

Saudi Arabia backs US campaign against Iran

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Last week, the Sunday *Times* of London revealed that Saudi Arabia has conducted tests to let Israeli jets pass through its airspace for a bombing raid on Iran's nuclear facilities.

The *Times* quoted a US defence source: "They have already done tests to make sure their own jets aren't scrambled and no one gets shot down. This has all been done with the agreement of the [US] State Department."

The *Times* report continued, "The four main targets for any raid on Iran would be the uranium enrichment facilities at Natanz and Qom, the gas storage development at Isfahan and the heavy-water reactor at Arak. Secondary targets include the lightwater reactor at Bushehr, which could produce weapons-grade plutonium when complete."

These reports come after years of sanctions and war threats by Israel and the US against Iran, citing Iran's alleged nuclear weapons programme.

The significance of the Saudi plans lies in the fact that the targets are more than 2,000 km away from Israel. Even with aerial refueling, a successful raid would be a difficult operation for the Israeli military, which historically evolved to attack its neighbors, such as Egypt and Syria. It lacks the capability for long-distance operations, particularly against a widely spread set of targets in a country the size of Iran. The *Times* noted, "An open corridor across northern Saudi Arabia would significantly shorten the distance" to be traveled by Israeli fighter planes.

Given the *Times*'s reputation as an outlet for leaks from Israeli military intelligence, this revelation prompted extensive comment in the Middle East. Saudi officials denied the report, claiming that they would not allow Saudi territory to be used for attacks on a neighbouring country.

Such denials are at best unconvincing, given that Saudi Arabia has a long history of backing Washington's operations in the Middle East—most notably, serving as a base for US forces in the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq.

Recent months have seen increasing tensions between

Riyadh and Tehran. Arab regimes are pressing the US to adopt a tougher stance with respect to Iran's nuclear programme. In a meeting with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Riyadh in February, Saudi Foreign Minister Al-Faisal stated that the Iranian nuclear threat demands "a more immediate solution" than sanctions.

In March, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates helped the US to defuse Chinese opposition to UN sanctions against Iran, by reassuring Beijing that they would increase their oil exports to China, if sanctions against Iran cut the amount of oil China could import from Iran.

In addition to fears of the regional geopolitical implications of Iran's nuclear programme, the Saudi monarchy is concerned about the internal implications of tensions between the Shiite-populist Iranian regime and the Sunni Saudi monarchy. As a result, it has supported the US and European campaign against Iran.

These concerns were highlighted by the recent war between Shiite Houthi rebels and the US-allied Yemeni government of Ali Abdullah Saleh in northern Yemen, near the border with Saudi Arabia. The Saudi regime worried about the impact of the Houthi uprising on its own southern Shiite population. In November 2009, the Royal Saudi Land Forces entered into Yemen, with the support of joint Saudi-US air raids on rebel strongholds. The conflict resulted in 133 Saudi casualties, with close to 500 soldiers captured or wounded.

US-allied Arab states accused Tehran of backing the Shiite rebels in Yemen and supported the Saudis. In response, Tehran accused Saudi Arabia of waging an unequal war against the Shiite population of Yemen, on orders from Washington.

The longstanding sectarian tensions between Shiite and Sunni Muslims in Saudi Arabia have vast strategic implications for the Saudi regime and the world economy.

Although there is a large population of Shiites on the Yemeni border, Saudi Arabia's Shiite minority is concentrated in the "Eastern Province," across the Persian Gulf from Iran. This province contains most of Saudi

Arabia's oil resources. Shiite opposition thus potentially threatens to disrupt Saudi Arabia's crucial oil production. Saudi Shiites are socially oppressed, facing restrictions on their religious practices and, since the 1980s, on their employment in the oil industry.

These tensions are bound up with the lasting consequences of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. From 1968, the year that Britain announced its withdrawal from the Persian Gulf, until the revolution, the Iranian monarchy regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi maintained friendly relations with the Saudi kingdom.

The Saudi regime saw the massive oil strikes that led to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and the Shiite populist regime that emerged from it, as a deadly threat, however. The Saudi regime feared that opposition to monarchy and US imperialism could spread to its own population, particularly as Tehran appealed to the marginalised Arab Shiite populations against US-allied Arab monarchies. Despite their hostility to the nationalism of the Iraqi Baath party, the Gulf monarchies backed Saddam Hussein in the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, in which they saw Iran as a far more serious threat.

Saudi-Iranian tensions rose dramatically during the "war on terror," as the US invaded or toppled regimes in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon—intensifying competition between the Iranian and Saudi governments for influence in the Middle East.

The coming to power of Shiite parties in US-occupied Iraq after 2008—notably the rise of a Shiite anti-occupation movement in Iraq around Moqtada al-Sadr—was a source of deep concern for the Saudi regime. It has been widely suggested that Saudi intelligence was behind numerous bombings in Iraqi Shiite areas that helped push Iraq into sectarian civil war.

The 2005 election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad led to a more assertive Iranian foreign policy, including stronger support for the Shiite-based Hezbollah movement in Lebanon. Saudi Arabia and the US, however, backed a Lebanese government led by Sunni politicians Fuad Siniora and then Saad Hariri after the 2005 US-backed "Cedar Revolution" in Lebanon.

Iranian reformists around Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami have constantly attacked Ahmadinejad's foreign policy. Mohammad Abtahi, one of the key organisers of the 2009 Green Movement protests against Ahmadinejad's re-election, said in 2006: "[A]t a time when all the Arab and Islamic states are at their lowest level of diplomatic relation with Iran, Ahmadinejad's visit to left-wing Latin American

countries to resurrect the Socialist-Communist axis would entail a huge cost for the Iranian Muslim nation."

As part of the broader US strategy against the Ahmadinejad government in Tehran, media in US-allied Arab countries are waging a press campaign together with elements of the Green movement.

According to Iraqi news network "Nahrain Net", Saudi intelligence last month instructed Saudi-financed media throughout the Gulf to launch a campaign against Ahmadinejad and promote the Green opposition on the anniversary of the Iranian presidential election. The goal of the Saudis, according to the Nahrain Net's report, was to "demonstrate that there is a real crisis in Iran," and that "the events in the last 12 months have boosted the reformists vis-à-vis Ahmadinejad."

European sources that leaked the news also claimed that the "Iran Section" of Saudi intelligence has been trained in the US and Britain and familiarised with the views of various sections of the Iranian opposition.

One such media is Al-Arabiya news television station, which rivals Qatar's Al-Jazeera and Iranian-owned Alalam in the Arab world. Al-Arabiya launched a Persian website before the June 2009 election and has dedicated the website to the views of mostly London-based Green opposition leaders such as Ataollah Mohajerani.

Mohajerani also frequently appears in BBC Persian TV, as a spokesman for the Green opposition. Alireza Nourizadeh, the director of the Centre for Arab & Iranian Studies in London and a Western intelligence asset who promotes the Green movement, is also a frequent source in al-Arabiya TV channel discussions on Iran.

Alleged connections between the Green movement and the Gulf regimes was the subject of intense debate in the 2009 Iranian presidential election. In his debate with reformist candidate Mirhossein Mousavi, Ahmadinejad accused Rafsanjani of colluding with a Gulf country in 2005, shortly after Rafsanjani's defeat in the presidential election, to subvert his government: "Mr. Hashemi sent a message to one of the kings in a neighbouring country that he would overthrow the new government in six months."



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