

## **Jordan Summit: A Revival to Saudi-Iran Talks?**

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Saudi Arabia and Iran established their relations on 24 August 1929 with a Friendship Treaty, involving the inception of the full diplomatic ties.<sup>1</sup> Since then, there were two main occasions where the relations between the two giants of the region were severed. The first instance of hostility was the era of 1980's which was marked by the strained relations between the two countries as KSA was backing Iraq in the eight-year long Iran-Iraq war in 1980's coupled with the Iranian accusations of discrimination by the KSA officials against the Iranian pilgrims.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, this phase quickly came to an end in the era of President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who adopted the policy of pursuing better relations between the neighbours.<sup>3</sup>

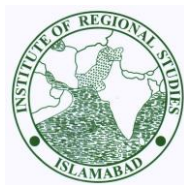
The second instance which severed the healthy relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia was the rise of Arab spring in 2011.<sup>4</sup> In the wake of the uprising during the Arab spring the Bahrain's Royal Family was faced with the protests by the Shiite minority. Saudi Arabia sent the troops to quell these protests and blamed Iran for backing these protests. Since then both the countries had been trying to better the rapports. Serious efforts to improve the relations resumed after the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013 but these efforts did not yield any fruits.<sup>5</sup> Both the countries clashed over numerous regional issues in Yemen and Syria. Moreover, in the following years the incidents like the death of numerous Iranian pilgrims in a stampede during the Hajj

further aggravated the relations between the two countries. In 2016 Saudi Arabia discontinued the diplomatic relations after protesters attacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran and consulate in Mashhad on the execution of a Shiite cleric, Sheikh Nimr al Nimr.<sup>6</sup>

Year 2021 heralded the prospects of better relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the wake of Saudi- Iran talks by Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa Al-Khaidimi.<sup>7</sup> The first round of dialogs was held in Baghdad in April 2021 which was followed by five other rounds, alongside the Vienna talks.<sup>8</sup> These talks were unique in the sense that they did not take place between the foreign ministry officials rather between the security officials of both the states. Iran and Saudi Arabia both amid these talks projected an optimistic outlook yet the Saudis exclaimed the talks as exploratory venture as well. The parleys mainly focused the security concerns of both the states in the region. Nevertheless, the dialogue came to halt in 2022 against the backdrop of growing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran accused Saudi Arabia of instigating the rioters and causing chaos in the country during the Mahsa Amini protests. Moreover, the top commander of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Hosseni Salami criticized Saudi Arabia for its ties with Israel. The first positive development that has occurred was the meeting of the foreign ministers of both the states in Jordan in 2022

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during the Jordan summit.<sup>9</sup> Jordan summit aimed to provide direction and ground for prosperity, stability and security for the Middle Eastern region especially Iraq. And for this stability to be achieved the success of the negotiations between Iran and Saudi Arabia (the highlight of this summit) are very important. Iran and US see Jordan summit as an opportunity to restore the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). While for Saudi Arabia the Saudi-Iran talks are of paramount importance because of the tension in their backyard, Yemen.

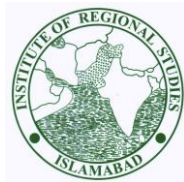
The Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian met his counterparts from different countries including the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud on the side lines of the conference in Jordan. Tweeting the highlights of the meeting, the Iranian foreign minister said that Saudi Arabia was open to resumption of the talks. In the light of this tweet, a sixth round is anticipated anytime soon for the first time at the level of foreign ministers.

But there are several impediments awaiting the two countries in doing so. First and the foremost being the political turmoil in Iraq itself which is the host country of the negotiations. In October, after the infighting between the political blocs, Prime Minister Shia al-Sudani came to power through the support of Iranian backed coalition. Furthermore, Iran intensified its rhetoric against Saudi Arabia by accusing the latter of propagating false news against Iran, which according to Iran has instigated terrorism inside the country amidst the nation-wide protests that began in September 2022.<sup>10</sup> Also, the empowerment of the entities in Iraq that have affiliation to Iran

makes the status of Iraq questionable as a mediator. Moreover, the suspicions and the threat perception on both sides have left the success of the talks in jeopardy. The meeting of the foreign ministers however is a message to the international community that both the countries want the door of negotiations open yet the hopes shouldn't be kept high due to the aforementioned reasons. Despite these impediments the success of the talks is important for both Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi-Iran talks started in the backdrop of the Vienna talks. The US under the Biden administration showed the commitment to resume the JCPOA talks. On the top of that in forty-two years, for the first time, there is an administration in the US which aims to engage less into the matters of the Middle East. Also, the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan is a positive development for Iran. These developments were being closely monitored by Iran. The pre and post elections statements and actions of the Biden administration were under the consideration of Irani officials as well. Considering this backdrop and prospects in mind, if Iran manages to make talks a success with Saudi Arabia, then it can intimidate the US into gaining more concessions and leverage out the JCPOA, if the deal is resumed.

The broader objective that Iran can derive from the success of these talks is the conclusion of the Iranian Islamic revolution. According to Ayatollah Khamenei, the revolution has not concluded yet. In 1990's while addressing to IRGC, he outlined five stages of the Islamic revolution i.e., the revolution itself which Iran has achieved, establishing the Islamic regime, state, society and eventually the



civilization.<sup>11</sup> Iran is in the middle of the fourth stage of creating an Islamic society. To achieve this goal Iran is working from within through its clerics and the government. To achieve the fifth stage and thus for the completion of the revolution that is the creation of the Islamic civilization, the presence of the US in the region is an impediment. So, in the Iran's calculus this is the right time to achieve this goal and resist any form of US presence in the region. The success of these talks will send a signal to the US that the countries of the region are responsible and can talk out their problems and thus don't need US as a policeman in the region. The least interest of the current US administration as mentioned before makes in an ideal time to execute the plan and try to make these talks a success. These talks from Iran are more of a PR move to prompt US to move out of the region. The feat of talks with a key US ally in the region will also tarnish the reputation of the hegemon which will be a victory for Iran. Iran also expects that Saudi-backed negative propagation through media would end if the negotiations are a triumph. Moreover, the success of talks will help Iran build a positive reputation before the regional states and will be a confidence building development as well. This can in turn foster Iran's talks and cooperation with other regional states as well, leading to better economic opportunities.

The outlook projected by Saudi Arabia in the media was not as optimistic as of Iran's. As mentioned earlier for Saudi Arabia these talks are more of an exploratory venture. Nevertheless, the success of these talks has prospects for Saudi Arabia as well. Saudi Arabia under the leadership of Muhammad Bin Salman has directed all its energies towards achieving

the 2030 goals which are predominantly economic in nature. For this reason, its need a stable backyard in the shape of Yemen and stability in the region for better economic opportunities for the investment. Saudi Arabia expects Iran to end Yemen War which it is fighting through proxies. This end to the war will save the Saudis a fortune which they can redirect to the economic development of the country. Success of the talks would mean stability in the region which means better prospects for investment.

The talks are a healthy and helpful opportunity for both Saudi Arabia and Iran, if, both the states are willing to see through and avail the fruits of it. Inability to achieve a major breakthrough will further widen the gap and increase the trust deficit between both the countries. For the sake of the region and the development of the people in it the two giants of the region should act responsible. Failure of these parleys will lead to exacerbation in the instability of the previously volatile region, worsening of the humanitarian crisis in Syria Yemen. Also, Saudi Arabia has withdrawn much needed capital from the Lebanese banks due to the issue of Hezbollah. If the matter were not resolve then the economic turmoil in Lebanon will exacerbate. Moreover, the Iranian-Saudi rivalry makes it nearly impossible for the greater powers to mitigate the conflict in the region. If this rivalry can be allayed, there are prospects for great powers like US and Russia to work towards constructive engagement with the local actors in Syria and other flashpoints in the Middle Eastern region for conflict resolutions. The tussle between the two giants of the region will inevitably draw the foreign powers into

conflict zones like Yemen Iraq and Syria leading to chaos at local, regional and international level. The robust opportunities of cooperation between US and Russia in Syria and bracing Assad regime in the region will vaporize if the diplomatic process collapses. Furthermore, the risk of Russia and US engaging into a conflict increases if Iran and Saudi Arabia continue to support their proxies in the region. So, both the countries should set aside their hardcore ideological differences and focus more on the

similarities and centripetal forces between them. They should also realize the fact that such occasions come rarely in history and should be mindful of the significance of this occasion. Saudi Arabia should be willing pull its hands back from the negative media projection of Iran whereas, Iran should also be willing to lessen the presence of IRGC and the backing of proxies against the Saudi Arabia in the region to accomplish substantial and concrete outcomes from these talks.

### Notes and References

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- <sup>11</sup> Mohammed Alsulami, Kasra Aarabi and Banafsheh Keynoush, "Saudi-Iran Talks," *Middle East Institute*, (Podcast) December 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/multimedia/podcast/saudi-iran-talks>.