



THE KEY FACTOR IN THE SAUDI-IRAN DEAL: ABSOLUTELY NO U.S. INVOLVEMENT

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Ever since it pushed aside colonial Britain and France, the United States has prided itself on being the dominant outside power in the Middle East. That lofty image was shaken this past week by the surprise announcement that Saudi Arabia, a close U.S. partner, and Iran, a longtime enemy, had negotiated a normalization agreement on their own to restore diplomatic ties. The final meeting to conclude the agreement took place in the Chinese capital of Beijing.

The symbolism of the signatures being put on paper with the support of the preeminent U.S. adversary China without an American presence starkly underlined the failures of an approach to the Middle East that prioritized belligerence and confrontation over cooperation and impartiality. Few can deny that U.S. policy has ended up playing a destabilizing role in regional geopolitics.

For years, hawks have argued that U.S. military and political drawdowns from the Middle East risk generating a chaotic vacuum. What unfolded in Beijing appears to be the inverse. Rather than dissuading conflict, the American role as an enforcer for certain powers against others has incentivized them to pursue policies like military aggression and even apartheid out of a sense of assurance that an outside superpower will always have their back.

The scene of two Middle Eastern rivals negotiating peace on their own also strengthens the arguments of noninterventionist foreign policy advocates. These figures have long argued that the U.S.'s presence itself has been an accelerant for regional conflicts. In the end, an increasing reluctance on the part of the U.S. to get more directly involved in the region, rather than fomenting chaos, incentivized local powers to sort things out on their own — exactly what are now seeing with the Iran-Saudi deal.

For all the challenges that a post-American world may entail, U.S. hegemony in the Middle East has been an undeniably disastrous project both for Americans and especially the people of the region. By engaging in direct violence, as well as enabling its aggressive client states, the U.S. helped turn the Middle East into a nightmare of instability. Yet as U.S. influence recedes and other countries adapt to its absence, a more sustainable status quo may be ready to emerge.

SAUDI ARABIA IS a signal example. In years past, the erratic Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, or MBS, seemed eager for war with Iran, publicly vowing to take the proxy conflict between the powers directly into Iranian territory and comparing Iran's supreme leader to Hitler. These provocative statements were undergirded by an implicit assumption that the U.S. would be doing the heavy lifting in a future war and ensure Saudi Arabia's defense.

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Yet, in 2019, after years of the Saudi government's feting of President Donald Trump, following an Iranian attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq oil facilities, many Saudis were shocked to find that the U.S. government did not retaliate on their behalf.

The realization after the Abqaiq incident that Saudi Arabia was on its own and would never enjoy Israel-like security guarantees in Washington, painful as it may have been, ultimately

helped spur years of peace talks between Iranian and Saudi officials in Iraq and Oman that have now reached their conclusion in Beijing.

The Saudis may have preferred to see a destructive U.S. war against Iran so long as they were provided their own American security umbrella to shield them from the blowback — a classic moral hazard. With that prospect off the table, peace gradually became the more attractive option.

“When Trump didn’t retaliate for the Abqaiq attack, that sent shockwaves throughout the region. If the U.S. had continued to show a willingness to fight for Saudi Arabia and uphold Saudi security, MBS never would’ve gone down path of diplomacy in first place,” said Trita Parsi, president of the D.C.-based realist foreign policy think tank the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. “This shows how U.S. military power has actually become an obstacle to security and stability in the region. As long as MBS felt that he could hide behind U.S. military power, that was more attractive to him than going down the difficult road of diplomacy with Iran.”

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Saudi Arabia and Iran still have serious obstacles to overcome to achieve a lasting détente. The normalization deal has a two-month implementation period before the return of ambassadors to their respective capitals, allowing time for outside parties, including Israel, which has objected loudly to the agreement, to act as spoilers. The two countries remain on opposite sides of the conflict in Yemen, which is still unresolved and poses a serious security threat to Saudi Arabia, while Iran is facing domestic unrest that has humiliated its government and thrown its economy into turmoil.

The deal includes a mutual agreement by the parties to stay out of each other’s domestic affairs — a clause that will also require some major course corrections. Saudi Arabia, according to a report in the Wall Street Journal, has indicated it will modify the coverage of Iran International, a Saudi-funded Persian-language television station that has become a favored outlet for anti-regime Iranian political activists, as well as, allegedly, Israeli intelligence.

Despite these challenges, if the agreement between them holds, it would put Saudi Arabia outside of the firing line of a possible U.S.-Israeli campaign to destroy Iranian nuclear facilities. Following the U.S. decision to violate the Iran nuclear deal — or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, known as the JCPOA — the likelihood of armed conflict is looking higher than ever.

Saudi Arabia’s agreement with Iran appears to be an attempt to stay out of the fray in case a war comes to pass. Yet it also signals the U.S.’s own relative isolation in the region, outside of its lockstep relationship with Israel, as it presses forward with a campaign to isolate Iran that even its own partners have begun to balk at.

“The Saudi-Iran agreement comes at a time when there is widespread acceptance that the JCPOA is not going to be revived and is effectively dead,” said Kristian Ulrichsen, the Middle East fellow at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy. “The Biden administration is

running of patience with Iran and its statements are becoming increasingly hawkish. But China moving in now and successfully engaging with the main regional antagonists suggests that the rest of the region does not share any U.S. or Israeli desire for escalation.”

U.S. OFFICIALS HAVE said time and again that they will not be turning attention away from the Middle East. Yet the country’s track record in the region has not been a good one.

Americans have suffered military casualties and terrorist blowback because of elite-driven interventions. The civilian population of the region has suffered more gravely — with millions killed, maimed, or displaced by American wars, immiserated under U.S. sanctions regimes, or repressed by U.S.-backed dictatorships and military occupations.

Now it seems like the U.S. may have exhausted its runway for pursuing similarly disastrous adventures in the future.

“The U.S. foreign policy establishment is not good at learning — it takes a lot of suffering, and sometimes killing and dying, for them to learn a lesson,” said Justin Logan, an expert at the Cato Institute. “If you look at the people involved in making U.S. policy for the region, many of them are still maximalists. But things have still improved, and we are not going to see a repeat of the Iraq War anytime soon.”

Although it cuts against the interests of a small yet vocal minority of D.C.-based hawks, a pivot from the region would be a welcome sign for many in the wake of years of military and diplomatic failures.

Recent farcical U.S. diplomatic agreements like the Abraham Accords did not entail any actual cessation of active hostilities and were largely based on U.S. concessions rather than any made by the involved parties. Unlike those deals, the Chinese-brokered rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran represents a genuine diplomatic accomplishment in which two rival powers were convinced to make compromises in the name of peace.

The U.S.’s extreme stances on various issues have not done it any favors. On the Israel-Palestine conflict, for instance, the U.S. makes no secret of its slanted position. And on issues like the Iran nuclear deal, the U.S. stance was erratic, violating the agreement shortly after it was signed. Outside powers like China have proven able to exploit the low bar of U.S. diplomatic performance in the region and position themselves as preferred mediators.

“In order to be able to serve as an effective mediator, you need to have a reputation of being fair. The U.S. has been clear that it does not want to be fair — it has not been impartial between Israelis and Palestinians, and it wouldn’t be impartial between Saudi Arabia and Iran,” said Parsi of the Quincy Institute. “This stance has disabled its ability to be an effective broker and peacemaker in the region. Now that other states are stepping into the vacuum to play that role, we are really going to start to see the costs of pursuing a policy that is explicitly perceived as biased.”

The Middle East is sufficiently far away from the U.S. that fomenting continued chaos through military interventions and abysmal diplomatic endeavors there may actually be politically

acceptable in Washington. With rising powers taking a role in the region and the U.S. grappling with other challenges, a healthier status quo may be given space to emerge.

As Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud acknowledged after the announcement of the normalization deal with Iran, “The countries of the region share one fate.”