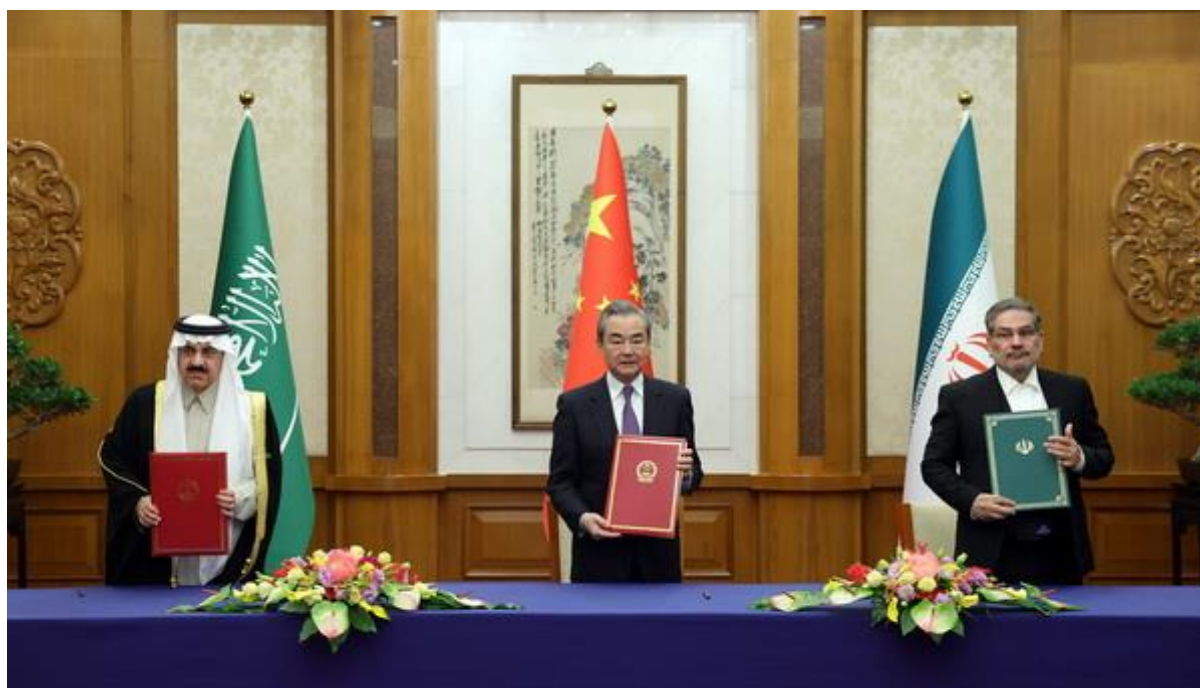


# A new variable in Yemeni conflict: the impact of Iran-Saudi Arabian reconciliation

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*The present paper is a follow-up work of the previous research [project](#) “Yemeni puzzle: Comprehensive Review of the Crisis with Emphasis on Humanitarian Dimensions”. This project as an updated report was immediately embarked on after the Iran-Saudi Arabian reconciliation.*



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China

On 10 March, Musaad bin Mohammed Al-Aiban, Minister of State, Member of the Council of Ministers, and National Security Advisor of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran, signed a Chinese-brokered agreement to restore ties and reopen embassies seven years after<sup>1</sup>.

The bilateral agreement with the interlocutor role of China states that “three countries expressed their keenness to exert all efforts towards enhancing regional

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. URL: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/202303/t20230311\\_11039241.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202303/t20230311_11039241.html)

and international peace and security”<sup>2</sup>. This Chinese-supported diplomatic breakthrough has a considerable impact on the power configuration of states in the Middle East.

The geopolitical landscape of the Middle East is changing with the global transformation of the international arena. Regional countries seek consolidation – and reconsolidation – to shape a stronger Middle East. This new conciliatory trend manifests itself in Iran-Saudi Arabian rapprochement. Such a diplomatic breakthrough might be deemed as an important driver to restoring diplomatic ties between Qatar and Bahrain<sup>3</sup>, or a thaw in Arab-Syrian relations<sup>4</sup>.

### **What was the reaction of international actors?**

On 10 March, the Houthis welcomed the deal, slamming at the same time the U.S. and Israel. “The region needs the return of normal relations between its countries, through which the Islamic society can regain its lost security as a result of the foreign interventions, led by the Zionists and Americans,” said Mohamed Abdulsalam, the Houthis’s spokesman and chief negotiator<sup>5</sup>.

On the same day, Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Secretary-General, Mr. Hissein Brahim Taha, expressed the hope that this step would contribute to strengthening the pillars of peace, security and stability in the region, and that it would give a new momentum to cooperation among OIC Member States<sup>6</sup>.

On 11 March, United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed welcomed the agreement by saying on Twitter it was an “important step toward stability and prosperity” in the region<sup>7</sup>.

On 13 March, U.S. Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price demonstrated support for dialogue, direct diplomacy and anything that “would serve to de-

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Qatari-Bahraini Follow-up Committee Holds its Second Meeting in Riyadh // Qatar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 12, 2023. URL: <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/1444/09/21/qatari-bahraini-follow-up-committee-holds-its-second-meeting-in-riyadh>

<sup>4</sup> // في بيان صحفي مشترك. سورية والسعودية تعربان عن ترحيبهما ببدء إجراءات استئناف الخدمات القنصلية والرحلات الجوية بين البلدين في بيان صحفي -/2023-04-12. URL: <http://mofaex.gov.sy/ar/news2187>

<sup>5</sup> Iran, Saudi Arabia agree to resume ties, with China's help // ABC News. URL: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/iran-saudi-arabia-resume-relations-after-tensions-97765340>

<sup>6</sup> OIC General Secretariat Welcomes Saudi Arabia and Iran’s Agreement to Resume Diplomatic Relations // Organization of Islamic Cooperation. URL: [https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t\\_id=38636&ref=26298&lan=en](https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=38636&ref=26298&lan=en)

<sup>7</sup> // عودة العلاقات بين السعودية الشقيقة و إيران خطوة هامة للمنطقة نحو الاستقرار و الازدهار URL: <https://twitter.com/abzayed/status/1634460171249360896?s=46&t=nTCCPa4yIioUwhkIx8BJOg>

escalate tensions in the region and potentially help to prevent conflict” and “would help to end the war on Yemen”<sup>8</sup>.

On 13 March, Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov also welcomed any steps that could and would contribute to reducing tensions and optimizing dialogue in the region, a very unstable region, “especially when it comes to key regional players such as Saudi Arabia and Iran”<sup>9</sup>.

During their meeting at the Quai d’Orsay on 13 March, France Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Catherine Colonna told a Saudi counterpart, Faisal bin Farhan, that “France is in favor of dialogue and of any initiative that can help de-escalate tensions and strengthen regional security and stability”<sup>10</sup>.

### **A new wave of hope for a long-standing problem**

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has affected many conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa since 2011<sup>11</sup>. Apart from other protracted conflicts across the Middle East, the Iran-Saudi Arabian reconciliation shall indisputably influence the situation in Yemen, declared by the UN as the country with the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Recalling that by 2022, the overall population of Yemen is 31.9 million, among whom 23.4 million are in need of humanitarian assistance, 4.3 million are displaced since March 2015, 19 million are estimated to face acute food insecurity, 2.2 million children are likely to experience wasting<sup>12</sup>, it is highly expected that Iran-Saudi Arabian rapprochement should have an immediate impact on relieving humanitarian suffering.

On 15 March, Hans Grundberg, the United Nations special envoy for Yemen, after visiting Tehran and Riyadh announced that “intense diplomatic efforts are ongoing at different levels to bring the conflict in Yemen to an end”<sup>13</sup>. Some

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<sup>8</sup> United States, Department Press Briefing – March 13, 2023 // U.S. Department of State. URL: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departement-press-briefing-march-13-2023/#post-428990-CHINAIRANSAUDIARABIA>

<sup>9</sup> В Кремле отреагировали на возобновление отношений Ирана и Саудовской Аравии // RIA. URL: <https://ria.ru/20230313/iran-1857513347.html>

<sup>10</sup> Iran / Saudi Arabia – France welcomes the announcement that diplomatic relations have been restored between the two countries (March 10th 2023) // Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. URL: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/saudi-arabia/news/article/iran-saudi-arabia-france-welcomes-the-announcement-that-diplomatic-relations>

<sup>11</sup> How Do Carnegie Scholars Interpret the Impact of the Saudi-Iranian Deal on Their Area of Interest? // Carnegie. URL: <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/89273>

<sup>12</sup> Yemen Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022 (April 2022) // UNOCHA. URL: <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-needs-overview-2022-april-2022>

<sup>13</sup> Iran-Saudi Diplomatic Relations Revival Boosts Yemen Peace Talks: UN Envoy // Tasnim News. URL: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2023/03/17/2868862/iran-saudi-diplomatic-relations-revival-boosts-yemen-peace-talks-un-envoy>

scholars hold a similar view. In particular, Abdullah Baabood, non-resident scholar at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, stated that the agreement might push forward the ongoing Saudi-Houthi negotiations over a lasting ceasefire in Yemen to arrive at a peaceful solution to the conflict<sup>14</sup>.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the day after the Iran-Saudi Arabian agreement, on 11 March, representatives of Yemen's government and Houthis had talks in Geneva regarding an exchange of prisoners. Abdul-Qader el-Murtaza, the head of the Houthi delegation, said they hoped that this round of talks proved to be "decisive"<sup>15</sup>. Thus, on 15 April a huge cross-border prisoners exchange between a Saudi-led military coalition and Houthis was agreed. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported an "emotional and precious" exchange of nearly 900 prisoners involved in Yemen's long-running war<sup>16</sup>. Detainees reunited with their families before Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr.

It has to be recalled that before the historical decisive intermediation of China there were a series of talks in Baghdad and Muskat. Since the Iran-Saudi Arabian reconciliation, Omani efforts concurrently gained further momentum. On 9 April, Saudi delegations accompanied by Omani diplomats flew from Muskat to Sanaa and held talks with Houthi officials in the Yemeni capital to discuss a permanent ceasefire in Yemen<sup>17</sup>. The visit marks progress in consultations between Riyadh and Sanaa mediated by Oman. While the agreement has not yet been unveiled, some sources suggested it could include a six-month ceasefire, opening of borders and ports, reparation and compensation measures, and the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Yemen before the political process begins<sup>18</sup>.

### **There is still a lot of work to be done**

Since the Yemeni conflict is multidimensional, complex and hybrid, the potential end of an Iran-Saudi Arabian proxy war does not solve all puzzles of contradictions in Yemen. Ahmed Nagi, a senior analyst for Yemen at the International Crisis Group think tank in Brussels, said that the rapprochement may change the regional balance around Yemen, but is less likely to resolve its internal conflict as quickly since the conflict is essentially a domestic one and not

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<sup>14</sup> How Do Carnegie Scholars Interpret the Impact of the Saudi-Iranian Deal on Their Area of Interest? // Carnegie. URL: <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/89273>

<sup>15</sup> Yemen's warring sides hold prisoner exchange talks in Geneva // Al Jazeera. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/11/yemens-warring-sides-hold-prisoner-exchange-talks-in-geneva>

<sup>16</sup> Red Cross announces exchange of nearly 900 prisoners in Yemen war // The Guardian. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/14/red-cross-announces-exchange-of-nearly-900-prisoners-in-yemen-war>

<sup>17</sup> Saudi, Omani envoys hold peace talks with Houthi leaders in Yemen // Al Jazeera. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/9/saudi-omani-envoys-in-yemen-for-peace-talks-with-houthi-leaders>

<sup>18</sup> Is Oman's hard work with Yemen and Saudi Arabia paying off? // Al Jazeera. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/12/is-omans-hard-work-with-yemen-and-saudi-arabia-paying-off>

a regional one.<sup>19</sup> The humanitarian catastrophe and the intra-Yemen conflict were deteriorated by the engagement of outside players, in particular the Saudi-led intervention on 26 March 2015.

Taleb Al Hassani, an editor for the Houthi-run Al Masirah news channel added “If Saudi Arabia continues to wait for a Yemeni-Yemeni agreement before it leaves, then it will wait for many years”.<sup>20</sup> Currently, the Houthis are concentrating on how Saudi Arabia and the UAE can withdraw from the conflict and return Yemen to the status quo. According to Al Hassani, with a coalition withdrawal in Yemen, either a “quick mediation” with the help of a neutral party will take place, or a civil war will start again. In both cases, he added, the Houthis are likely to emerge the winner<sup>21</sup>.

Such a position has objective right to exist. However, Al Hassani proposed that in the event of a coalition withdrawal, a Civil War would break out. This is not quite so. In effect, the internationalization of the protracted Yemeni conflict led to more conflicts of outside players’ interests, which frequently overlap. This in turn complicated an already insupportable situation and generated new tangles of contradictions.

Due to the multifaceted nature of the Yemen conflict, addressing the regional dimension through Saudi-Iran reconciliation – as well as direct and indirect negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis – is a positive signal but it is far from sufficient to ensure sustainable peacebuilding in Yemen. Ibrahim Jalal, a Non-Resident Scholar at The Middle East Institute in Washington, stressed that on a tactical level, there could be a breakthrough in the form of an extended ceasefire, followed by the potential resumption of intra-Yemeni negotiations.<sup>22</sup> However, whether and to what extent such steps will lead to lasting peace remains an open question. Hans Grundberg, the UN envoy for Yemen, hopefully and enthusiastically described the ongoing efforts, including the Saudi and Omani talks in Sanaa, as “the closest Yemen has been to real progress towards lasting peace” since the war began.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A Saudi-Iran reconciliation may not end the war in Yemen just yet // CNN. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/22/middleeast/yemen-war-saudi-iran-mime-intl/index.html>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> China and the Saudi-Iran rapprochement: Implications for Yemen // The Middle East Institute. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-and-saudi-iran-rapprochement-implications-yemen>

<sup>23</sup> Saudi officials visit Yemen’s capital for talks with rebels // AP News. URL: <https://apnews.com/article/yemen-saudi-arabia-houthis-peace-war-faf722203eca078d91e040c1c296a8f7>

As a whole, Iran-Saudi Arabian reconciliation might definitely give the impetus to spread the spirit of cooperation to other regional issues. If this China-brokered diplomatic breakthrough removes a single layer of conflict related to Iran-Saudi Arabian proxy war, achieving a sustainable peace in Yemen will be in the more foreseeable future. To truly gain momentum, peacebuilding efforts in Yemen must address the internal roots of the conflict, represent the forward-looking aspirations of the Yemeni people and have both regional and international support. The intertwined intra-Yemen crisis can only end with an agreement among the Yemenis themselves of their own accord. Outside players should only facilitate the diplomatic solution to the conflict and economic recovery of the state, not interfere with sovereignty.