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Reconciliation in the Gulf: the Case of Iran-Saudi Arabia Talks

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Introduction

The reconciliatory talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia has just come to the fore on the regional agenda in 2023 as Iran's foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian [expressed](#) Tehran's renewed interest in restoring diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia in early January. The diplomatic ties between the two countries were cut in January 2016 after Iranian protesters stormed Saudi embassy in Tehran following the execution of the prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran had intensified following the Arab Uprisings in 2011 and played out in a vast geography stretching from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen with devastating consequences on the ground. It was only a decade after the uprisings that both countries took steps to mend fences.

Saudi Arabia and Iran held the first round of direct talks in April 2021 in Bagdad, [mediated](#) by former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, after which both countries signaled their willingness to continue the process. In a 2021 interview, Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince and de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, [said](#) "We do not want the situation with Iran to be difficult," adding "on the contrary, we want it to prosper and grow".

For its part, Iran expressed their intention to improve ties with Riyadh. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi [said](#) "As

for Saudi Arabia, I say that there is no obstacle to having a dialogue with Saudi Arabia and relations with all countries. We are ready to reopen embassies," during his first press statement in July 2021, following his election.

A fourth round of the talks was held in September 2021 followed by the [reopening](#) of Iran's representative office in Jeddah to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in January 2022. The fifth round of talks between Saudi and Iranian officials was held on April 21, 2022. Saudi authorities agreed to allow [forty thousand Iranian pilgrims](#) to visit the holy cities of Mecca and Medina for Hajj in 2022, which appears to be a sign of warming relations. The last round of talks also raised the expectations for the future of bilateral relations. In July 2022, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein [announced](#) a forthcoming public meeting with Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers, however, as of the time of writing this insight, a public meeting between Saudi and Iranian officials has not materialized yet.

As the Middle Eastern politics have shown repeatedly, the fate of the Saudi-Iranian talks have been contingent upon numerous global, regional and domestic factors surrounding the countries involved. The geopolitical developments in the region are worth mentioning to contextualize the timing and dynamics of this particular rapprochement between two regional powerhouses.

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Geopolitical Context

The main parameters in the region over the last couple of years have created a feasible environment for Saudi Arabia and Iran to re-calculate their bilateral relations and facilitated reconciliatory moves from both sides. On the top of such parameters, there is the assumption that the US is changing its position towards the Middle East and Gulf region. Such an assumption is based on a number of major developments. The US decision to withdraw from Afghanistan on August 2021 had exacerbated Gulf States' security concerns amid waning US commitments in the region. It can be argued that US withdrawal played as a catalysis to further the political interest in Saudi-Iranian talks, as Gulf monarchies [were left to handle](#) their security issues via increasing cooperation and decreasing conflict with friends and foes.

Decreasing the conflict in the region serves the interests of oil exporting GCC States as a strategic source of state income. This is the case as those oil producers, particularly Saudi Arabia, do not see the US as the ultimate security guarantor for the free flow of oil from the Gulf given America's military inaction following Houthi claimed drones attacks to Saudi Arabia [Abqaiq oil plant in 2019](#) and recently to [ARAMCO storage facilities](#) near Jeddah in 2022. The [harsh rhetoric](#) of Biden, as a presidential candidate, towards Saudi Arabia also exacerbated Saudi concerns regarding the fate of their special relationship with the US.

The international enthusiasm to revive the 2015 Nuclear Agreement between Iran and P5+1 (Britain, France, China, Russia, the US and Germany) in 2021 also boosted mutual efforts to

restore Saudi-Iranian relations. In a contrast strike to their reaction in 2015, the Gulf monarchies expressed their support for the revival of the nuclear deal this time. In a statement following the US-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Working Group meeting in November 2021, Gulf states [called for](#) "an urgent mutual return to full compliance with the JCPOA, that would help pave the way for inclusive diplomatic efforts to address all issues that are necessary to ensure sustainable safety, security, and prosperity in the region."

Changing dynamics and independent foreign policy making patterns in the Gulf become more apparent following Russian offensive in Ukraine in February 2022. Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, refrained from condemning Russia despite the US stark position and sanctions against Kremlin. Further, Saudi Arabia [backed](#) OPEC+ decision to cut oil production by 2 million barrels per day in October 2022 despite [the US pressures](#) to pump more oil into the market. The White House [accused](#) OPEC+ of aligning with Russia over the decision, whereas the US allegations were dismissed by Saudi Arabia. For its part, Iran more overtly supported Russia by admitting that Tehran provided [drones](#) to Russia before the war in Ukraine started. Although their efforts resume in coordination or cooperation, Riyadh and Tehran seems to take a closer stance towards Russia.

Conflict fatigue in Yemen can be considered as another regional dynamic that contributed to the facilitation of the talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The internationalization of the conflict in Yemen has entered its eighth year since Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm against the Iran-backed

Houthis in 2015 without reaching a political solution on the ground. The situation in Yemen was one of the agenda items during the direct talks and a UN brokered truce [took effect](#) in April 2022 for six months.

On the other hand, Iraqi efforts to re-establish itself as an independent player in the regional issues can be considered as an important factor in the initiation and the continuation of Saudi-Iranian talks. Iraq has long been a battleground for Saudi and Iranian rivalry in the region. During his office as Iraq's Prime Minister, al-Kadhimi put significant effort to turn Iraq into [a 'mediation nation'](#) to carve an autonomous sphere for Baghdad in the regional re-configuration. His connections with both Iran and Saudi Arabia and his [personal efforts](#) were significant to keep the talks alive at the time when the enthusiasm for dialogue was faded.

Yet, the recent stall in talks exposed Iraq's limits in facilitating the reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The fragility of political setting in Iraq, the domestic circumstances in Iran and the ever-changing geopolitical dynamics have to be taken into consideration for any assessment on the future of the talks.

Assessment of the process: A Bumpy Road Ahead

The pace of the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation lost its momentum in November 2022 as Iranian intelligence minister Esmail Khatib [issued a warning](#) against Saudi Arabia referring to Riyadh's alleged interference in the recent domestic upheavals fueled by the killing of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, on September 16.

Although Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies have so far [refrained](#) from any official statement in supporting the protesters in Iran, Tehran expressed its concerns regarding media coverages in Saudi owned national and international media outlets. Particularly, Iran [framed](#) the broadcasts of Iran International TV, a London based and reportedly Saudi Arabia owned Persian language media outlet, as an interference to its domestic affairs.

Indeed, according to Iraqi sources, a planned sixth round of negotiations, to be hosted by Iraq, has been canceled since [Tehran refuses](#) to meet with Saudi officials due to Riyadh's role in alleged foreign incitement of the mass anti-government protests. Despite the revived interests in the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia as officials [met in Brazil](#) in early January, [concerns](#) around Iran International TV broadcasts continues to be a political issue within Iran. The future of the talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia will be dependent on either the closure or toning down of Iran International TV broadcasts.

Another prominent reason of the stalled talks is closely related to the political situation in Iraq, particularly a delay in forming the new government. Throughout the political crisis in Iraq, both Saudi and Iran were in a confrontational mood due to Iraq's delayed government formation.

It took more than one year to form a government in Iraq since the parliamentary elections in October 2021, when Muhammed Shia Al-Sudani managed to form a coalition government in alliance with [Iran-backed Coordination Framework](#) in 2022. While a new government authority in Iraq is a highly [contested issue](#) due to pressing economic, confessional, intra-coalitional

and security circumstances, Iraqi domestic politics have significant repercussions on the negotiation process.

The agency of the political actors in the negotiations is an important factor during the Iran-Saudi talks. The new government in Iraq, which can be labelled as Iran-backed, has affected Saudi perceptions towards the utility of Iraqi mediation. Indeed, as reported [by Amwaj Media](#), Saudi Arabia has told Iran through “special channels” that negotiations halted with the end of al-Kadhimi’s premiership and with Iraq’s return to faces from “the old guard.” From a Saudi perspective, al-Sudani appears to be pro-Iranian in his stance and approach and cannot replace former Prime Minister al-Kadhimi’s balanced, independent and unbiased stance towards the both parties.

The failure to revive the 2015 Iranian Nuclear Deal can be considered as another reason of the stagnation in Iran-Saudi talks. Although Iranian and European officials [signaled](#) their interest to continuing the work on the nuclear deal after the second meeting of the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership hosted by Jordan in December 2022, European Parliament’s step to [designate](#) the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization put further strain on the prospects for a deal.

In November 2022, the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi [validated](#) Iran’s assertion that it is enriching uranium to 60% purity at its Fordow plant. Saudi Arabia considers the revival of the deal to be a benefit as the nuclear program will put Iran under constant monitoring and therefore provide it greater credibility as it

guarantees regional peace, which is free from a nuclear threat.

On January 2023, Saudi Arabia has raised its concerns about Iran’s nuclear program and Tehran’s regional activities. In an interview with CNBC on January 18, Saudi Arabia’s Minister of State of Foreign Affairs Adel Al-Jubeir [emphasized](#) that Iran has an obligation to give up its nuclear program adding “issues like interference to domestic affairs of other countries is not acceptable”. Al-Jubair also referred to Saudi-Iranian negotiations: “We are ready to welcome Iran to community of nations and deal with it as a good neighbor” and dismissed Saudi interference in the recent domestic unrest in Iran.

Al Jubeir’s statements expose different perspectives held by Saudi Arabia and Iran towards the steps to be taken in the negotiations. It is clear that Saudi Arabia wanted to see a change in Iranian foreign policies concerning Iraq, Syria, and Yemen as a first concrete step to reinstate diplomatic relations. From an Iranian perspective, however, opening of the embassies first can be a sign of good will for Iran to reconsider its regional policies vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

Augmented by regional and domestic contingencies, the massive and multidimensional disparity in the discussions is the primary reason to why the Saudi-Iran talks have generated practically nil. There appears to be a deadly schism between Iran and Saudi Arabia in ideas on the fundamental essence of the negotiations and their objectives. The two states have essentially opposed difficulties and criticisms. Locally, this is known as hiwar al-torshayn, or “dialogue of the

deaf." Both parties are playing a zero-sum game in this process. This is particularly the case given the complexities of regional and international developments, which renders negotiations themselves a part of this wider context. The more players and factors intervene, the more difficult it becomes to progress, if not make impossible.

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