

Saudi Arabia, Iran work towards talks

Saudi Crown Prince asked leaders of Iraq and Pakistan to reach out to Tehran for de-escalation

**FARNAZ FASSIHI
BEN HUBBARD**

After years of growing hostility and competition for influence, Saudi Arabia and Iran have taken steps toward indirect talks to try to reduce the tensions that have brought West Asia to the brink of war, according to officials from several countries involved in the efforts.

Even the prospect of such talks represents a remarkable turnaround, coming only a few weeks after a coordinated attack on Saudi oil installations led to bellicose threats in the Gulf.

It was President Donald Trump's refusal to retaliate against Iran for the September 14 attack, analysts say, that set off unintended consequences, prompting Saudi Arabia to seek its own solution to the conflict. That solution, in turn, could subvert Mr. Trump's effort to build an Arab alliance to isolate Iran.

In recent weeks, officials of Iraq and Pakistan said, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman asked the leaders of those two



Easing tensions: A damaged pipeline at the Saudi Aramco oil facility in Khurais. •REUTERS/FILE

countries to speak with their Iranian counterparts about de-escalation.

Iran welcomed the gestures, stating privately and publicly that it was open to talks with Saudi Arabia.

Offer for mediation
In a statement to *The New York Times* on Friday, the Saudi government acknowledged that Iraq and Pakistan had offered to mediate talks

between the two countries but denied that Crown Prince Mohammed had taken the initiative.

"Efforts at de-escalation must emanate from the party that began the escalation and launched attacks, not the kingdom," the statement said.

Distrust between the two West Asian powers remains intense, and the prospect of high-level direct talks any

time soon appears remote. But even a slight warming could echo far outside their respective borders, where their rivalry fuels political divides from Lebanon to Yemen.

Iran has long wanted to wrest the Saudis from their alliance with Iran's archenemies, Israel and the U.S.

The new overtures between Saudi Arabia and Iran began in the aftermath of last

month's drone and cruise missile strikes on two Saudi oil facilities, which Saudi Arabia and the U.S. accused Iran of orchestrating.

No war
Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan met with Crown Prince Mohammed, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, in Jiddah last month. Days later, while Mr. Khan was at the General Assembly, he told reporters that the Crown Prince had asked him to talk to Iran.

Crown Prince Mohammed told Mr. Khan, "I want to avoid war," according to a senior Pakistani official. "He asked the Prime Minister to get involved."

Mr. Khan then spoke with Mr. Rouhani on the sidelines of the General Assembly. The Iraqi Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, visited Saudi Arabia a few days after Mr. Khan did. A key Iraqi official said that Crown Prince Mohammed asked Mr. Mahdi to mediate with Iran and that Iraq had suggested Baghdad as the venue for a potential meeting. NY TIMES

Trump signs proclamation to block visas for uninsured

It does not apply to asylum seekers, refugees or children

**ASSOCIATED PRESS
WASHINGTON**

Immigrants applying for U.S. visas will be denied entry into the country unless they can prove they can afford health care, according to a proclamation signed on Friday by President Donald Trump.

The rule applies to people seeking immigrant visas from abroad and not those already residing in the U.S.. It does not affect lawful permanent residents. It does not apply to asylum seekers, refugees or children.

Families affected
However, it would apply to the spouses and parents of U.S. citizens. That could have an impact on families who are trying to bring their parents to the U.S.

The proclamation says immigrants will be barred from entering the country unless they are to be covered by health insurance within 30 days of entering or have enough financial resources



Donald Trump

to pay for any medical costs. The measure will be effective November 3.

The Trump administration is trying to move away from a family-based immigration system and into a merit-based system, and Friday's proclamation is another effort to limit immigrant access to public programmes.

The Trump administration earlier this year made sweeping changes to regulations that would deny green cards to immigrants who use some forms of public assistance.

The White House also di-

rected officials to recover income-based welfare payments from sponsors, and proposed a rule requiring verification of immigration status for anyone seeking access to public housing benefits.

The required insurance can be purchased individually or provided by an employer, and it can be short-term coverage or catastrophic.

Medicaid doesn't count. And an immigrant will not be able to obtain a visa if he is using the Affordable Care Act's subsidies when buying insurance. Those subsidies are paid for by the Federal government.

"While lawful immigrants qualify for ACA subsidies, they'll be stuck in a catch-22 because subsidised coverage does not qualify as insurance under the proclamation," tweeted Larry Levitt, executive vice president for health policy at Kaiser Family Foundation, a health care policy think tank.

On Hong Kong streets, protesters defy mask ban

Violence justifies emergency law: Lam



Police restraining a couple wearing face masks in the Central district in Hong Kong on Saturday. •AFP

**REUTERS
HONG KONG**

Hong Kong's metro system stayed shut on Saturday, paralysing transport in the Asian financial hub, and malls and shops closed early after a night of chaos in which police shot a teenage boy and protesters torched shops and metro stations.

Friday's protests across the Chinese-ruled city erupted hours after its embattled leader, Carrie Lam, invoked colonial-era emergency powers for the first time in more than 50 years to ban the face masks demonstrators use to hide their identities.

The night's "extreme violence" justified the use of the emergency law, Beijing-backed Ms. Lam said in a television address on Saturday.

"The radical behaviour of rioters took Hong Kong through a very dark night, leaving society today half-

paralysed," she said in pre-recorded remarks.

"The extreme violence clearly illustrated that Hong Kong's public safety is widely endangered. That's the concrete reason that we had to invoke emergency law yesterday to introduce the anti-mask law."

But undeterred by the ban and transport shutdown, several hundred pro-democracy protesters, many wearing masks, took to the streets on Saturday, marching through the normally bustling central district of Causeway Bay.

Other groups gathered in Sheung Shui and Tsim Sha Tsui districts as the sun began to set.

"We're not sure what is going to happen later, but we felt we had to get out and show our basic right to wear a mask," said one protester, Sue, 22, who wore a black mask and dark glasses to the Causeway Bay march.

Iran frees Australian blogger couple

They returned home in a possible 'swap' for a student wanted in the U.S.

**AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
SYDNEY**

An Australian travel-blogging couple held in Iran on spying charges have been freed and returned home, authorities said on Saturday, in a possible swap for an Iranian student wanted in the U.S.

Perth-based Jolie King and Mark Firkin had been documenting their journey from Australia to Britain on social media for the past two years, but went silent after posting

updates from Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan about three months ago.

The pair, who have tens of thousands of followers on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, were alleged to have used a drone to take pictures of "military sites and forbidden areas", an Iranian judiciary spokesman said last month.

Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne said they were released after "very sensitive negotiations" and

had been reunited with their family in Australia.

"We are extremely happy and relieved to be safely back in Australia with those we love," the couple said in a statement issued by the foreign ministry in Canberra.

"While the past few months have been very difficult, we know it has also been tough for those back home who have been worried for us."

Hours later, state media in Tehran said an Iranian stu-

dent held in Australia for 13 months on accusations of circumventing U.S. sanctions on military equipment had also been released and returned home.

Australia's Attorney General Christian Porter confirmed in a statement that he had stopped the extradition of Reza Dehbashi to the U.S.

But he dismissed "speculation" over the case, amid media reports that it could be part of a prisoner swap involving the bloggers.

Iraq tense as toll rises to 81

Top officials meet protest leaders to discuss their demands

**REUTERS
BAGHDAD**

Clashes between police and protesters killed five people in Baghdad on Saturday in a resumption of anti-government unrest, as security forces deployed in their hundreds to keep demonstrations away from central squares in the Iraqi capital.

Police snipers shot at demonstrators and several people were wounded in eastern Baghdad, Reuters reporters said. Police also fired live rounds at demonstrators in the southern city of Nassiriya, where at least 18 people were killed this week.

At least 81 people have been killed and hundreds injured in four days of violent



Iraqi security forces closing access to a road in Baghdad on Saturday. •AP

unrest, according to police and medical sources.

The new clashes shattered a day of relative calm after authorities lifted a curfew and traffic moved normally in the centre of the capital city.

Officials from Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi's office met protest leaders from

Baghdad and other provinces to discuss their demands, state television reported.

Mr. Mahdi and President Barham Salih said they would seek to meet the demands, but gave no details how exactly they would respond.

The unrest is the deadliest Iraq has seen since the declared defeat of Islamic State in 2017 and has shaken Mr. Mahdi's year-old government. The government has responded with vague reform promises that are unlikely to placate Iraqis.

The protests over lack of jobs and services and government corruption erupted on Tuesday in Baghdad and quickly spread to other Iraqi cities.

Taliban, U.S. envoy meet after impasse over deal

U.S. officials rule out peace talks

**ASSOCIATED PRESS
KABUL**

The Taliban met with U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in the Pakistan capital for the first time since President Donald Trump declared a peace deal to end Afghanistan's war 'dead' a month ago, a Taliban official said on Saturday.

U.S. officials, however, have been keen to say there is no resumption of peace talks, at least not now in Islamabad.

Still, the meeting is significant as the U.S. seeks an exit from Afghanistan.

Mr. Khalilzad has been in Islamabad for much of the week meeting with senior

government officials in what the U.S. State Department described as follow-up meetings he held in New York during last month's U.N. General Assembly session. At the time he met Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, who has been calling for a resumption of peace talks.

The Taliban delegation, led by Mullah Baradar, arrived separately in the Pakistani capital for meetings with government officials. They reportedly held discussion on a wide range of political issues relating to the more than 1.5 million Afghans still living as refugees in Pakistan.

ELSEWHERE



Six elephants slip off Thailand waterfall, die
BANGKOK
Six wild elephants drowned after slipping off a waterfall in Thailand, authorities said. Two of the elephants were saved after they got stranded while attempting to save one of those that fell. AFP

U.S. state upholds e-cigarette ban
NEW YORK
The U.S. State of Massachusetts has upheld a ban on e-cigarettes. Eighteen deaths in 15 states have now been positively linked to vaping since March, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. AFP

SUDOKU

1			4					
	9	8		7		2	5	
			8	6		7		1
				3			1	
	8						6	
	4			8				
5		6		4	2			
	1	4		9		6	7	
				3				2

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

5	2	9	6	4	8	1	7	3
4	7	3	1	2	9	6	8	5
1	8	6	5	3	7	4	9	2
3	4	2	7	5	1	8	6	9
7	6	1	8	9	2	3	5	4
8	9	5	4	6	3	7	2	1
9	5	7	3	8	4	2	1	6
2	3	8	9	1	6	5	4	7
6	1	4	2	7	5	9	3	8

China masters propaganda for the Instagram age

The ruling party is competing with short videos, Hollywood movies and mobile games for the public's attention

LI YUAN

Lu Yingxin has been singing "My People, My Country" for the past week. An earnest propaganda anthem from 1985, the song typically wouldn't stand a chance against Taylor Swift, K-pop and other modern tunes the 18-year-old college student and her friends like to listen to.

Then, on Sunday, Ms. Lu and her roommates saw a hit Chinese movie of the same name. It depicts major events in recent Chinese history – its first nuclear bomb test, the Hong Kong handover from Britain and the Beijing Olympics, among others – through the eyes of ordinary people.

Its theme song is a polished cover of the 1985 version, sung by Faye Wong, the breathy Chinese superstar. It left them in tears, Ms. Lu said.

Then they shed more tears while watching Tuesday's parade in Beijing cele-



Patriotic display: Youngsters taking pictures of tanks returning to their base after a parade in Beijing on October 1. •NYT

brating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, a procession replete with images of progress and sacrifice.

Complex truth

It's easy to dismiss this outpouring of patriotism as evidence of the Communist Party's successful brainwashing of the Chinese people, or as a result of heavy surveillance

and heavy-handed tactics against dissenters.

The truth is more complex. The Communist Party indeed doesn't hesitate to use state power to tell the Chinese people how they should think. But the displays of patriotism, especially from young people, also show that the party's propaganda machine has mastered the power of symbol and symbolism in the mass me-

dia and social media era.

That's why Ms. Lu can't stop singing a song she first learned in a patriotism class in her elementary school. "It was beautiful. But it was also part of the patriotism education, so it felt forced," she said. "After I watched the movie and the military parade, I sang it from the bottom of my heart."

Beijing may be still struggling to influence the outside world more effectively, but at home it has learned how to compete with short videos, Hollywood movies and mobile games for the public's attention span. While imposing tight censorship, the Communist Party has also learned to lean on the most popular artists and the most experienced internet companies to help it instill Chinese with patriotic zeal.

It's propaganda for the Instagram age, if Instagram were allowed in China.

So many people rushed to add a national flag logo to

their profile photos on the WeChat social media platform that the webpage crashed. On Douyin, the Chinese version of the short-video platform TikTok, China's biggest entertainment stars and ordinary people alike posted videos of themselves cupping their hands into a heart shape over their chests. The "My People, My Country" music video has been played 73 million times on Tencent Video.

Full of opportunity

Broadly speaking, Chinese people have reason to be proud of their accomplishments. In 40 years, they have lifted their country out of poverty while avoiding the wars and unrest that have plagued much of the developing world. Modern China has its problems, but most Chinese believe it is still vibrant and full of opportunity.

The Communist Party has tapped into that sentiment,

and has been successfully blurring the line between love for the country and love for the party. For the first time, the flags of the Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army appeared in the military parade along with the national flag.

To blur those lines, the party has turned to potent symbols for the internet age. Its propaganda symbols of old included Lei Feng, a selfless soldier who died in 1962 at the age of 21 after being struck by a falling utility pole.

Today's version of Lei Feng is Azhong, a clean-cut cartoon character.

The *People's Daily*, the Communist Party's official newspaper, created Azhong, a boy from a poor family who is ridiculed by classmates. But he works hard and becomes a top student. Then it compares Azhong to China, saying it also rose from backwardness to power despite victimisation. NY TIMES