



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Saudi Arabia, Iran and America in the Wake of the Arab Spring

by Dr. Joshua Teitelbaum

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 140, May 23, 2011

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Many in the West have looked upon the “Arab Spring” with hopeful optimism. But for the rulers of Riyadh the Arab Spring’s primary result has been a shaking of the strategic foundation and alignments that have shaped Saudi regional policy since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The Saudis had previously believed that they were the leaders, with US backing, of a united Sunni coalition against Shiite Iran. Now its partners have fallen by the wayside – Egypt appears to be dropping out, Bahrain is threatened, and the US is wobbly. And, US President Obama’s speech on May 19 did not calm the Saudis down.

Background

Shiite powerhouse Tehran has been a long-time Islamic rival of Riyadh, the conservative Sunni monarchy across the Persian Gulf. It has significantly influenced Saudi Arabia’s restive minority Shiite population, which staged demonstrations during the recent Arab uprisings and was responsible, in 1996, for the bombing of the Khobar Towers. A Shiite government is already in power in Iraq (on the US’s watch). Most recently, Iran, along with Saudi rival Syria, scored a victory when its proxy Hizballah brought about the collapse of the Saudi-backed Hariri government.

With the advent of the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia believed itself engaged in a zero-sum game in which it would give no quarter. It could not stand idly by and

see a fellow Gulf ruling family – the Al Khalifa of Bahrain – pushed into a power-sharing agreement. Outraged at what it saw as the Obama administration's abandonment of anti-Iranian Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the Saudis charged into Bahrain on March 14 to support its ally against a Shiite uprising, despite last minute US efforts to head off the Saudi move. The Saudis troops are still there, and Iran is enraged. Egypt's announcement that it was ready to reestablish diplomatic relations with Tehran, and the Egyptian-brokered rapprochement between Fatah and Iranian-supported Hamas have further contributed to a Saudi sense of abandonment.

Saudi-Iranian Relations

Saudi Arabia relates to Bahrain a lot like America relates to Puerto Rico, which is an "unincorporated territory" of the US. An Iranian presence in Bahrain would be comparable, for the Saudis, to the US having Russian troops stationed in Puerto Rico, or perhaps Soviet missiles in Cuba. It is just too close for comfort. According to Saudi King Abdullah, "The security of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia is indivisible – two bodies with one soul."

The Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, rejected "Iranian interference" in their internal affairs at a foreign ministers meeting held in Riyadh on April 3, 2011. Assistant Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Sultan told Saudi troops to be prepared for all eventualities: "Iran should listen to reason while making statements. What we care about the most is the directives of our leadership to protect the security of our borders and our region." The clerical establishment, led by General Mufti Shaykh Abd al-Aziz Al al-Shaykh decried Iranian "hypocrisy and deception," calling them "Zoroastrians," or pre-Islamic Persian polytheists, a common Sunni epithet for Shiites.

Across the Gulf, a stream of criticism poured forth from Iran. In early April, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called on Saudi Arabia to remove its troops from Bahrain. Alaeddin Borojerdi, Chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee in the Iranian Parliament, called the Saudi move an "occupation." "Students," or perhaps members of the government-sponsored Basij organization, firebombed the Saudi Embassy in Tehran. The hard-line daily, *Keyhan*, called the leaders of Saudi Arabia "Hebrews" since they supposedly did the bidding of Israel. The newspaper also warned the kings of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia that they would face the same fate as Mubarak. Leading cleric Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati said that the "Wahhabi" leaders of Saudi Arabia "stunk" because of their invasion of Bahrain.

Iranian websites broadcast images purportedly of Saudis destroying eight Shiite mosques in Bahrain and burning pages of the Qur'an. Chief of the General Command Headquarters Maj. Gen. Seyyed Hasan Firuzabadi stressed that the "Islamic awakening" could not be stopped by the Saudis. "Saudi Arabia made the biggest mistake when it intruded in Bahrain," he said. Most ominously, Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, military adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, threatened: "The presence and attitude of Saudi Arabia [in Bahrain] sets an incorrect precedence for similar future events, and Saudi Arabia should consider the fact that one day, the very same event may recur in Saudi Arabia itself, and Saudi Arabia may [be invaded] for the very same [reason]."

As popular demonstrations spread in Syria, with which Riyadh has been at odds for years over Lebanon, the Saudi press condemned Iran's support of the Assad regime. At the same time, Iran blamed Saudi Arabia, along with Jordan, for the unrest in Syria.

Saudi-Egyptian Relations

A pro-Western ally of Egypt since the 1970s, the Saudis are concerned about the direction Egyptian foreign policy might take under the new transitional regime – after all, Egypt, until now, has been a stalwart of the anti-Iranian alliance. They worry that new Egyptian leaders might seek to align public policy with popular opinion, which is more favorable toward Iran.

When interim Egyptian Prime Minister Isam Sharaf visited Saudi Arabia in late April, his main goal was to address the issue of what to do with former President Hosni Mubarak. He also sought assurance of continued Saudi investment in Egypt and of Saudi support for the Egyptian candidate for Arab League Secretary General, Mustafa al-Fiqi. The Saudis reportedly indicated that they would support al-Fiqi against the rival Qatari-backed candidate.

During his visit, however, Sharaf stressed that Egypt was intent on renewing ties with Iran. He tried to put the Gulf rulers at ease by stating that this would "not undermine the security of Gulf states because the security of Gulf states is important to us and to Egypt's national security."

Saudi-US Relations

With multiple interests across the globe, the Obama administration has been divided on the Arab Spring: Liberal interventionists, or idealists, saw US

interests as being nearly synonymous with promoting democracy, while the pragmatists, or realists, believed that US interests were much wider and should consider many other factors. Saudi interests, on the other hand, were more clear-cut, the threats closer by and therefore much more immediate. Obama's May 19 speech was a victory for the administration's idealists, to the Saudis' great disappointment.

According to reports, the US tried to head off the deployment of Saudi troops to Bahrain. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman was on the ground in Manama trying to mediate an agreement between the ruling Al Khalifa family and the opposition. After what the Saudis saw as the US abandonment of Mubarak, even a phone call from President Obama was not well received. Knowing that the Saudis were angered by its choices, America sent in top officials to mollify the rulers of Riyadh. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates met with King Abdullah in early April, after having been rebuffed (along with Secretary of State Clinton) in March.

Less than a week later, National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon arrived in Riyadh to deliver a personal letter from Obama to Abdullah. Although the contents of the letter were not revealed, the back-to-back visits suggested that both countries were keen to put relations back on an even keel. According to a senior Saudi official, the trips were an effort to discuss "how do we move forward...given all the things that are happening, in ways that best protect interests." Donilon told *Washington Post* writer David Ignatius that the letter contained a message about "the bond we have in a relationship of 70 years that's rooted in shared strategic interest."

But the Saudis have been rallying support for their approach and signaling to the US that it is not the only fish in the pond. At the end of March, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, former ambassador to Washington, was dispatched to China, India and Pakistan. Bruce Reidel, a career CIA officer who has advised four presidents on Middle East and South Asian issues, wrote that Bandar was reportedly checking Pakistani readiness to send troops to Gulf countries to support regime stability. His trip to China, too, was designed to shore up Beijing's support for the Saudi regime. The courting of China (as well as Russia), while not new, has intensified throughout the Obama presidency.

Conclusion

This is certainly a rocky period in Riyadh-Washington relations. As the US struggles to align its interests with its values, it finds it more difficult to support authoritarian monarchies like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. But values and interests do not neatly align themselves in international relations. While the US wants to favor democracy and oppose authoritarianism, the authoritarian Islamic regime in Riyadh still plays an integral role in long-term stability and assuring oil supply. In October 2010, the US announced an arms deal with the kingdom worth over \$60 billion. In early April 2011, the US Navy disclosed that Saudi Arabia had asked the US to prepare a proposal for the supply of warships with integrated air and Aegis missile defense systems, as well as helicopters, patrol craft and shore infrastructure. Even if this latter deal does not go through, it demonstrates that the long-term survival of the Saudi regime is still a major US priority in light of the mutual Iranian threat. And, the Saudis knew they could turn to America, indicating business as usual.

There are those who have counseled the administration to reach a new understanding with the Saudis that would lead to the establishment of constitutional monarchies in the region. But it seems the Saudis are in no mood for such talks, nor will they be for many years. The current King, Abdullah, is 87 years old and ailing. The Crown Prince, Sultan, is also over 80 and ailing. The next in line, Prince Nayif, is a known conservative. It is hard to conceive of the Saudi ruling family countenancing any power-sharing arrangement in the near future. Thus, both countries will have to continue strategic cooperation, even as their values continue to be at odds. When President Obama said in his speech “there will be times when our short-term interests do not align perfectly with our long-term vision of the region,” he was speaking about Saudi Arabia.

Dr. Joshua Teitelbaum is a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, principal research associate at the IDC's GLORIA Center, and a lecturer at Bar-Ilan University. He is also a visiting fellow and contributor to the Task Force on Islamism and the International Order at Stanford's Hoover Institution. His latest book is Saudi Arabia and the New Strategic Landscape (Stanford: Hoover Press).

BESA Perspectives is published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family