

# China Brokered Rapprochement: Contextualising Saudi-Iran Rivalry in West Asia

**Dr. Md. Zubeer Ahmed**

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, JDM College, University of Delhi

## Abstract

Longstanding and arch rivals in West Asia, Iran and Saudi Arabia, who pulled out their diplomats and downgraded bilateral relations in 2016, had agreed on a rapprochement in their relations in March 2023. This time, it is not the Western states who were behind such a crucial and successful mediation effort in West Asia, rather, it was brokered by a new global actor—China. Therefore, it will be interesting to study the role of China as a peacemaker and the longevity of the Iran-Saudi rapprochement in the politically volatile West Asian region. As both the states have been competing and damaging each other in their quest to emerge as regional powers, especially since 1979. This rivalry is multilayered and deeply entrenched in their respective historical memories.

To understand the power politics between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the region, an attempt is made in the paper to analyse the efforts of these two countries to project themselves as regional powers. To explain the power politics in the region for regional power status by different states, in contemporary times, the paper has, first, examined the quests of Egypt, Iraq, and Israel and corresponding limitations of them becoming regional powers. Considering the long-standing and multilayered regional rivalry for supremacy between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the paper, in the second part, has examined the question—will China-brokered Iran-Saudi rapprochement be merely a temporary thaw in bilateral relations or will it turn into a long-lasting and comprehensive peace?

**Keywords:** Iran, Saudi Arabia, Rapprochement, regional rivalry, China, West Asia

## Introduction

West Asia is one of the most dynamic, diverse, conflict-prone, and crucial regions of the world. Its regional complexity is due to the habitation of various ethnic groups, sectarian divisions, artificial demarcation of the boundaries of most of the states, establishment of a settler state, availability of large oil reserves, contending ideologies, territorially and politically ambitious states, the impact of secular dictators on religious-minded sections of the population, absence of a regional power, and regular intervention of great powers in the regional politics (Buzan and Weaver 2003: 185-216). These factors have prepared a germane ground for rivalries among the West Asian states, mainly after the end of the Second World War. To take advantage of the absence of a strong and respectable regional power that could steer the West Asian region towards stability and handle the complexities, from time to time, the states such as Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia had projected themselves as potential regional powers in West Asia.

But, due to various limitations, Egypt, Iraq, and Israel failed to emerge as durable and acceptable regional powers in the West Asian region. Whereas, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been intensely competing and damaging each other to emerge as regional powers, essentially, since 1979. This rivalry is multilayered

and deeply entrenched in their respective histories. The ongoing political churning and conflict in the region and the involvement of great powers in it have further intensified the rivalry between them (Keynosh 2016). In 2016, their relations hit rock bottom. They significantly downgraded their bilateral relations and withdrew their diplomats from each other's capitals. The state of affairs between Iran and Saudi Arabia has not only affected regional politics but also had implications for countries like India, which has vital stakes in the region (Ahmad 2022).

On 10 March 2023, the arch rivals-Saudi and Iran agreed on a rapprochement. Unlike before, it was not a Western state who was instrumental in mediating this significant diplomatic breakthrough. The reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia was brokered by a great power, China. Therefore, it will be interesting to examine the role of a new global actor, China, as a peacemaker, sustainer of the agreement, and facilitator of further progress in their bilateral relations. To put the regional rivalry in perspective and understand the power politics between Iran and Saudi Arabia, an attempt is made in the paper to analyse the quests of both states to project themselves as the regional powers in West Asia. In order to explain the power politics in the region for regional power status by different states in contemporary times, the paper has, first, examined the efforts of Egypt, Iraq, and Israel and their limitations, and it underscores state-specific quests and their limitations vis-à-vis the states of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The paper has examined the question—will China-brokered Iran-Saudi rapprochement be merely a thaw in bilateral relations or will it lay the foundation for meaningful partnerships in the future?

### **The attempts to emerge as regional powers by Egypt, Israel, and Iraq**

From time to time, different states had tried to take advantage of the prevailing conditions in the West Asian region and made an attempt to assert their supremacy by leveraging their power advantages over other states in the region. However, these attempts for regional supremacy had led to intense rivalries among the states, which substantially destabilised the state system in West Asia. It further intensified the existing fault lines and conflicts within and between the states in the region. For example, Egypt, under the tutelage of President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s, had tried to emerge as the regional leader by promoting pan-Arab nationalism (Dawisha 2003). But his notion of Arab nationalism was dismissed, particularly by Gulf Monarchies, Iraq, and Western powers. Nasser's pan-Arab nationalism posed a direct threat to the existing sovereign state structure in West Asia.

During the same period, Egypt had also acted as the frontline military state in confronting Israel for the Palestinian cause. As a result, Egypt was admired by the general population of the region for resisting Israel. President Nasser attempted to use this popularity to enhance his and Egypt's status in regional power politics. However, this position of leverage vanished once Egypt delinked itself from the Palestinian issue and unilaterally opened the channel of negotiations with Israel in the 1970s to settle its own territorial disputes and secure its economic interests (Quandt 2005). The Arab states considered the unilateral engagement of Egypt with Israel an act of betrayal of the Palestinian cause, therefore, they engineered the expulsion of Egypt from the membership of the Arab League (Aburish 1999, Lesch 2001). Arab states also imposed an economic embargo on it, which continued for over a decade. Since the 1990s, Egypt has been trying to make a mark in the region as a mediator between Israel and Palestine, but it could not make any credible overall impact.

The state of Israel has been the dominant military power in the region since its foundation. It is also the only state in the Middle East which has nuclear weapons. It wants to maintain this position of hard power leverage at any cost. Therefore, it has never desisted from using military power against its potential rivals.

In 1967, it launched preemptive attacks on three frontline states (Egypt, Syria, and Jordan) and destroyed their air force and military infrastructure (Stine 1999). It also attacked and destroyed the under-construction nuclear reactors of Iraq (1981), Syria (2007). In 2025, Israel attacked Iran and inflicted heavy damage to its defence and nuclear infrastructure (Habibi 2025). It has been exerting diplomatic pressure on America and Western European countries to prevent them from selling offensive weapons to Arab countries, particularly to Saudi Arabia, and to stop Iran from its nuclear enrichment programme.

Iraq under Saddam Hussain's presidency was another state which attempted to establish its supremacy in the region between 1979-1991, on the back of its newfound economic prosperity and military strength after the 1970s oil boom. Revolutionary Iran became the first physical target of Iraq, as it was experiencing political turmoil after the overthrow of the Mohammad Reza Shah regime (the monarch of Iran) in 1979. In 1980, Saddam Hussain ordered a limited war on Iran to display Iraq's quest for regional supremacy. But his military strategy and estimates about Iran's retaliation went terribly wrong. The war dragged on for eight long years, and the consequences of this war on Iraq were devastating. There were hardly any significant gains, but it incurred massive human and material losses. It faced enormous difficulties in rebuilding the destroyed state infrastructure and in maintaining the one million army raised during the war period (Al-Marashi and Salama 2008).

To extricate itself from these troubles, Saddam Hussain took up the second external mission against affluent Kuwait in August 1990. He thought he could successfully subdue Kuwait due to its small size and resolve his domestic problems, but the plan went terribly wrong. Within a few weeks' time, a huge army from 35 countries sanctioned by the United Nations assembled and expelled the Iraqi forces from Kuwait (Khadduri and Ghareeb 1997). The power of Saddam Hussain over parts of Iraq was curtailed through the imposition of no-fly zones on Kurdish and later on Shi'a areas. The sanctions were imposed on Iraq by the international community, which further worsened the condition of the people and the government there (Pasha 2003). Thus, what one could find in the above three examples is: first, the quest for regional supremacy was leader-centric in the case of Egypt and Iraq; therefore, it declined after their defeat and demise. Second, in the case of Israel, the complete reliance on military power had limited its acceptance and influence in the region.

### **The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia for regional supremacy**

In the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia, the rivalry in the region is old and multifaceted. It involves both hard power "carrot and stick" and soft power— "persuasion" capabilities of the state (Nye 2004). They possess these capabilities mainly due to two factors: the availability of oil-generated wealth and the centrality of Islam in their state craft. Since centuries, the rivalry is deeply embedded in their respective Arab and Persian civilizational history. Both of them, simultaneously, nurture the hostility against each other. They judge their own progress by looking at the weakening of their neighbouring adversary.

In ancient times, the Persian rule was extended to the Mediterranean, whereas the Mesopotamian and Tigris/Euphrates civilizations were stretched into Persian territories. The constant tussle between the two civilizations had halted temporarily when the majority of the people had accepted Islam. Subsequently, the two civilisations united under the banner of Islam, after the war of Qadisiyya in 635. In this war, Zoroastrian Persian forces were defeated by Muslim Arab armies. Though the truce did not endure for long. The rivalry metamorphosed into a new form of inter-Islamic conflict for power in West Asia. In the 15th century, the Safawi dynasty of Persia revived the rivalry by officially declaring Shi'ism as the state religion. The move reinforced the division in the Islamic world between the two sects— Sunni and Shia

(Nakash 2006). In the years to come, this sectarian division became more pronounced, having far-reaching implications for the region and beyond.

After the end of the Second World War, the rivalry between Iraq and Saudi Arabia witnessed a thaw, despite the King's (Reza Shah Pahlavi) pursuit to establish Iran as a regional power in West Asia. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia was not as intense as before. This was due to the emergence of other ambitious Arab states such as Nasser's Egypt and Ba'athist Iraq, which wanted to spread their version of pan-Arabism in the region. This posed a direct threat to the stability of many Arab states, including Saudi Arabia. As a strategic response, Saudi Arabia started pursuing a policy of containment vis-à-vis Egypt and Iraq. The other reason for the thaw between Iran and Saudi Arabia during this period was the presence of both states in the Western camp. Hence, Saudi Arabia saw Shah's Iran as a partner in containing Egypt and Iraq's belligerence in the region (Lesch 2001).

The events that surprisingly unfolded in 1979, in both Iran and Saudi Arabia, once again strained the bilateral relations and reactivated the dormant feud between them. Iran witnessed an Islamic Revolution in which the monarchy was ousted from power, and the Shah was forced to leave the country (Freedman 2008). The revolutionary Iranian state retained the Shah's ambition for regional power status for Iran, but it wanted to realise the objective with the use of radical methods. The methods included the questioning of the legitimacy of Saudi rule and an open call to overthrow the dynasty from power. To realise this goal, the revolutionary Iran extended verbal support to dissident Shia groups in the region to spread its version of Islamic ideology (Bakhash 2004). Such a fundamental change in Iran's policy forced Saudi Arabia to reassess its security and integrate the threat emanating from Iran into its security calculus.

On the other hand, in Saudi Arabia, Juhayman al-Otaibi, a radical cleric, along with his associates, laid siege to the Grand Mosque of Mecca. To remove the siege, the Saudi government used French paratroopers (non-Muslims) successfully (Alam 2007). The use of non-Muslim forces to secure the Mosque clearly displayed the limitations of monarchy in safeguarding the two holy places of Islam. This incident allowed Ruhollah Khomeini (the Supreme Leader of Revolutionary Iran) to raise questions about the legitimacy of the al-Saud to be in power (al-Rasheed 2010). To counter this challenge to its legitimacy, the al-Saud Kingdom put its oil wealth to use. The Kingdom significantly increased spending on religious activities and gave a free hand to Salafi clerics, both inside and outside Saudi Arabia, to counter Iranian clerics. Taking a side in the Iran-Iraq war, the Kingdom provided over 40 billion dollars in assistance. It also embarked on modernisation of its military forces by acquiring advanced defence equipment from Western countries. It also formed a regional grouping, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), with other monarchical regimes of the Persian Gulf, to protect its regional stakes (al-Rasheed 2010).

After the death of Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989, efforts were made to mend hostile relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. They proposed to cooperate on a bilateral security pact, membership for Iran in the GCC, the regulation of the price of oil in the international market, etc. (Fraihat 2020). However, the countries failed to make any headway in these areas, mainly because of Saudi Arabia's suspicion towards Iran. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 on America, the listing of Iran as one of the "axis of evil" states by America, the active pursuit of a nuclear programme by Iran, and the hardline stance against Israel by Iran, had greatly impacted Saudi Arabia (Bahgat, Ehteshami, and Quilliam 2017).

In recent years, the intense interplay of this rivalry for regional supremacy between Iran and Saudi Arabia has unfolded in Bahrain, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Iran and Saudi Arabia, both, were found supporting opposite sides in the ongoing internal political conflicts to protect and maximise their influence (Fraihat 2016).

The tide of popular uprisings, “Arab Spring”, demanding political reforms, started in Tunisia in 2010 against the ruling regime, and had a domino effect across the Arab World. It spread like wildfire to other Arab countries. Bahrain was also one of the Arab countries affected by these popular protests. The Shia, numerically a majority sect in Bahrain, were at the forefront of these protests. As a consequence, a danger was looming over the survival of the ruling regime in Bahrain. Thus, to protect the brother Gulf monarchical rule and to quell the popular mobilisation, Saudi Arabia led the initiative to provide troops and military assistance to the Bahrain regime (Gause III 2014).

On the other hand, the Iranian media indulged in a propaganda campaign through giving wide publicity to the uprising in Bahrain and by writing scathing commentaries on the Saudi-led military intervention. The Iranian media projected that the King of Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf monarchs had intervened in Bahrain militarily to prevent the revolutionary tide from reaching their countries, as Bahrain is in their geographical proximity. However, the Iranian projection had some truth too. The Saudi regime took this step because the success of the uprising in toppling the monarchical rule in Bahrain would have become a template to be emulated by the people in other Arab peninsular countries (Fürtig 2014: 33-34).

### **China brokered the Iran-Saudi rapprochement and its implications**

On 10 March 2023, China surprised the entire world by successfully brokering a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the arch-rivals in West Asia. This was a significant departure from the past. Usually, the Western states were majorly responsible for any agreement or treaty for peace and security in the West Asian region. The joint trilateral statement issued by China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia declared the normalisation of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The statement expressed intentions “to resume diplomatic relations between them and re-open their embassies and missions within a period not exceeding two months”, as well as honour “the sovereignty of states and the non-interference in internal affairs of states.” Alongside these, Iran-Saudi Arabia also agreed to put into force two previously reached bilateral agreements, “the General Agreement for Cooperation in the Fields of Economy, Trade, Investment, Technology, Science, Culture, Sports, and Youth” and “the Security Cooperation Agreement”. The agreements were clinched in 1998 and 2001 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China 2023).

The deal signed under the mediation of China is more remarkable than the US-steered “Abraham Accords” (a set of agreements that were signed with Israel by the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan to normalise diplomatic relations in 2020). The successful culmination of these agreements in the most volatile and economically important region of the world is another demonstration of the escalating great power competition for global influence between China and the United States (US) (Quamar 2025). Interestingly, the global rivalry between the US and China is on an increasing trajectory, but the tensions between regional arch-rivals, Iran and Saudi Arabia, are on a de-escalatory mode.

In spite of the rapprochement, there will remain a lot of distrust between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the future. It will take time to subside the underlying rivalry between them. There are several outstanding issues that pose direct threats to Saudi national security, such as: the ongoing war in Yemen, the persistent challenge of the Shia minority in the Gulf states, the nuclear programme of Iran, and the active involvement of Iran in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon’s domestic politics and conflicts. In all these conflicts, Iran is playing an active role. Moreover, the threat of the export of the Islamic Revolution to other countries by the Iranian ruling regime is still lurking in the region (Habibi 2025). Unless Iran

sincerely addresses this fear, the agreement would continue to encounter the trust deficit between these two.

### Conclusion

Thus, what one finds is that the historical factors, sectarian divisions in Islam, and regional ambitions of Iran and Saudi Arabia have an overbearing effect on their bilateral relations and regional politics. The fundamental driver of their relationship in the region has been an aim to shape the regional balance of power in their favour. Both of them see the expansion of regional influence by the other as a net loss for themselves, be it in Bahrain, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, or Palestine. This is the reason why we find them often siding with opposite actors. De-escalation of regional conflicts is very crucial for both Iran and Saudi Arabia to ensure the success of rapprochement. Given the escalating China-US global rivalry, it will be interesting to watch the implications of China-brokered Iran-Saudi rapprochement on their bilateral relations and regional politics in West Asia.

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