

164TH BERGEDORF ROUND TABLE

Riyadh, 13 March 2017

Tehran, 15 March 2017

**WHAT ROLE CAN
EUROPE PLAY IN THE
MIDDLE EAST?**

Executive Summary

- Whereas the nuclear agreement with Iran was criticized in Riyadh as short-sighted and concern was raised that the Islamic Republic was becoming stronger, the participants in Tehran appealed to the Europeans to do everything in their power to safeguard the nuclear agreement – against US opposition if necessary.
- The positions on both sides of the Gulf have become increasingly entrenched. Although Iran and Saudi Arabia cooperated in the context of this year's *Hajj*, rapprochement remains out of sight on other issues. For the time being, the establishment of a common security architecture appears unrealistic.
- Especially against the background of a realignment of US Middle East policy under President Trump, Europeans should strive more strongly than ever to defuse the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, and to offer formats for dialog on topics of common interest.

Bridging the Gulf?

For the first time in its more than fifty-year history, the Bergedorf Round Table convened in two places. Against the backdrop of growing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, a high-ranking group of European politicians and experts from administration, academia, and journalism traveled to Riyadh and Tehran. The aim of the Round Table was to identify the different positions, perspectives, and expectations that are currently being placed on Europe and to use the results to explore the policy options facing Europe.

Saudi Arabia is currently in a phase of transition. Domestically, it is hoped that the “Vision 2030”, as laid out by then-Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman – now the official heir to the throne – will lead the country out of its oil dependency, and provide an impetus for economic reform. The Saudi participants stressed that the Kingdom did not view itself as a regional hegemon; rather,

they reaffirmed Riyadh's interest in restoring the status quo ante and promoting stability in the region, so as to allow the Kingdom to focus on domestic policy challenges. Furthermore, they described the conflict in Yemen as having tied up financial and military resources. The primary aim of Saudi Arabia's activities in the Yemen was to curb Iran's ambitions for hegemony.

The Iranian participants stressed that Tehran also faced economic, political, and social challenges. They pointed out that the nuclear agreement had nurtured great hopes among the population of rapid and tangible economic development. However, although the Iranian economy had grown by almost five percent last year, and inflation had decreased from over 40 percent to less than 10 percent during President Rouhani's first term, tangible improvements in living standards so far had eluded the population.

“THE REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT ON BOTH SIDES OF THE GULF IS CHARACTERIZED BY SIGNIFICANT LEVELS OF UNCERTAINTY.”

The regional and international environment is characterized on both sides of the Gulf as highly uncertain. The Saudi participants stated that, with Donald Trump having assumed office, they placed high expectations on US-Saudi relations. One discussant opined that relations could hardly deteriorate from the situation under President Obama. To the contrary on the Iranian side, where uncertainty has prevailed regarding the concrete implications of Washington’s changing role in the Middle East. However, they also maintained that the uncertainty surrounding the new US administration afforded new importance to Europe. Provided its role was clearly defined, the current situation could signify an enormous opportunity for the EU.

After the Nuclear Agreement

During the negotiations over the nuclear agreement, many capitals around the world had hoped that, in the long term, the agreement might have a positive effect on regional stability. According to the Saudi participants, such hopes had utterly failed to materialize.

Moreover, although the Gulf states had ultimately accepted the agreement, it had caused further destabilization in the region. Not only was Iran becoming an economic competitor on the oil market, but Tehran’s exuberance had led the country to become a threat to the entire region. Furthermore, the Saudi participants lamented the negotiating parties’ shortsightedness, arguing that as soon as the agreement would expire, freeing Iran of its current commitments, the country would resume developing its nuclear capabilities, backed by a much stronger economy. Finally, the Saudis pointed out that the threats posed by a more powerful Iran had resulted in Saudi Arabia increasing its defense budget and military build-up.

The Iranians also criticized the agreement. Although trade between Iran and Europe had risen by 28 percent compared to the previous year, and foreign direct investment was already worth €12 million, the agreement was yet to provide the Iranian population with any tangible benefits. However, in many fields, such as the environment, transport, agriculture, culture, and scientific programs, cooperation had been strengthened. Nevertheless, the human rights situation in Iran and the lack of trust had led the Europeans to clearly limit their cooperation. At the same time, European and international banks remained hesitant with regard to investing in Iran. In part, this was due to the difficulty of predict-



ing US policy, as well as the uncertain future with regard to existing financial sanctions. The European participants repeatedly called on

“SAUDI ARABIA BELIEVES THAT THE NUCLEAR AGREEMENT HAS CONTRIBUTED TO REGIONAL DESTABILIZATION.”

all sides to strictly adhere to the agreement and warned against even the slightest violation of its terms. This included Iranian missile tests, which had caused irritation

among investors and European partners alike. In addition, Tehran was yet to provide the EU with permission, as noted in the agreement, to open a representation in the city.

Finally, the Iranian participants appealed to the Europeans to do everything in their power to safeguard the nuclear agreement. If necessary, this should include pressuring the new US administration to refrain from issuing new sanctions, as well as lift the current punitive measures. As a key actor in Europe, Germany was viewed as having a special role to play in this process.

Conflict Management and Regional Security

The European participants noted that both Saudi Arabia and Iran defined their positions in the region’s conflicts in relation to

one another; this was particularly the case in the conflicts in Syria and Yemen. However, irrespective of the fact that the situation was complicated by the hostility between the two countries, it was clear that both conflicts had assumed their own dynamic and that no quick end was in sight.

In Syria, most of the warring parties lacked an exit strategy. Therefore, the most urgent steps would be to maintain a sustainable cease-fire and to secure access to humanitarian aid. In addition, it was important to forge ahead with the peace talks in Geneva and Astana. Importantly, rather than viewing the two as competing fora, Iranian participants saw the Astana process as a precondition for the Geneva talks. The next steps would involve bringing about a political solution that was acceptable to all sides. However, this was said to be impossible without the involvement of external actors, such as the US and Russia. However, in the long term, it was clear that Iran and Saudi Arabia would have to guarantee any peace agreement, no matter how unlikely this seemed at present. The 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years’ War, was proposed as a model peace agreement, namely because it had been guaranteed by both regional and international actors.

In the talks about a possible settlement in Yemen, the debate about the proportionality of Saudi Arabia’s intervention played a major role. The Saudi participants repeatedly em-



phasized that they had been increasingly unable to rely on their traditional partners during President Obama's presidency and that they had felt little choice but to become more active themselves. Nevertheless, the Europeans criticized the attacks by Saudi Arabia as disproportionate to the threat posed by its southern neighbor.

The participants noted that the EU played no significant role in conflict resolution in Syria or Yemen because it lacked the military and political clout to influence the actors involved in the conflict. Most participants from the region believed that Europe's role should focus on humanitarian assistance and post-conflict reconstruction.

Given the increasing regional tensions, the idea of constructing a regional security architecture was perceived as unrealistic. Rather,

“THE COOPERATION OVER THIS YEAR'S *Hajj* IS A POSITIVE EXAMPLE OF HOW RIYADH AND TEHRAN CAN WORK TOGETHER.”

the focus ought to be on minimizing the risk of escalating tensions between Riyadh and Tehran, moving towards each other in small steps, and identifying common interests. According to one participant, these included maritime safety, securing trade routes, strategies for tackling environmental problems, and the promotion of regional stability. Efforts at cooperation between Riyadh and Tehran over this year's *Hajj*,

when both sides had urgently sought a joint solution to enable Iranian pilgrims to travel to Mecca, were seen as a positive example.

However, such readiness for dialogue and compromise was said to be lacking with most other topics, with hostile rhetoric and recriminations dominating Saudi-Iranian relations. None the less, in order not to lose sight of the long-term objective of building a regional security architecture, the Gulf states should remain in dialogue with like-minded neighbors such as Egypt and Jordan regarding the elements and mechanisms of such an order.

In this context, the EU could adopt the role of strengthening Riyadh's and Tehran's confidence with a view to enabling both sides to take the first step towards rapprochement. European capitals should also involve other regional actors such as Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan in dialogue to create the largest and most stable regional alliances possible. At the same time, the EU ought to offer general platforms for discussion, as well as encourage debate on specific topics such as environmental protection, infrastructure, and nuclear security. Finally, the EU could also serve as a platform on the path towards a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. However, this was said to be a long way off, especially if Israel was to be involved in the plan.

“CURRENTLY THERE CAN BE NO TALK OF BUILDING A REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE.”



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