

ROUND TABLE

Iran's Bottleneck Diplomacy with Saudi Arabia and Israel

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Abstract

The October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel entailed a disproportional military counterattack by Israel on Gaza, and on Iranian strongholds in the Middle East. Iran's evident failure to fully protect its allies and military assets pointed to a receding regional influence. The US-Israel Twelve-Day War against Iran's military, industrial, nuclear, and civilian targets in June 2025 exposed the scale of Iranian defense vulnerability. On the diplomatic front, Iran failed to work with Saudi Arabia to prevent bloodshed in Gaza or the Twelve-Day War, despite joint appeals to reduce violence and condemn the Israeli aggression. Saudi Arabia encouraged a ceasefire in Gaza, but it discouraged Tehran and its ally Hamas from regrouping against Israel.¹ The Saudi response to the Twelve-Day War arrived belatedly, after other Muslim countries first condemned the attacks. Both conflicts revealed Iran's frequent resort to niche diplomacy: seeking limited diplomatic goals without garnering momentum to resolve conflicts.² Its triangular diplomacy to mobilize resources with Saudi Arabia to preempt Israeli aggression only served to sustain Tel Aviv's hostility and cautious ties with Riyadh.³

The difficult triangular diplomacy that shapes the Iran-Saudi-Israeli connection has for a long time prompted Tehran to engage in niche diplomacy with Riyadh, a tactic used by middle powers to avert risks under fragile regional conditions. Tehran sought limited diplomatic goals around niche themes, such as discouraging Riyadh's bonds with Tel Aviv to preempt the two capitals from containing Iran. But Tel Aviv vowed to attack Iran's nuclear sites if the country aimed to weaponize. Not surprisingly, Iran's and Israel's superior if not parallel military powers challenged the Saudi regional position, before and after the outbreak of two major conflicts in the Middle East, that is, the Israel–Gaza war of October 2023, and the US-Israel war on Iran in June 2025. As a status quo country, Saudi Arabia aimed to ensure that neither of its two military rivals gained regional hegemony or a dominant position due to the conflicts. This helped Riyadh ensure survival in a volatile region, by half-heartedly maintaining cautiously friendly ties with Tehran when they resumed in April 2023 after a seven-year lull, and entertaining building diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv. Saudi actions reinforced the limits of niche diplomacy that Tehran, lacking alternative strategic bonds with most Arab countries in the Middle East, aimed to promote with Riyadh.

¹ “HRH Crown Prince.”

² For details on niche diplomacy, see Keynoush, “Saudi Arabia and Iran: Can Balanced Relations be Restored?”

³ See “Triangular Diplomacy.”

Prompted by Iran's limited capabilities to promote its niche diplomacy to avert regional conflicts, Saudi Arabia backed the US and Israeli policies to disarm Iranian regional allies. For example, it offered incentives to invest in Lebanon in exchange for the Iranian-backed Hezbollah agreement not to rearm despite repeated Israeli strikes against the group's strongholds and the assassination of scores of its leaders, which was rejected.⁴ But Iran's niche diplomacy also led to mixed results, in this case, by working against Israel. For example, when Israel attacked Hamas central offices in Qatar in September 2025, Saudi Arabia and Iran joined regional bodies such as the Gulf Cooperation Council to condemn (but failed to prevent) Tel Aviv's increased military forays against Muslim countries in the Middle East. As the sole Muslim country to possess nuclear weapons, and fearing Israeli strikes against its weapons arsenal, Pakistan proceeded to build stronger relations with Tehran and Riyadh, and signed a joint defense pact with Saudi Arabia in mid-September to show unity against Tel Aviv's overwhelming military capabilities.⁵ Additionally, Pakistan acted as a mediator with the United States to end regional conflicts, including the June Twelve-Day War.⁶

Nonetheless, the bottleneck in Iran's niche diplomacy with Saudi Arabia and Israel compromised its gravitational pull to build regional unity on all fronts. Tehran and Riyadh disagreed about Iran's push to maintain its regional influence in the Arab world, and Saudi refusal to take a decisive stance over US-Israeli policies to contain Iran. The adversarial circumstances prevented Iran from formulating an effective peacetime or wartime strategy, thereby jeopardizing overall cooperation and perpetuating the fear of future conflicts. To complicate matters, Tehran advanced an aspirational worldview. Its leaders, for example, stressed that as long as Palestinians asked for support to restore justice in Gaza and the West Bank, they would aid the fight against Israel.⁷ Moreover, its foreign policy conduct aimed to contain American and Israeli hegemony, and Iran's nuclear program intended to ensure regime survival at the risk of sustained regional hostilities.⁸

Iran's Pre-War Diplomacy

Iran openly condemned the public rapprochement shaping between Saudi Arabia and Israel after the conclusion of the Abraham Accords of 2020. The accords threatened to disrupt Israel's periphery ties that had previously bonded it with Iran, as two non-Arab regional countries. Those bonds had even led Tehran to grant *de facto* diplomatic recognition to the Jewish state back in 1950. But when they broke down following the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979, Tehran and Tel Aviv sustained only marginal periphery ties, by avoiding actions that could irreversibly harm their respective interests in the Middle East in a manner that would grant preponderant power to the core and relatively hostile Arab states such as Saudi Arabia.⁹ By 2017, however, Israel and Saudi Arabia were showing growing signs of a mutual desire to build up their periphery-core relations to address threats from Iran, including its refusal to scale back regional influence in the Arab world. Riyadh therefore publicly endorsed an Arab NATO initiative under the first Trump administration, which did not materialize but led to an enlarged CENTCOM umbrella that engaged Saudi Arabia and Israel in joint military and security initiatives in the Middle East and the Red Sea region.¹⁰

Additionally, Tehran charged Riyadh and Tel Aviv with supplying funds to Iranian opposition groups. It stated that the domestic protests that erupted across Iran in 2017 and after,

⁴ Mroue and Chehayeb, "US Envoy."

⁵ Siddiqui, "Saudi Arabia."

⁶ Pakistan Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, "Field Marshal."

⁷ Author interview with anonymous source familiar with Iranian government's thinking, October 25, 2024.

⁸ Keynough, "Perils."

⁹ Keynough, "Iran and Israel," 25.

¹⁰ Keynough, "Saudi Arabia and Israel," 231.

due to this covert support, aimed to expedite regime change.¹¹ A subsequent terrorist attack purportedly led by Iranian regional allies against Saudi Arabia's oil installations in 2019, which Riyadh refused to openly pick a fight over with Tehran, nonetheless pushed Saudi leaders to rapidly build quiet ties with Tel Aviv through a peace for prosperity plan that would lead to the Abraham Accords a year later, while seeking ways to appease Tehran.

Iran rejected the Abraham Accords as a threat to regional peace, and it backed its Axis of Resistance, a network of state and non-state regional actors, to lead multi-flank warfare in the form of repeated small-scale attacks in response to the accords. These actors included Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iraqi Shi'i militia groups, the Houthis in Yemen, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps with its paramilitary Quds Force. Their frequent strikes against Israeli—and at times Saudi—targets discouraged Riyadh from joining the accords.¹²

By supporting Hamas, Tehran reminded Riyadh that embracing relations with Israel could thwart opportunities for peace in Palestine. Nonetheless, the two Muslim capitals failed to design complementary policies on Hamas and its military wing the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, which Tehran financed and supported. Riyadh reportedly extradited Hamas members who resided in Saudi Arabia before the October war.¹³ By September 2023, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud offered verbal support for drawing closer to Israel. Riyadh then withheld funds to Palestinian groups to encourage a road map for peace with the Jewish state, despite Prime Minister Netanyahu's fractured cabinet decision to control the civilian administration of the West Bank.¹⁴

Finally, Saudi Arabia actively sought US and Israeli security guarantees and the supply of advanced nuclear technologies. Riyadh may have harbored even loftier goals to extract its own uranium and develop a nuclear weaponization project in the process of negotiating normalization plans. This along with its 2025 joint defense pact with Pakistan would grant it leverage in the evolving, fluid deterrent nuclear regimes led by its two regional rivals, Israel and Iran, especially if they were to engage in direct war.¹⁵

Iran's Postwar Diplomacy

Iran expressed support for Hamas after it attacked Israeli citizens, leading to the war in Gaza in October 2023. Saudi Arabia supported a ceasefire and the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Gaza, without taking a strong stance on either issue, to maintain a balanced discourse with both neighbors. Riyadh's diplomacy enabled it to avert the serious topics it could not resolve, including the underlying cause of the war related to Iranian hostility toward Israel and the latter's plans to contain and eliminate Hamas and its Iranian backers. Its efforts to lead a triangular diplomacy with Iran and Israel caused political wrangling. This enabled a gradual buildup of US preponderant power over the fate of Gaza when Washington established a temporary but frail ceasefire in January 2025. The sidelining of Iran's and Saudi Arabia's interests to restore full Palestinian rights suggested that the conflict in Gaza would endure, after Washington and Tel Aviv unveiled plans to depopulate the area and take the land with a promise to rebuild.

Washington's policies in the region remained a variable in the destructive tensions between Tehran and Tel Aviv, as did preponderant US power to contain the Iranian nuclear program. In need of action to shape not only Syria's future, but also the fate of other conflict corridors in the Middle East where Tehran and Tel Aviv competed, Riyadh was left with few options but to push back against its two neighbors' regional ambitions through delay tactics

¹¹ Dehghanpisheh, "To Iranian Eyes."

¹² Keynoush, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: Spoilers or Enablers of Conflict?"

¹³ "Hamas Aims to Restore Saudi Arabia Ties."

¹⁴ "Saudi Crown Prince MBS."

¹⁵ Keynoush, "Saudi Arabia and Israel."

and collective action in a quest to offer alternative workable strategies to resolve conflicts. For example, Saudi Arabia advanced a 2002 Saudi-led Arab Peace Initiative to grant Israel recognition if it were to withdraw from occupied territories taken in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab–Israeli war based on terms outlined in United Nations Security Council resolutions 242 and 338.¹⁶ Tehran maintained, however, that the initiative was not practical, as nearly eighty years had passed since Israel’s establishment in 1948 without a solution in sight to give Palestinians their own state.¹⁷ It also denounced Israel as an “artificial or fake” state, and parted with Riyadh on the issue of recognizing the Jewish state.¹⁸

The October war also forced Saudi Arabia to appease and accommodate Iran to de-escalate regional tensions, by stressing the need to respect the country’s territorial integrity when Tehran and Tel Aviv exchanged direct fire, and after US sources confirmed that a key reason Hamas attacked Israel was to thwart pending normalization between Riyadh and the Jewish state.¹⁹ But Tehran demanded that Riyadh use its regional influence to build a quick ceasefire in Gaza.²⁰ Riyadh, however, rejected Tehran’s call to condemn the war on Hamas. Instead, it backed an Arab-Islamic Contact Group on Gaza through the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League in November 2023, to support mediation by the United States, Qatar, and Egypt. Hamas and Israel would delay a peace deal, despite negotiations, to decide on the fate of Israeli hostages held captive by the group, a permanent ceasefire, and the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

By March 2024, Tehran urged coherent positions over the fate of Gaza. But Riyadh stressed that Iranian support for Hamas could dampen regional initiatives.²¹ In the following months, Israel carried out strikes that killed Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut, following which Riyadh again launched a peace initiative by forming a coalition with Norway to advance a two-state solution for Palestine.²² Tehran argued for mechanisms to build joint governance between Hamas in Gaza and the Fatah party running the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, through elections in which Hamas members could participate.²³

Facing mounting pressures, Riyadh was left with no option but to appease and contain Iran at the same time. It delayed normalization and pronounced Israel’s campaign in Gaza a genocide.²⁴ It then conditioned normalization to a “just solution” for Palestine rather than insisting on statehood.²⁵ Subsequently, Riyadh openly embraced ties with the new leader of Syria, Ahmed al-Sharaa, a former Sunni rebel leader whose group ousted the pro-Iranian Bashar al-Assad regime in early 2025. In April of that year, with the breakdown of the US-led ceasefire deal for Gaza, Israel mounted attacks to eliminate Syria’s military capabilities. Tehran implied that Israeli actions could revitalize a new Syrian axis of resistance that would lead to the collapse of the Saudi-backed al-Sharaa government.²⁶ On April 17, Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman Al Saud traveled to Tehran to seek a resolution to the regional conflict, leading to quiet appeasement by both sides to build up collective regional diplomacy.²⁷

¹⁶ Keynoush, “Saudi Arabia and Iran: Spoilers or Enablers of Conflict?”

¹⁷ Author interview with anonymous source familiar with Iranian government’s thinking, October 25, 2024.

¹⁸ Karimi, “Iran’s Leader.”

¹⁹ “Hamas Attack.”

²⁰ Author interview with anonymous source familiar with Iranian government’s thinking, October 25, 2024.

²¹ “Iran, Saudi Foreign Ministers Meet.”

²² Lederer, “Europeans, Arab and Muslim Nations”; Author interview with peace organization in Israel, Notre Dame, November 3, 2024.

²³ Author interview with anonymous source familiar with Iranian government’s thinking, October 25, 2024.

²⁴ Salem, “Saudi Crown Prince.”

²⁵ “Saudi FM.”

²⁶ Motamedi, “Iran Says Syria’s Future Unclear.”

²⁷ Ebrahim, “Saudi Defense Minister.”

Despite these developments, Tehran and Riyadh lacked a strategy to help end the war in Gaza, although they agreed to work collectively to de-escalate regional tensions. Moreover, the massive scale of Israel's military campaigns and aerial and missile bombardments against Iranian regional strongholds barred Tehran from working effectively with Riyadh. Tehran therefore turned to building up its nuclear program despite Tel Aviv's efforts to sabotage its rapid advancement. When Riyadh advocated for a Middle East region free of nuclear weapons, Tehran welcomed the idea but Tel Aviv did not subscribe to it, pushing the Saudi leadership to address any potential proliferation challenge or future regional conflict over the Iranian nuclear program collectively with other Muslim countries, as Tehran engaged in five rounds of nuclear talks with the second Trump administration. The early optimism over the talks, which Oman and Italy hosted in 2025, soon faded. Tehran stressed the unethical aspects of Israel's nuclear military program and its war in Gaza, and the need to avoid another regional war and build a nuclear deal that would enable Iran's right to uranium enrichment under the terms of the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which did not clearly bar enrichment. But Israel insisted on the full dismantlement of the Iranian enrichment program.

Tel Aviv and Riyadh, meanwhile, struggled to address the divisive and ethical aspects of security regarding the question of the Iranian nuclear program and the Gaza war. Resolving the issue would have required state-level solutions that Riyadh was unable to work with Tel Aviv to address, short of warfare to disable Iran's enrichment capacity.²⁸ The clear limits and dangers of a security alliance between Riyadh and Tel Aviv against Tehran, their failure to present an alternative joint security system for the region, along with the defiance of Tehran's axis members, barred a resolution to regional tensions. For example, regarding Yemen, Tehran hoped that Riyadh would commit to signing a deal with the Houthis, forged by the United Nations before the October 7 attacks. Riyadh refused to sign a peace deal and engaged with the United States to safeguard its borders with Yemen, as the Houthis, in solidarity with the Palestinians, made repeated strikes on shipping lines and Israeli targets, despite US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth vowing revenge on Iran for backing the group. In Lebanon, the United States helped lead indirect talks with Hezbollah hoping to disarm the group in 2025. Riyadh and Washington backed the candidacy of Josphe Aoun and Hezbollah's disarmament, but Hezbollah called on Riyadh to join the group's efforts to contain Israel by September.²⁹ In Iraq, Iran urged the withdrawal of American troops when the mandate for UN assistance in the country concluded in 2025. Washington planned to retain some military bases for counterterrorism operations, although it endorsed downsizing militarily.³⁰

In June 2025, meanwhile, Israel bombed Iran's nuclear, military, and civilian infrastructures, two days before a scheduled sixth round of nuclear talks between the United States and Iran. Iran's diminished air-defense systems led to further attacks on three of its nuclear sites by the United States. This triggered debates in Iranian state media about the merits of building a weapons-grade atomic program, after more than 400 kilograms of highly enriched material reportedly went missing.³¹ President Trump's insistence on zero enrichment in Iran tipped the balance of power in favor of Israel, and the trajectory of the Iranian-Saudi-Israeli ties remained challenging. To get Iran back to the negotiating table, Western powers triggered a "snapback" mechanism on September 19, embedded in the Iran nuclear deal of 2015 from which the United States withdrew three years later. This ended sanctions relief for Iran unless it returned to talks to resolve its nuclear activities, in which case the sanctions listed in six previous United Nations Security Council resolutions passed

²⁸ Keynoush, *World Powers and Iran*, 210.

²⁹ "Yazid dar Beirut."

³⁰ Keynoush, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: Spoilers or Enablers of Conflict?"; Ali, "Pentagon Chief."

³¹ "Sedā va Simā"; El-Fekki, "Iran Issues Update"; De Luce, "Trump and US Intelligence."

between 2006 and 2010 could remain pending. Snapback also would refer Iran to the council as a threat to peace under chapter 7, article 39 of the UN Charter, to pave the way for future military action against the country.

Conclusion

As of the time of this writing, Iran remained defiant despite a new modalities oversight deal of its nuclear sites with the International Atomic Energy Agency that was concluded in early September 2025, threatening to limit cooperation with the agency if any hostile act was launched against it. Tehran also vowed that its allies in the region would not disarm, and turned to regional diplomacy and regular visits with Saudi officials, hoping this could buffer pressures from Israel and the United States and force a Saudi alliance with other Muslim countries to protect Iranian interests.³² This illustrated the double-pronged Iranian survival strategy, seeking to appease Muslim neighbors while rejecting US and Israeli policies. The prospect promises both continuity and change for Iran and its regional connections with Saudi Arabia and Israel, leading to further redistribution of power and interests, as well as disruptive and incremental change in the region.³³

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³² "Sokut yā hamrāhi-ye keshvarhā-ye eslāmi."

³³ Keynough, *World Powers and Iran*, 229–30; see also Seenha, "Building a Theory."

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