**Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Complexity of Conflict Mediation**

In early March 2023, years of backchannel diplomatic efforts reached a zenith as Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to normalise relations with each other. Seven years after relations were suspended following the fallout from the execution of the Saudi Shi’a cleric Nimr al-Nimr, the normalisation agreement set out a process of re-opening diplomatic missions and create the conditions for greater collaboration[[1]](#footnote-1). Reached after years of track II efforts, the agreement was heralded as a major step towards building peace across the Middle East. Yet it is not a panacea for conflict, but rather is a necessary part of a portfolio of moves to improve regional relations. In this short essay I reflect on the ways in which the normalisation agreement may contribute towards peace building and mediation efforts across the Middle East.

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has occupied a central role in the machinations of politics across the Middle East. Across the past century, Saudi Arabia and Iran (nee Persia) have endured a fraught set of relations, oscillating between periods of overt hostility and apparent rapprochement. Finding resonance amidst societies beset by social division, the rivalry entrenched and exacerbated division along sectarian, political, social and economic lines, creating precarious political environments in the process. The salience of Islam within the fabric of both states and the ability to create narratives that demonstrate religious credentials allowed Riyadh and Tehran to speak to their sectarian kin across the region, creating suspicion and the perception of external manipulation along sect-based lines, regardless of the veracity of such beliefs.

The agreement is a significant step in improving relations across the Middle East by reducing insecurity at the regional level. Across the past century, politics across the Middle East has been shaped by the interplay of regional and national politics. From the Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamist movements to the onset of the Arab Uprisings and the geopolitically charged construction of sectarian difference, what happens regionally resonates domestically and vice versa, prompting Paul Noble, an eminent scholar of the International Relations of the Middle East to speak of the region as a vast “sound chamber”.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is especially evident in the case of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran which has resonated across the region.

As I have argued elsewhere, regional politics and local politics have a symbiotic relationship, one that is especially evident in the context of the Saudi-Iran rivalry.[[3]](#footnote-3) Additionally, the construction of geopolitically charged sectarian difference has allowed developments in one area to resonate elsewhere. Sectarian kin in Bahrain and Iraq often demonstrated in support of each other at times of crisis. Similarly, fears of the perfidious actions of one community or actor in one state reverberate elsewhere. From this, regional politics takes on an increasingly fragile and precarious nature, shaped by the interplay of regional and domestic politics, tensions between nationalist and religious identities, contrasting ideological visions, and fears about the future.[[4]](#footnote-4) Sectarian identity markers occupy a prominent role within the rivalry, serving as a means of engendering cross-border support. The importance of religion within the rivalry has entrenched division, making resolution and mediation more challenging. When conflict is framed to be over such fundamental and intangible issues as faith, transforming perceptions of the other (and the self) prove challenging.

**A Panacea: Saudi-Iran and Regional Politics**

Saudi and Iranian foreign policy has seen them pitted against each other in a number of different arenas. From Yemen to Iraq, Lebanon to Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been engaged in competition to assert influence and dominance over domestic and regional politics. This has involved the deployment of a range of different strategies designed to cultivate relations and to assert particular visions of regional security, from the activation and mobilisation of particular identities to the provision of financial, ideological, or military support. A cursory glance at violence over the past few decades in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen and elsewhere may evoke suggestions that this rivalry has played a key role in entrenching violence. Lazy analysis seeks to reduce this to the deeply problematic ‘proxy conflicts’ underpinned by ‘ancient hatreds’ between Sunni and Shi’a.[[5]](#footnote-5) According to this thesis, in societies beset by violent difference, local groups often seek support from regional backers, yet this support is not unidirectional, it is not solely a patron-client relationship of the sort typically acknowledged by advocates of the proxy wars thesis.

The manifestation of the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran across regional politics takes a range of forms, from overt hostility such as that seen in Yemen and Syria, to political inertia in Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain. These points of rivalry are not static or monolithic, but rather are products of the contingencies of time and space, creating context-specific relationships and levels of engagement. Normalisation will thus affect these arenas in different ways.

The organisation of political life in Lebanon and Iraq allowed Riyadh and Tehran to cultivate relations with local groups in pursuit of their own interests. In Iraq, structural tensions within the political system have mapped onto social cleavages, much like in Lebanon, where local communities historically found support from regional backers.[[6]](#footnote-6) Yet as the 2019 protests demonstrated, the most salient point of difference revolves around economics, between those in positions of power and those not, along with anger at the role played by Iran and Saudi Arabia.[[7]](#footnote-7) Normalisation will do little to assuage the anger felt by many in both states, although there may be scope for regional powers to put local allies under pressure to reduce tensions in Iraq and Lebanon.

In Bahrain, the perception of nefarious Iranian activity in Bahrain had long shaped the approaches of both the Al Khalifa and Al Saud towards their own Shi’a groups and the Islamic Republic broadly. After the Arab Uprisings, however, the sectarianization of protest groups contributed to the evisceration of any opposition to Al Khalifa, beginning first with the hollowing out of Shi’a leaders before turning to Islamists at the bequest of Saudi Arabia.[[8]](#footnote-8) Normalisation will have little impact on politics in Bahrain, with those dissatisfied with Al Khalifa rule left with limited scope for political expression.

In Syria and Yemen, conflict continues to devastate the lives of people. With hundreds of thousands of deaths, and tens of millions of displacements, war has devastated the lives of a generation. In Syria, the army’s conquest of opposition held areas reassert regime control over all of the state, leaving opposition figures, Kurds, and people requiring international aid at the whims of the Assad regime.[[9]](#footnote-9) While Saudi Arabia and Iran have found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict, the reopening of embassies and consultations[[10]](#footnote-10) within broader efforts to normalise relations between Syria and Arab Gulf States points to a thaw, albeit with uncertain implications for Syrians themselves. Until then, a broader struggle against Da’ish and between Russia and the US continues to play out, further complicated by the presence of Hizballah (the Lebanese Party of God) and Israel.

It is Yemen where most were hopeful that the normalisation agreement would improve the situation. Once again, this stems from a misreading of the situation and the reduction of events to a problematic ‘ancient hatreds’ proxy war. Instead, closer examination of the conflict in Yemen points to a range of grievances that contributed to the onset of conflict. Moreover, conflict plays out between a number of different actors whose loose alliances conceal deeper tensions. The Houthis are positioned against a broad alliance of regime forces, the Southern Transitional Council, local authorities and tribal groups who seek to impose their own visions of order over particular spaces, often incongruently with the Houthis. [[11]](#footnote-11)

This broad alliance is also beset by serious differences over the future of the state. Saudi Arabia and Iran have contrasting levels of engagement in the conflict, providing support to the regime and Houthis respectively, albeit to different degrees, while Saudi Arabia has also engaged in a devastating bombing campaign which came at a huge humanitarian and financial cost. Saudi dialogue with the Houthis continues amidst Riyadh’s desire to end strikes against the Kingdom, yet it appears to be without positive outcome as yet.[[12]](#footnote-12) If the Houthis and the Saudis agree some form of ceasefire, most likely enforced by Iran, this is an important step in allowing the Kingdom to extricate itself from the war yet it will not resolve other lines of violent division that have manifested across the past decade. Nor will it lead to a reversal of the sectarianizing moves that have taken place, with a desectarianization[[13]](#footnote-13) of Yemeni politics essential in building peace. Whilst important, it is but one part of a far more complex picture.

**Transforming Perception**

The normalisation agreement is an undeniably positive step for improving regional security. It is a necessary step to making the region more peaceful, yet it alone is not sufficient.

Although the agreement does nothing to directly resolve conflict in these arenas, it does contribute to a broader reimagining of regional politics which may aid conflict resolution in the longer term. The agreement is not a panacea for the ills of the region and it alone cannot resolve conflict in the Middle East. The diplomatic agreement is a first step aimed at the broader recalibration of relations between Saudi Arabia – and the Arab Gulf states more broadly – and Iran. Underpinning the realm of formal politics, a number of issues remain unresolved, notably ethnic tensions, sectarian difference, nationalist rivalries, and the manifestation and interplay of these issues which has fed into the emergence of a complex environment.

Decades of suspicion and sectarianization has created a precarious environment for people across the region. While elites in Riyadh and Tehran have both constructed the other as a threat to (regional) peace and security, this resonated within both societies, creating a broader environment of distrust. Media narratives underpinned this narrative of sectarianization, culminating in widespread beliefs that the other was engaged in nefarious efforts to undermine group cohesion and the national project.[[14]](#footnote-14)

For those engaged in peacebuilding, a key difference exists between conflict resolution and conflict transformation. Those advocating for resolution call for an end to violence through addressing the grievances that fed into conflict in the first instance. Yet in a complex rivalry such as that between Saudi Arabia and Iran which plays out across time and space, identifying those structural grievances only gets us so far. Transformation is far trickier and necessitates identifying and transforming perceptions of the other with the hope of working towards a more collaborative environment.

Identity markers have long been a source of incongruence between Saudi Arabia and Iran: One is a monarchy while the other is an explicitly anti-monarchical republic; one is Arab and the other is predominantly Persian (albeit also home to a range of other ethnic identities); one has followed an exclusionary form of Sunni Islam while the other is overwhelmingly Shi’a; one is broadly conservative in its view of regional politics while the other presents a narrative of resistance to the status quo; one has relied on the US as a security guarantor while the other views the US as a threat. In recent years some of these harsh binaries have begun to be eroded, yet some of the more combustible lines of division will require more time.

In this realm, resolution is a necessary but not sufficient step in creating an improved regional security environment. Here, a broader transformation of perceptions of the other – far easier to put into words than action – is required that changes how people view their counterparts. Track II diplomatic work undertaken by a number of research organisations must be commended here. CARPO, in particular, has engaged in fascinating and invaluable work seeking to bring Saudis and Iranians together to transform perceptions of the other, using topics deemed politically neutral as a means of creating a shared space for dialogue and increased awareness of the other.[[15]](#footnote-15) Other organisations have sought to do similar things, albeit having to navigate the complexities of a precarious regional and global environment. SEPAD sought to do such a process but was thwarted by the Trump administration’s campaign of “maximum pressure” against Iran which warped the conditions for dialogue.

In addition, it requires brave people to engage with the other, knowing that many in their home countries would disapprove. I must commend two of my colleagues here, Eyad Al Refai and Samira Nasirzadeh, from Saudi and Iran respectively, who have written two important pieces, the first an opinion piece for *The Conversation*[[16]](#footnote-16)and the second an academic article, both calling for an improvement in relations.[[17]](#footnote-17) Eyad and Samira put forward an argument for improving relations based on pragmatic economic reasons. With the Kingdom and Islamic Republic both facing socio-economic pressures – albeit for contrasting reasons – the need for an economic stimulus was presented as a reason for improving relations. After decades of securitization and sectarianization, such social transformations will not take place on their own. Instead, this requires much careful work to desectarianize political life and to desecuritize the other, moving perceptions of the other out of the realm of ‘security politics’.

Organisations in both states have engaged in valuable work in pursuit of this goal. For example, *Rasannah,* formerly an organisation critical of Iran, has hosted scholars from the Islamic Republic and has begun to produce material that shifts perceptions within the Kingdom.[[18]](#footnote-18) As findings from a CARPO project stresses, cultural diplomacy and exchange are hugely important in bringing about the transformation of perceptions of the other. One area that has proved hugely valuable is food, with friends in Saudi telling me how Persian food is increasingly popular in the Kingdom.

**The Residue of Security Politics**

While identity matters, it is one part of a bigger and more complex jigsaw that brings together material and ideational factors. Ongoing dialogue over Iran’s nuclear issue remains a point of concern for many, with no breakthrough despite intense diplomatic efforts. Washington’s disengagement from the agreement during the Trump presidency and implementation of the “maximum pressure” sanctions regime exacerbated tensions across the Gulf. The signing of the JCPOA came at the cost of tacit approval for Saudi Arabia’s military incursion into Yemen. This time such a cost may not be necessary to appease Saudi Arabia, but guarantees will be required. The cost may be demanded by Israel, which remains another joker in the pack of Middle Eastern politics. Despite the apparent successes of the Abraham Accords and the ongoing presence of “tacit security regimes”, Israel and Saudi Arabia have not normalised relations, much to the chagrin of Jerusalem and Washington. Yet Riyadh is unlikely to agree to such moves under a Democrat, whilst also acknowledging that this move will prove deeply unpopular amongst the Muslim world where commitment to the Palestinian cause remains strong. It may also incite friction with Iran, which continues to support Hizballah and Palestinian groups under the banner of the resistance axis.

In addition, the role of the US in the strategic calculations of both states is less certain. The Biden administration – and any Democrat that follows – has been viewed with much trepidation in Riyadh, prompting the Kingdom to reassess its ability to rely on Washington as a security guarantor. Such a realisation prompted a reimagining of relations with China and Russia, both of whom have engaged diplomatically with Iran. Rumours of Saudi and Iranian applications to the BRICS+ point to the further realignment of global politics away from a US dominated vision of order, prompting Riyadh to further

**Concluding Remarks**

Bringing about a lasting thaw in relations between the two great Gulf rivals is a challenging task comprised of diplomatic efforts and attempts to transform perceptions of the other. As I have sought to show, the structural grievances that have shaped relations between the two long-standing rivals are serious but have manifested in a range of ways, creating an environment that has been incredibly toxic, leaving the region on the brink of a devastating conflict.

The development of such an architecture is equally challenging, requiring an imaginative approach to engaging with complex problems manifesting across different levels. It must deal with existing modes of conflict, arenas where latent structural grievances have the capacity to manifest, the changing contours of global politics, and black swan events. Creating a security architecture with the means of mitigating these challenges would be an even bigger achievement than the normalisation agreement. And yet, it remains a necessary construction.

All the while, the efforts of a great many people are having an impact on transforming the nature of regional security. Normalisation is an important first step. The development of a security architecture that can mitigate and protect developments if needed is a positive step. At the same time, perceptions of the other are changing, creating a moment of possibility that must be capitalised upon. Failing to do so will have catastrophic consequences for the people of the region.

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14. Simon Mabon (2018) Muting the trumpets of sabotage: Saudi Arabia, the US and the quest to securitize Iran, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 45:5, 742-759 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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