



WORLD

How Iran and Saudi Arabia's diplomatic breakthrough could impact the entire Middle East

BY AHMED SHAWKAT, KHALED WASSEF

Last week, Iran extended an official invitation to Saudi Arabia's King Salman to visit Tehran, one of many steps recently undertaken by the two countries as they slowly improve their relations. The two countries have been bitter rivals for decades, but their relationship has begun to thaw since they signed an agreement to resume diplomatic ties in Beijing last month. It was a diplomatic breakthrough in a standoff that has shaped events and attitudes across the Middle East for more than 40 years.

The two countries completely severed diplomatic ties after Sunni Muslim-ruled Saudi Arabia executed a prominent Shiite Muslim cleric in 2016. Iran's ruling clerics, and most of its population, are Shiite, and the two nations' animosity has exploded into "proxy wars" in several countries across the region, including Yemen, where groups backed by either side have taken a heavy toll in human lives and caused a dire humanitarian crisis.

There are many questions about how much progress Saudi Arabia and Iran will actually make toward putting their long-standing grudge behind, but given both nations' heavy influence across the Middle East and wider Muslim world, the rapprochement could have a meaningful impact on a range of disputes and crises.

Below is a look at how the deal brokered by China could impact the region.

The Saudi shift to China

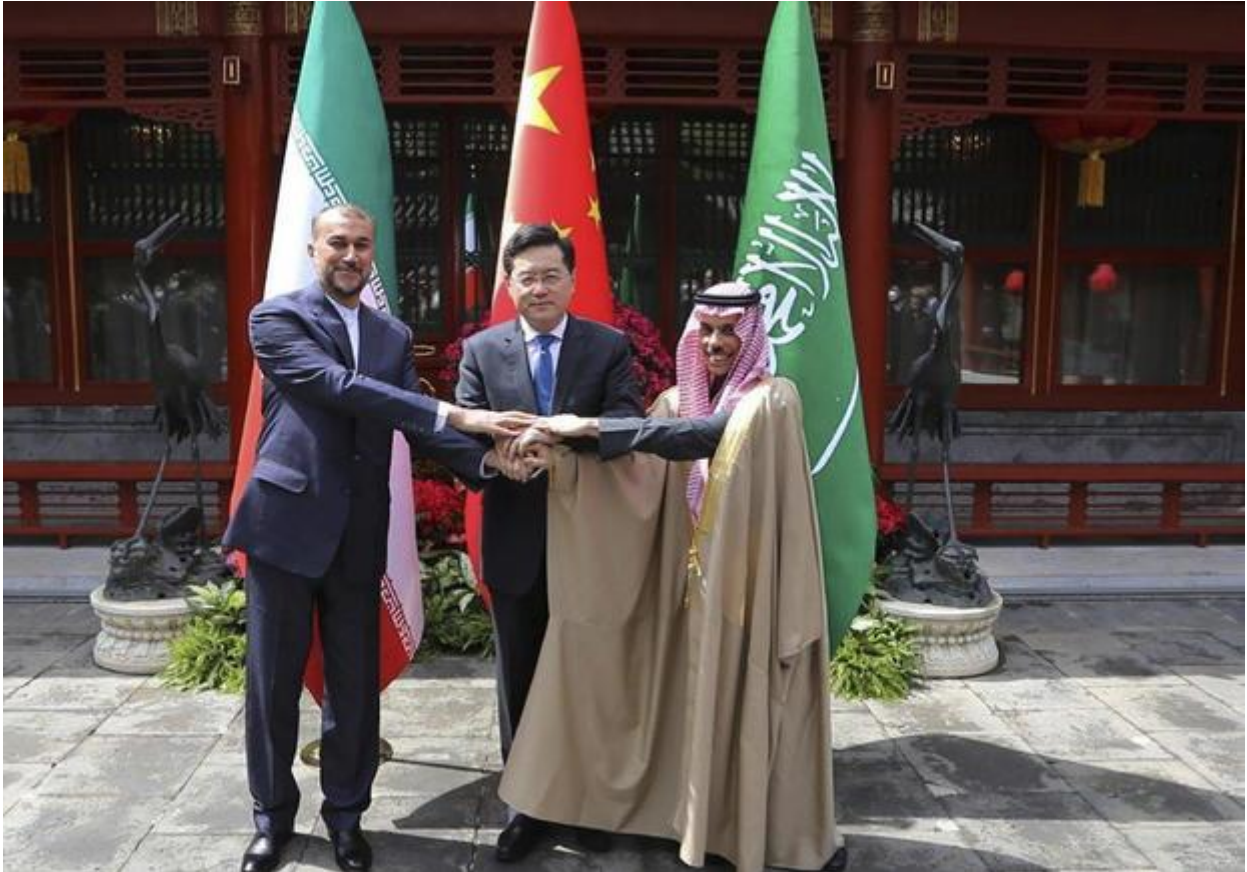
"There are two types of common medicines, American medicine and Chinese medicine," Saudi political analyst Salman Al-Ansari told CBS News. He said the Saudis spent four decades trying to convince the U.S. government to stop "Iranian terrorism in the Middle East," but they didn't get the results they were after.

"So the kingdom [Saudi Arabia] decided to shift its direction to Chinese medicine," said al-Ansari. "Will it succeed in preventing the 'cancer' of Iranian terrorism from spreading in the Middle East? Only time will tell."

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He said Saudi Arabia would see the agreement as an opportunity to assess Iranian commitments to peace.

There is no doubt, meanwhile, that this mediation has enhanced China's image on the world stage as a global mediator and power broker.



In this picture released by the Iranian Foreign Ministry, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian, left, shakes hands with his Saudi Arabian counterpart Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, right, and Chinese counterpart Qin Gang in Beijing, April 6, 2023. IRANIAN FOREIGN MINISTRY VIA AP

"China is the one and only country that has substantial leverage over Iran," said al-Ansari. "If Tehran doesn't hold up to its promises, then the Iranian regime will be cornered by its biggest ally, which is China. So either way, the deal is positive."

Iran's internal turmoil

Iran's relationship with Saudi Arabia has been tense since the 1979 Islamic Revolution brought Iran's hardline clerical regime to power. Over the last year, that regime has faced an unprecedented challenge from within, as a wave of protests saw tens of thousands of Iranians demand greater freedom.

One expert believes the diplomacy between Tehran and Riyadh, even if it bears limited fruit for their bilateral ties, could help Iran's ruling clerics put the unrest behind them.

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"The fact that Iran and the Saudis now will again have a diplomatic relationship strengthens the Islamic regime, which is currently struggling with internal turmoil, a fully collapsed economy and full isolation from the rest of the world," Dr. Ardavan Khoshnood, an Iran foreign policy expert who teaches at two universities in Sweden, told CBS News. "It does not, however, mean that all the obstacles between the two countries will be eliminated. Absolutely not."

Khoshnood said the highly ideological nature of the two countries' conflict will make it very difficult to achieve meaningful reconciliation between the two sides.

"The obstacles between the countries will continue to exist, and we may also witness covert malign operations on both sides," he said.

Yemen's civil war

Yemen's civil war has always been seen as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Saudis lead the regional military coalition battling Yemen's Houthi rebel movement, which is backed by Iran. While the new diplomacy between the regional powers could bolster a fragile truce that has quieted the fighting since last year, few believe a definitive end of the war is near, and some fear it could even get worse.

"It would be a mistake to assume that a Saudi-Iran rapprochement will translate into ending the war in Yemen," Nadwa Al-Dawsari, a nonresident senior fellow at the Project on Middle East Democracy, told CBS News. "The Saudi goal now is to extricate itself from the Yemen mess that it contributed to."

Al-Dawsari said that as Saudi Arabia has failed not only to reinstate Yemen's government and end the Houthi uprising by force over the last nine years, but also come under direct attack due to its role in the war, the kingdom is likely to push Yemen to accept a deal with the Houthis in a bid to at least contain the crisis.

That, al-Dawsari said, would effectively be "granting the Houthis political recognition in exchange for assurances to stop their missile attacks against Saudi Arabia and containing Yemen as a civil war."

That may help Saudi Arabia in the near term, but it would do little to help the people of Yemen as they endure the brutal humanitarian crisis caused by the war.

"The Houthis have been stocking up on arms and repositioning their forces. They are not done fighting and this deal is not about to change that," said al-Dawsari. "Yemen is yet to enter its most intense phase of the conflict."

Israel and Saudi Arabia

Iran and Saudi Arabia have played significant roles in shaping the political landscape of the Middle East, including Israel's relations with its Arab neighbors — ties that Israel's leaders have sought to improve in recent years.

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Saudi Arabia and Israel share a common cause in opposing Iran's nuclear program and containing its regional influence.

Dr. Meir Javandanfar, a lecturer at Israel's Reichman University, told CBS News it's possible that Iran and the Saudis will now be able to manage their differences more smoothly, but that their agreement was unlikely to have a major impact on efforts to normalize Israel's relations with Saudi Arabia.

He said, however, that it could see Israel and the Saudis collaborate more to counter Iran's influence in the region.

"I think the two countries [Israel and Saudi Arabia] will work together behind the scenes... monitoring what Iran is doing in the region," he said.

Lebanon crisis

An estimated 75% of Lebanon's population is living in poverty. The country is nearing financial meltdown and currently has no president, as its major political parties can't agree on a path forward to hold new national elections.

Lebanon's unique, incredibly complex political system has long been framed by sectarian division, with the Iran-backed Shiite group Hezbollah on one side and the Saudis backing Sunni politicians on the other.

So, could the thaw in Saudi-Iranian relations help end the deadlock and make Lebanon's government work again, maybe even filling its presidential vacuum?

Not quickly, analysts believe.

"This rapprochement – not yet exactly a deal – does not mean an end to competition, tension, or even friction between KSA [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia] and Iran, but it aims at regulating it," Joseph Bahout, director of the Issam Fares Institute at the American University of Beirut, told CBS News. "Until Iran and KSA openly and frontally address this issue, all local parties in Lebanon will most probably hold to their positions and to their respective candidates."

Iraq's internal divisions

Iraq played a significant role in facilitating the nascent reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with the country's capital, Baghdad, hosting five rounds of talks between Iranian and Saudi officials. Those talks led directly, on March 10, 2023, to the signing of the pact brokered in Beijing for the two countries to restore diplomatic relations.

Iraq had a vested interest in bringing the two longtime foes together: The decades-old sectarian rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has played out on Iraqi soil as much as it has anywhere else.

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Iraq's Sunni and Shiite Muslims have fought for decades for political clout in Baghdad, and Iran's leadership has long held huge sway with Iraq's powerful Shiite factions. It was that division at the heart of the post-U.S.-invasion violence that plagued the country for two decades.

"With Saudi and Iran not escalating, there's hope that the sectarianism in both countries, toward the sect minorities there, will decrease, impacting positively the sectarian tensions in Iraq," Iraqi analyst and deputy Middle East editor for New Lines magazine, Rasha al-Aqeedi, told CBS News.

Al-Aqeedi said another benefit of the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation for Iraq, albeit a symbolic one, "is the return of Iraq to the center of geopolitics — not as a headache, but rather a problem-solver. It gives Iraq great leverage on the regional and international stages."

CBS News' Tucker Reals contributed to this article.