

IS SAUDI ARABIA ABANDONED FOLLOWING THE EASING OF TENSIONS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND IRAN?

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Abstract: The current improvement in ties between Washington and Tehran has caused Arab concern on Iran's increasing influence in the region, especially in Iraq. Arab administrations in this particular situation sometimes try to take advantage of Tehran's Shiite and Persian characteristics in order to depict them as a threat to Sunni Arabs across the Middle East. Instances of sectarian views may be seen in the Arab media, namely in publications such as Asharq al-Awsat and the satellite TV network al-Arabiya. The Jordanian king offered the most well-known instances, warning of a "Shiite crescent," while the Egyptian president said that the devotion of Arab Shiites is always to Iran. Despite the strong and enduring U.S.-Saudi ties, there are concerns in the kingdom over President Obama's friendly approach towards the Islamic Republic of Iran. The incoming U.S. government has expressed its intention to adopt a fundamentally different approach towards Iran, departing from the confrontational and isolating policies of the previous Bush administration. Paradoxically, it is often observed that the more American officials provide reassurances about the preservation of the historical and strategic connections between the United States and its Arab partners and friends in the area, the worse the feeling of uneasiness becomes. The Arab governments, including Saudi Arabia, acknowledge that the United governments needs Iran to contribute positively in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. As a result, they are concerned about a potential strategic alliance between the United States and Iran. There is a generally held perception in some circles that if the United governments and Iran improve their relationship, it would have a detrimental impact on Saudi Arabia and the smaller Arab governments of the peninsula. Therefore, every diplomatic gesture made by Washington towards Tehran is seen as being detrimental to the interests of the Arab nations.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Gulf politics being a zero-sum game may be questioned on several levels. The foundation of our discussion is a significant improvement in the relationship between the United States and Iran. While we do not want to make predictions regarding such occurrences, it is a logical starting point based on our argument. Our study will be divided into three distinct domains: security, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the economy. It is crucial to prioritize two distinct connections in all three scenarios. Firstly, it is crucial to comprehend the implications of the evolving U.S.-Iranian ties on the unique alliance between Saudi Arabia and the United States. Conversely, any alterations in the relationship between the United States and Iran would inevitably result in changes to the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. We want to demonstrate that the unsettling reconciliation between the United States and Iran does not necessarily have to be the frightening scenario that some people propose. Instead, a more equitable portrayal will emerge, in which possible challenges and benefits compete for attention,

and where the policy decisions made by Arab leaders in the Gulf region alleviate the perception of an inevitable outcome[1][2][3].

Summarizing the complex history of volatile international relations is a challenging endeavor. It is important to use simplified models that do not fully capture the complexity of reality. An accurate model that effectively represents a significant portion of the Gulf's contemporary political history is Henner Fürtig's concept of a triangle power order in the oil-rich Persian Gulf. This model highlights the rivalry for domination among three powerful nations - Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. A significant portion of the region's strategic maneuvering may be devoted to this triangular relationship.

Upon the Baath party's second ascension to power in Iraq in 1968, Iran and Saudi Arabia swiftly formed an alliance. Moreover, the Islamic revolution prompted Saudi Arabia and Iraq to form a stronger relationship, and subsequently, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait led to a little reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran[4]. One should not underestimate the impact of elements such as external meddling, ideological imperatives, internal politics, and the process of forming a state. However, the effectiveness of this regional balancing act seems compelling.

TWO-PILLAR STRATEGY

Prior to the Islamic Revolution, the regional order was primarily shaped by a combination of the regional factors mentioned earlier and the strategic goals of the Cold War. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran were aligned with the Western powers at this time. Undoubtedly, the two were indispensable in the implementation of the American twin-pillar policy[5]. There was already a sense of competition between the two parties over their dominance in the Gulf and their leadership in OPEC. However, the shared interests of the two kingdoms prevented this rivalry from escalating. The non-threatening character of the secular Pahlavi aspirations in relation to the Saudi claims to Islamic leadership also contributed to the preservation of this equilibrium.

The fault lines exhibited distinct variations from the current, well recognized Sunni-Shia division, which is definitely not without disagreement. Instead, as David Long accurately highlights, the division in past decades existed between conservatism (supporting the existing order between the Al Saud and the Pahlavis) and radicalism (opposing the existing order through Nasserist pan-Arabism, and earlier with the Hashemites in the 1920s). This was followed by Baathist nationalism and eventually Khomeinism[6].

IRAN: EMBRACING REALIST PERSPECTIVES

The collapse of the Pahlavi government in Tehran was the most significant event that changed Gulf politics in the latter part of the twentieth century. Regardless, it significantly reconfigured the triangle relationship and the strategic priorities for the United States. The model takes a while to activate. Initially, the Al Saud, in their customary non-confrontational approach, sent their congratulations to Khomeini on his triumph. Soon after, it became evident that the two nations had fundamentally opposing views and that Saudi Arabia's concerns about Iraq's pan-Arab ambitions would be overwhelmed by Iran's foreign policy goal of spreading the revolution. In an effort to protect themselves from what they saw as a potential danger, the Saudi monarchy provided assistance to Iraq in its war against Iran[7][8].

Although it is often believed that Saudi-Iranian ties began to noticeably improve with the election of Khatami in 1997, they really reached a stage of "cautious pragmatism" much earlier, just after the conclusion of the first Gulf

war in 1988. The Iranian menace, for instance, had been much diminished. In addition, Saddam Hussein assumed a dominant position and began to assert his power, which prompted the Saudi monarch at the time, Fahd, to reconsider and realign his stance inside the triangle. Retrospectively, his efforts to establish a relationship with the Iranians proved to be a prudent decision, considering the Iraqi incursion into Kuwait. Despite apparent indications that key figures in the Iranian establishment, such as the commander of the armed forces, Hashemi Rafsanjani, were inclined towards a policy of reconciliation even before the death of Khomeini in 1989, their efforts were generally unsuccessful.

Numerous individuals, including ourselves in other places, have highlighted the significantly restricted influence of this reconciliation between about 1990 and the early twenty-first century. One primary rationale for the constraints of this détente is the stark contrast in Saudi Arabia and Iran's relationships with the United States. The second aspect was the escalating economic issues in Saudi Arabia and Iran, particularly in the latter. This, along with the diminished influence of OPEC, led to intense rivalry between Iran and the Arab governments of the Gulf. However, there was a minor positive aspect to this negative situation: these economic challenges led to a push for economic diversification and international investments, which in turn necessitated a stable regional climate. Therefore, a significant number of individuals in the Gulf region acknowledged the importance of the pragmatic approach that was being established[9].

THE IRAQ CONFLICT

It may be convincingly argued that the "containment" of Iraq during the second Gulf war in 1991 effectively marked the conclusion of the aforementioned triangle. However, disregarding this point, it is abundantly clear that it has been of little use since the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

There is a prevalent argument that Iran emerged as the unequivocal victor of the 2003 Iraq war. While Iran has undoubtedly benefited from this, there are significant constraints to this assertion: Iraqi Shiites exhibit strong nationalist sentiments, as seen by their defense of their homeland against Iran during the first Gulf war. Moreover, religious sites in Iraq have greater significance than those in Iran, hence posing a potential danger to Iran's religious leadership. Additionally, the majority of Shia leaders in Iraq oppose the concept of velayat-e-faqih. Therefore, although Iran undoubtedly gained advantages from the elimination of Saddam, it also has a vested interest in ensuring that Iraq does not become too powerful.

Conversely, the Al Saud also gained advantages. They also celebrated the ouster of Saddam Hussein and felt rather secure under the protection of the United States, particularly during the Gulf War of 1991. The choice to align with the United States during this period had a significant impact inside the country, resulting in the kingdom's shame on September 11, 2001, and a subsequent surge of domestic violence after May 2003[10]. Considering the information provided, it is evident that both Iran and Saudi Arabia have a strong desire for two specific objectives: a stable and peaceful Iraq that is not too powerful, and a practical restriction on irredentist and sectarian assertions and behaviors[11]. Therefore, it is evident that there exists a greater degree of shared interests than often acknowledged. However, these shared interests are frequently disregarded due to the unstable situation in Iraq, the assertiveness of Iran, and the overall uncertainty about the regional power dynamics. However, according to the authors of a recent RAND analysis, sectarianism and ideology have a significant influence on interactions, but they are not the only determining factors[12].

THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

Their relations in the Levant are more adversarial than their approach in the Gulf, where the Saudis are trying to engage more than confront. This is mostly due to Iran's more forceful, if not confrontational, stance in the Arab-Israeli arena, which has prompted Saudi Arabia to take a more coordinated backseat. We will first look at the depth of Saudi-Iranian tensions in this particular Middle Eastern sub-region. Second, given this context and the potential for détente between the US and Iran, we will re-examine both the current and potential future dynamics between the US and Saudi Arabia.

It would be an understatement to suggest that the political battles in Lebanon and the war in Palestine have significant symbolic importance in the Saudi-Iranian fight for the support of the "Arab street." The Arab-Israeli conflict has long been utilized by Saudi Arabia as a means of internal justification and, more significantly given its contribution, as a tool for demonizing competing political groups in the area. The kingdom rose to prominence in the anti-Israeli alliance during the war in June 1967 and the occupation of Jerusalem that followed. Over the years, Riyadh has maintained a reputation of standing up for Palestinian rights; but, after the Israel-Hezbollah conflict in Lebanon in 2006 and Israel's assault into Gaza in December 2008, the situation has deteriorated significantly. Tehran's backing of Hamas and Hezbollah has allowed it to outmaneuver the Saudis and cast doubt on the Al Saud's legitimacy in the eyes of both local and regional audiences. Riyadh severely denounced Hezbollah for its "irresponsible adventurism" in the early stages of the 34-day Lebanese-Israeli conflict, placing the responsibility for the subsequent tragic events squarely on Hezbollah rather than Israel. As accurately recalled by Korany and Fattah, "Many observers thought that Saudi Arabia, like Egypt and Jordan, had decided to side with the U.S.-Israeli plan to eliminate the sources of threat and instability in the region." This was due to the clear and rapid statements of denunciation.[13] Saudi Arabia has stepped up its assistance for the Salafi groups in the nation in an effort to thwart Hezbollah's ascent. Some sources claim that this support for Sunni forces in Lebanon has even extended to various clandestine operations, such as financing paramilitary and sectarian political movements in Iraq, Iran, and the Palestinian territories in addition to Lebanon[14]. The Bush administration was obviously in favor of these activities.

TRADE AND HARMONY

The political economy of the Gulf is shaped by sectarianism, but it does not define relationships in the same manner. History demonstrates that the politics surrounding an issue greatly influence its boundaries. Even though Saudi Arabia and Iran's economic objectives in the 1970s were quite similar and consequently competitive, politics required a peaceful rivalry.

Likewise, only in the context of cautious détente could the two countries' common economic interests be acknowledged and subsequently strengthened until the mid-1990s[15]. It is evident today that there is little space for issues other than the big political ones due to the unstable political landscape and the enmity between Riyadh and Tehran. Still, it seems sense that a significant improvement in U.S.-Iranian ties would likewise change the boundaries of the regional economy.

Let us first state the obvious: Saudi Arabia has 25% of the world's known oil reserves. This fact would not change even if Tehran and Washington were to become closer[16]. Furthermore, it would not revoke the many long-standing, strategic, multi-million dollar or billion dollar agreements across several industries between American and Saudi businesses.

As long as Iraq is unstable, the United States will not have a feasible substitute for its imports of Saudi oil in the near future. Even if things were to change, Saudi Arabia would still be crucial to the world energy market because of the rising demand for oil throughout the world and the country's continuing growth in imports, notwithstanding recent rhetoric in Washington. Furthermore, the US has been using oil as leverage in international affairs for decades. The necessity to "control" Persian Gulf oil has been recognized by several U.S. administrations in succession as a way to curtail the independence of possible adversaries like China. Lastly, Saudi Arabia (as well as the other minor Gulf monarchy) has developed into a market for Western products as well as an investment opportunity as a result of its oil riches and consequent industrial development[17].

In Saudi Arabia, inbound foreign direct investments (FDI) increased from 4.5 percent of gross fixed capital in 2004 to 32.1 percent in 2006 (compared to 0.7 and 1.9 percent in Iran and 13.8 percent on average for the developing countries in 2006)[18]. The interests of several businesses, such as Chevron Phillips, Dow, and ExxonMobil, are obviously essential to the United States, and their interest in Saudi Arabia today beyond the conventional "access to feedstock[19]." These inbound FDI creates an interdependent relationship. It is not necessary to severely doubt the December 2008 Jadwa economic forecasts[20], which indicated a slowing of growth rather than a recession for the Saudi economy, given the at least steady and expected upward trend of oil prices. Remember that at that time, the price of oil was around forty dollars. Furthermore, the 2010 forecasts are looking pretty good, particularly when compared to the outlook for the Western industrial economy, despite the fact that the Saudi stock market lost 60% of its value and the total value of GCC assets in sovereign wealth funds dropped by an estimated \$600 billion in a matter of months[21]. Furthermore, since smaller Gulf monarchies rely more on banking, real estate, and tourism, the impact on them is now more severe. Thus, it can be claimed with some degree of confidence (if that is possible in economics) that many of the bilateral quid pro quo opportunities listed above will persist.

CONCLUSION

As was already said, the regional triangle has very little significance nowadays. What, then, is the most accurate schematic depiction of the intricate situation that exists in Gulf affairs right now? a "artificial triangle" made up of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Iran. While American involvement in the Gulf is not new, it is now more direct (in Iraq) and supports the idea of two against one (Iranian containment). In fact, he continues, it may also be called bipolar given how heavily the Arab Gulf nations rely on the United States[22]. Regardless, it's critical to highlight the triangle's artificiality: although the US has contributed to the regional order for many years, it has never been a key component and never wants to be. Leaving the when aside, an exit from Iraq will fundamentally upset this fragile equilibrium.

Some recommendations are as follows: the Gulf triangle has to be respected. But the equally prevalent idea of two against one should be discarded. A more balanced and peaceful triangle is envisioned, given the overlap of Saudi Arabia's and Iran's interests in Iraq and the tentative thinning of antagonism between the two countries. Iran and Saudi Arabia should be encouraged to develop this multilateral security system as Saudi Arabia can play a significant role as an intermediary in establishing this equilibrium. Iran and the Desert Kingdom are thus crucial if anything along these lines is the goal in Washington.

There are benefits that must be weighed against this loss, even if it is not surprising that some would call it one

for the kingdom. It is beneficial for the kingdom if there is a stable order along with a stable Iraq. Reduced hostilities may enhance Saudi Arabia's ties with Oman and Qatar in particular and may even promote GCC collaboration. The present Saudi-Iranian contest for the "Arab hearts and minds" (and the consequent need to walk a tightrope; this has sometimes damaged Saudi credibility both inside the nation and outside) may be significantly curtailed by an American-Iranian detente. Lastly, we have shown that there are significant opportunities for economic collaboration between Riyadh and Tehran. Peace is beneficial for business. These economic imperatives are now impeded by politics; nevertheless, if the political landscape changes substantially, these obstacles may disappear.

The interests of Saudi Arabia would be best served if all parties engaged took these factors—positive and negative—into account. While fearing Iranian or even "Shia dominance" is simple, it is more productive to envision a less isolated Iran and the possible advantages of repairing ties.

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