

ORION FORUM

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy Shift: A New Peacemaker in the Middle East?

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Saudi Arabia's "[positive neutrality](#)" foreign policy doctrine is serving Riyadh's interests. Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) has shrewdly navigated international crises, projecting the kingdom to the "[forefront of world statecraft](#)."

This has been underscored by the important Saudi role in hosting and/or mediating talks on ending the Ukraine war and exchanging Russian and Ukrainian prisoners. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has also reportedly [offered](#) to mediate between the US and Iran in pursuit of a new nuclear deal. This development speaks to the extent to which the Gulf region's security landscape—and specifically Saudi-Iranian [relations](#)—have drastically shifted since President Donald Trump's first term in office.

During the first Trump administration, the Saudis lobbied Washington to impose "maximum pressure" on Tehran and [hailed](#) Washington's decision to sabotage the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018. In defense of Trump's bold move, Saudi Arabia's foreign ministry [stated](#) that Iran "used economic gains from the lifting of sanctions to continue its activities to destabilize the region, particularly by developing ballistic missiles and supporting terrorist groups in the region."

But today there is a [détente](#) in Riyadh-Tehran relations. Bilateral ties have improved to the point whereby the two countries are engaged in [defense cooperation](#). This would have been practically unthinkable in the 2016-21 period in which there was much hostility between the two rivals.

Saudi National Interests

Now the Kingdom seeks to flex its diplomatic muscles in ways that can reduce the risk of a US-Iran war while also making it clear to the leadership in Tehran that Saudi Arabia will not be a partner in any international pressure campaign against Iran.

Following Israel's wars on Lebanon and Gaza, as well as the fall of the Syrian government led by Bashar al-Assad, the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance" is now [weaker](#). Against this backdrop, there is [increased](#) debate in Tehran about the pros and cons of weaponizing Iran's nuclear program to guarantee the country's security with its "[forward defense](#)" foreign policy doctrine in a severely compromised state. The possibility of the Islamic Republic becoming a nuclear-armed state seriously [concerns](#) Riyadh, which hopes to [leverage](#) its close ties with Trump to provide Iran with a diplomatic bridge to the White House that could, ideally, lead to a new deal that prevents Tehran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

A lesson learned in 2019, when 'maximum pressure 1.0' was in full effect, is that when Iran feels pushed into a corner the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states become most vulnerable to any lashing out on Tehran's part. The acts of [sabotage](#) carried out off the United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s east coast and the Saudi Aramco [attacks](#) that year highlighted how much danger Iran's wrath can be for its Arab neighbors across the Gulf. This context helps explain Saudi Arabia's motivations for keeping its normalization deal with Tehran, which was [signed](#) two years ago in Beijing, on track and seeking ways to control, mitigate, and manage—rather than escalate—tensions in Saudi-Iranian relations.

MbS would certainly like to avoid a situation whereby the US bombs Iranian nuclear facilities. There is growing risk of that scenario playing out if Iran's nuclear activities continue advancing and no deal to limit them is reached. Such an armed confrontation would severely undermine Saudi Arabia's economic and security interests. With policymakers in Riyadh focused on advancing [Vision 2030](#) (Saudi Arabia's ambitious economic diversification agenda that seeks to end the country's economic dependence on oil by 2030), the Saudi leadership understands that attracting high levels of investment, business, and tourism to the Kingdom in these next five years will be crucial. Vision 2030's success depends on stability inside Saudi Arabia and the neighborhood, which only adds to Riyadh's drive to use its diplomatic cards to prevent the Iranian nuclear file from leading to an armed conflict.

MbS has a lot of influence with Trump, who has made clear his desire to avoid war with Iran while seeing to it that the country never develops a nuclear weapon. Furthermore, when the Obama administration and the rest of the so-called P5+1 negotiated and eventually signed the JCPOA with Iran, the Saudis were left out of the negotiations. That factor led to much resentment in the Kingdom, where the general view was that Washington struck a deal with Iran without accounting for Riyadh's security considerations, prompting Saudi officials to see Obama as a leader who failed to understand the perceived Iranian threat. Now, one decade later, perhaps the thinking among the Saudi leadership is that by establishing Riyadh as a facilitator and/or mediator of US-Iran talks it will not be possible for Saudi security considerations to be disregarded.

Reasons to Question the Viability of a Saudi Bridge

It is far from guaranteed that Saudi Arabia can succeed in terms of becoming an effective diplomatic bridge between the White House and Tehran. At least two factors which could lead to some skepticism about Riyadh's ability to play such a role in any effective manner are worth considering.

First, there are figures in the Iranian government who are deeply skeptical about the Trump administration's rhetoric about diplomacy between Washington and Tehran. The legacy of Trump's decision to delegitimize the JCPOA and to assassinate Major General Qassem Soleimani in his first term makes it harder for Iran to negotiate with the second Trump administration. In a broader sense, Tehran has come to learn that any deal with Washington stands a good chance of only staying in place as long as the US administration which negotiated it remains in office. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's [statement](#) in February that talks with Washington were "neither wise, nor intelligent, nor honorable" highlights some of the challenges—albeit not insurmountable ones—that the Trump team will face in seeking to negotiate with Iran.

Second, although Iran has lost trust in European states to mediate between Tehran and Washington and become more favorable to GCC states playing this bridging role, Iran will likely be more comfortable with Oman and/or Qatar, as opposed to Saudi Arabia, leading the mediation. Despite the extent to which Saudi-Iranian relations have drastically improved during

the past two years, there remains a lack of trust between the two countries. Therefore, it would be understandable if the Iranians prefer an Omani or Qatari backchannel over a Saudi one mindful of how Muscat and Doha have been the Gulf's traditional interlocutors between Iran and the West.

Saudi Arabia's Cards

For all the reasons to question Riyadh's ability to play a bridging role between Washington and Tehran, Saudi Arabia has unique cards which could make it an effective mediator. With Iran likely wanting more economic dividends to come from its 2023 diplomatic deal with Saudi Arabia, Riyadh could offer Tehran some economic incentives to come to the table and stay there until negotiations lead to a finalization of a new nuclear accord. MbS also has a significant amount of influence with Trump and his inner circle, with the Saudi and American leaders both conducting foreign policy in highly transactional manners that have helped them understand each other, even if the situation in Gaza might soon test this relationship.

Looking ahead, it is unclear what will come out of Saudi Arabia's offer to mediate in nuclear talks between the Trump administration and Iran. In fact, Riyadh has not yet officially offered. Yet, with Saudi Arabia understanding that Trump would like to take credit for bringing the US into a nuclear deal with Iran that he would frame as superior to the 2015 JCPOA, Saudi Arabia could potentially leverage its relationships with both Trump and Iran to gain ever greater legitimacy as a global "peacemaker."

*image credit: VOA.

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