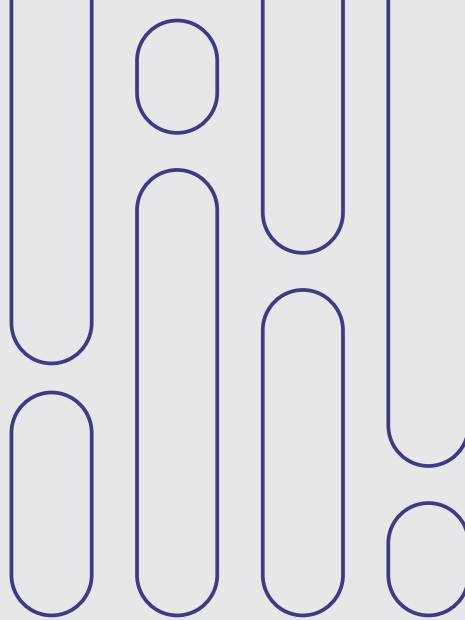


Study

The Scope of Influence of the Parties that Could Obstruct the Restoration of Saudi-Iran Relations

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Many observers and analysts argue that the Saudi-Iran rapprochement agreement is a shift that could lead to “a political earthquake” in case it succeeds. This success will result in radical shifts in the Middle East’s decades-long arrangements. However, concerned parties, whether states or groups, who are expected to lose out from the agreement are preparing to obstruct the agreement so that it does not achieve its objectives as desired by Saudi Arabia and Iran or diminish the expected outcomes as much as possible, especially as they could pave the way for geostrategic shifts that will create the foundations for a new phase in the region. This phase will undermine general and specific interests as well as the strategic orientations of the parties that are expected to suffer as a result of the agreement. This is because the Middle East is a vital part of the world that possesses strategic resources in abundance which are deemed of critical importance in the calculus of the parties that have not welcomed the agreement. Their geopolitical, security and economic considerations have pushed them to reject the agreement and adopt a hostile position toward it.

It is expected that the parties that will lose out from the Saudi-Iran agreement will adopt negative or even destructive positions toward the agreement. This will happen particularly if they sense that the signatories (Saudi Arabia and Iran) and the guarantor (China) are keen to ensure that the agreement is successful. No sooner than a few hours after the announcement of the agreement, the parties that expect to lose out rushed to question Iran’s compliance with the agreement’s terms, arguing that Tehran’s policy will remain unchanged and its sectarian proxy actors will not reduce their operations in Iranian

spheres of influence. They base their argument on the role of ideology and its centrality in the mindset of the Iranian regime.

The proxy actors likely to suffer from the signing of the agreement have started to express their disgruntlement. This is evidenced on the one hand by their refusal to bless and endorse the agreement, which is likely to impact their future, and on the other the shelling that targeted US positions in Syria. In the same context, the United States swiftly responded to Iran's positions on Syria by delivering a strong message of deterrence. This reflected the US desire to prove the veracity of its suspicions about Iran's compliance with the agreement's terms. Additionally, Houthi leader Mohammed Ali al-Houthi mentioned that the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran only concerns the signatories while the Yemeni issue is an independent issue and will be settled through Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue. These remarks reflect the extent to which the Iran-aligned militia is concerned about the prospective decline in its significance within Tehran's calculus in light of this agreement.

This study seeks to discuss the following key questions: to what extent will the potential subversive moves impact the Saudi-Iran agreement and the restoration of diplomatic ties? Are the signatories and guarantors of the agreement capable of deterring or withstanding the moves of the parties that aim to obstruct the agreement and prevent its desired end? What will be the limits and scope of Iran's compliance with the agreement and the resumption of diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia? Are there any Iranian levers of pressure on the Iran-

aligned parties that are expected to obstruct the agreement, as they achieved mutual benefits over the years that are hard to concede now, to force them to submit to Iran's new approach to Saudi Arabia?

Answering these questions will help in determining the parties that are expected to lose out and attempt to obstruct the agreement. In addition, we will be able to shed light on their respective influence on regional and global equations. The significance and impact of the tools that these parties possess to sabotage the restoration of Saudi-Iran diplomatic ties will ultimately depend on their respective clout. The answers will also help in assessing the potential negative moves or policies to obstruct the agreement's objectives. In addition, they will help the agreement's signatories avert and overcome the obstacles to ensure the successful implementation of the agreement and the maximization of its gains. These answers will also enable the agreement's signatories to prepare confrontation strategies to respond to all the potential schemes plotted by the parties that are expected to lose out.

The Clout of the Parties That Lose out From the Agreement and Their Losses

The reality-based assumptions indicate that the parties that are expected to lose out from the agreement signed by Saudi Arabia and Iran – two regional powerhouses that exert huge influence on regional and global affairs – will be determined in light of the consequences of the agreement on their respective clout and interests in Iranian spheres of influence. The

losing parties in the context of the Saudi-Iran agreement are expected to be the following:

The Militias Facing Losses

These militias include pro-Iran ones that have financially benefited and secured economic interests over the past years in the Iranian spheres of influence in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. These militias include Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Ahl al-Kahf in Iraq and Syria, the People's Defense Units in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen. They have generated immense profits from the black market trade through money laundering and smuggling drugs and arms. In addition, they have extorted money to cover the expenses of their fighters, combat operations, purchases of arms, and to pay reparations and for the care of the families of deceased fighters. However, it is fair to say that these militias have faced tough financial conditions after the decline of Iranian financial support due to the economic sanctions imposed on Iran.

These militias also own tourist, commercial and real estate businesses in several Syrian and Iraqi provinces. They also own shipping companies that are used to transfer and smuggle strategic goods from Iran or Iraq to be re-exported for financial gains. This is in addition to their immense political and military clout which has allowed them to acquire preferential loans and legal assistance for a variety of private projects to increase their profit margins. Furthermore, these militias control enormous swaths of agricultural land.

Given this agreement's impact on their interests, it is expected that these militias will not comply with its outcomes un-

less Iran uses all available pressure levers against them to curb their excesses in the Iranian spheres of influence due to the following considerations:

Their Considerable Weight and Influence

The militias impacted by the agreement wield a considerable degree of clout in the Iranian spheres of influence due to a number of considerations such as the number of their fighters, the level of their weapons stockpile, and their deployment on border crossings and in strategic regions which possess abundant oil and other natural resources.

Extent of Potential Losses

The losses of these militias will include their private gains which are hard for them to give up on or concede such as the revenues gained from the black market through smuggling drugs, weapons and commodities as well as the profits from their own private enterprises and projects. Therefore, retreating from Iranian spheres of influence that include strategic items, vital corridors and border crossings is not in the interest of these militias. Moreover, these militias will lose the clout to exercise influence over strategic matters in their favor, particularly in Iranian spheres of influence. They also face the possibility of having their political and military clout diminished in light of growing calls for banning the carrying of weapons beyond the writ of the state as well as other measures to strengthen the state at the expense of non-state actors.

The Fears of the Houthi Militia

As Saudi Arabia and Iran are coordinating an imminent meeting between the two countries' top diplomats for reopening their respective embassies, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi made

a statement which reflects the extent of the Houthi militia's support for the agreement and its concern about its position in Yemen's future political equation. He said, "The Yemeni issue is independent (of any regional settlement) and only the Yemenis are concerned with it and its settlement. The agreement between Riyadh and Tehran only concerns the two countries."⁽¹⁾

This statement reflects the militia's awareness that it has become a bargaining chip between the two sides and that it will not accept a resolution that does not secure it a position in the new Yemeni equation which is commensurate with its clout on the ground. This statement enhances the possibility of adverse developments on the ground which may impact the progress of the agreement unless the two sides realize the sensitivity of the situation, with Iran using all its available levers to pressure the Houthi militia to accept a resolution that satisfies all parties. But the question here is: are Iran's levers of pressure on the Houthi militia sufficient to persuade it to accept a resolution to the Yemeni crisis? What if the militia obstinately rejects the deal, raising the bar in such a way that its demands cannot be met? What will Saudi Arabia's reaction be if this occurs?

Prioritization of Private Gains

Past events demonstrate that some militias with private gains will prioritize their interests when they collide with Iran's dictates. For example, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq refused to meet Iran's demands not to shell US positions in order not to anger former US President Donald Trump during his 2020 election campaign which would prompt him to use force against Iranian

targets in Iraq and increase his chances of winning. The militia shelled US positions on two occasions in November and December 2020. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq leader Qais al-Khazali considered resistance against US forces to be an Iraqi rather than an Iranian demand.⁽²⁾ This position was interpreted by some as reflecting his “rebellion against Iran’s dictates.”

Israel

To the Israeli government, opposition and citizens, the Saudi-Iran agreement was a severe shock, throwing the Netanyahu government’s calculus at home and abroad into disarray. The Israeli opposition led by former Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid described the agreement as a major blow to Israel, deeming it a major foreign policy failure of the Netanyahu government and a huge diplomatic foreign policy triumph for the Iranian government. Over the past few years, Tel Aviv has exerted huge efforts to isolate Tehran and establish “a defense wall” against it. Gideon Sa’ar, a member of the Israeli Knesset, wrote on Twitter, “Netanyahu has promised peace with Saudi Arabia, but in the end, Saudi Arabia has made peace with Iran.”⁽³⁾

Based on the comments of Israeli officials and observers, Israel’s shock suggests that it will incur the greatest losses from this agreement. Israel will suffer significant losses because the agreement will eliminate its grand strategic objectives which it has for worked tirelessly in recent years, including the following:

- Reducing the chances of the circle of normalization expanding at a time when Israel was preparing itself for a new era of

diplomatic relations with Arab countries.

- Diminishing the chances of Israel imposing more isolation and siege on Iran to counter Tehran's regional behavior and nuclear and ballistic missile programs. This agreement comes at a time when the Netanyahu government has been exerting massive efforts to deepen Iran's isolation.
- Curtailing the Israeli ambition of building a politico-military defense wall against Iran in the region with the participation of Saudi Arabia. Thus, the possibility of a military coalition targeting Iran including Riyadh has become unlikely.

The United States

Evidence indicates that the agreement was neither satisfactory nor acceptable to the United States. US officials questioned the possibility of the agreement succeeding.⁽⁴⁾ The United States' dissatisfaction with the agreement is reflective of the losses it will experience as a result of it. Among its losses are the following:

- Losing additional points to China in the grand battle over global leadership, with Beijing clinching a major diplomatic breakthrough in a region that has remained for decades within the US sphere of influence.
- Ending the US monopoly and sponsorship over mediation initiatives to settle disputes between influential powers, thereby maximizing China's gains and interests.
- Seeing a further decline in US clout in the Middle East and reducing the chances of its participation in security arrangements in light of the existence of many alternatives that could play this role such as China.

- Emerging signs of losing Saudi Arabia, a traditional strategic ally in the Middle East, with the scale tipping in favor of China, with the latter attracting Riyadh which is a heavyweight in the region, the Islamic world and a vital player in the global energy market.
- Losing the gains it has been reaping from fueling Sunni-Shiite sectarian strife in the region. This deprives the United States of levers enabling it to exclusively maintain dominance over the global order.

Potential Negative Measures and Policies to Undermine the Agreement

Given that the parties that will potentially incur losses as a result of the agreement are of significant regional and global weight (the United States, which remains the number one world power, with massive capabilities, potential and tools deployed globally; Israel, a regional power, exerting influence over global and regional affairs; the impacted militias; and all the countries aligned with the West that will be impacted by the possibility of growing Chinese interests in the Middle East at the expense of their own interests, including some European countries as well as India, Japan and South Korea), they have the capacity to deploy tools to impact the future trajectory of the agreement.

The losses of these parties can be categorized as geopolitical and geostrategic at the regional and global levels. Thus, it will be hard for these parties to stand idle and watch the agreement succeed, particularly in light of the efforts of rising glob-

al powers to strongly compete with them in regional and global arenas.

The greater the anticipated losses are, the more likely it is that each party will take steps to obstruct the Saudi-Iran agreement. In the following lines, the possible moves that will impact the chances and gains of the agreement's signatories and guarantor will be examined.

Military Escalation by the Militias Against Foreign Targets

Some militias that are likely to suffer losses may embark on shelling targets inside or outside Iranian spheres of influence, particularly in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. They will aim to influence the positions of Saudi Arabia and Iran and undermine their determination to render the agreement successful. There are heavy deployments of armed militias in Syria and Iraq. Thus, the recent spate of drone attacks, which Washington announced were carried out by militias aligned with the IRGC against US targets in Syria, could be repeated in the future. The latest attacks resulted in the death of a US civilian contractor and wounded six others, including five US army servicemen.

This scenario is backed up by the remarks of a source close to Quds Force Chief Ismail Qaani. On March 30, 2023, he said that the investigations carried out by Iran after the recent spate of attacks against US targets revealed that the perpetrators belonged to a cell consisting of IRGC officers and other elements affiliated with Syrian, Yemeni, Lebanese and Iraqi factions. It is likely that they also plan to obstruct and sabotage the Saudi-Iran reconciliation.⁽⁵⁾

Intensification of US and Israeli Strikes Against Pro-Iran Militias in the Region

The United States and Israel could resort to intensifying strikes against the positions and headquarters of pro-Iran militias. The aim would be to reignite regional tensions on the one hand, and to prove the veracity of their doubts that Iran and its aligned proxy actors will not fulfill their commitments on the other. This scenario is also in the context of the US army's rush to vindicate its assertions regarding Iran's non-compliance with the agreement, thus it carried out extensive strikes against several positions in Syria on March 24, 2023. The strikes were carried out against positions which Washington said belonged to militias affiliated with the IRGC. The attacks killed 14 militiamen and were undertaken in response to a spate of drone attacks against US targets in Syria.

Meanwhile, Israel increased its attacks on Iranian sites in various parts of Syria for two consecutive days (March 31 and April 1), killing five IRGC personnel, including a high-ranking officer. Iran has stated its preparedness to retaliate against Israeli attacks, suggesting that the two sides will escalate mutually in Syria, Lebanon and Israel.

Increasing Talk About an Imminent Israeli Military Strike Against Iran

The Middle East could see increasing talk about an imminent Israeli strike against Iran, taking advantage of Iran's nuclear file, its regional behavior or ballistic missile program. This is against the backdrop of the Saudi-Iran agreement and the ramifications of its grand strategic objectives.

In this context, Russian analyst Alexander Nazarov expects that Washington and Tel Aviv will step up military provocations against Iran. They aim to influence the Saudi position on the agreement on the one hand and push Riyadh to join them in any military action against Iran on the other. This supports the likelihood of striking Iran,⁽⁶⁾ especially given that the United States and Israel are aware of the fact that Iran's deterrence force in light of the new phase after signing the agreement will decline compared to the period preceding it. Iran does not have shared borders with Israel and cannot threaten US or Gulf interests in the region in general and Saudi Arabia in particular after signing the agreement. This represents a departure from the past when Iranian attacks against the Gulf region led the United States to refrain from launching military attacks against Iran.

Here we notice that the agreement has deprived Israel of a golden opportunity to form an anti-Iran regional military alliance for which it has exerted immense efforts over the years. In the context of a military calculus, Iran has lost its military deterrence via signing the agreement and cannot threaten to wage an all-out war in the Middle East. For the first time, Iran and Israel are locked in a face-off far away from embroiling the Gulf region in their disputes. Therefore, the two countries ought to take considered decisions to determine the course of their dispute and bear the responsibility and consequences away from the Gulf region.

In addition to the potential military escalation against Iran in light of the agreement, there is the Israeli political escalation against Tehran from several fronts. The remarks of Israe-

li Foreign Minister Eli Cohen on the agreement at a meeting with his Azerbaijani counterpart, urging the formation of “a unified front” against Iran represented the most recent manifestation of this escalation.

Washington Reevaluating Ties With Saudi Arabia

There are mounting calls for the United States to realize the significance of Saudi Arabia as a partner and to better understand the kingdom’s political proposals given its capabilities, potential and tools to influence regional and global affairs. These calls are made on the basis that there are strategic Saudi interests of utmost priority for Saudi decision-makers to consider and that the United States should reevaluate its relationship with Saudi Arabia on this basis rather than its present stubbornness which serves no one but its rivals and threatens its global alliances. Still, there are fears that the United States will ramp up pressure on Saudi Arabia across different files such as human rights, energy and the war in Yemen with the aim of dissuading Riyadh from turning toward China and forming understandings with Iran.

More Escalation From the United States and Tightening the Noose Around China

It is expected that the US-Chinese dispute will escalate across the globe over Beijing’s efforts to end the US monopoly over global leadership. This comes amid tireless Chinese efforts aimed at changing the rules governing the global order since the end of the Cold War, hence spelling the end of the monopolar order.

The Biden administration may take a more aggressive approach against China in relation to Taiwan, the most sensitive hotspot between the two world powers. This move intends to drag China into numerous disputes, diverting its attention and upsetting its global efforts to rewrite the norms governing the global order. For example, the United States may simply insinuate that it will no longer follow the One China Policy in a way that emboldens Taiwan, encouraging it to declare independence from China. At this point, China would retaliate militarily, launching itself into a protracted war with far-reaching consequences.

The United States could also take more measures to encircle China in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean to strengthen and bring into force its political and military alliances with its Asian allies.* This comes as part of Washington's "looking eastwards" policy to further encircle China, which is a rising power on the global stage.

In connection with the foregoing, US President Joe Biden took a decision on March 24, 2023, to replace sophisticated US multitask fighters in the Middle East with older A-10 fighters, with the former being pivoted to the Indo-Pacific and Europe to encircle China.⁽⁷⁾ The sophisticated fighters will address growing Chinese military capabilities. Meanwhile, the A-10 fighter jets are better used against the danger posed by militias armed with light Iranian weapons in the Middle East.

The United States could also further weaponize sanctions against Chinese companies in general, particularly targeting those with huge interests in the Middle East. There is a possibility that the United States will threaten Chinese interests

in the Middle East by disrupting commercial ships and strategic commodity tankers heading toward China via the strategic Strait of Malacca under the pretext of “dealing with a state subject to US sanctions “. Finally ,the United States calling into question Chinese mediation to resolve the Russia-Ukraine war reveals its real motivations for blocking China from settling more international crises.

The Extent to Which the Agreement’s Signatories Can Overcome the Hindrances Placed by Detractors

The losing parties are likely to adopt several adverse measures and policies to impact the signatories ‘positions and curb their gains under the agreement .However ,there are several chances for the two countries to maximize their gains on the one hand and avert the sabotaging policies implemented by the losing parties on the other .This will play out as follows:

Iran’s Ability to Curtail the Violent Behavior of Militias

Iran’s control over the majority of armed militias in its spheres of influence – Iraq ,Syria ,Lebanon and Yemen has provided Iran with an opportunity to curtail them .The majority of the militias deployed to the four Arab countries pledge allegiance to the Qom marjaya ,with their leaderships embracing Wilayat al-Faqih .Thus ,Iran could exert significant influence over these militias ,curbing their clout and impacting their violent behavior in order to positively impact Saudi-Iran ties.

However ,it is expected that Iran will pursue new tactics to continue its expansionist schemes in its spheres of influence

in line with the ideological nature of the Iranian regime on the one hand and the nature of the new era of Saudi-Iran relations on the other .Iran could give precedence to soft power and pragmatic approaches over military and hard-power ones such as enabling militias to control the economies of the aforesaid Arab countries to enhance its control and reap further benefits in the new era.

The Deepening Rifts Within Israel

Israeli society is witnessing crucial disputes in terms of the nature and parties involved .In addition ,these disputes are having severe ramifications on Israel's domestic front and foreign policy orientations .These disputes have been described by Jewish intellectuals and thinkers as the worst and most dangerous for Israeli society since the establishment of the state 75years ago .These disputes have clearly exposed the social cleavages and Israel's own weaknesses that have been threatening the existence of the Zionist state for decades.

The scenario of chaos engulfing Israel has become much more likely because of the crisis erupting over judicial reforms. The crisis has taken dangerous turns ,with the opposition urging Israelis to take to the streets and the consecutive protests calling on Netanyahu to resign .The protests have run so deep leading to the dismissal of the Israeli defense chief ,and the country's senior military and security officials have warned about the dangerous situation facing the country.

Israel having its hands full at home amid the continued sharp disputes and the right-wing moving ahead with controlling not only the judiciary but all other state institutions ,offers an

opportunity for Saudi Arabia and Iran to strengthen ties and curtail Israel's adverse impact on the agreement's future.

The United States Preoccupied With Maintaining Its Global Leadership

The fact that the United States is engaged in a battle to keep in place its global hegemony provides an essential opportunity for Saudi Arabia and Iran to maximize their gains while mitigating the negative consequences of the parties that disapprove of the agreement. The United States and the West are also paying close attention to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. The US-China battle over global leadership in the 21st century led to Washington shifting its focus to the Indo-Pacific region to challenge the growing Chinese influence in this hotspot deemed as the most decisive in the battle for global leadership. This is in addition to Washington's concerns about the growing nuclear danger posed by North Korea in East Asia, the display of missile force and the firing of ballistic missiles in close proximity to US allies in response to the growing US-Japanese-South Korean aggression.

Profitable Peace Over Exhausting Crises

It appears that the dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia has reached the point of saturation, with the two sides convinced that continuing down this path will not serve either side. Therefore, the two sides, with the help of a mutual ally who will benefit from a process of reconciliation, decided to sit down at the negotiating table. A process of peace with profitable outcomes is now the preferred option for achieving in-

terests and maximizing gains, ending the phase of regional and global political blackmail, and contributing to achieving regional stability instead of continuing disputes or prospects of sliding into war. This agreement has been reached due to considerations related to the cost of war, its security implications and economic consequences. Reaching this stage eases the mutual distrust between the two sides. The two regional powerhouses' efforts since the signing of the agreement reflect their shared desire at the highest levels to render the process of reconciliation successful.

Saudi Arabia's Strategic Weight in Washington's Eyes

Riyadh is adamantly intent on pursuing a policy based on diversifying its partnerships and seeking alternative options at the regional and global level — along with its historic US partner — to achieve its strategic interests. Nonetheless, this does not mean that its weight and significance in US strategy has declined, given the tools, capabilities and strategic commodities it possesses, which permit it to exercise great influence over regional and global affairs. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is considered by the United States to have strategic weight and significance, which provides it with an opportunity to maximize its gains in accordance with its own determined policies and orientations. The signing of a \$37 billion Boeing commercial planes deal on March 14 between the United States and Saudi Arabia, only four days after signing the rapprochement agreement with Iran, is the best case in point.⁽⁸⁾ The deal was announced by the White House spokesperson, not the plane manufacturer, in what appeared to be a message to China that Saudi Arabia still retains close relations with the United States.

China's Global Power as a Mediator

The existence of a heavyweight global mediator like China — in its first global test in the field of international mediation — is the main opportunity for the two sides to render the agreement successful. China is a credible international partner that prioritizes the principles of noninterference in the affairs of countries and respecting their sovereignty. It also possesses massive global economic capabilities and was ranked by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2022 as the world's number one economy on a purchasing power parity basis. China's share of global GDP accounts for 18.6 percent while the United States' share stands at 15.7 percent. India's share accounts for 7 percent and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' share combined equals 5.5 percent.⁽⁹⁾

In addition, China is the world's number two military power behind the United States. It is relentlessly seeking to plug the military gap with the United States annually. At the political level, China is a UNSC permanent member. China's political and economic clout is growing globally, evident in its cutthroat competition with the United States. Thus, rendering successful the mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran in a sensitive geostrategic region is considered the first real test for China's power and tools of influence in the region. It will seek to render it successful and support it using all means possible.

At the same time, China has levers it may use against Iran, the first of which is Tehran's need for Beijing to oppose US resolutions aimed at isolating it. Furthermore, even during the sanctions, China has been Iran's most important trading partner and a major buyer of Iranian oil. It is a significant global counterbalance to the US hegemony over the world order.

Conclusion and Results

In light of the aforementioned, the study concludes that the losers include not only those who are influenced by international decisions but also those who make such decisions. The United States, its Asian and European allies and Israel, because of their power and influence can play a role in determining the fate of the agreement. Though the winners have several options to reverse the losing parties' policies, it is difficult to imagine that the latter will stand idle in the face of the agreement's potential outcomes and the impact on their interests.

The obstructing policies have started in Syria against the backdrop of the agreement's terms contradicting the interests of some militias in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. They seek to reduce the gains of the agreement's stakeholders, particularly in light of their determination to ensure that the agreement is successful. This necessitates that the parties to the agreement should stay in close contact to reverse the policies and measures of the detractors to deprive them of the opportunity to sabotage the agreement on the one hand and maximize their potential gains on the other. The main beneficiaries of the agreement are:

China

It is the biggest winner from the agreement due to considerations such as scoring more points in its dispute with the United States over global leadership. By mediating the deal, China has secured an opportunity to enhance its status as a global mediator, which enhances its role to initiate more mediation

efforts to resolve international crises. This demonstrates that China is capable of laying down solutions to international crises, offering options which are somewhat different from the US-Western model of resolving differences via dialogue and democracy promotion. In addition, the agreement provides China with more clout and enables it to achieve further interests in the Middle East since Riyadh and Tehran are among Beijing's most important strategic partners and possess strategic commodities (oil and gas) necessary for keeping the Chinese production wheel rolling. It also enhances China's quest to implement its Silk Road Initiative in the Middle East, given that the two countries are located within its geographical scope. Settling a dispute between two regional heavyweights will ensure the safe passage of oil tankers and commercial ships, the majority of which are Chinese. This will enhance China's foreign trade. Therefore, China is expected to be the keenest party to ensure that this agreement is successful, while presenting itself as a global alternative to the countries seeking an independent foreign policy away from US hegemony.

Saudi Arabia

It is the second biggest beneficiary. This is due to considerations related to Saudi Arabia's quest to end the vortex of exhausting disputes in the Middle East and maximize its interests through its relations with China, a major global counterbalance to the United States. Putting an end to the standoff with Iran will reduce the political and security costs borne by Saudi Arabia, particularly the ongoing security threats and dangers coming from the Yemeni arena, while diminishing the Sunni-Shiite

sectarian dispute. The agreement's completion will also put an end to the pressure placed on Saudi Arabia by the United States and Israel, and most crucially, will remove Saudi Arabia from any calculations regarding the onset of a future conflict between Iran and Israel. For the first time, Saudi Arabia has allowed Iran and Israel to face-off with one another in which only they can determine what the next step is. As a result, Saudi Arabia has stripped Iran of the possibility of launching a comprehensive war, which it has in the past used to threaten US interests in the Gulf in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. What is more, the agreement will enhance Saudi Arabia's opportunities to play a bigger role in the strategic decisions and security arrangements in the Middle East. The country will also see its chances of acting as a regional mediator grow to settle several regional crises, at the same time, it will have the stature to deliver the message that sovereign nation-states must be respected. Through this agreement, Saudi Arabia prioritizes nation-states and state actors at the expense of non-state actors. The agreement also ensures a positive environment to achieve the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030.

Iran's Spheres of influence

Countries such as Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq may also achieve several gains. The first of these gains is the strengthening of the nation-state at the expense of non-state actors that embrace narrow sectarian interests at home and overseas. The agreement will enable these countries to resume playing their forsaken but essential role of exclusively controlling weapons, pulling the strings, and making strategic decisions away

from non-state actors to achieve the interests of the state and citizens rather than the interests of a certain sect or minority. There is another gain mainly related to reducing the chances of sectarian Sunni-Shiite disputes and ending the sharp political polarization, whether among Shiite forces or between Sunni and Shiite ones. This will enhance opportunities for restoring security and stability to these countries, contributing to resolving the outstanding crises exploited by non-state actors. Therefore, there will be a better chance for improving citizens' economic and living conditions, paving the way for these countries to achieve stability. The third gain revolves around enhancing the principle of establishing balanced foreign relations, partnerships, mutual interests, respecting national sovereignty and independence. The agreement also sends a message to the parties close to Iran that national interests should be prioritized over sectarian loyalties and that Iran, the sponsor, must change its approaches, opting instead for more pragmatic ones.

Iran

The agreement will enable Iran to achieve several strategic gains such as offering a huge opportunity to end its regional isolation as well as the regional and global mobilization against it to change its malign behavior. It will also render futile the Israeli bet on Saudi Arabia acting as a spearhead in confronting Iran and its regional clout while depriving it of the “all-out war” principle as well as some military and economic gains in its spheres of influence, forcing it to change its hard power tools.

The agreement represents a real test for Iran, particularly to what extent it pulls the strings and controls its aligned armed militias in its spheres of influence, particularly the Houthis. Making whatever progress on the Yemeni issue would mean ushering in a new era marked by increased confidence between the two sides to make progress on the other regional files. The agreement constitutes a test for Saudi Arabia on how it can diversify its partnerships and alternatives when it comes to foreign relations. It is also the first test for China in terms of tools of influence and global competition with the United States over influence in the Middle East.

However, one should not ignore the centrality of ideology governing the Iranian regime in the era that follows restoring diplomatic ties. Iran is adept at pursuing “long-term” schemes; thus, it could resort to changing the tools it uses to extend regional clout, using new tools and means commensurate with the new era. It could replace the use of military power with more pragmatic tools through which it could conceal the traces of its expansion. An alarm should be raised about this tactic so that it is confronted using new methods and different approaches to avoid the impact of any potential Iranian policies aimed to renege on its pledges. There is a long way ahead. It is still fraught with challenges when resolving the thorny issues. The losing parties are still capable of obstructing the agreement. Nonetheless, stability and detente are worthy investments to enhance the chances of a profitable peace and end the exhausting crises.

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