



The Institute for National Security Studies
Strategic, Innovative, Policy-Oriented Research

INSS Insight No. 897, February 16, 2017

Turnaround in Saudi-Iranian Relations?

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There are growing indications that efforts to reduce the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia are underway. The most recent one was the arrival of the Kuwaiti foreign minister in Tehran on January 25, 2017 for a meeting with the Iranian president. The foreign minister brought with him a letter expressing the willingness of the Arab Gulf states to begin a “strategic dialogue” with Iran. Although complete details of the initiative were not disclosed, it included an invitation to begin negotiations based on good neighborly relations, non-intervention in internal affairs, and mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty. This rare visit would not have taken place without the blessing of Saudi Arabia. It follows a previous invitation from Saudi Arabia to Iran to begin negotiations to accommodate Iranian participation in the annual hajj. The Islamic Republic boycotted the pilgrimage last year, following the disaster during the 2015 pilgrimage in which many Iranian pilgrims were killed.

The Iranians have publicly signaled their desire to improve the tense atmosphere between the two countries and reduce the expressions of hostility. At the Economic Forum in Davos, the Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif expressed his regret of the attack against Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran a year ago. He stressed the importance of dialogue between the parties, and publicly stated Iran’s willingness to sit with Saudi representatives to clarify the disputes between the two sides. At a press conference a week before the Kuwaiti foreign minister’s visit to Iran, Iran’s President Rouhani also confirmed that the two countries would conduct an indirect dialogue through Kuwait, including discussion of the war taking place in Yemen, and expressed a wish that the disputes could be resolved. His words were repeated by Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Council, thereby adding to the list of senior Iranian officials who made seemingly well-timed public expressions of support for improving relations between the two countries.

Until now, attempts to mediate between Iran and Saudi Arabia by players in the region, such as Iraq and Oman, and those outside of it, such as Germany, have been unsuccessful. A year ago, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran had reached an unprecedented level of tension and hostility after Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations with Iran (not all the Arab Gulf states followed suit) in the wake of the attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran, following the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a Saudi Arabian Shi’ite. The efforts to bridge the difference through unofficial talks (“Track II”) in Germany were of no avail. Now, however, the possibility of change has emerged, with some milestones in the dialogue, albeit indirect, between the countries.

These include OPEC December 2016 deal to curb output where, after many delays, Saudi Arabia, OPEC's biggest producer, agreed to reduce its production while allowing Iran to increase its own to the level it had reached before the sanction. After a two-year stalemate, an agreement also was reached on the appointment of Michel Aoun as President of Lebanon, following a compromise between Hezbollah and Hariri, Saudi Arabia's protégé. Aoun has already visited Saudi Arabia in the hopes of renewing the Saudi promise to grant the Lebanese security forces the four billion dollars in aid that had been canceled by Riyadh.

It should be emphasized that the hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia is rooted in geopolitical and religious-ideological disputes, and is a significant component of the contemporary Middle Eastern geopolitics. The competition for influence between the two countries is expressed mainly on various fronts through allies and proxies, but the two countries are also involved – more than ever – in direct conflict, including mutual subversion efforts through various means. For example, cyberattacks likely originating in Iran against various government agencies and institutions in Saudi Arabia have multiplied recently, causing considerable damage. A similar attack in 2012 damaged the computers of Saudi Aramco Iran was also behind the attempted assassination of the Saudi Arabian ambassador in Washington in 2011. Saudi Arabia is supporting opposition groups in Iran, and appears to have recently stepped up its campaign on behalf of the Arab minority in Ahwaz, with parties, on behalf of Saudi Arabia, repeatedly raising the issue of the Iranian occupation of this region. In addition, while participating last year in a conference of Mojahedin-e Khalq, the Iranian opposition organization, the Saudi Prince Turki Al-Faisal—who no longer serves in any official position—publicly called for the first time for the overthrow of the Iranian regime. There is no doubt that from Saudi Arabia's perspective, Iran currently is the main threat to regional stability, and senior members of the royal family do not hesitate to criticize the Islamic Republic for what they call “its involvement in internal Arab affairs.”

A series of regional and global changes is influencing Saudi Arabia and Iran to consider making this effort to begin a dialogue, which seems to have a realistic chance of alleviating some of the tensions between the two countries. Saudi Arabia apparently is concerned about the momentum gained by Iran and the forces loyal to it in Iraq and Syria. Riyadh also is troubled by Tehran's achievements in the Lebanese political arena; Saudi Arabia's inability to achieve its goals in Yemen after almost two years of fighting; and above all by the anticipated arrangements in Syria, this time perhaps under American-Russian sponsorship, which will perpetuate Iran's gain in this theater. Despite the “hope” that Saudi Arabia is pinning on the Trump administration, it cannot ignore the possibility that Trump will reach a settlement with Russia that will leave Bashar al-Assad's regime in power, which will be another setback for Riyadh and victory for Iran; Riyadh has an interest in being part of the solution, rather than being left out of the picture.

Such a scenario is likely to cause Saudi Arabia to attempt to hold a dialogue with Iran so that an agreement about the political future in Syria and beyond can be reached. Saudi

Arabia also is aware of the changing position of Turkey—which had been close to Saudi Arabia on several regional issues—especially in its opposition to Bashar al-Assad’s remaining in power in Syria, and in Ankara’s willingness to join the Russian initiative, in cooperation with Iran, to establish a ceasefire in Syria to promote Turkey’s interest on the Kurdish issue. Saudi Arabia is also cognizant of Egypt’s rapprochement with Russia on the Syrian question and its tacit consent to the continuation of Bashar al-Assad’s regime.

The Iranians are mainly concerned about the change liable to occur in their standing following the entry of President Trump into the White House. The president’s anti-Iranian attitude — shared by his main security officials, headed by Secretary of Defense Mattis, who regards Iran as the main cause of instability in the region — dovetails with Saudi Arabia’s views. Under these circumstances, Tehran is likely to believe that a thaw in the level of mutual hostility will help reduce Saudi Arabia’s interest in escalating the tension, and will also influence the Trump administration.

Even though the two sides have much to gain, it cannot be predicted if the turnaround in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran will be genuine and concrete. The clash of interests between the two sides is profound, and the basic causes of the hostility, which has reached new heights, still exist. The changes in the region, however, especially the apparent regional acceptance of Bashar al-Assad’s remaining in power; the continuation of the war in Yemen—now approaching its third year—with neither side able to achieve victory, which is politically and financially costly to Saudi Arabia, but also for Iran; and the entry into office of the Trump administration, are likely to stir things up for all the parties involved and provide a powerful motivation for the parties to reposition themselves. Even if full relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran cannot be quickly restored, the parameters of the relations between the two countries indeed seem to be changing under the current circumstances, and given the statements mainly by the Iranian side.

Israel shares its opposition to Iran with the Gulf states and it has used this opposition as a means of improving its relations with the Sunni Arab countries. Ostensibly, a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement could have some negative impact on this shared interest between Israel and the Gulf states. However, on the assumption that any improvement in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran—if it does happen—would result from conjectural interests and would not reflect a real solution to fundamental problems, this mutual demonstration of pragmatism is unlikely to have any serious impact on the mutual interests of Israel and the Gulf states opposite Iran. In any case, the trend towards realignment appears to be continuing, given the developments in the balance of power among the parties in the regional conflicts, especially following the escalating involvement of Russia and the incumbency of President Trump in the White House. Israel should monitor all these changes so that it will not be caught unaware, and so that it can preserve its security interest in the face of possible new developments.