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Saudi Arabia's Quiet Diplomacy with Iran
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Introduction

Recently, Saudi Arabia confirmed the kingdom's quiet openings with Iran that put the regional security narratives of the King Salman bin Abdul Aziz period into question. Since both states severed their ties in 2016, it was the first time in April 2021 when Saudi leadership under King Salman shifted its hostile language into a moderate one. Moreover, it stated the kingdom's aspiration for [a good relationship with Iran](#). At the official level, the Saudi government announced [their hope for direct talks](#) with the Ebrahim Raisi government if it contributes to peace, stability, and [confidence-building](#). The process of moderating its foreign policy discourse appeared as part of the kingdom's recognition of diversifying its allies inside and outside the region to ensure stability and confidence in the royal rule at home. However, Saudi-Iran relations evolve around the interconnected threat perceptions of the decision-makers on both sides. It is prone to change continuously as the decision-makers redefine their security priorities regarding the conflicts and tensions in the domestic structure. Plus, the emerging regional crisis, strains, and conflicts regularly serve to cripple the process of building a mutual regional security understanding between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Transformation of the Domestic Rhetoric and Reconstruction of Iranian Foreign Policy under Salman Doctrine

The King Salman period initiated a process of rapid social, political, and economic changes in the domestic sphere as a response to the regional crisis and conflicts since January 2015. Under the Salman doctrine, supervised by the current Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia found itself in an environment to create new points of reference for its regional security narratives at the perception of the Saudi people besides the regional and international audience. In this manner, the new government began a reconstruction process of traditional Saudi narratives at home. This process went hand in hand with centralizing the royal power in the hands of the trusted royal figures of the government and dismissing some senior princes in the succession line like Prince Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz, Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz, and Prince Nayef bin Mohammed.

Disregarding the seniority principle of the decision-making process helped the Salman government control the new government's narrative construction. Herewith, Salman doctrine enforced a Saudi first policy with a renewed nationalist tone out of the monopoly of the Kingdom's Wahhabi characteristics. At the economic level, it publicized a new state model in [Saudi Vision 2030](#) built upon the diversification of the Saudi economy from the oil wealth through encouraging

Saudi peoples to invest inside the kingdom. It would also attract international customers to seek contracts in various sectors of the kingdom.

Besides its domestic reform process, the Salman government redefined its foreign policy rhetoric towards Iran as an external adversary desired for the dissolution of the political systems of the neighbors. The military aspect of rhetoric was incorporated within the foreign policy discourse of the kingdom more decisively than before, which was illustrated in the cases of Syria and Yemen. Within the reconstruction of Iran as the leading cause of all the crises and conflicts in the region, Saudi Arabia presented itself as an actor protecting the region from Iranian hegemonic ideals. Nevertheless, the Salman period avoided excessive weight to the Iranian threat to Saudi Arabia in its foreign policy discourse; instead, it portrayed Iran as an existential, sectarian and ideological threat to the whole region that insidiously penetrated the domestic structures of the neighbors. However, the region's shifting economic and political components repositioned the regional actors' security perceptions. They directed the Salman government to take a moderate change in its threat perception towards Iran.

Regional and Domestic Sources of Rhetorical Change towards Iran

Salman doctrine began portraying the kingdom as a reasonable regional actor, not having an inherent hostility towards others. It polished the concepts of regional stability, security, and peace with the neighbors in Saudi

foreign policy rhetoric. After [an interview with Crown Prince Mohammed in Al-Arabiya, in April 2021](#), Saudi Arabia opened the way for a possible rapprochement with Iran by portraying Iran as a neighbor that the kingdom desires to [glow](#). This shift came as a surprise given the previous descriptions of the Iranian Supreme Leader [Ayatollah Khamenei as a new Hitler](#) in the region. It was substantially an outcome of Crown Prince Mohammed's perceived deteriorated image of the Yemen war as well as the Biden administration's red lines with the several regional actors, such as putting a distance with Israeli governance and renegotiating a nuclear deal with Iran without a compromise in returning to the terms of the annulled agreement of the Obama administration.

Several factors brought a perception change in the government towards regional cooperation with the current adversaries. [The military withdrawal of the United Arab Emirates \(UAE\) from Yemen in mid 2019](#) caught Saudi Arabia in a sense of loneliness in the region, given the kingdom's disillusion from a major ally with whom it had initially cooperated over the Muslim Brotherhood, Iran, and Qatar issues. The rise of distrust towards the old allies directed the kingdom to review its economic and national self-interests, even if it was at the expense of the friendly neighbors or in favor of the old enemies. To illustrate, [Saudi Arabia amended the rules of imports of the goods made in free zones](#) that are the primary driver of the UAE's economy. Alongside the indirect challenges to the UAE economy, Saudi Arabia encountered [a conflict with the UAE over the timing of the oil prices cut in July 2021](#). It demonstrated that GCC

states do not hide their divergencies; instead, they lay them on the international audience to legitimize their positions.

Another factor contributing to the perception change on the Saudi side was the arrival of the Joe Biden administration to power in the US. Although the reconciliation of the Gulf crisis in the Al-Ula Summit was held just two weeks before the arrival of the new US administration, the fact that Saudi Arabia initiated the Summit demonstrated a perceptual change of the kingdom towards the regional dynamics. In a short time, the Biden administration could influence several regional developments such as calming tensions between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the peace negotiations with Yemen, and a reconstruction of an official dialogue rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Biden administration's red lines with [Saudi](#), [Israel](#), [Turkey](#), and [Iran](#), contrary to the Trump administration's investment conditioned relations, moved the Saudi foreign policy rhetoric towards regional cooperation with others like Turkey and Iran. Although the Biden administration refrained from certain sanctions to the kingdom, it published [a US intelligence report](#) on human rights violations by Saudi Arabia. It blamed Crown Prince Mohammed for the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018. It constituted one of the primary drivers of the change in the Saudi regional security perception while putting the royal power in question at home and ended with the [house arrest of the former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef](#). For all that, Crown Prince Mohammed defined the US as a strategic partner that the kingdom

agrees with in [more than 90%](#) of the regional affairs, while referring to the %10 of the divergencies both on Yemen war and the renewal of a nuclear deal with Iran.

The regional wave of [normalization between Israel, Bahrain, and the UAE](#), since the end of 2020, began to confirm the unofficial relations between the GCC states and Israel. The sense of loneliness on the Saudi side, seeing the Gulf neighbors' individual decisions to restore relations with the others, and the lack of confirmation of the Biden administration for the Saudi regional acts caused a rhetorical change officially since April 2021. While the [Saudi-Iranian meeting in Baghdad led by Saudi intelligence chief Khalid bin Ali al-Humaidan](#) was formally denied by the kingdom in April 2021, the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud, confirmed the ongoing dialogue in early October. After the official announcement of the quiet dialogue, Iran began presenting an outspoken attitude by pointing the Saudi side for the cut off relations, as illustrated in the speech of the Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian: ["It was not us who broke off diplomatic relations – that was a Saudi decision."](#)

In the same vein with the statements of Iran, Saudi Arabia restated its concerns over the Iranian nuclear program, Iranian-backed militias in neighboring countries, and Iran's ballistic missile program. In Yemen, Saudi officials insisted on Houthis cross-border actions and de-escalation needs for the reconciliation. [The meeting between Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Yemen, Mohamed al-Jabir](#), and the United Nations Security Council ambassadors in November

2021 to ask for support for Yemen's official government demonstrated Saudi's determination on its claims.

Domestic political developments and crises, particularly in Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon, continuously disrupt the relations and constitute an irresolvable regional spiral to reach a mutual threat perception. Although the Iraqi government's close ties with Iran create a sense of distrust among the Saudi decision-makers, the Iraqi officials' endeavors for gaining political independence from Iranian influence, from time to time, lets the kingdom consider regional cooperation. On the Lebanon side, the recent political crisis with Saudi Arabia emerged after the Information Minister of Lebanon, George Kordahi, portrayed Houthi rebels as ["defending themselves... against an external aggression"](#). The Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, interpreted Kordahi's statements as ["insulting"](#) and ["part of the influence of Hezbollah, as an Iranian proxy"](#), over Lebanon's political aggression against the legitimacy in Yemen. The immediate shift in the Saudi foreign policy rhetoric from a moderate tone into negative statements illustrated the fluidity and susceptible nature of the kingdom's regional security perception towards Iran that the political tensions with the neighbors can easily convert.

Conclusion

Biden administration's changing priorities in the Middle East have reversed the unimaginable process of easing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran during the Trump administration. Diminishing the US's military involvement policy in the region

was practiced through the US's departure from Afghanistan in August 2021, and keeping distance with the leaderships in Iraq, Jordan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. The perceptual shift in US foreign policy has challenged the regional security narratives of the kingdom, particularly towards Iran, since the beginning of 2021. Despite the apparent rapprochement process at the discourse level, regional crisis and political tensions with neighboring countries like Lebanon disrupt a mutual security understanding between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The deterrent facts of political crises do not secure a rapid diplomatic process, particularly without achieving reconciliation among the political actors in Yemen. The substantial weight of the political turmoil at neighbors in shifting the route of the Saudi-Iran relations demonstrates the process of a possible rapprochement will develop gradually on tiptoes to avoid aggressive policies on the ground.

About the author

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