

## SAUDI-IRAN RAPPROCHEMENT AND CHALLENGES FOR PAKISTAN

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### **Abstract**

*Saudi-Iran relations have been continuously evolving, with regional and global implications. Though religious differences make up a large part of this relationship, it is not all. Multiethnicity, Arab versus Persian domination, and divergence of interests of regional and extra-regional players are also significant. The two regional heavyweights have driven the neighbouring states towards alliances of varying natures. It has repercussions for Pakistan due to its security, economic concerns, and religious and sectarian fault lines. Opportunely, the current political environment is developing prospects to rebuild relations. After unfinished rapprochement efforts by Pakistan, Iraq has recently made the latest endeavour of arbitration. This paper analyses the effects of Saudi-Iran contention on Pakistan and the scope and implications of the current rapprochement effort. Primarily, the qualitative method has been used, and it has been established that due to the complexities of a relationship, achieving peace is not as easy as it appears. Also, from Pakistan's perspective, escalation levels should ideally remain below the threshold of a dispute necessitating precise positions and above a minimum threshold of complete peace to keep Pakistan's security-related relevance. Therefore, diplomatic efforts should be limited to de-escalating conflicts rather than mediating them.*

**Keywords:** Rapprochement, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq.

**I**n recent years, the tense relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran and their difference of interests, vying for influence over the Middle East, have become strategically important. The competition between both states has significantly affected regional states like Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Syria, Yemen and Qatar. The extent of this contention fluctuates from mere distorting each other's role in global politics to proxy wars. Pursuing a nuclear program is considered undesirable behaviour of Iran, whereas Iran views Saudi Arabia as an ally of the US to further its interest in the region. The Gulf is, therefore, an arena where shared interests regulate bilateral tensions.<sup>1</sup>

Saudi Arabia and Iran have been driving neighbouring states towards varying alliances. Pakistan has high stakes in the Saudi-Iran relationship as tensions between the two vital Islamic states have often put the country in a difficult spot to maintain a balance.<sup>2</sup> Although Pakistan maintains neutrality, sustaining this approach has been

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problematic against intensifying Saudi-Iran rivalry.<sup>3</sup> Pakistan always endeavours to play an essential role in bringing both states to the table. In retrospect, just four years ago, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ruled out the chances of any settlement avenues with Iran. However, the recent reconciliatory efforts from both sides revealed that their conflict could be resolved through negotiations. In 2019, Pakistan's leadership also showed intentions for mediation efforts by visiting Iran and Saudi Arabia. Recently, under the mediatory role of Iraq, Saudi and Iranian officials have held talks to improve relations. If successful, these talks could lower the temperature of several conflicts across the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> It is believed that some rapprochements between Saudi Arabia and Iran will likely address Pakistan's challenge in maintaining balanced diplomatic relations in the region.

This paper, therefore, analyses the effects of Saudi-Iran contentious relations on Pakistan and the scope and implications of the current rapprochement efforts carried out since 2015. Primarily, the qualitative method has been used, and it has been established that due to the complexities of a relationship, achieving peace is not as easy as it appears. Also, from Pakistan's perspective, escalation levels should ideally remain below the threshold of a dispute necessitating precise positions and above a minimum threshold of complete peace to keep Pakistan's security-related relevance. Therefore, diplomatic efforts should be limited to de-escalating conflicts rather than mediating them.

## **Pakistan Relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran**

The Saudi-Iran relations are complex and directly affect Pakistan's relationship with both states. Pakistan always tries to find a middle way to reduce the tension in the region; however, there are certain challenges that Pakistan is facing amidst regional powers' rivalry. The Saudi-Iran rivalry has caused the division of the Middle East into Arab and non-Arab blocks, which poses severe foreign policy restraint on Pakistan, particularly maintaining neutrality between the two flanks.

Pakistan has a friendly relationship with Iran being a strategic imperative. However, straddling miscreants on the border occasionally disturb their good relations. Both countries have shown their concerns on the issue; Iran has complaints regarding the activities of anti-Iran miscreants, whereas Pakistan has raised concerns about the presence of Indian intelligence elements in Iran to foster troubles in Balochistan. Besides, there are several avenues to be explored in the trade and energy sectors, as Pakistan's western trade link, which passes through Iran, holds significant ground. However, due to the US strained relations with Iran and imposed sanctions, Pakistan remained undemonstrative in economic ties with Iran. For example, Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline agreement was signed more than two decades ago, but India abandoned the project due to US pressure, thus creating problems for Pakistan.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is vital for Pakistan because of its religious affiliations and historical and political relations. Other important matters are oil

imports from Saudi Arabia, the Pakistani diaspora in the Middle East, and Kingdom's financial assistance to Pakistan. Apart from aid from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan also relies on remittances from its workforce in GCC states, with a significant portion from the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia has always supported Pakistan in times of crisis, which is duly reflected in Pakistan's foreign policy.

Pakistan, with a majority Sunni population, is also home to one of the largest Shia populations in the world. However, the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran is tainted to fuel societal sectarian appeals. During the 1980s and 1990s, sectarian violence between Shias and Sunni militants started and was further nourished by the support given to such outfits by external players. Fear still exists that Saudi-Iran turf can provoke radicalized elements again as the row in the Middle East may be exploited by certain religious-militant organizations to fulfill their radical agendas, giving impetus to domestic extremism. Moreover, Iran-Saudi opposing foreign policies also found their crossroads in Afghanistan's decades-long turmoil, with spillover effects on Pakistan.

### **Pakistan's Neutrality and Rapprochement Efforts**

While establishing the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) in 2015, Saudi Arabia's request for military support initiated an unprecedented debate in Pakistan, as Iran did not perceive it positively. The coalition contained 41 Muslim nations with a mission to combat ISIS in Iraq and Syria and to combat militancy across Northern and Western Africa. However, according to media reports, the operational scope of the alliance could be expanded to include fighting against Houthi rebels.<sup>5</sup> Pakistan clarified to Iran that the coalition is neither against Iran nor will Pakistan be part of any anti-Iran activity. The situation became complex when Saudi Arabia enlisted Pakistan as a coalition member in its Yemeni war. Pakistan responded that the degree of Pakistan's participation would only be established when the alliance's objectives were shared; however, it assured Saudi Arabia of full support in case of any direct attack on the Kingdom. Pakistan's resolve to refrain from participation in IMCTC was short-lived, and it later agreed to join. However, Iran did not openly criticize Pakistan's decision to join IMCTC. In 2018, Pakistan also sent combat troops to Saudi Arabia, confirming that they would not be used beyond Saudi borders.

Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia further deteriorated after the execution of prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr in 2016 by Saudi Arabia. During protests, Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran and Mashhad were ransacked by angry mobs, resulting in severing diplomatic relations.<sup>6</sup> Pakistan remained cautious, carefully responding to events but did not take a position on the execution of Nimr and condemned the burning of the Saudi embassy in Tehran. In 2016, when OIC condemned Hezbollah during its Istanbul summit,<sup>7</sup> Pakistan followed the trend despite its desire to avoid taking sides. On various occasions, international efforts have been made to peacefully resolve differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In the past, Oman's Sultan Qaboos played a pivotal role in conveying messages between the two countries. In October 2017, Switzerland came up with an arrangement through which it could

represent Saudi interests in Iran and Iranian interests in Saudi Arabia. Pakistan has been putting in efforts, albeit without much success, owing to its security and diplomatic challenges. However, such efforts have recently shown some positive trajectory.

In October 2019, the speaker of Iran's parliament supported starting a dialogue with Saudi Arabia by expressing that an "Iranian-Saudi dialogue could solve many of the region's security and political problems."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in 2020, Saudi Arabia and Turkiye agreed to resume bilateral ties.<sup>9</sup> In an interview in 2021, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated that Saudi Arabia is working with their regional and global partners to find solutions to these problems.<sup>10</sup> While speaking to *The Atlantic*, the Crown Prince also stated: "Iran and Saudi Arabia are neighbours and will always remain neighbours. It is better if we resolve our issues with Iran. We have had four rounds of talks with Iran."<sup>11</sup> During an interview with the *Financial Times* in 2021, US State Secretary Anthony Blinken stated that the US did not directly encourage the Saudi-Iran talks but viewed them as a positive development.<sup>12</sup> Earlier, in an interview with *Al Jazeera*, Iranian Foreign Minister Abdollahian expressed that "relations between the two countries would return to normal whenever the Saudi side wishes. Iran is ready and welcomes the reopening of the embassies and consulates."<sup>13</sup>

Pakistan has always been equidistant when it comes to Iran and Saudi Arabia. In 2016, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan considered the mediation between the two countries a sacred mission. Such mediation in the past bore fruits and was acknowledged by Tehran and Jeddah. Recently, Pakistan again attempted to mediate between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In October 2019, Pakistan's Prime Minister visited Iran and Saudi Arabia to initiate dialogue between the two rivals. Iran reassured Pakistan of its willingness to engage with Saudi Arabia; however, Pakistan's shuttle diplomacy could not produce a clear road map. Nonetheless, a flurry of visits by Pakistan's leadership to Saudi Arabia and the UAE suggested that there might be some breakthrough in the diplomatic efforts initiated by Pakistan. Pakistan has kept a clear stance over the Middle East crisis by not taking sides and continuing its mediation efforts. However, increased regional tensions mean that Pakistan's efforts would more likely be limited to de-escalating conflicts between Riyadh and Tehran rather than mediating them.<sup>14</sup>

In May 2021, Pakistan was once again poised to play its role in seeking rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran when Pakistan's Foreign Minister visited Iraq.<sup>15</sup> Though no significant breakthrough was expected, this rapprochement positively impacted Saudi-Iran reconciliation. Lately, Iraq has been influential in resolving regional disputes, especially when Iranian and Saudi officials began talks in Baghdad. Iraqi government aimed to establish an atmosphere for resolving outstanding problems,<sup>16</sup> whereas the Iranian President acknowledged Iraq's role in resolving regional disputes.<sup>17</sup> In April 2022, during a high-level meeting in Baghdad, the two sides settled on practical steps to improve relations, laying down the way for future talks, including an upcoming session in Oman. The talks were, however, deferred due to the mass execution of Shiite activists by Saudi Arabia in March 2022. In Baghdad talks, Saudis regretted Iran's role in Yemen and emphasized that Tehran should play a more positive

role. On April 1, 2022, the UN announced a ceasefire in Yemen,<sup>18</sup> which Iran welcomed; however, they highlighted that ceasefire should be a step towards sustainable peace.

## **Geostrategic Environment of the Middle East**

Previously, the situation in the Middle East got worse when a missile was fired from a US drone killing Quds Commander General Qassem Soleimani at Baghdad airport. The attack was directed in response to the killing of a US contractor and resulted in protestors' raging into the US embassy in Baghdad. This event brought the US and Iran to the brink of a conflict. Provoked Iran reacted through missile attacks on Iraqi bases housing US troops but with a well-calculated act of not engaging US troops; it gained an upper edge on moral grounds until Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps admitted the downing of a Ukrainian plane in Tehran. The situation cooled down for the time being after the US decided not to respond militarily.

Iran's missile strike against US bases and Iraq's parliament resolution to oust US troops from the country appeared to be a victory for Iran. Earlier, the killing of General Soleimani, without much escalation from Iran, was also a significant military success for President Trump in a crucial election year. Both sides, therefore, saved face by claiming their respective victories. Analysts believed the US pushed for an Arab alliance to coerce Iran, keeping the situation below the threshold of a military conflict.<sup>19</sup> However, subsequent developments in the region with offers for dialogues with Iran suggested toning down the anti-Iran stance.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has also become apprehensive about the US reassurance as a security provider. US Pivot to Asia policy, its decreasing dependence on the Kingdom's oil and the likelihood of revival of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) have sparked a more assertive Saudi foreign policy. Also, the US report on Jamal Khashoggi's murder and declining external support for the Yemen war imposed implications on Saudi Arabia. Therefore, US disengagement left Saudi Arabia vulnerable to various threats, thus looking for alternate alliances. The US disengagement in the region is evident in the pulling out of troops from Afghanistan, declining US military assurances to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, and Iraq, and an increased emphasis on Russia and China. There are reasons for the shift in US policy, especially given the recent tragic history of US involvement in the region, but it also brings risks.<sup>20</sup> Resultantly, regional diplomatic engagements by Saudi Arabia have emerged to improve relations with Iran and bring betterment for all stakeholders in the region. Saudi Arabia has altered the policy by removing the Qatar blockade and releasing prisoners, a rapprochement gesture. At the same time, Iran's proxies in Yemen, the Houthis, have already made substantial gains to the extent of power sharing.<sup>21</sup>

Iranian and Saudi Arabian negotiations are credited for the recent cease-fire in Yemen, which contradicts the Israeli strategy of considering military options against Iran. On the other hand, China is also fostering closer ties with Turkiye, Iran and the Gulf states, supplying high-tech military and communication equipment that was

formerly the sole purview of the US. Apparently, in contemporary times, the Middle East is far more complicated than it previously was.<sup>22</sup>

### **Iran's Nuclear Issue**

In April 2018, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman expressed that Saudi Arabia would develop its nuclear weapon if Iran went ahead with its nuclear weapon policy.<sup>23</sup> However, for few, an analysis of Iran's history, regional ambitions, domestic politics, real and perceived threats and other compulsions reveal that Iran proclaims to be convincing in its actions. On the national front, the Iranian nuclear programme and technological advancement have become a symbol of the nation's resolve against odds and a substantial issue in Iran's domestic politics.<sup>24</sup> Also, Iran's aspirations for a ballistic missile programme continue without interruption despite international pressure. On the strategic and economic compass, it was noted during the Trump administration that Saudi Arabia's interests might align with Israel in the region, adding complications for Iran. US administration appears to be running out of options. The US has nearly drained every aspect of Iran's economy that it can sanction; the result has been increased Iranian regional belligerence and JCPOA violations.

While the US intends to revive the Iran nuclear deal, Israel openly opposes the agreement. During a recent visit to Israel, President Biden and the Israeli Prime Minister displayed a united front against Tehran,<sup>25</sup> besides pushing for normalization between Israel and Arab countries, mainly Saudi Arabia.<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding intense diplomatic efforts to revive JCPOA during the last few months and visible progress at both ends, a "new nuclear deal will not survive without a broader rapprochement."<sup>27</sup> Iran has brought forward a clear stance that pressurizing Iran on the nuclear issue and pressure strategy by enforcing sanctions cannot be pursued together.<sup>28</sup> According to US National Security Strategy, China is the biggest competitor to the US in Asia and globally. On the other hand, China and Iran are strategic partners in the region, and US policy toward Iran is, one way or the other, helping China; therefore, Washington may have to put its Iran policy in context.<sup>29</sup> Analysts believe some pressure on Iran is rebuffed through its relations with China and Russia. Russian support to Iran on various fronts, including Syria and economic matters, provided Iran with some respite. Russian bid to provide the S-400 Air Defence missile system to Iran and China's oil import in defiance of US sanctions showed Iran's required support.

### **Biden and Putin's Visit to the Middle East (2022)**

Recently, US President, followed by the Russian President, visited the region to carry forward their regional strategic objectives. The Jeddah summit attended by President Biden and regional leaders was believed to determine the region's future security and economic integration. During his visit, President Joe Biden reaffirmed old commitments to allies and pushed for further Israeli-Arab normalization, reaffirming US commitment to Israel's security.<sup>30</sup> As much as President Biden and his top aides stressed that the trip to the Middle East was not about oil, experts have argued that

the energy crisis has driven US President's visit.<sup>31</sup> President Biden's tour to the Middle East came to a subtle finish, wherein Saudi Arabia made no promises about boosting oil output. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman brought up human rights issues, citing US silence regarding Shireen Abu Akleh, a Palestinian American journalist assassinated in the West Bank by the Israeli forces.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, US President not only failed to win old allies during the Arab summit but was also accused of promoting Iranophobia.<sup>33</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Iran only days after US President visited Israel and Saudi Arabia and met with Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan. During the bilateral meetings, the Iranian leadership urged long-term collaboration between Iran and Russia and emphasized that the two nations must be watchful against western deceptions. It was also reported that Russia showed interest in Iranian drones.<sup>34</sup> This visit aimed to demonstrate to the world that Russia is a significant player and that the US is not the only major force in the region.

## Analysis

Contestation between two flanks of the Middle East - Arabian and Persian - is due to their diverse historical experiences and civilizational differences. Although religious differences make up a large part of the conflict, these are not all. There has always been the phenomenon of Arab domination versus Persian domination. Such zero-sum policies are due to the complexity of interests resulting in an unending protracted conflict. Various peace initiatives failed in the past due to diverging interests of global players, thus impacting regional order.<sup>35</sup> At the moment, Saudi-Iran rapprochement is very much in US interests, as it can lessen the risk of open conflict and extremist activities allowing the US administration to focus on China and Russia. The US has also indicated to end the Yemen war by halting weapons supply to the Kingdom. Therefore, Saudi Arabia needs Iranian cooperation to wrap up a long-drawn conflict. Iran also seeks a diplomatic détente with its Arab neighbours. Two flanks can converge on minimum commonalities, such as oil supply and prices.

Events of the past, mainly the Arab Spring, have caused the realization among Saudi leadership that regional power politics has hampered their economic and social development without much improvement in regional influence. Iran is an important regional player in the Middle East. Instead of attempts to marginalize it, a policy of negotiation, rapprochement and cooperation with Iran would be more beneficial. In a nuclear deal, only diplomacy and not coercion will succeed. On the other hand, Iran should also show flexibility in its approach and review its policy not to disturb the regional balance.

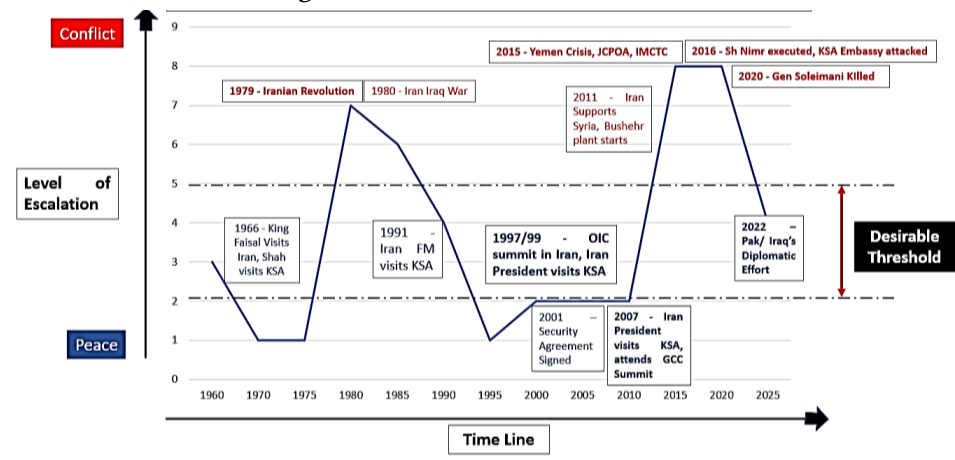
Saudi-Iran contestation in the region has also posed considerable challenges to Pakistan's foreign policy. Pakistan's position vis-à-vis the Gulf region to play a positive role has been impaired. Seeking to mediate between two flanks for a long time, this is

an ideal opportunity for Pakistan to further its efforts. Many issues requiring striking a balance in a decision regarding Saudi Arabia and Iran would be relaxed comparatively.<sup>36</sup> Pakistan has never been part of any intra-Arab conflict, i.e., the Iraq war and the ongoing conflict in Syria and Yemen. However, Pakistan never faced a situation like IMCTC or OIC meetings where it was compelled to choose a side. Amid stronger economic and defence ties with Saudi Arabia, neutrality is harder to achieve as Saudi-Iran relations often impinge on broadening their civilizational and ideological nexus with other states.

Historically, Pakistan has played an important role in bridging gaps between states, like the Sino-US rapprochement, and has also offered mediation in the Saudi-Iran rivalry. Recently, after the killing of General Soleimani, Pakistan again offered a mediation role. Outside GCC, Turkiye and Pakistan have a constructive role in peace negotiations. Immense human suffering has also become a concern for Iran and Saudi Arabia as the state of human security in the region is crumbling with passing times. The introduction of modern technological innovations and nuanced ways to explore benevolent avenues may also serve as a common ground for initiating new peace initiatives immediately.

As part of broad-based and constructive engagement, Pakistan should impartially engage and maintain positive relations with all stakeholders. Pakistan may undertake mutually acceptable rapprochement efforts to keep friction within a desirable threshold. From Pakistan’s perspective, escalation levels should ideally remain below the threshold of a dispute, wherein Pakistan is compelled to take clear positions. However, escalation levels staying above a minimum threshold of long-term enduring peace will allow Pakistan to maintain its security-related relevance to the region (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Iran-Saudi Escalation Matrix



(Source: Authors’ Compilation)

Therefore, diplomatic efforts should be limited to de-escalating conflicts rather than mediating them, wherein Pakistan can create space to relay messaging for its interests. Pakistan, in association with other regional states like Iraq, Qatar, Oman and



Kuwait, can expedite diplomatic approaches for an early and meaningful culmination of Saudi-Iran talks. The best option for Pakistani leadership in the current scenario is to continue its mediatory efforts and maintain positive neutrality while pursuing proactive diplomacy.

A thorough and objective assessment of Pakistan's specific interests in both countries is recommended. Saudi Arabia's interests in Pakistan revolve around a brotherly relationship, military assistance and workforce availability. Pakistan to ensure that its security support and commitments should come with national interests, including Saudi Arabia's unequivocal support for Pakistan's economy and stance on Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). Similarly, Saudi Arabia enjoys substantial influence over other gulf countries and OIC, through which Pakistan must further its economic and political interests. On the other hand, Iran's interests in Pakistan are security related and support for its weakening economy. There is a need to exploit the full potential of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as Chabahar Port can supplement CPEC through cooperation and connectivity. Increased connectivity through railway and the import of electricity for border areas are a few essential steps that would raise Iran's interests. Extra regional forces can also be urged to promote peace, stability, and reconciliation in the interest of all stakeholders for the global energy corridor. Independent foreign policy depends upon economic strength, and Pakistan needs to forge economic ties with the states instead of just security-centric relations. Pakistan, therefore, should restructure its economic strategy to decrease reliance on foreign aid and support. Until Pakistan revamps its economy, policy options will remain restricted.

## **Conclusion**

Saudi Arabia and Iran are unlikely to bury past decades' traditional rivalry easily. Nevertheless, the involvement of other regional states manifests regional understanding to defuse tensions, which Pakistan should exploit to keep this reconciliatory process continued for its security interests. Considering the economic and human sufferings, Saudi Arabia and Iran may find a common ground of interdependency to nurture public good and project a softer image abroad. The onus lies with Tehran and Jeddah to bury the hatchet of domination to attain regional peace and stability; such ascendancies have had a spiral effect in the past, and the traces would dampen in the future. However, Pakistan's policy towards both countries should be founded on multilateralism, and it should clearly perceive the vital interests of both countries but not at the expense of the legitimate interests of each other. Pakistan's fundamental tool to pursue its interests should be its independent foreign policy based on an objective analysis of the current geostrategic and evolving geo-economic environment, which is entirely dependent upon its strong economy and national harmony.

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