

FROM RIVALS TO RECONCILERS: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF IRAN-SAUDI CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

Iran-Saudi rapprochement presents a unique case study where the erstwhile rivals, while still competing in the Middle East, have undergone a shift in their bilateral affairs. It is not to say that the issues between the two regional powers have been resolved or the apprehensions about each other have subsided; instead, what is astonishing, rather than pragmatic, on the part of both Iran and Saudi Arabia is the management of their disputes. For example, Saudi Arabia has stopped commenting on Iran's nuclear and missile program, while Iran has prevented Houthis from attacking Saudi Arabia by utilising its influence over the armed group. Not only has the cessation of hostilities between these two states occurred, but the bilateral relations have also entered into a positive phase. For example, the restoration of diplomatic channels, resumption of Hajj pilgrimages and working together in OIC for the Palestinian cause reflect the upward trajectory in the bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. To understand this transformation, the paper will theoretically analyse the factors and features of the Iran-Saudi rapprochement. The paper would also explore the different perspectives of both Iran and Saudi Arabia to understand the motivations behind their rapprochement.

Keywords: Iran-Saudi Rapprochement, Transcend Method, Conflict Transformation, Middle East, China's Mediation.

Introduction

The enduring rivalry between Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has remained a defining feature of the volatile situation in the Middle East, which

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influences the regional and global affairs. The rivalry, rooted in historical, ideological, and geopolitical dynamics, has manifested in the forms of proxy conflicts, sectarian crises, and quest for regional dominance, both politically and strategically, causing instability and insecurity across the Middle East. The root cause of Iran-Saudi rivalry is a complex web of issues that have shaped their contentious relationship for a long time. The rivalry can be traced back to the contending views on Islamic leadership and legitimacy. Iran, representing Shia Islam, and KSA, spearheading Sunni Islam, have led to a religious divide that has now been compounded by geopolitical ambition as they eye regional hegemony in the region and beyond.¹

These historic ideological differences were exacerbated by the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the rise of political Islam (Shia version) as the basis of the new Iranian government.² This deepened the ideological confrontation between the two leading countries and fueled sectarian tensions not only domestically but regionally as well. This root cause of animosity played out across various arenas, including proxy conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. At the same time, strategic and economic competition over control of vital waterways and energy resources also began to take shape.³ The rivalry was epitomised in the form of destructive consequences resulting from the clash between KSA and Iran-backed Houthis. The Syrian civil war also provided a battleground for regional powers, causing the conflict to prolong and exacerbate human suffering.⁴

Amidst this backdrop of the conflict, recent developments have indicated a potential thaw in Iran-Saudi relations. With the mediation of China and the prevalence of a pragmatic and moderate approach towards one another, there is hope for further enhancement of relations between the two states. Diplomatic initiatives, such as backchannel communication, third-party mediation, and track-two diplomacy, have ushered in a period of potential reconciliation. Although these developments have signalled a departure from the entrenched hostility of the past, the path to absolute reconciliation remains fraught with several challenges posed by peace spoilers. Deep-seated mistrust compounded by the external factors, such as the involvement of the US and Israel, can cause divergence of interests.

Since the Iran-KSA rivalry poses a formidable obstacle to regional peace and security, it is therefore pertinent to understand the root cause of the conflict and the measures that can be taken to bring the two parties in the conflict to

peace. This research examines the trajectory of Iran and KSA towards peace. It analyses the impacts on regional stability, as well as the involvement of global powers in either facilitating peace between the two or creating obstacles. The causes of reconciliation have been explored, and this study aims to contribute to further understanding of the complexity of bringing peace in enduring conflicts and the process of conflict transformation in the contemporary Middle East.

Historical Background of Iran-Saudi Conflict

The rivalry between Iran and KSA dates back to the early period of Islamic expansion. The conquest of the Persian Empire by the Arabs in the 7th century AD led to the beginning of the Arab-Persian rivalry.⁵ In the contemporary era, modern Iran, as the successor to the Persian Empire, and KSA, as the leader of the Arabs, contested with each other for the leadership role in the Muslim world. Both countries hold pride in their cultural and religious evolution. Iran has a rich culture and history dating back almost 2500 years, when it was known as Persia. Persians have always maintained their distinct identities even after the arrival of Islam in the region. After the Arab conquests of Persia, Islam spread throughout the empire; however, Persia was “Islamized” but never “Arabized”.⁶ The land has not, to date, lost its rich cultural and historical identity. The Persian Empire adopted Shia Islam as its official religion during the Safavid dynasty in the 16th century, mainly due to its competition with the rival Sunni Ottoman Empire.⁷ On the other hand, Salafist ideology, also known as *Wahhabism* – the extreme version of Sunni Islam – was born in KSA.⁸ KSA is also revered as a leader in the Sunni world due to the presence of the holiest sites and funding of religious education across the globe.⁹ This shows that both countries have strong historical and religious backgrounds.

The recent rivalry intensified due to one major factor, which is “politicisation of religion”. In KSA, a nexus emerged between Wahhabism (known as the Al-Sheikh family) and the royal ruling family of Al-Saud.¹⁰ In Iran, following the 1979 revolution, Shia Islam assumed a distinct form of political Islam. The revolution brought about a significant shift in the regional balance after overthrowing the Western-backed monarchy of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and challenging the influence of other allies in the Middle East. Although competition existed before, it intensified right after the revolution, when the preeminent Sunni power of KSA was challenged on both ideological and political grounds. The Iranian leadership’s idea of exporting the revolution outside the country essentially threatened the Arab world. Therefore, during the Iran-Iraq war

(1980-1988), KSA and other Gulf countries provided substantial financial and logistical support to Saddam of Iraq against Iran.¹¹ This action of the Arab countries further exacerbated the tensions between Iran and KSA. It played out majorly in the form of sectarian conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain, where Iran and KSA supported rival proxy groups. For example, in Syria, Iran backed the Assad government while the KSA supported rebel Islamist groups.¹² A similar situation was in Yemen, where Iran supported the rebel group, Houthis, while KSA supported the Yemeni government.¹³ Iran's nuclear program has also remained a bone of contention between the two countries for a long time. Other aspects, such as the Arab Spring, the Iran nuclear deal, the leadership transition and the crisis in the Levant, led to the intensification of conflict between Iran and KSA until 2023, when a peace deal was agreed upon between the two states through the mediation of China.¹⁴ With the rapprochement, the conflict between Iran and KSA has been transformed, which would be analysed through the theoretical lens developed by Johan Galtung.

Transforming Iran-KSA Conflict: Galtung's Theory in Practice

To understand the transformation of the Iran-KSA conflict, it is pertinent to examine it through a theoretical lens. Johan Galtung, a prominent scholar, has presented his ideas on conflict transformation, focusing on both interstate and intrastate conflicts. Given the scope of the present research, the focus is on the interstate conflict transformation through the lens of Galtung's structural paradigm.

Forms of Violence and Iran-KSA Conflict

Galtung identifies causes of conflict by focusing on direct, structural and cultural violence.¹⁵ Direct violence manifests in the form of war or any direct military aggression between states, which can be due to a power struggle over territory or resources. Although power politics is at play in the cases of Iran and KSA, it has never resulted in direct conflict between the two. Structural violence, according to Galtung, emerges when there exist systemic or institutional inequalities between states. Such a kind of structural violence is mostly an intra-state process. It occurs when there is economic inequality, political oppression, or social inequality; however, this cause does not apply to the case of the Iran-KSA conflict. Cultural conflict justifies direct or structural conflict, through the prism of cultural factors. Cultural conflicts emerge due to differences in ideology, ethnicity, and religion.

The distinct sense of identity can emerge due to historical grievances or a heightened sense of nationalism that can lead to conflict between groups or states.¹⁶ To analyse the conflict transformation between Iran and KSA, it is first pertinent to examine the nature and underlying causes of the conflict between them. In terms of the nature of the conflict, the Iran-KSA conflict has never been a case of direct violence. This is because the Iran-KSA rivalry was not about claims over territory or resources, but rather a conflict of influence, identity, and power politics. This conflict has been primarily ideological, which has not led to direct conflict but rather to indirect conflict through the use of proxy groups.

For instance, when Houthis launched a direct attack on Saudi oil facilities in 2019, it was not considered a direct attack by Iran. Still, since it supported Houthis, it was an incident of indirect conflict.¹⁷ The structural aspect of conflict cannot be applied in the case of Iran-KSA since it is not a question of economic or social inequality or institutional disparity. The Iran-KSA conflict can be viewed more in the context of cultural dynamics that span historical, nationalistic, and ideological animosities. The identity consciousness and the sense of otherness that prevail in their relationship are rooted in their history. The historical grievances and hyper-nationalism are the prime characteristics of the cultural conflict that exists between Iran and KSA.

Iran-KSA and Conflict Triangle

Galtung also developed a framework which he called “conflict triangle”.¹⁸ Three factors, namely attitudes, behaviours and contradictions, sit at the three corners of a triangle. The first factor is the hostile attitudes between states and the perceptions or narratives built regarding the enemy. The perceptions can be misunderstood or part of a propaganda through which the image of the enemy is constructed to justify the cause of conflict or differences. The second factor is behaviour, which refers to aggressive or coercive actions that may include direct military attacks, economic sanctions, or any diplomatic rift. The third factor is the contradictions, which are basically the differences or incompatibility of goals, which may be due to identity, religion, ethnicity, claim over resources or territory. These factors contribute to the conflict, and there is a need to bring about a positive change in all of them to transform the conflict and achieve lasting peace. The conflict triangle mechanism, as proposed by Johan Galtung, provides a lens through which to understand the actual conflict between Iran and KSA.

The contradictions between Iran and KSA explained earlier are based on sectarian differences, geopolitical rivalry and the quest for regional domination. Both KSA and Iran follow different and opposing versions of Islam. The Iranian political system is based on the notion of *Vilayat e Faqih*, which means “Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist”.¹⁹ This idea is central to the political structure of Iran, which asserts the authority of a jurist over political and social matters. This idea is mainly derived from the Shia interpretation of Islam. On the contrary, KSA follows the ideology of Wahabism developed by a Sunni fundamentalist figure, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab, in the 18th century.²⁰ The idea was based on purifying Islam from practices that deviate from the strict interpretation of Sharia. It gained massive popularity in the Arabian Peninsula and greatly influenced the Al-Saud tribe.²¹ Wahhabism is more rigid and conservative in viewing other interpretations, especially of Shia Islam, which has eventually resulted in sectarian tensions throughout the Muslim world.

Both ideologies are distinct yet quite influential as they not only influence the political systems of respective countries but also aim at expanding the ideas throughout the Muslim world, leading to an ideological competition. These contradictions shape the attitudes of both Iran and KSA. Most of the Persian-speaking people view Arabs as *Bedouin* who lack culture. This stereotyping still exists among many Iranians who feel pride in their own rich culture and history.²² Similarly, KSA and other Arab countries see Iran’s goals of exporting the revolution beyond its borders as intervention. These attitudes further shape the conflict and channelise the behaviour of the two states, which has resulted in proxy wars, KSA’s support for economic coercion against Iran and the diplomatic rift between the two states.

Iran-KSA Relations and Galtung’s Peace Concept

As introduced by Galtung, there are two concepts of peace: negative peace and positive peace.²³ Negative peace refers to the mere absence of any direct conflict or war. This, however, does not mean that a lasting peace has been achieved; instead, it’s only the absence of an overt conflict, while the covert, deeply rooted grievances are still there. Justice and equality are not established in this case. On the other hand, positive peace is the one that not only eliminates direct conflict but also establishes social justice and equality. It is the elimination of all three forms of conflict: direct, structural and cultural. This kind of peace is more sustainable and long-lasting because it addresses the root causes and brings a transformation in the attitude, behaviour and contradictions of the states. It is

also possible that conflict transformation occurs in two steps, where first negative peace is established and then efforts are made to attain positive peace. The deal between Iran and KSA initially established is what Galtung labelled as negative peace. The agreement itself provided an immediate solution to the conflict, with the resumption of diplomatic relations and the reopening of embassies in 2023, creating a channel of direct communication and reducing the risk of miscommunication.²⁴ The immediate security concerns were also addressed with the cessation of proxy wars and hostile rhetoric against one another. However, to make it more sustainable, there is a need to transform it into positive peace by moving further than just stopping confrontation and addressing the root cause of the conflict, which is based on ideological and political dimensions. However, efforts are made by both countries to soften their stance, mainly because of the modernisation process going on in KSA, which is seen as a policy of shifting away from the extremist ideology of Wahhabism.²⁵ Moreover, economic cooperation, political inclusion, respect for sovereignty, social and cultural reconciliation, and regional stability can bring about positive peace in relations between Iran and KSA.

Transcend Method for Iran-KSA Conflict Transformation

Galtung introduced a “Transcend Method” as one of the first steps to transform the conflict, which has the following aspects.

Conflict Diagnosis

The first aspect is “conflict diagnosis,” as elaborated before, which is essential to understand the underlying causes, dynamics of the conflict, as well as the interests of the states involved. There is a need to identify whether a conflict is taking place directly, structurally or culturally. The conflict must be mapped by identifying the relevant actors involved. These could be primary actors who are directly involved in the conflict, as well as some external or secondary actors who are influencing the conflict indirectly. In cases of bilateral disputes between states, secondary actors could be regional or international powers that have vested interests in the conflict. After identifying the actors, their goals and interests need to be determined, along with the legitimacy of their claims. This helps to understand how each party views the conflict, how they can show cooperation in case of negotiations and in which issues their stance might not bend.

The relationship between these actors is also essential as there are hostile, neutral and allied actors. The relationship among the primary and secondary

actors defines the power dynamics and highlights the space for negotiations and dialogue. Moreover, it is pertinent to understand what the goals are that actors might seek to achieve from conflict resolution. For this, third-party mediation and confidence-building measures are crucial while assessing the right time and readiness of the parties to establish peace. The power dynamics show which actor has how much power in terms of political, military, economic and social aspects. Power dynamics also show the cultural and structural influences over the conflict in cases of inequality and cultural biases. There are historical roots to the conflict, but also immediate triggers that result in its escalation. These triggers can assist in identifying the points of intervention and negotiation. For conflict diagnosis, the underlying causes, the maturity of the conflict and the interests of different actors have to be considered. The underlying causes, being ideological and regional competition, shape the conflict by characterising its nature as a cultural conflict.

Based on the assessment of the variables above, the actors involved in the present case study are both primary and secondary. The primary actors are the ones which are party to the conflict, like Iran and KSA. The secondary actors include regional and international entities such as Arab countries (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE), Israel, China, and the US. The conflict between Iran and KSA either directly or indirectly impacts all of these secondary actors. For example, Iraq since 2003, Syria under Assad, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen, religious groups in Bahrain and Hamas in Palestine were allies of Iran and part of its Axis of Resistance.²⁶ While the Arab countries, especially the GCC countries, are much closer to KSA. Israel is blatantly opposed to Iran, but it has been trying to get into cooperative terms with the KSA. It has been successful to some level in establishing relations with some of the Arab countries, but the KSA has still not established full-fledged ties with Israel. The US is an ally of the KSA but has adversarial relations with Iran. China's role in the Middle East is neutral, which is why its mediation efforts were acceptable to both Iran and KSA.

Setting Goals

The second step of Galtung's transcend method is "setting goals".²⁷ Such goals must be established which are positive in the sense that they are shared by all the parties involved. The goals should be realistic, achievable, and ones that transform the conflict entirely, rather than creating new problems. The transformative goals must be aimed at achieving sustainable peace conditions. Shared goals for conflict transformation between Iran and KSA can only be

understood by recognising their individual goals first. Both of them want regional domination to attain security. If the primary cause of concern, which is the security threat, is removed, then cooperation can be achieved. For example, Iran uses its proxies to attain regional domination, which the KSA counters by confronting Iran. Therefore, through utilising its influence over the Houthis to prevent the group from attacking KSA, Iran has eradicated the security dilemma of KSA. The proxy groups allied with Iran are still present, but now they are not directed against the KSA. Such goals are realistic and achievable. If KSA had remained strict to its earlier narrative of completely ending Iranian support for proxy groups, that would not have been a realistic goal. This is how transformation occurred in the case of Iran-KSA following the rapprochement.

Generating Creative Solutions

Whether the transformation is initiated by a mediator or by the states involved in the conflict, the aim is “generating creative solutions” as per the transcend method.²⁸ This requires extensive brainstorming sessions to consider a wide range of potential solutions that can not only transform the root cause of the conflict but also initiate cooperation in constructive domains, such as economic and cultural exchanges. The solutions must aim to achieve a win-win situation where all the parties in the conflict gain considerable benefits. The brainstorming process should not be conducted without engaging the parties involved, as solutions will be sustainable and agreeable only if they are indigenous, i.e., emanating from the conflict parties. The solutions must be transcendent in nature, which surpass the existing conflictual perceptions of the actors by creating new realities. Enhanced cultural and economic exchanges can be creative solutions to resolve the political conflict between Iran and the KSA. For example, an agreement has been made regarding the Iranian pilgrims who will be admitted to perform Hajj, as there was previously a ban on Iranians to visit KSA to perform Hajj.²⁹ Moreover, cooperation on climate change and environmental issues can also be a creative way of increasing cooperation.

Implementation and Evaluation

The next step is “implementation and evaluation”.³⁰ An action plan is developed based on the agreed-upon goals and solutions, with the consent of the relevant parties. The action plan outlines the practical steps to be taken, including deadlines for implementing the plan or its components, and other requirements. This step involves the building of an agreement, such as a ceasefire or resumption of diplomatic relations between the states. The agreement process requires an

active role for mediators, such as an international organisation or civil society, to facilitate the talks. After the negotiation and agreement have taken place, there is a need to develop a monitoring framework to monitor and assess the progress of the agreement, address any pending or newly emerging issues and make changes to the agreement if required. The Iran-KSA rapprochement is a resilient deal which did not break off even after the Gaza conflict began on October 7, 2023.³¹ The Gaza conflict was a test case for the agreement, as KSA was also looking towards reconciliation with Israel. The ceasefire still holds, and KSA faces no threats from the Iran-backed groups, especially the Houthis. It was evident during the October 07 Gaza-Israel war, where Houthis remained fixated on countering Israeli ships in the Red Sea and didn't attack any of the Saudi sites. The diplomatic relations also resumed after the agreement and are growing.

Sustainable Peace

The last step of Galtung's transcend method is to ensure that a "sustainable peace" is established through structural changes and cultural transformation.³² The transformation must be institutionalised on all levels, including military, economic, political and social. New institutions must be created if required to avoid relapse into conflict. The dialogue process should remain ongoing with the introduction of new joint projects and confidence-building measures. Cultural exchanges and track-two diplomacy can help engage civil society and academics who may understand the benefits of maintaining peace with the enemy. To make the deal more sustainable, the cooperation between Iran and KSA should include all areas, such as political, economic, military, social and cultural. While political-level collaboration has been initiated through the resumption of diplomatic ties, investment in each other's countries, the establishment of a joint maritime force to secure commercial ships and energy lanes, and cultural and academic exchange programs could help facilitate the consolidation of bilateral ties.

Unpacking the Transformation of Iran-KSA Conflict

The reconciliation process between Iran and KSA has been ongoing since 2021 under Baghdad talks.³³ However, mutual mistrust could not be resolved, and neither side was willing to make concessions.³⁴ Nonetheless, specific changes at the domestic and geopolitical levels brought a shift in the policies of both countries. KSA did a strategic re-evaluation after the 2019 attacks on its oil facilities by the Houthis and the inconsistent US policies towards the Middle

East.³⁵ Additionally, Donald Trump's remarks during his first presidency to reduce the defence guarantees for the KSA made Saudi leaders more vulnerable.³⁶ Moreover, Saudi Arabia's aggressive policy in the region backfired, as witnessed in cases of the Yemen crisis and the Qatar blockade, where KSA had to retract from its original position and resorted to negotiations. On the other hand, Iran also wanted to prevent further encirclement by Israel and maintain its deterrence capabilities, especially in the aftermath of the Abraham Accords and the US "maximum pressure policy". Therefore, the reasons for involving parties to pursue Iran-Saudi rapprochement are as follows.

KSA's Perspective

KSA's shift towards a pragmatic approach vis-à-vis Iran came after the 2019 attacks on Saudi oil facilities by the Houthis.³⁷ Moreover, KSA under Muhammad bin Salman – the crown prince and de facto ruler – has goals for economic diversification and modernisation that cannot be achieved without reducing regional tensions. A greater focus on military spending was necessary to ensure national security, which barred KSA from pursuing its envisioned goals until 2030.³⁸ To establish its strategic autonomy, KSA also moved closer to China, Russia and OPEC+ countries while striking a balance in relations with Iran and Israel.³⁹ Saudi policies hinted towards a move away from dependence or reliance on the US. All these factors indicate that KSA wants to pursue an independent foreign policy, focusing on reducing its dependence on the US and mending its relations with regional foes to ensure its 2030 vision.

Iran's Perspective

From the Iranian perspective, there has been a domestic political shift with the cohesive approach towards foreign policy pursued by the late President Ebrahim Raisi. He aimed to align foreign policy with Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) objectives and pursue regional hegemony by increasing Iran's influence over the non-state proxy and state partners of Iran. It also corresponded to Iran's 'Neighbourhood First Policy' and 'Look East Policy', in which Iran prioritised its relations with regional neighbouring states and eastern powers, such as Russia and China.⁴⁰ This policy helped Iran join the multilateral forums of the SCO and BRICS+. This policy was further complemented by the disengagement of the US from the Middle East, which created a vacuum for regional states and eastern powers (China and Russia) to enhance cooperation with each other. Iran has also realised that KSA is gradually reducing its reliance on the US and showing its interest in engaging with Iran's "Axis of Resistance" as

reflected from the Saudi delegation's visit to the Yemeni capital Sanaa and welcoming Bashar Al-Asad back into the Arab League.⁴¹ Moreover, there are also strong strategic interests for Iran to pursue normalisation with the KSA. The Abraham Accords and increased Israeli presence in Azerbaijan and the Kurdistan region of Iraq had threatened Iran.⁴² There was also a fear regarding the possible normalisation between Israel and KSA, which would have eventually created bipolar division in the Middle East with Iran and its Axis of Resistance on one side and Israel, along with Arab nations, on the other. As a result, Iran might have felt encircled as well, which could severely damage its regional position and internal security due to the possible grouping of Arab-Israel-Turkish-Azeri front. Hence, by engaging with KSA, Iran made an effort to prevent the formation of such a nexus.

China's Perspective

The third major actor in Iran-Saudi rapprochement is China. China's role as mediator shows its foreign policy priorities and influence in the Middle East. It is perceived as an unbiased and responsible global power due to its *modus operandi* that focuses on consultation rather than military force, as adopted by the US, especially after the 9/11 attacks. This approach was further solidified under Xi Jinping, who transformed China's foreign policy in two key realms: a proactive role and a facilitator.⁴³ In the context of the Middle East, China has strategic and economic interests based on its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁴⁴ Moreover, it has gained a diplomatic victory by mediating and brokering a deal between Iran and the KSA. At the global level, China wants to strengthen non-US-dominated institutions such as BRICS and SCO. Iran and KSA have also been included in these cooperation institutions, which was not possible before the rapprochement. However, China has been cautious in its approach towards the Middle East because it does not want to get entangled in the complexities of the region or replace the US as a dominating military force.

When there is peace, there is a spoiler's problem because it's not a win-win situation for all the actors involved in the conflict. Reconciliation is a difficult task, but it is even more difficult to achieve conflict transformation and sustainable peace. There are several challenges surrounding the rapprochement between Iran and KSA. The rapprochement is tactical, which resulted from economic and security interests rather than long-term goals. Although it remained resilient in the face of regional tensions that erupted after the Oct 7, 2023, start of the Gaza conflict, the pressure on KSA to recognise Israel is still

there. Although Iran-KSA rapprochement proved to be a setback, it would be interesting to see how a possible Israel-KSA normalisation will impact the rapprochement. US interests in the region, its alliance with the Arab nations and animosity with Iran are a big challenge for the sustenance of the deal in the long run. Regional tensions are increasing as the war in Gaza is prolonging, and a direct stand-off between Iran and Israel is developing. At the regional level, a competition can occur between connectivity projects such as the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEEC) led by KSA and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which Iran pursues.⁴⁵ China's economic and strategic interests under the guise of BRI have also been challenged as a result of the Gaza war. It mediated between Iran and KSA to reduce regional tension, but the Gaza conflict has once again brought instability in the region and insecurity to Chinese interests. All these factors may challenge the resilience of the Iran-KSA rapprochement in the future.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Iran-KSA rapprochement signed on March 10, 2023, marked the end of a historic enmity between the two countries. Political, economic, and strategic concerns, coupled with the interests of global powers, brought the two countries together. Both countries have realised that regional aggression towards one another and a diplomatic rift have yielded nothing except further tensions. Due to an excessive focus on security aspects, the two countries were unable to pursue their domestic economic development goals. Although the mistrust has not fully resolved, it is a positive step towards realising that conflict will not bring any benefits. A lot of issues are pending, like KSA's willingness to normalise with Israel and Iran's regional proxies. Still, the conflict has been transformed in a way that these issues are not directed towards one another.

Iranian support for the proxy groups has not changed, nor has its development of missile and drone technology stopped, but due to the rapprochement, KSA no longer feels threatened. KSA now relies less on military support from the US because of the pacification of the threat posed by the proxy groups. Similarly, Iran sees a way out of the US maximum pressure by integrating into regional cooperation and establishing relations with other global powers such as China and Russia. However, to make the deal more sustainable and resilient, efforts should be made beyond just the resumption of diplomatic relations and security reassurances. Instead, cooperation can be enhanced in fields of

economics, energy, environment and cultural exchanges. Cooperation on non-military issues can transform the Iran-KSA deal into a lasting peace.

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