

Saudi Arabia angered by US-Iran rapprochement

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Saudi Arabia, like Israel, has bitterly opposed President Barack Obama's deal with Iran, accusing it of abandoning its long-time allies in the Gulf.

The US-Iranian rapprochement has soured Riyadh's relations with Washington. These have already been strained by Obama's about-turn on launching a military strike in support of the Islamist forces in Syria in September, his earlier refusal to support longstanding dictators Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt in 2011, and his now-abandoned backing for the former Muslim Brotherhood-led government of President Muhamad Mursi.

So enraged were the Saudis that in September they rejected their long-sought-after seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Last month, according to the Fars news agency, Prince Bandar Bin Sultan, director general of the Saudi Intelligence Agency, met the head of Israel's Mossad and several senior Israeli intelligence officials during the Geneva nuclear talks to discuss "containing Iran by any possible means, exercising stronger control over Syria's jihadist forces, sidelining Muslim Brotherhood and stopping the waves of the Arab Spring."

The Saudis were seeking to "explore ways of enticing the world powers into war on Syria," it reported, and were "co-conspiring to produce a computer worm more destructive than the Stuxnet malware to sabotage Iran's nuclear programme."

Prince Bandar reportedly visited Jordan last month to oversee plans to set up a Sunni army to oppose the forces defending the Assad government.

In addition, Britain's *Sunday Times* reported that Tel Aviv and Riyadh were coordinating plans for a possible military strike on Iran, and that Riyadh was prepared to let Israel use its airspace to strike Iran and cooperate over the use of rescue helicopters, tanker planes and drones.

Last month, the Riyadh-dominated Gulf Cooperation

Council announced it was imposing additional sanctions against Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran, within its member states, and threatened to expand the sanctions if its military wing continued to support the Assad regime. This followed the two suicide attacks aimed against the Iranian Embassy in the Lebanese capital Beirut and other bombs against Hezbollah strongholds in Beirut's southern suburbs, widely attributed to forces linked to Saudi Arabia. Such actions are aimed at undermining Hezbollah and restoring a Sunni government in Lebanon led by Sa'ad Hariri, a billionaire with vast business interests in Saudi Arabia, currently living in Paris.

Washington abruptly abandoned its anticipated attack on Syria and switched to engaging in negotiations with Iran because it calculated that, with the Iranian regime buckling under crippling US-European economic sanctions, it could harness Tehran to its strategic interests. This would free up the political and military resources to confront Russia and China.

Iran's bourgeois regime had indicated its readiness to accommodate to the US, proclaiming its eagerness to give US and European Union corporations privileged access to Iran's oil and natural gas resources and to assist the US in stabilising the Middle East, from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the Arabian Peninsula.

This is particularly crucial in Syria, where sectarian civil war threatens to spill over into the entire region, redrawing the national boundaries set in place by Britain and France after World War I, and leading to mass population transfers that will destabilise Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.

But Riyadh, no less than Tel Aviv, is enraged at the prospect of playing second fiddle to Iran, a state whose power based on its well-educated population of 75 million and abundant oil and gas reserves it has long sought to contain. It loathes Iran and its Shi'ite clergy, in part at least because it fears Iran's influence over its own Shi'ite

minority.

Along with Israel, it used Tehran's nuclear programme as the pretext for sanctions as a means of containing Iran. According to secret US State Department cables released by WikiLeaks in 2010, King Abdullah repeatedly urged the US to attack Iran's nuclear installations, with the Saudi ambassador to Washington, Adel al-Jubeir, quoting the king telling US general David Petraeus to "cut off the head of the snake" in April 2008.

For seven decades, the sclerotic House of Saud has been dependent on US imperialism to face off domestic opposition and regional rivals. In return for military, political and diplomatic support, the Saudis have kept the oil flowing, cracked down ruthlessly on dissent, and prevented another Arab war against Israel.

Saudi Arabia faces seething discontent and widespread unemployment among its own working class and youthful population, and that of its even weaker neighbours, particularly since 2011. Its domestic response has been threefold: the brutal crushing of demonstrations in the oil-producing eastern provinces by the impoverished Shi'ites; a \$360 billion package of reforms whose delivery depends on high oil revenues; and measures to intimidate and deport up to 2 million of its 9 million migrant labour force to provide jobs for its own citizens.

In Bahrain, it crushed the opposition protests in March 2011 with troops from the Gulf Cooperation Council and shored up the rule of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa. It negotiated the transfer of power in Yemen, its southern neighbour, from longstanding President Abdullah Saleh to his deputy, Abed Rabbo Mansour al-Hadi, in exchange for Saleh's immunity against prosecution. In both cases, it laid the blame for dissent on Iran.

Saudi Arabia backed the NATO war to topple the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011. It has funded and trained Islamist forces in Syria and backed Sunni insurgents in Iraq who are mounting terrorist atrocities targeting Shi'ites and the Shia-led government's security forces that threaten to plunge the country into a full-scale civil war.

Now, the main thrust of its foreign policy—its opposition to Iran and the "Shia arc" that allowed Saudi Arabia and Israel to dominate the region—has been undermined by Washington. The US has now gone so far as to suspend aid to the umbrella Free Syrian Army, and there are reports that it is considering action against Al Qaeda in Syria and Iraq.

Furthermore, an increase in Iran's oil production—from 2.7 million to 4 million barrels a day (bpd)—due to the

easing of sanctions and Western investment, combined with increasing production in Iraq, would increase supply and drive down oil prices, which have averaged \$110 a barrel in 2013. This would threaten the wealth and viability of the House of Saud. The world's largest oil producer with a maximum capacity of 12.5 million bpd, it currently produces 9.7 million bpd, somewhat less than its recent average of 10 million. It exports just under 8 million, of which 1.4 million goes to the US.

Saudi Arabia has been further isolated by opposition from its Gulf allies. Qatar has had discussions with Hezbollah, the UAE is making contact with Damascus and Bahrain has invited Iran to Manama.

Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, the emir of Kuwait, speaking at the opening session of the GGC last week, said that the GCC welcomed the Geneva agreement between the US and Iran. Riyadh's attempt to form a closer union of the GCC, set up in 1981 as a coalition against Iran, was rebuffed by Oman in favour of a joint military and police command aimed at crushing internal dissent.

The US has sought to reassure the Gulf States. US defence secretary Chuck Hagel told a regional security meeting in Bahrain this month that the US was not retreating. "We know diplomacy cannot operate in a vacuum," he said. "Our success will continue to hinge on America's military power, and the credibility of our assurances to our allies and partners in the Middle East.... America's commitment to this region is proven. And it is enduring."

Hagel cited the US deployment of more than 35,000 military personnel, its most advanced aircraft and 40 navy vessels in and around the Gulf. He held out the prospect of more advanced weapons sales to the Gulf states.

But Hagel also warned that the rise of violent extremism among rebel groups in Syria had to be addressed, and called for efforts to ensure that aid for the opposition "does not fall into the wrong hands."

His visit to the Gulf followed a tour by Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif last week to four of the six Gulf nations in an effort to improve commercial and diplomatic relations.



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