

III. Diplomacy for Development

On the China-Negotiated Agreement Between Saudi Arabia and Iran

by Chandra Muzaffar

March 16, 2023—Chandra Muzaffar, a political scientist and a renowned Islamic scholar, is the founder and current president of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST) based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He issued the following statement to EIR March 16. Sub-heads have been added.

Friends, peace be with you! We are focusing today on a very important theme—the Saudi-Iran normalization of relations, under the auspices of the government of the People’s Republic of China, and what it means for all of us. I regard this normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, through the good offices of the Chinese government, as an event of immense importance, of tremendous significance. It could well be a turning point in regional and international politics. It could well usher in a new epoch in relations between nation states and peoples.

Let me explore this by first looking at its impact upon the three actors involved in this normalization, which would be Saudi Arabia, Iran and China. And then I shall look at the impact upon other nations within the region, which is West Asia and North Africa, and outside, and also what it means for global politics.

Saudi Arabia

Let’s begin with the actors directly involved in this extraordinary event. I’ll begin with Saudi Arabia. By normalizing relations with Iran, the Saudis are, in effect, sending a message to a number of groups in the region, which they have been supporting and sponsoring for quite a while, in their targeting of Iran. A number of these groups are known to all of us. They are sometimes described as jihadists, which is not an



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accurate term, but nonetheless, that’s what they are. They are there, and they’ve got a certain agenda. They have been targeting Iran in countries like Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, even Qatar, and a couple of other countries in the region, like Yemen, which is a very important target, and so on. These are countries which are targeted by these groups that are aligned to the Saudi regime.

The Saudi government and the groups linked to them have also been churning out a great deal of propaganda against Iran. Basically, anti-Shia propaganda, since Iran is a preponderantly Shia state. And as we know, the Sunni-Shia dichotomy is the most persistent and pernicious dichotomy within the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia is Sunni, and the Sunnis are the majority all over the Muslim world. The Shias are a minority and [the Saudis] have been targeting the

Shias through Iran. That has been going on for quite a long while, in fact, ever since the Iranian revolution of 1979, and it has been intensified in the last few years. That is yet another aspect of the Saudi relationship with Iran, which will now perhaps change because of this thawing of relations, this attempt to establish ties with Iran. It may change for the better.

Iran

If you look at Iran, the other actor, Iran has been doing the same thing. Iran has been supporting various groups in different countries in the Arab world against the Saudis. They've been supporting the Houthis in Yemen, for instance, and also other groups in Syria, in Iraq, in Lebanon, in Bahrain and so on. It is a sort of tussle that has been going on for quite a while. Iran has also been churning out anti-Sunni propaganda against the Sunni community. This has also had an impact upon various countries outside the region.

So you have two actors here who have been involved in this gigantic tussle, and it has been very unhealthy for the whole region. I'll come to that in a while.

China

Let me look at the third actor, China. China will also, in a sense, stand to benefit from what has happened, directly. Why? Because China has been portrayed in various countries in the Muslim world as suppressing and persecuting its Muslim minority, especially the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province. There has been an image of China that has been cultivated in the last few years by the opponents of China and the Chinese government. Now it's going to be very difficult to sustain that sort of attack against China, when China has emerged as a peacemaker between two of the most important Muslim states, one Sunni, one Shia. You can't say that China is against Islam. You can't say that China is an enemy of Muslim countries, because it has played this role of a peacemaker between two Muslim protagonists. So that's going to have a positive impact as far as China's image is concerned.

China and Islam

And at the same time, I think China's long relationship with Islam, which is not highlighted in the mainstream media, but a lot of people who know China and who know the Muslim world are aware of this: the very close relationship between the Chinese

civilization and Islam. The first mosque outside the Arab world was actually built in China. It's a very ancient relationship. And Islam has had an impact, we know, upon Chinese dynasties and upon Chinese governments at different points in Chinese history. Now, I think China would be able to project that aspect of China with this change that has taken place. And China perhaps will be seen as a peacemaker. That it is playing the role of a peacemaker, and has taken head on one of the most protracted conflicts within the Muslim world and perhaps amongst communities anywhere in the world, the Sunni-Shia conflict, reflected in the relationship between Sunni states and the Shia government in Iran. The fact that the Chinese have done that, and they've succeeded, at least to this point, in bringing them together, I think that's going to help China.

Impact on the Region

Now, that's as far as the three main actors are concerned. If you look at the larger impact upon the region, as I hinted a while ago, some of the conflicts may come to an end, or at least they would decline even if they may not come to an end immediately, because that doesn't happen in situations like this. That will take a bit of time, but there may be a decline in the violence and the killing, which would be very good if it happens all over the region, because you have these conflicts, as I pointed out a while ago, in a number of states in the region. So that may change. And also the anti-Sunni, anti-Shia propaganda—that may also decline considerably, as far as the region is concerned, and that would be a positive development, I think, for the region.

Israel and Palestine

The end of conflicts, if this happens, would perhaps, have a positive impact upon the region in other ways, too. It is quite conceivable that with the end of conflicts of this sort, the relationship between Israel and some of its neighbors will also change. Israel had thrived upon this antagonism between the Sunnis and Shias, and they had exploited it to a great extent. We know that this had happened in various ways, but if this conflict comes to an end and that antagonism declines, Israel is going to be deprived of one of its main weapons in the region.

Israel may have to re-look at its relations with the other countries in the region. It was supported

all along by the United States of America. It played a certain role for a while, a long while, and it may now feel that since China has become a major actor, the United States is no longer the dominant player. Israel doesn't have the protection of the United States of America. Israel may have to rethink how it's going to relate to the other states, and Israel will have to rethink its relationship with the Palestinian people in particular. It was able to deny the Palestinians the right of self-determination all these years. It has been able to oppress and marginalize and suppress the Palestinians.

It's going to be a bit more difficult now when it doesn't have the sort of protection it had at the international level. And when it knows that even regional politics has changed because new actors have emerged, and the new actors are having an impact upon the region.

China has relations with both the Palestinians and Israel, but China does not support Israel's aggression against Palestine. Neither does Russia, though they both have relations with Israel. So Israel will have to rethink its role and what it's doing to the Palestinians and to some of the other countries in the region. It has annexed the Golan Heights, for instance, which actually belongs to Syria. It has to recognize that the Golan Heights is not Israel's, it belongs to Syria. And maybe things will begin to change as far as that is concerned, and countries like Syria would be able to regain their sovereignty in the real sense. So that would be a positive development. In other words, an attempt to re-engineer relations where Israel itself may want to take up the initiative because it knows that its own position is changed in the region.

The United States and Britain

But more than Israel, I think it is the United States and Britain, and the other groups that are allied to the United States and Britain, that will be very concerned about this development, the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with the emergence of a new actor, a powerful actor. And with the sort of re-establishment of ties between these two countries, the U.S. and Britain will have to look at their own rules all over again. Can you go on manipulating the region? Can you go on playing one against the other? Can you go on exploiting the Sunni-Shia divide, the schism which has worked to their advantage for such a long

while? They will not be able to do it anymore if this normalization works out.

Britain and the United States of America, perhaps more Britain than the U.S., because Britain has been at the forefront of the exploitation of Sunni-Shia differences, and we know that. They will have to now ask if they can continue to benefit from this game, or will they have to change the approach completely. This is something that would also impact upon the whole region.

Peace and Development Worldwide

One could argue that with this change we may see peace in the region. We may be able to welcome an era, an epoch where the different states are able to live together, and perhaps even peace plans, which in the past were proposed, supported by countries in the region, but subverted by Israel and the United States of America in particular—peace plans, like the Arab initiative, which the Saudis were very keen on at one time. If these initiatives are brought back, and you've got a two-nation solution and there is recognition of each other's existence and each other's strength. If that happens, then I think we may be able to usher in a new dawn for the region.

And with a new dawn, we would also be able to usher in the development that all these countries need. They have been so engrossed; they have been so embroiled in wars and conflicts which have sapped their energies for so long. Isn't it time that they were able to devote their energies to something else, to development, to the transformation of the region, which is so important? And since this region, as we know, is also part of the One Belt One Road Initiative, a number of the countries are part of it. Perhaps the change will take place, and some of the countries in the region are themselves very interested in a new emphasis upon development. And that may also be something that would happen as a result of this accord.

These are the positive dimensions. But because the accord is so important and it changes the dynamics of the whole region, it changes relations, it changes politics, it changes the geopolitical map completely. You can be sure that there will be attempts to sabotage and destroy this epoch. I wouldn't be surprised if people have not already started working on this, how to subvert this plan, this accord, as it has happened in the past, in some other situations, some other peace accords. That would be a pity.

World Citizens: Support This Accord!

I think one way in which all of our citizens of the world can help, is if you can speak up and support this accord, and say clearly and in very lucid terms, that we see this as something important. It is not linked just to China or Saudi Arabia or Iran. It is linked to peace. And this is something we want to support because we believe in peace. We believe in development. We believe in transformation that benefits ordinary human beings, men and women everywhere. They need that. That is their future. And if we are prepared to speak up, perhaps there will be some change. It cannot guarantee the success of the accord. The accord in the end will depend upon, apart from the three actors, the two actors in particular, and China, it also depends upon all the other forces at work. We know that.

This is something that has come at an unexpected time, when there is a global crisis, when there is a war going on and tensions fill the air and friction is the order of the day. And yet you have this peace effort.

Don't forget that China is also behind the Ukraine peace plan, which has been put forward. Interestingly, more or less at the same time. One hopes that that also works in the long run. It is something which has strengths to it. It has got some weaknesses, that plan, but it has strengths, and one should support it. If that can happen, if this peace accord between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the beginning of something much more significant, if it's going to impact Ukraine and the world as a whole, if it's going to convince people and persuade people to look at countries and the roles they play in a different light, if there are efforts to bring people together, and they are prepared to support it, then I think we will be able to welcome a new dawn. That is our dream, and that is the dream of human beings everywhere. We don't want war. We don't want violence. We don't want this wanton killing of human beings, the destruction of all that is worthwhile in human civilization.

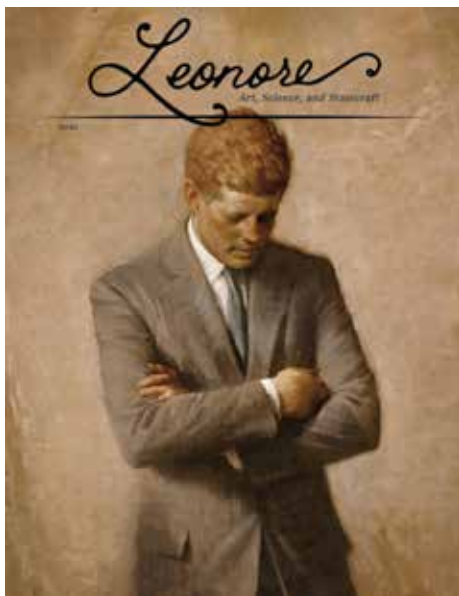
Thank you.

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