

The Saudi Led War against Yemen, Backed by the U.S. (2015-)

“Tension Between the Axis of Resistance and the West Is Coming to Its End”,
Interview with Massoud Khodabandeh

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Negotiations between the western powers and Iran are continuing concerning a new nuclear deal. [Steven Sahiounie](#) of [MidEastDiscourse](#) interviewed Massoud Khodabandeh to gain insight not only about the negotiation, but a wide array of topics connected to Iran and the Middle East. Khodabandeh is a regular writer and contributor on Middle East issues in print, broadcast and documentaries. He co-authored the book ‘The Life of Camp Ashraf – Victims of Many Masters’ with his wife Anne Singleton.

Steven Sahiounie (SS): We have seen the Houthis launching several attacks on the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In your opinion, are these attacks in reply to the Saudi-led coalition massacres, or is it political pressure by Iran against Saudi Arabia and the USA to change the conditions of negotiations?

Massoud Khodabandeh (MK): If we look at history, we can see that there is consensus among all parties that the Houthis started fighting for the things that all Yemenis crave: government accountability, an end to corruption, regular utilities, fair prices, job opportunities for ordinary Yemenis. It is also true that they wanted an end to Western influence which to their view was the main cause of all the above problems.

In 2015 a Saudi-led coalition – backed by the United States – intervened militarily in Yemen in a bid to fight the Houthis and restore their favorite President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi’s government, who, facing the uprising of Yemeni citizens, had to run away and hide in Riyadh. The UAE is also officially part of this hostile coalition. It is important to observe that the UAE is both under Western pressure to do her bit to help the invading coalition but also vulnerable to any disturbances in the country’s position as both a trade and military base for the US, UK and nowadays increasingly Israel.

After nearly 7 years of resistance against these invaders, the Houthis – rather say the

Yemenis – are now in a position to effectively push back against one of the most brutal bombing and siege campaigns in the recent history of the region. This is of course not without the help of Iran, but Iran also has legitimate interests in the region, not least the security of oil exports and the security of the Persian Gulf.

Let me explain.

If Yemen becomes a subsidiary of a US/Saudi coalition, if pipelines and roads are put in place to export Saudi (and UAE, also perhaps Kuwaiti, Iraqi and Qatari) oil from Yemeni ports and if the Gulf of Aden (and the Red Sea) is secured for western tankers but not for Iranian tankers, then not only will Iran have a strategic problem, it is more than likely that the historic desire of western powers to start a war in the Persian Gulf (involving the separation of southern parts of Iran from the mainland) would certainly be on the table. This scheme has always been left on a back burner as any disturbances in the Persian Gulf would result in disruption to over 1/3 of the world's oil supply.

Hence Iran has legitimate security issues. Other non-western countries are also looking at this geopolitical phenomenon with interest; just remember last year and how a simple accident in the Suez Canal disrupted the flow of Chinese (and other) goods to Europe and beyond. The Gulf of Aden, Yemen, Djibouti, and the Red Sea are not somewhere you can just invade to change its fabric without huge consequences.

SS: We have seen attempts to have a peace deal between Riyadh and Tehran. In your opinion, will these peace talks between the two regional powers, Tehran and Riyadh, go through and if so will this end the war on Yemen?

MK: First of all, Iran and the KSA are not at war (let's hope they never will be), therefore there is no need to negotiate peace. Although the leaders of the KSA have historically always been conservative as well as pragmatic, in recent years the kingdom has been invited (or pushed) to play a more hostile role against Iran. The KSA has of course been backing the enemies of Iran for years (for example, Saddam Hussain during the 8 years of war and financing and supporting anti-Iranian terrorist groups like the Mujahedin Khalq and others) to balance regional power. Even though Iran has not been the cause of imbalance or at least not as persistently. Confronting Iranian interests in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon (the axes of resistance if you will) and confronting Iran in Yemen have always been on the Saudi agenda. But although there has been push and pull, it is clear that Iran is not the loser in this confrontation on either front, and the KSA is not getting the Western backing she hoped for.

There are clear indications that the KSA and her Persian Gulf allies are coming to the conclusion that a new treaty or at least a new approach (i.e. diplomacy based on mutual understanding and addressing the needs of both sides) with Iran and her allies like China, Russia, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, would perhaps be more effective than confrontation. The KSA's leaders have also seen that the Iranians are more inclined to respond positively and negotiate when their neighbors are working with them directly rather than bringing outside powers into the region. Iran's policy is based on independence rather than 'who has got the bigger backer' and as time progresses, the other regional powers are seeing the benefit of this line of action for their own stability and prosperity.

The KSA and Iran certainly have the potential to work very closely together. Their hostility is a concept imported into the region, and both Iranian and Saudi officials know this well. As

they move forward – a first negotiation step was started recently in Baghdad – they will certainly get closer together on a variety of subjects. The interests of Saudis and Iranians in the region are in many aspects the same – security and the stability of governments – and many of their differences have simply been brought in from other parts of the world and imposed on them.

The legitimate concerns of both Iranians and Saudis (and the UAE) in Yemen are not separate from their concerns about the wider Persian Gulf, Gulf of Aden and Red Sea areas. These can easily be addressed and resolved. In fact, the immediate result of such an understanding should be both Iran and the KSA getting together to help the Yemenis build a democratic process of governance as well as rebuilding the war-torn country. That is true in both Iraq and Syria and in much-needed cooperation between neighboring countries that has unfortunately not been achieved, perhaps due to foreign interference.

SS: The Israeli occupation is escalating politically and military against Iran and its allies like Syria, Hezbollah, Palestinian resistance, and others. Does Israel want a war with Iran, or are they just trying to put pressure on Washington to not make a new Iranian nuclear deal?

MK: There is a theory within the Israeli elite that we (i.e. Israel) have to be at least 50 years ahead of any other country in the Middle East. If we (Israel) cannot advance as rapidly as we need, then the only way is to send the other back 50 years. That happened – or at least was tried – in Iraq, Syria, Libya etc. If you recall history, what George W Bush was intending to do was to start with Iran as part of his Axis of Evil, but he was persuaded at the time that this would be too risky. Better to start with Iraq and Afghanistan and then surround Iran. Even then many Israeli officials were not happy and wanted him to attack Iran; essentially to fulfill their need to have Iran sent back fifty years.

Now, after all these years, Iran is not a country that either Israel, or the USA and her allies, could attack without dire consequences. Israel's population – if we count every Israeli passport holder as part of the population – is less than half Iran's capital, Tehran city. It is not feasible for them to even provoke Iran to war. Remember that Iran hit the American Base 'ein Al-Assad' in Iraq in retaliation against the assassination of their general Qassem Soleimani. This demonstrated very clearly that Iran will not hesitate to hit back against any attack on its territory. It is however true that the Israelis, through their powerful lobbies in the US and UK, are doing their best to stop any rapprochement between Iran and Western countries.

What is more important now is that the existence of Israel – in its current manifestation as an apartheid occupation force in the region – will be under serious threat if Iran and the KSA become partners rather than rivals.

As they say Israel is adamant to fight the Iranians, and others in the Middle East, to the last American soldier. Israel by itself however does not have a passion for doing anything themselves. Their provocative incursions into Syria and Lebanon are nothing more than an effort to engage the US and UK. It is simply not going to happen.

The only exit strategy for the people in Israel is to accept to submit to internationally recognized laws and norms: put pressure on their rulers to end the apartheid, have a fair and meaningful democratic process of Governance (to start with accept the system of one person one vote) and join the rest of the international community.

SS: The Iranian nuclear deal meetings have got to a crucial point. In your opinion, is it possible to get to a new nuclear deal, and if not, will this lead to war, or more regional tension between Iran and its alliances and the West?

MK: Let's start from beginning. It was the USG which tore up the JCPOA agreement and spat at their own signature on camera (demonstrated in a [performance](#) by [Rudy Giuliani](#), President Trump's lawyer, in a rally organized by the anti-Iranian Mujahedin Khalq Terrorist Organization, which was deported from Iraq and is now based in Albania). The door has always been left open by the rest of the signatories to allow the Americans to come back to their obligations and they are on the cusp of an agreement in Vienna. However, if they don't come back the agreement will continue, under United Nations scrutiny and observations, with or without the US. There is no "new nuclear deal" as such and what is being discussed is how the west can get back to lifting sanctions against Iran and how Iran can go back to the original nuclear restrictions. I believe there will be an agreement; although Israel is determined to torpedo the negotiations, America's benefits will outweigh Israeli pressure.

Whether or not the US and Iran come to an agreement in Vienna, the JCPOA will come to an end in less than 2 years. Iran is not holding back on advancements because of this deal and the West will not stop their sanctions but will continue them under other pretexts and labels - human rights, missiles, defense, terrorism, etc., you name it. The only time sanctions will actually be lifted is when Western countries realize that sanctions are hurting their own economies more than hurting Iran's economy. I believe that with Iran joining the Shanghai treaty and the fading of the US dollar as dominant international currency this is not going to be too far off. Iran's currency has stabilized in the last couple of years thanks to a variety of reasons. These include the opening of Iranian trade routes to Mediterranean ports as well as trade through Tajikistan and other neighboring countries. Only a few years ago, Iran's import/export trade was at the mercy of the UAE from where Iran's currency could be manipulated easily. Now, bilateral pacts with Russia, China, India, South Africa etc. are helping this stabilization.

I would conclude by pointing out that there has been a shift of power in the Middle East - as there has been a global shift. The dust is settling, and a new world and Middle Eastern order is on the horizon. Both the winners and losers of this change - if we can call it losing or winning as it is not as black and white as that - are coming round to the reality that accepting the new order is much better for everyone than trying to disrupt and disturb and try to bring back what is not deliverable.

I firmly believe that the tension between the axes of resistance and the West is coming to its end. The West is no longer in a position to dictate to these countries and frankly they really don't need to be dictated to either. In the post neo-colonial world and in particular due to recent rapid changes in the world of business and technology, the interests of all parties can be negotiated and protected over negotiation tables not the field of battle. I am not downplaying this - it will not be easy. It will not happen overnight, but it is certainly both a possible and desirable way forward for all parties.

SS: In your opinion, could the new Iran nuclear deal, if successful, lead to the lifting of Syrian sanctions as well? Is the situation in Syria tied into the Iran negotiations at all?

MK: Remember, the sanctions imposed on Saddam Hussain's Iraq are still in place and have not been lifted. New Western sanctions are being imposed on Russia and China every day. It is important to acknowledge that:

1. Unilateral sanctions, especially US ones, are imposed because the military option is either not possible or has been tried and failed.
2. Sanctions are only effective as long as they can be implemented and maintained. The days of effective unilateral sanctions are numbered. Monopolies are being replaced by alternative means. The use of non-dollar currencies, alternative financial transfer mechanisms and treaties that do not involve either US or EU are being introduced.
3. Sanctions will only be lifted when they are more harmful to the Western countries than the ones imposed on.

Having said that, the Iran nuclear deal has a great message. It is a success story of moving forward in a direction that preserves everyone's interests. History shows us that every war ends. Every conflict is resolved with a treaty signed by diplomats. The Syrian situation is no different. The people of Syria may have lost a lot in lives and livelihoods, but they have gained a lot as well. The self-esteem, the confidence, the new examination of the world and their place in it has most definitely created the springboard Syrians need to accelerate into a better future. This time more and more standing on their own feet and relying on their own powers. Syrians certainly don't lack the drive, the history or the knowledge needed for this.

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