

# Transcript

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I would like to welcome Simon Bublun workshop and give you 20 minutes to enlighten us.

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Mabon, thank you so much.

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Thank you. Thank you, Rehan for the invitation and for all of your efforts. Thank you, Eugene, for your kind words, kind invitation hosting and I will do my best to to follow what was an excellent presentation and I think it it sets up what I was going to talk about quite nicely. So thank you for the foresight.

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And the careful.

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Planning my talk this about Saudi and Iran.

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And how the Saudi Iran dynamics?

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Have shifted or indeed not shifted post October 7.

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And I thought I'd.

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With a quote from Fred Halliday, the late Great Fred Halliday.

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Who remarked that it's very easy to say that everything has changed. It's very easy to say that nothing has changed.

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The reality is probably somewhere in the middle, and I think that's kind of appropriate for what I'm going to be talking about today.

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With regard to the the Saudi Iran.

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Rivalry. Rapprochement.

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Relationship.

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Pragmatic dynamics, depending on how you want to frame it, it's something that I've been working on for.

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A couple of decades now and over that period of time, it's oscillated between moments of overt hostility, strange incidents of let me get this right.

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Mexican drug cartels being hired by.

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The cousin of an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps member to assassinate Adel al Jubeir in 2011.

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It's a very strange story that sort of disappeared quite quickly, but you'll find online and that was.

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Two days before it's due to submit my PhD on Saudi Iran relations. So I was pulling what little hair I had left out of my head.

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Office.

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Very worried but.

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Some 13 years later, we're in a very different position.

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And I think we're in a different position in light of some pretty dramatic shifts in transnational relations and some pretty pretty dramatic shifts in the way in which regional politics is being constructed.

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The role of the United States, for example, the shifting contours of Israeli Arab relations, and.

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A broader pragmatism that I think has started to emerge in Saudi strategic thinking.

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Perhaps in some elements of Iranian strategic thinking. And of course, the region more broadly. So what I'm going to try and do is trace the evolution of that and position what happened with October seven in that broader sort of.

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Ish jury or short ish jury, I guess. Of Saudi Arabian relations.

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I think.

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Three main ways of understanding Saudi Iran Relations 1 is to reduce it purely to power politics and say religion is being used instrumentally. It's all about power. It's all about national interest. That is obviously problematic for a number of reasons.

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Another is to say it's all about religion. It's all about Sunni versus Shia, which is probably more problematic than the first one.

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For obvious reasons. And then the third approach is, it's more sort of nuanced to say, well, actually religion and power and national interest and ethnicity all sort of come together at particular moments in time and or mobilise or or deployed by those in positions of power and pursuit of their interests in pursuit of the collective goal.

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And shaped by the contingencies and complexities of time and space.

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And what my most recent book tried to do was show that this rivalry between the Saudis and the Iranians wasn't just monolithic. It didn't just play out in a hegemonic, singular way across the region, but actually it was.

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Was quite malleable.

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And conditioned by what was happening across what I identified as five different arenas, competition and contestation. So I focused on Bahrain, Gerard, Lebanon.

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In that it's safe.

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Syria and Yemen and the the political, economic, social, religious, structural, geopolitical context of those different arenas created different types of transnational relationships, some of which were predicated on sector based.

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Affinity. Some were predicated on ideological, some were predicated purely on who can help us to counter the threat posed by our rival in that particular context.

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And what I tried to do in in that book was was trace how these things played out and grounded most of a spatially and temporally. And I think that's, I would say this of course, but I think that's quite a useful way of looking at where we are right now.

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In terms of of looking at the the factors that are giving rise to the the evolution of of Saudi Arabian relations.

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So if I talk a little.

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About the historical context and and then segue into.

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The the more.

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More recent past.

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If we look at the history of of relations or rivalry between the two, you can see from sort of a century ago.

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And I imagine you're formal, qualified tonight to.

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About this.

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You see some interesting dynamics at play with the the Shah and even the Saud recognising each other, acknowledging the right of Persia and Saudi Arabia to emerge as political projects in this.

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Post World War One world.

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You see that too broadly agreeing with one another on a number of issues. You see them collaborating, you see politics sort of trumping.

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You shouldn't really say that, should I?

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Now.

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'S forgiven, I hope trumping religious difference neither.

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Wanted to privilege and privatise religion over the the national interest.

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Although there were some tensions emerging from within Persia later Iran, of course, over how Shia communities were being treated within Saudi Arabia and how pilgrims were being treated within the culture.

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So the reason for mentioning that is when we go back essential and we get a very political type of rivalry, there wasn't so much a rivalry was a relationship. It was.

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It was.

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Collaboration cooperation. A little bit of contestation.

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But politically driven would be undertones of of.

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Of religious concept, of course, 1979 changed everything. Not just with the revolution, not just with the establishment of the Islamic Republic, but rather the fusion of politics and religion, the politicisation of Islam.

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And the seizure of the Grand Mosque, of course, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

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The increasing unrest that's spilled out across the region, inspired by, influenced by supported by Iran.

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And that adds a different flavour to to the rivalry adds a different type of transnational contestation, and you get this this period where.

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The two States and elites in both states are embroiled in this rhetorical cycle. \*\*\* for that rhetoric.

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Rejecting the legitimacy of the other, one is the standard Saudi line, which NBS used.

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A decade ago, comparing the Iranian leadership to Nazis, the Iranian.

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Reject the legitimacy of the Al Saud.

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Called them infidels.

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Unfit, unworthy to be the protectors of the two.

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Places et.

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Et cetera. And this reverberates across the region, across the wider Muslim world, into the organisation of Islamic cooperation, et cetera, so.

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With with the.

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Sort of. The injection of religion into these transnational dynamics, the nature of the rivalry becomes more fraught. There's an existential dimension here in the sense that the Iranians wanted the the the Islamic legitimacy for their new political project, whereas the Saudis were contingent, were reliant.

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On legitimacy in terms of their own position within both the Kingdom and the wider Islamic world.

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We then have, obviously the war with Iraq.

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And the death of Khomeini, with the death of Khomeini, we start to see this this versioning, rapprochement, this opening up of relations. We see Crown Prince.

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Do love like the King Abdullah making a lot of diplomatic work and doing a lot of diplomatic legwork to try and and open up relations with Iran? Also, the Iranians are reciprocating and in part I think that reflects the political structures that were were playing out there, right?

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But we see this this period of versioning, rapprochement, where the two begin to work closer and closer together. There was a devastating earthquake in Iran. The Saudis sent condolences and a great deal of financial support. So this, this, this positive moment.



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Until 2003, and I guess I should mention, just before there was in the aftermath of 911, the Iranians were working closely with the Americans with regard to Afghanistan so.

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Things start to to shift, I guess with the access of legal speech, but they they deteriorate dramatically within 2003. the US renovation of Iraq and this, this opens up a broader geopolitical competition. It opens up the conditions to give rise to a sectarian.

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Violence in Iraq.

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And across the wider region, in Bahrain, for example, there were widespread demonstrations in support of Iraqi Shia.

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At this point in time, about 2007.

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The the Bahraini king in comic who was facing his own serious domestic pressures.

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Reach out to the Americans to say I want to normalise with Israel because I'm worried about it.

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And so this is what, 13 years before the Abraham Accords would say, look, we need to, we need to normalise. We need to have Israel on side. So this is sort of sheer present time. This is nefarious Iranian presence across the region.

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Iranian puppet master.

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Of all of these, sort of securitizing moves.

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Culminating in what King Halek said.

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We'll see the Arab uprisings. All of this happens.

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The the opening up of sect based cleavages in pursuit of geopolitical, political economic interests.

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And it plays out.

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The different places that I've mentioned.

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Well, what we start to see, I think from well.

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We see a lot of hostility when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman comes to to power. He's clearly at this point.

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Ideologically driven, bombastic living up to the.

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Of Abu Rahman.

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Trying to get things done in his way.

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Very quickly.

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And I think that the the case of side Hariri and his fateful.

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To viad highlights.

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The the lack of diplomatic subtlety, as does the killing of Jamal Khashoggi.

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But somewhere around this time.

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We start to see a shift in the thinking of the Saudis in terms of how they are approaching.

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Their influence across the region, and I'm thinking here in particular of Lebanon.

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And the Saudis have, they've got this long.

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Relationship with the Hilary Battery, of course.

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Both Rafik and Saeed were were Saudi allies key partners in the Saudi effort to curtail the influence of Hezbollah and by.

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Iran, but.

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What we started to see, and this I think, is why we see a pragmatic turn.

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Is the Saudis realising that Hariri wasn't able to provide them with what they were looking for in Lebanon and they start looking elsewhere? They go away from the Sunni block, if you will.

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And they start looking at Christian groups, so they reach out to the Lebanese forces. They reach out to Samia Zaja and they cultivate these. These relationships, transnational relationships based on economic interests and political interests.

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Not based on sectarian affinity, which had been the key sort of tool or the lever that they would pull whenever the situation arose.

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And I bring this up because I think it's actually quite important to note.

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That we see.

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It's MBS maturing as as a decision maker or whether it's a pragmatic turn that's influenced by members of the Royal Court and key decision makers. I guess that's something that we're not going to find out.

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But we start to see this pragmatic shift.

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Realisation that there are other ways of.

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Politics and.

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Other point is that 2019 the upkeep attacks, the Houthi attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure. The Saudis, I think.

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Pretty frustrated that the Americans didn't jump in.

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They'd been saying for.

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Decade, I guess that something needed to be done about Iran. King Abdullah's famous remarks about cutting off the head of the snake, for example. But then when the Houthis stroke the life blood of the Saudi economy and Washington did not.

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I think there was a real sense of, OK, we cannot keep doing things in the way that we're doing them because we can't rely on the state that had been our security guarantor for.

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70 years, yeah.

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My boss is bright. Yeah, so that I think is an existential moment in Saudi decision making that says, OK, we need to start.

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Things differently.

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They can't rely on the US.

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That was on the truck. Biden comes in. He starts pushing human rights agenda. He starts criticising the Saudis for their approach in democracy and human rights. Again, this sort of double S down their thinking that the way that they've been doing politics, the way that they've been trying to engage with the region.

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Isn't to keep working.

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At least not in the same way. So I think we start to see a shift, a pragmatic shift in the transnational workings of Saudi foreign policy at this point.

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So there's all these different initiatives that are going on and eventually cultural initiatives, political initiatives.

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Environmental initiatives. There were lots of really interesting environmental work done by civil society organisations. A lot of European actors were doing really valuable work and it gets to a point where Beijing is able to get the deal over the line.

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Now that surprised a lot of people. Obviously these two great rivals coming together with a shared vision of the region.

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Move forward, but it was a pragmatic vision and I think pragmatism is the way of looking at this. It was a sense.

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That Riyadh.

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Couldn't rely Washington that Tehran was in dire need of capital investment.

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It needed the money it needed to reintegrate itself and Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Manama.

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Wool accepted that the way for a more stable region was to reintegrate Iraq.

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Now The X Factor of course, then is Israel.

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The moves towards normalisation appeared to jeopardise that.

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So Israel is a spoiler, so I was in, I was in Geneva a few weeks ago.

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And I was attractive event between Saudi's with Saudis and Iranians. That was fascinating and.

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The consensus position was that normalisation between the Saudis and Israelis was something that was for the future.

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Maybe if and only if certain steps were being taken, IE irreversible steps towards a Palestinian State, what was really interesting though, is that that was a consensus position.

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The Saudis and the Iranians were pretty much united in this. They were pretty much on the same page with almost everything that was talked about.

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And I think that's really quite.

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Well, optimistic.

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I think a lot of people were expecting the the Saudi Iran deal to very, very quickly unravel. There wasn't much progress in Yemen. There hadn't been a lasting peace agreement in Yemen. There were the strikes.

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Syria the strikes in Iraq, the strikes in Iraq, the devastation.

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Of Gaza and South Lebanon.

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And yet the Saudi Arab deals holding, and I think that offers a sliver of hope that there is a pragmatic shift towards a region. First way of looking at security and collaboration.

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At the future?

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I guess there's a lot of questions that need to be.

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Particularly in terms of how is this actually going to manifest in societies such as Leffler, Yemen, Syria?

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There's a lot.

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That still needs to be done, but we've seen Saudi Arabian officials meeting pretty regularly senior officials meeting pretty regularly, having very serious diplomatic talks, having security base talks.

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I didn't think I'd.

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On a bit of a positive.

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I think there was a.

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Don't feel.

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Well, this may be sleeve deprivation.

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Obliged.

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After witnessing what I've witnessed with this particular rivalry over the past few decades like, I think this is.

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A positive moment and.

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Seeing Iranians and Saudis bowling together on mixed teams at the end of.

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Serious couple of days of trying to diplomacy it was.

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It was something.



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OK, I think I'll leave it there. Thank you.

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Fantastic. Thank you.