

The insignificance of Iran and Saudi Arabia resuming diplomatic relations

Glen Segell (DPhil, FRGS)

(Professor at the University of Cambridge, and Visiting Professor and Research Fellow in the Department of Political Studies and Governance at the University of the Free State, South Africa. He is also Research Fellow at the Ezri Center for Iran & Gulf Studies, University of Haifa, Israel, and Editor of The Middle East Tracker and The London Security Policy Study. He serves as an Executive Advisory Board Member of the International Political Studies Association Research Committee on Armed Forces and Society. He holds the rank of Brigadier-General (Reserves) and is an expert for NATO STO)

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publication date: 25 March 2023

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If one were to undertake a hypothetical survey on the streets of the Middle East asking the question “What is the problem between Saudi Arabia and Iran?” the answer could be “The rivalry is primarily a political and economic struggle exacerbated by religious differences. Sectarianism in the region is exploited by both countries for geopolitical purposes as part of a larger conflict.”

One example of this rivalry was manifest when diplomatic relations between the two states were suspended from 1987 to 1990 and for seven years after the execution of Nimr al-Nimr and the 2016 attack on the Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran.¹ On 10 March 2023 China announced that it had brokered a resumption of diplomatic relations.² But is this significant?

The significance depends on a second question in the hypothetical survey and that is “What is the biggest challenge regarding Iran?” The answer could be “The challenge is to ensure that Iran doesn’t enrich to weapons grade uranium; and if it does, then to ensure it doesn’t manufacture a nuclear device.”

¹ Mamadkul, J. (2014). Saudi Arabia–Iran’s foreign policy crisis: A case study of execution of Saudi Shia Cleric Shaikh Nimr al-Nimr. *Rangsit Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 75.

² Patrick Wintour, “Iran and Saudi Arabia agree to restore ties after China-brokered talks,” *The Guardian*, 10 March 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/10/iran-saudi-arabia-agree-restore-ties-china-talks>

One inevitable consequence of pointing to the dangers of a severe escalation or a worst-case scenario is to point to the dangers of the outcome. That means that even though Saudi Arabia and Iran have resumed diplomatic relations, it is insignificant. The Iranian nuclear and missile dangers remain, and Iran continues to be engaged in regional interference.

The worst-case scenario leading to Battle with Iran

In the Middle East rivalries and hostilities last longer than friendships. Friendships are ad hoc or temporary to suit a specific purpose between specific individuals or states. An inclination of common interests is typical of such friendships. The strongest allies are within the same family or family-clan structure of a *hamula*. The origins and cause of rivalries and hostilities may be overlooked temporarily but will resurface.

An example of temporal friendship was the announcement of the resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran brokered by China. At the top of the list of the common interests of these three states is economics. Even though they are resuming diplomatic relations there can be no doubt that the beliefs and daily practices of Sunni and Shia Islam are irreconcilable. The friendship will last no longer than the immediacy of the economic needs. Neither the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia nor the Ayatollah in Iran will be signatories to the resumption of diplomatic relations.

Examples of the longevity of rivalries and hostilities and so the insignificance of the resumption of relations can be seen from separate events that took place in the months leading up to the announcement on 10 March. While the representatives of China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia sat at a triangular arrangement of tables in Beijing, Saudi officials reiterated in various fora that “all bets are off” if Iran acquires nuclear weapons.³

To reinforce that point Saudi Arabian Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman announced the Kingdom intended to advance its plans to develop a front-end nuclear fuel-cycle infrastructure.⁴ The “right to enrich” for energy purposes is enshrined in international convention. It would also be a step toward matching the nuclear program of Shia rival Iran.

³ Reuters, “Saudi foreign minister: 'All bets off' if Iran gets nuclear weapons,” 11 December 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-foreign-minister-all-bets-off-if-iran-gets-nuclear-weapon-2022-12-11/>

⁴ Caggiano, L. (2023). Saudi Arabia Aiming for Complete Nuclear Fuel Cycle. *Arms Control Today*, 53(2), 33-33.

The catalyst to achieve a “balance of capability” was an IAEA report that Iran was enriching uranium at ever-higher levels.⁵ Enriching uranium is the key factor in how quickly Iran could produce a nuclear weapon. The threat of such capability is heightened by Iranian bellicose threats against the West and Israel.

Iran might well have mended fences with Saudi Arabia diplomatically, but this hasn't included others. In January joint military exercises between the US and Israel were undertaken sending a message to Iran. More than 180,000 pounds of live munitions were fired.⁶ In February, the CEO of the BOEING Corporation visited Israel. He confirmed that Israel would be purchasing four KC-46 refueling tankers with an option of delivering four more in the future and 25 new and sophisticated fighter jets, F-15 IA.⁷ Such capability could only have one target in mind, that being Iran.

Israel doesn't stand alone. In February European Union imposed further restrictive measures against 32 individuals and two entities in Iran responsible for human rights violations and urged it to cooperate with the IAEA on uranium matters⁸. In March US Army General Michael Kurilla, commander of Central Command (CENTCOM), confirmed to Senate lawmakers that Iran is now able to produce an atom bomb in less than two weeks.⁹ Tensions between the US and Iran have increased with reports about Iran supplying drones to Russia for use in the Ukraine war.

⁵ Stephanie Liechtenstein, “UN report: Uranium particles enriched to 83.7% found in Iran,” AP News, 1 March 2023 <https://apnews.com/article/iran-nuclear-uranium-enrichment-germany-israel-c9b3669a7721bd8929d465117c81b70f>

⁶ Dion Nissenbaum, “U.S., Israel Send Message to Iran With Biggest-Ever Military Exercises,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 January 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-israel-send-message-to-iran-with-biggest-ever-wargames-11674762881>

⁷ Jonathan Regev, “Israel boosts cooperation with Boeing, purchases 25 advanced fighter jets,” *i24 News*, 20 February 2023, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/defense/1676891563-israel-boosts-cooperation-with-boeing-purchases-25-fighter-jets>

⁸ Council of the EU Press Release 20 February 2023, *Iran: EU imposes further restrictive measures against 32 individuals and two entities responsible for human rights violations*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/20/iran-eu-imposes-further-restrictive-measures-against-32-individuals-and-two-entities-responsible-for-human-rights-violations/>

⁹ “Statement For The Record General Michael “Erik” Kurilla Commander, US Central Command Before The Senate Armed Services Committee On The Posture Of US Central Command,” 13 March 2023, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kurilla_SASC_Posture_Final_141200March2023.pdf

Even if the US and EU have any qualms, Israel doesn't. In March Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's is undertaking short visits to Europe capitals (Rome, Bonn, London) to convey the message that Israel would act alone against Iran if essential to its security needs.¹⁰

The dangers of the outcome

If 2023 is the year for military strikes against Iranian uranium enrichment and missile program sites, then the dangers of the outcome need to be assessed. These are ongoing assessments and on face value have been undertaken for many years with little change in the analysis.

Iran may well lose the battle and have its uranium enrichment facilities destroyed but it might also come out stronger. The Ayatollah regime may remain in power after precision strikes by the US and Israel. Iran could opt to absorb the blows and do nothing or only carry out limited (symbolic) retaliatory strikes against Western naval targets in the Persian Gulf for example.

By Iran not escalating in response to such precision strikes, Washington would be left without any justification to strike Iran again. Washington would not be willing to try a regime change by invading Iran. Experiences from Iraq and Afghanistan have indicated that such attempts are not productive or successful.

Furthermore, precision strikes on the enrichment sites lasting less than a few hours are no guarantee that it would lead to the Iranian population rising against the Ayatollah. While there have been unrest, demonstrations and riots in Iran, no-one has leverage over Iran's elite or wider society to be able to influence or determine where there would be a popular revolution. That would need a complete change in the social and religious structure.

That means that while Iran might have its uranium and missile facilities destroyed the longer-term threat would remain. That threat is from Iran's regional interference using proxy networks. These comprise complex and multi-layered inter-personal and inter-organizational links. They are undergirded by a diverse range of power centers in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Gaza strip. Linked to these is the key nexus of the Shiite faith. Iran builds social and religious networks centered on the Shiite faith and support for Iran's theocracy. These are evident in Africa and Latin America for example the Hezbollah organization.

¹⁰ Ron Ben-Yishai, "The Diplomatic Agenda behind Benjamin Netanyahu's European Travels," *Mosaic Magazine*, 17 March 2023, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/israel-zionism/2023/03/the-diplomatic-agenda-behind-benjamin-netanyahus-european-travels/>

Conclusions

All indications are that Israel and Iran are edging closer to battle, but conflict isn't inevitable, and the outcome is uncertain. The present moment is rife with potential pitfalls. At the fore of any analysis is to ascertain whether the danger from Iran today is truly greater than it has been in recent years, or whether the threat of battle is being overstated for political ends. Maybe there is truth to both views - The posturing is part of the strategy. The same could be said about Iran and Saudi Arabia resuming diplomatic relations – Is it significance or only a yardstick of the insignificance of secular perceptions given the irreconcilable rivalry between Sunni and Shia Islam?