

Beginning of a new phase?

Iranian analysts speculate that the presence of two Arab country leaders, alongside high-level diplomatic representations, could signal a potential shift in Iranian-Arab relations. Iranian political analyst Hakam Amhaz weighs in, attributing the Arab turnout to the diplomatic efforts of Raisi's administration. He interprets it as a sign of "the openness of Iran's relations with all neighboring Arab and Gulf countries". Hussein Royvaran, director of the Society for the Defence of Palestinian Nation, shares this outlook. He elaborated on the significance of the Arab presence in Tehran to BBC Arabic, highlighting two connotations. The first is a "humanitarian and solidarity" gesture following the tragic death of Raisi and his delegation in a helicopter crash on May 19. The second connotation, he explains, is a "rational" indication, suggesting the potential formation of new "strong" relations between Tehran and certain Arab countries, with Tunisia taking the lead. He adds, "Given the vast geographical distance between Tunisia and Iran, Kais Saied's presence in Tehran for the first time since assuming office in 2019 could signal a new chapter in relations between the two nations." Abdelaziz Fournati, former editor-in-chief of the Tunisian newspaper *Al-Fajr*, concurs. Speaking to the BBC, he characterizes Saied's visit — one of his "few" foreign trips — as a display of Tunisia's "political courage" in forging ties with Iran. He pre-

dicts "a notable development in Tunisian-Iranian relations at all levels in the coming period".

Gulf participation

Relations between Iran and the Persian Gulf countries have been fraught with tension over the past four decades, dating back to the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Divergent political stances, coupled with economic and intellectual competition, have kept the two sides at odds. Analysts highlight that the Iranian-Gulf rapprochement was markedly evident in the attendance of high-level Gulf delegations at Raisi's funeral, with some delegations standing out as particularly noteworthy. The presence of Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif al-Zayani in Tehran — his first visit in 13 years — sparked questions about a potential thaw in relations between Manama and Tehran, which are currently in a state of diplomatic rupture. These speculations were further fueled by statements by Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, who remarked that "there is no reason to postpone the return of diplomatic relations between Bahrain and Iran," signaling Manama's intent to enhance ties with Tehran. The relationship between the two countries has been fraught with tension, marked by Bahraini accusations of Tehran meddling in its internal affairs. Manama also pointed fingers at Tehran for fueling protests against the ruling regime in 2011, claims which Iran refuted. In 2015, Bahrain summoned the Iranian ambas-



Iranian top-ranking officials receive Saudi Ministers Prince Mansour bin Miteb bin Abdulaziz (4th-R) and Prince Faisal bin Farhan (3rd-R) at the funeral ceremony for Iran's president and his accompanying team in Tehran on May 22, 2024. SAUDIGAZETTE

sador over allegations of interference in domestic affairs. Tensions escalated further in 2016 when Bahrain cut diplomatic ties with Iran, following suit with Saudi Arabia after Saudi diplomatic missions in Tehran and Mashhad were stormed. Amhaz holds the view that Bahraini-Iranian relations need time to mend and rebuild trust. He notes that relations between Manama and Tehran had already been on a gradual path to improvement following the Iranian-Saudi agreement last year. Amhaz shared with BBC News Arabic, "The visit of the Bahraini delegation to Tehran to offer condolences is a positive sign of Bah-

rain's desire to bolster relations." However, Bahraini political commentator Abdulla Aljunaid offered a different perspective to the BBC. He downplayed Manama's participation, stating that it fell within "diplomatic custom and nothing more". He drew a distinction between politics and humanitarian norms, asserting that "all countries attended the funeral not for the person of Ebrahim Raisi, but out of respect for the Iranian president who perished in a horrific accident." Aljunaid further elaborated, "Bahrain's participation was to offer solace to a people enduring a tragedy, a humanitarian gesture."

Observers noted the attendance of a high-level Saudi delegation at the funeral, which included notable figures such as Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, Saudi Ambassador to Iran Abdullah bin Saud al-Anazi, and Prince Mansour bin Miteb bin Abdulaziz, advisor to Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. Dr. Hesham Alghannam, director of the Security Research Center at Naif Arab University, remarked that the visit reflects the objectives of Saudi-Iranian reconciliation, aiming for a more sustainable and stable relationship. He pointed out that the interactions during the offer-

ing of condolences by the Saudi foreign minister indicated the presence of "features of a close and important personal relationship" with Iranian officials, which contribute to fortifying diplomatic ties. However, he opined that confidence-building measures might still require some time. Saudi-Iranian relations resumed in March of last year, following the announcement of a "historic" agreement brokered by China. This deal put an end to a seven-year rift between the two nations. Saudi journalist Mubarak al-Ati weighed in, stating that the presence of the Saudi delegation, and, by extension, the countries of the Gulf region, at Raisi's funeral underscores the Gulf states' commitment to "cooling differences and constructing more bridges of communication with Iran". It's also seen as a signal from Saudi Arabia of their intention to "build on what was achieved in building confidence over the past year," potentially translating into tangible progress in implementing agreements, particularly security-related ones, that emerged from the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation.

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Bahrain's three reasons for restoring relations with Iran



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OPINION

During his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, the King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa underlined, "Bahrain confirms the normalization of relations with Iran." He went on to say, "We had problems with this country in the past, but now there are practically no problems and we see no reason to drag our feet on the normalization of relations with Iran." We try to spell out why the king of Bahrain has officially called for a rapprochement with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Bahrain is a tiny country in the Persian Gulf region; it's a mere 786 square kilometers and plays host to fewer than 1.5 million folks, half of whom are foreigners. The majority of Bahrain's locals (about 60%) are Shiites. Bahrain's geopolitical significance stems from its strategic location — it's rubbing shoulders with two regional heavyweights, Iran and Saudi Arabia — and the fact that it plays host to the US Fifth Naval Fleet, the biggest American naval base outside its own shores. So, to sum it up, the significance of Bahrain lies in three things: its majority Shia population, its proximity to Iran and Saudi Arabia, and its role as a base for the US Navy.

Bahrain's Geopolitical Dance

Bahrain is the smallest member

state of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, and when it comes to foreign policy, it tends to go along with whatever Saudi Arabia and the United States are doing. Relations between Bahrain and the Islamic Republic of Iran were severed back in 2016, just a day after Saudi Arabia did the same with Iran.

In the following years, the increase in tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as between Iran and the United States, has had a negative effect on Tehran-Manama relations and widened the gap between the two countries. One of the reasons why Iran-Bahrain relations are influenced by the policies of other countries regarding Iran is that the volume of business relations between Manama and Tehran is at a small level. According to the report of the Research Center of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Iran's annual exports to Bahrain between the Iranian calendar years 1396 and 1400 (March 21, 2017–March 21, 2021) were 11.7, 12.1, 9.9, 8.4, and 9.7 million dollars, respectively. Only 0.02 percent of Iran's total exports in 1400 went to Bahrain, ranking the country 68th among Iran's trading partners. In turn, Bahrain took only 0.002% of Iran's imports that year. Here are three key factors that shed light on why Bahrain is keen on mending fences with the Islamic Republic of Iran:

Iran-Saudi détente

In the wake of the resumption of ties between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran on March 10, 2023, discussions turned to the potential resto-



Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif al-Zayani (2nd-R) shakes hands with his Iranian interim counterpart, Ali Bagheri Kani, during the former's trip to Tehran to pay respects to Iran's late president and his accompanying team on May 23, 2024. FOREIGN MINISTRY OF BAHRAIN

Diplomatic efforts of Raisi, FM

The flagship foreign policy strategy of Iran's government, helmed by Raisi, was to build bridges with neighboring, Islamic, and like-minded countries. Over time, this policy gained traction and wasn't just all talk and no action. 28 trips to 23 countries during the 34-month presidency of Raisi are a testament to that administration's commitment to mending fences and building bridges. Countries like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain came to recognize the genuine intentions and honest approach of the Iranian administration in restoring relations, even steering clear of taking hasty positions. As a result, tensions between Iran and its neighboring countries, including Bahrain, have cooled down. Now, the King of Bahrain is emphasizing that there's no point in dragging their feet when it comes to normalizing relations with Iran.

Waning US influence in Mideast

The third relevant factor is the declining American influence in the Middle East. With Joe Biden taking the reins in the US in 2021, ties with Saudi Arabia hit a rough patch, and Washington started to shift its focus to East Asia.

ration of relations between Bahrain and Iran. Just days after Riyadh and Tehran patched things up, Ahmed bin Salman Al Musallam, Speaker of Bahrain's Council of Representatives, held talks with a parliamentary delegation from the Islamic Republic on the sidelines of the 146th session of the international Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in Manama. He disclosed that Tehran and Manama had commenced negotiations aimed at reinstating passenger flights between the two nations. Adding to the momentum, Barbara Leaf, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Near-Eastern Affairs, briefed members of the US Congress on June 13 regarding the potential resumption of diplomatic relations between Bahrain and Iran.

As Iran and Saudi Arabia bury the hatchet and get closer, Bahrain has been shown to be keen to jump on the bandwagon. Despite not having official diplomatic ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran, Bahrain sent its foreign minister to Tehran to pay its respects to the late Iranian president and foreign minister. Abdullatif al-Zayani, Bahrain's foreign minister, jetted off to Tehran on Thursday to attend a ceremony honoring president Ebrahim Raisi and the late Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the foreign minister of Iran. In the same vein, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, the King of Bahrain, emphasized the importance of rekindling ties between Manama and Tehran during his meeting with Vladimir Putin.

Nevertheless, the US doesn't seem keen on adding fuel to the fire in the Middle East, and it's not against efforts to improve relations between countries in the region, including Iran. One reason for this shift is that the US doesn't hold all the cards anymore, and its ability to throw its weight around and strong-arm countries in the Middle East has taken a hit. Saudi Arabia's refusal to follow US policy on the Ukraine war, as well as its refusal to ramp up oil production, are tell-tale signs of the US losing its grip on the Middle East. With the US influence on the back foot, Bahrain now has more freedom to reconcile with the Islamic Republic. The King of Bahrain stress on restoring relations with Iran is a surefire sign that the policy of trying to make the Islamic Republic isolated and driving a wedge between Iran and Arab countries, which the US was hell-bent on, has fallen flat. The decline in American influence in the Middle East has also given Arab countries more wiggle room to call the shots in their foreign policy. Even with the untimely death of the Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi and his foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the Islamic Republic is still keen on mending fences with its neighbors. This was echoed by Iran's leader of the Revolution in a meeting with foreign dignitaries who flew to Tehran to pay their last respects. Iran welcomes the idea of restoring relations with Bahrain and even calls for expanding economic ties alongside political ones.

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