


A way to improve Iran-Saudi relations



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(Persia Digest) - Seyed Hossein Mousavian, former diplomat and spokesperson of Iran's nuclear dossier, wrote in the Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper:

The Saudi war in Yemen has plunged the country into misery; claiming the lives of thousands of civilians, displacing millions, and triggering a devastating cholera epidemic. As a Saudi blockade has tightened, famine is also spreading, leading the United Nations to describe the situation as approaching an "apocalypse" and on track to be the "world's worst humanitarian crisis in 50 years."

However, of the Middle East's many conflicts, a political solution ending major hostilities is most possible in Yemen. While the track record of successful diplomacy in the region has been poor, the Iran nuclear deal stands out in recent years as a model for peaceful conflict resolution.

At the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference, the deputy foreign ministers of Germany, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom (the "EU4") gathered for talks on Yemen with their Iranian counterpart. This is a significant development, and if the Europeans get the Saudi Arabia (/tag/Saudi-Arabia) and the United States on board as well, the potential exists for a diplomatic breakthrough in the Yemen war. Notably, the Iran nuclear negotiations began as talks between the "EU3" (Germany, France,

and the United Kingdom) and Iran and only later did the United States join. Iran should enter negotiations with EU4 on Yemen only with the consent of Houthis otherwise its involvement wouldn't be legitimate.

The two Persian Gulf (/tag/Persian-Gulf)powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, have severed bilateral ties, are at the opposite sides of nearly every regional crisis, and regularly trade barbs at international forums. While the Saudis once tepidly supported the Iran nuclear deal, they now welcome Donald Trump's efforts to undo the agreement.

As U.S.-Iran tensions have increased in parallel, no second track or multilateral channels currently exist to allow for communication between them on the pressing regional crises. This compels regional states and other global powers to take the initiative to ameliorate regional conflicts, lest they intensify to the detriment of all.

International consensus on resolving Yemen crisis through diplomacy can bring the warring parties there to reconciliation, bridge the Saudi-Iran divide, and decrease the confrontational tone between the Trump White House and Iran. Such diplomacy is imperative given the catastrophic humanitarian toll of the war. It is also viable because, unlike the Syrian conflict, there are not a dizzying number of self-interested outside players. Three powers have consequential influence on the ground in Yemen: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United States.

With European diplomatic backing, the Yemen conflict can be the beginning of dialogue and de-escalation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The template for a political solution both sides can agree on already exists; it would be the same formula that was successfully implemented in Afghanistan and Iraq. The critical factor that allowed the post-war governments of these countries to stabilize was the major outside players, mostly significantly Iran and the United States, agreeing upfront on a general end-state, and then allowing the details to be hashed out by the relevant parties.

The end-state that was successfully enacted in Iraq and Afghanistan to universal international support was based on the following principles: the preservation of territorial integrity, power-sharing between the major domestic factions, will of the majority, minority rights, free elections supervised by the United Nations, and cooperation in delivering humanitarian and economic aid to rebuild war-ridden areas.

If Saudi Arabia (/tag/Saudi-Arabia)and Iran, together with the United States and European powers, agree on the same model for Yemen, the brutal war can move towards closure-saving an untold number of lives. This solution can be further cemented through an endorsement by the UN Security Council. The United States, which has been complicit in the Saudi military campaign, will benefit by supporting such an endeavor, which will allow itself to extricate itself from the Yemen quagmire. The heated debate in Germany not to send weapons to countries involved in Yemen war, should be welcomed and led to a decision by EU and other countries to stop weaponizing Yemen war.

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A Saudi-Iran agreement on Yemen will also create positive momentum for diplomatic solutions to be found to other crises in the conflict-ridden region. It will also improve prospects for greater cooperation between all regional powers and move the Middle East (/tag/Middle-East)towards sustainable peace and stability.

Seyed Hossein Mousavian is a Middle East (/tag/Middle-East)security and nuclear policy specialist at Princeton University, former spokesperson of Iran's nuclear dossier and author of Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace.

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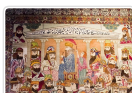
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