

China's Middle East Deal: Iran & Saudi Arabia Reestablish Relations as U.S. Watches from Sidelines

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author and analyst who serves as executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.

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Iran and Saudi Arabia have agreed to reestablish diplomatic relations after seven years and reopen their respective embassies within months, in a deal brokered Friday by China and signed in Beijing. The rapprochement between the two rivals is the latest sign of China's growing presence in world affairs and waning U.S. influence in the Middle East amid a shift in focus to Ukraine and the Pacific region. "If we have a more stable Middle East, even if it's mediated by the Chinese, that ultimately is good for the United States, as well," says author and analyst Trita Parsi, executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. He adds that the U.S. focus in the Middle East is mainly on helping Israel normalize relations with Arab states while "all of the pressure is taken off of Israel to end its occupation" of Palestinian territory.

Transcript

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AMY GOODMAN: We begin today's show looking at a new agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia to reestablish diplomatic relations after a seven-year rift. The deal was reached after four days of secret talks in Beijing in a sign of China's growing diplomatic power in the Middle East. As part of the deal, Iran and Saudi Arabia have agreed to reopen their embassies within two months. China's top diplomat, Wang Yi, called the agreement a victory for peace.

WANG YI: [translated] I think this is a victory for dialogue, a victory for peace, offering significant good news for today's turbulent world.

AMY GOODMAN: U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres praised the deal, saying, quote, “Good neighborly relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are essential for the stability of the Gulf region.”

The response in Washington was more muted. White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said the Biden administration supports any effort to deescalate tensions in the region, but he questioned if Iran is going to, quote, “meet their obligations.”

Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, spoke Friday in Beijing.

ALI SHAMKHANI: [translated] At the end of the talks, we reached a conclusion, to start a new chapter after seven years of breaking off relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia, while considering the matters of the two countries and the security and future of the region, to prevent meddling from extraregional and Western states and consistent meddling of the Zionist regime in the region. ... We hope that this new chapter will compensate for the stagnation of relations that took place these last seven years, and also leads to stability and security in the region, as well as the development and welfare of all its peoples.

AMY GOODMAN: We’re joined right now by Trita Parsi, executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, author of several books, including *Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy*.

Trita, welcome back to *Democracy Now!* Start off by your response to this thawing of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and where it took place, these secret talks in Beijing.

TRITA PARSI: [inaudible] really significant development in the region, not only because the Saudis and the Iranians have come to terms on their normalization, which hopefully will be used to reduce their tensions and, as a result, bring down tensions in other countries in which the Saudis and the Iranians are fighting each other, but also because of the fact that China stepped in and brought this deal over the goal line. It had already been prepared for more than two years by the Iraqis and the Omanis, but they had not managed to get it over the goal line the Chinese did. This is a major development, because China has so far not shown any interest or ability to be able to play that type of a diplomatic role in the region. Now it has. It has been successful, and it is sending shockwaves throughout the region and beyond.

AMY GOODMAN: So, talk about the role of China in negotiating the secret deal, or at least the secret talks, not secret deal anymore.

TRITA PARSI: Well, the Chinese were able to play this role for a couple of very simple reasons. First of all, they actually have excellent relations with both the Iranians and the Saudis. Unlike the United States, the Chinese have retained a neutral position on their conflicts. They worked very hard and with great discipline to not get themselves entangled into the conflicts that the various regional powers have with each other, and, as a result, have been in this position to be able to play this role.

It's also noteworthy that China had this diplomatic influence without having a single military base in the region, without being the main arms provider of any of these countries or without providing any security guarantees to any of these countries, which is usually the American model for mediation, which we're seeing less and less of.

If this, then, now means that the Chinese are going to play a greater role beyond this issue, then that would, without a doubt, be a very, very

important development. And there are signs that that is the Chinese ambition. It is not just a normalization deal. The Chinese want to hold a summit between Iran and the GCC countries, or the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, in Beijing later this year. This could be the first steps towards a fundamental, different security architecture in the region.

AMY GOODMAN: President Biden was asked about the deal on Friday as he was leaving a press briefing.

REPORTER: What are your thoughts on Saudi Arabia and Iran reestablishing diplomatic relations, sir?

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: The better the relations between Israel and their Arab neighbors, the better for everybody.

AMY GOODMAN: National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby also commented on the deal in an interview with Chuck Todd on *Meet the Press*.

JOHN KIRBY: Anything that can bring tensions down in the region is welcome, Chuck. And if this can help us end that war in Yemen, if it can help the Saudi people feel more comfortable, that they're not going to be attacked from the Houthi rebels that are supported by Iran, then we welcome that. ... It remains to be seen how sustainable this is going to be. We've seen Iran enter into agreements before, make commitments that they actually don't follow through on. We actually hope they do. We hope this does work to deescalate tensions.

CHUCK TODD: Do you think you're going to close this deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia? And do you think this deal with Iran makes it harder or easier for the Israelis to do that?

JOHN KIRBY: We certainly want to see Israel more integrated into the Middle East. We support the Abraham Accords, Chuck, and we want to see that integration continue. One of the reasons why the president went to the Middle East last summer was to help move that process along. You saw just recently Oman opened up their airspace to flights to and from Israel. That's an outgrowth of that trip that the president made. Of course, we got the Red Sea islands deal done. So, we've made a lot of progress on that. We want to see that integration deepen and broaden. Now, whether or not this Iran-Saudi Arabia deal, how that affects that, I think, remains to be seen. But it doesn't change our focus on trying to see Israel more integrated into the region.

AMY GOODMAN: Your response, Trita Parsi, to all that, both what John Kirby said and President Biden?

TRITA PARSI: I'm not sure if the president heard the question right, because answering about the U.S.'s effort on the Abraham Accords and Israel's integration in response to that question, obviously, seems to suggest a dismissive notion. But as we saw John say on TV later on, the U.S. welcomes this development because it ultimately can bring down tensions in the region. And I think that is truly an important point, because even though there's a lot of nervousness right now in Washington about China stepping in to the diplomatic vacuum that the United States itself has left by disabling itself from being able to play the role of a mediator in many of these different conflicts, the reality nevertheless is that if we have a more stable Middle East, even if it's mediated by the Chinese, that ultimately is good for the United States, as well.

The U.S.'s focus has almost singularly been on the Abraham Accord. And the Abraham Accord does bring about better relations between some of the GCC states and Saudi Arabia — and Israel, but does absolutely nothing to bring about a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which is the

actual real problem that needs to be resolved. It signals that the United States has essentially moved beyond even having the ambition to be able to help. And that would be one thing, but reality is that the Abraham Accord actually is helping cement that conflict and making sure that it cannot make any progress, because all of the pressure is taken off of Israel to end its occupation of the Palestinian territories, by moving forward on normalization with other countries. So, the incentives for the Israelis to move in the direction which actually would resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is removed by the Abraham Accord. And for what? For, you know, direct flights between various countries, etc. It seems to me a very odd trade-off. And it's, again, part of the reason why I think more and more countries are no longer looking towards Washington to help resolve some of these disputes, but potentially now we're going to see a trend in which the eyes are going to be turned towards Beijing.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about the Iran-GCC summit that's going to be held in China, scheduled for China later this year, the significance of the meeting being held there? What are the key issues expected? And also, China's role as, well, major trader with both countries — that's T-R-A-D-E-R — but the biggest consumer of Gulf oil, the largest purchaser of Iran's oil?

TRITA PARSI: Well, again, we have to be very clear. This is what the Chinese are proposing. We don't know yet if the Iranians and the GCC states all have accepted. I suspect they will. We don't know how ambitious the agenda is going to be. So, there's a lot of unknowns. But the mere fact that it's been suggested, the mere fact that there's a high likelihood that these countries will accept, is, in and of itself, very significant.

The Persian Gulf is one of the few areas in the world that does not have any security architecture at all. And to have China step in and move towards building something along those lines is going to be a very significant development, particularly if it does not bring about arms sales, does not

bring about security guarantees, but is actually helping the region build its own security architecture and be its own guarantors of that. That would be a very different approach from what we've seen so far. It would fill a vacuum that can bring about far greater stability in the region.

And from the Chinese perspective, the key reason why this is important to them is because they are in dire need of the energy in the Persian Gulf. And they need stability in the Persian Gulf. It is also important for them, it appears, that as U.S.-China tensions are increasing, and the United States is increasingly moving towards trying to contain China, by China playing this type of a diplomatic role elsewhere in the world and showing itself to be constructive, perhaps indispensable, that will make it all the more difficult for the United States to contain China.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Trita Parsi, executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. Talk about how this decision and the deal has been received in South Asia, in the Middle East.

TRITA PARSI: Well, throughout the Middle East, it's been welcome from countries such as Lebanon to Yemen to Iraq, Saudi Arabia, of course, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain. The only country that really has stood out in opposition to this has been Israel in the region. And we've seen statements by Yair Lapid, for instance, the opposition leader, who blames this on Netanyahu, calls this a very dangerous development, and others. And I think this is because of their fear that this normalization between Iran and Saudi Arabia will now mean that the Saudis will be far less interested or drive a harder bargain for it to normalize relations with Israel and join the Abraham Accord. The issue, though, is that this doesn't need to be an either/or. Saudi Arabia can have normal relations with Iran and later on also move towards normalizing relations with Israel.

What is the main obstacle there, I think, ultimately, is that unless the Israelis move towards a real peace and a two-state solution, it will always be a difficult position and decision for the Saudis to move towards normalization. Polls have shown that even though the Saudi population are open to having trade with Israel, they're not open to normalization unless there is a two-state solution and a Palestinian state. And this is not a minor issue for the Saudi population. This is not a public transportation issue. This is an issue that carries a tremendous amount of emotional potential. So, even though I think the Saudi crown prince is eager to normalize and has been indicating that, this is an issue that he has to be very careful about, because having the Saudi population completely be against it will be a problem for him if he goes forward without any movement on the Israeli side towards peace.

AMY GOODMAN: And what does this mean for Yemen, Trita?

TRITA PARSI: Well, that's where I think the hopes are high, that as a result of Saudi Arabia and Iran normalizing, agreeing to not interfere in each other's internal affairs, which from the Saudi perspective means that the Iranians stop supporting the Houthis, and that it will bring pressure onto the Houthis, that there will be a higher likelihood now that the truce that is in place — has expired but is still abided by, largely, by both sides — will now be able to be extended and potentially move towards a more permanent settlement between the two sides. Whether the Iranians have that influence over the Houthis or not remains to be seen. I think it's largely been exaggerated. So now the Iranians need to deliver on that front. But people I've spoken to are very hopeful about this, because even though the conflict in Yemen has its internal roots, it has been fueled significantly by the complication and rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

AMY GOODMAN: And finally, what do you think this means, China negotiating this deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia? Could China play a similar role between Russia and Ukraine?

TRITA PARSI: Well, it's very interesting that you mention that, because the Chinese, of course, first, a couple of weeks ago, launched this idea of them mediating between Russia and Ukraine, and it was not perceived particularly well in the West. Even before it came out, the proposal was essentially poo-pooed. And then, when it came out, it didn't appear to contain that much.

Reality is that I think down the road the Chinese very well could play that role, because they do have leverage over Russia, which is something the United States does not in the same way. Again, we're talking about a conflict in which the U.S. is clearly on one side. The Chinese, from the U.S. perspective, are on the Russian side because they have not taken the Ukrainian side, but I don't think that's necessarily the Russian view.

More than anything else, I think what's important here to realize, we are now in a multipolar world. And in that multipolar world, powers such as China — down the road, India — are going to play a more important role, perhaps a leading role, when it comes to diplomacy and conflict resolution. Our approach from the American side, I think, should be to flexibly adjust to this and welcome the positives that come with that, rather than seeing that as a negative and dangerous development, that it would be a threat to us. I think the threat would come if we continue to pursue approach, particularly in the Middle East, in which we're constantly taking sides and, as a result, become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. If the new normal is that other countries look towards China for peacemaking and America for warmaking, that would be a threat. But it doesn't have to be that way. It's in our hands to be able to change that.

AMY GOODMAN: Trita Parsi, we want to thank you for being with us, executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft and author of a number of books, including *Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy*.

Next up, we go to North Pole, Alaska, as President Biden moves to approve a massive oil and gas development known as the Willow project in northern Alaska. Stay with us.

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