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Saudi-Iranian Dialogue: Toward a Strategic Change?

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The meetings reported in recent weeks between Iran and Saudi Arabia are a new development in the relations between the two countries, which were severed in 2016. The immediate context is the change of administration in the United States. The Biden administration has begun a dialogue with Tehran about a return to the nuclear agreement, and has also severely criticized Saudi Arabia. The changed stance in the White House has led to adjustments in Saudi foreign policy, including a reconciliation with Qatar in January 2021, the offer of a ceasefire agreement to the Houthis in Yemen in March, and most recently, the beginning of a dialogue with Iran. The direct talks with Riyadh serve Iran's stated policy of excluding the regional issue from the current dialogue with Washington. This is also the background to the round of talks with Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman conducted by the Iranian foreign minister. For its part, Saudi Arabia seeks a solution that will end the war in Yemen, and is aware of the regional changes that are likely to occur if Washington and Tehran return to the nuclear agreement. For Israel, the existence of a Saudi-Iranian dialogue should not constitute a change in principle toward improved relations with the Gulf states, some of which have official and unofficial relations with Israel along with their ties with Iran. At the same time, a concrete Iranian-Saudi rapprochement will be a significant crack in the anti-Iran front that Israel has tried to present. More importantly, it will eliminate a key element in the opposition to the US return to the nuclear agreement.

In recent weeks, there have been many [leaks](#) about meetings between representatives of Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as between Iran and Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan, under the auspices of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. According to these reports, two Iraqi-sponsored rounds of direct talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia have already taken place, with the Saudi team headed by General Intelligence Directorate Director General Khalid al-Humaidan. A spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry neither confirmed nor denied the contacts, but [said](#) that his country supported a dialogue with Riyadh. The Iranian ambassador in Baghdad spoke more specifically, saying that Iran "supports Baghdad's mediation to bring Tehran closer to countries with which we have faced challenges or with which ties have cooled." An April 20, 2021 Saudi cabinet meeting presided over by the king called on Iran "to engage in the ongoing negotiations,

avoid escalation, and not expose the region's security and stability to more tension." Meanwhile, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif is reported to have met with senior Saudi officials on a visit to Iraq on April 26, and has also visited Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman.

Saudi Arabia is worried about Tehran's drive and that of the forces loyal to it in Yemen, and about Iran's achievements in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Iran still regards Saudi Arabia as its rival and a key factor in encouraging US policy against Iran. Furthermore, it sees normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain as a negative development, and believes that even if no similar development takes place in Israel's relations with Saudi Arabia, the two countries are maintaining covert ties, primarily in intelligence.

The change in the White House attitude toward both Saudi Arabia and Iran has already led to adjustments in Saudi foreign policy, including a reconciliation agreement with Qatar in January 2021, an offer to the Houthis of a ceasefire agreement in March 2021, and now the dialogue with Iran. Saudi Arabia's priorities are headed by the need to end the conflict in Yemen, which has exacted a considerable political and public relations toll from the kingdom. Riyadh fears that if the negotiations between the United States and Iran are successful, Iran's regional standing will be strengthened. In order to at least partly offset the possible negative consequences of these negotiations for Saudi standing and influence, it has looked to engage in dialogue with Iran.

The meetings reported in recent weeks between Iran and Saudi Arabia are a new development for the two countries, which severed their relations in 2016. In contrast to 2015, when talks between Iran and the United States led to the JCPOA, this time Riyadh wants to stay in the picture of the talks and is taking steps to ensure this. Saudi Arabia expressed public support for the unofficial talks between Iran and the United States on the nuclear issue, provided that other matters of concern are discussed after agreement is reached on the nuclear issue. These additional issues include Iran's missile arsenal, as well as the activity of Iran's proxies in the region. The director of the Saudi Foreign Ministry Policy Planning Department made it clear that any return to the agreement that did not also address the issue of Iran's missiles and support for destabilizing regional groups would not last. A return to the nuclear agreement should therefore be the opening step toward the inclusion of the regional players for the purpose of expanding the clauses in the agreement and ensuring that the money released by the lifting of the sanctions against Iran will not be devoted to destabilization of the region.

For Iran, restoring relations with Riyadh is perceived as contributing to limiting the consequences of normalization between the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain and Israel,

alleviating the confrontational atmosphere in the Gulf, and improving Iran's regional standing. All of this serves Iran's stated policy of opposing the demand by the United States and European countries that the discussion on the nuclear agreement be extended to include the subject of the missiles and Iran's regional policy, while emphasizing that discussion of the regional issues should be confined exclusively to the regional players. The dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran, assuming that it continues and sees progress, is an extremely significant development, and Iran will take advantage of it in order to improve its standing in its dialogue with Washington, with the aim of having the sanctions against it removed and bettering its economic situation.

Saudi Arabia's main goal is to reach concrete agreements leading to an end to the war in Yemen and the Houthis' attacks against the kingdom. Riyadh, which for years has been subject to ongoing attacks from Yemen, Iraq, and Iran against its strategic facilities, including the world's most important oil facilities, recently made a generous proposal to the Houthis for ending the war. Figures from the Saudi military show that as of February 2021, at least 860 ground-to-ground missiles and drones were fired against Saudi territory since March 2015, when the Saudi offense in Yemen began. In September 2019 in Abqaiq, and again in March 2021 in Ras Tanura, Iran launched combined attacks using a variety of missiles, drones, and loitering munitions, hitting the bottleneck of Saudi oil production. Embarrassment over their vulnerability and inferiority to Iran prevented the Saudis from accusing Iran directly. Despite their massive arms purchases over the years, the kingdom lacks adequate defense capability, not to mention offensive capability. The war in Yemen has become a bone of contention with Washington, which has eyed the humanitarian crisis there with much concern.

The speech by Saudi Crown Prince and de-facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman on April 28 indicates a significant change in Riyadh's policy on Iran, or at least in its rhetoric. [He stated](#), "Iran is a neighboring country. All we ask for is to have a good and distinguished relationship with Iran". We do not want the situation with Iran to be difficult. On the contrary, we want it to prosper and grow as we have Saudi interests in Iran, and they have Iranian interests in Saudi Arabia." These remarks are in stark contrast to bin Salman's previous statements, in which he compared Iran's Supreme Leader to Hitler.

At this early stage, it is difficult to estimate the talks' prospects for success. As in the past, they are likely to fail, and even if a thaw in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran occurs, it stands to be insubstantial. The enmity on both sides runs deep and the basic reasons for hostility have not disappeared, even if the changing circumstances in the region prompt the two sides to reposition themselves and lessen the tension between them, at least to some extent. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, a prominent element in the regional architecture, is rooted in geopolitical disputes, and involves

ideological aspects. The competition for regional influence is reflected mainly in a struggle in various theaters through allies and proxies. Indeed, the report of the talks aroused the concern of the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq because of the possibility that this will contribute to efforts to include them in the Iraqi army and reduce their independent power. The commander of the Kataib Hezbollah Shiite militia made his dissatisfaction with the talks clear, and announced that his organization was not part of them, meaning that he was not bound by any agreements that would weaken his status.

The existence of a Saudi-Iranian dialogue should not constitute a change in principle in the regional trend towards improved Arab relations with Israel, since some of the Gulf states have official and unofficial relations with Israel along with their ties with Iran. At the same time, the softer, almost conciliatory line adopted by Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states toward Iran and toward the Biden administration stands in sharp contrast to the position displayed by Jerusalem to the negotiations with Iran. Furthermore, a concrete Iranian-Saudi rapprochement (following on the heels of the measured thaw in relations between the United Arab Emirates and Iran) will constitute an important crack in the anti-Iran front that Israel has sought to present. More importantly, it will eliminate a key element in the opposition to the US return to the nuclear agreement.