

**Thumbnail Image:**



# Iran-Saudi Arabia Honeymoon: How public diplomacy can sustain peace between Tehran and Riyadh? <sup>[1]</sup>

Since the announcement in March when national security advisors from Iran and Saudi Arabia issued a joint statement expressing their commitment to restoring bilateral ties, there has been a lot of discussion about the root causes of the swift agreement and, more importantly, Beijing's involvement in the rapprochement. While ongoing contentions aim to unpack the rationales behind Iran-Saudi detente, there has been little focus on the ways and means to make the renewed relations sustained as Tehran and Riyadh have distinct and different grand objectives for their intent to re-approach.

Despite varying motives for achieving peace, what is ultimately essential for Tehran and Riyadh is ensuring the long-term sustainability of their restored bilateral relations. The history of Iranian-Saudi relations suggests that a security pact reached through a top-down approach would be vulnerable to both domestic and external factors. Although the two countries are currently on their honeymoon, a healthy relationship requires a comprehensive, multi-vector approach that is nurtured from the bottom-up. To achieve this, both governments and other stakeholders who support the new status quo in Tehran-Riyadh relations should utilize various public diplomacy tools at their disposal to consolidate the relationship, diversify its dimensions and make it resilient to future risks.

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## **Iran-Saudi public diplomacy needs prerequisites**

Iran and Saudi Arabia have missed the potential of Hajj diplomacy and the coronavirus-related health diplomacy during their own cold war era (2016-2022). Both authoritarian regimes deliberately overlooked the significance of the enormity of the people-to-people engagement during the Hajj and lost the opportunity to use a health crisis as a pretext for initiating much-needed science-based dialogue that transcends politics.

Over the past seven years, the main obstacle to effective public diplomacy has been a lack of

political will for engagement on the part of both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Rather than using resources for resolving differences, both nations have recklessly invested significant funds into instruments, such as TV networks, typically utilized for public diplomacy, with the intention of undermining the social integrity and national security of each other.

As long as the political will stemming from renewed diplomatic relations is vigorous, leveraging public diplomacy instruments could yield significant benefits. However, successful public diplomacy requires more than just political resolve; it also depends on strong non-state actors. Alas, both countries face a self-imposed challenge: enervated and suppressed civil societies. Tehran and Riyadh have a history of cracking down on their civil societies, labelling them as foreign agents or instrumentalizing them for geopolitical objectives. The recent protests in Iran have further constrained the already fragile civil society actors. However, unlike Iran, Saudi Arabia has launched a series of reform initiatives to grant freedom to its citizens, but it is not without its limitations.

To compound the problem, civil society actors in both Iran and Saudi Arabia who are already vulnerable and oppressed have had little to no interactions with each other in recent years. Developing cross-border engagement between such non-state actors will require time and genuine incentives. Until trust and strong connections are to be established, a less noticeable actor can play a role within the public diplomacy framework. Epistemic communities within both countries can step in to fill the gap in the short term and help to channel political will towards public diplomacy initiatives.

### **Epistemic communities facilitate public diplomacy**

Epistemic communities are networks of knowledge-based experts primarily tasked with providing decision-makers with valid, science-based policy solutions. Although these communities are often affiliated with and funded by governments, they are mostly apolitical. Similar attributes apply to epistemic communities in Iran and Saudi Arabia. Their expertise is primarily concentrated on the progress and development of their respective countries across all policy areas. That is why their scholarly endeavors do not always reflect the mainstream discourse within the political establishment.

The epistemic communities in both Iran and Saudi Arabia are heard and commended by their senior leadership. Their merit progressively places them in a unique position to take advantage of the renewed relations and the potential of public diplomacy to set the agenda on common issues and struggles between both nations with cascading effects on the Middle East. One such shared challenge is environmental degradation, which affects both neighboring countries. Given that state efforts alone are unlikely to effectively address the pervasive ecological insecurity, science diplomacy through the epistemic communities of both nations could offer viable and apolitical solutions that suit both nations and the region alike.

As an example, sand and dust storms (SDSs) have become a growing concern in the Middle East, particularly in Iran and Saudi Arabia. Riyadh experienced more than 35 days of SDSs in the first four months of 2022. In comparison, the highest number of SDSs in the past four years was 48 days in 2019. The United Nations estimates that SDSs cost the region's economy \$13 billion annually. SDSs in Saudi Arabia can originate from distant locations like Libya, disrupting maritime traffic in Egypt and affecting neighboring countries like Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, Oman and Yemen. In the meantime, the Chief of Iran's Department of Environment stated last year that 270 million hectares in Iran's neighboring countries are the

source of SDSs, with 90 million hectares in Saudi Arabia alone. Riyadh has pledged to plant 10 billion trees to counter SDSs. However, given the country's limited renewable water resources, achieving this goal may be far-fetched. Given the transnational and transgenerational nature of SDSs, it's imperative that all countries in the region, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, should collaborate to address this issue.

Shared ecological insecurities, including SDSs, are just one example of the long list of environmental challenges faced by Tehran and Riyadh. Without prompt action, these issues are expected to worsen during the upcoming summer months. To address this, cross-border cooperation is crucial, and the epistemic communities in both nations are capable of prioritizing science diplomacy to spark relevant initiatives as both nations and their leaderships require incentives and catalysts to maintain the momentum of their new bilateral ties at large.

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