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Why Are Saudi Arabia, UAE Engaging With Iran?



Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Muhammad bin Salman al-Saud (L) is welcomed by Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi on November 22, 2018.

DUBAI (Dispatches) – Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, resigned to the revival of a nuclear pact with Iran they always opposed, are engaging with Tehran to contain tensions.

World powers have been negotiating in Vienna with Iran to revive the 2015 deal. The new U.S. administration of President Joe Biden wants to restore the deal, which Washington abandoned under his predecessor Donald Trump. But its failure to undo the former regime's wrongs has bedeviled the negotiations.

Saudi Arabia is embroiled in a costly war in Yemen and facing repeated missile and drone attacks on its oil infrastructure.

Persian Gulf officials worry that they lack the same clout with the Biden administration that they had under former president Donald Trump.

Rather than wait for the outcome in Vienna, Riyadh accepted Iraqi overtures in April to host talks between Saudi and Iranian officials, Reuters cited two sources familiar with the matter as saying.

According to the news agency, Iran holds a number of cards which give "a strong bargaining position", Persian Gulf Research Center's Abdulaziz Sager, who has been active in past unofficial Saudi-Iran dialogue, said this week.

Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MBS) is "engaged in efforts to defuse tensions with the Islamic Republic of Iran by engaging with Syria," a Damascus-based Syrian Foreign Ministry official told Al Jazeera.

The official said MBS instructed his team to reassure Syria that he does not want regime change against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

According to the Syrian Foreign Ministry official, the Iranians were "immediately very welcoming to what they heard" about the possibility of the Riyadh-Damascus détente.

Early last month, Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief traveled to Damascus to meet his Syrian counterpart in a move seen as a precursor to a détente between the two regional foes.

Later in May, Syria dispatched its first ministerial delegation in 10 years to Riyadh, led by Tourism Minister Rami Martini, who said at the time that "efforts are being made to upgrade ties with Saudi Arabia, and may soon have positive results."

Throughout the war on Syria, Saudi Arabia was among the countries that supplied militant groups with finance and weaponry, including U.S.-made anti-tank missiles.

Al Jazeera quoted a Saudi Foreign Ministry official as saying that "the time has come to accept that Syria, as it is, is an indelible part of the Arab landscape."

A senior official from the Syrian opposition Free Officer's Movement also said the "political mood within the House of Saud has changed, many senior royals, particularly Mohammad bin Salman himself, are keen to reengage with Assad."

"The prevailing attitude can be defined as, 'times have changed...' and the region is transitioning towards a new future, with new geopolitical characteristics," the official added.

According to the official, the Saudis have made clear to Damascus that they want Assad to reduce the influence of the Iranians in Syria, but for now they have accepted Iran's influence as a strategic reality. "The Saudis acknowledge that the Iranians will continue to have cov-

ert political influence in Damascus as they do in Baghdad, but they and the UAE want Assad to pressure the Iranians to at least reduce their build-up of strategic military assets, like the missile storage and production bases," he claimed.

The UAE, for its part, has already been in regular contact with Iran trying to de-escalate, a third regional source said.

The priority now for Persian Gulf states is to focus on their economies following COVID-19. According to Reuters, Persian Gulf states hope Washington maintains leverage over Tehran by keeping some sanctions.

But they remain skeptical, the agency added. UAE envoy to Washington Yousef Al Otaiba said in April he saw no evidence the nuclear deal would become "a tool where moderates are empowered" in Iran, which holds presidential elections this month.

"But we need to live with them in peace," Otaiba said.

Last month, Iran confirmed reports of talks with Saudi Arabia, saying the goal of the talks is to secure bilateral and regional interests.

"We have always welcomed such talks in any form or at any level and this is not our new policy, but let us wait and see the outcome of the negotiations and judge accordingly," Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said.

The remarks came days after a Saudi Foreign Ministry official confirmed the talks, saying they were intended to reduce regional tensions.

"As to current Saudi-Iranian talks, they aim to explore ways to reduce tensions in the region," Ambassador Rayed Krimly, head of policy planning at the ministry, said.

Warning to U.S. Over Monitoring Iranian Vessels

TEHRAN -- Iran has rejected as interference a reported U.S. monitoring of Iranian navy vessels that may be headed to Venezuela, saying Tehran would not be breaching international law even if it sent arms to its Latin American ally.

Western media including CNN and Politico have said that the United States has been monitoring two Iranian warships that may be headed to Venezuela.

Last year, Tehran began sending tankers carrying gasoline to Venezuela to help ease an acute fuel shortage there. Both Iran and Venezuela face U.S.

sanctions.

"Iran reserves the right to enjoy normal trade ties in the framework of international law and regulations, and considers any interference and monitoring of these relations as illegal and insulting, and strongly condemns it," Government spokesman Ali Rabieci told reporters.

Without confirming that the ships carried weapons, Rabieci said Iran has the right to trade arms after former U.S. President Donald Trump's administration failed last year to stop a UN conventional arms embargo on Iran from expiring.

"Regardless what these ships carry, there is no ban on the purchase and sale of weapons by Iran. ... America did its best to maintain the sanctions last year, but it failed miserably," Rabieci said.

Trump left Iran's 2015 nuclear pact in 2018. Then last August, Washington said it had triggered a process at the United Nations Security Council to reimpose UN sanctions on Iran and maintain the arms embargo.

But 13 of the 15 Security Council members said Washington's move was void as Washington had abandoned the pact.

The Holy Qur'an

You do not serve besides Him but names which you have named, you and your fathers; Allah has not sent down any authority for them; judgment is only Allah's; He has commanded that you shall not serve aught but Him; this is the right religion but most people do not know.

The Holy Qur'an (12.40)

PRAYER TIMINGS

Noon (Zohr)	13:04
Evening (Maghreb)	20:41
Dawn (Fajr) "Tomorrow"	04:02
Sunrise "Tomorrow"	05:48

Rouhani Angrily Defends His Administration

TEHRAN — Iran's president angrily defended himself Wednesday after coming under harsh attack during a presidential election debate the night before, saying his critics' "love for power causes memory loss."

Hassan Rouhani, who has been Iran's president for eight years, is now term limited from seeking office again. During Iran's second presidential debate Tuesday, the candidates repeatedly criticized the Rouhani administration's "hope" campaign that surrounded its now-tattered 2015 nuclear deal.

His signature nuclear deal, which saw Iran eager to limit its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief, fell apart after then-President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from the accord in 2018.

"In the debates, it was clarified that only the administration suffers from problems and the parts (of government) are blameless" Rouhani said.

"Nobody dares to say that he supports blocking internet," he added, without admitting that the real issue for most Iranians is the economy which his administration is accused of mis-handling.

Rouhani went on to claim that his critics should be put on the spot about whether they want sanctions relief through a return to the accord.

"Say you do not want to return to the deal if you have such an idea," he said. Leading candidate Ebrahim Raisi on Tuesday discussed the need to "remove oppressive sanctions," suggesting he'd back returning to the nuclear deal if the U.S. removes its sanctions on Iran.

Foreign Ministry Spokesman in Baghdad Iran Reiterates Support for Strong, United Iraq

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) – Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh on Wednesday reaffirmed Tehran's support for a strong, free, developed, united and independent Iraq during a visit to the Arab country.

Khatibzadeh discussed ways of expanding all-out relations with Iraqi National Security Council (INSC) Advisor Qasim al-Araji, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and Sheikh Humam Hamoudi, the leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which is a Shia political party.

He also met a number of Sunni clerics, visited Al-Tamayoz Strategic Institute and Al-Nahrain Re-

search Institute, and spoke with Iraqi scholars and thinkers about the latest regional developments and Iran-Iraq relations.

Khatibzadeh reiterated Iran's full support for the Iraqi government and the will of the Iraqi people.

Iranian Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif visited Iraq in April and held "excellent" talks with top Iraqi officials and senior Shia and Sunni leaders.

The Islamic Republic gives priority to its neighbors in its foreign policy, Zarif told Iraqi President Barham Salih, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, Parliament speaker Mohamed al-Halbousi and Foreign Minister Fuad al-Hussein.

Zarif's Letter Rebukes UN Chief Over Voting Right

TEHRAN -- Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif has written to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres earlier this month, criticizing the United Nations' decision to deprive Iran of its voting rights.

As the UN Security Council backed Guterres for a second term on Tuesday, Zarif's letter to the UN chief slammed the UN decision as "fundamentally flawed, entirely unacceptable and completely unjustified."

"Iran's inability to fulfill its financial obligation toward the United Nations is directly caused by 'unlawful unilateral sanctions' imposed by the United States to punish those who comply with a Security Council resolution," Zarif wrote.

He was making a reference to the sanctions that the U.S. slapped on Iran after former president Donald Trump withdrew from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and violated UN Security Council Resolution 2231 that endorsed the historic pact.

The sanctions have blocked Iran's access to global financial systems, and its money in foreign banks, including in South Korean, Japanese and Iraqi banks.

Zarif said the world is well aware that the people of Iran have been under unprecedented economic warfare and terrorism since the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal, also called the JCPOA, in material breach of preemptory norms of international law, the Charter of the United Nations and Resolution 2231.

"It is astonishingly absurd that Iranian people, who have been forcibly blocked from transferring

their own money and resources to buy food and medicine – let alone pay UN contributions arrears – by a permanent member of the United Nations' Security Council, are now being punished for not being allowed to pay budget arrears by the secretariat of the same organization, which has unjustifiably chosen for the past 3 years to remain indifferent in the face of attempted mass starvation – a crime against humanity – by the United States," he noted.

The letter came after the UN said it had suspended the voting rights of Iran and four other countries over dues under Article 19 of the UN Charter, which states that any member owing the previous two years of assessments may not vote in the General Assembly.

However, Zarif pointed out that the UN Charter gives the General Assembly the authority to decide "that the failure to pay is due to conditions beyond the control of the member," and in that case a country can continue to vote.

"By what definition are Iran's arrears not 'due to conditions beyond control'?" the chief Iranian diplomat asked.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran is fully committed to fulfilling its financial obligations to the United Nations and will continue to make every effort to settle the arrears in the payment of its financial contribution to the UN and other international organizations as soon as the underlying imposed conditions, i.e. the U.S. unlawful unilateral coercive measures, is removed," Zarif added.