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Saudi-Iran Relationship: The Beginning of a New Era

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Abstract: *The article pertains to the recent process of reconciliation and normalization of ties between two regional adversaries, Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), after a prolonged period of animosity and confrontation. The paper examines the several causes that contributed to this significant development, including the series of negotiations held in Baghdad, the involvement of Oman and China as mediators, and the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East. It further explain the ramifications of this agreement for both the area and the global community, including the potential for peace, stability, collaboration, and growth. Additionally, the study will advocate the impact of the said deal between the two former rivals on the politics of the Middle East.*

Key Words: Saudi Arabia, KSA, Iran, Reconciliation, Confrontation, Negotiation, Mediation, Balance of power, Middle East, A Way Forward

Introduction

Saudi Arabia and Iran are prominent nations in the Middle East, exerting significant influence and possessing considerable power. These countries exhibit contrasting political, religious, and strategic objectives. Over the course of many decades, a significant rivalry has emerged, exerting a profound influence on regional politics and security. This competition has often resulted in proxy conflicts, sectarian unrest, and diplomatic challenges (Aljazeera, 2023). Nevertheless, in March 2023, the two nations astounded the global community by unveiling a momentous agreement to reinstate their diplomatic relations and foster collaboration on a range of matters of shared interest (Hafezi, et al., 2023). The agreement, facilitated by China and Oman, indicated a significant shift in Saudi-Iran ties and had far-reaching implications for the broader Middle Eastern region.

This article seeks to analyse the causes, substance, and outcomes of the Saudi-Iran agreement while evaluating its importance for both the regional and global contexts (Keynoush, 2023). The contention posited is that a confluence of both internal and foreign elements influenced the agreement. These reasons included economic difficulties, regional volatility, the United States' exit, and China's engagement. This convergence of circumstances provided a favourable environment for initiating discussions and pursuing a mutually agreeable resolution. The agreement is believed to have favourable ramifications for peace, stability, collaboration, and prosperity in the Middle East. However, it also presents some obstacles and dangers for the involved nations and other relevant entities.

The article is structured in the following manner to support the arguments: The first part presents a concise historical synopsis of the Saudi-Iran ties and the underlying factors contributing to their antagonism. Secondly, it examines the elements that contributed to the significant advancement and delineates the primary characteristics of the agreement. Thirdly, the article will illustrate the implications of the agreement on the distribution of power and the security dynamics within the Middle East region. Furthermore, it delves into the prospective involvement of other players, including the United States, Russia, Turkey, and Israel, in exerting influence or offering responses to the agreement. Lastly, the study

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provides an analysis of the future chances and difficulties that lie ahead in Saudi-Iran relations, offering reflective insights.

Research Question

- How did China broker the peace deal without involving the world's mediator, the United States?
- How did the Saudi-Iran agreement affect the Middle East's balance of power and security dynamics?

Research Gap

Being bitter rivals in the Middle East, Saudi and Iran remained hostile for years, but the recent development proved to be breaking off the ice. The article will fill the lacuna of a comprehensive historical overview of Saudi-Iran relations, the sources of their rivalry, and the impact of the Saudi-Iran deal on the Middle East.

Research Methodology

The research methodology used in this study is a qualitative case study technique, which involves the utilization of secondary sources like government statements, media reports, newspapers, academic publications, and books. These sources are used to gather and analyze data pertaining to the Saudi-Iran agreement and its repercussions on the Middle East region.

Literature Review

Historical Background

The establishment of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran occurred in the late 1920s. However, their relationship remained generally amicable and restricted until the 1970s (Badeeb, [1993](#)). From 1902 to 1932, Abd al-Aziz ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Saud, often referred to as Ibn Saud successfully conquered the Arabian Peninsula. However, it is worth noting that the connections between Iran and Saudi Arabia during this time were relatively restricted. The primary focus of their relations revolved around Iranian pilgrims undertaking the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and Persian merchants who accompanied them and engaged in commercial activities along the hajj route.

Following his successful consolidation of power over the majority of the Arabian Peninsula, Ibn Saud formally created the Kingdom in 1932. Subsequent to this juncture, the association between Saudi Arabia and Iran evolved into a symbiotic rapport, particularly during the tenure of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1952-1970). Following the neutralisation of Nasser and his Pan-Arabism doctrine, the subsequent matter that required collective focus was the withdrawal of the British from the Middle East in 1971. Following the British departure, both the Americans and the British saw the emergence of a vacuum that presented a suitable environment for undesirable Soviet influence. In order to counteract the proliferation of Soviet influence, the United States established a security framework that aimed to use the capabilities of Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two dominant and very powerful nations in the region.

Establishment of the Saudi Kingdom and the Pahlavi Dynasty in Iran: The beginning of diplomatic ties between the two nations

Saudi Arabia and Iran exhibited resemblances in their approaches to nation-building at a period when a significant portion of the Middle East remained under colonial governance. In 1932, with the consolidation of around eighty percent of the Arabian Peninsula under his leadership, Ibn Saud established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which was founded upon a stringent interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism (Hitman, [2018](#)). Consequently, Ibn Saud acquired the royal title of king. In 1925, Reza Shah ascended to the position of king after successfully overthrowing the reigning Qajar Dynasty via a coup d'état in 1921 (Balaghi, [2015](#)).

Nevertheless, the two governments adopted contrasting positions in relation to Great Britain, the prevailing colonial power in the area. The selection of these places would eventually provide advantages for Ibn Saud while simultaneously imposing disadvantages on Reza Shah. The Shah's aggressive attitude towards Britain ultimately led to the loss of his monarchy due to his alignment with the Axis forces during

the Second World War. Following the Allies' victory in the war, Britain and Russia compelled him to relinquish the throne, facilitating the succession of his son, Mohammed Reza. The newly appointed Shah maintained diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia until 1943, at which point the Saudi authorities carried out the execution of an Iranian pilgrim named Abu Taleb Yazdi (Weddington, 2017). This action was allegedly in response to accusations that Yazdi had intentionally defiled the Ka'ba by dumping his vomit over it (IFP, 2015). The Iranian government expressed strong opposition to the execution, while the Saudi Arabian government argued that they have the authority to enforce their laws according to their own discretion. The consequence of this particular incident was the termination of diplomatic relations between the two nations, a situation that lasted until 1946. In the year 1946, King Abd al-Aziz (commonly known as Ibn Saud) sent a correspondence addressed to the Shah, wherein he advocated for the reestablishment of diplomatic relations (Hadžikadunić, 2015). The Shah consented to the king's proposition, leading to the resumption of diplomatic relations.

According to the Saudi historian Saeed M. Badeeb, there was a notable enhancement in Saudi-Iranian ties during the period from 1947 to 1950 (Baghdadi, 2018). This development occurred due to the convergence of interests between the two nations in two significant domains. Initially, Iran firmly established its alignment with the West, particularly with the United States. Furthermore, as both nations progressed in the development of their own oil sectors, they often encountered shared challenges. In 1953, the diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran experienced a disruption but were not completely severed. This occurred as a result of the Shah's forced departure from Iran after a coup sponsored by the United States and the United Kingdom (Entessar, 1991). The objective of this coup was to depose the democratically-elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammed Mossadeqh. The motivation for the Americans and British desiring the removal of Mossadeqh from his position of power stemmed from his decision to nationalize Iranian oil in 1951. Mossadeqh's primary motivation stemmed from a strong inclination to terminate the prevailing foreign economic control over Iran. The British were very angered by this action since they had maintained a significant investment in Iranian oil from the year 1901. The Shah temporarily departed from Iran due to his involvement in the coup. Under his directives, Mossadeqh was to be ousted from his position and replaced with a prime minister who would be receptive to the interests of both the United States and the United Kingdom. Following the unsuccessful attempt, Mossadeqh, assuming the role of Iran's new leader, maintained diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia.

During this period, the two nations had a significant expansion in commerce. In the year 1953, a covert operation was conducted by the British and Americans, resulting in the successful overthrow of Mossadeqh (Zahrani, 2002). Simultaneously in the year 1953, the death of King Abd al-Aziz occurred, leading to the ascension of his oldest son, Saud, to the throne as the new monarch (Cherian, 2005). According to Badeeb, the transition in leadership in both Iran and Saudi Arabia marked the start of a distinct era for both nations. This period saw significant developments in the political ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran, focusing on three key areas: regional politics, oil, and international security.

Pan-Arabism, a potential security risk for Saudi Arabia and Iran

Pan-Arabism is an Arab nationalist ideology that espouses a secular approach to fostering unity among all Arab nations. The primary advocate of this cause was the former Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel Nasser (Boms & Aboubakr, 2021). Within the upper echelons of Saudi Arabian society, a faction of individuals aligned themselves with the Arab nationalist movement, garnering backing from Nasser. The Arab National Liberation Front and the Union of the People of the Arabian Peninsula aimed to create a republican form of government in Saudi Arabia. The opposition parties encountered little support inside Saudi Arabia, hence resulting in less apprehension for the government.

Nevertheless, a dispute arose inside the monarchy over the appropriate approach to address Nasser and his opposition to the monarchy. The King saw nationalism and socialism as formidable challenges, contributing to the Shah's diminished authority in 1953. Initially, King Saud attempted to appease Nasser. It may be seen when the monarch backed Egypt during the Suez Crisis, when Israel, Great Britain, and France invaded Egypt to reestablish authority over the canal subsequent to its nationalisation by Nasser (Khalidi, 1991). During the crisis, Riyadh terminated diplomatic ties with France and Britain and halted oil exportation to both countries. The monarch believed that by appeasing Nasser, he could effectively curtail



Nasser's aspirations. However, with the increasing popularity of Nasser, dissidents inside the Kingdom also saw a corresponding rise. Instances of labour unrest emerged in Saudi Arabia and were found to be associated with Pro-Nasserist forces that were actively operating inside the Kingdom (Baba, 1992). The diplomatic ties between Riyadh and Cairo deteriorated rapidly after Nasser's shift from Pan-Arabism to an anti-royalist stance. This shift was evident in his backing for the socialist faction within the Saudi army, which failed to topple the Saudi monarchy in 1955. Consequently, King Saud initiated a public confrontation with Nasser and his ideological stance.

The pivotal historical association between Egypt and Saudi Arabia occurred in 1961, when President Nasser made allegations against conservative governments, including Saudi Arabia, for providing financial support towards the dissolution of the United Arab Republic (UAR). The UAR was a political alliance between Egypt and Syria, operational from 1958 to 1961 (Palmer, 1966). The 1962 Egyptian participation in the coup in North Yemen was motivated by the fall of the UAR, as it represented a significant setback and source of embarrassment for Nasser and his Pan-Arabism ideology. According to Fawaz A. Gerges, it is evident that the dissolution of the United Arab Republic (UAR) brought to light significant divisions among Arab communities, highlighting their diverse nature and tendency towards factionalism. The dissolution of the relationship also exposed the insolvency of ideology within Arab politics and the prevailing influence of national interests.

Moreover, Gerges stated that Egypt needed to sustain the Pan-Arabism revolution and disseminate it to Yemen. Through this action, Nasser maintained the potential to restore the status he had lost in the Arab region after the fall of the United Arab Republic (UAR). The considerable impact of this decline in reputation was noteworthy, as it had implications for Nasser's perceived position as a key figure in Pan-Arabism and as a prominent leader within the Arab world. The coup in Yemen allowed Nasser to demonstrate Egypt's military capabilities and seek retribution against the conservative Arab states aligned with the West, whom he held responsible for the decline of the United Arab Republic. Participation in the Yemeni Civil War furthered the declining Arab nationalist movement. According to Gerges, the decline of Arab nationalism was not just a matter of foreign concern but also had significant home implications.

In light of Nasser's provocation in Yemen, the Saudi government extended support to the deposed Yemeni Imam, Muhammad al-Badr, in his efforts to reclaim his position (Orkaby, 2014). This support was shown by the provision of military assistance and the refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the newly established Egyptian-backed government in Yemen. The Saudi government assisted the Yemeni ruler to safeguard their national interest. Due to the ongoing crisis in Yemen, Saudi Arabia has sought assistance from its allies, particularly Iran. Consequently, the bilateral ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran were strengthened due to the Shah's apprehension of the possible ramifications of Arab Nationalism. Both states harboured concerns about the potential Soviet influence in the Gulf region, particularly via its proxy, Egypt. The perceived prospect of Soviet involvement in the Gulf, coupled with Iran's extensive thousand-mile border with the Soviet Union, engendered a sense of encirclement inside Iran (Bissell, 1978). The diplomatic ties between Tehran and Moscow were strained during that period due to Russia's territorial annexation of northern Persia under the Qajar dynasty. The previous acquisition of territory instilled caution in Iran over potential Soviet encroachments in the Gulf region. The engagement of Egypt in Yemen proved to be the beginning of Nasser's decline rather than a means of his salvation. The participation had a significant impact on both the Egyptian economy and the military. The financial burden was further amplified as a result of the severe damages incurred by Egypt during the 1967 conflict with Israel. Subsequently, Nasser decided to withdraw his military forces from Yemen, diminishing the perceived danger posed to Saudi Arabia and mitigating the risk of Iran being surrounded. As the reputation and power of Nasser started to decline, there was a noticeable change in the interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran. In 1968, as the matter of Yemen remained unresolved, other concerns emerged as more significant, such as the British government's choice to remove its military presence from the Gulf region.

Saudi stance over the Iranian Revolution of 1979

The Iranian revolution of 1979 had a profound impact, especially on the Middle East and generally on the whole world (Parvaz, 2014). The outcome of the events led to the deposition of the Shah, a political figure closely aligned with the United States and Saudi Arabia (Maloney et al., 2019). Consequently, this paved

the way for the Islamic Republic's formation under Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership. Khomeini espoused a radical and transformative interpretation of Shia Islam, which posed a significant challenge to the prevailing regional and global power dynamics (Homan, 1980). In its capacity as the foremost representative of the Sunni Muslim community and the guardian of Islam's most sacred locations, Saudi Arabia saw a sense of vulnerability in response to the emergence of Iran's new administration and its ideological stance. Saudi Arabia expressed concerns over the potential for Iran to disseminate its revolutionary ideals to other nations, particularly those with substantial Shia populations, like Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Lebanon (Keynoush, 2016). This anxiety stemmed from Saudi Arabia's apprehension that such actions may erode its legitimacy, security, and regional and global influence. Saudi Arabia saw Iran as a competitor in terms of regional dominance and a possible adversary. Saudi Arabia expressed concern over Iran's potential pursuit of regional dominance in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, which are important for Saudi Arabia's oil exports and economic interests. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is concerned about Iran's potential pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles since this might present a significant danger to the very existence of Saudi Arabia and its allied nations.

Saudi responded to the Iranian revolution by adopting a position characterized by hostility and apprehension. In order to lessen Iran's impact and aspirations, Saudi Arabia used a range of strategies. Saudi assisted Iraq during its war against Iran, a protracted and violent struggle from 1980 to 1988 (Rakipoğlu, 2017). This war stands as one of the most devastating and lethal wars in contemporary times. Saudi Arabia extended financial, political, and military aid to Iraq to undermine or overpower Iran. Besides financial and military assistance, Saudi also played a mediating role in facilitating negotiations between Iraq and Iran to resolve the war and minimise Iran's position in the Mid-East. This intervention was motivated by Saudi Arabia's concern about the area's potential destabilization and its adverse impact on its own interests.

Saudi Arabia also endeavoured to curb Iran's influence in many nations, seeing Iran's backing for Shia militias, terrorist organizations, and political organizations that wanted to undermine or confront Sunni administrations and the established regional structure. In 2011, Saudi Arabia engaged in a military intervention in Bahrain to suppress a widespread revolt that was seen to have received support from Iran. Saudi Arabia provided support to the Syrian opposition in their struggle against the administration of Bashar al-Assad, who had formed an alliance with Iran and Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia, in conjunction with a coalition of Arab governments, spearheaded a military campaign in Yemen aimed at countering the Houthis, a Shia insurgent faction that was said to have received backing from Iran (Haykel, 2011).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also expressed its opposition to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, an agreement between Iran and international powers over Iran's nuclear program (Motamedi, 2023). KSA said that the agreement was deemed faulty and inadequate due to its failure to sufficiently handle Iran's ballistic missile program, its regional affairs intervention, and its human rights breaches. The Saudi Monarch harbored concerns about the potential ramifications of the agreement, namely regarding lifting sanctions on Iran, which may facilitate economic growth and enhance its influence in the area. Saudi Arabia sent a formal request to the United States, urging it to withdraw from the agreement and reinstate economic sanctions on Iran. This request was subsequently fulfilled in 2018 under the presidency of Donald Trump.

In 2016, Saudi Arabia's relationship with Iran escalated to a state of heightened animosity and conflict. This was exemplified by the execution of Nimr al-Nimr, a prominent Shia cleric who openly criticised the Saudi leadership and advocated for the rights of the Shia community. Iran denounced the execution as a transgression of human rights and an act of provocation. The Saudi embassy in Tehran was forcefully entered and set ablaze by Iranian demonstrators, leading to the subsequent decision by Saudi Arabia to terminate its diplomatic relations with Iran and impose a complete cessation of economic and travel connections. Both nations participated in a verbal conflict and implemented economic penalties, levying allegations against one another over interference in their domestic matters, sponsorship of terrorism, and the creation of regional instability.



Balance of Power in the Middle East

The balance of power in the Middle East is a multifaceted and ever-evolving phenomenon that encompasses several stakeholders, variables, and vested interests. Saudi Arabia and Iran are widely seen as two prominent and powerful states within the region whose competing dynamics have significantly influenced the political and security landscape for an extended period of time. Several key aspects regarding the balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran include:

Saudi Arabia and Iran possess different sources of power and influence. KSA has a robust economy that relies heavily on the exportation of oil. Additionally, it maintains a tight partnership with the United States and other Western nations, assumes a prominent position within the Arab and Sunni Muslim realms, and asserts its custodianship over Islam's most sacred locations. Iran has a substantial populace, exhibits a multifaceted topography, boasts a culturally and historically affluent heritage, adheres to a revolutionary doctrine rooted in Shia Islam, maintains a nuclear initiative alongside ballistic missile capabilities. Iran also sustains a network of regional proxies and alliances (Robinson, [2021](#)). Both of the states possess divergent perspectives and strategic objectives pertaining to the area. KSA aims to maintain the existing state of affairs, safeguard its prevailing authority and security, curb Iran's influence and aspirations, and foster stability and collaboration among the Arab nations. Iran aims to disrupt the prevailing state of affairs, extend its sphere of influence and participation, counteract Western intervention and coercion, and provide backing to its friends and proxies engaged in many wars. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran have been engaged in several wars and crises, which have had significant implications for the regional balance of power. Several significant events have contributed to the ongoing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. These events include the Iranian revolution of 1979, which marked the initial emergence of their rivalry. The Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 also witnessed Saudi Arabia providing support to Iraq in its conflict against Iran (Jones, [1995](#)). Furthermore, the Gulf wars of 1991 and 2003 witnessed Saudi Arabia aligning itself with the US-led coalitions against Iraq. The Arab uprisings of 2011 also played a role, as Saudi Arabia intervened in Bahrain and supported the Syrian opposition against Iran's ally, President Assad.

Moreover, the Yemen war since 2015 has seen Saudi Arabia leading a coalition against the Houthis, who are aligned with Iran. The Iran nuclear deal of 2015 is another significant event, with Saudi Arabia opposing the agreement that lifted sanctions on Iran (Cook, [2022](#)). Lastly, the diplomatic crisis of 2016 occurred when Iranian protesters attacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran, leading Saudi Arabia to sever diplomatic ties with Iran (Hubbard, [2016](#)). Saudi Arabia and Iran have endeavoured to maintain a delicate equilibrium of power via the use of diplomatic channels, constructive communication, mediation efforts, cooperative measures, and the pursuit of compromises on certain matters. Several notable instances of Saudi-Iranian mediation can be identified. Firstly, the Taif Agreement of 1989 effectively brought an end to the Lebanese civil war. Secondly, the Mecca agreement of 2007 resulted in establishing a national unity government in Palestine. Thirdly, the Geneva talks spanning from 2013 to 2015 involved Saudi Arabia and Iran as members of the P5+1 group, which negotiated with Iran regarding its nuclear program. Fourthly, the Astana talks, which have been ongoing since 2017, have seen Saudi Arabia and Iran assume the role of guarantors in facilitating a ceasefire in Syria. Lastly, recent endeavours to reinstate diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been observed since 2021.

Breaking off the ice

The Iran-Saudi deal brokered by China

Since the year 2021, there have been efforts made by Iran and Saudi Arabia to reconcile a rupture in their ties that originated in 2016. This rupture resulted from Iranian protesters seizing Saudi diplomatic offices in Tehran and Mashhad as a retaliatory measure against the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a prominent Saudi Shiite opposition preacher (Kennedy, [2016](#)). After many rounds of negotiations, the culmination of the endeavour ultimately yielded results officially disclosed on March 10, 2023, in the city of Beijing. Historically a passive diplomatic actor, China has opportunistically taken the initiative to mediate globally. The agreement facilitates the process of reestablishing diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, allowing for the reopening of their respective embassies and diplomatic missions within a timeframe of two months (Wintour, [2023](#)). Additionally, it reinstates security

cooperation, commerce, and investment agreements. Furthermore, the two nations expressed their commitment to upholding the principle of state sovereignty and refraining from interfering in the internal affairs of other states. This choice of language highlights Saudi Arabia's apprehensions regarding Iran's Revolutionary Guard, an opaque entity responsible for overseeing Shia militia proxies with sectarian affiliations in the region. According to a statement from the White House, the Saudi Arabian government maintained communication with the United States over the discussions, and the United States expressed its approval of any actions aimed at reducing tensions in the area (Batrawy, 2023). The announcement was met with enthusiastic responses from countries in the Middle East as well as the secretary-general of the United Nations. In 2021, the Islamic Republic of Iran sent an invitation for diplomatic negotiations aimed at reestablishing diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The city of Riyadh rejected the proposal, citing significant differences in security perspectives. As a consequence of this development, Admiral Ali Shamkhani, who holds the position of Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), put up the nomination of Amir Saeed Irvani, who was serving as Shamkhani's deputy at the time and now holds the position of Iran's UN ambassador, to assume the role of chief negotiator. The Saudi authorities made the selection of Khalid bin Ali al-Humaidan, who serves as the director general of the General Intelligence Directorate in Saudi Arabia. Both parties reached a consensus that under the governance of former Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, Iraq might assume the role of a mediator. On the condition of anonymity, a confidential Iranian diplomat informed the author that the Iranian delegation consisted of a blend of professionals from the Intelligence Ministry, Foreign Ministry, and SNSC. By the year 2022, a total of five rounds of rigorous negotiations had taken place between the two nations in the city of Baghdad. The discussions reached a standstill subsequent to the replacement of al-Kadhimi by Mohammad Shia al-Sudani in the position of prime minister.

According to a report from *The Diplomat*, in the year 2022, a group from Saudi Arabia visited Iran to evaluate the extent of damage incurred by their diplomatic posts. This assessment was considered a necessary step toward the future reopening of those missions. The Iranians, for their side, assessed the intents of Saudi Arabia by conducting a test when the Kingdom granted permission for Iranians to participate in the Hajj pilgrimage once again. According to the ambassador, the establishment of confidence is not a process that can be quickly achieved. Initially, it was necessary to assess the manner in which the Saudi Arabian authorities would handle the pilgrimage of our Hajj participants. In July 2022, an Iranian pilgrim was apprehended by Riyadh authorities inside the Holy Shrine of Mecca for publicly exhibiting an image of Gen. Qassem Soleimani on his mobile device (Motamedi, 2022). Gen. Soleimani, a notable Iranian military figure, was subject to assassination by the United States in Iraq in 2020 (Galbraith, 2020). The pilgrim had furthermore captured an image including the Kaaba as the backdrop, afterward sharing it on his Instagram profile. Several months later, Iran successfully facilitated the release of the individual via the assistance of Omani officials, who have often served as intermediaries in negotiations between Iran and its foes. At that juncture, nonetheless, the realm of Iraqi politics had made its presence felt; following the departure of Kadhimi, Prime Minister Sudani showed less enthusiasm in upholding Iraq's position as a mediator.

Additionally, he did not possess the same confidence in Saudi Arabia as his predecessor. In light of the perceived delay, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia requested that the People's Republic of China undertake the mediator role during President Xi Jinping's visit to Riyadh in December 2022 (Azimi, 2023). Xi sent the word from Riyadh to Tehran, and subsequently, the latter accepted the Chinese offer. In February 2023, a diplomatic encounter took place between Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Chinese President Xi Jinping, during which the two leaders engaged in discussions and exchanged views. As per an additional Iranian diplomat inside the group, who was interviewed by the author on the condition of anonymity, it was conveyed that Iran deemed Saudi Arabia's proposition for the restoration of relations to be agreeable. As a condition for Iran's compliance with previous commitments of non-interference in Saudi Arabia's internal affairs, Iran has requested that Saudi Arabia cease its financial support for Iran International, a Persian-language news channel that provides a platform for critics of the Islamic Republic. Additionally, Iran has demanded that Saudi Arabia fully withdraw from Yemen and acknowledge the Ansarallah (Houthi) movement as a legitimate governing authority in the conflict-ridden nation. Tehran has requested Riyadh to cease its backing for several Iranian opposition factions, including the Mujahedin-e Khalq, the ethnic Arab organization Al-Ahvaziya, and the Baloch terrorist group Jaish al-Adl. Iran classifies all three



organizations as terrorist groups. Furthermore, Iran has formally requested that Saudi Arabia alleviate the constraints imposed upon its Shiite minority and allow them to visit the revered Iranian Shiite pilgrimage site, Mashhad. On March 5, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), Mr. Shamkhani, visited Beijing to conclude the details of an agreement. This was achieved via trilateral discussions with Mr. Wang Yi, the State Councillor and former Foreign Minister of China, as well as Mr. Musaed bin Mohammed al-Aiban, the National Security Advisor of Saudi Arabia. The accord can contribute to reducing regional conflicts, particularly in Yemen, and signifies China's aspiration to assume a more proactive role as an international mediator. During the announcement of the Iran-Saudi deal, Wang Yi emphasized that the global landscape encompasses a multitude of concerns beyond the Ukraine crisis, including other challenges that significantly impact both peace and the well-being of individuals. The proactive stance adopted by the United States starkly contrasts China's rather passive attitude throughout the discussions leading to the establishment of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Furthermore, China's efforts to resurrect the JCPOA after the transition of power from Donald Trump to Joe Biden in 2021 have so far proven futile.

China desires both prestige and economic gains as a reciprocal outcome for its involvement in mediation efforts. China expressed confidence in the potential for a favourable resolution to the Iran-KSA dialogue and determined that intervening would carry no risk. According to Scita, China saw the transaction as an opportunity to secure a significant diplomatic triumph in the Global South. The Minister of Oil of Iran, Javad Owji, said the day after the declaration in Beijing that Iran has also established other significant economic initiatives with China. Furthermore, Iran has successfully negotiated and finalized contracts and agreements with prominent Chinese corporations, with the details of these arrangements set to be disclosed later. China has persistently engaged in the importation of substantial volumes of Iranian oil, despite the imposition of secondary sanctions by the United States. Additionally, China has a significant position as a key buyer of Saudi Arabian oil (Turak, 2023).

Saudi-Iran deal: Impacts on the Middle East

An equally important question is whether and to what extent the Beijing agreement will contribute to managing or even resolving conflicts elsewhere in the Middle East. The concurrent regional objectives of Riyadh and Tehran have exacerbated the severe conflicts in Yemen and Syria while also perpetuating instability in Lebanon and Iraq. The Gulf States have expressed longstanding concern about the potential of direct threats or assaults by Iranian proxies and the purported assistance provided by Iran to dissident organizations. On the other hand, Israel perceives Iran's nuclear program as a menace that poses a significant risk to its existence (REZAEI et al., 2014). Tehran alleges that Israel is responsible for undermining its nuclear program while also accusing Saudi Arabia of supporting ethnic opposition factions in regions like Kordestan and Baluchistan. Additionally, Tehran claims that unfriendly Iranian diaspora media outlets contribute to this antagonistic environment. The experts from Crisis Group, based in the Middle East, provide insights from a local standpoint about the Saudi-Iranian deal and its ramifications on the ongoing conflicts and crises in the area. The ultimate finding suggests that while reducing the intensity of regional rivalry may facilitate the redirection of political focus towards domestic problems of primary concern, the likelihood of expeditious resolutions remains minimal. The potential reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia has the potential to alleviate the security apprehensions of the Arab States. However, the aforementioned measures do not mitigate the potential danger of a crisis instigated by Iran's swiftly progressing nuclear program and the consequential threat it presents, primarily to Israel but also to some neighbouring countries such as Saudi Arabia (Crises, 2023).

Gulf Arab States

The Saudi-Iranian accord outlines a strategic plan for the restoration of diplomatic relations within a timeframe of two months. If the circumstances unfold favourably, it has the potential to mitigate the profound hatred that has persisted between the two nations for a significant portion of a decade. Currently, the implementation of the agreement seems to be progressing well. King Salman, the monarch of Saudi Arabia, invited President Ebrahim Raisi of Iran, resulting in a planned meeting between the two nations' foreign ministers in Beijing on April 6th (Amwaj, 2023). According to a senior Saudi official interviewed by Crisis Group, Riyadh expresses its intention to capitalize on the positive outcomes achieved during the

Beijing accord. Additionally, the Saudi finance minister has conveyed the country's readiness to initiate investment activities in Iran promptly. Both nations sent technical teams to make necessary arrangements for reopening their respective embassies, indicating that the anticipated schedule of two months is progressing as planned.

In addition to enhancing bilateral ties, the accord has the potential to lessen tensions throughout the wider Gulf area. The agreement was commended by authorities in the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Oman. They saw it as a significant step towards achieving peace and prosperity, with mutual benefits for all parties involved. According to a senior Qatari official, the agreement may be considered as "positive first step." However, it is important to acknowledge that Saudi Arabia may need a certain period to rebuild a level of confidence in the intentions of Iran, given their prolonged history of hostility. Bahrain, a country known for its cautious approach towards interacting with Iran, released a formal statement expressing its support for the agreement and expressing optimism for the potential settlement of disputes via diplomatic means and conversation. The diplomatic ties between Gulf Arab nations and Iran have seen a notable enhancement in the last two years (Gambrell, 2023). The current discord between Iran and the Arab countries may be attributed to events that transpired in January 2016. During that time, Iranian demonstrators forcefully entered the Saudi embassy located in Tehran in response to the execution of Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr by the Saudi government. Al-Nimr, a notable dissident inside the Kingdom, was the subject of this controversial action. With the exception of Oman, all Gulf Arab nations subsequently had diplomatic ties with Iran (Aljazeera, 2017). During subsequent years, Oman, Qatar, and sometimes Kuwait maintained diplomatic relations with Tehran despite the persistent presence of heightened tensions. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain provided their support to the "maximum pressure" campaign led by U.S. President Donald Trump. This campaign included the implementation of more than 1,500 additional sanctions and the use of aggressive language, all with the objective of isolating and undermining Iran. Presently, all the Gulf Arab governments, with the exception of Bahrain, have accepted or are in the process of undertaking the restoration of comprehensive diplomatic ties with Iran. According to reports, Manama has consistently alleged that Tehran is inciting discontent among Bahrain's Shiite majority population and has engaged in bilateral discussions with Iran in recent months. Following the declaration of the Saudi-Iranian agreement, Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, convened with prominent security and economic figures in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), indicating a potential intensification and broadening of UAE-Iran ties (Associated Press, 2023). The ultimate measure of the agreement's efficacy will be the extent to which the involved parties refrain from intervening in the internal political affairs of nations around the region. Riyadh has consistently expressed concerns over Iranian backing of extremist factions around the region and purported Iranian endeavours to incite dissent within Saudi Arabia's Shiite minority. Similarly, Iran has levied allegations against the Gulf Arab governments for their perceived role in enabling the proximity of the United governments and Israel to its geographical vicinity. There exist two discernible first measures that Iran and Saudi Arabia may do in order to manifest their dedication to non-interference, both of which have purportedly been agreed upon by the two nations as components of the aforementioned agreement. According to reports, Saudi Arabia has expressed its intention to reduce its backing of media networks that have been involved in inciting opposition against the Iranian government. In a similar vein, Iran has allegedly stated its intention to limit the supply of weapons to Houthi rebels in Yemen.

The agreement has the potential to facilitate a security discourse between the Gulf countries, Iran and Iraq. Certain smaller Gulf Arab governments have previously shown reluctance in terms of expanding their involvement with Tehran unless Riyadh took the initiative to repair their relations. Therefore, in this regard, the agreement paves the way for more extensive deliberations. A forum of this kind might serve as a platform for governments to engage in discussions and formulate strategies to effectively tackle their foremost security challenges, with a special focus on the Gulf region. The possible effects of this action on the conflict in Yemen, and perhaps in other contexts, might be beneficial. According to reports, China has purportedly extended an invitation to facilitate a gathering between the Gulf nations and Iran in Beijing at a future date in 2023. According to a senior Saudi official, the possibility of such a meeting is deemed "logical"; nevertheless, no formal agreement has been reached.



Conclusion

The Saudi-Iran agreement, facilitated by China, is a significant milestone with the capacity to fundamentally transform the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and its ongoing disputes. The agreement's objective is to end the longstanding antagonism and animosity that have contributed to the proliferation of proxy conflicts, sectarian strife, and regional instability over an extended period. The two nations aim to reduce tensions, bolster security measures, and cultivate economic advancement by re-establishing diplomatic ties and reopening their respective embassies. The agreement also has significant ramifications for other parties in the region, including Turkey, Qatar, UAE, and Oman, who may be compelled to adapt their policies and alliances in response to the emerging circumstances. Additionally, it is worth noting that the agreement has the potential to impact the ongoing nuclear negotiations between Iran and the United States, as well as the prospective roles of the United States and China in the area. While the agreement does not serve as a universal solution to address all the complexities and obstacles encountered in the Middle East, it does represent a noteworthy stride towards fostering a future characterized by enhanced tranquillity and prosperity. This event signifies the beginning of a new epoch characterized by collaboration and discourse between two prominent powers within the area. China assumes a pivotal position as both a mediator and a partner in this context. The agreement also signifies the evolving dynamics of international politics, whereby nation-states increasingly assert their autonomy from global superpowers, actively influencing and managing their own ties and alliances rather than passively conforming to external influences. The Saudi-Iran agreement represents a promising advancement for both the regional and global contexts, as it can potentially address protracted problems and foster an atmosphere of trust and reciprocal regard.

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