

Saudi-Iranian Consultations: Searching for a Balanced Regional Security System

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Preliminary

Since an Islamic Revolutionary government came to power in Iran in 1979, relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran have fluctuated between rapprochement and disagreement. In the wake of the American occupation of Iraq and the ensuing Iranian sectarian militancy, the two countries became entangled in a state of conflict and hostility. Iran's export of the Islamic revolution to the region had devastating repercussions on Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Lebanon and Yemen.

Security concerns dominated the discourse of both governments. The security dilemma in the region arose from Iran's revolutionary vision and the resolve to export it beyond the borders of the Islamic Republic. This move was viewed as the kernel of ill intentions towards the Arabian Peninsula, and particularly towards Saudi Arabia, the largest country and oil exporter in the region. Several factors contributed to tense Iranian-Saudi relations. All of those factors stem primarily from the revolutionary orientation of the Islamic Republic, which precluded any significant security cooperation. Factors that help explain these troubled relations include "ideology, nationalism, leadership, and local factors". Since the eruption of the Khomeinist revolution in 1979, events helped exacerbate the Iranian threat to the region, leading to an increasing mistrust between Iran and its Arab neighbors.

In April 2021, Saudi Arabia and Iran initiated consultations, preceded by informal and unannounced talks and meetings nearly two years earlier, following the September 2019 attack that targeted Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais owned by the Saudi economic giant, Aramco. The Houthi group claimed responsibility for launching the attacks from Yemen, but Saudi Arabia and the United States stated that the attack came from Tehran.

These consultations are based on the conviction that understandings between Saudi Arabia and Iran are necessitated by geographical factors that inevitably make the two countries permanent neighbors. Although national security is the source of constant conflict among countries on both shores of the Persian Gulf, Iran and Saudi Arabia have often sought to avoid irreparably disturbing their relations simply because they are neighbors who must learn to coexist.

Hence, contacts between the two countries have not been suspended, even in the most troubled times. Even during their most intense disagreements over political issues, they have always opted for avoiding open confrontation. Hence, the two countries have relied on indirect, secret, or proxy operations, regardless of the extent to which political solutions are achievable through these means. The theater of indirect confrontations expanded from Iraq to Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, the latter being the closest to Saudi territory and the most critical to its national security.

This paper examines international relations between the two countries. It argues that the common interests of the two large, neighboring countries can serve as a ground for a new phase of Saudi-Iranian relations that are not ideal or permanent, within the framework of a regional security system that establishes stability in a region that owns most of the world's oil reserves. The balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran is inevitable, and the stability of this balance will depend to a large extent on the nature of the local transformations within the two states. However, achieving this goal depends on the extent of the Iranian regime's ability to transform itself and adapt to realpolitik. The paper discusses various internal, regional and international variables that push the two countries towards rapprochement. It also examines the structural factors influencing the relations between them. It argues that the regime in Saudi Arabia is more capable than its Iranian counterpart of achieving a regional security system that starts from the Yemeni file as a yardstick for building confidence. It further argues that it is difficult for the Iranian regime to supersede its revolutionary ideology in order to address the new challenges facing the region and the need for a regional security system. In order to understand the nature of the Saudi-Iranian disputes, it is crucial to highlight the structural factors affecting Saudi-Iranian relations.



I. Structural factors affecting Saudi-Iranian relations

In order to understand the nature of the Saudi-Iranian disputes, it is critical to understand the structural factors affecting relations between the two countries. Key factors include:

1. Identity as a security dilemma: States classify other states as friends or enemies based on the concept of identity: who are they? What is the identity background of the state? This view is expressed by the constructivist approach in international relations. According to this approach, the security dilemma is the product of states' perceptions of their own identities more than a specific position that characterizes the chaotic international system as assumed by the new realism. Studying the structural map of the security dilemma helps explain many issues since the ideas and identities adopted by the two countries are important in explaining their policies.

State identity also refers to a state's perception of the role it should play and the place it should have in international relations. Identity has been the dominant factor in determining how Saudi Arabia and Iran have viewed each other since the early 1980s. Religion is the most important constituent of Saudi and Iranian identity. It is the source of legitimacy in Saudi Arabia and of the regime of the ayatollahs in Iran. ¹

According to post-1979 Iranian revolutionary constitution imposed by Khomeini, Shiism is the source of legislation. Salafism/Wahhabism is the source of Sharia law and a pillar of governance in Saudi Arabia. Recently, Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, carried out religious reforms regarding the legacy of Wahhabism, but the impact of those reforms on Saudi identity is still being studied by researchers.

Saudi Arabia presents itself as the leader of the Islamic world, in its capacity as custodian of the two holy mosques in Makkah and Medina. The Saudi family alliance with Wahhabi Salafism is a distinctive feature of the Saudi monarchy. On the other hand, after the Iranian revolution, "Persian" nationalism" and "Persian Shiite Islam" were employed as mechanisms that enabled Khomeini to integrate his revolutionary ideas into the Shia doctrine.

These political ideas, particularly exporting the revolution and Iran's role as "the leader of the oppressed against their oppressors," were later fused into Iranian national identity. This polarization created a security dilemma - fueled by regional ambitions - between the two countries. Decision-makers in Tehran and Riyadh alike believe that there will be no internal stability without weakening the other side.

Thus, a state's identity means its preferences and actions. Shared norms of states having the same identity are significant in building relations. By norms, we mean the shared expectations about appropriate behaviors by states having a particular identity. That's why Saudi Arabia is not concerned about Pakistan's nuclear military capability, but is concerned about Iran acquiring one. Saudi Arabia considers Iran a hostile country having a different identity, while, for the Saudis, Pakistan shares their identity.

Since the 1980s, Iran has presented itself initially as a supporter of the Shiites worldwide and views its seminary in Qum as the leading Shiite seminary, despite the fact that seminaries in Lebanon and later in Iraq are the primary points of reference for the Shiites. Iran annually attracts hundreds of Arab students to study at the religious schools in Qum, including students from Yemen, where the Twelver Shia school of thought does not exist. Iranian demands of the GCC states to protect Shiite minorities have always angered officials in Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries since Tehran presents itself as a patron of the local Shiite communities. However, Iranian support is usually pragmatic as it is not limited to Shiite groups. Any party that serves the Iranian agendas, even if it belongs to the Sunni sect or even has no sectarian affiliation, is welcome. Iran supported a party in the civil war in southern Yemen in 1986, factions of the Southern Movement, and Sunni political, tribal and partisan leaders in Yemen before and after the Arab Spring in 2011. It also supports the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and the Islamic Jihad Movement, which fight the Israeli occupation, even though both are Sunni movements.

Perhaps Iran's view of its role as the protector of the Shiite Arabs has greatly affected the view of the countries in the region of the local Shia communities which they have come to view as mere tools of Iran. This view, in turn, pushed the Arab Shia communities to lose their safe incubator and rush to the sectarian regime in Tehran.

2. The GCC countries' vision of security: Much of this geopolitical tension is the outcome of inconsistent visions of security on both sides of the Arabian Gulf; namely, in the GCC countries, Iran and Iraq. For Saudi Arabia, security in the Gulf is maintained through a long-standing network of relations with the United States. From Iran's point of view, security should only be maintained by the countries in the region.² This division was exacerbated in the years following the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. Saudi officials urged their American counterparts to curtail growing Iranian influence in Iraq and to counter Iran's nuclear program. At the pinnacle of violence in Iraq in 2008, the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz urged the United States to "cut off the head of the snake."³

The security problem in the Gulf is common to the threatened six GCC members, whose oil reserves, financial surpluses and large-scale investments are at stake. Their security concerns stem from their inability to protect their economic resources in the vicinity of two regional giants, Iran and pre-2003 Iraq. The Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, which left more than 600,000 people dead, resulted in weakening their troops.⁴ When Iraq collapsed after the 1991 and 2003 wars, Iran appears as an existential threat to GCC regimes and the most serious threat to national security in the Arabian Peninsula, especially because of its growing influence in Iraq and later in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

Gulf security also overlaps with international energy security at the levels of oil and gas sources, strategic waterways and geopolitics. The study of the geopolitical environment of energy requires a three-layer analysis. The first layer covers internal data of the countries possessing energy sources, and bordering countries, or those located within their strategic passageways (Yemen and Iran).

The second layer is formed by the nature of prevalent interactions within the different subregional units, or the so-called "regional patterns of interaction". The third layer is related to the energy navigation data; i.e., the prevailing conditions in the straits and waterways of vessel voyages between the exporting and consuming countries. Therefore, the fact that Gulf security today has become universal in nature and scope cannot be overemphasized. It is also an indicator of international security in the strict sense of the word. Hence, crystallizing a coherent vision of sustainable security is crucial. ⁵

3. Defense Strategies: The realist school (classical and new) opines that states resort to offense-defensive theory in dealing with security dilemmas, reinforced by the arms race because the chaotic international system pushes states towards self-protection due to the lack of a higher power capable of controlling global security.⁶ Since energy security, necessarily Gulf security, is synonymous with international security, the defense strategies adopted by the Arab Gulf states in dealing with Iraq and Iran were based on two well-known principles; namely, the balance of power in the Gulf and defensive alliances with international parties. This situation led to the full internationalization of Gulf security through a series of defense agreements with the United States concluded by Saudi Arabia (1945), Bahrain (1971-1991), Oman (1980), Kuwait (1987), Qatar (1992), and the UAE (1994). Because the principle of the balance of power ceased functioning with the rift in Iraq in 1991 before the full collapse of Iraqi troops and military in 2003, only "defensive alliances" with the United States are viable, but the problem with defensive alliances is that they have always caused problems. ⁷

However, these defensive alliances have often been embarrassing to Arab Gulf states. Internal questions have been raised in the region concerning the Gulf states' need to cease to be American satellites. There was no clear dividing line between the goal of helping GCC countries and other goals, based on the American and Western military bases in the Gulf, which were used during the war on Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, even if these countries were opposed to the American views and goals. The United States used Kuwaiti military bases and facilities in invading Iraq despite Kuwait's opposition to the invasion.

This raises Iran's concerns about using the airspace and lands of the GCC countries in the event of a Western attack on its territory. Iranian officials usually raise these concerns in their meetings and statements, as well as in their threats to GCC countries. The recent Israeli presence in the UAE and Bahrain further fuels Iranian concerns. Iran accuses the Israeli occupation of killing nuclear scientists and planning to launch an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities, which Israel has long threatened to do. Therefore, the core of Iran's vision of Gulf security is that it is an exclusively regional affair, while foreign troops should be expelled from the region. According to the Iranian view, the Gulf countries, including Iran and Iraq, should sign non-aggression agreements. However, the regime's revolutionary enthusiasm raises security concerns in the GCC countries regarding Iran's evil "intentions" towards them. Moreover, the presence of foreign troops in the Gulf is meant to deter, rather than attack, Iran. If it were not for Gulf fears of Iran and Iran's control of the political decision-making of the post-2003 Iraqi governments, those troops would not have been summoned to the region, especially after the demise of Saddam Hussein's regime. Since Saddam Hussein's regime proposed signing a non-aggression agreement with Saudi Arabia before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, GCC decision-makers are still worried about repeating the experience.

This raises the question: is Iran a threat to the GCC countries, or rather a source of power that can be trusted? For Saudi decision-makers, Iran is a threat, and its proposals cannot be trusted. Moreover, its current political system raises endless concerns, especially in a changing regional environment. The Iranian monopoly of sectarianism in Iraq and transforming Iraq into a dependent state had a profound impact on these tensions, especially since it came after a security agreement between the two countries in 2001, during the term of Muhammad Khatami. The Houthi attacks on Saudi oil facilities reinforced these Saudi concerns. In an incident in 2019, Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in northeastern Saudi Arabia were targeted. The Houthis claimed responsibility for the attacks, but Riyadh and Washington stated that the attacks were launched from Iranian rather than from Yemeni territory.

The slow American response, along with other American behaviors, caused Saudi Arabia to reconsider defense agreements with the United States, despite the fact that Donald Trump's tenure witnessed good relations with the Saudis, particularly with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

For Gulf academics, the Iranian vision seeks to replace international defense alliances with a regional defense alliance, such as Hassan Rouhani's Hormuz Initiative (2019). This means, at a minimum, "we will not attack the other side if those [foreign troops] are expelled from the region." At its maximum, it means "we must form a Gulf defense or security alliance against the West," a proposition that is unacceptable to the Arab Gulf states.⁸

4.The Iranian Nuclear Deal: The GCC countries are concerned over Iran's possession of a nuclear bomb, and therefore see an agreement that prevents it from obtaining a one as a halfway point towards easing their concerns. The other half has to do with lifting the economic sanctions imposed on Iran and reintegrating it into the international community, which will lead to increasing Iranian support for proxies in the region, including the Houthis in Yemen, who have grown into a threat to GCC states. Therefore, GCC states lobbied for including articles in the nuclear agreement that obligate Iran not to interfere in the region and to stop supporting its proxies.

Therefore, during Obama's presidency, US diplomatic overtures towards Iran were the source of much anxiety among the GCC countries, especially Saudi Arabia, and led to a more proactive Saudi foreign policy that sought to limit Iranian influence throughout the region.⁹ Saudi concerns were exacerbated after the nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was signed in 2015. The deal was endorsed by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council without heeding Gulf concerns. During the tenure of Obama's successor, the fiercely anti-Iran Donald Trump, relations with Saudi Arabia — and Prince Mohammed bin Salman in particular — improved dramatically, largely due to the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal¹⁰ before the Biden administration sought to return to agreement and stop military support for Saudi Arabia in its war against the Houthis in Yemen. The Houthis were delisted as a terrorist group.

II. Common national interests

Amid these challenges, it is not surprising that tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have increased and covered the religious, political, economic and social spheres. This fusion of local and regional politics had a significant impact on relations, opening new arenas for competition and escalating tensions between the two countries and framing relations in the security jargon.¹¹ Some experts point out that national interests and common economic threats may overshadow "material and intellectual" concerns that play a pivotal role in the competition, and that breaking up differences into arenas could push Riyadh and Tehran towards seeking a solution. International relations literature indicates that competition is not static, but is shaped by the immediate contexts of time and place.

The past four years were a suitable time to start rapprochement as security problems between the two countries intensified. Iraq was a suitable facilitator and mediator of these consultations, combining both factors of time and place. Those consultations were announced in 2021, but they had been preceded by initial consultations at a lower level. It took a long time, possibly more than two years, to lay the foundations for diplomatic efforts,¹² and included publishing high-profile opinion pieces written by Hossein Mousavian and Abdulaziz Sager, who enjoy relations with senior officials in Tehran and Riyadh, respectively.¹³

The continuation of dialogue between the two countries for six difficult rounds preceded by preliminary efforts reflects a new and serious will on their part to close files of disagreement and conflict that have preoccupied them for long and consumed much of their efforts and resources. Progress in these consultations is evidenced by statements by the two parties and the official nature of talks. Both countries plan to raise representation to the level of foreign ministers in the sixth round of consultations, according to the statements of the Saudi¹⁴ and Iranian¹⁵ foreign ministers.

So, why do Saudi Arabia and Iran need to reduce tension?

According to international relations literature, a country's national security priorities can change based on the immediate circumstances and the need to ease fears, either because there are higher, possibly internal, fears, or because of the emergence of new considerations in regional and international politics.¹⁶

The following variables and common interests prompted the two countries to hold consultations:

1. Concerns about escalation of the conflict: In the context of the escalation of tension between the two countries, attacks on vessels in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, and the Israeli presence in the Gulf states, old concerns over escalating conflict that might lead to the eruption of war returned. These concerns emerged in the aftermath of the 2019 attacks on Saudi Aramco that were widely believed to have been carried out by Iran. For officials in Saudi Arabia, the attacks were the latest instance of an increasingly unstable regional security environment, a situation that prompted taking practical steps to ease tensions. As one US official observed, to “begin easing the various conflicts in the region, one of the single biggest things you can do is to start a dialogue between Riyadh and Tehran that could bring down the tensions.”¹⁷

2. The Russia-Ukraine war: The Russia-Ukraine war pushes countries in the region to discuss a regional security framework that will distance them from tensions in the emerging global axes. In contrast to the Cold War, the Arab Gulf states enjoy good relations with Russia and the United States, but the increasing international polarization into two axes reinforces regional polarization that is likely to increase instability in the region. Iran is also very interested in Central Asia (the former republics of the Soviet Union), and it is very likely that its presence in that region will be affected by the war in light of the Russia-NATO polarization in eastern Europe. Therefore, Iran may seek to build stability with its Arab neighbors to deal with the concerns coming from its northern borders.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia does not want to be entangled in a state of cold war, especially in view of a clear Arab weakness, where Iraq and Syria are under Iranian control, and Egypt is weak due to internal problems.

3. The economy as a main incentive: The coronavirus pandemic crisis, the economic visions of the two countries, and the perceived need to move towards diversifying the economy away from carbon pushed the two countries' ambitious visions to top priorities.

In October 2018, Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced his aspirations for the future of the kingdom and the broader Middle East as the “new Europe.” This statement by bin Salman was made at the Future Investment Initiative conference, an international gathering hosted annually by Riyadh to attract global investment as part of the drive to diversify the Saudi economy to implement Vision 2030. The war in Yemen costs Saudi Arabia money and smears its reputation. It is estimated that Saudi Arabia spent about \$200 million a day during the Yemen war, about \$5-6 billion per month,¹⁸ or approximately \$420 billion over the seven-year period of its involvement in Yemen. The damages the reputation of the kingdom and negatively affects its efforts to attract investments, a situation which leads to weakening Vision 2030. Most of the industrial and commercial facilities in the southern region of the Kingdom are suspended due to the war.

Less than a year after the royal declaration, the September 2019 attack took place. Oil refineries in Abqaiq were damaged in a drone and ballistic missile attack. Direct Iranian involvement in the attack is most likely. Even in the case of indirect involvement through the Houthis, the attack prompts Saudi Arabia to revitalize channels of contact with Tehran to ensure that the main rule of avoiding a direct battle is not broken, and to push Iran to reduce Houthi attacks. During the next two years, the Houthis launched more attacks on targets inside Saudi territory, and thus emerged as a serious threat to Saudi national security and Vision 2030. Therefore, if Saudi Arabia seeks to pursue its internal economic ambitions, it will need regional stability.

Similarly, Iran has a 20-year vision (2025), which revolves around economic and political goals.¹⁹ International sanctions and regional isolation greatly affect the Iranian economy. Tehran adopted a policy of "maximum resistance" to address the international sanctions crisis, relying on local capabilities.

Yet, during the Trump administration, sanctions against Iran under the "maximum pressure" campaign were "the most intrusive sanctions in contemporary history, which sought to destroy Iranian economy and society."²⁰ Indeed, the sanctions greatly affected the Iranian economy.

Iranian decision-makers know that they urgently need Saudi Arabia's approval of the nuclear agreement with the West to revive Iranian economy, and Saudi Arabia's positive image of Iran in its contacts with other Islamic countries is significant to ensure their cooperation with Iran.²¹

4. A Saudi-Iranian u-turn: It seems that Saudi Arabia and Iran have realized that their costly foreign policy conflict will not lead to victory. Saudi Arabia has taken a "u-turn" in reading foreign policy files, while the sixth round of consultations with Iran was under preparation. The Turkish president was in Riyadh, on a visit that was the first in years after relations between the two countries reached an all-time low due to Ankara's position on the Arab Spring, its relations with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2013, its support for Qatar in the Gulf crisis of 2017-2021, and the repercussions of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in 2018.

Riyadh has also improved its relations with Pakistan after years of cold and apathetic relations, despite the history of strategic relations between the two countries. Pakistan had declined to send troops to the Saudi border with Yemen. Over the past few years, Saudi Arabia also has sought to improve relations with Iraq and reached out to Iraqi Shiite groups.

Iran has also changed its view of the importance of the nuclear agreement in its relations with countries in the region. Tehran believes that Saudi Arabia is an American puppet and that signing an agreement with the United States means that "when US-Iranian relations are normalized, Saudi-Iranian relations will be normalized." Iran has always questioned the possibility of shaping Saudi and Arabian Peninsula relations with Iran independently of the American factor.²²

The nuclear agreement (2015) and the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 prove that the GCC countries pursue a policy that is more independent of the United States than the ministries of foreign affairs of several countries, particularly of Iran, believe, especially if the United States ignores Saudi/GCC concerns.

5. A bleak picture of Iran's proxy war: Iran relies on supporting non-state actors in its confrontations and attempts to build influence. This strategy reduces the huge costs which Iran would incur if it gets involved directly. In addition to the relatively low cost, compared to missiles and major weapon systems, Iran's network of non-state actors also allows it to engage in conflicts beyond its borders. The deniability provided by using proxies also reduces the political cost for Iran.²³ For these reasons, Iran's Supreme Leader has argued that "there is no wise government that would give up strategic depth and 'remote defense' of Iran through allying with non-state actors."²⁴

However, in the long term, if Iranian interventions continue in the same vein, it is only natural that Iran will run into a stone wall and its efforts will backfire. It is, therefore, in Iran's interest to avoid overreliance on its network of proxies if it plans to remain a regional power for a longer period. Iran's monopoly of a network of regional non-state actors is not sustainable. It is likely that those states will transition to stable governments and the local pro-Iran groups will be driven primarily by their own interests rather than those of Iran. Moreover, while conflict zones and failed states provide fertile ground for Iran to establish a foothold, such environments also create fertile ground for terrorist groups — such as ISIS — that could pose a serious threat to Iran itself. Therefore, it would be shortsighted for Iran to believe that its network of proxies is a suitable alternative to a regional security arrangement with Saudi Arabia and the other GCC countries.²⁵

Unlike Iran, Saudi Arabia tries to build ties with states in the first place, and to a lesser extent, with local groups, except for the complex Syrian case.

6. Oil: When it comes to natural resources, oil is a good example of studying the huge potential that can be achieved through reconciliation. Instead, Saudi Arabia and Iran use oil as a weapon in the conflict. The two countries own more than a third (35.5% according to OPEC) of the world's proven oil reserves. Undoubtedly, rivalry has negatively affected oil prices due to the damages wreaked on Abqaiq facility and the unstable supply routes across the Persian Gulf. Given the role of oil in both economies, creating a more stable environment for securing prices will have a significant impact on both countries and their social and economic development. From this standpoint, a range of other activities could emerge, including tourism, a central constituent of Vision 2030 that could benefit both countries.²⁶

In conjunction with Russia's war in Ukraine, proving that oil will continue to be a weapon of power in the near future encourages communication between the two countries. Controlling the oil market, rather than competing, positively affects the interests of the countries in the region. The United States and the European Union want to return to the nuclear agreement so that Iran increases oil exports, a move that would contribute to cutting oil prices. This negatively affects both Saudi Arabia and Iran as well as other oil-exporting countries.

7. The emergence of new generations: This factor is often overlooked by researchers. Saudi Arabia and Iran began to integrate their religious identities into their foreign policy in the 1980s. Ever since more than one generation has emerged. The current young generation (15-30 years) does not witness the starting points from which these problems emerged. Among these is Prince Muhammad bin Salman (38 years). Therefore, Saudi Arabia introduced reforms in line with the state of social openness and the implementation of Vision 2030. The rise of bin Salman contributes to reforming the Saudi national discourse, so that it transcends sectarian differences and seeks to unite the nation under the Saudi flag. This can also be seen in the infrastructure and economic development in Shia populated areas since 2015.²⁷ Moreover, it is demonstrated by the promise of the Saudi crown prince to purify Islamic heritage.²⁸

Iran also goes down the same path, as Shiism is no longer important to Iranian youth, who think that the country's political system is corrupt and must reform itself or be replaced.²⁹ They are not cognizant of or interested in the reason for the Khomeinist revolution, the motives for the establishment of the Velayat-e faqih (guardianship of the jurist) regime, or the drive for exporting the revolution. Iran's younger generation merely wants jobs, homes, a better future and putting an end to the reactionary laws that restrict their freedom and rights.³⁰

This is evidenced by the demonstrations in September 2022 that covered most of the 30 Iranian provinces, following the murder of the young Iranian woman of Kurdish origin, Mahsa Amini (22), after she was severely beaten during her detention by the morality police because she did not wear the hijab in the "correct Islamic manner." The regime responded with a crackdown and launched a campaign of arrests, but the intensity of the demonstrations increased when several Iranian women took off and burned their headscarves in solidarity with Amini. Men and youth chanted "Death to the dictator" in reference to the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, and "Khamenei is a murderer, his rule is illegitimate." Demands also escalated to include calls for a general strike throughout Tehran and the suspension of schools and universities. Dozens were killed and more than 1,200 arrested in the first 19 days of protests.

Protests against economic deterioration and corruption lasted for several months in late 2017 and early 2018 and during the period 2019-2021. Protesters called for addressing problems of poverty, the economy, and economic corruption, and demanded raising wages and pensions in particular. The government, the parliament and the judiciary promised to solve this issue more than once.³¹



These protests reinforce the Iranian regime's push to negotiate faster with Saudi Arabia in order to break the economic isolation of the regime at the regional and Islamic levels. As the return of the United States to the nuclear deal still falters, the regime needs to negotiate with Saudi Arabia to mitigate the ongoing sanctions.

III. Foundations of success of the Iranian-Saudi negotiations

Safeguarding the common interests of the two countries rests on foundations for reducing tension and easing the concerns of the two countries as listed in the structural factors affecting international relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Three key procedural foundations of progress in the consultations between the two countries are dealt with below.

1. Securitization:³² A pivotal requirement for improving relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the need to replace the security competition discourse with a less hostile one, which experts refer to as the process of de-securitization; i.e., “the attempt to break away from the threat.” This does not mean the end or full neutralization of the threat. Literature on “de-securitization”³³ shows ways of building security among states and relevant policy implications. There are three forms of de-securitization: the first is to cease treating an issue as a threat. The second is to manage the securitization process to avoid a feedback loop. The third involves the return of a previously securitized issue to the realm of ordinary politics. This reduces the intensity of the security dilemma that has been exaggerated over the past six years.

Apparently, since the announcement of the start of the consultations, the discourse of the elites has become less hostile than before as a result of the need felt by both countries for regional stability and local cohesion to achieve social and economic development. The Saudi crown prince said his government seeks to establish "good relations" with Iran and "we are working with our partners in the region to overcome our differences with Iran."³⁴

The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council said: "Iran's active presence in bilateral talks with Saudi Arabia, which is hosted by Iraq, stems from the Republic's principled strategy in the field of cooperation and friendship with its neighbors." ³⁵

2. Yemen as a basis for managing disputed files: Breaking down of Saudi-Iranian files is important during the transition to improving relations and creating a regional security framework. In order to build confidence and deescalate tensions across the Middle East, it is essential to resolve the war in Yemen, which arguably constitutes the most direct Iranian challenge to Saudi interests in decades. Saudi Arabia considers the Houthis an existential threat to its security. This threat is intensified by the weapons that Iran supplies to the Houthis, and the fact that they are an armed group that owes allegiance to Iran. The truce that began in April 2022 can constitute a basis through which the two countries can work towards ending the war and ensure the existence of a unified and sovereign Yemeni state.

However, Yemenis fear that Saudi Arabia will support the Houthis' survival as an influential and obstructive force during a transitional period in return for securing its borders, provided that they stop contacting the Iranians. This is a dilemma in itself, as it is difficult to measure the Houthis' distance from Iran or from the approach of the "Iranian revolution," given their involvement in the so-called "axis of resistance" and the remarkable Iranian and Hezbollah influential presence in the armed group. This scenario allows resuming diplomatic relations and reopening embassies by the two countries, Saudi concessions in Iraq, or support for economic development projects in Baghdad, which Iran considers crucial to its national security, and supporting the return of the Syrian regime to the Arab League.

At any rate, an Iranian/Saudi agreement on Yemen will not entail ending the war in Yemen or the Yemeni internal dilemma that escalated as the Iranian-backed Houthis took control of the capital, Sana'a, in September 2014 and the subsequent intervention of a coalition led by Riyadh in March 2015.

It also does not mean that such an agreement would be in favor of the allies of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - the internationally recognized government. Rather, it will certainly be in the interest of the Houthis, whose presence near Bab al-Mandab Strait is valued by Iran as part of its broader hegemonic presence in the region, even if the Houthi movement goes into a state of stagnation for some time. Iranian foreign policy is still based on "exporting the revolution," and this has not yet amended this goal in its constitution.

3. Economic Cooperation: Increasing the volume of trade between the two countries will help improve social and economic conditions. Saudi Arabia has an ambitious vision in the arenas of tourism and trade cooperation. Iran is a nation of 100 million people. It has suffered from sanctions for decades and will need economic cooperation and contacts with Saudi Arabia, and vice versa.

Conclusion

A permanent Iranian dilemma precludes agreement. In addition to issues of energy and cooperation in the tourism and energy sectors, these tracks are obstructed by the current regime in Iran, which thrives on "exporting the revolution" and wants the Gulf to be swept by its revolutionary change and to be part of its confrontation with the West.

The Saudi experience with agreements with Iran is also daunting. In 2001, Tehran and Riyadh signed a security cooperation agreement, which Saudi press at the time described as the end of a long and unproductive period of disagreements.³⁶ Signing this agreement was informed by regional needs in the context of the American war on terrorism and concerns about negative repercussions on the region. This agreement did not last long. The Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the officials responsible for exporting the revolution took advantage of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 to renew their campaign of Shiite domination. Tehran saw the war as an opportunity to reconnect with Iraqi Shiites and reversing the vision of Muhammad Khatami, the Iranian president who led efforts to reconcile with the GCC countries.

The same still holds today. Iran's Revolutionary Guard and the Quds Force are responsible for managing militias in the region and do not heed the orders of the national government in Tehran. Improving foreign relations with the Arab world was at the top of Hassan Rouhani's agenda, which exposed him to criticism by conservative opponents determined to undermine his approach. A more pernicious factor is the growing involvement of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the war in Yemen, which has frustrated the Rouhani government's attempt to reach out to Saudi Arabia. Qassem Soleimani considered Yemen strategically important, not because of Ayatollah Khamenei's support of the 20-year navy plan, which aims to hinder American efforts to patrol the seas.³⁷ Saudi Arabia is a major part of that vision. If Iran persists on exporting the revolution, the problems will continue. Moreover, if the security dilemma subsides for a while due to agreements, it will resurface again, which makes it difficult to reach a new regional security system in the near future.

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