



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

How long will peace developments last in the Middle East?



If the agreements between Saudi Arabia and Houthi rebels in Yemen from last week develop into a longer and more stable ceasefire, it will be the first significant achievement of the recent thaw between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Peace in Yemen was considered the first goal of the agreement between Riyadh and Tehran, mediated by China, which came as a surprise, and a geopolitical turn for the Middle East on March 10.

After almost a decade of devastating civil war, Yemen has been on the verge of a sustainable peace, where all previous political disputes between the pro-Saudi government and the Houthi rebels, strongly supported by Iran, should be resolved.

The conflict in Yemen and its resolution should be a model for solving other crises throughout the Middle East, where conflicting parties have been proxies of Iran and Saudi Arabia and their interests.

The region is not yet on the path of stabilisation

After the agreement on diplomatic normalisation, Saudi Arabia has been emphatically thawing ties with pro-Iranian factors in the region.

High-ranking officials of the militant, pro-Iranian Palestinian Hamas, will head to Jeddah for talks that will improve relations that have been strained for 15 years.

Last week, Riyadh hosted Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad, the first meeting at that level since 2011.

The great Saudi-Iranian diplomatic thaw, and particularly Chinese mediation, are still not a guarantee that the region has been put back on a track that would irreversibly lead to the stabilisation of the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia has shown determination to

proclaim regional security and political leadership, acting as a factor that quickly resolves protracted conflicts.

This effort has been in line with the "Saudi First" policy promoted by the Kingdom's leadership, putting aside the traditional attachment to the US and its Middle East initiatives to stabilise the region.

Limitations of the Saudi-Iran deal

Riyadh's new course has been the result of the passivity of the US to act more decisively in the region, and simultaneously, Saudi Arabia's stated intention to position itself as regional leader in every respect, even when it involves the use of soft power.

For Riyadh's megalomaniac projects, which it wants to use and position itself as an oil hub, a centre of business, tourism, and new technologies, the US has been too strict a partner due to its constant highlighting serious violations of human rights in Saudi Arabia.

China has been favourable in this regard. Such issues are not an obstacle to major joint affairs and diplomatic cooperation.

Although it acts as a reliable mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as regional powers, Beijing has remained distant from both sides so as not to take responsibility for the possible collapse of the agreement.

China has presented itself as a "reliable friend of the two countries", keeping itself at an equal distance from both, according to Yasmine Farouk, a researcher at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"This is a position that Saudi Arabia doesn't necessarily favour, even if it benefits from China's leverage over Iran. Second, China is also signalling its distance from the final outcome, despite reiterating the promise that it 'will continue its constructive role. Chinese

priorities in the Middle East remain largely economic, with security being a function of them", said Yasmine Farouk.

A significant limitation of the new Saudi "offensive" is that it maintains the agreement with Iran and respects Chinese interests, which do not necessarily coincide with the positions of its Arab partners.

Riyadh, for example, has been advocating the return of Syria to the Arab League, which it will possibly officially request at the summit it will host on May 19.

The initiative, however, is not viewed favourably by some of Saudi Arabia's important Arab partners, who remain strongly opposed to the regime of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad.

Inevitable Israel

The position of Israel cannot be ignored here either. Israel has contributed to the growing influence of Saudi Arabia, but has also been a factor without which Riyadh could hardly achieve its ambitions to stabilise the region.

Although Benjamin Netanyahu's government announced in its first days last December that its priority would be the further normalisation of relations with Arab partners in the region, this did not happen.

Netanyahu's ultra-right wing cabinet has turned to controversial internal changes, primarily in the judiciary, which have sparked the anger of hundreds of thousands of Israelis, mass protests, and internal instability.

At the same time, conflicts with the Arab population have been radicalised, which, combined, have encouraged Riyadh to take diplomatic initiatives to normalise conditions in the region into its own hands.

Without a cooperative Israel, there is little hope that Riyadh's moves would have more lasting effects, for example, in the Gaza Strip, one of the most incendiary issues in the region.

Risks are greater than initial success

The limitations and potential risks of the Saudi-Iran-China deal are therefore greater than they appeared to be in the first weeks of implementation.

Their main drawback has been the marginalisation of the influence and interests of the US in the "big package".

Saudi Arabia, as the protagonist of the new deal, emphasises that even without the US in the Middle East, important political and security affairs can be achieved.

The recent decision to cut daily oil production has been Riyadh's clearest message so far in that direction.

However, this strategy has been implemented in a circle of highly authoritarian regimes and their conflicting interests, such as the military exchange between Iran and Russia, which directly harms the security position of Saudi Arabia.

Although the US may look favourably on any peace success in the Middle East, even if it comes from states it considers apostate (Iran) or a strategic threat (China), its impact on the long-term stabilisation in the region is unavoidable.

For this to happen, a recalibration of US-Saudi relations and finding new common ground for their partnership is needed. At the moment, it is being neglected, and neither Washington nor Riyadh can be satisfied with that.