutionary guard of Iran and Iranian-backed militias operating throughout the area, as well as the shadow war that Israel is waging against Iran. It appears that both the Riyadh and Tehran regimes are committed to improving relations for the time being.



While the arrangement is expected to have some effect on the area, its long-term consequences are unclear. The remaining concerns are how strictly the agreement will be adhered to and if Beijing will insist on accountability on either side. Given the distrust between Riyadh and Tehran, the chances of things going wrong are significant.

Disagreements over Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria must be worked out through negotiations between the two countries. Recognizing the risks and spoilers that could derail the benefits of the agreement is the first step toward making it last. An increase in communication between ministers, parliamentarians, think tanks, NGOs, and ordinary citizens might go a long way toward solving these problems. More robust security talks should be continued and prioritized, since military-security concerns will remain the most important concerns for both parties.

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