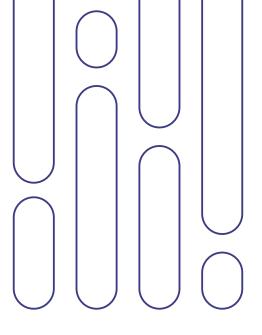
REPORT

How Did the Raisi Government Present the Agreement With Saudi Arabia to the Iranian Public?

March 23, 2023





CONTENTS

| low the Agreement Was Presented Inside Iran | |
|--|---|
| Objectives and Limits of Influence | 6 |
| Convergence and Reconciliatory Rhetoric That C | |
| Be Employed | 8 |

The Saudi Arabia-Iran detente agreement, signed on March 10, 2023, grabbed regional and international attention. It received significant media coverage for a number of reasons. First, it puts an end to a confrontation between the two largest powers in the Gulf region. Second, it could pave the way for de-escalation in the region, opening prospects for engagement and agreement with regional countries after a decade of turmoil and conflict. Third, it signified the importance of the mediation role of China which reflected another move in the ongoing Sino-US competition for leadership in the world and the Middle East. The recent agreement caused much stir in Saudi Arabia and Iran. In Iran, the political system tried to present it to the public as "as an important victory" which will yield returns at home. This report highlights and analyzes the Iranian government's discourse in promoting the agreement with Saudi Arabia.

How the Agreement Was Presented Inside Iran

The Iranian government views the agreement with Saudi Arabia as a critical triumph, with Khamenei's advisor and former IRGC Commander Yahya Rahim Safavi dubbing it as a "political earthquake." This position indicates that the Iranian government is eager to reverse its policies toward Saudi Arabia, which can be characterized as being quite extreme. In addition, the Iranian government wants to use the agreement to enhance its image and pave the way for policy change. The agreement was primarily promoted as:

• "Hardliners" achieving victory over the "reformists:" The "hardliners" in Iran promoted the agreement as a significant victory and a major diplomatic breakthrough. The agreement is purportedly blessed by the supreme leader himself, according to sources close to him. It is also reported that Khamenei's message to the Chinese president, which Raisi conveyed during his visit to Beijing prior to the agreement, was important in Iran and Saudi Arabia signing on the dotted line. The approval of the agreement at the official level resulted in its positive handling by the media including pro-IRGC media outlets. These same outlets have, until recently, promoted a negative attitude toward Saudi Arabia. However, in light of this agreement, they retracted their previous position and promoted the agreement as a victory and a lesson for the "reformists" in the art of negotiations – a field which the "conservatives" have claimed to be skilled in.

• A foreign policy success for the Raisi government: The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted in its statement on March 2023,11, that the agreement is "another step to implement a balanced, dynamic and effective foreign policy...within the course of the neighborhood policy." The neighborhood policy is, for the Raisi government, an important foreign policy approach. Raisi's foreign policy has faced many obstacles in light of the imposed US-led sanctions. Another obstacle was that Iran was not viewed as a trusted partner given its regional behavior, leading to neighboring countries losing all confidence in the Iranian leadership. The agreement with Saudi Arabia perhaps revitalizes Raisi's foreign policy. This is in light of previous failed attempts to formalize agreements with neighboring countries, especially during Rouhani's tenure when Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif proposed the Hormuz Peace Endeavor.

• A means to solve the economic crisis: The Iranian leadership and affiliated media outlets have presented the agreement with Saudi Arabia as an opportunity to overcome the country's deteriorating economic situation. They cited the low foreign exchange rate as evidence. Following the signing of the agreement on March 10, Iran's currency reached 47,700 tomans against the US dollar — the lowest rate registered in the past 45 days. In the free markets, the US dollar against the toman declined to about 2,200 compared to the day before; the US dollar continued to decline against the toman.

4

• A setback for the United States' clout and stature in the world and the Middle East: The Iranian corridors of power considered the United States as the biggest loser in the aftermath of the agreement signed with Saudi Arabia. Also for Iran, the agreement marks a change in Saudi Arabia's approach toward the United States and Israel and a move that will stop the Gulf countries rushing toward expanding the Abraham Accords. In addition, Iran believes that the agreement will thwart the United States' and Israel's conspiracy against the Iranian political system. Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi described the agreement, on March 12, as "an end to US hegemony in the region." The agreement was also presented by Iranian officials as an indication of the decline of Washington's regional and global influence.

• A success for Raisi's "look to the East" policy: The Raisi government has focused on orientating toward the East and toward China in particular. Thus, it took the opportunity of the Chinese-brokered agreement to emphasize the success and credibility of its foreign policy approach. Iranian media outlets have also linked the agreement with a move forward in implementing bilateral agreements and strengthening trade relations with Beijing. They also promoted China's presence in the region as reflecting a change in the international order and that a new phase has started regarding the United States' presence in the Gulf.

• A platform for achieving regional stability and further understandings between Iran and its neighbors: The Iranian government has emphasized the point that achieving regional stability is the main success of the agreement. For Iran, the agreement will initiate cooperation at various levels, as noted by Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. Iran mainly aspires for economic cooperation as confirmed by Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf. "The agreement is an important step toward the stability of the region and the Gulf and political and economic development under regional cooperation," Ghalibaf stated on Twitter on Friday, March 10. A similar tweet was published by the Deputy Chief of Staff for Political Affairs to Iran's President Mohammad Jamshidi on the same day. "Good neighborly and brotherly policies with Eurasian integration create economic and security benefits free from foreign intervention." Moreover, Iranian officials view the agreement as a starting point for broader understandings with the rest of the regional countries. This was evident in the visit of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani to the UAE and another Iranian delegation's visit to Bahrain.

Objectives and Limits of Influence

Regarding the Saudi-Iran agreement, Iran has significantly exaggerated its impact and expected gains. The following points put the agreement into context:

• **The agreement is still under examination**: Iran's propaganda shows great optimism and dependence on the agreement to achieve many gains, while the agreement is still under examination and requires important concessions, especially from Iran's side, particularly in regard to its regional policies.

• Limited contribution to calming internal tensions: The Iranian government has promoted the agreement as a means to resolve internal crises despite the fact that the latter have political, economic and social dimensions that are beyond the scope of the agreement. The agreement will have little impact on the prevailing crises in the near future. The Iranian political system is facing a new generation that aspires for change and whose values contradict those of the "Islamic Republic." These crises have deep political dimensions. Although the agreement has contributed to thwarting the foreign opposition – the Gulf states, the United States and the West – who were hoping for further external pressure on the political system, the Iranian

government is facing crises that are too deep to be addressed by the agreement.

• Possibilities of resolving Iran's economic crisis: Iran is facing a complex economic crisis, which is mainly a structural crisis that has accumulated through post-revolutionary governments basing their policies on confrontation and building an economy of resistance. In addition, these governments have poorly managed resources and weak relations with the Iranian people. Moreover, the sanctions prevented cooperation at the regional level including economic cooperation with Saudi Arabia. Hence, the Iranian market's improvement that followed the agreement is based more on political rather than economic considerations. This economic improvement will not continue unless the real reasons behind Iran's economic crisis are addressed — as demonstrated by the recent rise in the foreign exchange rate.

• Repercussions for the United States and Israel: It is true that the agreement is likely to harm the interests of the United States and contribute to supporting China's desired status in the context of a decline of the United States' power. However, despite its relative decline, the United States is still the most effective and indispensable international power at the regional level with no alternative, even though the Chinese role is growing in the region. The United States is still capable of shouldering the burden and responsibility of regional security and still holds many cards in the region, even if it seems less interested and involved in regional affairs. The United States has been successful in taking Iran's behavior in the region as a pretext to forge security cooperation with the Gulf and Israel against it. The agreement cannot change the course of normalization with Israel as it is based on other contexts and considerations.

Chinese limitation of Iran: To pursue its interests in the region, especially its economic relations and investments with Saudi Arabia, China will limit Iran and avert any harm it may cause to its interests. China's main goal behind the agreement is to remove obstacles hindering its vital interests, which are present in all countries in the region, especially those which form part of its New Silk Road project. Moreover, China needs a calm atmosphere to prevail between the two most important regional powers to ensure the flow of its interests from both sides without threats. China may take its economic ties with Iran as a bargaining chip to place pressure on Tehran.

Convergence and Reconciliatory Rhetoric That Can Be Employed

At home, the rhetoric has been unified, with all actors praising the agreement, stressing that the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called the negotiation team and informed them that they must reach an agreement with Riyadh. The Iranian supreme leader, however, has not commented on the agreement yet. This silence is deliberate because Iran's policy dynamics and decision-making process are based on dual leadership (i.e., the supreme leader and president), in addition to the fact that the Iranian leadership often leaves some room for revising its commitments or to justify its policy contradictions.

Along with praise of the agreement, the Raisi government received applause. Depending on the agreement as a means to exit internal and external crises — that are irrelevant to the agreement or fall beyond the scope of the agreement — is some sort of a media propaganda and politicization game to serve the Iranian leadership's goals, cover its internal crises or justify its policies to the Iranian public.

Apparently, the agreement was debated between the "reformists" and "hardliners;" their disagreement was not about the normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia but on who first called for reconciliation with the kingdom. Iran's political currents agreed that the Saudi-Iran agreement is a win, yet every party has attempted to take the credit. The "reformists" exploited the agreement to return to the political scene, claiming that their policies under the Rouhani government were effective. The latter had initiated the proposal to forge rapprochement with Saudi Arabia under Rouhani's Hormuz Peace Endeavor. The Raisi government attempted to benefit from the agreement, asserting that the former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani was the first to propose reconciliation with Saudi Arabia before his death in 2020.

It is significant to note here that the agreement has defied Saudi Arabia's stereotypical image in front of the Iranian people. The "reformists" and "hardliners" agree that resuming ties with Saudi Arabia is necessary and a plus for them. As the agreement has been welcomed by the Iranian people, this imposes popular limitations on any decision to negate the agreement. The implementation of the agreement and curbing the most radical "hardliners" who had caused Saudi-Iran relations to strain are significant to establish a solid bedrock for sustainable relations based on understanding and participation rather than confrontation and sectarianism.

To conclude, one assumes that if Iran is eager to reap the benefits of the agreement at home, media propaganda must be translated into practical polices that lead to tangible results because normalization and adoption of a balanced foreign policy have been part of the Iranian rhetoric for the past years — even before regional and international actors asked for this from Iran.

#