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## Deep Dive: The Iranian visit to Saudi Arabia

Peninsula / Diplomacy

Amwaj.media



Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman meet in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on Aug. 18, 2023. (Source: KSAMOFA/Twitter)

Bottom Line

Go Deep

**The story:** Saudi Arabia has hosted Iran's foreign minister, reciprocating a landmark Saudi trip to Tehran in June. The Iranian visit follows the China-mediated deal between Riyadh and Tehran in March to normalize diplomatic relations. While Hossein Amir-Abdollahian met his Saudi counterpart and the crown prince for a total of five hours, details are scant on the practical outcome of the talks. Notably, progress on bilateral cooperation is further complicated by US sanctions, and Washington's reported push for Saudi Arabia to normalize ties with Israel—Iran's arch-rival in the region.

**The meetings:** The Saudi Press Agency (SPA) on Aug. 18 [reported](https://www.spa.gov.sa/11a8d0b5ccz) that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (MbS) received Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in Jeddah.

- The [agenda](https://www.spa.gov.sa/11a8d0b5ccz) included bilateral relations, opportunities for future cooperation, and regional and international developments. SPA also [noted](https://www.spa.gov.sa/11a8d0b5ccz) that Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud and new Iranian Ambassador to Riyadh, Ali Reza Enayati, were in attendance.
- Two days earlier, on Aug. 16, the prominent Kuwaiti daily Al-Jarida [cited](https://www.aljarida.com/article/34415) sources at the Iranian foreign ministry as saying that Amir-Abdollahian had requested to meet with the Saudi King in addition to MbS. Of note, Farhan was not received by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during his June visit to Tehran.

Taking to Twitter/X, Amir-Abdollahian [said](https://twitter.com/Amirabdollahian/status/1692503456324386948?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1692503456324386948%7Ctwtgr%ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fcdn.iframe.ly%2FzHv7sNb) his "90-minute" meeting with MbS entailed a "beneficial, frank, productive and transparent conversation that was based on [the Ebrahim Raisi administration's] neighborhood policy."

- The Iranian top diplomat further [charged](https://twitter.com/Amirabdollahian/status/1692503456324386948?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1692503456324386948%7Ctwtgr%ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fcdn.iframe.ly%2FzHv7sNb) that "with the will of the leaders of the two countries" there was an emphasis on "[establishing] sustainable bilateral ties in all fields." He added, "We agree on achieving development and security for all in the region."
- In remarks to reporters on the plane home, Amir-Abdollahian [said](https://twitter.com/IranNuances/status/1692595427151867960) his Saudi hosts had sought to underscore a change in their views and a readiness to "turn a new page" in the bilateral relationship. He also said that MbS had accepted an invitation to visit Iran and that Farhan had been instructed to take "preliminary steps to prepare the framework for...[a] long-term cooperation document."



### Iran-Saudi Arabia dialogue

#### Saudi Arabia cuts ties with Iran

**2016**

Iranian protesters overrun Saudi diplomatic facilities following the execution of Saudi Shiite dissident cleric Nimr Al-Nimr.

#### Initiation of talks in Baghdad

**2021**

In Apr. 2021, senior Iranian and Saudi security officials initiate talks in Baghdad in a bid to restore ties.

#### Dialogue in Iraq suspended

**2021**

Following a round of talks in Sept. 2021, the two sides suspend dialogue pending the formation of a new government in Iraq.

#### Resumption of talks

**2022**

Following a 7-month hiatus, Iranian and Saudi delegations resume talks in Baghdad in late April.

#### Agreement to restore ties

**2023**

Talks in China in March produce an agreement to reopen embassies within two months and implement past cooperation accords.

Source: News agencies • Collated by: Amwaj.media

Upon his arrival in Riyadh on Aug. 17, Amir-Abdollahian met with his Saudi counterpart Farhan. According to Iranian media, the two top diplomats engaged for a total of 3.5 hours.

- Saudi-funded Al-Arabiya reported(<https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/gulf/2023/08/17/%D8%A8%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9>) that the two sides discussed “the reconciliation and restoration of diplomatic ties.” It further highlighted(<https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/gulf/2023/08/17/%D8%A8%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9>) comments made by the Saudi foreign minister during his visit(<https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/gulf/2023/08/17/%D8%A8%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9>) to Tehran in June, when he asserted that bilateral ties must be based on “mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs.”

Later in the day Al-Arabiya also reported(<https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/gulf/2023/08/17/%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A8%D9%86-%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A6%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%81%D8%B5%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D8%A9>) on the joint press conference held by the Iranian and the Saudi foreign ministers.

- Farhan highlighted(<https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/gulf/2023/08/17/%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A8%D9%86-%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A6%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%81%D8%B5%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D8%A9>) Saudi Arabia's resumption of ties with Iran as “pivotal for the security of the region,” emphasizing Riyadh's keenness to “activate economic and security agreements” with Tehran.
- Al-Arabiya cited(<https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/gulf/2023/08/17/%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A8%D9%86-%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A6%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%81%D8%B5%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D8%A9>) Amir-Abdollahian as confirming that Iranian President Raisi “would visit the Kingdom soon.” He further praised Saudi Arabia's “role in the region” and voiced openness to “work with Saudi Arabia to immediately resolve tangled issues in the region.” Amir-Abdollahian also asserted(<https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/gulf/2023/08/17/%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A8%D9%86-%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A6%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%81%D8%B5%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D8%A9>)

%B5%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D8%A9) Tehran's keenness on activating "key [bilateral] agreements."

**The coverage:** On Saudi social media, reactions to the Iranian foreign minister's visit were mixed.

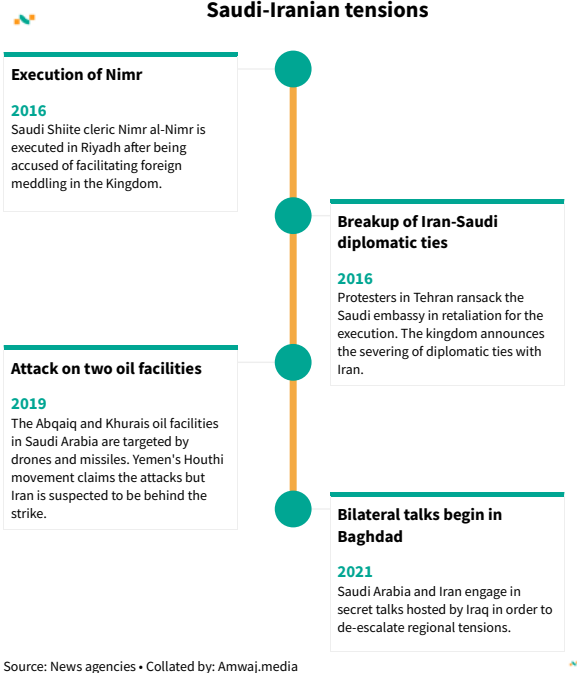
- Saudi user Abd Al-Aziz Al-Ghureiry on Aug. 18 [hoped](https://twitter.com/3Ghureiry/status/1692505787057291280) that Iran would share the Kingdom's "Vision 2030 especially when it comes to the safety and security of waterways." Of note, the Iranian military has repeatedly targeted shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, partly in response to the US seizure of Iranian oil on the high seas.
- Saudi political analyst and researcher Saud Al-Rayes [saw](https://twitter.com/AsharqNOW/status/1692289969983824368) the rapprochement effort as a push to "return the region to normal and to eliminate any differences or obstacles."
- Twitter/X user Abu Abdullah Al-Marshad on Aug. 18 [wrote](https://twitter.com/AA_almarshad/status/1692503638952837538) that Amir-Abdollahian's visit highlights Saudi Arabia's "might and status...which forced Iran to cave in."

The absence of Saudi objections to Amir-Abdollahian's use of the term "Persian Gulf" at his joint press conference with Farhan sparked reactions among Emirati and Saudi users on social media. Of note, the body of water separating Iran and its southern neighbors is known as the "Arabian Gulf" in the Gulf Arab states.

- Emirati Twitter/X user Fatima Mubarak on Aug. 18 [highlighted](https://twitter.com/omsalem70/status/1692419027916689645?s=20) the controversy which erupted when Emirati National Security Advisor Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahyan attended a meeting at a venue in Tehran where the term "Persian Gulf" was shown on a large map. Mubarak lamented that "we have not heard comments" from previous critics.
- In a hint at the Emirati claim to the three Iranian islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb, Saudi user Abd Al-Malik Al-Harathi [responded](https://twitter.com/abdulmalik_6831/status/1692509091300573625) to Mubarak, "At least we don't have islands that are occupied by Iran."
- Emirati Twitter account Shkhbot on Aug. 18 [interpreted](https://twitter.com/SHKHBWOT/status/1692454529013285313) Amir-Abdollahian's use of the term "Persian Gulf" as a message from Iran that "it will not back down from its encroachment on the Saudi-Kuwaiti [gas field Arash/] Dorra."

**The context:** Amir-Abdollahian's meeting with Farhan is the [fourth](https://asharq.com/ar/4vmTnOR2JH33WOJ4QDmzUq-%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B6-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%84/) between the two ministers since the Mar. 2023 normalization deal brokered by China. However, progress remains slow and behind schedule. Under the Beijing-mediated accord, embassies were meant to be reopened by May 10.

- Iran [reopened](https://amwaj.media/article/inside-story-iran-s-riyadh-embassy-reopens-as-saudi-ops-resume-from-tehran-luxury) its diplomatic missions in Saudi Arabia in June. Moreover, Tehran's new ambassador to Riyadh only assumed his position in connection with Amir-Abdollahian's recent trip.
- Saudi diplomats remain stationed at hotels in the Iranian cities of Mashhad and Tehran. It is unclear whether the Kingdom's new envoy is in Iran. In the wake of Amir-Abdollahian's visit, [reports](https://asharq.com/ar/4vmTnOR2JH33WOJ4QDmzUq-%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B6-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%84/) have emerged that an "announcement regarding the reopening of the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the Saudi consulate in Mashhad is impending."

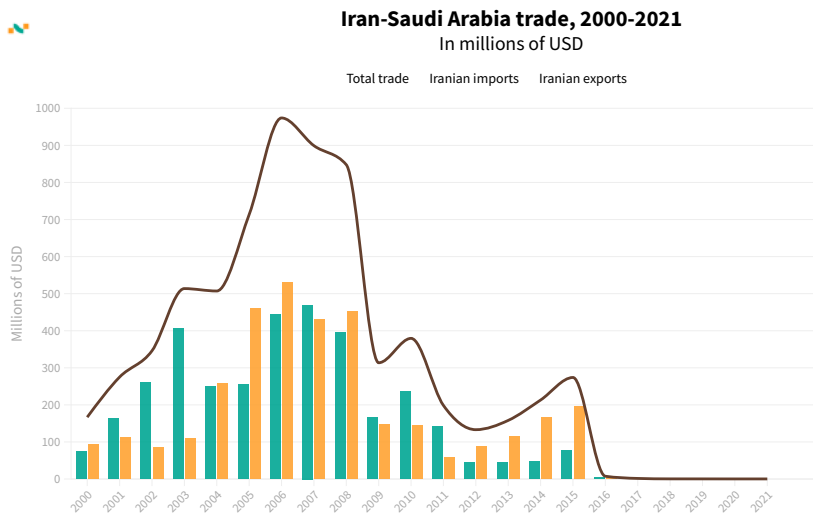


Iran is also locked in a clash with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia over the Arash/Dorra offshore gas field. Kuwaiti media have [highlighted](https://www.aljarida.com/article/34182) (https://www.aljarida.com/article/34182) Amir-Abdollahian's remarks about the need to resolve the [dispute](https://www.media-monitor/will-iran-vs-kuwait-saudi-arabia-gas-clash-turn-into-trilateral-deal) (https://www.media-monitor/will-iran-vs-kuwait-saudi-arabia-gas-clash-turn-into-trilateral-deal) "through reaching a legal and technical understanding following negotiations."

- Prominent Saudi outlet Okaz [highlighted](https://www.okaz.com.sa/news/politics/2141039) (https://www.okaz.com.sa/news/politics/2141039) the Kuwaiti foreign minister welcoming Amir-Abdollahian's visit to Saudi Arabia, describing it as a "bright chapter in the history of Gulf-Iran ties." The Kuwaiti intervention is notable given the dispute over the Arash/Dorra field.
- Kuwaiti chief diplomat Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah [said](https://www.okaz.com.sa/news/politics/2141039) (https://www.okaz.com.sa/news/politics/2141039) the new "bright chapter" ought to be based on "the principles of good neighborliness, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, and enhancing relations and establishing bridges of cooperation, dialogue and mutual understanding." He further [lauded](https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=3106472&language=en) (https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=3106472&language=en) the positive impact of the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement on regional countries.

As Amwaj.media has previously [reported](https://www.amwaj.media/article/inside-story-iranian-saudi-detente-remains-entangled-in-bigger-games) (https://www.amwaj.media/article/inside-story-iranian-saudi-detente-remains-entangled-in-bigger-games), a senior Saudi official last month told a closed group of experts in Europe that "despite all this positive movement there are many complications and hurdles." While emphasizing that "the hope" is to resolve issues with Iran, the source warned that "it is too simple to think in that way—and also dangerous, because if you don't see results you will think that de-escalation is in vain or has no results."

- Pointing to the fundamental issues at hand, the Saudi official charged that "Iran's forward-defense [strategy]" must change in the "very long term." The senior official continued, "The resumption of diplomatic relations is just that," likening the situation to how the west has "diplomatic relations with Russia, but you're at war with Russia."
- According to the Saudi source, "not addressing" the [Iranian] nuclear crisis "can not only complicate but also be counterproductive to de-escalation between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the rest of the region." The Saudi official continued, "In very practical terms, [a failure to resolve the nuclear issue] means that sanctions will continue," concluding that the "economic benefits of the rapprochement will be very limited," adding that the Kingdom "is not seeking any [sanctions] exemption."
- While Iranian officials have made clear that there are no expectations of a sudden inflow of Saudi investment and trade, Iran's new ambassador to Saudi Arabia on Aug. 17 reportedly [expressed](https://asharq.com/ar/4vmTrOR2JH33WOJ4QDmzUq-%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B6-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%84/) (https://asharq.com/ar/4vmTrOR2JH33WOJ4QDmzUq-%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B6-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%84/) Tehran's desire to "consolidate the economic element in bilateral relations."



Source: IMF • Collated by: Amwaj.media

**The future:** The emerging rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia is an outcome of a seemingly genuine shared desire for a changed relationship. However, there are structural factors which make progress difficult.

- Key Saudi concerns relate to security-oriented issues—particularly the situation in Yemen, and less so Syria. But beyond the tall order of convincing the Islamic Republic to abandon its “forward-defense” strategy, the Kingdom faces the reality that actors such as the Iran-backed Ansarullah movement, better known as the Houthis, are rather autonomous. Increasingly, it is becoming clear that Tehran’s ability to sway outcomes is limited—even as the Houthis say(<https://sputnikarabic.ae/20230820/%D8%A3%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A8-%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%B5%D9%81%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%80%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85%D8%A9-1080269857.html>) they are committed to finding a final solution to the war in Yemen.
- On the other hand, Iran’s focus revolves around the economic dimensions of rapprochement with Gulf Arab states. In this respect, Saudi officials have privately [highlighted](#)([./article/inside-story-iranian-saudi-detente-remains-entangled-in-bigger-games](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/08/11/iran-saudi-detente-remains-entangled-in-bigger-games)) that significant direct investment and trade is unlikely as long as the US sanctions regime remains in place. In effect, this ties progress to the Iran-US relationship. To avoid the latter, Riyadh and Tehran may turn their focus to cooperation in third countries, such as Iraq or on the Arash/Dorra gas field. However, collaboration in such arenas will likely also be stymied by western sanctions.

However, there could be light at the end of the tunnel. Iran and the US have seemingly made progress on some of the issues which the two sides have been indirectly discussing this year.

- Iran has reportedly abstained from further major accumulation of 60%-enriched uranium, taken steps towards the release of jailed Iranian-American dual nationals, and discouraged attacks on US forces by its regional allies. In exchange, the US has given the green light to the unfreezing of some Iranian assets in third countries for non-sanctionable activities, including food and medicine imports.
- The Joe Biden administration’s [effort](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/08/11/us-israel-saudi-arabia-normalization/)(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/08/11/us-israel-saudi-arabia-normalization/>) to broker Saudi-Israeli normalization adds further layers of complexity to the Iranian-Saudi and Iran-US dynamics.
- Beyond an Iranian presidential visit to the Kingdom and MbS traveling to Iran, there is a potential for Iranian-Saudi engagement on the sidelines of the upcoming United Nations General Assembly.

[Saudi-Iran](#) , [Hossein Amir-Abdollahian](#) , [Mohammed bin Salman](#) , [Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud](#) , [Saudi Arabia](#)