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Urgent need for improved Saudi-Iran relations

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This will help reverse the current trajectory towards further sectarianism, extremism and terrorism spreading throughout the region

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The Middle East is in turmoil and increasingly there is a need for the two regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, to mend their differences in an effort to address urgent regional security matters. There is no denying that the Arab-Persian rivalry and sectarian divide is deep-rooted and will require serious dialogue and engagement to be rectified. The historical mistrust between Riyadh and Tehran dates back decades and reached their lowest point following Saudi support for Saddam Hussain's invasion of Iran that led to the eight-year war from 1980-88.

In the past decade, Iran-Saudi rivalry intensified as the

regional configuration tilted favourably towards Tehran — as the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq led to replacing regimes by leaders closely allied with Tehran and the US. With the Arab Spring, yet another opportunity opened for the reshaping of the Middle East, with both Saudi Arabia and Iran jockeying for more influence. Today, both countries to varying degrees have vested interests in conflagrations in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq. In each of these conflicts Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a cold war, providing all-out support to their respective allies. The latest advancement by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil), trying to disintegrate Syria and Iraq, has introduced intolerable and uncontrollable fundamentalists bent on further dividing Muslims based on sectarian lines. The need for a transformation in Iran-Saudi relations is no longer an option but an urgent necessity to halt and reverse the current trajectory towards further sectarianism, extremism and terrorism spreading throughout the region.

With the election of the moderate Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Iranian foreign policy returned to pragmatism, with emphasis on preserving the geostrategic interest of Tehran while engaging wholeheartedly with regional players. One of the key foreign policy goals of the new administration has been to reconcile its relationship with the GCC, specifically Saudi Arabia.

It is feasible that Tehran-Riyadh relations could progressively improve, underpinned by national interest of both countries in stemming out sectarianism and extremism in the region. There is precedence for improved Saudi-Iran relations at turbulent times. While serving as the Iranian ambassador to Germany in the

mid-1990s, on behalf of then Iranian president Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, I visited Saudi Arabia in an effort to revive bilateral relations. Following intense rounds of negotiations with then Saudi crown prince Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz, we finalised a comprehensive agreement that addressed security, political, economic and social issues. The initiative was welcomed by both capitals and led to normalisation of Tehran-Riyadh relations until Ahmadinejad's presidency in 2005. It is likely that Tehran and Riyadh will rework the 1996 comprehensive plan with emphasis on combating extremism, containing sectarian conflict and schisms in the region.

Iran and Saudi Arabia, as the two key regional powers have the responsibility to seriously engage in a dialogue to achieve a comprehensive agreement on issues of tension and mutual interest. Reviving Iran-Saudi relations is to the benefit of both countries and the region as a whole — in terms of security, stability, socioeconomic vitality and managing the crises in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. They could form a bilateral committee at the foreign ministerial level to bring to the table areas of contention and mutual interest in the framework of regional developments. The items for discussion could include the conflicts in which both parties are involved, mutual security concerns and regional policies.

Common cooperation

Opening direct channels with respective defence and military institutions to counter any misinformation and enhance future discussions on regional security, specifically stemming the rise of terrorism, civil war, sectarian conflict and maritime passage of oil in the

Arabian Gulf. As the epicentres of Islamic religious authority, Tehran and Riyadh could develop an intra-faith dialogue to reduce the sectarian divide that is plaguing the region and risks dividing the Muslim population further along sectarian lines. In a rare event, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the US have welcomed the appointment of Haider Al Abadi as Iraq's new prime minister. This could be a good beginning for Iran and Saudi Arabia to exercise cooperation to stabilise Iraq.

An economic council that aims to enhance business relationships between the two countries can also be established. Iran with its rich human resources and self-sufficient industrial sector could play a vital role in economic development and job creation in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's access to advanced technologies in construction and extraction industries could be mutually beneficial. The intertwined cultural and religious ties between the peoples of Saudi Arabia and Iran should be revived with people-to-people diplomacy. This can be done by easing visa processes and boosting tourism between the two countries.

The normalisation of Saudi-Iran relations, however, will be tenuous in the absence of the constructive role of the US — which as the sole superpower with extensive military ties with the GCC can assist in reformulating Riyadh's security and defence doctrine towards Tehran. The recent US-Iran rapprochement within the framework of the P5+1 [five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany] nuclear talks bodes well for opening a regional dialogue. The convergence of mutual interest of the US, Iran and Saudi Arabia along the lines of tackling extremism, terrorism and sectarianism, therefore, is a key joint commitment for transforming the relationship into a

positive and constructive one.

Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian is a research scholar at Princeton University and a former spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiators. His latest book, *Iran and the United States: An Insider's view on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace* was published by Bloomsbury in May 2014.