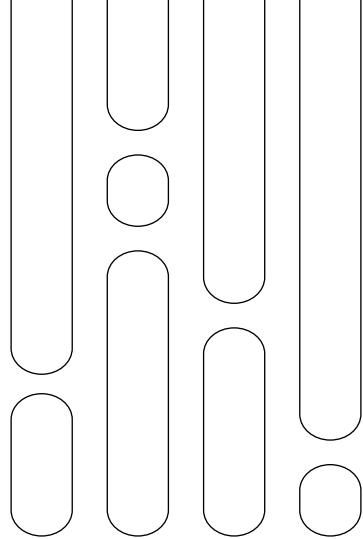


REPORT

THE SHIFT IN IRANIAN MEDIA DISCOURSE AGAINST SAUDI ARABIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COURSE OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

May 13, 2024





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Iranian media discourse toward Saudi Arabia experienced a noticeable de-escalation following the restoration of diplomatic relations last March. However, in recent times, there has been a resurgence of offensive rhetoric against Saudi Arabia, fueled by the turbulent regional landscape. This escalation can be traced back to military tensions in the Middle East, beginning with the conflict in the Gaza Strip, followed by the recent Iranian-Israeli escalation. Additionally, discussions have resurfaced regarding potential Saudi-Israeli normalization and recent US efforts toward a two-state solution to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This report sheds light on the indicators and implications of this shift in media tone toward Saudi Arabia. It explores the Saudi perspective on the Iranian escalation and its ramifications on bilateral relations. Furthermore, it assesses the potential gains and losses for both parties in the continuation of relations or in the event of heightened tensions or a severance of ties.

Indicators and Significations of the Shift in the Iranian Media Narrative Toward Saudi Arabia

In recent days, various indicators have surfaced, pointing toward a resurgence of the offensive tone in Iranian media discourse directed at Saudi Arabia. Here are some notable examples:

An article penned by Ali Reza Taghavinia and published in the “reformist” newspaper Arman-e Emrooz on May 5, 2024, took an aggressive stance against Saudi Arabia. It accused not only Saudi Arabia but also the UAE and Jordan of facilitating Israel by purportedly establishing a land corridor from the UAE to occupied Palestine. This accusation was made against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict in Gaza. It is worth noting that there were no official statements from Israel or Saudi Arabia corroborating these claims. Saudi Arabia has maintained a clear stance since the outset of the conflict, urging Israel to cease hostilities, abide by international humanitarian law, and work toward a resolution of the conflict by supporting a two-state solution. Saudi Arabia has actively coordinated with Egypt to provide aid to civilians and has staunchly opposed the Rafah operation while leading Arab efforts to defend the Palestinian cause and rally international support for ending the conflict.

The writer’s language toward Saudi Arabia takes on a more provocative tone, particularly when he mentions “its [Israel’s] supporters,”

likely referring to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. He suggests that although it may be technically challenging to target Israeli and allied ships in the Mediterranean, it remains a possibility for Yemeni forces, specifically the Houthis, given their potential possession of weapons capable of accurately hitting targets at distances exceeding 2,000 kilometers. His tone becomes even more confrontational with the assertion that controlling the Mediterranean through ballistic missiles and armed aviation would equate to dominating maritime trade routes spanning North Africa, Southern Europe, Turkey, Russia, and West Asia. This, according to the writer, would grant the Houthis greater leverage in international power dynamics.

These remarks represent a clear and direct incitement for the Iran-backed Houthi militia to target commercial ships belonging to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. It extends to advocating for the continuation of the Houthis' aggressive policies against international navigation and trade, broadening their targeting to include the Mediterranean Sea. This effectively amounts to a call for obstructing and attacking the movement of Gulf and Saudi commercial vessels and oil tankers bound for Europe and the Americas. Such actions would inevitably draw Saudi Arabia into the ongoing conflict, as it would not remain passive in the face of any aggression directed toward it.

The views stated in this article, while unofficial, align with the sentiments expressed in [Kayhan](#) newspaper, affiliated with the office of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Kayhan suggests that the Emirati-Saudi land route, purportedly facilitating Israel, falls within the range of Yemeni missiles and advances. It highlights the ongoing conflict between these countries and Yemen, noting the Houthis' unveiling of their hypersonic missile with a 2,000-kilometer range. The article warns Arab and non-Arab leaders who betray public opinion and the Palestinian cause to be fearful, especially since Khamenei has cautioned that such Islamic governments would face consequences for their betrayal.

In an article published on April 16, 2024, titled "The Futility of the Arab NATO Strategy," [Khorasan newspaper](#) adopted an accusatory tone against the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, alleging their support for Israel. The article subtly hinted at a potential threat by noting the absence of Houthi attacks on Saudi or Emirati ships at

the moment. Additionally, the Entekhab news website featured expert opinions claiming that there is a contradiction in the Saudi and Jordanian positions on the Gaza war; they intercepted Iranian drones heading to Israel passing through their airspace yet they are against the Israeli assault on Gaza.

The recent escalation in the media's tone against Saudi Arabia aligns with US discussions regarding potential normalization between Riyadh and Tel Aviv. This reflects Iranian discontent with such talks, which Iran perceives as deepening its isolation and strengthening Israel's legitimacy. Additionally, Iran is dissatisfied with the outcomes of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement deal concluded in Beijing over a year ago. Iran views the progress in bilateral relations as stagnant with little advancement where cooperation is feasible. Consequently, the heightened rhetoric may signify Iranian concerns about the trajectory of relations, aiming to convey messages to Saudi Arabia that Iran stands to lose from normalization with Israel. Iran fears that such a development could lead to the formation of a new alliance or bloc detrimental to its interests.

The recent escalation also coincides with the Hajj season, a significant occasion for the Iranian establishment. Iran has historically utilized this period to present a unique Iranian model that intertwines political and religious dimensions, often disregarding the religious protocols governing the Hajj ritual. This includes Iran's persistent efforts to promote the so-called ceremony of disavowal of polytheists, targeting what they perceive as Western arrogance and Israel. Khamenei has sought to capitalize on the events in Gaza since October 2023, labeling this year's Hajj as the "Hajj of Innocence." This move aims to impart special significance to Iranian ceremonies, potentially establishing them as distinctively Iranian in the future. However, this designation represents a clear attempt to politicize the Hajj, overlooking the sensitivities of Saudi Arabia and the wider Islamic world regarding the ritual's politicization for specific political agendas.

Potential Implications of Escalation for the Course of Bilateral Relations

The return of Iran's rhetorical escalation toward Saudi Arabia has prompted varied assessments within Saudi circles. Some speculate that Iran's concerns stem from Saudi Arabia's potential comprehen-

sive security agreement with the United States and its ambitious nuclear plans. Others suggest that Iran may be apprehensive about the sluggish progress in economic relations with Saudi Arabia. From the Saudi perspective, such an agreement with the United States would enhance its regional power and security, fostering stability that is crucial for navigating the region's crises. While Iran perceives this as a threat directed against it, Saudi Arabia maintains a commitment to balanced relations at both the regional and international levels. As always, any major steps taken by Saudi Arabia will prioritize regional security, stability and peace, and it aims to ensure that any agreement with the United States or Israel does not risk the interests or security of other regional actors, including Iran.

While engaged in negotiations to enhance cooperation with the US administration, the Saudi government has been mindful of maintaining its relationship with Iran and ensuring that the atmosphere of rapprochement remains undisturbed. However, Saudi Arabia cannot ignore the seriousness of Iran's escalation and rhetorical threats, which pose a significant challenge to bilateral relations. Historical considerations and past experiences with Iran highlight the potential for fluctuations in Iran's positions and its readiness to evade agreements, often for frivolous reasons. Therefore, the Saudi government remains cautious, recognizing that internal or external factors could prompt Iran to downgrade relations with Saudi Arabia, despite efforts to foster stability in regional relations.

It is likely that Iran will exert pressure on Saudi Arabia to halt its progress toward establishing advanced relations with the United States. This pressure may manifest through direct or indirect threats to Saudi Arabia's security, possibly by leveraging regional proxies like the Houthis in Yemen to escalate tensions and target maritime navigation in strategic waterways like the Gulf of Aden and Bab al-Mandab. Such actions would undermine trust between Riyadh and Tehran. Alternatively, Iran might resort to incitement and attempts to stoke security tensions within Saudi Arabia or among the Gulf states. Signs of these Iranian attempts were evident in Khamenei's speech in which he explicitly called for protests against the United States and Israel during this year's Hajj ceremony, exploiting the suffering of Gazans. "Iranian and non-Iranian pilgrims should be able to convey the Quranic reasoning in supporting the Palestinians to the entire Islamic world," he

stated. This move signifies a clear violation of the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran and could be seen as a form of political blackmail to advance Iran's agenda, unrelated to religious considerations or the plight of the people of Gaza.

Despite efforts to address Iranian concerns and swiftly implement the economic and trade aspects of the agreement, delays in implementing some parts of the agreement were unavoidable due to catastrophic regional developments. Economic ambitions necessitate regional security and political stability, which Saudi Arabia prioritized by restoring relations with Iran and opting for engagement over isolation. However, Iranian actions and self-serving calculations in the region have disrupted security and political stability, hindering progress in the economic dimension of their relationship.

Reciprocal Benefits Derived From Maintaining Bilateral Relations

During the first meeting of the tripartite joint committee in mid-December 2023, Saudi Arabia, Iran and China recognized the gains achieved by the agreement. These gains included laying the groundwork for a cooperative relationship between the two countries at both bilateral and regional levels. The agreement has helped avoid the dangers of crisis and tension that previously prevailed between them, particularly amid Israel's war on Gaza. This war led to direct confrontations between Israel and Iran, bringing the region close to a comprehensive regional war. Continued adherence to the Beijing-brokered deal allows Saudi Arabia and Iran to neutralize the exploitation of their differences by the United States to achieve its goals in the region. It ensures that neither party utilizes its capabilities against the other during times of tension with other regional and international powers. Moreover, in the medium to long term, adherence to the agreement could become a factor that complements and enhances the strategies of both countries for maintaining regional stability and security. China's sponsorship of the agreement and its efforts to ensure the commitment of both parties through periodic meetings further support this notion. The second edition of such meetings is scheduled to be held in Riyadh in June 2024.

The economic aspect represented a significant challenge in the agreement, particularly for Iran, which had hoped for substantial economic benefits. Commercial transactions between the two countries, in

particular, necessitate a longer period for investors to rebuild trust, given past historical experiences. Therefore, maintaining friendly and cooperative relations, both in rhetoric and practice, over an extended period becomes essential to address this weakness in the agreement. Furthermore, sustained cooperation fosters conditions conducive to implementing national development projects and their regional extensions. Stability is paramount in allocating greater financial resources to development initiatives and creates an environment conducive to attracting foreign investment.

Potential Losses for Both Sides if Tensions Continue or Relations Are Severed

Tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran could affect their political and economic interests, and potentially impact interconnected relations throughout the region. For Saudi Arabia, tensions leading to a rupture in relations could destabilize the region, reigniting competition and confrontation. Consequently, Saudi Arabia may then need to recalibrate its policies, focusing more on defense and allocating increased resources to military spending to address potential threats. A breakdown in relations might prompt Iran to target Saudi oil facilities, reignite conflicts where their interests intersect, such as in Yemen, and possibly employ the Houthis to launch attacks, as seen in the past. Furthermore, Iran may intensify its media campaigns against Saudi Arabia, exploiting regional sentiments, particularly in the context of the Israeli war on Gaza. Already, signs of such campaigns have emerged in Iran, particularly within clerical circles.

The resurgence of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran could impact Saudi Arabia's pursuit of its domestic ambitions outlined in Vision 2030. Instability and strained relations with Iran are likely to disrupt Saudi Arabia's development projects, economic momentum, and efforts to attract investments crucial for enhancing its regional and global influence. Additionally, the potential collapse of the agreement between Iran and major world powers places Saudi Arabia in a delicate position, potentially prompting it to revert to the United States for support — after Riyadh had managed to halt Washington's exploitation of its tensions with Iran. Moreover, should the agreement fail, Saudi Arabia might find itself compelled to engage in security arrangements aimed at countering Iran, potentially leading

to unpredictable security dynamics. Furthermore, the escalation of tensions with Tehran risks undermining Saudi Arabia's burgeoning relations with China. The resulting instability could disrupt shipping routes and oil flows.

The potential collapse of the agreement would mark a significant shift for Iran, potentially undoing the recent progress in its relations with the Gulf states and regional countries. This scenario could prompt the formation of a new coalition akin to the one established in 2016 to counter Iran's perceived threats, necessitating a reallocation of resources toward this confrontation effort. This scenario has long been a subject of acrimonious debate within Iran. The active involvement of the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, alongside the United States and European nations, could exert substantial pressure on Iran, encompassing economic and other measures related to its nuclear program. Such pressure would likely reverberate within Iran, impacting its political and social landscape and potentially undermining the government's effectiveness. This, in turn, could intensify domestic discontent, particularly given the government's promises to improve regional relations and enhance the economy. Consequently, the Iranian government may face heightened popular pressure. Moreover, Iran's influence in various arenas could diminish due to efforts by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries to persuade other nations to sever ties with Iran, potentially isolating it further on the international stage.

The potential collapse of the agreement heralds the closure of a crucial diplomatic channel between the involved parties. Additionally, the withdrawal of a significant international player like China from the equation suggests a looming era of heightened conflict and confrontation. Such a scenario poses a serious risk of destabilizing the region, with various actors potentially becoming pawns in the hands of major powers who seek to manipulate the situation to serve their own interests amid ongoing strategic competition.

Conclusion

The recent escalation in Iranian media attacks targeting Saudi Arabia should not necessarily be interpreted as the definitive stance of the Iranian government, particularly following the recent meeting between the foreign ministers of both nations on the sidelines of

the Organization of Islamic Cooperation meeting in Banjul, Gambia. Both sides affirmed that bilateral relations are progressing positively. However, it is plausible that certain factions within Iran are discontent with the resumption of diplomatic relations and may seek to stir up crises. It is possible that Iran is attempting to convey messages to Saudi Arabia, albeit through the media, in order to prevent a return to heightened tensions. Such a scenario could risk the trust that has been gradually rebuilt, especially considering Saudi Arabia's proven commitment to its pledges toward Iran following the restoration of diplomatic relations. Saudi Arabia has repeatedly expressed its eagerness to enhance ties with Tehran across various fronts. Stability in their relationship would prove beneficial for both countries, particularly for Iran, which grapples with internal crises and external pressures. Escalating tensions could result in missed economic opportunities in the Saudi and Gulf markets for Iran and potentially impede progress on joint international initiatives and cross-border projects. Moreover, losing the role of a mediator like China, which facilitated this rapprochement, would be a setback if relations deteriorate once more. Hence, it would be unwise to squander the current opportunity that offers significant gains for both Saudi Arabia and Iran and the wider region, and both nations must steer clear of major geopolitical projects and international polarization. What both countries truly require is increased dialogue, exchange of visits, and exploration of new avenues to fortify their relations in a manner that serves their mutual interests while mitigating sources of tension and isolation.



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