

Al-Sayigh's Deportation and a Warming of Saudi-Iranian Relations

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Brief Analysis

Today's announcement of the deal between U.S. law enforcement officials and Hani al-Sayigh, an alleged member of the clandestine Shi'i organization "Saudi Hizballah" with links to the al-Khobar Towers bombing, has strategic, not just legal, implications for the investigation of that terrorist act. The decision to seek al-Sayigh's deportation to the United States and his cooperation in gaining information about al-Khobar suggests that the United States may in fact be willing to grapple with the ramifications of what al-Sayigh has to say about Iran's possible complicity. Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, as Secretary of Defense Cohen promotes "dual containment" with America's Gulf allies, an equally intriguing development is afoot—a tentative rapprochement between a victim of al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia, and the state many observers believe is chiefly responsible for it, Iran.

From Conflict to Reconciliation? Generally, Saudi-Iranian relations are best understood within the context of both Islamic and nationalist tensions. The two countries represent competing visions of the Islamic past and future and vie for domination in the Persian/Arabian Gulf (the battle over this term is a case in point). One arena in which the two parties have played out these tensions since the Islamic revolution in Iran has been at the annual pilgrimage (the hajj). As head of the Saudi Royal Family, King Fahd has declared himself since 1986 to be the "Custodian of the Two Holy Shrines," a title until then reserved only for the now-defunct caliphate. The Saudi family guards this role jealously, and sees an obligation and a responsibility to facilitate the now close to 2 million strong pilgrimage. However, its approach to the hajj is very simple: "Muslims, perform your duty, avoid politics and then go home."

For revolutionary Iran, on the other hand, the pilgrimage is a magnificent, God-given vehicle for promoting and exporting the Islamic Revolution. Each year, Iran's contingent to the pilgrimage attempts to perform a ceremony cum political demonstration (which, as far as this writer can tell, did not exist before the Revolution) called "Disavowing the Infidels" (al-bara'a min al-kuffar, or al-bara'a min al-mushrikin). During this event, the faithful condemn America, Israel, and other "enemies of Islam" and, by implication, the Saudi government. The Saudi `ulama have branded this demonstration bid`a, an un-Islamic innovation, and have forbidden it each year, although Iran claims that it still carries it out. In 1987, Saudi attempts to prevent the ceremony resulted in the death of 275 Iranian pilgrims and 85 Saudi policemen. Iran deeply resents Saudi attempts to pose as the paragon of Islam while being an ally of "the Great Satan," and may have assisted directly or indirectly in the al-Khobar bombing in order to send a strong signal of disapproval to both Riyadh and Washington and to carry on the campaign to evict the "infidels" from the Gulf.

In this context, recent indications of a honeymoon of sorts between these longstanding regional and ideological rivals are perplexing. Low-level talks aimed at improving relations began in late 1996, leading one Iranian paper to talk about a "new chapter" in bilateral ties. In mid-March 1997, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited the Kingdom in order to invite King Fahd to the December summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which Tehran seeks to host. Saudi Crown Prince `Abdallah and Iranian President Rafsanjani met in Islamabad later that month, and the two countries announced the signing of an air transport protocol on March 30. Although the visit

never materialized, Iranian officials stated that Rafsanjani intended to make this year's April hajj. Iranian officials were surprisingly mild in response to the death of over 200 pilgrims during the 1997 hajj. Last month, Fahd congratulated Iranian President-elect Mohammed Khatemi on his victory, and Khatemi wired back his hope for the "opening of a new page" in bilateral relations. Together, all this hardly sounds like the beating war drums of states with daggers drawn.

Between Sunni and Shi`i Opposition: The key to understanding this shift in Saudi-Iranian ties lies in understanding Saudi domestic politics. Saudi Arabia is a country founded on a rigidly orthodox Sunni creed "Wahhabism," yet it has witnessed a growing Sunni opposition since the Gulf War. While perhaps not well-organized, this opposition is quite vocal. In mid-1996, four young Sunni oppositionists were executed for the November 1995 bombing of the U.S.-run Office of the Program Manager/Saudi Arabian National Guard headquarters in Riyadh, which took the lives of five Americans. It is this opposition which is of most concern to the Saudis, as it carries the potential of undermining the Islamic legitimacy of the regime. On the other hand, the Shi`i opposition, while not a major threat to the regime's legitimacy-Shi`is are only 12-15 percent of the population, and their type of Islam is anathema to most Saudis-has lately become more active. In August 1996, hundreds were reportedly arrested in the Eastern Province. Though Saudis certainly wish they had no Shi`i problem, they have found a silver lining in highlighting the Shi`i threat, i.e., it diverts popular and media away from the more serious Sunni challenge. Indeed, given that Shi`is are a minority, Riyadh can-both comfortably and legitimately-point a finger at an outside instigator: Iran.

Unofficially, the Saudis have let it be known that they suspect that local Shi`i members of a shadowy group called Saudi Hizballah, acting with Iranian help, carried out the bombing of the al-Khobar housing complex on June 25, 1996, killing nineteen American airmen and wounding hundreds of others. In light of the involvement of Sunni radicals in the earlier Riyadh bombing, it served Saudi interests to let it be known that the perpetrators of al-Khobar Towers were not from its Sunni majority. But, having done that, Riyadh was left with the big unknown: If there was convincing proof of Iran's complicity, would the United States retaliate? And, if so, how? While President Clinton is on record saying that clear Iranian complicity would trigger U.S. retaliation, it remains unclear exactly what standard of proof the Americans would require and what would be the nature of the retaliation.

For the Saudis, any direct U.S. retaliation would involve a temporary wounding of Saudi pride a non-Islamic "older brother" sticking up for its Muslim "little brother." But if Washington is going to respond anyway, Riyadh prefers that it be a heavy blow, an operation that would amount to a strategic military setback for Iran, instead of the rather ineffectual pinpricks which the Kingdom has witnessed being inflicted on Baghdad in recent years. Even though Secretary of Defense Cohen affirmed "dual containment" to the Saudis during his current Gulf trip, the flood of speculation in Washington regarding possible shifts in Gulf strategy, coupled with the lack of a strong U.S. and UN reaction to Iraq's continued flouting of the UNSCOM inspection regime, have left Riyadh concerned at Washington's diminishing resolve.

Against this background, the normally puzzling phenomenon of a warming trend in Saudi-Iranian relations makes sense. Since Riyadh is not sure if or how the United States will react, it prefers to pre-empt the worst of all possible U.S. actions-a retaliation strong enough to arouse the Iranians' ire at Saudi Arabia but too weak to actually cause lasting damage to Iranian military or strategic assets-by proactively improving relations with Tehran while encouraging Iran to hand over anti-Saudi Hizballah activists that it harbors. For its part, Iran may be interested in exploiting Saudi fears to ensure Riyadh's stamp of approval for Tehran's hosting of the OIC summit in December, a major event that would mark the Islamic world's full confirmation of the legitimacy of the Islamic revolution.

Deporting al-Sayigh: Until today, the biggest question mark surrounded al-Sayigh, whom the Canadian Security Intelligence Service believes to be a member of Saudi Hizballah and to have participated directly in the al-Khobar bombing. Saudi Arabia would understandably like to get its hands on al-Sayigh, both to find out details of the al-

Khobar attack and to control the flow of information about it; indeed, chances are likely that if he went to Saudi Arabia, al-Sayigh would soon be executed. Washington was reportedly hesitant to seek his extradition because it was not convinced it could obtain a conviction given the clandestine sources of the Canadian intelligence information on him. Alternatively, some argued that the prospect of a conviction that would directly implicate Iran in the al-Khobar blast, with the intense pressure to retaliate that would ensue, may itself have been giving the Administration pause. Now that al-Sayigh has decided to cooperate with U.S. law enforcement, what he has to reveal about Iran's role in al-Khobar and perhaps other terrorist activity has immense implications for the U.S.-Saudi-Iranian relationship and the direction of U.S. policy in the Gulf.

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