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Current Affairs

PART II

Q4 KSA - Iran rapprochement would have far reaching positive implications on the conflicts in the Middle East but would also have far reaching impacts on Pakistan. Discuss.

The KSA - Iran rapprochement, was announced in March 2023, and marked a significant shift in the geopolitical climate of the Middle East. Previously, KSA and Iran have not enjoyed a very warm relationship, particularly after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The Sunni led monarchy of KSA viewed Iran's Shia led revolution with suspicion, fearing its potential destabilizing effect on the region and challenging their own legitimacy of being the torch bearers of the Islamic world. This unease further evolved into a regional rivalry when both countries aspired to gain regional dominance, competing for influence over other Arab states as well as forming alliances with Western and Russian governments.

There also have been few major flashpoints between KSA and Iran, starting in the last century. During The Gulf War of between Iraq and Iran (1980 - 1988), KSA

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KSA supported Iraq and Saddam Hussein ~~with~~ which bittered relations with Iran. This unease was also felt in the religious sphere as well, as multiple disputes over the Hajj pilgrimage management sparked diplomatic strains. Both Iran and KSA support opposing sides in conflicts like Syria and Yemen and have been known to financially support other religious-political parties in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. However, the execution of a prominent Shia cleric, Nimr al Nimr, by KSA in 2016 proved to be the last straw as both countries severed diplomatic ties with each other after protesters in Iran attacked the Saudi Embassy in Tehran.

In 2023, the ties between KSA and Iran shifted towards ~~opening~~ betterment after much internal and external pressure. Years of proxy war had left regions like Yemen and Syria in chaos while also damaging both economies. Leaders in both Iran and ~~syria~~ KSA wished to seek solutions that can bring some sort of stability in the region. With USA occupied in other global conflicts, there was much less pressure on KSA to not pursue stable relations with Iran. However, China proved to be a key player, as it acted like a facilitator by hosting talks and encouraging both countries towards

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dialogue and cooperation. Several rounds of secret talks with Iraqi and Emirati mediators laid the groundwork for official engagement. This increased communication and led to de-escalation and shifted moods to solve issues by diplomatic dialogue. Finally, both agreed to reopen their embassies and engage in diplomatic activities to counter economic and security problems.

KSA Iran rapprochement has the potential to significantly impact both regional conflicts and Pakistan itself. Some of the positive outcomes can be

- i) **Reduced Regional Tensions:** Lowered hostility between two major powers could lead to de-escalation in proxy conflicts like Yemen and Syria. This could translate to fewer civilian casualties, decreased arms trafficking and potentially smoother paths towards diplomatic solutions.
- ii) **Improved Economic Cooperation:** Increased trade and investment cooperation between KSA and Iran could benefit the entire region. Both oil exporting countries can benefit from shifting their to non oil based exports. Presently Iran faces sanctions by Western countries which has crippled its economy and has left much of its

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citizens in financial stress. KSA also faced criticism for its totalitarian style of govt under which multiple human right violations have occurred.

Enhanced Stability: A more stable Middle East benefits everyone as terrorist organization would find it difficult to spread and destabilize regions.

For Pakistan, the rapprochement can have multiple positive implications as well.

i) Calmed religious discord: As the funding from ~~the~~ KSA and Iran would not be available. The extremist religious groups would not be able to spread hate speech and religious divide in the country would lessen.

ii) Reduced Security Threats: Some of the extremist organizations of the middle east also supported terrorism in Pakistan. It can be hoped that the frequency of attacks would decrease.

iii) Economic Opportunities: Both oil rich countries can be persuaded to invest in Pakistan, especially in the energy sector. This could help Pakistan get out of the multiple economic crisis that have engulfed the country over the past decades.