



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on December 2, 2013

Iran Reaches Out to Saudi Arabia

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (shown), during a recent public appearance in Kuwait City, extended an open invitation to Saudi Arabia to "work together in order to promote peace and stability in the region." "We look at Saudi Arabia as an important and influential country in the region," he was quoted by AFP as saying.



Observers suspect that Iran's overtures to Saudi Arabia and other nations in the Persian Gulf region are intended to assure its neighbors that its recent thaw in relations with the West — as exemplified by [the deal reached in Geneva](#) on November 24 between Iran and the P5+1 nations regarding Iran's nuclear fuel enrichment program — should not be construed as a turning away from close ties with its neighbors.

P5+1 refers to the five permanent members of the [UN Security Council](#) — the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France — plus Germany.

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Zarif reassured Iran's Gulf neighbors that the Geneva agreement "cannot be at the expense of any country in the region," promising them: "Be assured that the nuclear deal is in favor of the stability and security of the region."

Prior to this latest regional tour, Zarif wrote an opinion piece in the Saudi-owned daily Asharq Al-Awsat, in which he emphasized that "notwithstanding the focus on our interactions with the West, the reality is that our primary foreign policy priority is our region."

The Indian newspaper [The Hindu](#) observed that Zarif's outreach to the Saudis is significant, since prior to the Geneva agreement being reached, members of "the Saudi establishment" made it clear that they were opposed to the deal.

The Hindu also cited an interview granted by Mohammed bin Nawaf bin Abdulaziz, the Saudi ambassador to Britain, to the *British Times*, in which he warned that Saudi Arabia would not "sit idly by" if the Western powers failed to stop Iran's nuclear program.

However, Saudi Arabia is apparently pursuing not only a nuclear enrichment program, like Iran's, but a nuclear weapons program. The BBC has reported that "Saudi Arabia has invested in Pakistani nuclear weapons projects, and believes it could obtain atomic bombs at will."

Saudi Arabia, which is predominantly Sunni Muslim, is Shiite Iran's main rival in the Gulf region.



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When reporters asked Zarif during his media event in Kuwait if he also planned to visit the Saudi Arabian capital of Riyadh, Zarif answered: “We look at Saudi Arabia as an important and influential regional country and we are working to strengthen cooperation with it for the benefit of the region.”

A [Reuters reporter observed](#) that the six member-states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are wary of Iranian influence in the Middle East, fearing that Shiite-controlled Iran is attempting to dominate the region and also fueling sectarian tensions.

These neighbors also are concerned that Iran’s nuclear program is aimed at producing a nuclear weapon, a charge that Tehran has denied.

Just as Iran’s new president, Hassan Rouhani, has sought to improve relations with the West — a key factor resulting in Iran’s agreement to limit its nuclear program and allow UN inspectors to visit its uranium enriching facilities — Rouhani also seeks to improve relations with his Gulf neighbors. Zarif’s regional tour, which included stops in Qatar and Oman as well as Kuwait, is a clear indication of this.

Iran’s [Fars news agency](#) went into greater detail about Foreign Minister Zarif’s visit to Kuwait, noting that Zarif met with his Kuwaiti counterpart, Shaikh Sabah Khalid Al Hamad Al Sabah, as the two discussed ways to bolster mutual relations in all areas. “We believe that a new era has begun in ties between Iran and regional states which should turn into a new chapter of amicable relations through efforts by all regional countries,” Zarif said.

Zarif continued:

We are happy that the meeting of the second joint high economic committee was held between the two countries after seven years and it is necessary to try to implement its agreements through regular contacts between Iranian and Kuwaiti officials at different levels.

[Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia](#) soured after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 overthrew the U.S.-backed Shah and replaced the Pahlavi dynasty with an Islamic republic. The new Iranian government regarded the Saudis with suspicion, largely because of their close ties to U.S. oil interests, and regarded Saudi Arabia as an agent of the United States in the Persian Gulf.

Other major differences have divided the two leading Persian Gulf nations. Iran opposes monarchical regimes such as that of the Shah, which the revolution deposed, and the Saudi Royal family. In Iran, authority is exercised primarily by Islamist clerics, making it more of a theocracy than a democratic republic. The two nations also differ on oil policy, with Saudi Arabia favoring a policy of long-term energy stability and moderate oil prices, while Iran, whose energy exports have been severely hampered by Western sanctions, favors a policy of high oil prices.

Tensions between the two powers escalated during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, when Saudi Arabia provided aid to the Sunni Saddam Hussein, whose armies fought the Iranians for eight years before the war ended in a stalemate.

Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia improved when the two nations signed a Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement in May 1998, in which both countries agreed to cooperate with each other in the fields of economics, culture, and sports. Further improved relations were indicated when Iranian President Khatami stayed in Saudi Arabia for five days in May 1999 for a series of discussions.

However, until the most recent overtures made by Iran, relations between the two nations have been rocky at times. In 2012, when Western nations imposed sanctions against Iran, which reduced Iran’s oil exports, Saudi Arabia offered to increase production to offset the lost Iranian oil sales. This action



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prompted strong condemnation from Iran.



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