

Saudi Arabia's Prince Faisal bin Farhan's Visit to Tehran: What This Means for Regional Diplomacy

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan arrived in Tehran on Saturday, June 17, 2023, marking the first visit of a Saudi official to Iran in years, as well as the first visit since the restoration of Saudi-Iranian diplomatic relations, announced last March in a deal brokered by China. Following Prince Faisal's arrival in Tehran, he attended a session of bilateral talks with his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and met with President Ebrahim Raisi. The visit highlights that both sides are invested in re-establishing their



diplomatic ties and addressing areas of mutual interest, as well as the belief that the restoration of relations between Riyadh and Tehran will have a positive regional and global impact.

For the Kingdom, the visit demonstrates Riyadh's position in pursuing all avenues to solve the regional security dilemma, as the issue was heavily featured throughout discussions that took place during the visit. "I would like to refer to the importance of cooperation between the two countries on regional security, especially the security of maritime navigation, and the importance of cooperation among all regional countries to ensure that it is free of weapons of mass destruction," Prince Faisal **stated**. With his clear outlining of what is expected, the visit placed a spotlight on Iran, urging them to refrain from escalating tensions and to end its regional interference.

Although the atmosphere has improved markedly between both sides, the main concern for the Kingdom remains Iran's commitment to non-interference policies in the Kingdom and the wider Arab region. For Riyadh, this is the primary basis for restoring and strengthening ties with Iran going forward. Prince Faisal emphasized this and described the talks in Tehran with his Iranian counterpart as "positive" mentioning that the discussions "**stressed** the necessity of non-interference in internal affairs" as regional security issues cannot be excluded.

It must be noted that while the reconciliation appears to be a tactical de-escalation that benefits both sides, it should be highlighted that it is not a comprehensive agreement. It is unlikely to materially alter the regional security environment in the short term because it does not fundamentally transform the strategic calculus of either side. However, the significance of the agreement in fostering mutual trust and laying the groundwork for further regional integration cannot be understated. From the Saudi perspective, it is expected that Tehran will review its regional policies in light of the growing level of cooperation between the two countries. Given the new political environment and realignment of the region, after both sides restored diplomatic ties, Tehran is expected to review and amend its hostile policy and behavior toward the region. The broader outcome of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement revolves around whether Tehran will invest in the relationship and expand its efforts to improve its attitude in the region, especially regarding its deterrence policies. The critical question now is what measures should be taken to make the current political climate durable and cohesive to achieve the main regional security concerns for the Kingdom.

The issue of a nuclear-free zone was also stressed during the Saudi Foreign Minister's discussions in Tehran. The importance of 'security cooperation' in the region is to ensure the Arabian Gulf is free of weapons of mass destruction and to maintain maritime safety in crucial trade routes. In December 2004, the Gulf Research Center (GRC) launched the WMD Free Zone in the Gulf as a Track II initiative. While the GRC's GWMDZFZ concept did not operationalize into actionable policy, it serves as a fundamental example of a response to the pressing challenge of nuclear proliferation and the growing security crisis that still exists in the Gulf region.

The two sides also discussed forming a joint economic, political, and border committee and agreed to accelerate steps to strengthening cooperation in security, economy, tourism, and transportation. From the Saudi perspective, regional stability is key in developing vital economic diversification plans. Deepening economic cooperation with Tehran is the byproduct of political stability in the region, which the Kingdom aims to secure first in addressing its regional security concerns. The Kingdom's two priorities are securing itself against threats and expanding its economic base.