

The rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia can be the seed for a regional collective security system

Heinz Gärtner

Diplomacy as it should be

The restoration of the diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia under the mediation of the Republic of China was a major political event in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and a success for diplomacy in general. The participation of China gave the agreement a global dimension. It goes without saying that it is an important step towards normalization between these two regional powers and the stabilization of the Middle East. The accord has the potential to enhance not only diplomatic but also trade, political, cultural and technological relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It has also demonstrated that Iran is very much capable for diplomatic processes; what has been denied by opponents of the nuclear agreement (JCPOA).

It should not come to the surprise if one applied regular rules and norms of diplomatic relations between state actors. All actors involved did what they were supposed to do in a world based on multilateral principles. Iran and Saudi Arabia prepared the eventual successful accord with several rounds of bilateral talks. China played the role of the honest diplomatic broker, although it also had its own interest.

Missed the opportunity of the US and the EU

Both, the US and the EU, missed the opportunity to play a major diplomatic role because they are caught in their own defined idea of a “rule based order”, which means you only work with states you agree with. Traditional diplomacy requires the management of the relations with states that have potential conflicts with each other, however. President Biden’s dichotomy between democracies and autocracies is a major obstacle for establishing normal diplomatic relations with a large part of the world. In this specific case, the US had no partner to talk to on the basis of this ideology although it tries to have good relations with Saudi Arabia but not with Iran. An honest broker has to build contacts with all the parties even though it disagrees with the values or the behavior of one or all of them.

To leave this initiative to its rival China demonstrates the political weakness of the EU. The EU always claimed to maintain decent relations with all the states in the Persian Gulf. It developed a hierarchy of relations over time, however. It goes without saying that Israel always was on top of these relations which does not mean that it could not engage the other states as well. The energy crisis contributed to the EU’s selective approach. The EU’s “Strategic Partnership with the Gulf” of May 2022 covered many important issues, like trade, investment, youth employment, pandemic, transport, digitalization, energy security, green transition and more. But the document does not include Iran, Iraq and Yemen but mainly incorporates the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This selective approach reduces the EU’s role as a credible broker.

This approach also contributed to the failure of the EU to revive the JCPOA and to give Iran sufficient initiative to defend the JCPOA effectively. It has to be said that the Saudi-Iran accord

does not address the JCPOA neither. It might be possible that it facilitates the progress of the talks, however. Saudi Arabia's initial opposition to the deal could well vanish.

Collective security and regional arms control

The Iran-Saudi rapprochement can be seen as a kernel of a regional collective security system. After all, it emphasizes the necessity to respect each other's national sovereignty and to refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of one another. Beyond the bilateral security issues, it can balance the Abraham accords that comprises among others Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, but not Saudi Arabia. It has been brokered by former US-President Donald Trump and in many ways is designed as a future anti-Iranian alliance.

If the regional cooperation could be expanded to the UAE and other Persian Gulf States, it might be possible to start regional arms control talks. Western pundits time and again have requested that Iran's missile program should be included into a JCPOA agreement. This is a very counterproductive request, since it would address the program of only one party. Regional arms control talks could agree on limits on numbers and on the range of missiles of all parties in the region. It goes without saying that without a resolution of the violent conflict in Yemen regional security will remain shaky.

The Palestinian rights have to be addressed

Another issue that has not been part of the Iran-Saudi agreement are the rights of the Palestinians. The Abraham Accords have left the Palestinians hanging in the air. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are strong supporters of the Palestinian rights. They could propose common road maps. Saudi Arabia should remember the "Arab Peace Plan" of 2002. It requests the recognition of a Palestinian state within the borders of 1967 as a condition for the resumption of diplomatic relations with Israel. This is a condition which has been dismissed by the Abraham Accords. A common approach toward the Palestinians could open a path of Iran to the GCC.

Many winners

All in all, the Iran-Saudi Accord is a very good start for regional cooperation. It is also an example for successful diplomatic efforts in the Middle East. Most of the actors can be beneficiaries. It can enhance regional stability which should be in the interest not only of the countries in the Persian Gulf and China but also of the United States. But there is still a long way to go.

Bio

Prof. Dr. Heinz Gärtner teaches at the Department of Political Science at the University of Vienna. He was academic director of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs. He has held various Fulbright Fellowships and the Austrian Chair at Stanford University. He was Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation Fellow at the Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC. Among other things, he chairs the advisory board of the International Institute for Peace in Vienna and of the commission Strategy and Security of the Austrian Armed Forces. He published widely on issues of international security, transatlantic relations and the Middle East. Heinz Gärtner

received the Bruno Kreisky (legendary former Austrian Chancellor) Award for most outstanding Political Books.

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