Iran-Saudi rapprochement: cautious optimism in a changing MENA region
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INTRODUCTION

Optimism surrounding the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement is unlikely to materialize without additional action. Freeing and directing its potential in a dynamic and changing MENA region requires medium-to-long-term compromise and the right incentives.

After a seven-year impasse, Tehran and Riyadh opened a new chapter in bilateral relations on the back of three-tier Iraqi, Omani and Chinese mediations. The execution of Saudi cleric Nimr Baqir Al-Nimr and the attack on the Saudi Embassy in the Iranian capital helped to turn the bilateral rivalry into enmity in 2016. This, in turn, had regional repercussions, with Lebanon, Syria and Yemen experiencing political deadlock, ostracism and violence.

The Iranian-Saudi rapprochement generated a great deal of optimism regarding its potential regional impact. Recent developments offer hope and a moment of reflection: What was the reaction of the international press? What conditions are necessary for optimism to materialize? And what challenges lie ahead?

RAPPROCHEMENT: GOOD NEWS FOR SOME

The re-establishment of Iranian-Saudi bilateral relations was announced in Beijing on March 10, 2023. The news was welcomed by international analysts as a positive sign for a region that had experienced protracted political deadlock and violent conflict since the outbreak of the Arab revolts in 2011.

Beyond the enthusiasm, reports pointed to a clear schism between sources in the US and MENA region. While the first adopted a zero-sum game narrative, the latter preferred to speak of regional shifts and pragmatic foreign policies.
The zero-sum game narrative is exemplified by scholars Maria Fantappie and Vali Nasr, who wrote: “For Beijing, the announcement was a great leap forward in its rivalry with Washington.” Analyst Jonathan Panikoff added: “Make no mistake, a China-dominated Middle East would fundamentally undermine US commercial, energy and national security.” And, finally, journalist Vivian Nereim described the diplomatic rapprochement as “a coup for China.”

Briefly, the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement is framed as a Chinese victory and a loss for the interests of the US in the MENA region.

Alternatively, co-editor at Jadaliyya Mouin Rabbani contextualized the rapprochement as part of “important developments in the geopolitical disposition of the Middle East and North Africa.” In a similar vein, professor at National Defense College (UAE) Albadr Alshateri observed that “in today’s Middle East there is a discernible pattern that could be described as a pragmatic trend to resolve regional disputes, be they military or political.” Senior political analyst at Al Jazeera Marwan Bishara appears to follow a similar line of argument when writing “The deal was conceived out of need and out of desire.”

Here, the surfacing image depicts a dynamic region engaging in conflict resolution based on pragmatic foreign policies.

While the zero-sum game narrative is tempting when looking at events from Washington’s perspective, it is worth reminding readers that the US was in no position to make a breakthrough in Iranian-Saudi bilateral relations. First, the US has no bilateral relations with Iran, and, second, the Biden administration distanced itself from Saudi Arabia. Thus, the zero-sum game analysis is, at this time, inappropriate. Briefly, one cannot frame as a loss something could not be won in the first place.

**MEDIUM TO LONG-TERM COMPROMISE**

The Iranian-Saudi rapprochement comes at a time when the MENA region is experiencing realignments in the short-to-medium term. Following the first Iranian-Saudi meetings in Baghdad in 2019, the Gulf countries and Qatar mended fences at the 2021 Gulf Cooperation Council Summit. Turkiye followed suit when visiting the UAE and Saudi Arabia in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Egypt and Turkiye are also negotiating the re-establishment of bilateral relations, and Syria was welcomed as a full
member by the Arab League in 2023. Meanwhile, Iranian and Saudi embassies were reopened in Riyadh and Tehran,7 Iran’s Hajj quota was raised from 38,481 in 2022 to 87,550 in 2023,8 and Iran and Saudi Arabia were invited to become members of BRICS.9 These developments are welcome when it comes to strengthening Iranian-Saudi relations and represent a bilateral compromise beyond immediate needs. It is the positive feedback needed in the short term to transform the general optimism into conflict resolution in the medium-to-long term.

Another promising sign for the region’s future trajectory is “the convergence of several distinct yet related dynamics. These include: a diversification of strategic relationships; the reduction of regional polarization; and efforts to restore the Arab regional order after more than a decade of upheaval.”10 In other words, the emergence of similar patterns across the region reinforces the idea of a sustained code of conduct. Most importantly, the shift has had an immediate and observable impact beyond Iran and Saudi Arabia (more will be said in the following section).

While medium to long-term compromise on the part of Iran and Saudi Arabia is a development, the translation of the optimism into positive regional dynamics also depends on the engagement with allies. In that sense, Riyadh and Tehran must continue to deepen bilateral relations while redefining the terms of engagement with regional allies and fending off opposing interests attempting to derail the current trajectory.

RIGHT THE INCENTIVES

The regional optimism generated by the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement stems from the fact that Riyadh and Tehran are seen to be supporting opposing sides in regional conflicts. Thus, the reduction of tensions between the two regional heavyweights is expected to reduce conflict levels across the region. However, international politics and conflict resolution are complex and require incentives to translate optimism into reality.

The current scenario in the MENA region bears some resemblance and has been compared to the US-USSR rivalry. In fact, Western academics have posited the question: “A new Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa?”11 The comparison may be useful as far as it is limited to enemies attempting to avoid direct confrontation. Beyond that point, any parallels between the US-USSR and Iranian-Saudi enmity are limited.

The aversion to nuclear warfare led the US and USSR to sponsor proxies in order to promote different political, economic and social world views. The reality in the MENA region is quite different, as the enmity relates to regional influence. In the words of Ruth Hanau Santini, “the Gulf subcomplex has increasingly become the dominant one in shaping regional security dynamics, and is more and more interlinked with the Levant subcomplex.”12
Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed on March 11, 2023, to restore ties and reopen diplomatic missions, which includes the reopening of the Saudi embassy in Tehran. AFP

From that perspective, the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement has leverage over regional allies to transform the optimism generated into a mechanism assisting conflict resolution across the region. For example, the political deadlock in Lebanon has been intimately associated with the Iranian-Saudi rivalry. Most importantly, the normalization of relations is already affecting conflicts in the region as the Yemen ceasefire opens the door to negotiations, Syrian society and government refrain from violence during protests, and Lebanon enters a process of political dialogue to end its deadlock. Although it remains unclear what every party is gaining by abandoning confrontation, the change in the matrix of incentives is evident as political deadlocks and violent conflict give way to negotiation. In this area, Riyadh and Tehran must display sensibility and justify the value of adopting a pragmatic foreign policy to identify and address the concerns of allies, while dispensing the right incentives for the establishment of a stable regional order.

THE ELEPHANT AND THE HAWKS IN THE ROOM
The obvious threat to translating the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement into positive regional outcomes is Israel and hawkish elements in Washington. For Tel Aviv, the development closed the door on the expansion of the Abraham Accords through the establishment of bilateral relations with Riyadh. This is bad news for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has grown accustomed to finding in foreign policy achievements a way to shelter from domestic shortcomings.

In fact, the Likud-led Israeli government finds itself at odds with regional dynamics. Far from good news, the recent occupation of the Lebanese village of Ghajar, continued air attacks on Syrian territory, and attempts at reforming the Israeli judicial system exemplify the threat an out-of-tune Israeli government represents for positive regional developments.

As shown above, analysts based in Washington interpret the newfound Iranian-Saudi rapprochement as contrary to the interests of the USA in the MENA region. Consequently, one may come across a piece proposing ‘deterrence through diplomacy’ in which Iran is still framed as a security threat and the greatest challenge to Saudi Arabia’s future. As suggested in reference to the zero-sum game narrative, hawkish policy analysis is appropriate for another time past when the logic of conflict reigned and dictated further armament.

Today, the MENA region is shifting away from conflictivity and engaging on the basis of strategic alliances, conflict resolution and political stabilization. In that same line, Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi speaking in the name of Iranian society affirmed that “We have never considered Saudi Arabia as our enemy.” Moreover, the recent visit by Saudi Ambassador Nayef Al-Sudairi to the State of Palestine may just be another step in the convergence between Riyadh and Teheran.


10. Rabbani, ibid.


Santini, R.H. (The International Spectator, vol. 52, no.4, pg. 94) A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited.
