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# Expert Assessment Report

## Saudi-Iranian Normalization and its Repercussions on Israel-Iran Confrontation

GULF STUDIES CENTER

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## Expert Assessment Report<sup>1</sup>

### “Saudi-Iranian Normalization and its Repercussions on Israel-Iran Confrontation”

#### Introduction

On March 10, 2023, the news of restoring diplomatic relations between regional powerhouses Saudi Arabia and Iran surprised some observers of regional politics. After a seven-year rupture since 2016, the re-opening of their respective embassies marks one of the most significant regional diplomatic shifts in recent years. Although the China-brokered deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran may not be as groundbreaking as it appears, the agreement undoubtedly leaves a mark on the conflict lines of the region. Following the announcement of restoring diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran, Saudi Arabia and Syria also agreed to re-open their embassies, having cut their diplomatic ties over a decade ago.

Among other things, the Israeli perception of regional dynamics, particularly confrontational relations with Iran, is a top immediate impact of the deal. Israel has been portrayed as the ultimate loser of the recent agreement, and it is nervous about the improving relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Contrary to the recent chill in Arab-Israeli relations, the Abraham Accords, which began a series of normalizing diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan in 2020, was an ultimate triumph for Israel in forming a block against Iran, which was systematically demonized and accused by Israeli officials. Both Iran and Israel have engaged in unconventional ways of conflict to harm each other and have not refrained from blaming each other overtly. While a full-fledged confrontation has not taken place yet, an all-out war between Israel and Iran concerns many observers in the region.

Against this background, the Gulf Studies Center at Qatar University aims to publish an expert assessment report on how the recent normalization in the Gulf region will affect the nature of the confrontation between Iran and Israel. This report seeks to analyze whether the conflict will continue with less intensity or escalate into a more intensified confrontation between Iran and Israel. Alternatively, the report examines whether the current status quo of a shadow war with plausible deniability is preferred by both states and likely to continue.

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<sup>1</sup> This report was prepared by Nesibe Hicret Battaloglu, Gulf Studies Center

## **A sideshow to the main event**

*Rory Miller, Professor of International Politics, Georgetown University in Qatar*

It is unlikely, for many reasons, that the recent Saudi-Iranian agreement to normalize relations will in itself directly impact on the confrontation between Israel and Iran. While the overt and covert war between Israel and Iran has escalated in the years since Saudi Arabia broke-off diplomatic relations with Iran in 2016, this conflict has never been a function of Saudi-Iranian relations.

Nor has it been a function of Saudi-Israeli relations. Recent years have witnessed an unprecedented rise in interactions between these actors both on a bilateral level and through mini-lateral frameworks.

Decision-makers in Israel would undoubtedly prefer Saudi-Iranian tensions to continue, but they have no interest in rolling back the progress made in recent years. For their Saudi counterparts, Israel's unwillingness to make substantive concessions on the Palestinian issue, not relations with Iran, is the major impediment to moving forward bilaterally with Israel.

Preoccupied with achieving their hugely ambitious goals for domestic economic development, Saudi leaders also have no desire to swap tensions with Iran for tensions with Israel. They are also very aware that their recent commitment to renewed diplomatic relations with Iran is in no way a guarantee of future harmonious relations or substantive cooperation. After all, their mutual antagonism long-predates the 2016 Saudi decision to break-off diplomatic relations over the storming of their embassy in Tehran or even the earlier suspension of relations by both sides.

They are no more enthusiastic about living in the shadow of a nuclear Iran or high levels of Iranian influence across the wider Arab and Sunni world now than they were before the announcement of the China-brokered deal.

In the final account, the clash between Iran and Israel runs much deeper than either country's relations with Saudi Arabia at any given time. If their conflict worsens further, or even results in all-out war, the surprise news of an Iran-Saudi normalization agreement that has preoccupied geopolitical analysis for the last month will be but a minor footnote in the story.

## **Why is the deal a political-military loss for Tel Aviv?**

*Abdolraosol Divsallar, Visiting Professor, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*

No doubt, the Israeli factor played a role in the Iranian calculus to normalize relations with Riyadh. The deal has a strategic value for Tehran in deterring future Saudi-Israeli security-military cooperation. No matter how remote, the possibility of Riyadh-Tel Aviv security collaboration against Tehran recently found a heavyweight in Tehran's military threat perception. For Tehran, such a possibility could have been a game changer, resetting the regional balance of power in favor of Tel Aviv and posing a risk to Iran's nuclear program. Tehran looks at the deal as a tool to deter such a danger. Iranians seem to be aware that restoring diplomatic relations with Riyadh is no guarantee to prevent Saudi-Israeli normalization because of a series of other factors involved

in Riyadh's decision-making toward Israel. But they hope to use the non-intervention clauses of the deal with Saudi Arabia as a context to prevent an emergence of a regional-wide anti-Iranian security-military alliance—a plan which the Israeli side has wishfully advocated. If the deal goes ahead and the parties respect their commitment, then Tehran can be assured that it has successfully added a new layer of technical complexity to Israeli military plans against Iranian nuclear sides. With Saudi air space closed to Israeli jets, their flight path to target Iranian nuclear facilities will be further limited. On the political side, it can be read between the lines of the deal that Saudi leadership, like their Emirati counterparts, see more danger than benefit from being a party in the Iran-Israeli conflict and has no desire to get caught up in a war between the two foes. Israel seems to have lost the momentum to attract regional support for its anti-Iranian policy. This is happening when US-Israeli relations are also facing challenges as protests in Israel continue. These developments bring new scores to Tehran's longstanding conflict with Israel.

### **Restoration of Saudi-Iranian Ties: Wider Geopolitical Implications**

*Bulent Aras, Center for International Policy Research & Visiting Scholar, Gulf Research Center, Qatar University & Meltem Ozel, Adiyaman University*

The Saudi-Iranian re-establishment of diplomatic ties through facilitation of China already resulted in tectonic shockwaves in geopolitical landscapes around these two countries. The early analyses mostly focus on immediate impact of this development in the Gulf politics, looking from the perspective of the interests of these two states. In this short response, we will discuss the implications of this normalization initiative for the northern tier of the Middle East and Eastern Eurasia, namely Turkey, Caucasus and Central Asia, and their nearby environs.

There are three ongoing regional integration schemes, among others, which promote inter-connectivity in this geography. The first is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that brings China and Russia together with Central Asian countries and Iran. Turkey is a dialogue partner and Saudi Arabia became an observer country recently. The SCO continues to expand and members attribute increasingly more prominent roles to this organization. The second one is the Organization of Turkic States (OTC) that consists of Turkish speaking countries and Hungary. There is a new momentum in the OTC that aims political, economic and strategic integration within this bloc. The third is the deepening energy ties and revival of middle corridor (in the spirit of old Silk Road) for economic relations.

Iran has central role and considerable influence in all these emerging interconnectivities, which will redefine this geography. Historically, Iran re-activates regional engagements when it has relative ease in its regional and international tensions. Two examples are the end of Iran-Iraq war and the nuclear deal under Obama administration. There is no reason that Iran may act differently in this case, and it will likely re-direct some of its efforts to the direction of Eastern Eurasia. Iran will seek to contain the development of OTC, considering its perception of threat, in particular after Azerbaijan's restoring of its lands from Armenia. The regional balance of power shifted toward Turkey and Azerbaijan with the support of Pakistan and Israel. This unlikely constellation is one of the headaches for the Iranian hardline regime nowadays. Iran has become

the ninth member of the SCO and puts efforts to utilize the organization to achieve its regional interests. Iranian policy makers follow the pipelines and transportation projects closely and they are concerned that they are being sidelined in these projects.

In sum, the dynamic geopolitics of the northern tier of the Middle East and Eastern Eurasia will face a new regional reality. Depending on the success of the newly reignited Iran-Saudi Arabia normalization, Iran may emerge to exercise more active role in the mentioned geography. It is a matter of time to see the direction of Iranian role in this region. However, judging based on the historical Iranian roles in this geography, it is safe to assume that this emerging position is likely to be a spoiler role rather than a constructive engagement.

### **The Iranian-Saudi Deal: Consequences for Israel**

*Hassan A. Barari, Professor, Qatar University*

The most recent reconciliation between long-time regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia sent shock waves through much of the region as it represents a striking shift in Middle Eastern diplomacy. To be sure, it dealt a blow to Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, who has worked relentlessly to isolate Iran in the region.

Over the last few years, Netanyahu has flaunted that he was the key factor behind the U.S-brokered normalization deals in 2020. In Israel, he presented the normalization deals with four Arab countries as part of a wider plan to oppose Iran in the region. And yet, the Iranian-Saudi deal could be detrimental to his efforts. Saudi Arabia's decision to mend fences with Iran has left Israel alone in the effort to tighten the noose around Tehran.

While it is still early to judge the ability of Saudi Arabia and Iran to hold up their end of the bargain, the likely resumption of diplomatic ties has the potentials of changing the rule of the game in the Gulf. The deal may reshape the dynamics of the region if it succeeds in defusing the Yemeni crisis and put an end to their proxy wars.

Indeed, it is hard to avoid the realization that Israel is not happy with the Iranian-Saudi deal. For almost a decade, Israel has marked Iran as its number one nemesis and launched a campaign to demonize the country thus making it a pariah in the region. In particular, Israel has thrown its weight behind the ill-advised move of forming an anti-Iran Sunni coalition. Needless to say, this idea has runs aground.

Having said that, however, Iran and Saudi Arabia will remain regional rivals. Seen in this way, the deal – which is a setback to Israeli efforts – will not change the nature of Iranian-Israeli troubled relationship. I suspect that Israel will continue exerting a huge pressure on Iran with regards to two issues: Iran's nuclear program and Iranian influence and presence in Syria. The nature and depth of Iranian-Israeli differences coupled with the threat conception of both of them could get them on the verge of a military showdown.

In a nutshell, the Iranian-Saudi deal may defuse tensions between the two key rivals, but it will not change the course of antagonistic relationship between Israel and Iran. Hence, Israel is most likely to continue tightening the noose on Iran.

### **No détente yet but cooling tensions**

*Abdullah Baabood, Chair of the State of Qatar for Islamic Area Studies, Waseda University*

The Saudi-Iranian agreement represents one of the most striking shifts in Middle Eastern diplomacy over recent years. While the deal is not directly related to Israel's interests, it occurred amidst growing Israeli concern about Iran's nuclear program and increasing preparation for a military option to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Riyadh's decision to renew ties with Tehran dealt a severe blow to Israel's efforts to increase international and regional pressure against Iran. The deal weakens Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's hope for building a coalition of nations against a nuclear Iran, at a time when anti-Iran sentiment was rising due to the deadlock in nuclear talks, Tehran's supply of drones to Russia, and the suppression of domestic protests. It has also weakened Netanyahu's main foreign policy objective to broaden the Abraham Accords and reach a peace agreement with Saudi Arabia.

Iran has emerged as the most potent regional challenger to Israel and for years, the two countries have engaged in a shadow war, quietly attacking each other on land, by air and at sea, and in some cases through covert and proxy wars, including assassinations and acts of sabotage, and support for non-state actors in the region.

However, the changing dynamics of global geopolitics is likely to ease the tension; the waning power of the U.S. in the Middle East, Washington's obvious reluctance to wage war on Iran, its preoccupation with the war in Ukraine, and the growing role of China, as evidenced by Beijing's brokering of the Saudi-Iran deal, all require a recalibration of U.S. regional policies. Neither the U.S. nor China, and to a large extent the wider international community, would welcome an escalation of conflict in this strategic region.

For Israel, growing internal polarization and the perennially unresolved Palestinian question are more immediate threats to its survival, and the country needs time and external security to concentrate on solving its own internal contradictions. Equally, Iran needs to focus on rebuilding its economy, dealing with declining living standards, deepening environmental and infrastructure degradation, discontent among broad segments of the population, and reintegration into the global community.

Whilst the state of permanent shadow war and plausible deniability between them is no longer tenable, the potent mix of ideology and power politics presents a formidable barrier to any

attempt to reach a détente and end conflict between Iran and Israel. However, it is clearly in the interests of both countries, as well as in regional and international interests, to cool the tensions.

## **The Specter of War over the Region**

*Nikolay Kozhanov, Associate Research Professor, Qatar University*

Despite the fact that several conflict settlement processes have been launched in the region to normalize relations between key players, the specter of war is haunting the Middle East. As the situation around the Iranian nuclear program worsens and the prospects for reviving the JCPOA decrease, the likelihood of a military clash between Israel and Iran is estimated as increasingly high. Possible scenarios of this clash range from a simple intensification of the proxy confrontation between the parties, to a direct strike by the Israeli Air Force on Iranian military and nuclear facilities.

Under these circumstances, the normalization of Iranian-Saudi relations is in many ways a negative signal for Tel Aviv. First, it clearly allows Tehran to reduce the number of sources of tension around its borders and focus on the upcoming confrontation with Israel. Iran is also getting out of political isolation. According to some experts, the 2021 appointment of Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, an expert in the Arab affairs, to the post of Iran's foreign minister was intended to help Iran improve its relations with Saudi Arabia and other Arabian monarchies. Given the de-facto failure of negotiations on the nuclear issue and confrontation with Israel, this was an urgent task. And it is being successfully accomplished.

Secondly, the Saudi leadership has also demonstrated the absence of any desire to be part of the conflict in the Middle East. Riyadh intention to negotiate the rapprochement with Iran was determined by the need to ensure the security of the Kingdom and, first of all, its economic infrastructure. The Iranians have clearly demonstrated their ability (and the ability of their proxies), if necessary, to destroy the Saudi oil sector quickly and effectively. These examples include the 2019 air strike on Saudi oil facilities in Khurais and Abqaiq as well as the 2021 attack on petrochemical infrastructure near Riyadh. At the same time, in 2019, the US air defense systems failed to repel attacks. Meanwhile, the Saudi leadership is focused on the diversification of the country's economy and its adjustment to the ongoing energy transition, setting this as a national priority. Least it needs to achieve this goal is the conflict with Iran.

Thirdly, the Saudis' distancing from the anti-Iranian camp may also have a practical impact on Israel's military plans. If Israel decides to launch a direct airstrike on Iranian targets, then, in the new realities, the number of possible scenarios to do this is very limited. If earlier there were speculations that the Israeli Air Forces could use the airspace of Saudi Arabia for its needs to strike Iran, now only the skies of Jordan and Iraq presumably remain open to them.

Finally, the future of the new Abraham-like agreements is also in question. Signing them by the Saudi authorities in one format or another was questionable even before the Saudi deal with

Iran. However, rapprochement with Tehran may completely postpone the formal normalization of diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tel Aviv for an indefinite period as the Saudis may be afraid to create a new irritant in their relations with Iran.

In general, the Iran-Saudi rapprochement was an unpleasant surprise for Israel. In such a situation, another question becomes important: will Iran-Saudi rapprochement survive the Iran-Israeli conflict? On the one hand, in the case of another round of the proxy war between Tehran and Tel Aviv, it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia will try to risk its peace with Iran. On the other hand, the direct clash between Iran and Israel may be a real test of the rapprochement. In case of the direct conflict the exact retaliatory measure by the Iranians and their targets are difficult to predict. Thus, if Tehran decides to close the Strait of Hormuz, it will be very difficult for Saudi Arabia to maintain neutrality.

### **Does the End Justify the Means?**

*Saban Kardas, Research Professor, Qatar University*

Israel's quest for security has been at the center of the regional normalization efforts crystallized by the Abraham accords. Since the primary driver of the normalization agenda has been the reduction of tensions in regional disputes, any development that contributes to that objective should normally be a welcome news for Israel. Seen from that perspective, the recent Saudi-Iran deal on reopening embassies can be construed as an opportunity for Israel. However, since the Iran-Israel enmity is entrenched in the regional security complex so deeply, many observers naturally are skeptical about such a positive impact to unfold anytime soon.

A key factor likely to shape Israel's reaction to the Saudi-Iran deal is the extent to which an end to the regional isolation will embolden Iran's conventional and asymmetrical capabilities throughout the region. Judging by Iran's behavior in the post-JCPOA period, it can be assumed that Iran will capitalize on the window of opportunity opened by the deal to maintain a similar expansionist regional outreach, as well as continuing on the nuclear program. Hence, the underlining sources of enmity between Israel and Iran are unlikely to disappear, and the former will approach any gains of the latter from a zero-sum calculus.

Nonetheless, there will be major limitations on Israel's policy on Iran, particularly its potential resort to military option. Saudis' quest for a détente with Iran and other Gulf states' willingness to continue engagement with Tehran will restrain Israel's escalatory steps. Expanding the scope of regional normalization by bringing the Kingdom into the Abraham Accords remains a major objective, and Israel realizes that it cannot pursue an aggressive path, which will put it into position of the spoiler. Moreover, the tense political climate within Israel's domestic setting and rising tensions in the West Bank will likely set further limitations on Israel's response to Iran.



## **A Big Win for China, but Challenges Remain**

*Adel Abdel Gaffar, Fellow, Middle East Council on Global Affairs*

The normalization deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran brokered by Beijing is a big win for China, and cements its role as a key player in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. While both Saudi and Iran have been [engaged](#) in direct and indirect talks over the past years to diffuse tensions between them, China [stepped in](#) a critical phase of the negotiations to iron out the final differences, then took credit for the deal.

To be clear, the deal is not ground breaking per se, but is a return to the status quo and [détente](#) between the regional rivals, and it remains to be seen if this de-escalation is long term and durable. While China was able to put its name on the deal, this also signifies that it will act as its guarantor, which may provide Chinese policy makers with challenges down the line should Iran's destabilizing regional activities, as well as nuclear ambitions, not be curtailed.

For example, it remains to be seen if the normalization deal will have an impact on Yemen, with the Houthis' [declaring](#) that they are not subordinate to Iran and the deal will have no impact on the War. On the nuclear file, Iran continues its uranium enrichment with the IAEA reporting last month that its monitors have [detected](#) uranium enriched to levels just below weapons grade. Given Iran's economic challenges, China does have leverage over the country, but such leverage is not unlimited and China at this juncture is unable to underwrite the normalization deal with tangible security guarantees to both sides. So in the short term, the deal is a big diplomatic win for China, but in the long term may come back to haunt it.

## ***Israel and Iran: A Conflict Beyond Politics***

*Mahjoob Zweiri, Professor of Gulf Studies and Iran, Qatar University*

The announcement of restoring the diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia has raised many questions on the impact on regional players and regional files. One of the major issues is the ongoing conflict between Israel and Iran. It still seems unclear what would be the impact on the dynamic of that relationship. However, it is important to consider the fact that the domestic politics in both countries is a deterrent factor to their stability, and to look at home rather than prioritizing their confrontation with one another. The instability in the two mentioned states shows the momentum to extend over time, which would halt regional confrontations.

One of the major platforms for the conflict between Israel and Iran is Syria. Therefore, it is inevitable to wonder whether Israel will continue to target assumed Iranian bases in Syria. Stepping back from doing that would be an indication to the extent to which Israel is focusing more inwards, and is deterring confrontation with Iran.

The second platform for the Iranian Israeli conflict would be cyber intelligence attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities. Israel's continuation, or not, from engaging in these attacks would be another indication to its conditional slowing down of regional conflict and engagement.

Finally, the increasing involvement of China in the region will less likely play a role in the prominent regional dilemma between Israel and Iran. Israel and Iran's dilemma goes beyond a political conflict, on the contrary, it carries a heavy weight of ideological and religious beliefs that would make it difficult to close the conflict file over changing regional dynamics and alliances with international players such as China and Russia.