A Triple Bind:
Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the West

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Introduction

When Saudi Arabia and Iran announced that they were restoring diplomatic relations in Beijing, the West was conspicuously absent. The trilateral statement, issued on 10 March 2023, followed two years of Iraqi, then Omani, mediation that stopped short of ending the Saudi-Iranian rift. Between 2016 and 2021, Saudi Arabia and Iran had no diplomatic interactions with each other, but in actuality were both talking to—and *at*—the West. Iranian officials often blamed Saudi Arabia's close ties with the West for their bilateral problems, while Saudi Arabia accused the West of failing to contain Iran's Islamic Revolution and not providing enough support to the Kingdom. Such narratives underplayed the power that both Riyadh and Teheran had in shaping the Western role in their relationship. That power triggered different dynamics in the bilateral relationship in reaction to similar, and at times even identical, Western policies.[1]

Two recent cycles of Western policy to isolate and sanction Iran, to engage in indirect military escalation with Iran, and attempt rapprochement with Saudi Arabia are cases in point. These cycles instigated two different dynamics in Riyadh and Tehran's relationship. Between 2018 and 2021, President Trump's maximum pressure campaign on Iran fed into soaring levels of hostility between the two

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countries, which culminated in an unprecedented attack on Saudi Arabia in 2019, which Saudi Arabia and the West accused Iran of committing. Since 2023, Western sanctions and military escalation with Iran have been met with a slow but steady Saudi-Iranian détente, rather than interrupting it. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Iran have had differing reactions to Western policies, motivated in part by political and socioeconomic changes inside both Saudi Arabia and Iran and broader structural changes in the region. Factors reconfiguring the Western component in the Saudi-Iranian relationship include a common perception that the United States is disenchanted, if not disengaged, with the Middle East, the absence of a European or regional collective alternative to the U.S. role, and a more diverse international system that raised the profile of China and Russia in the region.

Opposing Views of the West in the Region

Among experts and policymakers, it is conventional wisdom that Saudi Arabia and Iran possess opposite views of the West's role in the Middle East. Iran considers that regional political and security problems must be met with regional solutions—solutions that include Iran and exclude external actors, particularly Western ones. Conversely, Saudi Arabia's longstanding position is that the de facto Western-dominated international community has a *responsibility* to solve the Middle East's most pressing political problems, including destructive Iranian policies in the region. All the same, since 2015, Saudi leadership has doubled down on its autonomy over foreign policy decisions, particularly vis-à-vis the United States. [2]

In Tehran, distrust of the West is rooted in a complex history, instrumentalized in ideological narratives such as "resistance," and occasionally fueled by specific Western policies. Over recent decades, such policies have included Western interference in support of the Shah's regime before 1979, the intelligence, military, and political backing of Saddam Hussein's war against Iran in the early days of the Islamic Revolution, and the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018. In the case of the JCPOA, the United States single-handedly killed an agreement that lifted consequential Western and UN sanctions on Iran's economy and improved its diplomatic standing both regionally and internationally. In the Islamic Republic of Iran's ideology, the United States is the "foremost enemy of Islam" and Iran *must* eject it from the region through a mix of military confrontations and pragmatic ententes.[3]

Saudi Arabia's disappointment with its Western partners is based on Ri-

yadh's dissatisfaction with several Western policies in the region. Ironically, Saudi Arabia's growing mistrust of the West is often linked to Iran. Several political decisions have nurtured Saudi doubts that the West might opt for a "grand bargain" with Iran against Saudi Arabia's interests. These decisions include Western abandonment of the Shah in 1979, accusations of supporting Imam Al-Khomeini's revolution, recurring Western limits on the arms sales needed to boost Saudi military capabilities against Iran, U.S. policies of de-Baathification in Iraq and limited military intervention in Syria that empowered Iranian-backed factions in both instances, and Western JCPOA negotiations with Iran in 2015.[4]

Yet, for Riyadh, the West provides two levers in its relationship with Iran that it is not ready to see disappear, even in times of détente with Iran and Chinese mediation. The first is the Western military support—for arms sale, maintenance, and training—and deployments in the region which both adjust the imbalance of threat in the Gulf in favor of Saudi Arabia and establish deterrence vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia's Persian neighbor.[5] The second is Western political, financial, technological, and military leverages over Iran that translate into multilateral and unilateral sanctions, international isolation, and attacks against Iranian targets. To Riyadh's benefit, Western pressure on Iran incentivizes the Iranian government to de-escalate conflict with its neighbors in times of economic and diplomatic hardship. It also degrades Iran's capacity to develop its arsenal of missiles and drones, as well as its ability to support its anti-Saudi allied militias across the region. For Saudi Arabia, Western presence in the region challenges Iran's self-perceived natural hegemony over the Gulf and its sense of national security.

More in Common than Admitted

Despite their political and ideological differences, Saudi Arabia and Iran have more common perceptions of the West than either would like to admit. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran share the experience of direct Western colonialism that has affected many of their neighbors. Iran's history, wealth, and capacity to survive as the leader of a so-called "axis of resistance" against Western domination enroot a rejection of the international hierarchy where the West/North surpasses the East/South. Similarly, in Riyadh, Saudi officials consistently remind the world that their country has never been under Western colonial rule. They often mention to Western audiences that the Saudi state did not come about through colonial arrangements and demarcations but, rather, through an endogenous will of unity.[6] Despite a history of reliance on the West for infrastructure building

and defense, Saudi Arabia has systematically refuted its designation as a client of the United States or the West. The Kingdom takes pride in asserting that it paid back for every service it received—either in money or by serving Western interests in the oil markets, both in the Islamic world and as far away as Latin America and the Balkans.[7]

Since his ascension to power in 2015, Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman has been reshaping Saudi national identity along nationalist lines. In his speeches, Bin Salman specifically demands that the West respect the difference between its value system and that of the Kingdom.[8] Both Saudi Arabia and Iran reject the notion that Western conceptions of human rights and political values should be considered universal. They both emphasize their respective Islamic and national values as the legitimate normative framework of reference while simultaneously competing over how to put this framework into practice. Likewise, both criticize the current normative hierarchy in the international system that allows Western powers to dominate global governance. The difference, however, lies in the policies that operationalize those convictions. While Saudi Arabia seeks to enhance its status within a reformed, potentially Western-led international order, Iran is a revisionist state that calls, at least rhetorically, for replacing this order with a more "polycentric" international system.[9]

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Currently, both governments are ambivalent about the political activities of Western embassies inside their societies. They are both founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement, established in 1955 at the height of Asian and African anti-colonial movements and the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. They both claim to belong to a Global South that demands an equal integration of non-Western interests in global governance. In 2023, they were both invited to become members of BRICS, an intergovernmental organization that represents Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. BRICS was founded on a "shared commitment to restructure the global political, economic, and financial architecture to be fair, balanced, and representative."[10] As of January 2024, Iran became a full member of the BRICS bloc, while Saudi Arabia is still considering joining. While Iran may perceive BRICS as an alterna-

tive to the Western-dominated international order that isolates it, Saudi Arabia sees BRICS as an opportunity to diversify its network of partners beyond the dominant Western powers that at times ignore its interests. In 2023, Iran became a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization while Saudi Arabia became a dialogue partner in the same organization. The similarities between Saudi Arabia and Iran, however, have more often led to rivalry than rapprochement over the history of their relationship.

2017–2021: Escalation Meets Escalation

In 2018, the United States withdrew from its nuclear agreement with Iran and launched a "maximum pressure" campaign against it. U.S. President Donald Trump viewed the nuclear deal as "one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into," as it allowed Iran to benefit economically from sanctions relief while expanding its destructive regional activities. Importantly, the deal only partly and temporarily froze Iran's enrichment of uranium, leaving the door open for an Iranian nuclear weapon if Teheran were to decide to. The Trump administration restored unilateral economic sanctions on Iran, conditioning their end on Iran's compliance with a list of demands that included "never developing a nuclear weapon," as well as the release of all American hostages in Iran. Iran was also asked to halt its support to regional militias, the manufacture and proliferation of ballistic missiles, and threats and cyberattacks against Israel.[11] The incapacity of Western European powers to escape the U.S.-dominated international financial system and sustain the economic relief promised in the JCPOA to Iran, which continued to abide by the deal, made salvaging the deal impossible. As a result, the Iranian foreign minister at the time, Javad Zarif, asserted his country's loss of "hope" in Europe and the Iranian moderates' loss of hope in the possibility of engagement with the West as a whole.[12]

Two years before President Trump was elected in 2016, Saudi Arabia and Iran cut off diplomatic relations after Iranian demonstrators stormed the Saudi embassy and consulate in Tehran. A new cycle of open hostility between the two countries ensued. Like President Trump, the Saudi leadership was hostile toward the 2015 deal, as Saudi Arabia felt sidelined and there was no link between sanctions relief for Iran and the requisite of rolling back Iran's military activities in the Middle East, including against Western targets. The launch of the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign against Iran coincided with a U.S. policy of rapprochement with Saudi Arabia. Both President Trump and Crown

Prince Mohamed Bin Salman agreed that the Iranian threat needed not only to be contained but also neutralized: "We are a primary target for the Iranian regime…We won't wait for the battle to be in Saudi Arabia. Instead, we'll work so that the battle is for them in Iran," declared the Saudi crown prince in 2017.[13]

From the Trump administration's 12-point list of demands to Iran, the call for a complete stop to what it called Iran's "malign activities" across the region was music to Riyadh's ears.[14] It came after 15 years of the West prioritizing the limitation of Iran's nuclear program over that of the missile and militia programs that it uses to meddle in Arab affairs. Riyadh was rebounding from years of U.S. policies facilitating the expansion of Iranian influence in the region, which began with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and ended with the "Obama doctrine," which called for Saudi Arabia to share the Middle East with Iran.[15] Most offensive to Riyadh, according to its interpretation of the Obama doctrine, was the U.S. and European position that de facto acknowledged the Iranian hegemony over the region. This interpretation was due to a deal that allowed Iran to become the only country in the region, aside from Israel, to have the right to enrich uranium, as well as lifted sanctions on Iran without discussion of the transgressions of the Iranian-backed militias in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories and arrested alleged Iranian cells in Bahrain and Kuwait.[16] From the Saudi perspective, U.S. and European powers were setting aside decades of Riyadh's partnership with them against Iran.[17] Indeed, even during the current Saudi-Iranian détente and Western isolation of Iran, Saudi Arabia's tightly controlled media still mentions the Obama doctrine, claiming it to be proof that the United States betrayed its decades-old partner in favor of Iran. This deep feeling of resentment explains why until October 2020, Saudi decision-makers wanted to believe that "the maximum pressure campaign, while it hasn't shown a final result yet, is working."[18]

The core Saudi request has always been for the West to negotiate with Iran more comprehensively in areas that would also benefit Riyadh. Namely, for a deal that would simultaneously cover Iran's nuclear program and regional activities. Whether under the Obama, Trump, or Biden administrations, Saudi Arabia requests a JCPOA++ that includes addressing Iran's missile programs, its proliferation of arms and funds to militias across the Arab World, and its meddling in the domestic affairs of Arab nations. This request was incompatible with what Iran, the United States, and the European powers pursued, primarily to limit the negotiations strictly to the nuclear file. New political leadership in Saudi Arabia was, however, confident that it could increase the ceiling of what Saudi Arabia could ask from its Western partners, given its decades-long provision

of conciliatory oil policy, arms purchases, investments, financial support, and political and strategic partnerships. U.S. hawkishness encouraged the maximalist Saudi position of asking Iran "to change its behavior before we can talk." That hawkishness was also compatible with a Saudi foreign policy that allowed military intervention in Yemen in 2015, the kidnapping of the Lebanese Prime Minister in 2017, and the severance of relations with Germany and Canada in 2017 and 2018, among other drastic decisions.

Despite European opposition, the maximum pressure campaign imposed more than 1,500 sanctions on Iranian individuals and institutions, as well as the entities that dealt with them.[19] The former Iranian foreign minister, Javad Zarif, estimated the damage to the Iranian economy at one trillion dollars and placed a return to the nuclear deal contingent upon this amount being compensated.[20] Saudi political support for this campaign did not go unnoticed by Tehran, especially when escalation with the United States took a military turn. Iran's concern about the possibility of U.S. and Israeli use of Saudi territories in an operation against the nation stands as paramount in Iran's threat perception of Saudi Arabia. As both the United States and Iran engaged in military escalation in Syria, Iraq, and the waters of the Gulf, Saudi Arabia became the target of Iranian proxy attacks from Yemen, Iraq, and the waters of the Gulf and Red Sea.[21]

Both escalation tracks continued until September 2019, when Iran launched its biggest attack against the territory of a Gulf Cooperation Council country. On 14 September 2019, a coordinated high-precision drone and missile strike targeted Abqaiq, the world's largest oil processing facility, and Khurais, a major oilfield, in Saudi Arabia. The attack disrupted Saudi oil production, causing an initial drop of over 5 percent in global oil supply. The Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, who are at war with Saudi Arabia, claimed responsibility, but the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other Western nations believe Iran was behind the attacks.[22] Though a strong message, it was not the first time that Iran hit an oil facility to warn its Gulf neighbors of the danger of their relationship with the United States.[23]

The U.S. response to this strike was also markedly different. Unlike the U.S. military reaction to the tanker war in the Gulf in the 1980s, or its intervention to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation between 1990 and 1991, President Trump stated that the United States did not have to respond to the attack because it "was an attack on Saudi Arabia, not the United States."[24] Still, the United States and Saudi Arabia's European allies rushed to boost the Saudi defense. The United States deployed a limited number of U.S. troops and air

defense systems. Europe, led by France and the United Kingdom, sent radars and personnel, but France disqualified any military involvement in an escalation that it had not supported since the beginning. The French minister of defense, Florence Parly, even stated that the Trump administration's reaction signaled that, "irrespective of who wins the next elections," the "deliberate U.S. disengagement" from the region has become "clear," "more serious," and with it goes "the edifice" of Western deterrence in the Middle East.[25]

2023 Onward: Escalation meets Détente

This U.S. reaction heralded the beginning of the end of Saudi alignment with the U.S. maximum pressure campaign, reconfirming its mistrust in the United States resulting from the Obama doctrine. It became the most direct message of U.S. disenchantment with military operations in the Middle East. Though the United States deployed more troops to the region in terms of numbers, it was clear that it would only move from deterrence to defense in the Middle East if American troops in the region came under attack.

The attacks did not receive a direct military response and did not immediately lead to a Saudi-Iranian détente. Three months later, in January 2020, the United States continued its military escalation with Iran by assassinating the commander of the Iranian Quds Force, Qassim Suleimani, in charge of Iran's military activities in the region. During the same month, the then-Saudi minister of foreign affairs, Adel Al-Jubeir, stated before the European Parliament that Iran is "the largest sponsor of terrorism in the world, that's why we have a problem with Iran."[26] In February 2020, Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif still believed that "our neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia, do not want to [de-escalate]," likely because Saudi Arabia had publicly supported U.S. policy—despite not retaliating to the 2019 attacks on it.[27] That same month, the U.S. Navy seized a shipment of Iranian-manufactured weapons on their way to the Ansarullah/Houthi militia fighting a war against Saudi Arabia in Yemen and on Saudi territories.[28]

It took the two countries another year to start negotiating the settlement of their bilateral disputes. In April 2021, an Iraqi government source announced that the first round of mediated talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran was underway in his country. Four more rounds followed in Iraq and Oman before the March 2023 trilateral statement officially restoring their bilateral diplomatic relations in China. The Western public reaction was generally supportive, but it systematically cast doubts on China's capacity to replace the West as a guarantor

of Iranian commitments made to the Kingdom. The U.S. National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications, John Kirby, reacted to press questions on China's role by saying "We believe that what likely helped bring Iran to the negotiating table with Saudi Arabia is the pressure that it's under internally as well as an effective deterrence against attacks from Iran or its proxies on Saudi Arabia. And we, as you know, help support Saudi Arabia and their effective deterrence capabilities." He later added, "It does remain to be seen whether the Iranians are going to honor their side of the deal."[29]

Saudi officials stressed that Chinese mediation was behind the new attempt at détente with Iran. Iran, conversely, downplayed the Chinese role, crediting instead the endogenous regional efforts of the Iraqi and Omani mediators over the previous two years. Such a narrative is consistent with the two countries' respective positions on the role of external powers in the region. Saudi Arabia continues to see an external role as an asset, while Iran would prefer to do without it. Still, Iran saw a sense of victory in the Saudi recourse to a Chinese mediation rather than Western support. The military advisor to the Supreme Leader of Iran, General Yahya Rahim Safavi, spoke of a "post-American era starting in the Persian Gulf region."[30]

Saudi officials systematically denied any distancing or anti-Western signaling through this trilateral move. Since 2015, Riyadh has been advancing the diversification of its international relations—opening new areas of technological, military, and diplomatic cooperation with the world beyond the West. The depth and scale of Saudi Arabia's political and strategic relations with the Western powers still surpass its growing strategic relations with international powers such as China, Russia, and India. Yet, as they do with Iran, those powers have shown readiness to provide Saudi Arabia with the kind of technological, economic, military, and political support that the West is occasionally hesitant to offer.[31] Russian and Chinese political support to their partners in Syria and Iran in times of need contrasts with the West's abandonment of the Shah in 1979, Mubarak during the Arab revolutions of 2011, and its punitive measures for Saudi Arabia's war conduct in Yemen and the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi. For Russia and China, the development of relations with Saudi Arabia—the region's biggest economy and the world's biggest exporter of oil—has significantly increased the limited influence in the Gulf region that they had managed to achieve by engaging with Iran.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy started looking eastward in 2005 in the aftermath of a U.S.-Saudi rift over U.S. policies made in reaction to the 9/11 attacks, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Notably, Asian

countries were already becoming the main source of Saudi national revenue by replacing the West as the biggest buyers of Saudi oil. In 2023, the strategic competition between the United States and China—in addition to Western Europe's containment campaign against Russia—caused Western powers to treat Saudi Arabia's foreign policy with greater strategic significance. China's 2023 mediation was a sign of the political turn in the region. Until that point, China had focused on economic and trade relations in the Gulf region, from where up to 50 percent of its oil needs emanated. As the world's largest importer of oil, China is the main trading partner of both Saudi Arabia and Iran.[32] Amid domestic political, and socioeconomic challenges in Iran, the Chinese-mediated deal allowed Tehran to pursue its anti-Western rhetoric. Even at a time when Iran had freed U.S. hostages and halted its proxy attacks against U.S. targets in exchange for unfreezing Iranian assets in South Korea, anti-U.S. language in official statements persisted. Meanwhile, China offered the economic, strategic, and political leverage against Iran that Saudi Arabia had always wished for from the West. Furthermore, from a Saudi perspective, Iran has a vested interest in maintaining its sole superpower support by allowing its first grand mediation maneuver in the Middle East to succeed.

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The strategic timing of the Chinese mediation was of equal importance to Saudi Arabia. The Saudi leadership's pragmatism had already led it to reverse its escalatory policies in the region in 2019. The aim was to provide regional stability conducive to the achievement of its Vision 2030 plans to overhaul the country's economy and society. Riyadh still lacked a regional collective framework to apply pressure on Iran but, for the first time in years, it held another point of leverage. Saudi Arabia was reported to have funded Persian-speaking media coverage of anti-regime demonstrations in Iran, which the West also supported, in addition to the extensive coverage in its own Arabic-speaking media.[33] This leverage did not coincide with a Western willingness to appease Iran that would foul the Saudi bargain. On the contrary, the West stopped any dialogue with Iran in reaction to the repression of Iranian demonstrations and its supply of drones to Russia. This favorable situation notwithstanding, the West could not entertain any Saudi requests for policy to contain Iran's rising

nuclear threat, missile proliferation, and influence in the region as promised in the framework of the hypothetical JCPOA++ agreement. It seemed that all the stars were aligning for Riyadh: Western pressure, Chinese leverage, and a Saudi threat to the regime's survival in Tehran.

Chinese mediation has not replaced the Western role in the Saudi–Iranian relationship. Rather, it allowed Saudi Arabia to instrumentalize Western pressure on Iran before Iran could respond by targeting Saudi Arabia again. By the same token, both Saudi Arabia and Iran are holding to their détente despite rising military escalation between Iran and its proxies—Israel, and the U.S.–led West since the war in Gaza began in October 2023. One month after the start of the war, the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ibrahim Raisi, visited Saudi Arabia for the first time since 2007 to attend an emergency Organization of Islamic Cooperation summit. The visit came on top of communication between the ministers of foreign affairs and lower officials as well as a call between the crown prince of Saudi Arabia and the President of Iran. The following month, the Saudi-Chinese–Iranian tripartite committee met, according to the March 2023 agreement. This meeting took place despite reinvigorating Iranian military support to the Ansarullah—or Houthi—militia attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. Ending such support was the most significant Saudi ask from Iran as they normalized relations in Beijing. In a further escalation, the Houthi attacks triggered a U.S.-led military response, threatening the impending peace agreement with Saudi Arabia that would end its costly war against Iranian-supported forces in Yemen. The Houthis repeatedly threaten retaliation against Saudi Arabia if it supports U.S. military strikes against them in Yemen. Even as escalation mounts to an unprecedented level, with Iran responding to an Israeli strike by directly targeting Israeli soil, communication between Saudi Arabia and Iran has not stopped.

The Way Ahead

For the time being, Western support for Israel in the war in Gaza is unexpectedly reinforcing the Saudi-Iranian détente in two ways. Firstly, it confirms Saudi doubts about the West's capacity to play a constructive role in the regionally driven de-escalation led by Riyadh in the Gulf. Secondly, it allows Tehran to show Riyadh that direct bilateral arrangements are more effective for Saudi security than Western security guarantees, with détente shielding Saudi Arabia from attacks by Iran and its proxies. Saudi Arabia is also maintaining its end of the bargain by neither aligning nor participating, at least publicly, with U.S.,

U.K., and Israeli strikes against Iranian targets and militias in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq.

Nevertheless, the Saudi-Iranian détente still faces many challenges. It remains difficult for both countries to exclude the West from their respective bilateral relationships. To Saudi Arabia, there is no credible alternative to Western deterrence against Iran, however shaky it may be, even if China were to become more involved. It is not the first time that Saudi Arabia and Iran have attempted détente. Saudi Arabia knows this attempt could fail, like many others before it. This fact explains why the country fulfilled its commitment as a member of the United States Central Command by sharing intelligence on the trajectory of the Iranian drone and missile counterattack on Israel on 13 April 2024. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran need a dialogue with the West regarding the next steps to take concerning Iran. The isolation of Iran and Russia is hampering the containment of Iran's nuclear program, as it freezes nuclear negotiations and, in turn, the sanctions relief needed for Saudi-Iranian economic cooperation to kick off. Despite its violations of U.S. unilateral sanctions on Iran, China cannot compensate for the Western economic backlash against Saudi Arabia if it decides to circumvent or outright violate the sanctions on Iran. Saudi Arabia also needs the West to mitigate military cooperation or even energy entente, between a heavily sanctioned Iran and Russia that extends to North Korea, and which China might decide to back. Unlike the West, China's military deployment in the region remains limited and narrowly focused on protecting Chinese rather than international collective interests.[34] The Chinese policy does not address Iranian hegemonic aspirations over the Gulf. The Chinese and Russian military cooperation with Iran, albeit limited, feeds into Iran's military capabilities that it deploys in the region and proliferates to its proxies.[35] It is precisely such policies that keep Saudi Arabia's attachment to Western deterrence against Iran on the table, hence its simultaneous pursuit of a mutual defense agreement with the United States and a détente with Iran. So far, both Iran and Saudi Arabia still need the West to support, or at least not disrupt, their détente. It is up to the West to either use this role constructively to preserve regional stability and a say in the Saudi–Iranian dynamics that are consequential for Western interests in the region, or gradually lose it and bear the consequences. WA

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