

SAUDI-IRAN TALKS: RAY OF HOPE IN THE GULF

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Iran and Saudi Arabia - the two regional arch rivals, held talks in Baghdad in April 2021. Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi played a key role in bringing both the countries to the negotiating table. The talks were held between Khalid Al Homeidan, Chief of General Intelligence, Saudi Arabia, and Saeed Iravani, Deputy Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council.

On May 5, 2021, Iraqi President Barham Salih confirmed that Iran and Saudi Arabia have held talks "more than once" and added that the talks are still "ongoing."¹ Though details of the talks have not been made public, reports noted that the Yemen issue figured prominently in the discussions.²

The talks between the two regional rivals is a significant development which has the potential to change the geopolitics and security in the West Asian region. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan expressed hope that the "exploratory talks" will yield concrete diplomatic gains.³ Saeed Khatibzadeh, Spokesman for the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expressed his country's interest to resolve issues of conflict with Saudi Arabia and affirmed that de-escalation between the two was "in the interest of both nations and the region."⁴

The relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, marked by rivalry and competition, further deteriorated in the aftermath of the Arab unrest. They have been involved in a proxy war in regional conflict zones ranging from Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. Neither of them had till now showed any intent to engage with each other to resolve the issues between them.

In the aftermath of the execution of the Saudi Shia cleric Nimr Al Nimr by the Saudi government in 2016, the relations deteriorated even further. Nimr was a vocal critic of the Saudi government who allegedly instigated the anti-government protests in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Iran strongly condemned the execution of Nimr and warned that Saudi Arabia would "pay a heavy price" for his execution.⁵

Saudi Arabia, along with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), called Iran's reaction a "blatant interference in the Kingdom's affairs."⁶ Soon after, the Saudi Embassy in Tehran and the Saudi Consulate in Mashhad were ransacked by protesters. Infuriated with the attack on its Embassy and the Consulate, Saudi Arabia cut off diplomatic ties with Iran.

In the present context, engaging in talks is beneficial for both Iran and Saudi Arabia. In Yemen, while Saudi Arabia has been involved in a military campaign against the Houthis since 2015, the latter have been backed by Iran. The situation in Yemen continues to deteriorate even after several rounds of negotiations mediated by the UN.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are under international pressure for the deteriorating internal security and humanitarian situation in Yemen, especially so since President Joe Biden came to power. Saudi Arabia has been asked by the US to end its military offensive in Yemen. Earlier, in February 2021, Biden announced withdrawal of US military support to the war in Yemen.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are facing significant security and economic challenges as a result of their

regional policies. The Houthis have launched drone and missile attacks on a number of vital installations in the Kingdom including the ARAMCO oil facilities in Yanbu, Jazan, and Ras Tanura; Abha airport; military bases in Dammam, Najran and Asir, among other targets.

Saudi involvement in the military operations in Yemen has not achieved its intended objective of driving the Houthis out of capital Sanaa. Rather, the years of military operation in Yemen has been a drain on its national budget. Riyadh, therefore, would want an acceptable solution to the conflict and an honourable exit from Yemen. In the present context, talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia seem to be the most effective way to find a solution to the Yemeni conflict.

The Iranian economy is suffering badly from crippling sanctions imposed on the country since the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The Biden administration is insisting on Iranian compliance with the terms of the deal, before the US can lift sanctions. Iran is engaged in talks in Vienna with the remaining signatories of the JCPOA – the United Kingdom, Russia, France, Germany and China, to revive the nuclear deal. Iran, thus, faces dual pressure from the US on Yemen and the JCPOA.

Though both the countries have come forward to engage in talks, the fundamental differences between them on ideological, political and their national and regional security issues are massive. They perceive each other as a threat to their national security. Despite the Iranian assurance on the peaceful use of nuclear energy, Saudi concerns over the Iranian nuclear activity still remain high. Saudi Arabia believes Iran acquiring nuclear weapon would change the regional balance of power in the Middle East in favour of Tehran.

The presence of the US in the region has been another key issue of contention. Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries are reliant on the US for their security and US forces are present in all the GCC states. Iran, on the other hand, strongly opposes the US military presence in the Gulf region. Iran, instead, proposes a regional security architecture involving the countries of the region only without any involvement of the external powers. Saudi Arabia and its allies suspect that withdrawal of the US military from the region would lead to Iranian domination in the Gulf.

Besides Yemen, the Iranian and Saudi interests run counter to each other in other conflict zones such as Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. In Syria, Iran is a key factor for survival of the Bashar Al Assad regime while Saudi Arabia supports the opposition coalition. Iran has deeply engaged with the Shiite leaders and militias in Iraq and Lebanon, including the Hezbollah.

Riyadh has been engaging constituencies in these countries to counter the growing Iranian influence. The competition for regional supremacy between the two is not likely to end soon. It would be difficult indeed for them to reconcile the historical differences and long-term interests they have throughout the region.

Given the adversarial relationship between the two, achieving substantial progress would require long negotiations, as well as mutual trust and willingness to engage in dialogue on critical issues. The talks at present are in the embryonic stage, but the reconciliatory approach exhibited by them may de-escalate the tensions in the short and medium term which may help bring temporary peace and stability to the region.

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