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Saudi Arabia’s Desperate Measures
The Domestic and Regional Fears Fueling Riyadh
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There might appear to be no connection between the shipment of 25,000 pounds of low-enriched uranium out of Iran on December 28, 2015, which was part of the landmark nuclear deal between Iran and six global powers, and the decision by Saudi Arabia a week later to sever diplomatic ties with Iran. But there is.

Days after the shipment, Saudi Arabia beheaded Ayatollah Nimr Baqir al-Nimr. Charged with sedition, he was a prominent dissident and leader of the country’s Shiites, who constitute 15 to 20 percent of the population. When a hysterical mob, likely supported by some elements within Iran’s ruling elites, torched an annex to the Saudi embassy in Tehran, Riyadh immediately severed ties with Tehran. Iran sent to the United Nations an official letter of regret about the embassy attack, but it did not defuse the crisis.

Riyadh quickly severed all ties with Iran and pressured its regional allies to follow suit. This comes at a time when Iran is implementing the nuclear deal and is struggling to normalize relations with the West, suggesting that Riyadh has been anxiously waiting for a good opportunity to justify escalating its lingering cold war with Iran. For too long, Saudi Arabia must believe, Iran has had the upper hand, gaming the battlefields in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. To put the country back in its place, Saudi Arabia, whose regional policies have at times been at odds with Washington’s, has been maneuvering restlessly to compel Washington to come back to its side and let go of any détente with Tehran. Washington must resist falling into this Saudi trap.

TROUBLING TRANSITION

Authoritarian monarchies face their most perilous moments during succession processes and when they initiate major internal changes. Simultaneously going through both, Saudi Arabia is nervous and hides its insecurity by projecting power at home and abroad.

Less than a year ago, Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, who was 79 years old and in poor health, became king, precipitating a discreet power struggle in the royal family. His succession was smooth but expensive. He ordered $30 billion in new spending, including lavish payouts to state employees. He also sacked the existing crown prince, Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, to appoint the 57-year-old Muhammad bin Nayef instead and his 30-year-old son, Mohammad bin Salman, as deputy crown prince and minister of defense. The duo has since moved to consolidate power by promoting a sense of Saudi nationalism wrapped around Wahhabism, suppressing dissent at home, and pursuing an aggressive foreign policy. Their political fortunes are somewhat dependent on the success of these bold policies.
The kingdom, however, faces daunting political challenges. U.S. President Barack Obama has eloquently spoken of the country’s “populations that, in some cases, are alienated, youth that are underemployed, an ideology that is destructive and nihilistic, and in some cases, just a belief that there are no legitimate political outlets for grievances.” Given all that, sooner or later the kingdom will have to reform itself.

Saudi Arabia also faces serious economic difficulties. Thanks to lower oil prices and its lavish spending at home and abroad, the country had an $87 billion deficit in its $224 billion budget in 2015. At the same time, its foreign exchange reserves plummeted from $746 billion in 2014 to $669 billion by July 2015. The price of gasoline has increased by 40 percent, and the government has cut subsidies, always an unpopular move. Adnan Mazarei, deputy director of the Middle East and Central Asia Department at the International Monetary Fund, has noted that, apart from Iran and Iraq, the Middle East's economic outlook is dismal. For its part, Saudi Arabia’s economic growth is projected to slow. The remarkable, oil-driven prosperity that the people of the kingdom have enjoyed in the past has increased their expectations, and therefore any sharp economic decline could have destabilizing consequences.

To contain any negative consequences of the emerging political and economic challenges, the new leadership has pandered to the Wahhabi clerical establishment. Ever since the founding of Saudi Arabia in 1932, there has been a symbiotic relationship between the Saud family and the Wahhabi clerical establishment. The clerical establishment provides religious legitimacy to the monarchy and is allowed to control some key religious and legal institutions at home and export its ideology abroad. Anti-Shiism is a major component of Wahhabism, and this takes us to the beheading of Nimr.

Having incarcerated Nimr in 2012, Riyadh beheaded him in 2016 despite repeated pleas from Iran, Iraq, and even U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to release him. Nimr was no ordinary dissident: he was an ayatollah, a revered authority for Shiites. Saddam Hussein was the last Sunni leader to execute an ayatollah; his regime’s killing of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr in April 1980 was a contributing factor to the war between Iran and Iraq that began six months later.

By executing Nimr and 45 others, the new leadership has sent an unambiguous signal to the Shiite and Sunni dissidents that it will not tolerate insubordination. The new leadership is especially concerned about the restive and persecuted Shiite population that lives in the oil-rich areas of the country. Unrest there could easily metastasize to neighboring Bahrain, an ally of Riyadh, where a small Sunni minority rules over a large Shiite majority.

COLD CONFLICT

Two years ago, I explained in these pages the nature of the cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This conflict is not caused by—nor is it even about—sectarianism. It is about power and hegemony in the Middle East. But both countries have conveniently used sectarianism to enhance their agendas.

The Saudi decision to sever ties with Iran is directly related to its assessment that Iran has the upper hand in the region. They fear that Iran’s position will significantly improve after the lifting of the sanctions. And they know Saudi Arabia’s strategic value to the United States diminishes as tension between the United States and Iran decreases.

The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq was the most critical phase in this cold war, and it decidedly tilted the balance of power in Iran’s favor. The Saudis regarded the Sunni-ruled Iraq as the most effective counterweight against Iran and a brake on Iranian expansion into the Persian Gulf and the Levant. This is why the Saudis lavishly donated to Saddam Hussein’s war machine against Iran in the 1980s. The establishment of a Tehran-friendly, Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad was a momentous strategic setback.
Preventing the consolidation of a Tehran-friendly government in Baghdad by all means necessary was and remains Riyadh’s top strategic goal. That strategy failed, though, as Baghdad became Tehran’s close political ally and Iran substantially expanded its sphere influence in southern Iraq, right on the border with Saudi Arabia. In this context, the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS) has been both a real blessing and a potential danger for the kingdom. It is a blessing because ISIS is anti-Shiite, anti-Iran, and a destabilizing force in Iraq. It is a potential danger for the Saudis because ISIS seeks to create a caliphate whose heart would be Mecca in Saudi Arabia. This Janus-faced quality of ISIS explains the Saudis’ reluctance to seriously engage in the U.S. coalition to defeat ISIS.

The Saudi policy toward Syria, too, has paid no dividends. Iran has generously supported the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and has provided political, financial, and military aid, including sending military advisers and Hezbollah troops. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has provided a great deal of support to Assad’s opponents, including to some violent jihadists. By demanding the removal of Assad, Riyadh wants to kill three birds with one stone: bring to power a regime willing to terminate Syria’s strategic alliance with Iran; prevent Iran from using Syria to transfer money and weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon; and support a friendly Syria that will undermine the Shiite government in Iraq. Unlike Washington, where the top priority is to defeat ISIS, Riyadh is focused on removing Assad, even though it has yet to offer a viable alternative to him. But Assad is still in power. Moreover, Russia has militarily intervened in the civil war and is propping up Assad and working closely with Iran, Iraq, and Lebanese Hezbollah. Most important, and despite Riyadh’s unreasonable objections, Washington has officially invited Tehran to participate in negotiations to end the civil war.

In Yemen, too, the Saudis are in a quagmire. After nine months of aerial bombardment of the poorest Arab country, the Saudis, who are spending $200 million each and every day in Yemen, have not achieved any of their major goals. The Houthis are still powerful, and Yemeni President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi has not returned to power. At least 5,000 people have been killed, thousands more are being displaced, and the country faces a humanitarian disaster. The chaos created in Yemen by the Saudi military intervention has empowered al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and has opened the road for ISIS to establish a presence there. To justify its intervention, Riyadh has exaggerated Iran’s role in supporting the Houthis. As I wrote in these pages seven months ago, Iranian support is limited and is not a decisive factor in the civil war in Yemen. Ultimately, the Saudi government will have to either accept the Houthis as important players in the government or support the partitioning of Yemen, with the Houthis as major players in one part. In either scenario, its military adventurism is likely to pave the way for Iran to become a much more influential player in Yemen than ever before.

TOUGH LOVE

The new leadership in Saudi Arabia has been pursuing an aggressive foreign policy that is less dependent on, and on many occasions at odds with, the United States. The country is overstretched militarily and is facing potential domestic trouble. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Saudi Arabia’s military expenditures from 2003 to 2014 totaled $507.6 billion. According to estimates, Iran spent less than one-fourth of that staggering amount. Despite its militarization and the support from major Western powers, Saudi Arabia has yet to score a victory on the battlefields in its cold war with Iran.

Of course, Iran does not have clean hands. But Iran does not claim to be a U.S. ally. Saudi Arabia does. It is an open secret in Washington that Riyadh provides huge financial contributions to violent extremists and to hundreds of radical madrasahs and mosques throughout the world that sometimes teach intolerance. And Saudi Arabia has been the main financial contributor to the civil war in Syria, but the kingdom has refused to accept refugees from that conflict, while Europe is being flooded by them.
It is high time for the United States to give a little tough love to Saudi Arabia. This is not to suggest abandoning it, as it has been a useful ally in some respects. It does mean that the United States should not automatically side with Saudi Arabia against Iran at a time when Iran is implementing the nuclear deal, seeks a rapprochement with the United States, and has proven to be a sworn and effective enemy of ISIS, which is a major threat to American national interests.

There are those in Washington who say the United States must get tough with Iran and have proposed a new set of sanctions to contain it. And then there are those who say the United States should side with Saudi Arabia against Iran. Both camps are doubling down on the failed policies of the past. Instead, Washington must pursue a new approach toward Iran and Saudi Arabia that is based on a balance of power strategy. Only such a strategy can serve U.S. national interests, facilitate the transformation of Iran from a spoiler power to a responsible power, save the Saudis from their dangerous military overstretch, and help bring stability to a region exhausted from decades of war, sectarianism, and humiliation.

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