



Saudi Arabia vs. Iran and the Role of the USA

By Jean-Francois Sez nec

The success of the Geneva talks between the P5+1 and Iran is widely reported as being opposed by Israel and by the Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia. Three important princes¹ have leveled much criticism against US policy in the Middle East, especially as regards Syria and Iran. However, it seems that no open criticism has been coming from the inner circle of major decision-makers in the Saudi Kingdom. In fact on November 25, the Saudi government issued a low-key statement of support to the Geneva agreement. Undoubtedly, Saudi Arabia feels threatened by what it perceives as Iran's hegemonic tendencies, which from the Saudi point of view include the development of nuclear weapons and the establishment of a Shi'a crescent composed of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. This crescent is perceived as threatening by the Gulf monarchies. For Saudi Arabia, the Shi'a crescent and the development of nuclear weapons in Iran are the two faces of the same coin: *the Iranian threat*.

Saudi Arabia was particularly upset that the USA did not attack Syria, even after it had crossed the line established by President Obama on August 12, 2012 concerning the use of chemical weapons against the Syrian population. It is also worried that the USA might make more nuclear deals with Iran despite the reported lobbying by Saudi Arabia.

This paper argues that Washington's deal with Iran and its abandoning the option of a military strike in Syria are due to three main issues: 1) The USA is tired of endless Middle East wars, which have brought nothing but grief and debt. It will not undertake military operations in the region unless its direct interests are at stake. The USA will not respond to entreaties from a third party to use force on its behalf and to promote its own parochial interests, like Saudi Arabia against Iran. 2) The USA does not need Gulf oil as much as it used to: it only needs to protect the sea-lanes to keep prices stable. 3) Most importantly, the US Administration has given up pushing for regime change in countries that refuse to democratize their political systems, however unpalatable to the West. The focus is now on reducing immediate and long-term threats to stability by pushing for the removal of all weapons of mass destruction from these undemocratic regimes.

The clash of the two crescents

The Shi'a crescent meets the Sunni crescent in Syria. Most unfortunately for the population of Syria, it is forced to bear the brunt of the ruthless proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

¹ Princes Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdel Aziz, Turki al-Faisal bin Abdel Azi and alWalid bin Talal bin Abdel Aziz

Iran has provided extensive support to the Syrian regime: money, oil and military support to the Alawi leadership in its massive repression effort. On the opposite side, the Saudis have financed the moderate opposition in exile, but are also providing substantial support in arms, money and perhaps unwittingly manpower to the more extreme groups. Unfortunately, the extremist groups have proven themselves the best fighters on the ground and have established administration zones that seek to impose a ruthless interpretation of the Sharia law on the population. It seems that any group, however extreme in its Islamism, is an acceptable party for Saudi support, be it private or public, as long as it does not refer itself as an al-Qaeda offshoot. These groups promote a rabid anti-Shi'a and anti-Christian ideology, turning the rest of the world against them and by association against the moderate opposition, and thereby limiting the Saudis' ability to unite the opposition. The current success of the Assad regime in regaining control of large sections of the country is due largely to the disgust felt by many in the opposition and its supporters for the Islamist ideology being imposed by Gulf-supported groups.

The Saudis' support of the opposition has been caused in great part by their feeling of having been betrayed by the Syrian regime. King Abdullah, before he ascended to the throne, had been working closely with the Assad clan to promote peace and stability in the Levant. However, as Saudi Arabia became increasingly influential in Lebanon, the Syrians killed Rafiq Hariri—the former Prime Minister of Lebanon, a citizen of both Lebanon and Saudi Arabia who was close to the Saudi leadership. The Saudis also see that the Assad regime has no qualms about using weapons of mass destruction, bombing civilian areas with airplanes and artillery, has no respect for historical sites and seems generally ready to kill and torture any number of people, be they fighters or civilians, men, women or children. King Abdullah in particular is highly sensitive to any regime imposing its will by sheer cruelty. He himself is not a democrat, but he has always tried to lead by creating consensus and promoting understanding between groups and factions. Indeed, he is the first Saudi leader to have publicly stated that Islam is a religion of love and tolerance—a view not in line with traditional Wahhabi doctrine—and to have organized systematic dialogues between sects of Islam.

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have tried to garner support from the large foreign powers in their proxy war. President Assad has received considerable help from Russia and to a lesser extent from China. Western observers may find it hard to understand the Russian support. It would appear that Russia has nothing to gain from supporting a very bloody dictator. On the other hand, it seems that the main Russian concern is not the Ba'ath regime, but the very concept that the regime (any regime, for that matter) can be overthrown by the United States and its close allies, in this case Saudi Arabia. Also China feels strongly that regime change is a policy to be opposed with determination. Both Russia and China feel vulnerable, having seen many of their former friends lost to forces of democratization fully supported by the USA. Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Georgia are examples of countries that have been lost to Russian influence. For its part China feels threatened by centrifugal forces in Tibet and Xinjiang. Hence both China and Russia have been fighting US efforts to bring democracy, which Russia and China view as *de facto* efforts to spread an ideology premised on breaking their hold on their people or their “near abroad.” US efforts, whether overt or covert, to bring democracy to the Russian and Chinese spheres of influence are seen as nothing more than a Western form of Komintern—the failed Soviet effort to spread communism throughout the world.

Another important factor in the Russian and Chinese mindset on Syria is that the two countries feel that a victory by the opposition in Syria would give a victory to Islamist extremists—which, in turn,

will sooner or later translate into further Islamist activities in the Caucasus or in Moslem western parts of China and Tibet.

The Saudis assume that the Syrian civil war is part and parcel of an Iranian strategy for taking control of the region, and of the Islamic world as a whole. The Saudis see the hand of the Iranians in every crisis in the region. They see the opposition in Bahrain, which is largely Shi'a, as manipulated by Iran. They see that the Huthis in Yemen are Shi'a, with some of their leaders based in Tehran. They are convinced that the current Iraqi leadership is completely dominated by Iran. They also see that Hizbollah, which they view as merely an arm of Iran, control Lebanon and support the Alawis in Syria. Most importantly, the Saudis feel certain that Iran is building a nuclear weapon capability to promote their hegemony over the region.

Hence they know they will have to fight Iran on many fronts in order to stop it in its tracks. However, the Saudi military is weak, despite the hundreds of billions of US dollar spent by the Kingdom on building a state-of-the-art military machine. They have among the most advanced airplanes, tanks and ships in the world. They have spent large amounts on training their men and officers. Still the military has not fared well against a small number of Huthi rebels in Yemen. The Saudi military seem to always look to the United States to protect it against all its foes, especially Iran. The US Navy base in Bahrain and the US Air Force base in Qatar are bases meant for the protection of the oil producing areas and sea-lanes—a euphemism for the defense of Saudi Arabia. There was no need for the Saudis to address their military weakness as long as the leadership could count on the US to provide a military umbrella against Iran, Iraq or Syria. This US cover allowed the Saudi military establishment to be dominated by various royal family clans, regardless of their ability to lead and organize. Unlike the main industrial and economical segments of the country, which are of world-class standard under the management of the civil service and commoners using a merit-based system, the military has been organized to provide internal security and protect the position of the royal family, not defend the nation against foreign threats. Today, however, actions against Syria aimed at fulfilling the Saudi goal of removing the Assad clan from power are no longer seen by the US administration to be protecting any US interest.

Some US based analysts think that the Syrian policy promoted by Prince Bandar Sultan bin Abdel Aziz has failed totally, and that Saudi lobbying to attack the Syrian regime is merely a smokescreen to hide this failure. Many in the US Administration cannot see the worth in blood and expenditure of yet another military involvement in the Middle East, and feel that the Saudis should be bearing this burden. In the case of Syria, however dreadful the regime, the US Administration, with support of the majority of the US population, does not want to start a new war in the Middle East. The USA has grown weary of its activities in the region, including Afghanistan. It has become clear that since the first invasion of Iraq, they have not advanced the goal of promoting democracy in the world. On the opposite, they have handed Iraq to Iran. Afghanistan is seen as being unmanageable. Thousands of US citizens have died, tens of thousands have been maimed and hundreds of billions [almost \$200 billion per year] have to be borrowed to pay for these wars—with no benefit to the USA. The question facing President Obama this past summer was not whether Syria should be bombed, but how to assuage the hawks in Congress and in Israel without going to war.

In fact, the US refusal to get involved in Syria and the reward of doing so by seeing the Syrian chemical weapons taken out of contention is probably seen by the Saudis as a complete change of US policy. The agreement between Mr. Lavrov and US Secretary of State Kerry on Syria was significant.

Certainly, the Russians became the guarantor of Syria's surrendering its WMDs; however, at the same time, the USA, by not bombing Syria, has signaled that it no longer seeks the overthrow of the Assad regime.

It is in this light that the opposition of certain Saudi princes to the Syrian and the P5+1 agreements with Iran can be viewed. It now seems clear to the Gulf regimes that the US is not interested in pushing for regime change for the sake of democracy. Therefore, the fact that Iran seems to be willing to give up its quest for nuclear weapons means only that Washington is likely to strike a deal with Tehran: in other words, exchanging its failed efforts to change the hierocratic regime that controls Iran, in return for Iran abandoning any effort to develop WMDs. From the Arab Gulf standpoint, such a deal would also mean that, even without nuclear weapons, Iran could maintain the Shi'a crescent and use its vastly superior numbers in population to dominate the region, without fear of a weak Saudi military force.² Hence, there is disappointment in the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council about the United States and its commitment to their support. However, no one in the Gulf can deny that an Iran without WMDs will have a positive effect on their ability to negotiate with Iran.

From the Saudi point of view, it would seem that the scenario whereby WMDs are exchanged for abandoning regime change in Syria is now being repeated in the nuclear talks with Iran. On the other hand, from the US perspective, regime change in Syria did not work because Saudi policies failed and because no deal could be achieved without the support of Russia and China, both veto-wielding players on the UN Security Council. Having no appetite for unilateral military action, the USA has to bargain with these two countries and give them what they desire most—the abandonment of the policy to push for regime change in countries that refuse to democratize—and in return obtain what will satisfy the US fundamental interest in getting rid of WMDs in the Middle East—except, of course, for Israel.

The Saudi leadership now seems to have understood that Washington's policy of seeking to change the Syrian and Iranian regimes has been replaced by a policy focused on the elimination of WMDs. To work under this new constraint, the Saudis could consider following a three-pronged policy:

1. They may have to actually talk to the Iranian leadership. Indeed they would have to revert to the previous efforts of King Abdullah to work with Iran. When Abdullah assumed the throne, his first trip abroad was to Iran. He worked ceaselessly to lessen the tensions between Sunnis and Shi'a. He welcomed Ahmadinejad to the Kingdom. He also tried to establish a dialog among the Wahhabis, the Sufis and the other Sunni schools of thought. However, this policy was abandoned when the Saudis felt that the more extreme elements of the Iranian leadership were instead trying to revive the hegemonic dream of the Shah and Ayatollah Khomeini. Today with a more amenable President Rouhani and the support of the Supreme Leader Khamenei in Iran, the dialog may be able to start afresh.
2. On the other hand, they are also likely to continue, indeed step up, their support of the Syrian opposition—if only to improve their bargaining position with Iran and help to break the link between Iran, Syria and Hizbollah.
3. They will have to actively support the P5+1 efforts to stop the development of nuclear weapons.

² Iran has a population of about 85 million, while the GCC states have about 48 million people in total, including 18 million foreigners.

The lack of US interest in pursuing military adventures in the Gulf in most circumstances also means that the Saudis will have to become serious about building a credible military machine of their own. Professionalizing the Saudi military may not be to the liking of many clans in Saudi Arabia, who will find themselves unable to expect positions and profits from the huge military expenditures. In fact, this professionalization may already be underway, with the appointment in April 2013 of a non-royal as head of the military to replace Prince Khalid bin Sultan.

Conclusions

If Russia, China and the USA, followed by Europe, agree on a basic new deal of no WMDs but no regime change, this may mean havoc for the oppositions in all countries that are trying to overthrow ruthless dictators with support from the United States. On the other hand, it will make for a safer world. Saudi Arabia will still feel that the Middle East states are treated unfairly, as long as Israel is able to keep its own WMDs. It also will mean a decrease in tensions in the Gulf region and a regionalization of conflicts without intervention from the greater powers. If, indeed, Iran and the P5+1 were successful in obtaining a real deal on nuclear weapons after the first step achieved in Geneva, that will imply that Saudi Arabia will be basically on its own in fighting against the hegemonic efforts of Iran.

Saudi Arabia is not without assets in a battle for influence with Iran. It has a very healthy economy and huge amounts of capital available. By contrast, Iran has to catch up after years of declining industrial growth. Saudi Arabia's oil industry is in excellent shape, while Iran's will take years of heavy investments by foreign firms to bring it back to par. Foreign involvement will of course come at a substantial cost, and unless bureaucratic tendencies in Iran can be checked, the results will be just as poor as those of Iraq, which has not managed to increase oil production in the past year despite the billions poured in the fields by foreign companies. Saudi Arabia enjoys superb credibility in the oil business; and Chinese, Japanese, and Korean buyers first seek to deal with Saudi Arabia, not Iran.

Thus, despite occasional complaints against the USA, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States will have to support the P5+1 agreement. The larger powers will not undermine each other through their proxies. That gives grounds for cautious optimism that, with the support of all the UN Security Council members (and of Russia and China in particular), WMDs in the Gulf and Syria can become a threat of the past. However, conflicts will not disappear, they will just become more regional.