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**A Possible Thaw in Iranian-Saudi Tensions:**  
**Ramifications for the Region and for Israel**

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**Recent signs point to a mutual effort by Iran and Saudi Arabia to clear the air and ease tensions, and suggest a willingness to address disputes through dialogue. New contacts between these countries come against the backdrop of the September 14, 2019 attack on the kingdom's main oil facilities, which was attributed to Iran and temporarily shut down approximately half of Saudi oil output. Iran demonstrated that even if it would not like to see a sweeping deterioration in regional stability, it is prepared to take greater risks, believing that neither the United States nor Saudi Arabia is interested in escalation. Indeed, the Iranian attack made clear to Riyadh the vulnerability of its strategic facilities, as well as the extent of US reluctance to take military action against Iran. However, any reversal in Saudi-Iranian relations is unlikely to have a deep impact or last long. The root hostility between the two countries remains, and the region's changing circumstances are what motivates them to dispel the tension, even if only partially. While it is not clear if the United States is involved in Iranian-Saudi contacts, Riyadh presumably feels at liberty to pursue them, given its disappointment with the lack of an American response to the attack on the oil facilities, as well as at the pressure from Congress on Saudi Arabia. Thus the Saudis may prefer to test waters that are independent of the US administration – particularly given the clear interest of the administration, and of President Trump himself, in launching direct talks with Iran.**

A series of recent developments suggests a mutual effort by Iran and Saudi Arabia to ease the tension between them. Both states have signaled that they wish to improve the atmosphere and reduce the hostility, and that they see importance in dialogue and a willingness to address disputes. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir confirmed on Twitter that Saudi Arabia relayed a message to Iran via a "sister country" that Saudi Arabia has always sought regional stability and security. A senior official in the Iraqi Prime Minister's office, Abbas al-Hasnawi, revealed that Saudi Arabia agreed to let Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi organize a meeting with Iran as a first step toward reducing regional tension, and there is a possibility that a meeting would be held in Baghdad. While at the UN General Assembly in September, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan talked with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as well as with Iranian

President Hassan Rouhani, about the need to reduce regional tension, and subsequently visited the two countries to pursue the matter. In parallel, Iranian Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani announced that Tehran was willing to engage in dialogue with Saudi Arabia and additional countries in the region, arguing that an Iranian-Saudi dialogue could resolve many of the region's security and political problems – suggesting inter alia that a dialogue addressing the ongoing war in Yemen is possible. In addition, the UAE, like Pakistan and Iraq, also took upon itself to attempt to mediate between Riyadh and Tehran so as to reduce Gulf tensions.

Against the backdrop of these contacts is the September 14, 2019 attack on Saudi Arabia's main oil facilities, which was attributed to Iran and temporarily shut down approximately half of Saudi oil output. The attack demonstrated that even if Iran does not seek a sweeping deterioration in regional stability, it is prepared to take greater risks than previously in the belief that both the United States and Saudi Arabia will avoid responding, as they are not interested in escalation. Indeed, the Saudi response was measured and disproportionately lower than the damage caused, and as in the past, Riyadh avoided directly blaming Iran, preferring to emphasize that the attack was a grave blow to the security of the global energy market – which perforce necessitates determined international action to protect Saudi oil facilities. For their part, the United States and European nations announced they had information pointing to Iran as behind the attack, but avoided taking direct action against it. In all, the attack and the lack of an American response demonstrated to Riyadh the vulnerability of its strategic facilities and the determination of President Trump not to take military action against Iran. In addition, the attack, like previous Iranian attacks since May 2019, underscored Iran's supremacy in the Gulf and the vulnerability of its main regional adversary Saudi Arabia in a manner that shook the Arab axis and gnawed at the sense of security among Gulf Arab states and the reliability of the American security buttress.

In the ongoing war in Yemen, Saudi Arabia has not succeeded in preventing the Houthis, who receive both overt and covert Iranian military support, from improving their position. In parallel, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia's main partner in the Yemen war, is in the process of disengaging from the fighting in Yemen and holding a dialogue with Iran. In this context, the respective naval chiefs of the two countries met recently, and the Emirati national security adviser – a brother of the crown prince and de facto ruler, Mohammed bin Zayed – visited Tehran. It was also reported that the UAE unfroze \$700 million of Iranian money deposited in UAE banks.

European nations similarly see in Iran an important player in ending the Yemen war, and it was reported recently that secret contacts have been held between American and Houthi delegates. Furthermore, Riyadh is troubled by the possible launch of negotiations

between the United States and Iran on the nuclear file, given that President Trump has repeatedly made clear his desire for direct dialogue with the Iranian leadership. Saudi Arabia has an interest in being part of the solution and not being out of the picture.

This constellation of circumstances augurs changes in Saudi Arabia's strategic environment that require its leaders to consider a policy overhaul. The possibility of opening an active dialogue to dispel tension with Iran is no easy matter for Saudi Arabia, but there are signs that it is discussing the matter with international representatives close to Iran.

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia stems from significant geopolitical and religious-ideological disputes and serves as a salient component in the architecture of today's Middle East. Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran deteriorated in early 2016, after Saudi Arabia cut off diplomatic ties with Iran over attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran that followed the execution in Saudi Arabia of Shiite sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. Mohammed bin Salman is seen as having contributed heavily to the increased hostility between the countries. On several occasions, he resorted to anti-Iranian rhetoric of a harshness uncharacteristic of previous rulers of the kingdom – for example, when he likened Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to Hitler.

The contest for influence is manifest mainly in the struggle underway in various arenas through allies and proxies, but the two countries are also involved in a direct struggle that includes, inter alia, mutual attempts at subversion through various means. Saudi Arabia is troubled by how Iran and its loyalists have been boosted in Yemen – especially against the backdrop of the UAE's intent to withdraw its forces from Yemen – and by Iran's gains in Syria and Iraq; hence Riyadh's eagerness to talk to Iran to try to reach agreements on a range of issues, mainly in these latter arenas. Iran, for its part, continues to see Saudi Arabia as an adversary and a main factor in encouraging American hostility toward it, and is even troubled by reports regarding intelligence and operational coordination between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Improved relations with Riyadh are thus also perceived in Tehran as part of a struggle against the isolation sought by the United States.

A thaw in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran is unlikely to be of significant duration and have a material impact: negative sentiments on both sides run deep, and the basis for hostility remains. However, changing regional circumstances are an incentive for both sides to reach a new level of stability and dispel, at least partially, the tensions between them. It is not clear if the United States is involved in the contacts between the sides, though presumably the Saudis feel at liberty to pursue them, given their disappointment with the lack of an American response to the attack on the oil facilities, as well as with the pressure in Congress on Saudi Arabia. It is possible that the Saudis prefer

to see what options are open to them independent of administration policy – particularly in light of the US position on Iran and the clear interest of the administration, and of President Trump himself, in launching direct talks with Iran.

Even if there is no prospect for a full restoration of proper ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran, in the current circumstances – and given the Saudi willingness to improve the atmosphere – the tension between Riyadh and Tehran may subside, at least in the short term. Yet in the long term, in the absence of a change in the fundamental level of hostility between the countries, and particularly if Iran launches another significant attack on Saudi targets, there is a greater likelihood of Saudi-American retaliation against Iran, especially given the beefing up of US forces in Saudi Arabia.

Any change in Saudi-Iranian relations will affect Israel. Israel saw its shared interest with Gulf states vis-à-vis Iran as a basis for cooperation – even if away from the public eye – and as part of the improvement of ties with Sunni Arab countries. However, Israel and Saudi Arabia share interests in other areas as well, including the fight against ISIS and opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, as well as preservation of special relations with the United States. Thus even if there is progress in the contacts between the Iranians and Saudis, it will be a result of current, situational interests and not a manifestation of an essential solution to fundamental problems.

In any event, there are signs that the trend of ad hoc changes in relations between and within alliances and fronts in the region will continue in the wake of developments in the relative power structure. Israel must monitor these, in order to safeguard its security interests as new developments arise. Israel should prepare for a situation in which Saudi Arabia is weakened, which would mean that the burden of countering Iran will fall mostly to Israel. Furthermore, as time progresses, Saudi helplessness in terms of national security is liable to prompt it to increase further its investment in advanced weaponry and heighten its desire to achieve military nuclear capability.