

Iran, Saudi Arabia; a strategic shift from ideological confrontation to shared interests

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ANALYSIS

Analysts from both major political camps have viewed Prince Khalid bin Salman Al Saud's visit to Tehran with skepticism, raising varied and conflicting concerns. Some question the timing and purpose of this visit, asking, "Why invite a Saudi prince at this juncture, particularly when concerns persist over potential ground attacks by Saudi- and Emirati-aligned opposition groups against the Houthis — strategic allies of Iran — and whether this aligns with regional interests?"

Others express reservations, asking, "Given Saudi Arabia's obstructive role in Iran's past nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 (the five permanent UN Security Council members — China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US — plus Germany), could welcoming their delegation now revive their negative influence or meddling in ongoing talks?"

Another group worries, "Might establishing relations at this level signal weakness or submission to external parties?"

Finally, some dismiss the very notion of engagement, citing decades of escalating rivalry and full-scale geopolitical competition between the two nations. They deem any effort toward neighborly relations as fundamentally misguided.

To address these critiques, several points merit consideration: First, Khalid bin Salman did not arrive in Tehran at the invitation of Iranian officials but as a messenger bearing an unprecedented letter from the Saudi monarch to Leader of the Islamic Revolution of Iran Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. Naturally, fostering ties is not a unilateral endeavor — it requires mutual goodwill. Iran, for its part, has shown no hesitation in receiving the Saudi defense minister, extending full diplomatic courtesy. Ayatollah Khamenei touched on "some of Iran's advancements", telling the Saudi defense minister in Tehran that the Islamic Republic is ready to share them with the kingdom.

When national resources and capital can be directed toward understanding and cooperation — yielding enhanced national security and significant, tangible achievements in energy and sustainable development with minimal cost—why choose a path of futile confrontation and tension?



Saudi Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman Al Saud (L) delivers the message of his father King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to Iran's Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei in Tehran on April 17, 2025.
● khamenei.ir

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Top Chinese diplomat Wang Yi, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani and Minister of State of Saudi Arabia Musaad bin Mohammed Al Aiban pose for pictures during a meeting in Beijing, China on March 10, 2023
● REUTERS

Mohammed bin Salman, called on the leader in Tehran on Thursday to present the message of Saudi Arabia's King Salman.

Second, in the context of the Houthi conflict with Israel and subsequently the United States, the current phase has seen minimal friction between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Unlike past cycles, Saudi Arabia has not directly intervened, nor have the Houthis — despite their capacity to target Saudi oil and gas infrastructure — opted for escalation. Instead, the Houthis have focused on striking deep into Israeli territory despite immense challenges, avoiding a direct US-Iran confrontation. This calculated restraint has, in fact, laid the groundwork for trust-building and strategic recalibration between these two pivotal powers in the Middle East and the Islamic world. Third, Saudi Arabia's posture today differs markedly from its

in current or future talks lack credibility and merit.

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regional equation. It now understands that pouring vast resources into this zero-sum approach has not only failed but also squandered unique opportunities.

Mediated by China, Iran and Saudi Arabia reached an agreement in March 2023, in the Chinese capital of Beijing to restore their diplomatic relations and re-open embassies and missions, seven years after their ties were broken off over several issues.

The two sides signed the Beijing Agreement aims to restore diplomatic ties and promote mutual respect for sovereignty and security between Iran and Saudi Arabia under the principles of the UN Charter, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and international law. Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic relations with Iran in January 2016 after Iranian protesters, enraged by the execution of prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr by the Saudi government, stormed its embassy in Tehran.

The two sides had held five rounds of negotiations in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad since April 2021.

Saudi Arabia's regional doctrine over the past two to three years has prioritized de-escalation and economic development over expanding political influence or asserting Islamic leadership — a strategy that previously drained resources and undermined its strategic economic and energy se-

curity interests.

Why choose a path of futile confrontation and tension when national resources can instead be directed toward understanding and cooperation? With minimal cost, this approach enhances national security while yielding significant, tangible achievements in energy and sustainable development. As the saying goes, "cutting losses wherever possible is itself a gain."

The years-long war in Yemen, with its billions squandered on an unwinnable conflict, served as a wake-up call for Saudi Arabia to recalibrate its policies toward its neighbors. The visit by the high-ranking Saudi official underscores Riyadh's seriousness about shifting its foreign policy strategy — opting for regional dialogue over rivalry and prioritizing shared interests, a stance mirrored by Iran's welcoming response. This marks a move toward balanced diplomacy over hostility, aligning actions with long-proffered rhetoric about Islamic unity.

This bilateral shift could establish a new paradigm in regional dynamics, extending beyond Iran-US negotiations to fundamentally reshape interactions among Middle Eastern neighbors and their engagement with external rivals.

The article first appeared on the Persian news website Asriran.



In this July 14, 2015 file photo, British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond (2nd R), US Secretary of State John Kerry (R), and European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini (L), talk to Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif as they wait for Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, for a group picture in Vienna, Austria.
● CARLOS BARRIA/AP

Khalid bin Salman, brother of Crown Prince and de facto ruler

stance during the JCPOA era (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) and the early Trump administration. Far from aligning with Israel, Riyadh now sends overt and subtle signals of solidarity with Iran in post-October 7 conflicts, positioning itself alongside Tehran rather than its adversaries.

Notably, Saudi Arabia was among the first nations to openly welcome and endorse the resumption of Iran-US negotiations. Given this shift, fears of Saudi obstructionism

public opinion. Additionally, stability, security, and the avoidance of war and heightened tensions along their borders — and within the heartland of global energy — remain paramount for the Saudis. After decades of ideologically charged rivalry with their traditional Middle Eastern competitor, vying for leadership of the Islamic world, and two decades of geopolitical competition, Saudi Arabia has come to recognize the futility of eliminating rivals from the

