

Saudi and Iranian Rapprochement in the Face of Russia and Turkey

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Feb 15, 2017

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Brief Analysis

It is strange to hear talk of an alliance between Saudi Arabia and Iran, whose competition is notorious. The two states, who have clashed in multiple countries, now find themselves in a new political situation which may force them to work together. At the very least they may have to modify their respective policies by reinforcing those that could help lead to a rapprochement and by turning a blind eye to the most contentious matters between them - Syria and Yemen - even if only temporarily.

One sign of these efforts in just the past few weeks was the high-level Kuwaiti visit to Tehran, explicitly touted as a fence-mending attempt between Iran and the entire GCC, including Saudi Arabia. Another sign was the Saudi agreement to resume discussions with Iran about the hajj, which Iranian pilgrims boycotted last year. Iraq's foreign minister also publicly offered to mediate between Riyadh and Tehran, and Iran's senior military advisor to the Supreme Leader, Gen. Shamkhani, openly advocated rapprochement between the two major Islamic countries.

This reexamination comes in the wake of the Turkish-Russian rapprochement, a development meant to exploit America's preoccupation with its own political transition. Given that the new American president has expressed his hatred for Iran and the divergence of his future policies with Saudi Arabia, both nations look at this new era with renewed anxiety.

A number of factors may help connect the views of Saudi Arabia and Iran, including a recent visit by the Lebanese president, an ally of Hezbollah, to Saudi Arabia in his first trip outside the country since taking office. Saudi Arabia's agreement to decrease oil production, thereby helping Iran to continue increasing its own production, is another contributing factor. The Saudi revision of its procedures was interpreted in the Iranian media as a message from Saudi Arabia to ease hostilities as well as an instrument to empower Iranian reformers who seek to improve the economic situation and gain popular support against hardliners.

The other countries with influence on a potential rapprochement are Russia, Egypt, Turkey, the US, and Oman.

Russia has been making a major show of strength in the fierce battle in Syria and is leveraging its gains in favor of

Russian diplomacy and its own foreign interests. This has marginalized the Iranians and Hezbollah, who have supported Assad's forces on the ground. This has also left the Iranians grappling with the fear that they may leave Syria having sacrificed much just to benefit another foreign actor. It appears that this quiet infighting, characterized by the fall of Aleppo to the regime and the Russian police imposition to secure the city at the expense of years of fighting between the regime, Hezbollah and Iran against opposition groups. Despite Russia's late appearance in the battle, they were able to take control of the city. It was clear that the Turkish-Russian truce contributed exceptionally to preventing Iran from appearing in the terms of the ceasefire.

There had been talk about the emergence of a Sunni axis to overwhelm Iran and its Shi'ite allies. This axis would have been led by Saudi Arabia and Turkey with the aim of bringing down Assad. This occurred despite the clear conflict between the two over who would have power in Syria afterwards. But America's shying away from direct intervention and Russia's entry destroyed their plans.

In recent months, after further developments in Syria and the failed coup in Turkey, Turkey has begun to think beyond the AKP-led dreams of Sunni expansion. American support for the Kurds and their Arab allies in Syria, moreover, spurred Turkey to apologize to Russia and put the anti-American machine to work.. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, watched how Aleppo fell to its enemies, and it became clear from events on the ground – as well as from Turkey's official rhetoric, which began to eschew anti-Assad statements – that Turkey was pursuing national interests distinct from Saudi desires. With this rhetoric comes a sort of fear that Turkey could become a close ally of Iran if it helps to smash the Kurds.

Turkey has begun to concede an Iranian role in Iraq by accepting the Popular Mobilization Forces, which have been incorporated into the Baghdad military institution. Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim's visit to Baghdad came as part of Turkey's concessions to its sectarian enemy in exchange for the Turks obtaining Baghdad's support in rejecting the presence of Kurdistan Workers' Party fighters in Sinjar.

The official conflict between Turkey and Egypt began after President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi rose to power and overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood, who held the support of the Turkish government. However, Saudi Arabia, despite its support for Sisi and opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, tried to avoid hostility with Turkey in order to help with other contentious issues, including confronting Iran and Russia. But Egypt, trying to establish its role in the region and beyond, began to think in terms of its old Arab leadership and to speak about peaceful solutions rather than foreign intervention in Syria. This allowed Iran to draw closer to Egypt and increase the split with Saudi Arabia. Although Iran moving towards Egypt did not spare Egypt from staying close to the reluctant Saudi Arabia, it did make Saudi Arabia aware of the importance of continuing to uphold Egypt as a pivotal state in the region with fixed constants in foreign affairs. and ready to change its policies in issues it considers secondary, such as Turkey.

Although Saudi-Iranian hostility is nothing new, the shifting alliances and conditions in a hotspot like the Middle East carry many surprises. With the Turkish-Russian alliance, Iran will continue shrinking away from Russia while Saudi Arabia looks to do the same to America, especially given the fear that Trump will leave it on its own. Iran is also suffering from the possibility that Trump's antagonistic statements toward them will turn into action. The nuclear deal vaunted by the reformist groups in the Islamic regime was put at risk by Trump's statements during his campaign. The popular support that has sheltered President Rouhani's faction is rooted in this agreement, which should bear economic fruits with time despite the delay. If Trump intervenes to reconsider the agreement, the hardliners will return to the stage again and Rouhani's faction will lose the faith of the people who voted for him. Accordingly, if this turns into reality, the Saudi and Iranian parties will be reduced to the lowest levels of international protection, and this will encourage them to draw closer so as not to waste energy fighting one another.

The Sultanate can tie together the links between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Oman represents a spot of concern to the Gulf countries standing shoulder-to-shoulder against Iran; they cannot drag it into full confrontation with Iran and

fear losing its support. So they turn a blind eye to Oman's non-aggressive policies toward Iran. Iran, as a result, uses it as a base to communicate with the whole Gulf. Oman itself relishes this role, because it is suffering from a decline in revenues after the fall of oil prices. The Sultanate knows that Saudi Arabia cannot singlehandedly keep Oman's economy afloat. However, Saudi Arabia also cannot afford to give it up; its loss would be Iran's gain. This central role will increase the Sultanate's value to both sides.

The recent statement by Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif that there have been attempts to heal the rift between the two important regional countries is part of the campaign to open public opinion to the possibility of ending the disputes with Saudi Arabia, which Iran has made into a bogeyman among its people, just as it has been made into a similar bogeyman in Saudi Arabia. What Zarif said at Davos about how Iran and Saudi Arabia should work together to end the conflicts in Syria and Yemen after they cooperated effectively in Lebanon last year represents a clear response to Saudi Arabia's overt estimation of the importance of the role of the Lebanese president in the current period. It is part of a bigger rapprochement whose features have appeared on the screen, even if it still needs a long time to be completed. Though the potential rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia may occasionally face some disturbing challenges, such as the latest Houthi attack on the Saudi warship in the Red Sea, both Iran and Saudi Arabia will work to alleviate the impact of the event through reining in the actions of their clashing supporters and controlling the media discourse that often fuels such crises. ❖

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