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# Riyadh Summit and Prospects of Iran's Regional Role

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**I**ran's role in the Middle East has considerably increased in the last decade, and the country has emerged as a key player in the post-Arab Spring crises afflicting Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Iran's influence rose in 2003 due in part to its control of the Iraqi political process and its support for the country's Shiites at the expense of marginalizing its Sunni population.

In addition to its massively destructive role in Iraq, Iran also expanded its sphere of influence into Syria after the outbreak of the revolution in 2011, backing Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and supporting his regime by supplying both money and weaponry. Iran has also engaged with Syria militarily by sending thousands of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) troops and members of affiliated militias to fight alongside the Assad regime's army in crushing the Syrian people's calls for freedom. Iran has also emerged as an influential party in Yemen by supporting the Houthis with both money and weaponry, as well as providing support to Lebanon's Hezbollah and Shiite groups in some Gulf countries such as Bahrain.

Through all these conflicts, Iran has sought to establish itself as a regional powerhouse in the framework of the Middle Eastern political system. To do this, Iran has employed its material resources of oil and gas, developing its ballistic and nuclear military capabilities as well.

On the occasion of the United States president Donald Trump's first visit to Saudi Arabia, 55 Arab and Muslim leaders and senior representatives came together to attend the May 2017 Riyadh Summit. This event included a bilateral meeting between the United States of America and Saudi Arabia and two multilateral meetings, one between the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the other between a variety of Arab and Muslim countries. This summit was a turning point that will eventually serve to determine the future of the Middle East.

To understand Iran's complex participation in the region, it is imperative to examine reasons for the escalation of the regime's role and the tools it has used to advance its agenda, as well as the dangerous repercussions of this involvement on the stability in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

The fundamental question to be addressed is, what are the repercussions of the Riyadh Summit on Iran's regional role, and to what extent can Iran be deterred from continuing to have a negative impact on the region?

Because of the recent strategic changes in regional and international alliances, the Riyadh Summit seems to have constituted an important turning point toward curbing the Iranian regime's destructive role in the region.

### **First: Reasons for the escalation of the Iranian role and tools used in the region**

According to Boston University department chair and Professor David J. Mayers's model on roles in the Middle East, the inability of major powers to extend full control over regions has provided an opportunity for countries such as Iran to exercise their aspirations of hegemony over the nations and peoples within their geographical reach.

According to Mayers, three participatory forces can be distinguished. The first force is a regional or hegemonic entity, such as a country that already has power or control over a regional system (Iran). The second force is a bargaining power or interventionist entity, such as a power that has enough clout to bargain with another dominant power or intervene in such a way to make the situation for that dominant power more difficult

(i.e., Western powers with fundamental interests in the Arabian Gulf region). The third force is a balancing entity, such as a force within the regional system with a vested interest in both other powers because of a desire to create balance within the regional system.<sup>1</sup>

### **A. Reasons for the escalation of the Iranian role**

According to Professor Mayers's framework, the Iranian role in the region in the last decade can be explained by several factors:

#### **1- Invasion of Iraq**

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its subsequent strategy of withdrawal in 2011 left Iraq as an unstable open arena, a vacuum that Iran sought to fill, bringing Iraq into its own sphere of influence. By consolidating relations with Iraq's Shiite ruling elite, Iran was able to control the course of this political equation and guide the country in a direction that would best serve Iranian interests rather than the interests of the Iraqi people.<sup>2</sup>

#### **2- Absence of Arab countries' involvement in Iraq and Syria**

The absence of Arab countries' involvement in the crises in both Iraq and Syria contributed to the creation of situations that Iran used to its own advantage. In Iraq, the Iranian regime allied itself with the Iraqi Shiite ruling elite in an effort to draw Iraqis away from retaining a strong Arab identity or connection with other less involved Arab countries.

Iran also used the absence of a strong Arab country's involvement to put itself into a position of power in Syria. Since 2011, Iran has supported President Bashar al-Assad's brutal efforts to crush an initially peaceful people's revolution for freedom. However, in 2014, when Assad was most at risk of being overthrown, Iran directly intervened strategically to prop up the regime more militarily. As such, Iran played a major role in preventing the people's revolution from dismantling the Assad regime.

The increasing prevalence of non-Arab roles in Arab crises has led to growth in the involvement of regional and international players, including Iran, in these situations. Iran has exploited the current weakness of the Arab system to its own benefit. Because of a general state of decline in the region and the waning power within many Arab countries owing to domestic crises, Iran has been able to strengthen its political and military influence in the region. This has paved the way for Iran to become a major player in Arab crises throughout the region.

#### **3- Western focus on only Sunni and not Shiite terror**

Western duplicity in dealing with the issue of terrorism has contributed to the growth of Iranian power in the region. When Western nations declared their "War on Terror," with a selective focus on Sunni terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda, they overlooked the importance of investigating Shiite terrorist organizations, which are no less dangerous than their Sunni counterparts, as clearly shown by their organized terror activities in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. One of the primary reasons contributing to the growth and persistence of organizations such as ISIS and al-Qaeda is their being a reaction to the growing role of Iranian-backed armed Shiite groups.

#### **4- Iran nuclear deal**

The 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 group (composed of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, France, and China, plus Germany) and the EU contributed to Iran's suspension of its uranium enrichment program.

This nuclear deal did not, however, result in Iran completely dismantling its nuclear structures, meaning that there is a possibility of their restoration at any time. In return for suspending the uranium enrichment program, Iran was able to get heavy international sanctions lifted, thereby releasing tens of billions of dollars to the country. The Iranian regime did not use this money to develop Iran, to bridge the extreme disparities in wealth, or to raise the standard of living for the majority of Iranian citizens suffering crushing mass poverty and unemployment. Instead, the regime used this money to serve its regional ambitions of expanding its influence by supporting allied terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and regimes such as that of Syria's Bashar al-Assad. The nuclear agreement disastrously ignored the complex combination of political, religious, and ethnic climates, instead focusing solely on one aspect of Iran's negative potential, rather than taking into account how Iran could utilize other methods to destabilize the region.<sup>3</sup>

#### **5- Russian-Iranian alliance**

The Russo-Iranian alliance in Syria was a major factor in strengthening Iran's regional influence. The goal of saving Bashar al-Assad's regime from collapse was the initial factor in bringing Russia and Iran together, with Russia intervening through its air force in 2015 to bomb Syrian opposition areas, while Iran intervened through its militias operating on the ground alongside Assad's army. Despite massive losses of civilian life and the incessant targeting of areas with no presence of any terrorist groups, Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime continued to claim that their military engagement was focused solely on dismantling terrorist groups—especially ISIS. Russia's goal in allying with Iran and supporting the Syrian regime was to ensure its influence in the region by establishing military bases in Syria, such as the one in Tartus. Russia felt the need to expand the range of its power due in part to a new cold war with the United States.

In 2014, Russia annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea in the aftermath of the Ukrainian revolution. In response, multiple world powers, including the United States, issued harsh sanctions against Russia. These sanctions were only the beginning of escalating nonviolent tensions between the two nations that continue to the present day. To help ease the pain of these sanctions, Russia sought to gain influence on a territory that it had largely ignored for some years—the Middle East.

The complex relationship between Russia and the United States also proved a fertile ground for a Russo-Iranian alliance. Not only is an alliance with Russia breaking Iran's international isolation because of Western sanctions, but Russia's success in the Middle East may serve to weaken American influence in the region, which would be a further massive boon to Iran.<sup>4</sup>

## **6- Rise of terrorist organizations**

Iran has sought to increase the prevalence of terrorist organizations in both Iraq and Syria to continue fulfilling its role in the region, supposedly as a buffer against terrorism. The regime in Tehran has taken painstaking efforts to convince the West and Russia of its commitment to fighting terrorism in Iraq and Syria. In reality, however, Iran is directly responsible for the emergence and growth of these types of organizations due to its support of extremist and heavily sectarian Shiite policies in Iraq and its alliance with the Shiite-majority Syrian regime.

Pursuing a policy of pragmatism, the United States has continued to avoid engaging militarily with Shiite and Iranian groups in Iraq so as to protect its forces from involvement in the escalating conflict. This refusal to engage terrorist Shiite groups is giving carte blanche to Iran and its terrorist militias in Iraq to continue committing crimes against Sunnis.

### **B. Tools of the Iranian role in the region**

Iran's regional role in interfering in the affairs of other countries varies, depending on its military strength, geographical location, and other sectarian factors.<sup>5</sup>

Iran also relies on strategic alliances with terrorist groups and organizations in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon rather than with those states retaining strong international or American ties.<sup>6</sup>

The tools that the Iranian regime relies on most heavily in maintaining positions of regional power and influence are as follows:

#### **1- Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps**

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is the military arm of the Iranian revolution in Iran and has served as Iran's primary tool in implementing its foreign agenda in the Arab region. The IRGC was established after the revolution in 1981 as a parallel military force to the Iranian army.

The IRGC is based on the principle of [Wilayat-e-Faqih], or "Jurist Leadership," the founding doctrine of the regime, denoting blind loyalty and total obedience to the rule of Iran's ruling Islamic legal scholars, or Jurists, meaning that this armed force is ideologically dissimilar to typical armies. The IRGC has a massive budget, ties to over 100 major and extremely profitable companies, billions of dollars in business/construction revenue, and billions more in oil/gas/petrochemical contracts. In addition to protecting the regime and arresting opposition elements, the IRGC is supposedly tasked with supporting liberation movements and the oppressed/vulnerable people of the world.<sup>7</sup>

Over the past three decades, the IRGC has been active in illicit activities in more than a dozen countries in various forms. This involvement increased dramatically after the nuclear agreement in 2015. The IRGC has been directly involved in occupations in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon and continues to have a strong military presence in all four countries. Since 2014, around 70,000 pro-Iranian regime militia members have been permanently stationed in Syria. The IRGC intervenes in the internal affairs of no less than

eight countries, namely, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Palestine, Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan. Twelve IRGC centers inside Iran are tasked with providing training to foreign agents joining the ranks of the Iranian regime's regional military forces and militias—especially from Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup>

The IRGC is one of the strongest economic institutions in Iran; the profits from the IRGC's various commercial and economic interests finance the Iranian regime's interventions in other countries, although such activities have a heavy toll on Iran's economy. Over the last five years, Iran has spent more than \$100 billion on its regional interventions. A large proportion of this budget has been allocated through the clandestine office of the revolutionary leader Khomeini. Most of the money has been spent on arms purchases as well as the costs incurred in propping up the Syrian regime. Among other expenses, Iran has allocated nearly \$1 billion a year to pay the salaries of the IRGC and their military allies, including paying the members of the Syrian regime army and their affiliated militias.

## **2- The Quds Force**

The Quds Force is the elite unit and main arm of the IRGC. Led by Qassem Suleimani, the Quds Force aims to engage in Iran's overseas military operations, which primarily involve exacerbating already-turbulent conflicts. The most prominent activities of the Quds Force are training Hezbollah's soldiers in Lebanon and supporting Shiite movements and militias affiliated with the Iranian regime in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup>

The Quds Force was established in 1990 in the wake of the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War to be the main arm of the Iranian regime in extending its hegemonic reach. The Quds Force is estimated to have approximately 15,000 troops, according to a 1998 document by the Federation of American Scientists on how fundamentalist terrorist groups are trained.<sup>10</sup>

Although the IRGC and the Quds Force are funded and trained in Iran, they carry out terrorist activities by establishing mercenary networks across a variety of countries, with the Iranian regime using its embassies abroad to coordinate, plan, support, and fund these terrorist groups.

## **Second: Risks and implications of the Iranian role in the region**

Iran's role in the Arab region has been a central factor contributing to escalating regional instability, tension, and violence in several ways:

### **1- Feeding sectarian conflicts in the region**

Iran has taken to intervening in a variety of crises in the region by aligning itself with whichever domestic group or sect proves to be the most loyal to Iran. More often than not, the groups Iran tends to support favor a Shiite majority, but the regime will form unions with any group that will increase its expansion of power in the region. This in turn increases sectarian polarization among the people in these countries. Iran's role in such sectarian conflicts has not been a passive one. Iranian militias such as the Quds Force, led by Qassem Suleimani, have been leading forces in liquidating tens of thousands of Sunnis from Iraq,

killing thousands of Sunni opposition members in Syria, and supporting predominantly Shiite Houthis in the Yemeni crisis.

Iran's regime has continued to claim that the aim of its military interventions is to support oppressed and defenseless groups in these crises. In reality, however, the regime's actions have shown that its support is contingent solely upon which groups will prove to be advantageous political/religious allies—often at the direct expense of other groups that are suffering from deteriorating humanitarian conditions. These kinds of alliances only further sectarian rifts and exacerbate the downward spiral of violence between groups.<sup>11</sup>

## **2- Exporting the Iranian Revolution and the rule of Jurist Leadership**

Religion plays a pivotal role in Iran's foreign policy in the region, with the regime primarily seeking to support pro-Shiite groups across the Middle East. The regime's goal of spreading Shi'ism stems from a desire to expand its regional influence and revive the "Persian Empire". This is a direct threat to the security, independence, and sovereignty of Arab countries, as Iran has now become a powerful governing force in four Arab capitals—Baghdad in Iraq, Damascus in Syria, Beirut in Lebanon, and Sanaa in Yemen. A deputy of the Iranian Shura Council described Iran's regional interventions by saying that "three Arab capitals are now held by Iran and the Iranian revolution and Sanaa has now become the fourth capital on its way to joining the Iranian revolution".<sup>12</sup>

The IRGC and the Quds Force carry out the Iranian regime's agenda of interference in the affairs of other countries as well as the "export" of their supposedly Iranian revolution. Iran's objective for utilizing these forces is not just to overthrow governments but also to establish heavily sectarian Shiite states in their place.

Iran wishes to establish Jurist Leadership across the region. Jurist Leadership is a theory in Shia Islam that holds that Islam gives the [Jurist] a divinely ordained right of guardianship over people. In Iran, the primary Jurist is called the "Supreme Leader."

Iran's heavily sectarian foreign policy has exacerbated regional crises by escalating sectarian conflicts between religious and ethnic groups. This in turn has increased insecurity and instability in the region, creating an environment conducive to the growth of extremist groups and terrorist organizations. In this way, Iran exports its Shia revolution to weaken regional powers, dismantle regimes, and replace them with their satrapies, ideally under the Jurist Leadership doctrine.

## **3- Threat to Arab and Gulf national security**

Iran's regional role has become a destabilizing threat to Arab national security in general and Gulf national security in particular. While Iran claims that its aim is to combat terrorism in the region, in reality, the regime continues to support domestic terrorist factions and Shiite uprisings that exacerbate regional tension and instigate escalations of conflicts. It is in practice allied with a policy of well-organized advocacy, which the regime allows to be extended and used to justify terrorism.

In Bahrain, Iran has supported the Shiite uprising, and in Syria, Iranian militias have continually supported the Shia-majority Assad regime to crush the Sunni-majority

population. Iranian support for these groups has created the perfect environment for the growth of extremist groups since neither country is making any serious effort to dismantle domestic terrorist organizations.

#### **4- Maximizing Iran's economic interests**

The Iranian regime seeks to maximize its geopolitical interests in the Arab region through intervention in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to establish what it calls the "Shiite Crescent." Whoever controls this crescent region will then dominate the region's economic capabilities. Having already established control over Iraq's oil wealth, Iran is now trying to establish a land corridor to reach the Mediterranean Sea by occupying parts of Syria and Sunni provinces in North and West Iraq such as Anbar, Salahuddin, Diyala, and Nineveh. To achieve this, Iran is using a policy of forced displacement and demographic change in Iraq and Syria to impose its hegemony over large areas. By shifting those regions' identities towards a Shia majority, Iran aims to take control of Iraqi and Syrian wealth. Such insidious efforts pose massive threats to both domestic and regional national security.

#### **Third: Iranian role in the crises of the region**

Iran's negative role has emerged in many crises in the Arab region.

##### **1- Iran's role in Iraq**

One of the central causes of the political insecurity and countrywide crisis in Iraq is the negative role of Iran, with the Tehran regime completely dominating the country's political arena after America's withdrawal, representing Iran's interests in the country rather than those of the Iraqi people. Iran's intervention in Iraq has contributed to strengthened sectarianism through a network of strong alliances with the ruling Iraqi Shiite elite. Iran has predominantly supported Shiites to retain positions of power in Iraq, thereby marginalizing Sunnis in the political process and further oppressing Sunni civilians.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime weakened the country severely, leaving a political vacuum that allowed the Iranian regime to step in as a powerful main player. Iran deployed the "Badr Army" and the "Quds Force" to assist in the forced displacement of Iraqi Sunnis during the sectarian war between 2006 and 2008.

The Iranian role in Iraq's sectarian conflicts contributed to the creation of an atmosphere ripe for the emergence of terrorist organizations. Because of lack of representation, the oppressed Iraqi Sunnis began supporting domestic extremist groups to defend their interests. By 2014, terrorist groups such as ISIS gained control of half of Iraq's north and west. Their presence poses a real danger of dividing the country.<sup>13</sup>

In an effort to retake these areas from ISIS, Iran used the Quds Force to train domestic Shiite forces and gave the Iraqi state-sponsored Shiite Popular Mobilization Forces militias permission to monitor and control large swaths of the country. However, these militias have become best known for their brutal policies against domestic Sunnis, fueling sectarian tension and strengthening ISIS's power in the country.

## **2- Iran's role in Yemen**

Iran's role in the Yemeni crisis is a clear encapsulation of how its intervention has escalated instability in the region. Iran's military, political, and financial support for the Houthi group contributed to the crisis and massively aggravated the Yemeni humanitarian tragedy. After a series of uprisings in Yemen forced the authoritarian president Ali Abdullah Saleh to hand over power to his deputy, Mansour Hadi, in 2011, Hadi proved ill-equipped to address a plethora of problems in the country, including an upsurge in al-Qaeda attacks, a southern separatist movement, divisions in the military due to continued loyalty to Saleh among a vocal minority of the population, and widespread corruption, unemployment, and hunger.

Houthis allied with forces loyal to Saleh exploited Hadi's struggle, seizing control of the large Yemeni city of Sa'da in 2014. Many Yemenis supported this action because of their dissatisfaction with the country's leadership at the time. By 2015, the Houthis had secured the city of Sa'da enough to completely surround the presidential palace, effectively initiating a coup. Hadi fled the country soon after.

Since 2009, Iran has supplied the Houthis with military advisers and advanced weaponry and has helped in launching ballistic missiles, also provided by Tehran, at Saudi targets from border areas such as Najran and Jazan. Iran's strategy has been based on changing the balance of power in Yemen to favor the Houthis. Despite multiple instances of the presence of Iranian weaponry in Yemen, with large quantities being confiscated, Iran has continued to smuggle supplies for the Houthis—even after the embargo imposed by UN Security Council Resolution 2216.<sup>14</sup>

Continued military and political support for the Houthis from Iran has led to the group's defiance of the international community and rejection of any political solution to the Yemeni crisis. The outcomes of this national dialogue and UN Security Council Resolution 2216 led Saudi Arabia and eight other mostly Sunni Arab states to confront the Houthis militarily in support of President Hadi Mansour. These efforts succeeded in regaining control of more than 80% of the Yemeni territory.

The continuation of the coup has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. The aggression of hostile forces has led to thousands of deaths and injuries of Yemeni civilians—one-third of whom have been children. Years of conflict have destroyed the country's infrastructure and brought Yemen to the brink of famine.

Areas controlled by the Houthis and forces loyal to Saleh have seen mass cholera outbreaks. Some 17 million people are currently considered food insecure, and 6.8 million are suffering from severe food insecurity. Malnutrition has become an epidemic sweeping over Yemen. Millions of Yemenis are either under siege or internally displaced, while hundreds of thousands more have fled the country. Because of high demand, the country's understaffed and overcrowded hospitals cannot meet the needs of the Yemeni people.

## **3- Iran's role in Syria**

Iran's intervention in Syria has been a major negative factor further complicating a war, which has lasted for over six years to date. The war in Syria began in 2011 when people of

the Sunni-majority country rose in peaceful protests against the oppressive Shiite Assad regime, which had subjected the country to brutal tyranny since 1971. President Bashar al-Assad acted to suppress this revolution with immediate and shocking disproportionate violence, opening fire on unarmed protesters and abducting civilians on the streets. This ultimately led to the people taking up arms to defend themselves. Eventually, these armed groups organized themselves into armed opposition forces seeking autonomy for the people from regime rule. Assad responded by ramping up military engagement, releasing terrorist criminals from jail to create dissent in the revolution, and using siege as a weapon to force rebellious areas into submission. The once peaceful revolution escalated to a complex and bloody war between multiple groups with disparate interests.

Iran has supported Assad's brutal regime financially, militarily, and politically, with Iranian forces from the IRGC and the Quds Force participating in the battles against the Syrian armed opposition alongside other Shiite forces such as Lebanon's Hezbollah. The total number of Hezbollah operatives in Syria currently stands at around 10,000, but the group has lost up to 1,500 fighters in combat to date, including many of its senior officers. Numerous Iraqi Shiite militias, also backed by Iran, are also engaged in support of the Assad regime in Syria, including Iraqi Hezbollah, the Iraqi Shia paramilitary group *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, the Iraqi "al-Nujaba" movement, the militias of "Imam Hussein", the "Imam Ali" Brigades, and the brigades of Abu al-Fadl Abbas.<sup>15</sup>

Iran's influence in Syria and its support for the violent Assad regime has led to the failure of the five Geneva peace talks' conferences, which aimed to reach a consensual political solution that would facilitate Assad's transition from power. In accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, all groups were "demanded" to immediately cease any attacks against civilian targets, "urged" to support efforts to achieve a ceasefire, and "requested" to engage in formal negotiations in early January 2016. The resolution called for "free and fair" elections to be held in Syria within 18 months under UN supervision.

Iran is one of three countries, along with Russia and Turkey, tasked with monitoring the ceasefire agreement reached during the first round of the Astana talks in January 2017. Despite the opposition's relatively strong commitment to this ceasefire agreement, the Assad regime has continued to bombard civilian areas with all kinds of weaponry, with this continuing aggression toward civilians supported in the air by Russia, and on the ground by Iran's IRGC, and other allied militias. These continuing clashes have prevented any political solutions from being effective in Syria.

#### **4- Iran's interference in Gulf affairs**

Iran has continuously attempted to export its Shiite revolution to Gulf nations, with its methods in these efforts varying over time. In the 1980s, Iran was able to export revolution by inciting conflict in Kuwait when a member of the Iran-backed "Da'wa Party" attempted to assassinate the Emir. Years later, the Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani stated that exporting the Shiite revolution would not be achieved without force. During the era of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, meanwhile, the Iranian regime's goal of exporting the revolution was hidden behind a façade of civil dialogue and friendly

relationships between neighboring countries. Later, during the term of Ahmadinejad, Iran exported the revolution by presenting itself as supposedly being a protector of all the world's most vulnerable and oppressed people on the earth. Once the incumbent Iranian President Hassan Rouhani assumed power in his first term, Iran returned to its tried and tested methods of exporting the revolution by inciting regional instability through IRGC and the Quds Force, with military interventions in neighboring Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Bahrain.<sup>16</sup>

In 1984, the Iranian regime established the so-called Gulf Hezbollah under the leadership of Brigadier General Mohammad Mustafa al-Najjar, with the aim of interfering in the affairs of neighboring Gulf states.

After the establishment of the Quds Force in 1990, headed at the time by Brigadier General Ahmed Sharifi, dean of the Revolutionary Guard, the new force took over the role of exporting terrorism to the Gulf states to destabilize the region. Sharifi played an active role in the internal conflict in Bahrain in 1993.

Since 2014, Brigadier General Amiran has been the senior official directing the Quds Force's activities in Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula. The Sixth Corps of the Quds Force took responsibility for intervention in the Gulf States. In the wake of the crisis that erupted in February 2011, the Iranian regime became heavily involved in the situation in Bahrain, taking multiple steps to intervene and create crises. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei referred to Bahrain in 17 speeches between March 13, 2011, and June 3, 2012, claiming that Iran's intervention in Bahrain would be controlled by the Jurist Leadership regime.

The measures taken by the Iranian regime to intervene in Bahrain include a directive issued by the regime's Supreme Security Council to the Quds Forces instructing Lebanese Hezbollah militia members present in Bahrain to operate under the cover of trade and family relations. Iran also provided the media channel Al-Alam to Rashid Al-Rashed (Ph.D.), a leader of Islamic Action in Bahrain, to furnish him with a public platform to call for the overthrow of the Bahraini government.

The Iranian regime also used the Quds Forces of Iraq to support Tehran-affiliated groups in Bahrain. In late 2014, the Quds Force in Baghdad sent weapons and explosives to Bahrain and established a network of operatives there. The Bahraini security forces uncovered one such cell on September 30, 2015, when a bomb-making factory was discovered in the Nuwaidrat neighborhood, south of the Bahrain capital, Manama. On June 20, 2016, IRGC and Quds Force Major General Qassem Suleimani issued a public statement threatening that if Bahrain exceeded the "red line" issued by the Iranian regime, Iran would ignite a fire in Bahrain and throughout the region.<sup>17</sup>

On July 22, 2016, Bahraini authorities detained five people suspected of having links with the Iranian regime, who had attempted to plant bombs. Bahraini authorities noted that these individuals had received military training from the IRGC and at Hezbollah centers in Iraq and were planning to place explosives throughout the Kingdom of Bahrain.<sup>18</sup>

Iran's negative role and intervention in the affairs of Saudi Arabia have also increased significantly since the Iranian revolution in 1979, with the Iranian regime carrying out

many terrorist operations inside the kingdom. Ahmed Sharifi, a senior Quds Force official, led the terrorist attack on Saudi Arabia's Khobar Towers in 1996, which resulted in the death of 19 American soldiers and injured 400 others. The Iranian regime also tried to use the IRGC to incite the Shiite population in southern Saudi Arabia against the country's leaders. In September 2011, the US government arrested an Iranian named Mansoor Arbabsiar for attempting to assassinate the then Saudi ambassador in Washington, Adel al-Jubair, who is now the kingdom's foreign minister. In January 2016, factions of the IRGC and Basij forces were reportedly instructed directly by Khomeini to attack the Saudi embassy in Tehran, although the Iranian regime has, of course, denied responsibility for that incident.

In the United Arab Emirates, meanwhile, the Quds Force's Sixth Corps has carried out multiple terror operations. In April 2016, a number of IRGC members were captured and put on trial, with the Emirates' Supreme Court ultimately convicting four individuals on charges of spying for Iran and Hezbollah.<sup>19</sup>

On February 2, 2016, Iranian-backed sabotage activities by Lebanese Hezbollah operatives in the UAE prompted all the Gulf states to include Hezbollah on their list of terrorist organizations.

In Kuwait, meanwhile, members of an Iranian terror cell known as al-Abdali were arrested and tried by the Kuwaiti government in January 2015. Investigations showed that a number of Iranian diplomats at the Iranian embassy in Kuwait had covertly supported the Abdali cell through training, financial assistance, and coordination among cell members.

Iran's activities threaten the nationals of all the Gulf countries, even when they are outside their own nations. On January 2, 2016, the IRGC and the Quds Forces, in cooperation with the Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militia Asaib Ahl al-Haq, abducted a number of Qatari nationals in Iraq.

## **5- The Gulf's response to and concerns regarding Iran**

Despite these efforts to destabilize the Gulf region and nations, particularly Saudi Arabia, all the nations have continued to reject Iran's attempts to assert its power regionally. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution in Iran led by Khomeini, Iran has adopted a strong policy of exporting the Iranian revolution and consistently interfered in the affairs of other countries to destabilize the region and establish Shiite states in nations such as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.

The Gulf states can clearly see that Iran is seeking to maximize its regional role at the expense of Arab nations, continuing its acquisition of military and nuclear power in an effort to forcibly impose hegemonic control over the region. Iran occupies three islands of the United Arab Emirates, as well as maintain a heavy presence in the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. For Iran's regime, the occupation of these lands blocks Gulf states from the north and south in the hopes of reviving the "Persian Empire". Such a revival represents a threat to the national security of these countries.

While the Iranian regime should be free to seek to maximize its interests and to play a full regional role, such advantages should not be achieved at the expense of Arab nations' sovereignty.

Arab countries recognize Iran's right to develop its peaceful nuclear capabilities but remain extremely wary of its possession of military capabilities that pose a clear threat to the security and stability of the region. There are also legitimate concerns regarding Iran's growing role in the region after the signing of the regime's nuclear agreement with the West.

The Gulf States take care to distinguish between the Iranian people and the Iranian regime and respect the importance of establishing a state of peaceful coexistence with Shia-majority Iranian citizens and the Iranian regime, which is governed by the mullahs [learned in theology and law] in accordance with the mandate of the Jurist [Fa'iqh]. The Sunni-majority Gulf states make every effort to respect the common Shia practice of al-Taqiyyah [Shiite term referring to precautionary dissimulation or denial of religious belief and practice in the face of persecution]. However, while the Gulf States constantly endeavor to support coexistence, cooperation, good neighborliness, and respect for regional sovereignty, Iran's regime has done the exact opposite. While claiming to seek peaceful relations, the regime's actions in the Gulf region are very clearly founded on supporting terrorism and destabilization.

As such, the Gulf keeps a respectful yet cautious stance toward Iran, engaging with the regime based on a commitment to a policy of good neighborliness, respect for the principles of international law, noninterference in its internal affairs, cessation of support for terrorist organizations, and relations based on mutual respect and coexistence. While Iran continues a policy of aggression, the Gulf states respond diplomatically and methodically to protect their interests and national security.

#### **Fourth: Implications of the Riyadh Summit on Iran's role in the region**

The American Islamic Summit in Riyadh on May 21, 2017, was an important turning point in confronting and limiting Iran's role in the region in several ways:

##### **1- Revealing Iran's role in supporting terrorism**

Saudi Arabia succeeded in mobilizing 55 Arab and Muslim countries to participate in the Riyadh Summit, which also included participation from the United States leadership. At the summit, Saudi King Salman bin Abdul Aziz, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, has described Iran as the spearhead of terrorism in the region. United States President Donald Trump also stated that he considers Iran to be the main sponsor of terrorism in the world ever since the Khomeinist revolution of 1979. Trump asserted that nations in the region should unite in their efforts to confront the Iranian regime. Trump also declared his support for the Saudi war in Yemen against the Iran-backed Houthi coup.<sup>20</sup> "From Lebanon to Iraq to Yemen, Iran funds, arms, and trains terrorists, militias, and other extremist groups that spread destruction and chaos across the region. For decades, Iran has fueled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror," Trump orated before the summit. He continued, "Among

Iran's most tragic and destabilizing interventions have been in Syria. Bolstered by Iran, Assad has committed unspeakable crimes, and the United States has taken firm action in response to the use of banned chemical weapons by the Assad Regime—launching 59 Tomahawk missiles at the Syrian air base from where that murderous attack originated.” Trump also asserted that “responsible nations must work together to end the humanitarian crisis in Syria, eradicate ISIS, and restore stability to the region.” Trump went on to note that “the Iranian regime’s longest-suffering victims are its own people.<sup>21</sup> Iran has a rich history and culture, but the people of Iran have endured hardship and despair under their leaders’ reckless pursuit of conflict and terror.”

Talks during the Riyadh Summit revealed the true face of Iran. Because of its flagrant support for terrorism and its hunger to destabilize the region’s countries, the leaders attending the summit proved that Iran is a threat to global peace and security. Although Iran claims to be more moderate and open because of President Hassan Rouhani’s policies, the country is the farthest thing imaginable from either of these things. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, along with the country’s other senior clerics, control Iranian foreign policy, and the IRGC is constitutionally mandated not only to defend Iran’s borders and maintain internal order but also to protect the nation’s “Islamic identity.” As such, the supposed moderate influence of Rouhani is subsumed by the absolute control wielded by the Iranian regime and its militia.

The delegates at the summit also stressed that terrorism is not only represented by radical Sunni organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS but also by extremist Shiite organizations such as the IRGC, the Quds Force, and pro-Iranian regime organizations such as “Badr Army”, “al-Nujaba” movements and “Asaib al-Haq” in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Lebanese Hezbollah terror group. In this way, the summit refused to dignify Iran’s claims to be fighting Sunni terrorism when it is simply deploying Shiite terrorism, a primary contributor to an unending cycle of sectarian extremism. The delegates focused their efforts on how to address and combat terrorism in all its forms—most especially the extremist Shiite organizations supported by Iran, without whom there would be no ISIS or al-Qaeda. Such open discourse demonstrating the symbiosis between the Iranian regime and terrorism exposed Iran’s true intentions before the world in a truly revelatory manner.

The summit succeeded in conveying a firm and dissuasive message to the Iranian regime that the Muslim world and major powers led by the United States will not allow the expansion of the Iranian regime’s influence and its negative role in destabilizing the region and supporting terrorism there.

## **2- Building an international partnership against Iran**

The Riyadh Summit resulted in several political, military, and intellectual understandings that facilitated the building of important international partnerships to confront Iran’s role in the region.

### **A. Political and military partnership to counter Iran’s expansion**

The Riyadh Summit succeeded in reshaping alliances in the region by creating an Arab-

Islamic-American coalition capable of balancing and reducing the Russian-Iranian alliance. This new alliance will help resolve political crises and conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The alliance will also develop a clear road map to change the Iraqi political equation by involving the Iraqi people in the political process. The alliance will also work to achieve a real political transition in Syria that cannot include Assad, as his continuing hold on power will only continue the war and strengthen ISIS in the region. The alliance will also seek to end the disastrous war and illegitimate coup in Yemen and resolve the crisis by political means in accordance with the Gulf initiative and UN Security Council Resolution 2216.

### **B. Intellectual partnership to counter terrorism**

The Riyadh Summit marked an important turning point in the strategy for the War on Terror and the containment of the Iranian regime's threats of extremism. It also somewhat changed the perceptions of President Trump and his determination to confront terrorism. In the early days of his presidency, Trump issued an executive order banning the entry into the USA of those from seven predominantly Muslim countries. This controversial executive order was perceived to be "anti-Muslim" by the American people and was suspended by the United States judicial branch. Trump eventually seemed to loosen his obdurate stance, becoming more careful to distinguish between the 1.6 billion moderate Muslims on earth and the organized extremist minority, which constitutes less than 0.016% of the total Islamic population, who are the extremists' primary victims. Trump's summit speeches in front of more than 50 leaders from the Muslim world seemed to show he could have a more nuanced awareness of terrorism, thereby changing the region's perception of Trump being anti-Muslim.<sup>22</sup>

The summit stressed that making the US counterterrorism strategy successful in the face of terrorism requires cooperation and alliances with moderate Islamic countries, led by Saudi Arabia. The summit highlighted the importance of a comprehensive confrontation of terrorism in all forms, through military, security, and intelligence strategies. The summit also encouraged a more open exchange of information between allies to sever the sources of funding for terrorist groups by countries such as Iran. Additionally, the summit called for a comprehensive de-escalation of conflict by presenting a moderate Islamic discourse based on tolerance, diversity, and coexistence. Saudi Arabia will be a leader in this new strategy due to its regional importance as a symbol of the Islamic world and its religious significance as the home of the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

The establishment of the World Center for Combating Extremism and Terrorism in Riyadh was the product of a new partnership between the United States and the Islamic world to confront extremist ideas on the ground and in cyberspace.<sup>23</sup>

### **C. Strengthening the regional role of Saudi Arabia**

The ability of any country to exercise a regional role of power depends on its military, political, and economic capabilities. The regional role of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has increased, and the American Islamic Summit supported Saudi Arabia in confronting Iran's regional role in several ways:

### ◎ **Military Power**

At the summit, Saudi Arabia and the United States signed several letters of interest and intent for future arms sales. These arms deals, set to take place over the course of 10 years, include \$350 billion in potential sales of tanks, combat ships, missile defense systems, radar, and communication/cyber-security technology. This deal is viewed as a necessary strategic counterbalance against Iran's influence in the region. By enhancing the military capabilities of Saudi Arabia, the kingdom can lead the Islamic coalition of more than 40 countries in combating terrorism and limiting Iran's disruptive regional practices.

The alliance also aims to support a legitimate leader in Yemen and put an end to the coup launched by the Houthi and pro-Saleh forces. The summit also succeeded in establishing a better Arab-American-Islamic understanding of how to confront Iran's role in the region and formulate a clear strategy to stop its expansion in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Saudi Arabia has the primary responsibility of defending its national security and dealing with crises in the region, which emerged in its leadership of the Arab Alliance to Support Legitimacy in Yemen. Trump praised Saudi Arabia's strong leadership in this alliance during his address at the summit, stating that "Saudi Arabia and a regional coalition have taken strong action against Houthi militants in Yemen." Trump stated that he feels that their arms deal will "help the Saudi military to take a greater role in security operations."

The new Saudi strategy began to attract Iraq to the alliance after the visit of Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir to the country last April. The United States has also changed its strategy in Iraq to curb Iranian influence by strengthening the US military presence there. The US participation in the battle of Mosul against ISIS seeks to dismantle the terrorist group, liberate the city, and prevent any outside forces from enacting demographic change in accordance with sectarian considerations.<sup>24</sup>

### ◎ **Economic Power**

Saudi Arabia is a huge economic force and a member of the G20, an international forum where governments and central bank governors from 20 major economies come together to discuss policy issues related to international financial stability. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has started to diversify its economic base to avoid relying solely on oil and gas revenues. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 blueprint for the country, which was announced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2016, seeks to present an "ambitious yet achievable blueprint, which expresses our long-term goals and expectations and reflects our country's strengths and capabilities." One of the goals put forth in Vision 2030 is the establishment of more significant industrial, agricultural, and commercial economies in the kingdom.

Since the growth of Saudi Arabia's economy has already proven to be a successful feature of the Vision 2030 strategy, one of the important results of the Riyadh Summit was the establishment of major economic partnerships between Saudi Arabia and the United States. Through joint investments of more than \$400 billion, the powers aim to bring technology and American investments to Saudi Arabia, thus creating jobs and opening new horizons for the Saudi economy.

### ◎ Political Power

Saudi Arabia represents the main regional power in the region in light of the collapse and disintegration of most Arab countries, whether through wars and conflicts, such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, or through economic and political crises. Saudi Arabia also enjoys close relations with major powers in the international system, such as the United States, Russia, Britain, France, China, and Japan. Saudi Arabia has become a focal point in the region's political interactions and is capable of leading the Arab world in the coming period in the face of hostile Iranian interventions.

### 3- Building a Gulf Arab partnership to counter Iran's role

During the Riyadh Summit, Saudi Arabia succeeded in strengthening Gulf Arab partnerships to work to curb the Iranian regime's destructive role in the region. A partnership of notable importance is the Saudi-Egyptian partnership, which was confirmed at the Riyadh Summit during a meeting between King Salman and President al-Sisi. This meeting helped Egypt recalculate its position regarding Iran's meddling in the region, which destabilizes not only the Gulf but also Egypt.<sup>25</sup>

### 4- Changing US policy toward Iran after the Riyadh Summit

The Riyadh Summit was an important factor that seemed to bring about a positive change in US policy toward Iran under President Trump compared with the unfavorable policies during the Obama administration. The administration of former US President Barack Obama adopted a lenient policy toward Iran based on absorption, containment, and the pursuit of diplomatic negotiations. After difficult negotiations during the Obama administration in 2015 to reach an agreement regarding Iran's nuclear program, all efforts thereafter failed to curb Iran's regional dominance. The release of frozen assets to the Iranian regime only strengthened its level of involvement and exacerbated the instability in the region. The Obama administration also sought to increase coordination with Iran in Iraq under the pretext of fighting terrorism, but Iran's role in Iraq has only further complicated the crisis. Obama's decision to withdraw US military presence from Iraq in 2011 led to a vacuum that Iran exploited for its own regional ambitions to control Iraqi wealth.

In contrast to Obama's policies, Trump's approach focuses on strengthening relationships with Arab allies to limit Iran's advance in the region while curbing the Tehran regime's nuclear program.<sup>26</sup>

The Riyadh Summit succeeded in changing the US position toward Iran with the adoption of a firmer, more aggressive policy. The administration of US President Donald Trump has criticized the Obama administration's policy toward Iran, especially with regard to Iraq. The United States has begun to renew its military presence in Iraq with the aim of correcting what the Trump administration considers to be the mistake of withdrawing from the country too early. The Trump administration feels that Obama's disbanding of the US military presence in Iraq made the country vulnerable to coming under Iranian control and terrorist occupation in the wake of an invasion that cost trillions of dollars. The war against ISIS in the region presents a favorable opportunity to secure that military return.<sup>27</sup>

The Trump administration also rejected the agreement on Iran's nuclear program as being bad for US interests. As an astute businessman, Trump pledged to cancel the agreement during his election campaign. Once he was elected, however, because of international pressure, the UN Security Council resolution on the agreement, and opposition from other major powers, he subsequently changed his position. Trump is now seeking to formulate an alternative agreement that will enable American companies to enter the Iranian market as the nuclear agreement enabled Russian companies and European investors to enter the Iranian market.

Since the summit, the critical political and diplomatic discourse of Trump's administration toward Iran has also escalated. The Trump administration has explicitly accused the Tehran regime of supporting terrorism to escalate instability in the region, thereby complicating US efforts to work toward greater peace across the region.

### **Fifth: US strategy toward Iran after the Riyadh Summit**

America has several options when it comes to deciding how to address Iran's regional role after the Riyadh Summit.

America seems to no longer be passively complicit with Iran's role in the region. The US strategy in the war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria must run parallel to a process that reduces Iran's influence in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.<sup>28</sup>

In the Syrian crisis, the Trump administration has taken a tougher policy toward the Syrian regime, striking an air base with Tomahawk missiles after Assad was accused of using sarin gas against civilians in Khan Shaykhun.

The United States also bombed an arms convoy belonging to Iran near an Assad air base in Southern Syria. This action sent a deterrent message to the Iranian regime, warning it of consequences the United States is willing to inflict on perpetrators of criminal activities. America seems to be playing an increasingly active role militarily in Syria to deter Russian and Iranian influence in the country.

In the Iraqi crisis, the United States has increased its military presence to take part in the battle to liberate Mosul from ISIS. The United States' renewed presence in Iraq also aims to limit Iranian influence.

In the Yemeni crisis, the United States has supported the Arab alliance to end the Houthi coup and stop Iran from further supporting Houthi activities.

The dismantling of the Russian-Iranian alliance, through the concept of a deal, is based on the idea of enabling Russia in Syria in exchange for dismantling the Russo-Iranian alliance in Syria and ending any Iranian military or political presence and any presence of Hezbollah there. If this strategy is successful, Washington will achieve two goals: first, securing its ally Israel from any new threat on the border with Syria, and second, leaving Hezbollah without the Iranian and Syrian regime support, on which it relies.<sup>29</sup>

A US military option against Iran is unlikely, as there are limits to any success that armed confrontation might achieve for several reasons:

**First**, an outbreak of armed confrontation between the United States and Iran would cause both countries to sustain high costs, both politically and financially. The United States, especially, is not interested in fighting new military wars abroad, particularly after

the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan resulted in high death tolls and massive financial losses to the US economy. War is not easy to manage, and Trump is still in the process of rebuilding and readying the US military.

**Second**, the American military presence in Iraq and the Gulf region makes US interests and soldiers easy targets for Iranian aggression. Russia especially has a vested interest in defusing tensions between the United States and Iran, considering their position in Syria. The Trump administration has also taken precaution by refusing to classify the IRGC as a terrorist organization after warnings from US intelligence services of possible retaliation against US forces in light of such move.

**Third**, the history of American-Iranian relations since the Iranian Revolution and throughout the various American administrations indicates that diplomatic hostility, rather than military hostility, has been the more successful method of maintaining civil relations. The United States and Iran cooperated in the war in Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban. They also coordinated in the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime. The two countries also cooperate on energy issues in the Caspian region. In light of these factors, relations between the two countries will remain at the level of verbal hostility only, with diplomatic and political discourse ongoing to facilitate continuing cooperation.<sup>30</sup>

## **Conclusion**

After the repercussions of the Riyadh Summit on Iran's role in the region were discussed, a number of results can be reached:

### **Regarding the Iranian role in the region**

**1-** The escalation of the Iranian role in the region was a result of the weakness and absence of the Arab role and the policies of the major powers in the region, led by the United States, especially under the Obama administration.

**2-** The Iranian role was a negative factor that led to the escalation of the instability in the region, which took on sectarian dimensions. This contributed to fueling sectarian conflict in the region, resulting in an escalating threat of terrorism and the proliferation of terrorist groups.

**3-** Iran's regime has used the ISIS organization and the issue of terrorism in general to strengthen its influence and expand its regional role in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, while actually supporting terrorism and spreading it across the region.

**4-** The leaders of the Iranian regime rejected the statement of the Riyadh Summit and has adopted a policy of defiance, thereby confirming the continuation of Iran's negative role and its aggressive policy toward the countries of the region.

### **Regarding the implications of the Riyadh Summit for the future of the Iranian role in the region**

**1-** The Riyadh Summit was an important turning point in confronting and reducing the Iranian regime's destructive role in the region.

**2-** The summit revealed the true face of the Iranian regime as a supporter of terrorism in the world, conclusively refuting its claims to be fighting terrorism as well.

**3-** The summit contributed to building an Arab-Muslim-American partnership to counter the Iranian regime's expansion in the region, as well as showing a real change in US policy in the Trump era, demonstrating increasing combativeness toward Iran's negative role.

**4-** The summit delegates agreed to confront the Iranian role by adopting a comprehensive strategy to combat terrorism in all its forms, as well as to face all terrorist organizations, especially those supported by Iran.

**5-** The American-Islamic Arab partnership will contribute to resolving the crises in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, thus reducing Iran's destructive role across the region.

**6-** The Riyadh Summit contributed to strengthening the regional role of Saudi Arabia in combating terrorism and confronting the destabilizing role played by the Iranian regime in the region.

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