Iranian president's Saudi Arabian visit fails to lessen tensions

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For all of the official expressions of goodwill, the one-day visit of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Saudi Arabia on Saturday has done nothing to lessen the intensifying rivalry between the two countries.

Amid escalating US military preparations against Iran and urged on by the Bush administration, the Saudi monarchy has in recent months been actively intervening across the Middle East to counter Iranian influence. Saudi Arabia has assumed a far greater role in propping up the Lebanese government against the Iranian-aligned Hezbollah and last month brokered a coalition deal in Mecca between the two Palestinian factions—Hamas and Fatah.

In response, Ahmadinejad's visit was aimed at blunting Washington's diplomatic offensive to forge an anti-Iranian alliance of "moderate" Sunni states, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. The trip to Riyadh—Ahmadinejad's first since winning the presidency in 2005—follows a recent visit by Iran's top security official Ali Larijani and came as the US pushes this week for tougher UN sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programs.

Saudi King Abdullah made a point of meeting Ahmadinejad on his arrival at the airport and feting the Iranian president with a banquet in his honour. According to the official Saudi Press Agency, the two leaders declared that "the greatest danger threatening the Muslim world" was the attempt to "spread strife between Sunni and Shiite Muslims" and promised efforts "to stop such attempts and close ranks".

Beyond these formalities, however, nothing was resolved. No joint statement was released and no initiatives, even cosmetic, were announced. On his return to Tehran, Ahmadinejad declared: "We discussed the Palestinian and Iraq issues comprehensively. We have common views in this regard." But it soon became evident that they did not.

As Ahmadinejad was making his statements in Tehran, the Saudi Press Agency announced that the Iranian president had "voiced support for the Arab peace initiative endorsed by the Arab summit in Beirut in 2002". The Saudi-engineered plan, which would normalise relations with Israel in exchange for the establishment of a Palestinian state, has never been accepted by Tehran. Ahmadinejad in particular has sought to posture as an intransigent defender of the Palestinians by calling for Israel to be "wiped off the map". In response, an Iranian presidential spokesman cautiously announced that "no discussions were held in this regard".

Nor was there agreement on other matters. Ahmadinejad told the Iranian media that he and the king had discussed "the plots carried out by the enemies in order to divide the world of Islam". The two leaders, he said, "were fully aware of the threats of our enemies and we condemned them". Ahmadinejad clearly numbers the US among Iran's "enemies", yet Saudi Arabia is a longtime US ally and has been strengthening its ties. The comments were met with silence in Riyadh.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are just as far apart on Iraq. While the Iranian regime calls for an end to the US occupation, the Saudi monarchy has opposed any withdrawal of US troops fearing it would leave in power a Shiite-dominated government with close ties to Iran. King Abdullah reportedly warned US Vice President Dick Cheney during his visit to Riyadh last November that Saudi Arabia would actively back Sunni insurgents if the US began a pull-out from Iraq. Within Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, Sunni fundamentalist clerics have openly denounced Shiite Iran as a more dangerous enemy than either the US or Israel.

A Saudi analyst with close ties to the government rather contemptuously commented to the *New York Times*: "In the end, they [Abdullah and Ahmadinejad] both know this is a geopolitical struggle. They can offer big words about

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ending sectarian strife, but what can they really do? Ahmadinejad simply undertook this visit to make himself look more cooperative with other Persian Gulf states."

A former Iranian official told the British-based *Financial Times*: "It's not a war between the Shia and Sunni. It's a hidden war between Iran and the Arab world. But the incidents in the region are also not about regional issues. They are about tensions between Iran and the US. Arab countries are having to choose between the two, and they go with America."

While wanting to avoid another war in the region, the Saudi regime has been strengthened by the growing US naval presence in the Persian Gulf and escalating US propaganda against Tehran. King Abdullah no doubt used the talks to intensify the pressure on Ahmadinejad prior to a regional conference on Iraqi security in Baghdad this Saturday.

Along with other Middle Eastern and international delegates, US officials are due to attend, together with their Iranian counterparts, fuelling speculation that the Bush administration is making a "shift" in its longstanding refusal to hold direct negotiations. The rather frosty meeting between King Abdullah and Ahmadinejad in Riyadh is another indication that Washington, far from looking to open talks with Tehran, will exploit the opportunity to ratchet up its threats.

Commenting on Ahmadinejad's visit, US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack declared: "We hope that they [the Saudis] send a message to the Iranian president that across a wide spectrum the Iranian behaviour in the region and around the world is just unacceptable, whether it's their support for terrorism or their pursuit of weapons of mass destruction or their efforts to block any sort of progress in building a democracy in Lebanon or in the Palestinian areas."

The very fact that Ahmadinejad's trip to Saudi Arabia attracted close attention in the international media is another symptom of the escalating tensions being produced by the Bush administration's preparations for war against Iran. A lengthy article by veteran journalist Seymour Hersh in last week's *New Yorker* pointed to Saudi-US collaboration in funding anti-Hezbollah groups in Lebanon, including Sunni extremists sympathetic to Al Qaeda, and opposition parties inside Syria, a close Iranian ally.

The oil-rich Gulf states have also become arenas of intrigue. A lurid story in yesterday's British-based *Sunday Telegraph* declared that "Iran has trained secret networks of agents across the Gulf states to attack Western interests and incite unrest in the event of a military strike against its nuclear program." The details from a disenchanted former Iranian diplomat, who now lives in exile in Europe, claimed that Dubai was "a hub for regional intelligence operations" because of the large number of Iranians working there.

These accusations will undoubtedly be added to the "wide spectrum" of allegations being made by the US to justify its confrontation with Iran. It should be noted, however, that Iran is not alone in using Dubai as a base of operations. A US Council on Foreign Relations publication last month revealed that "about half a dozen US State Department officials have opened a diplomatic mission there to collect information about Iranians in the region...

"The Dubai-based embassy is the first of its kind devoted to Iran since diplomatic relations were severed after the 1979 seizure of the US embassy in Tehran and subsequent hostage crisis. A State Department official based in Dubai rejects the term 'listening station,' because 'it makes it sound like we have radars hanging out our windows and "station" sounds like the CIA.' The purpose of the post, the official continues, 'is to get a sense of what's going on in Iran. It is not some recruiting office and is not organising the next revolution in Iran.' Still, the official says the Iranian press is very concerned by the US presence in Dubai, which it refers to as the 'regime-change office'."

Notwithstanding its implausible declaration of benign intent, the existence of a US diplomatic post in Dubai specifically targetted against Tehran is just one more indication that the Bush administration is rapidly intensifying a confrontation with Iran that threatens to engulf the entire region.

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