

Tehran-Manama détente benefits Mideast

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**INTERVIEW
EXCLUSIVE**

The presence of a high-ranking delegation from Bahrain at the funeral ceremony of the late president and foreign minister of Iran was a clear sign of the country's desire to get relations back on track with Tehran. Ties between the two neighbors were cut in 2016, following the severing of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Now, two years after Tehran and Riyadh patched things up and normalized their relations, Manama is making a U-turn toward Tehran's embrace. Iran Daily discussed the shift in Manama's approach with Jafar Qannadhashi, an expert on Middle East issues.

IRAN DAILY: How do you evaluate the policy of the late Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi in building bridges with its neighboring countries? Has it delivered positive results?

QANNADBASHI: The Raisi government's adoption of the "good neighborliness" policy was a fresh development in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. Surprisingly, the groundwork for the implementation of this strategy was swiftly laid as well. This policy yielded positive results for Iran in terms of reinvigorating and bolstering ties and collaboration with its neighbors. More importantly, this strategy also factored in economic cooperation. As a result, under the umbrella of this good neighborliness policy, Iran's economic relations and the quality of its trade exchanges with neighboring states improved. Previously, Iran had to source some of its needs from distant countries, whereas it could have procured them from neighboring nations such as Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and Turkey. The previous government's foreign policy approach made it possible to tap into the capabilities of neighboring countries for mutual benefit. This strategy was well-received, particularly in the Persian Gulf region and the neighboring Arab countries, and served Iran's interests.

Objectively, one of the most notable outcomes of Iran's good neighborliness policy was the normalization of its relations with Saudi Arabia. Has the revival of ties between Tehran and Riyadh facilitated the improvement of Tehran's relations with other Arab countries in the region?

Indeed, Saudi Arabia carries significant weight within both the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. So, Riyadh's policies, particularly in the realm of foreign and regional affairs, carry influence over the politics of other Arab countries. It was only natural that with the normalization of relations between Tehran and Riyadh, the groundwork would be laid for strengthening cooperation between other Arab countries and Iran. In effect, Iran's regional standing and the authenticity of its intentions in fostering peace and stability in the Middle East were demonstrated to other nations, especially Saudi Arabia, prompting them to turn towards Tehran and reconsider some of their previous misguided stances and policies. This shift in policy did not exclusively affect Iran as the Arab League opened its arms for Syria's return after some years.

Why has Bahrain, as one of the member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council that followed Saudi Arabia in severing diplomatic ties with Tehran, been slow to re-engage with Iran and restore relations?

The situation with Bahrain differs somewhat from that of other Arab countries. Bahrain is home to a significant Shia population, many of whom have grievances towards the government, and many of whom have been arrested and imprisoned. Additionally, the Bahraini government has established political relations with Israel, contrary to the wishes of its Muslim populace. As a result, the restoration of relations between Bahrain and Iran presents complexities. In my view, Tehran

should bring up some of the misguided policies and positions of Bahrain in its dialogues with Bahraini authorities and, among other things, call for the fair treatment of Shia in Bahrain.

The attendance of a delegation from Bahrain at the funeral ceremony of Iran's late president and late foreign minister was a clear indication of Bahrain's desire to

reinstating diplomatic ties with Tehran. What, in your opinion, are the reasons behind this extension of an olive branch and Bahrain's re-engagement with Iran?

Even before the burial ceremony of president Raisi, the Bahrainis had conveyed their wish to restore political relations with Iran. Again, one of the reasons for this involves Saudi Arabia. When the older brother normalizes relations with Tehran, the younger brother is likely to follow suit. Another factor is linked to the public sentiment in Bahrain and other Arab countries concerning the issue of Palestine and Israel. The people in these Arab countries stand with and support the Palestinian cause and oppose Israel, naturally pressuring their governments to do more for Palestine. On the other hand, Iran leads the way among Islamic countries in backing Palestine. So, Arab governments, especially those few that have established relations with Israel, develop ties with Iran to justify their positions to their citizens and strike a balance. A further reason could be that Bahrain and other Arab countries are concerned about the diminishing American support for them and the reduction of its presence in the region. As such, they see the benefit of fostering good relations with Iran as a prominent regional power.

Does the improvement of Bahrain's political relations with Iran carry economic benefits for both sides,



Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani (2nd-R) shakes hand with Iran's acting Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani in Tehran on May 23, 2024, during the funeral ceremony of Iran's late President Ebrahim Raisi.
FOREIGN MINISTRY OF SAUDI ARABIA

or do security and political considerations take precedence in the significance of these relations?

At any rate, political relations typically encourage the development of economic cooperation. In this case, however, Iran and Bahrain don't present significant economic opportunities for each other. Bahrain can easily meet its needs from other sources. It isn't a sizeable consumer market for Iranian goods, either.

Bahrain's significance in its membership in the Gulf Cooperation Council. It is the only member that has yet to normalize relations with Tehran, and this détente is the missing piece in Tehran's relations with the council. In essence, restoring Bahrain's ties with Iran strengthens cooperation between the council and Iran and can pave the way for new collective endeavors that will benefit the region. Overall, it's fair to say that the previous government's good neighborliness policy, coupled with Iran's regaining of its influential position in the region and the late foreign minister Amir-Abdollahian's proactive foreign policy efforts, laid the groundwork for the revival and enhancement of relations between Iran and its neighbors. The fact that Bahrain is taking steps towards Iran, albeit with some delay, should be viewed as a positive sign in this regard. It is hoped that the expanding regional cooperation will advance the interests of the people in the region within an atmosphere of peace and stability.

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A Bahraini woman holds a placard that says in Arabic, "No Sunni, No Shia, National Unity," while others around her wave the country's flag. A significant portion of Bahrain's Muslim population consists of Shia Muslims.