

Iran And Saudi Arabia Are Finally Talking

Doug Bandow

April 29, 2021

Washington's fixation on Israel has undermined U.S. policy in the Middle East and helped make Americans global targets of terrorism. Perhaps even worse has been Washington's devotion to Saudi Arabia, essentially turning American troops into royal bodyguards and treating Iran as an enemy. Taking sides in the Sunni-Shiite struggle, a miniature cold war that sometimes runs hot, has needlessly entangled the U.S. in multiple violent conflicts.

However, recent discussions between Iranian and Saudi delegations at the encouragement of Iraq have generated hope for change. Although the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia denied that any talks had occurred, Saeed Khatibzadeh, spokesman for Iran's foreign ministry, suggested otherwise while refusing to comment directly.

He explained: "The Islamic Republic of Iran has always welcomed dialogue with the Saudi kingdom and considered it in the interest of the peoples of the two countries as well as regional peace and stability. [Iran] will continue to think this way." Moreover, an anonymous Iranian official confirmed the contact to Reuters: "This was a low-level meeting to explore whether there might be a way to ease ongoing tension in the region."

Antagonism between Tehran and the Kingdom is intense. But that shouldn't matter much to America, despite the tendency of U.S. officials to fawn over the ostentatiously corrupt Saudi royals. The regime's oil influence always was overstated, since the absurdly oversized princely class must sell petroleum to maintain its luxurious and licentious lifestyle, irrespective of the state of government-to-government relations. And there really is no other reason to support a dictatorship that earns the KSA a place among the world's ten most repressive nations.

The best the Pentagon could do on the security side was cite Riyadh as a supposed bulwark against Iran. However, that was an argument for leaving, not staying, since the U.S. had more than adequately armed the royals. Moreover, the Kingdom is not alone. The other Gulf states and Israel similarly worry about outside Iranian influence and can

collectively balance against Tehran. Egypt and Turkey also could offer more distant support. Riyadh should forge regional arrangements rather than expect U.S. protection.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia's objectives increasingly differ from America's. While the Trump administration offered the royals essentially unconditional support, the Kingdom, especially under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, proved to be the most reckless, radical, and destabilizing force in the Middle East.

The Saudis invaded Yemen, visiting murder and mayhem on one of the world's poorest nations. The KSA also kidnapped Lebanon's prime minister, backed jihadist forces in Syria and Libya, underwrote a coup and brutal dictatorship in Egypt, deployed troops to enforce Bahrain's dictatorship and suppress pro-democracy protestors, launched an economic blockade that was supposed to culminate in a military attack on Qatar, and tolerated domestic support for Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups until they turned on the royals. America's benefits in return? The U.S. military industrial complex banked substantial profits from arms sales. All hail the merchants of death!

Unfortunately, the Kingdom used its disproportionate influence to convince Washington to do its bidding. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned that the Saudis would fight Iran to the last American. That was borne out by the regime's pressure on Washington to act against Tehran. State Department cables quoted the Saudi ambassador citing "the King's frequent exhortations to the US to attack Iran and so put an end to its nuclear weapons program. 'He told you to cut off the head of the snake'." The ambassador stated that "working with the US to roll back Iranian influence in Iraq is a strategic priority for the King and his government." Moreover, the diplomat reported that the Saudi foreign minister "stated that the use of military pressure against Iran should not be ruled out."

Riyadh's manipulative behavior does not suggest that Iran's conduct is benign, of course, but Washington has spent decades making the problem worse. Indeed, the U.S. did much to turn Iranians into enemies—organizing a coup against their democratic government, aiding repression by the dictator who took control, endorsing a violent military crackdown on protestors, supporting Iraq's invasion of Iran, shooting down an Iranian airliner, arming Riyadh and other enemies of Tehran, and constantly threatening military action against Iran.

The better outcome for America and the region would be a regional balance of power. Although President Barack Obama was derided for telling the spoiled Saudi royals that they needed "to find an effective way to share the neighborhood" with Tehran, he was right. Washington could never trust the KSA, especially under the murderous Mohammed bin Salman, as a regional hegemon.

Riyadh's failure to accept a role for Iran ensures continuing conflict, in which, ironically, the Kingdom is unlikely to prosper. After all, how many Saudis want to die on behalf of absolute monarchy? Despite Saudi pretensions of grandeur, the Houthi-dominated Yemeni forces went from victims to aggressors and are now dropping

drones and missiles about Saudi Arabia, causing tremulous Saudi officials to whine about the unfairness of it all. The spectacle would be comedic if people were not dying. In contrast, Iran has demonstrated surprising resilience in the face of sustained U.S. pressure, relying on missiles for deterrence and proxy forces for asymmetric warfare.

The best counterbalance today may be the purely Realpolitik ties between Israel and the Gulf States. Better than simply allowing some sort of balance to emerge would be a negotiated *détente*. Most essential is tension reduction between Iran and the Kingdom, though the United Arab Emirates and Iraq, as well as the rest of the neighboring states, also should be involved.

A good starting point for peace between Tehran and Riyadh would be the apparent subject of the recent meeting: Yemen. Six years ago Saudi Arabia invaded to restore a puppet government. Iran got involved to bleed the KSA, its chief adversary. The Yemenis suffered desperately. The Kingdom should stop killing hapless civilians and exit the war. Tehran should join the U.S. in halting military assistance to the belligerents. Such a *modus vivendi* would both reduce indirect conflict between the two and deescalate the fighting.

Lebanon also apparently came up in initial discussions. Both nations have been deeply complicit in Lebanon's steady disintegration, Tehran more so because of its close relations with Hezbollah. The Lebanese state is in crisis and a competent, honest, nonsectarian government is desperately required. Jointly backing reforms necessary to keep the country afloat—otherwise both governments would suffer significant losses—might offer room for compromise.

In Iraq religion still matters more than money, hence Iran's continuing substantial influence. However, Iraqis don't want to be controlled by their neighbor and need outside financial support. A possible compromise beckons: militias allied with Tehran reducing their political role, and Saudi Arabia increasing its financial and economic backing.

Bahrain offers a very different challenge. There Riyadh works with the incumbent Sunni government, which brutally rules over an oppressed Shia majority. Iran has been denounced for intervening on behalf of the latter, but human rights groups affirm that Manama and Riyadh have treated Bahrain's Shiites atrociously. The Kingdom should encourage domestic reform, with Iran endorsing Shia outreach to the government.

Finally, there should be broader talks to advance recognition, representation, and cooperation by Iran and Saudi Arabia, which broke diplomatic ties in January 2016. Conversation is most important among adversaries seemingly ready to come to blows. Competition and confrontation won't disappear overnight. Still, reestablishing diplomatic links would aid the two governments in addressing problems before they reach crisis levels. Perhaps, over time, they could move toward peaceful coexistence even if not enthusiastic cooperation.

The best way for Washington to encourage this process would be to continue disentangling from the various Middle East conflicts. Riyadh's interest in peace noticeably increased when the Trump administration did not act after Iran used drones against Saudi oil facilities. It then occurred to the royals that they, not America, were responsible for their own future, and that prospects for peace would be enhanced by reducing tensions with Tehran.

Expanded diplomatic ties would not be a jump into the void. Even as Saudi Arabia and Iran sustained their cold war, Qatar cooperated with Tehran on a shared natural gas field and accepted aid when Riyadh blockaded its small neighbor, in part due to displeasure with its more open foreign policy. Oman and Kuwait also maintained relations with both Iran and the KSA and proved able mediators and negotiators.

The Middle East has lost much of its significance to Washington. America has become an energy exporter and the Soviet Union's collapse removed the most serious outside threat to the West's oil lifeline. Other consuming states are capable of securing their own access. Israel is a nuclear-armed regional superpower that has proved more than able to protect itself. Its greatest security threat is internal, resulting from decades of unconscionable mistreatment of its subject Arab population, which will eventually constitute a majority between the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan River.

The fact that the Saudis and Iranians are now talking of their own accord offers yet further evidence of the disaster known as the Trump administration's campaign of "maximum pressure" and demand for Iran's veritable surrender. Offering the royals absolute, unquestioned support encouraged the regime's worst tendencies—brutal repression at home, murderous warfare abroad, vicious competition with Iran. Riyadh attempted to impose its malign will on almost everyone. Only when the Kingdom realized it had to fend for itself did its tone shift dramatically.

The U.S. should step back, putting a premium on nations in the region finding a way forward to the stability and peace which Washington was never able to impose. The meeting between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a significant positive step. Their neighbors should push them to continue. The *Financial Times* reported that Baghdad,, which fears being caught between Iran and its adversaries, also has facilitated "communication channels" between Iran and Egypt and Jordan. Other nations should weigh in as well.

Washington, too, should lead by example, with the mutual return to the nuclear agreement and reestablishment of diplomatic relations—*severed in 1980*—with Iran. The *Financial Times* reported one official involved in the Riyadh-Tehran session said that "It's moving faster because the U.S. talks [over the JCPOA] are moving faster." The U.S. should work even faster. It has spent two decades in disastrous "endless wars" in the region. It now should try a bit of "endless diplomacy."

***Doug Bandow** is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.*