

Saudi Arabia and Iran Make Quiet Openings to Head Off War

By Farnaz Fassihi and Ben Hubbard

Oct. 4, 2019

After years of growing hostility and competition for influence, Saudi Arabia and Iran have taken steps toward indirect talks to try to reduce the tensions that have brought the Middle East to the brink of war, according to officials from several countries involved in the efforts.

Even the prospect of such talks represents a remarkable turnaround, coming only a few weeks after a coordinated attack on Saudi oil installations led to bellicose threats in the Persian Gulf. Any reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran could have far-reaching consequences for conflicts across the region.

It was President Trump's refusal to retaliate against Iran for the Sept. 14 attack, analysts say, that prompted Saudi Arabia to seek its own solution to the conflict. That solution, in turn, could subvert Mr. Trump's effort to build an Arab alliance to isolate Iran.

In recent weeks, officials of Iraq and Pakistan said, the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, asked the leaders of those two countries to speak with their Iranian counterparts about de-escalation.

Iran welcomed the gestures, stating privately and publicly that it was open to talks with Saudi Arabia.

In a statement to The New York Times on Friday, the Saudi government acknowledged that Iraq and Pakistan had offered to mediate talks between the two countries but denied that Prince Mohammed had taken the initiative.

"Efforts at de-escalation must emanate from the party that began the escalation and launched attacks, not the kingdom," the statement said.

Distrust between the two Middle Eastern powers remains intense, and the prospect of high-level direct talks any time soon appears remote. But even a slight warming could echo far outside their respective borders, where their rivalry fuels political divides from Lebanon to Yemen.

Iran has long wanted to wrest the Saudis from their alliance with Iran's archenemies, Israel and the United States, which are waging a "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran to try to force it to restrict its nuclear program and stop backing militias in the region.



Secretary of State Mike Pompeo with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Jeddah last month. President Trump's decision not to strike Iran after the attacks on Saudi Arabia raised questions about the American commitment to Saudi security, and may have changed Saudi calculations. Bandar Al-Jaloud/Saudi Royal Palace

Iran's receptiveness for contact with the Saudis contrasts with its chilly tone toward the United States. Last week, Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, dodged an opportunity to speak directly with Mr. Trump while both were attending the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

The new overtures between Saudi Arabia and Iran began in the aftermath of last month's drone and cruise missile strikes on two Saudi oil facilities, which Saudi Arabia and the United States accused Iran of orchestrating.

Despite tough threats by the Trump administration, the president declined to order a military response. The demurrer raised questions for the Saudis about the American commitment to Saudi security, which has underpinned the strategic layout of the Persian Gulf for decades.

Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan met with Prince Mohammed, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, in Jeddah last month. Days later, while Mr. Khan was at the General Assembly, he told reporters that Prince Mohammed had asked him to talk to Iran.

Prince Mohammed told Mr. Khan, "I want to avoid war," according to a senior Pakistani official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to reporters. "He asked the prime minister to get involved."

Mr. Khan then spoke with Mr. Rouhani on the sidelines of the General Assembly.

The Iraqi prime minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, visited Saudi Arabia a few days after Mr. Khan did.

A senior Iraqi official said that Prince Mohammed asked Mr. Abdul Mahdi to mediate with Iran, and that Iraq had suggested Baghdad as the venue for a potential meeting.

"There is a big response from Saudi Arabia and from Iran and even from Yemen," Mr. Abdul Mahdi told journalists in Iraq after his return from the kingdom. "And I think that these endeavors will have a good effect."

Iran also endorsed the idea.

"Iran is open to starting a dialogue with Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region," Ali Larijani, the speaker of Iran's Parliament, told Al Jazeera in an interview broadcast on Tuesday. "An Iranian-Saudi dialogue," he added, "could solve many of the region's security and political problems."

While they explore back-channel possibilities, both sides have continued to stake out staunchly opposing public positions.



Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, dodged an opportunity to speak directly with President Trump at the United Nations but his government welcomed talks with Saudi Arabia.
Dave Sanders for The New York Times

The Saudi foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir, wrote on Twitter on Tuesday that Saudi Arabia had not asked anyone to send messages to Iran. Instead, he wrote, other countries he did not identify had offered to serve as intermediaries.

“We informed them that the truce needs to come from the side that is escalating and spreading chaos through aggressive acts in the region,” Mr. al-Jubeir wrote.

On Wednesday, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif of Iran said that his country would “definitely greet Saudi Arabia with open arms” — but only if it prioritized friendly relations with neighbors over purchasing weapons from the United States.

Iran has long sought to pull Saudi Arabia away from the United States and Israel. But it was the lack of an American military response to the strikes on Saudi oil facilities that appeared to have created an opening.

“There are cracks in the armor suggesting Saudi Arabia is interested in exploring a new relationship with Iran,” said Philip Gordon, a former White House coordinator for the Middle East. “The worst outcome for the Saudis is to move to a confrontation with Iran expecting the U.S. to support them and find out they won’t.”

He added, “This administration has shown it’s not really ready to take on Iran.”

Top officials from Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi allies which could suffer if open conflict broke out, have spoken publicly of the need for diplomacy to reduce tensions and have made their own efforts to reach out to Iran. The Emirates has held direct maritime security talks with Iran, and has pulled back from the war in Yemen, where it is allied with the Saudis in a battle against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.

If Saudi Arabia joins Kuwait and the Emirates in reaching out to Iran, it could undermine the Trump administration’s effort to build an international coalition to ostracize and pressure the Iranians.

“The anti-Iran alliance is not just faltering, it’s crumbling,” Martin Indyk, a distinguished fellow at Council on Foreign Relations and a former senior diplomat, said Thursday on Twitter. “MBZ has struck his deal with Iran; MBS is not far behind,” he said, referring to the Emirati crown prince, Mohammed bin Zayed, or MBZ, and the Saudi crown prince, known as MBS.

He also noted that Mr. Trump’s most hawkish anti-Iran adviser, John R. Bolton, had left the administration, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel is fighting for his political life and Mr. Trump has shown a willingness to talk directly to the Iranians.

For the Saudis, even indirect talks with Iran would represent a significant departure from Prince Mohammed's approach to his prime regional rival since his father, King Salman, ascended to the Saudi throne in 2015.



Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan met with Crown Prince Mohammed in Jeddah last month. Mr. Khan said that the Saudi leader had asked him to talk to Iran.
Bandar Algaloud/Saudi Royal Court

He has cast Iran as the root of the Middle East's problems and argued that political and theological differences make negotiations impossible. He has compared Iran's supreme leader to Hitler and threatened to instigate violence inside Iran's borders.

"We are a primary target for the Iranian regime," Prince Mohammed said in 2017. "We won't wait for the battle to be in Saudi Arabia. Instead, we'll work so that the battle is for them in Iran."

His antipathy toward Iran gave him common cause with Israel and the Trump administration. The Saudis have pitched themselves as the United States' greatest ally against Iran, proposing they carry out joint operations to weaken it and possibly bring about regime change, according to former United States officials.

But Prince Mohammed may now be more willing to explore a possible accommodation.

"We have reached the peak of Saudi-Iran tensions and both sides have concluded this balance of fear is detrimental to their interests," said Saeed Shariati, a political analyst in Tehran.

For now, the rift appears wide, and possibly unbridgeable. The Saudis criticize Iran for backing militias in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, where the kingdom has been mired in a disastrous war against the Houthis for four years.

The Houthis claimed responsibility for the attacks on Saudi oil facilities that seem to have helped prompt the diplomatic initiatives, but many Western experts believed that the Houthis could not have carried out the strikes unassisted.

Mr. al-Jubeir said Tuesday that Iran needed to stop its ballistic missile program, refrain from interfering in Arab states and "act like a normal country, and not like a rogue who sponsors terrorism."

For its part, Iran has called on Saudi Arabia to freeze its multibillion-dollar arms purchases from the United States, stop its intervention in Yemen and end discrimination against the Shiite Muslim minority in Saudi Arabia, a Sunni Muslim-led absolute monarchy.

At the General Assembly last week, Iran's president, Mr. Rouhani, aimed part of his speech directly at Arab countries in the Persian Gulf.

"It's the Islamic Republic of Iran who is your neighbor," he said. "At the day of an event, you and us will be alone. We are each other's neighbors, not America."

Correction: Oct. 5, 2019

An earlier version of this article misidentified the affiliation of Martin Indyk. He is a distinguished fellow at Council on Foreign Relations, not the executive vice president of Brookings Institution.

Salman Masood and Alissa J. Rubin contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 5, 2019, Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Mideast Foes Tiptoe Toward Talks to Avert War

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