

China Brokers Deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia

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The deal has been marked as a move back towards stability in the region
Source: Presidency Maldives (via Flickr)

After a seven year stalemate on relations, representatives from Iran and Saudi Arabia have shaken hands on a new effort to establish “neighbourly” relations. Following a four day mediation in China, the two countries agreed to a truce that marks a hopeful, if indefinite, pause to a regional divide.

The deal, confirmed by the Saudi Press Agency on the 10th March, denotes that the two countries will respect state sovereignty by not interfering in each other’s internal affairs. Trade and security relations are to be re-established as well as the reopening of embassies in Riyadh and Tehran within 2 months.

Both sides have embraced the move toward stability. Iran’s Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, notably stated: “The return of normal relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia provides great capacities to the two countries, the region and the Islamic world. The neighbourhood policy, as the key axis of the government’s foreign policy, is strongly moving in the right direction, and the diplomatic apparatus is actively behind the preparation of

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more regional steps.”

Relations between the two nuclear powers had been gridlocked since 2016, when Saudi officially ended ties after demonstrators stormed the Kingdom’s embassy in Tehran. The incident was in reaction to Riyadh’s execution of a prominent Shia cleric.

Since then, the two have openly pointed the geopolitical finger at one another in numerous instances that have threatened to further destabilise the Gulf region. In 2019, Saudi and its most prominent ally, the United States, accused Iran of involvement in an attack by missiles and drones on its oil facilities.

Arab-Iranian tensions trace back further through a number of proxy conflicts that have found the two on opposing sides of violence across the Middle East - in Syria, Lebanon, Qatar and Bahrain - as well as be-

yond the region with each providing military and support to their respective alliances.

The most notable battleground has been in war-torn Yemen, where the Iranian-supported Houthi insurgents seized control of the capital city, Sana’a, which forced out the Saudi-backed government in 2014. This led to a civil war that has caused the displacement of over 4 million people and a humanitarian crisis perpetuated by Saudi’s airstrikes across the country.

The involvement of China, a previously passive observer to the majority of Middle Eastern politics, as

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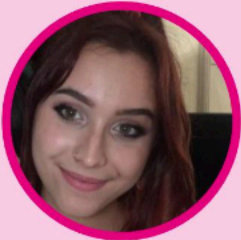
principal peacemaker in the negotiations has come as a curveball to those with an eye on the situation. In 2021, it was the United States that initially encouraged dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the latter of which has played a key role in perpetuating America’s interests and business in the region. A prominent issue has been the containment of Iran, whose nuclear arsenal has posed as a matter of contention for many US administrations.

Despite a handful of Washington-supervised talks between Tehran and Riyadh, it is believed that China’s involvement has provided the final guarantee to the Saudi government of a lasting deal with Iran.

America’s Security Council spokesman, John Kirby, has said: “We support any effort to de-escalate tensions in the region. We think it’s in our interests.” However, the involvement of China has arguably hit a nerve, as Kirby hastily added: “This is not about China and I’m not going to characterise here whatever China’s role is.” The US has also implied doubt over its faith in Iran to meet the obligations of the deal.



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