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# Inside The Real (And Really Secret) Middle East Peace Process

Tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran now defines the world's most combustible region the way the Israeli-Palestinian conflict once did.



By Akbar Shahid Ahmed

WASHINGTON — A little over a month ago, Iran established something close to a diplomatic presence in Saudi Arabia for the first time in nearly two years. The Saudis, for their part, got an equivalent not-quite-embassy in Iran. Suddenly, two regional powerhouses whose rivalry had caused hundreds of thousands of deaths and untold global instability seemed a little closer to peace — courtesy of Switzerland, which [announced on Oct. 25](#) that it would represent Saudi interests in Iran and vice versa.

The Swiss mandate is narrow. It only covers consular services, as a Swiss official was quick to remind HuffPost. The official said the foreign ministry had no further comment on the policy.

But when it comes to the possibility of a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, even the smallest steps matter. Despite the furor over U.S. President [Donald Trump's upending of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process](#) this week, the defining fault line in the Middle East today is not between supporters of Palestine and those of Israel. The fight that will decide the Mideast's future is that between Iran and its many opponents — most importantly Saudi Arabia.

“They are locked in a zero-sum power contestation,” said Randa Slim, a prominent peace-building expert at the Middle East Institute, a think tank. “Iran says it will never leave the Middle East” — that is, accept a marginal role in regional affairs — “including the Arab region, since it is from this region. Saudi Arabia says Iran has no role to play in the Arab region since it is not an Arab country. The level of tensions that exists today between the two countries is one of the highest I have witnessed.”

Peace in the region depends on effective diplomacy between Riyadh and Tehran. Years of attempts to achieve that goal have yielded a little progress and a lot of frustration — but experts say that given regional turmoil and the two countries' inevitably intertwined futures, even limited proof of success shows it's worth trying.

The good news is that the Swiss channel is just one of multiple attempts. Since autumn 2015, Western officials have paid increasing attention to a Europe-based effort to bring together a group of influential Saudis and Iranians on a fairly regular basis twice a year.

“Regardless of political tensions, there is always a core in both countries — in academia, but also in the think tank scene and in the security establishment — that is interested in having some forms of communication,” said Adnan Tabatabai, the head of the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient in Bonn, Germany. Known as a Track II dialogue because it does not include government (Track I) figures from either side, the exercise is a partnership, backed by the German government, between CARPO and the EastWest Institute, a nonpartisan American think tank.

The process is extraordinarily sensitive. The dialogue’s organizers do not reveal the names of the Saudis, Iranians and others who attend (usually European experts on the region). Nor do they say where the meetings are held.

It’s understood that the participants might share information or analysis with policymakers, Tabatabai said, but there have not been official inquiries from any side. The priority is maintaining trust, confidentiality and good faith — which involves expectations like the [Chatham House rule](#) that insights from the conversations can be shared externally, but only if they are free of identifying information about which individual or institution they came from.

“A real success is already if you have a continuous channel where people of knowledge from both sides come together to discuss current developments and do so in a civilized manner where discussions are frank yet respectful, and where you actually throughout those meetings have coffee breaks, lunches, dinners where these people then simply mingle and socialize and humanize each other,” Tabatabai said. “What we regard as a success is that throughout the past two and a half years we have been able to bring participants from both countries together six times and have had a continuous conversation which builds on the previous rounds.”



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After Iranian protesters attacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran in early 2016, Saudi Arabia and its allies in the region slashed ties with the Iranian government.

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After four of the meetings, the organizers have released brief reports to share the perspectives and concerns the Saudis and Iranians brought. They also conduct briefings in capitals around the world.

Officials see the dialogue as useful because it sustains relationships between fairly consistent groups and deliberately covers a range of issues. Among them so far are the refugee crisis, environmental concerns, the threat posed by Islamic State militants, and plans to reduce the two countries' reliance on oil revenue.

Simply meeting face-to-face regularly and becoming familiar with each other's methods can make it easier for both sides to be honest, according to Richard Nephew, a former top State Department official who participated in the broadest U.S. talks with Iran in decades as part of the Obama administration's nuclear diplomacy. He recalled something similar occurring during those negotiations. "In those initial conversations, the dimensions of what you could say and what you could float were profoundly different than a year and a half in," Nephew told HuffPost.

And committing to a dialogue even as Saudi Arabia and Iran have cut off official diplomatic ties and ratcheted up their rhetoric sends an important signal — that both sides take the talks seriously, and that some true confidence has developed.

"It's really impressive how [Tabatabai and his team have] managed to maintain these exchanges even after all of the terrible events of the last three years," a Western government official told HuffPost.

Tabatabai's definition of failure is a situation where no one is even able to start a conversation. That prospect seems more likely in a year in which Saudi Arabia's crown prince called Iran's leader "[the new Hitler](#)" and Iran-aligned rebels in Yemen almost successfully [destroyed the main Saudi airport](#). The report on the last workshop, held this past April, [noted](#) that it was more difficult than before to secure balanced participation on both sides.

The increasingly [hard-line](#) Saudi position — which the kingdom says is an appropriate response to Iranian assertiveness following its [gains](#) from the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 — is a particular problem.

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“Saudi officials have decided to go all in contesting Iranian influence in their backyard. They will not abandon this strategy anytime soon,” Slim, who runs her own broad regional dialogue at the quasi-official Track 1.5 level, said. She noted that even during less assertive periods, Saudi Arabia has been wary of engagement through nonofficial channels.

“The Iranians, always they have shown readiness,” said Seyed Houssain Mousavian, a former Iranian diplomat who worked on engaging the Saudis. “During the late King Abdullah’s era, Riyadh was ready to hear what the Iranians say, but no more in [current King] Salman’s era.”

Mousavian, now a researcher at Princeton University, sees the growing reluctance on Saudi Arabia’s part as a result of anxiety about the nuclear deal and Iran’s outreach to the West. For years, Saudi Arabia has sought to have its U.S. partner serve as a balancing force in the region, while Iran, skeptical of Washington’s intentions and more confident in its own abilities, has pushed to shape the Middle East on a bilateral basis, according to a [2009 study](#) from the RAND think tank.

The Trump administration’s chumminess with the Saudis, and its determination to challenge Iran, means there’s presently little American pressure to record  /o powers — though there’s still an acknowledgement that in the long run, a reconciliation is essential. Asked about the new Swiss policy, a State Department official said: “We have seen these reports. We continue to urge leaders across the region to take affirmative steps to calm tensions.”

Some observers feel the U.S. could do more even if the administration doesn’t want to. A top congressional aide working on Capitol Hill efforts to promote Saudi-Iran dialogue told HuffPost there’s frustration in progressive circles that former Obama aides are not more vocal, particularly to say their experience suggests Iran is willing to engage with its adversaries.

But there’s no telling when positions might soften on their own.

Some analysts believe that when the Saudi king-to-be thinks he has fully consolidated his control and boosted Saudi prestige abroad, he may modify his tone and attempt compromise.

Experts say Riyadh and Tehran have pragmatically kept their governments ready to launch such engagement at fairly short notice.

“There’s a number of well-placed Saudis who know their counterparts in Iran very well, not through [Tabatabai’s] stuff and not through the Swiss,” the Western official said.

Slim noted that the two governments have communicated surreptitiously for years through U.S., Swiss, Iraqi, Emirati and Kuwaiti officials — most recently in a Kuwaiti mediation that “reached an advanced stage” but is now “on hold if not finished.”

And despite impressions that sectarian differences might preclude open engagement, as most Saudis follow the Sunni school of Islam and most Iranians adhere to Shiite ideology, analysts say religious differences are not decisive. Probably more important are the differences in political systems, with Iran

supporting and exporting the idea of a quasi-democratic theocracy, which the Saudis see as a threat to absolute monarchies like their own.

Mousavian and Nephew, Iranian and American diplomats respectively, both told HuffPost the key to successful talks is high-level interest.

In the 1990s, reformist Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and then-Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah wanted to defuse tensions lingering from Saudi police scuffles with Iranians during the Hajj ceremony in Saudi Arabia in 1987, the Lebanese Civil War and other issues. Rafsanjani sent Mousavian to the kingdom as a special envoy in the summer of 1996.

“We discussed security concerns, interferences, very, very honestly, openly, frankly. We talked about the minorities — the Shiite minority in Saudi, the Sunni minority in Iran — and mutual suspicions about interferences in our internal affairs,” Mousavain said. “Ultimately, our package was a very comprehensive package that led to good Saudi-Iran relations for almost a decade.”

“The two leaders were really positive, both of them,” he noted. “We were recognizing every concern. We were not fighting. We were saying, ‘If this is your problem, what is the solution?’”



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Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran's top moderate politician, visited Saudi Arabia more than once and approved high-level talks. Rafsanjani (left) and Saudi King Abdullah (right), seen here in 2008, were both supportive of engagement between the two countries.

“The first real hurdle we had to overcome [in the Iran nuclear talks] is knowing that they were speaking on behalf of their government,” Nephew said. Otherwise dialogue can be useless, even with good intentions. “Saying the words ‘regional dialogue’ is a little bit like saying grace when you sit down at a table,” he added.

For Tabatabai, whose dialogue has identified a host of problems the Saudis and Iranians will have to cooperate on at some point, it's about waiting for that perfect moment.

He believes political reconciliation at the highest level will happen sooner or later — and when it does, he said, his project wants to ensure it can be deeply rooted in both societies “to continue these expert discussions on the social level.”



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