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Iran - Saudi Arabia Diplomatic Reconciliation: Unraveling Reactions, Charting Effects, and Analyzing Global Consequences

On the 3rd of January 2016, Saudi Arabia terminated its diplomatic connections with Iran. This follows after the Kingdom executed approximately 50 people on January 2nd, including a Shi'ite religious leader, known as cleric, Nimr al-Nimr (Reuters, Saudi-Iranian ties: A history of ups and downs). al-Nimr was critical of the Saudi Royal family, fancied the Iranian model of rule and believed that Saudi Arabia ought to adopt a similar governance structure. The cleric was popular within the Shiite minority in the Kingdom and was appreciated by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who strongly condemned the execution of the Shia cleric (English, Khamenei). Numerous other Shiite leaders in the Muslim world condemned the act and saw the execution as an escalation of the rivalry between the countries (The New York Times, Iranian Protesters Ransack Saudi Embassy After Execution of Shiite Cleric). On the same day as the executions, the Saudi Embassy in Tehran was forcefully entered, ransacked, ignited and Khamenei warned of "divine vengeance" on account of the execution that occurred. The Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia during that period, Adel al-Jubeir, pointed out in a statement that Iranian diplomats, officials at their Embassy and Consulate must depart the Kingdom within 48 hours and did announce that the diplomatic relations between the countries had ceased (The Guardian, Saudi Arabia cuts diplomatic ties with Iran after execution of cleric). Following Riyadh's declaration, that diplomatic relations with Tehran were officially concluded, several allies followed the Kingdom, including Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (AA, Iran-Saudi Arabia ties: What comes next after 'smooth restart?').

Since the relations were severed, the first direct dialogue between the rivalry countries was held in April 2021, with Iraq, Baghdad as host. In the upcoming months, between April and September the following year, 2022, four more rounds of dialogues were held, which was primarily mediated by Oman and Iraq. A fifth meeting was scheduled in March, but was

unexpectedly withdrawn without providing an explanation from Iran. Subsequently, on April 21st, 2022, Iran and Saudi Arabia were able to successfully hold their fifth direct dialogue. Following this meeting, an adviser to the Supreme Leader of Iran, suggested the reopening of Embassies in Riyadh and Tehran. In the subsequent phase, China in particular played a decisive role for the diplomatic process to continue forward. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman, on December 9th of the same year (2022) for further talks. Shortly after, Ebrahim Raisi, the President of Iran embarked on a visit to China, where he met the Chinese president (Returns, Iran and Saudi Arabia: Key developments towards resumption of ties). It was through the good dialogues that led to, on March 10 2023, that Iran and Saudi Arabia decided to re-establish diplomatic relations, by reopening their Embassies within two months, which brought an end to a seven year rift (Al Jazeera, Iran and Saudi Arabia agree to restore relations). The dialogue has likely also increased mutual interest and understanding between the nations. The diplomatic interactions in which the leaders of Iran, Saudi Arabia and China were present, was an important advance in international relations, which has played a key role in solving this difficult equation of disputes.

A number of countries, mainly in the Middle East region, have reacted positively in connection with re-established diplomatic relations between the arch-rivals. In addition to the countries seeing a different view of Islam, and do act as proxy wars in various places in the area, nations such as Oman, China, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen's Houthis, Qatar, Egypt, Turkey and additional countries have in numerous avenues welcomed and supported this global development. Several nations have declared their voice and expressed that this will contribute to de-escalate tensions and fostering stability in the region.

In the OIC, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Iran at the present moment has the opportunity to show its side of the coin to spread peace in the region. The question is if Iran will stand up to promote its great power image in the Middle East or if they will maintain a calmer diplomatic tone in dialogues. The Foreign Ministry in Egypt did indicate the following: "Cairo hopes the agreement will contribute to easing of tension in the region..." and the Omani Foreign Minister, Badr Albusaidi stated that "This is a win-win for everyone and will benefit regional and global security..." (Al Jazeera, Iran, Saudi Arabia agree to resume ties: World reacts).

Simultaneously as the countries conveyed a friendly response to Iran and Saudi Arabia, a small handful of countries also chose to express gratitude to China, for their positive role which has been a prerequisite for the agreement to have taken place. As an example, the Palestinian Authority (PA) indicated the following: "The PA said it appreciated the positive role of China in contributing towards reaching the agreement, and hoped that the move would lead to stability and a positive climate in the region, according to Wafa." Additionally a diplomatic advisor to the United Arab Emirates stated that "... also welcomed the agreement and hailed China's role in reaching it" (Al Jazeera, Iran, Saudi Arabia agree to resume ties: World reacts).

As mentioned above, it is not certain that the various proxy wars that the countries are responsible for will cease. In addition to the war in Yemen, both countries have contributed with weapons and financial contributions to diverse groups in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria (Al Jazeera, What to expect after Iran, Saudi Arabia agree to restore ties). Simply owing to the fact that the parties have agreed to re-establish diplomatic relations, does not imply in practice that the countries have total reliance and faith in each other in the current economy, Foreign Policy and geopolitics. The rationale behind this is Saudi Arabia is cautious about entering into economic agreements with Iran as they want to avoid falling under US sanctions. There is also an opportunity on the other hand for Iran to try to increase its oil exports through talks within OPEC, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, which may be easier by having better relations with Saudi Arabia (AA, Iran-Saudi Arabia ties: What comes next after 'smooth restart?').

During Donald Trump's presidency, the American-Saudi relationship has been all around positive, despite a slight downgrade with President Biden. For Saudi Arabia, deteriorating relations with the United States could have consequences for the Kingdom (NBC News, U.S.-Saudi ties were especially close under Trump. Under Biden, that looks likely to change). The countries in between have energy agreements, cooperate in the military as the Saudis have received military support from the US. It would require a lot of consideration for the Saudis to get closer to Iran and China and with that fact also Russia, in order to instead potentially at the expense of losing the relationship with the United States.

An additional noteworthy element in this settlement of discussions is the fact that China has succeeded in establishing itself as a peace broker in the Gulf region / Middle East. This should be seen as a threat to the US as it cannot ignore China's role, actual actions and the presentation of its diplomatic creative problem solver globally. They too, have also been at the forefront of trying to resolve the Russia-Ukraine war. With this deal between Iran, China and Saudi Arabia, it may be a small wake-up call for Biden to get closer to Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia, lest they lose a major player in the Middle East and let them slide towards other major powers that are considered primary competitors of the United States. According to William F. Wechsler, which is the senior director of the Rafik Hariri Center and Middle East Programs at the *Atlantic Council*, describes it as following “We may now be seeing the emergence of China’s political role in the region and it should be a warning to US policymakers: Leave the Middle East and abandon ties with sometimes frustrating, even barbarous, but long-standing allies, and you’ll simply be leaving a vacuum for China to fill. And make no mistake, a China-dominated Middle East would fundamentally undermine US commercial, energy, and national security.”

Closing remarks and conclusion

The outside world has chosen that the two rivals' choice to re-establish diplomatic relations is largely positive. It is believed that it will contribute to a de-escalation effect, simultaneously it is expected to transform a more stable basis for a number of countries where proxy war is a persistent condition. How this will unfold in the upcoming years remains to be seen, but I do believe that this will lead to more positives than negatives for the affected countries and areas.

The fact that US interests may be threatened by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with the major powers Iran, China and Russia may have an effect in the long term more than in the short term. In the current war between Hamas and Israel, USA and Iran have two markedly different objectives as to who has the leading and right reason for defending themselves according to international law, taking hostages etc. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has been close to a rapprochement with Israel, which during this war has declined when they notably have condemned a number of Israel's actions (Al Arabiya, Saudi Crown Prince reiterates Kingdom’s condemnation of Israeli violations in Gaza).

Precisely what the agreement between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and China will reflect in reality is an aspect that time will reveal. In its sense, the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between two arch-rivals signifies with great conviction that these diplomatic breakthroughs will lead to more enhanced regional stability with the passage of time.

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