



The Beijing-Brokered Reconciliation Deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its Security and Economic Impacts on Iraq and Kurdistan Region

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Abstract

Iran and Saudi Arabia have entered into diplomatic relations since the formation of the new Saudi state in 1932 and they have, since then, preserved their relations. However, the two states have often faced diplomatic dilemma due to sectarian differences and geopolitical ambitions and they have therefore referred to proxy military confrontations. One of the major diplomatic interruptions in the history of the two states' relations occurred in 2016 which continued until finally was mediated by some states including China in an agreement, known as the China-brokered Deal in 2023. The Deal was a set of provisions on diplomatic reconciliation and reimplementation of their previous general and security agreements. Although the Deal positively impacted on the whole area of the Middle East, its security and economic consequences were mostly realized in Iraq. Soon after the Deal was concluded, the confrontations ended and the security threats from and to Iraq and Kurdistan Region ceased. The security improvements later contributed to economic growth in all the country's regions including in the Kurdistan Region.

Keywords: Iran; Saudi Arabi; diplomatic relation; Beijing Deal; security consequence; economic consequence; Iraq; Kurdistan Region.

صفقة بكين للمصالحة بين إيران والمملكة العربية السعودية وآثارها الأمنية والاقتصادية على العراق وإقليم كردستان

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مستخلص البحث

أقامت إيران مع المملكة العربية السعودية علاقات دبلوماسية منذ تشكيل الدولة السعودية الجديدة عام (١٩٣٢)، ومنذ ذلك الحين حافظتا على علاقاتهما، إلا أن الدولتين قد واجهتا في كثير من الأحيان معضلات دبلوماسية بسبب الاختلافات الطائفية والطموحات الجيوسياسية، ولذلك لجأتا إلى المواجهات العسكرية بالوكالة. وأحد أهم الانقطاعات الدبلوماسية في تاريخ العلاقات بين الدولتين حدثت عام (٢٠١٦) واستمرت حتى تم التوسط في النهاية من قبل بعض الدول بما في ذلك الصين في صفقة عُرفت بصفقة مصالحة بكين عام (٢٠٢٣)، وكانت الصفقة عبارة عن مجموعة من الأحكام المتعلقة بالمصالحة الدبلوماسية وإعادة تنفيذ اتفاقيتهما العامة والأمنية السابقة. ورغم أن الصفقة كان لها تأثير إيجابي على الشرق الأوسط بأكمله، إلا أن عواقبها الأمنية والاقتصادية تحققت بشكل رئيس في العراق. وبعد فترة وجيزة من إبرام الاتفاق انتهت المواجهات وتوقفت التهديدات الأمنية من وإلى العراق وإقليم كردستان مما أدى إلى المساهمة في النمو الاقتصادي في جميع مناطق البلاد بما في ذلك إقليم كردستان. الكلمات المفتاحية: إيران؛ المملكة العربية السعودية؛ العلاقات الدبلوماسية؛ اتفاق بكين؛ العواقب الأمنية؛ العواقب الاقتصادية؛ العراق؛ إقليم كردستان.

Introduction

In 1992, after a decade of tensions in the diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia¹, the Gulf Cooperation Council² announced that the Council would welcome any attempt for the cooperation and participation of Iran in future arrangements of the regional security. In response, the (then) President of Iran, Hashimi Rafsanjani³ stated that his country's foreign policy was based on friendly relations, particularly with its neighbors and more particularly with the Gulf countries (Gaub, 2016, 3). The aforementioned statements essentially imply the security necessity of the Middle East Region but the opposing geopolitical ambitions distance the two states and drag them into military confrontations.

From the modern formation of the Saudi Kingdom (Kingdom of Hijaz and Kingdom of Najd) in 1925, Iran and Saudi Arabia have initiated their diplomatic relations but the relations have not been strong enough to fully bear protests and tensions. However, the two States' diplomacy was much rational in the pre-Islamic revolution as the states never fell into diplomatic dilemma except for the 1940s (Hadzikadunic, 2019, 1-22; Jalal & Khan *et al.*, 2023, 2-3). After the Islamic revolution resulted in ending the monarchy and establishing the Islamic republic of Iran, the two states returned to the state of tensions again (Sadeghi & Ahmadian, 2011, 115-148; Behzad, 2018, 124-134; Furtig 2006; Pollack, 2004; Tekeyh, 2009). The only peaceful period in their diplomatic relations was the last decade of the previous century and the beginning of this century in which they signed two important agreements on the economic and security cooperations (Hadzikadunic, 2019, 10). In 2016, after only three years of reconciliation, the two states fell into serious military confrontations again. The confrontations caused unprecedented security and economic catastrophe in the Middle East until finally were ended through the mediation of some states in 2023 (Political Studies, 2021).⁴ China was one of the states which facilitated the two states to conclude an agreement, known as the Beijing



brokered Deal, in which the two states promised a stage of rapprochement and normalization.⁵

The Beijing Deal was not a new and independent agreement but rather was the resumption of the two states' previous diplomatic understandings and ties. The Deal entailed the commitment of Iran and Saudi Arabia to reopen their diplomatic representations in each other's countries. It further included the mutual respect of the states to each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence. The last part of the Deal was devoted to the reactivation of their previous 1998 General Agreement and 2001 Security Agreement and the reinforcement of their provisions as the agreements were bases in the two countries economic and security relations (Keynoush, 2023).⁶

The Beijing Deal positively impacted on the region of the Middle East as its entirety, particularly on Iraq. Due to its geographical situation, Iraq was the most affected in the tensions and confrontations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its security and economy had extremely damaged. It therefore played an effective mediation role between the two confronting parties through hosting peace talks to contribute their rapprochement process (Saeed & Hammoud *et al.*, 2023, 102-132).⁷ The reconciliation of Iran and Saudi Arabia was, in other words, the solution to the economic and security crises of Iraq. After only one year from the implementation of Beijing Deal, Iraq witnessed a considerable development in terms of national security and economic development. Inside Iraq, the federal Kurdistan region benefited the most as the Deal stabilized the oil price and promoted dialogue between the central government and region's authority on the suspended issues relating to border security, oil and gas and general budget, besides the cease of the missile and drone attacks against the Iranian opposition and United States (US)-led Coalition bases which had caused serious security issues in the Region.⁸

There might exist numerous references as to the Beijing Deal and its consequential impact on the parties of the Deal but there is a lack of a comprehensive analyses of the consequences of the

Deal on Iraq and particularly on Kurdistan Region. The article, in other words, aims to discuss the provisions of the Deal and their impact on Iraq in general and on Kurdistan Region in particular. Such a study leads to have a clearer perspective as to the regional geopolitical relations and tensions in the Middle East, besides its bibliographical significance in academia. The study is largely based on Beijing Deal and its subordinate general and security agreements along with the relevant books and academic and news articles.

The article answers the following questions: when did exactly start the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia? How were the relations between the two states in the pre-Islamic Revolution in 1979? How did the two states diplomatically approach each other in the post-Islamic Revolution? What was the Beijing Deal and what were its provisions? To which extent the Deal restored the relations between its parties? Did Iraq and the Kurdistan region benefit from the Deal? What were the consequences of the Deal as to Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, then?

The article consists of three main arguments which are: The Historical Background of the Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Beijing-brokered Reconciliation Deal and the Consequences of Beijing Deal on Iraq and Kurdistan Region.

1. A Brief Historical Background

The new state of Saudi Arabia was formed along with some other states as the consequence of the Ottoman Empire's partition after the First World War and specifically during the 1920s.⁹ However, the new state initially was a reference to the dispersed rules of the regions of Hijaz and Najd and they were only united in 1932 under King Abdul Aziz, known as Ibn Saud (Wynbrandt, 2010, 164-185; Bowen, 2008, 83-97). Simultaneously, a military coup occurred in Iran in 1921 which resulted in toppling the Qajar rule and the beginning of Pahlavi dynasty under Raza Shah.¹⁰

During the 1920s, Saudia commenced diplomatic initiatives with Iran, despite the religious differences and geopolitical obstacles. Iran positively responded the Saudi good neighboring



intentions and appointed its diplomatic representative in Najd and Hijaz.¹¹ In 1929, the two states signed a friendship treaty in Tehran which was known as the Tehran Treaty. The Treaty later became the basis for the diplomatic recognition of the modern Saudi State in 1932 (Hadzikadunic, 2019, 1).

After the modern Saudi state was established, the two states took further steps to develop their relations. However, the relations deteriorated in 1943, following the arrest and execution of an Iranian pilgrim by Saudi authorities on charges of insulting Saudi Arabia and disrespecting the holy sites (Weddington, 2017, 8). After the occurrence of the incident, Iran cut all its ties with Saudia but the latter made serious efforts in hope for reconciliation. The efforts finally succeeded and resulted in restoring the relations. Yet, due to the recognition of Iran to Israel, the two countries' relations declined once again (Jalal & Khan, 2023, 3).

In 1952, the Free Officers' Revolution succeeded against monarchy in Egypt. The revolution resulted in the transformation of the political system into republic. This incident caused a serious threat to the monarchy in the entire region of the Middle East. As the consequence, the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia witnessed major improvements. The improvements occurred not only in political and security relations but also in the field of trade exchange in 1953 (Hadzikadunic, 2019, 5, 18).

During the 1960s, the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia remained strong. In 1967, the Saudi King, Faisal bin Abdul 'Aziz¹² visited Tehran and made a statement in the Parliament. In his statement, the King called for further development of their bilateral relations (Hadzikadunic, 2019, 18). The call eventually resulted in concluding the '1968 [Agreement concerning Sovereignty over the Islands of Farsi and Al-Aribayah and the Delimitation of the Boundary Line separating the Submarine Areas between Iran and Saudi Arabia](#)'.¹³

In the 1970s, the two countries pursued a parallel policy based on mutual and common interests in many regional incidents including in Egypt, Yemen, Oman, Iraq and Lebanon (Hadzikadunic, 2019, 5, 18). They further signed 'the Agreement

to partition the Neutral Zones' in 1978 (Hadzikadunic, 2019, 1, 19). Besides that, the two countries were the founding members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) which had been established since 1960.¹⁴

After the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia experienced another stage of decline and deterioration (Milani, 1988; Ficher, 1980).¹⁵ The reasons were primarily that the Saudis viewed the Islamic Revolution as the cause of reviving denominational differences and were deeply concerned with the idea of exporting the Islamic Revolution to foreign countries, particularly to the states with Shiite populations (Al-Rasheed & Abdolmohammadi, 2018, 5-6; Terril, 2011, 5).

During the eight-year war between Iraq and Iran, the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia remained unstable, specifically after the incident of the 1987 Hajj season in which about 400 people were killed in tensions in Saudi Arabia. The victims were mostly Iranians and therefore the incident led to the complete severance of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Saudi Arabia subsequently reduced the number of Iranian pilgrims for the Hajj season and Iran also boycotted Hajj for three years as a reaction (Hadzikadunic, 2019, 20; Wddington, 2017, 45; Chitsazian, 2020, 228). Although in the subsequent years, during the Hashimi Rafsanjani's rule (1989-1997), many normalization messages were delivered by both sides, the relations improved not to the level of complete reconciliation until the 1997 presidential elections were held when the reformists led by Muhammad Khatami¹⁶ won the elections (Al-Rasheed & Abdolmohammadi, 2018, 6; Chitsazian, 2020, 228).

After Khatami came to power, the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia witnessed considerable improvements. The two states signed two major agreements which were the General Cooperation Agreement in 1998 and the Security Cooperation Agreement in 2001. The agreements signaled the emergence of a



new stage in relations between Iran and the Gulf countries in general and Iran and Saudi Arabia in particular (Sadeghi & Ahmadian, 2011, 127-128; Hadzikadunic, 2019, 20-21). However, following the termination of the presidential term of Khatami and the wining of the conservatives led by Mahmoud Ahmadi Nejad¹⁷ in 2005, the relations declined again until the reformists came back to power under Hassan Ruhani in 2013. The reason of the decline this time, was primarily the development of the Iran's nuclear program (Weddington, 2017, 66-69).

After the outbreak of the Arab Spring in March 2011, the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia reached its peak as the two countries started to deal with regional incidents in two opposite directions. Iran allied Bashar al-Assad in Syria and the Houthi groups in Yemen and supplied them with weapons and ammunitions. In contrast, Saudi Arabia supported the anti-Assad groups in Syria and the Yemeni government military forces against the pro-Iranian groups in Yemen (Al-Rasheed & Abdolmohammadi, 2018, 7-10). The confrontations, in other words, caused the deterioration of relations between the two countries once again, particularly following the burning of the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the Saudi consulate in Mashhad in response to the execution of the Shiite cleric, Nimr Baqir al-Nimr¹⁸ by Saudi authorities (Hadzikadunic, 2019, 22).

In 2021, some states initiated their mediation efforts between the two states as such Iraq and Oman. Baghdad hosted four rounds of talks and Muscat hosted the fifth round to facilitate the ending of the confrontations and concluding a comprehensive agreement on the proxy regional war in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq and Iran's nuclear program (Jash, June 23, 2023). The mediation process eventually succeeded and resulted in concluding a deal in China in March 2023, known as the China-brokered Reconciliation Deal.¹⁹ As a demonstration of good faith and implementation of the Deal, the two countries sent back their ambassadors to each other's countries and the ambassadors soon resumed their diplomatic duties in June 2023 (Keynoush, 2023, 1).²⁰

2. The Beijing Deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia

The conclusion of the Beijing Deal was one of the crucial incidents in the contemporary history of the diplomatic relations in the area of Middle East as the agreement was brokered by a new world power possessing an alternative world view than the America's adversarial policy in the region and it conclusively impacted the security and peace of the entire region from Syria to Yemen and from Lebanon to Iraq.²¹ The Deal was, in other words, an initiative of geopolitical, security and commercial reorganization of the region on the basis of mutual interest of the world and regional actors including Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The Beijing agreement was not a normal and specific Deal but rather a short-drafted pact which included some very comprehensive articles aiming to reapproach the two countries and deescalate their confrontations in the region. The Agreement included that the two countries would reopen their representations in each other's countries soon; they respect each other's sovereignty; they interfere not in each other's internal affairs; they reinstate the implementation of their previous agreements: the 1998 General Agreement for Cooperation in the Fields of Trade, Technology and Culture and the 2001 Security Cooperation Agreement (Jash, June 23, 2023).

It is worth mentioning that the two countries have not published any of the agreements for national political and security reasons but their provisions were rather known from the statements of the responsible officials of the two states. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the Beijing Deal was nothing more than a diplomatic rapprochement and reactivation of the 1998 General Cooperation Agreement and the 2001 Security Cooperation Agreement.²²

The General Agreement for Cooperation in the Fields of Economy, Trade, Investment, Technology, Science, Culture, Sports and Youth was signed on May 27, 1998. Following the conclusion of the Agreement, the value of the trade exchange between the two countries increased to nearly 150 million dollars



in 1999 and the number of the joint projects reached twelve investment projects with a capital of around 280 million dollars.²³

The Security Cooperation Agreement was discussed for nearly two years until finally was signed by the Saudi Minister of Interior, Nayef bin Abdulaziz and his Iranian counterpart, Abdul Wahid Mousawi Lari in the Iranian capital city of Tehran on April 17, 2001. Based on the Agreement, the two countries would have to form a joint security committee under the interior ministers of the two countries or their representatives to cooperate in the fields of combating crime, terrorism, money laundering, monitoring borders and territorial waters, exchanging criminals, and combating drug trade. According to bin Abdulaziz and Musawi Lari the agreement entailed not any military dimensions but would serve the overall security of the Middle East region (Two Agreements..., April 16, 2023).

3. The Motives for concluding the Beijing Deal by Iran and Saudi Arabia

As we mentioned in previous, Iran and Saudi Arabia signed the Beijing Deal for reconciliation after seven years of tensions in their political and diplomatic relations. Like the existence of some reasons for their confrontations and proxy war, there were several different motives and goals for the two countries to reconcile and rebuild their political and diplomatic relations.

The conservatives led by Ibrahim Ra'isi won the precedential elections in Iran in 2021. Ra'si founded his administration on "balanced foreign policy, dynamic diplomacy and smart interaction". This perspective totally opposed the view of the previous administration which primarily focused on the settlement of the Iran's nuclear program and ballistic missiles through the Iran-Western negotiations. The Ra'si perspective, in other words, played an essential role in the conclusion of the subsequent reconciliation Deal with Saudia (Teker, 2024, 43).

Another reason that encouraged Iran to reapproach Saudi Arabia was the conclusion of the Abraham Accords between Israel and some Arab states which ultimately endangered the Iran's regional policy and geopolitical position. The Abraham

Accords were a set of peace agreements between Israel and Arab states mediated by America in 2020. Some of the agreements were signed as such the agreements between: Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Israel and Bahrain, Israel and Morocco. The last Arab states which were about to conclude the agreements were Sudan and Saudi Arabia but the Israel-Hamas war hindered the process.²⁴

Another motive of Iran in conclusion of the Deal was reducing the drastic effect of its Isolation from the international community, particularly the Western sanctions which had considerably weakened the country's potential. The sanctions had caused daily internal unrest due to the frustration of people from the lack of civil rights and constant depreciation of the country's currency (Özev, 2016, 83-104).

Other motives of Iran for the reconciliation and rapprochement with Saudi Arabia were the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the global consequential crises resulted from the war. The Deal was an opportunity to compensate the Iran's diplomatic and economic shortage to some extent (Özev, 2016, 83-104).

When we look at the Beijing Agreement from the Saudi's perspective, we realize that unlike the Iran's primary internal and regional motives, the Saudi's motive is more based on a global perspective which is related to the Vision 2030 announced by the Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman in 2016 (Rafique S. & Butt, 2021).²⁵ The Saudi's vision for 2030 is a strategic program to modernize and consolidate the country's economy and security as such that it has the potential to make the country independent from the contributive guarantees of other countries, especially the US (Teker, 2024, 45).

The Vision 2030 aims to reduce the country's dependence on oil and rather bases it on the green economy model which consists of cultural investment to attract global capital. The country aims to become a tourism, entertainment and sport center to attract 150 million tourists and visitors annually by the year 2030. It, in other words, is currently listed as the world's 19th largest economy but aims to become one of the 15 largest ones in the world. The state,



on the other hand, aims to redesign its security situation based on a balanced regional diplomacy and mutual interactive interests.²⁶

It is obvious that the Middle East has been divided for geopolitical and sectarian reasons which have consequently led to bloody conflicts and instability in the region since 2011. The continuation of this situation will hinder Saudi Arabia's goal of becoming a prominent global economic power; therefore, it has alternatively resorted to comprehensive diplomatic rapprochements and political cooperations as an essential part of its Vision 2030.²⁷

Saudi Arabia is further driven by the insurance of the safety of oil facilities and the security of waterways in the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea. This will not be achieved except for diplomatic reconciliation and friendship with Iran. Additionally, Riyadh is militarily tired of the constant confrontations in the region and knows that the current situation takes too much energy and capital in vain; therefore, seeks for political and diplomatic solutions, specifically after it convinced that the US would not contribute the region more due to its focus on Russia, China and the war in Ukraine (Caner, 2023, 2-3).

4. The Security Consequences of the Beijing Deal on Iraq and its Kurdistan Region

The main security concern of Iraq is perhaps Iran and not Saudi Arabia. The reasons are that Iran share more and longer borders with Iraq and has greater cultural influence on the communities of the country's society, particularly after the US-led intervention.²⁸ The Shiites as the majority of the Iraqi population, are under direct denominational and geopolitical strategy of Iran. Iran does not only design their political agenda but also has created some proxy groups under Popular Mobilization Forces²⁹ and supply weapons and ammunitions to them (Salami, May 19, 2023). In contrast, the Iraqi Sunni minority is in historical, tribal and denominational ties with Saudi Arabia and Riyadh also seeks to preserve and use its influence but the influence has been limited compared with the Tehran's and therefore resulted in limited political consequences (Wimmen H. & Esfandiary D. *et al.*, April 19, 2023). The two

states' influence on the Iraqi communities is a root cause of along sectarian violence in the country and the Beijing Agreement contributed as an opportunity for Iraq to improve its internal security situation through the transformation of the regional political reconciliation into internal sectarian peace.

After the fall of the Saddam Hussein's Regime in 2003³⁰, Iraq was often used as a confrontational field in the two states' proxy warfare and a threat against their security situations, besides the systematic dependence of the country on Iran and its distance from the Arab countries which all had essentially stemmed from the disputes between Riyadh and Tehran. The Beijing Deal contributed Iraq to neutralize its regional position again along with the realization of its internal security achievements.³¹

The Beijing Deal resulted in ending the security threats of the drone and missile attacks of the Iranian proxies against the US-led Coalition Forces³² and the sovereignty and integrity of Saudia targeting the major oil facilities and other economic institutions of the country. The group's attacks had faced Iraq with a frustrating situation as some were believed to be directed from inside Iraq and by the pro-Iranian groups, besides the official claiming of the responsibility for the attacks by the Yemeni Houthis (Najat, 2022, 19-20). Looking at the security situation, especially a year after the signing of the Deal, makes one feel almost the cessation of the missile and drone attacks and this has ultimately saved Iraq from political and diplomatic tensions with these states.

It is worth mentioning that the Beijing negotiations has led to a considerable development in the official relations of Iraq with Saudi Arabia as well. Under the current administration of Mohammed Shiah Sudani³³, Iraq has taken some diplomatic steps to strengthen its neighboring connection and historical friendship with Riadh. In February 2023, Iraqi and Saudi Interior Ministry officials signed a memorandum in the fields of security relations and coordination.³⁴

Another consequence of the Beijing Deal is that this agreement has encouraged other states in the Middle East to take similar steps



and try to settle their disputes and conflicts through similar mechanisms. Saudi Arabia has a similar vision and strategy with Syrian Assad Regime after long bloody confrontations. The agreement has also encouraged Qatar and United Arab Emirates to follow similar mechanism with Syria.³⁵ The most important rapprochement which followed by the Beijing Deal was the security statements of Turkey president, Rajab Taib Erdogan on the suspended diplomatic issues with Iraq and Syria. According to statements, Turkey intends to settle all its security concerns with Iraq and Syria through negotiations to eliminate the threats originating from inside Iraq against its country.³⁶ It is worth noting that Iran also concluded a similar agreement with Iraq on the protection of its borders from Kurdish armed opposition groups operating in the Iraqi-Iranian borders and have bases in Iraq, specifically in Kurdistan Region.³⁷

As the consequence of the Beijing Deal, Iraq has not only taken diplomatic steps with its neighbors but also with its internal Kurdistan Region. The country has initiated security cooperations with the Region's Peshmerga forces to counter the threats caused by the Islamic state in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)³⁸ in the central areas to put an end to their existence.³⁹ The country has further stepped to resume the export of the Region's oil to the world markets after a year from halting.⁴⁰ Iraq also restricted the armed activities of the Shia militia groups against the American diplomatic and military institutions in Kurdistan Region through its negotiations with America as to the termination of the Coalition's security mission.⁴¹ The Iraqi security cooperations have consequently contributed the region to recover from the large scale-terrorist attacks carried out by ISIS between 2014 and 2020. Besides, the central government has initiated diplomatic dialogues with the Region's authority as to the disarmament of the Iranian opposition⁴², as a mechanism to enforce its previous agreement with Iran, to guarantee that its territory is not used as a threat against the sovereignty of its neighbor.⁴³ It should also be mentioned that Iraq has taken similar steps against the Kurdistan Workers Party⁴⁴ to expel them from its

territory and cooperate with Turkey in the protection of its sovereignty and territory integrity.⁴⁵

5. The Economic Consequences of the Beijing Agreement on Iraq and its Kurdistan Region

The radical step in the development of the relations between Iraq and Saudia was initially taken by the government of Haider al-Abadi (2014-2018) which established the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council in 2017.⁴⁶ The administration of Mustafa al-Kadhimi (2020-2022)⁴⁷ later took further steps and brought the relations to the highest possible level.⁴⁸ However, the Iraq's diplomatic progress with Saudi Arabia has always faced the denominational challenges from the pro-Iranian politicians and such challenges often hindered the relations. Yet, after the peace negotiations between Riyadh and Tehran, the Iraqi government took the opportunities to surpass the challenges through following similar policies of negotiations and conclusion of agreements without being accused of treason (After 40 years..., February 20, 2023). This rapprochement policy consequently removed all the political barriers on the way of the Saudi investment in Iraq. Meanwhile, the reconciliation agreement has dispelled Saudi suspicions and concerns of military threats against its territory from the inside Iraq. This consequently created mutual trust and simultaneously improved the Saudi presence and role in Iraq, especially in the sectors such as energy, trade and investment.⁴⁹

The Kurdistan Region as part of Iraq, welcomed the Beijing Deal soon after its announcement due to its future positive economic consequences.⁵⁰ After only one year from the conclusion of the Deal, the Kurdistan region witnessed two obvious consequences which were specifically the security and economic improvements. The Deal considerably impacted the economy of the Region, particularly its energy sector. It further facilitated the reinitiation and progress of the negotiations between the Region's authority and central government on the production and export of natural resources along with guaranteeing the rights and privileges



of the Region's employees within the framework of the Iraqi general budget.⁵¹

The Beijing Deal has further changed the attitude and policy of the Shiite ruling elite in Iraq as such that they now think not of centralism as before and instead emphasize the national partnership and cooperation with the Sunnis and Kurds to solve the long-rooted issues and remove the barriers of security and economic development in the country.⁵² As we mentioned in previous that the Beijing Deal encouraged Iraq towards similar diplomatic rapprochement with Saudia and the policy consequently resulted in economic cooperation between the two countries. The Saudi-Iraqi relations provided a good opportunity for the Kurdistan Region as part of Iraq, to attract the foreign companies and investors, particularly from the Gulf countries to work in the energy sector of the Region.⁵³

Also, the normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia as two of the largest oil producers and exporters in the region and the world, has stabilized the oil price in the world markets and this has ultimately benefited the Kurdistan Region since the Region has large oil and gas reserves and its economy mostly depends on these natural resources.⁵⁴ It is worth mentioning that due to its strategic location and economic development, the Kurdistan Region still can broaden its relations with both sides of the agreement and benefit from the such opportunities to further develop and diversify its economy.

Conclusion

Iran and Saudi Arabia are two major actors of the Middle East region. The states share historical relations, geographical connection, cultural relatedness and religious fraternity. Yet, they suffer from denominational differences which have often manifested in a geopolitical adversary. From the formation of new Saudia in 1920s, the state has established relations with Iran but the relations have often interrupted over the lack of political confidence such as in 1942-1950, 1979-1997, 2005-2013 and 2016-2023; therefore, the states have alternatively sought regional confrontations. However, the confrontations have also resulted not

except in bloodshed, destruction and economic waste and hence, they have eventually returned to diplomatic normalizations. One of the major incidents in the two states' relations was the 2023 China-brokered Reconciliation Deal. The Deal was a diplomatic reconciliation on respecting the principles of sovereignty and non-interference along with the reactivation of previous bilateral agreements as such: the 1998 General Agreement for Cooperation on Trade, Technology and Culture and the 2001 Security Cooperation Agreement. The two agreements are considered crucial diplomatic exchanges in the history of the two states' relations as they have considerably developed the two states' internal situations and also had considerable regional impact in the Middle East. Iraq was one of the states which hosted several peace negotiations to reapproach the two states again. The peace negotiations finally succeeded and led to the conclusion of the Beijing Deal. After only one year from its implementation, the Deal significantly contributed to the security and economy of the Middle East Region but Iraq and its Kurdistan region benefited from it the most as the Deal considerably restored peace and security to the state and extremely improved the economic potential of its regions, particularly Kurdistan Region. Taking the quick and positive results of the Deal into consideration, Iran and Saudi Arabia may further find potential in the Deal and turn their regional adversary into regional alliance if only they pay the cost of some geopolitical compromises.



Notes

- ¹ For more information on the historical background of the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, see: Badeed S. M. (1993). *Saudi-Iranian Relations 1932–1982*. London: Centre for Arab and Iranian Studies and Echoes; Al-Saud F. B. (2003). *Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf: Power Politics in Transition*. New York: IB Tauris; Keynoush B. (2016). *Saudi Arabia and Iran Friends or Foes?*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Alsultan F. M. & Saeid P. (2016). *The Development of Saudi-Iranian Relations since the 1990s: Between Conflict and Accommodation*. New York: Routledge; Ehteshami A. (2002). “The Foreign Policy of Iran” in Raymond Hinnebusch & Anoushiravan Ehteshami. (eds.), *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*. London et al.: Lynne Rienner Publishers; Gause F. G. III. (2007). “Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectarian Question” *Strategic Insights* VI (2); Gause F. G. III. (2002). “The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia” in Raymond Hinnebusch & Anoushiravan Ehteshami. (eds.), *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*. London et al.: Lynne Rienner Publishers; Fredric W. & Karasik T. W. et al. (2009). *Saudi-Iranian Relations since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for US Policy*. California: Rand Corporation; Furtig H. (2007). “Conflict and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf: The International Order and US Policy”. *Middle East Journal* 61 (4); Mattaiar T. R. (2007). “Mutual Threat Perceptions in the Arab/Persian Gulf: GCC Perceptions”, *Middle East Policy* 14 (2), pp. 133–140.
- ² The Gulf Cooperation Council is a union of the Arab states situated in the Arabian Peninsula which are Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The Council was established following the signing of its charter in 1981 and its headquarters is located in the capital city of Riyadh, in Saudi Arabia. The objective of the Council is the realization of political, economic and security cooperations among the Gulf states (Charter of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, 1981; Alasfoor, 2007).
- ³ Hashmi Rafsanjani (1934–2017) was an Iranian politician who served as the president of Iran for two terms from 1989 to 1997. He was known to be an Islamic conservative but advocating a moderate policy in its presidential ruling. Rafsanjani initiated a new phase in the Iran’s foreign policy through political and diplomatic openness towards the world, particularly neighboring states. He consequently succeeded in regional normalizations, particularly with the Arab states but his relations with the West remained undeveloped (Koolae & Mazarei, 2018: 81–102).
- ⁴ See also Alsulami. Where to now for Saudi-Iranian Dialogue?// Middle East Institute. October 21, 2021. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/where-now-saudi-iranian-dialogue> (accessed: 15. 07. 2024); Saudi Arabia thanks Oman and Iraq// Foreign Ministry of Oman. March 10, 2023. <https://www.fm.gov.om/saudi-arabia-thanks-oman-and-iraq/> (accessed: 15. 07. 2024).
- ⁵ Wintour P. Iran and Saudi Arabia Agree to Restore Ties After China-Brokered Talks// The Guardian. March 10, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/10/iran-saudi-arabia-agree-restore-ties-china-talks> (accessed: 16. 07. 2024); Nereim V. Saudi and Iran Agree to Restore Ties, in Talks Hosted by China// The New York times. March 10, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/10/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-reestablish-ties.html> (accessed: 16. 07. 2024).
- ⁶ See also Jash A. Saudi-Iran Deal: A Test Case of China’s Role as an International Mediator// Georgetown Journal of International Affairs. June 23, 2023.

- <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/06/23/saudi-iran-deal-a-test-case-of-chinas-role-as-an-international-mediator/> (accessed: 17. 07. 2024).
- ⁷ See also Salami M. Saudi-Iran Deal: A Test Case of China's Role as an International Mediator Saudi-Iranian Reconciliation and its Impact on Iraq// Centre Français de Recherche sur l'Irak. May 19, 2023. <https://cfri-irak.com/en/article/saudi-iranian-reconciliation-and-its-impact-on-iraq-2023-05-19> (accessed: 18. 07. 2024).
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- ⁹ After the World War I broke out and specifically in 1916, the Allied encouraged a pan-Arab revolt against the Ottomans in today's Saudi Arabia. The Ottomans were eventually expelled and the Kingdom of Hijaz was established under Sharif of Mecca, Hussein bin Ali 1916. In 1921, the al-Saud defeated their long rival al-Rashid family and seized the kingdom of Najd. The al-Saud stopped not in Najd region but continued until finally controlled the region of Hijaz in 1925 and became the king of Hijaz as well (Al-Rasheed, 2002, 41-72).
- ¹⁰ The Qajar Dynasty ruled between (1789-1925) and the Pahlavi Dynasty ruled between (1925-1979) in Iran. Raza Shah was a high-profile official of the Qajar Dynasty who led a military coup against the Royal family in 1921 and he was eventually declared as the Shah of Iran in 1925 (Abrahamian, 2008, 9-72).
- ¹¹ The first Iranian ambassador in Najd and Hijaz was Habibullah Khan Hwaida, see Taha. B. Iran and Saudi Arabia: A History from Hostility and a Horizon for Friendship// Lvin. May 6, 2021. <https://lvlinpress.com/10811/> (accessed: 20. 07. 2024).
- ¹² Faisal bin Abdul 'Aziz was the third son of the founder of the Modern Saudi state, King Abdul Aziz. He became the King of Saudi Arabia in 1964 and he remained in the position until he was assassinated in 1975. King Faisal was known to be moderate and reformist but an advocate of pan-Islamist and anti-communist (Vassiliev, 2012).
- ¹³ See the Agreement concerning Sovereignty over the Islands of Farsi and Al-Arabiyyah and the Delimitation of the Boundary Line separating the Submarine Areas between Iran and Saudi Arabia (adopted 24 October 1968, entered into force 29 January 1969) 212 UNTS 9976.
- ¹⁴ The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is an intergovernmental organization that was established in 1960 by the oil-producing countries as means of cooperation and coordination in petroleum policy-making, see Brief History, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. <https://www.opec.org/opecweb/en/aboutus/24.htm> (accessed: 20. 07. 2024).
- ¹⁵ The Islamic revolution is a reference to the events occurred in 1979 in Iran which ended the Pahlavi dynasty. The revolution was headed by the politician and religious cleric, Ayatullah Khomeini (1900-1989) and led to overthrow the monarchy and the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran, see Mabon S. & Wastnidge E. *Saudi Arabia, Iran: Resilient Rivalries and Pragmatic Possibilities in Saudi Arabia, Iran and De-Escalation in the Persian Gulf*. SEPAD Richardson Institute. Lancaster university.



- [Saudi-Arabia-Iran-and-De-Escalation-in-the-Gulf-Formatted1 -4-.pdf](#) (accessed: 20. 07. 2024).
- ¹⁶ Muhammad Khatami is an Iranian reformist politician who served as the Iran's president from 1997 to 2005. Khatami followed a liberal model of policy and diplomacy making. He advocated the dialogue among nations and civilizations, respecting civil rights, promoting civil society, constructive diplomatic relations with the world, foreign investment and free market economy (Koláček, 2024, 9-28; Rivetti, 2020).
- ¹⁷ Mahmoud Ahmadi Nejad is a conservative Iranian politician who served as the president of Iran from 2005 to 2013. Ahmadi Nejad's foreign policy was based on internal development and not openness to the world as the reformists used to follow. However, he kept the country's diplomatic relations with the west and the diplomatic channels were active with the United States (US) during his presidency (ALDosari, 2015, 47-72).
- ¹⁸ Nimr Baqir al-Nimr was a Shiite Saudi Cleric who resided in the eastern Saudi Shiite populated province al-Awamiyah. Sheikh Nimr was critical of Saudi Arabia for its conservative policy and demanded for democratic reforms and human rights improvements. He was arrested in 2012 and executed in 2016 for disobeying the country's rulers and taking up the arms against the country's security forces, see Saudi Shia Cleric Nimr al-Nimr 'Sentenced to Death'// BBC News. October 15, 2014.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29627766> (accessed: 25. 07. 2024).
- ¹⁹ Cafiero G. A Year Ago, Beijing brokered an Iran-Saudi Deal. How Does Détente Look Today?// Atlantic Council. March 6, 2024.
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-saudi-arabia-china-deal-one-year/> (accessed: 21. 07. 2024).
- ²⁰ See also Saudi Arabia, Iran Exchange Ambassadors, Cementing Restoration of Ties// France 24. September 5, 2023. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230905-saudi-iran-exchange-ambassadors-after-years-long-rupture> (accessed: 22. 07. 2024).
- ²¹ Gallagher A. & Hamaseed S. *et al.* What You Need to Know About China's Saudi-Iran Deal// United States Institute of Peace. March 16, 2023.
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<https://www.npr.org/2023/03/10/1162524377/iran-saudi-arabia-resume-relations> (accessed: 16. 07. 2024).
- ²² Hafezi P. & Abdallah N. *et al.* Iran and Saudi Arabia agree to resume Ties in Talks brokered by China// Reuters. March 11, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-saudi-arabia-agree-resume-ties-re-open-embassies-iranian-state-media-2023-03-10/> (accessed: 25. 07. 2024); Iran and Saudi Arabia Agree to Restore Relations// Al-Jazeera. March 10, 2023.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/10/iran-and-saudi-agree-to-restore-relations> (accessed: 25. 07. 2024).
- ²³ "Two Agreements Mentioned in the Saudi-Iranian Statement... a Revival of "Security and Trade" After a Turbulent History// Al-Hurat. April 6, 2023.
<https://shorturl.at/6PAFJ> (accessed: 25. 07. 2024).
- ²⁴ See Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization Between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel (adopted 15 September 2020, entered into force 5 January 2021); Bahrain Follows UAE to Normalise Ties with Israel// AlJazeera. September 12, 2020.

- <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/12/bahrain-follows-uae-to-normalise-ties-with-israel> (accessed: 26. 07. 2025); Ferziger J. H. & Arbit C. Experts React: Sudan and Israel Reach Historic Peace Agreement// Atlantic Council. October 23, 2020.
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- <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/detalle1/-/blogs/the-abraham-accords-and-future-prospects-2> (accessed: 26. 07. 2024).
- ²⁵ Muhammad bin Salman is the current Saudi's crown prince and the prime minister of the country. He is the son of King Salman and the grandson of the modern Saudi founder, King Abdul Aziz. Bin Salman is known for his openness policy through broadening civil rights and normalizing regional and international relations. One of his major contributions to the country is the Vision 2030 which is aimed at making the Saudi's economy stronger through adding other sources as its bases including technology and tourism, see Vision 2030: Kingdom of the Saudi Arabia.
- https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf (accessed: 26. 07. 2030); Rafique S. & Butt K. M. 2021).
- ²⁶ Vision 2030: Kingdom of the Saudi Arabia.
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- ²⁸ The US-led Intervention was an international military campaign led by the US against the Baathist Regim under Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The Intervention started in March 2003 and resulted in overthrowing the Baathist Regime and official invading the country in May 2005, see Eckart C. (2006). *Saddam Hussein's Trial in Iraq: Fairness, Legitimacy & Alternatives, a Legal Analysis*, Cornell Law School, p. 6.
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- ²⁹ The Popular Mobilization Forces are a union of militia groups in Iraq which were formed to encounter the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014. The forces played a decisive role in the fight against ISIS and therefore still operate in the country. The union is mostly composed of the Shiite groups and some are Iranian proxies and sponsored by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard corps, see Derzsi-Horvath, A. & Gaston, E. Who's Who: Quick Facts About Local and Sub-State Forces// Global Public Policy institute. August 16, 2017.
- <https://gppi.net/2017/08/16/quick-facts-about-local-and-sub-state-forces> (accessed: 28.07. 2024).
- ³⁰ The Saddam Hussein's Regime was one of the most authoritarian regimes that has ever taken power in Iraq. The Regime was established in 1979, when Saddam Hussein plotted against the (then) Iraqi president, Ahmad Hassan Bakir and took over the office. The regime was toppled by the United States-led Coalition in 2003, after thirty-five years of systematic fear and violence against its citizens (Khdar. The Iraqi High Criminal Court, 2023, 128-156).



- ³¹ Harvey K. & Riedel B. Can Iraq play the Role of a Bridge in the Gulf?// Brookings. April 22, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/can-iraq-play-the-role-of-a-bridge-in-the-gulf/> (accessed: 27. 07. 2024).
- ³² The United States-led Coalition forces in this paragraph are meant the forces which were formed against the ISIS in 2014 and not the Forces which invaded Iraq in 2003.
- ³³ Muhammad Shiah Sudani is the current prime minister of Iraq and has been in office since October 2023. Sudani is a notable figure among the Iraqi Shia politicians and has held numerous ministerial positions prior to his last position. The Sudan's foreign policy is based on a balanced diplomacy between regional and international actors, see Kadow M. & Yavorsky E. Who is Muhammad Shia al-Sudani// The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. November 18, 2022. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/who-mohammed-shia-al-sudani> (accessed: 26. 07. 2024).
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- ³⁵ Syria Returns to the Arab Fold// The Soufan Center. May 8, 2023. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-may-8/> (accessed: 27. 07. 2024).
- ³⁶ Azizi H. & Çevik S. Turkish and Iranian Involvement in Iraq and Syria: Competing Strategies, Rising Threat Perceptions, and Potentials for Conflict// Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. October 12, 2022. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C58/> (accessed: 27. 07. 2024); Cagaptay S. & Uysal S. *et al.* The Iraq-Turkey Reset// The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. May 29, 2024. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraq-turkey-reset> (accessed: 27. 07. 2024); Soliman M. Why Turkey's President is Ready for Normalization with Damascus// Mir Interegional for Strategic Analysis. July 9, 2024. <https://www.interregional.com/article/The-Kurdish-Threat/2582/En> (accessed: 27. 07. 2024).
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- ³⁸ ISIS is a radical Islamic group operating in Iraq and Syria under different names since the beginning of 2000s. The group seized large parts of Iraqi and Syrian territories and established a so-called Islamic Caliphate in 2014. However, the group committed many heinous criminal acts in its military campaigns and this consequently led to the formation of an international coalition to encounter it. The Coalition eventually ended the rule of the group with the support of the local forces in 2018 (Khdar, *The Jurisdiction of...*, 2018, 69-181).
- ³⁹ Top Iraqi, Kurdish security officials meet in Erbil// Rudaw. June 5, 2024. <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/05062024> (accessed: 01. 08. 2024).
- ⁴⁰ Baghdad Works Through a Multiplicity of Challenges// The Soufan Center. July 16, 2024. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2024-july-16/> (accessed: 03. 08. 2024). For a detailed account on the operation of ISIS in the region, see, for example, Khdar R. (2017). "The Fate of Prisoners of War between the Quran, Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad and Practice of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria", *European Scientific Journal* 13 (34); Khdar R. (2018). "Jihad between Islamic Jurisprudence and Practice of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria", *European Scientific Journal* 14 (5).

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- ⁴² The Kurdish Iranian oppositions are several armed groups which have established their civil and military bases in Iraq and specifically in Kurdistan Region. The groups have often attacked Iran and caused security issues to the country using the territory of Iraq. Therefore, Iran has pressured Iraq to disarm the groups and expel them from its country, see Ali H. (2016). "Iran and its Opposition Kurdish Parties: The Need for Dialogue". *Middle East Research Institute* 3 (22). <https://www.meri-k.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/MERI-Policy-Brief-vol.3-no.22.pdf> (accessed: 02. 08. 2024).
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- ⁴⁴ The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) is a Kurdish armed group struggling to secure the collective right of self-rule for the Kurds in turkey. The group was established in 1978 and has been operating against Turkey since then. The PKK like the Iranian opposition groups, has some military bases in Iraq and the bases are always referred to as military threats by Turkey. Therefore, it has often concluded agreements with Iraq to close the bases and expel the group's members from its territory (Khdar. The Right to..., 2016, 62-80).
- ⁴⁵ Baghdad Works Through a Multiplicity of Challenges// The Soufan Center. July 16, 2024. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2024-july-16/> (accessed: 03. 08. 2024).
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