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Israel and the Saudis, United in Jealousy

By Scott McConnell

October 25, 2013

It may be hard to pity John Kerry, but in the last couple of days, I've felt for the guy. America has competitors and rivals, and enemies too. But the problems posed by so-called friends are more vexing. On Wednesday Kerry was in Rome, for a scheduled seven-hour meeting with Netanyahu. ^[1] Seven hours, that's right. Three weeks ago, Netanyahu got a lengthy meeting ^[2] with Obama, while the US government was on verge of shutting down. Max Blumenthal quipped that that one of Obama's main jobs is to be the "Bibi-sitter"—for his efforts to make sure that Netanyahu doesn't try to start a war in the Mideast or call up his minions in Congress to thwart US diplomacy.

Then there are the Saudis, the other "pillar" of the U.S. mideast alliance system. Unlike the case of Israel, no one even pretends there are "shared values" in play. It's a pretty pure protection racket: we provide protection to the Saudi monarchy, and they use their oil wealth to aid the U.S. in other objectives, most importantly keeping the price of oil stable. This arrangement made a fair amount of sense post-1945, when keeping Arabia in the Western camp and the Soviets away from Mideast oilfields seemed of paramount importance, as it was throughout the Cold War. But the inherent problems of a close relationship dealing with a medieval theocracy with piles of money are now becoming more obvious.

One problem is that they basically don't like us, at all; another is they seemingly prefer their women to be covered in shapeless black sacks; a third, that U.S. troops cannot be stationed there, lest Saudis feel compelled to blow up U.S. buildings in retaliation. (Most of the 9/11 hijackers were Saudis.) The Saudis use their vast wealth to spread their brand of Islam throughout the

Muslim world, a brand which happens to be more antimodern and anti-Western than any other kind. They are upset when Obama balked at intervening in Syria on behalf of the the Saudi-backed jihadi rebels, and of course ignore the fact that the Palestinians still have no state sixty-five years after the Zionists got one. My guess is that the Saudis care far more about the jihadi forces they support in Syria than the Palestinians, who are, by regional standards, a basically secular and forward-looking group. They have shown their anger by refusing to take the seat in the UN Security Council that they spent years lobbying for.

And of course Iran. Here is where the Saudis, the other little rich gulf states, and Bibi Netanyahu are on the same page. You can see why Iran frightens them. It is governed by Shi'ite Muslims, and there are restive Shia minorities in most of the Gulf states, pressuring and sometimes demonstrating for civil and political rights. And of course Iran has a genuine middle class and a scientific infrastructure, which is why both Israel (which behaves as if it has a right in perpetuity to a regional nuclear weapons monopoly) and the Saudis, who are perhaps embarrassed by their own relative backwardness, feel threatened.

So here comes John Kerry, needing to mollify Netanyahu and the Saudi monarchy, while trying to oversee negotiations with Iran without being completely hamstrung^[3] by an AIPAC- and Tea Party-dominated Congress. Oh and don't forget European pique at the fact that the NSA has been reading their email and monitoring their phone conversations—news of which has been splayed over the front pages in the very European capitals where Kerry is attempting to mend fences.

So of course Kerry is having a difficult time. But this is to be expected. The stakes in the current Iran negotiation are enormous: if they succeed in blocking Iran's quest for a nuclear bomb-making capacity while ending the diplomatic and economic blockade of the country, the impact will resonate throughout the region. Iran has modernized despite obstacles both self-imposed (by its own Islamic revolution) and imposed from without. It is entirely natural that Israel and Saudi Arabia should be jealous of American interest in country, natural that they would think that American attentions to Iran (and tourism, and business investment) long bottled up, would burst out and soon come to rival or exceed the attentions we bestow on them. And natural that they will pull out all the stops to prevent a successful negotiation.

I would wager nonetheless that the forces in favor of a rapprochement of Iran with the West will prevail. It is to some extent simply bizarre that the United States—which does, to a very considerable degree, believe in and support democracy and science and progress—finds itself permanently estranged from one of the Islamic countries which is most modern and most democratic. Not to fault Israel and Saudi Arabia, but Iran as well as Turkey should be on friendly terms with the United States.

Israeli spokesmen like to pretend that the current emotion for a rapprochement is based solely on a “charm offensive” waged by the new Iranian president and his American-educated foreign minister. I would argue it goes deeper. Perhaps some variant of a maxim formulated (if memory serves) by Robert Nisbet is at play: don't underestimate the importance of boredom as a force for political change. To be bound so tightly to Israel and Saudi Arabia—one the sort of ethnostate dreamed up by East Europeans in the last century, the other an exemplar of medieval backwardness—this is our destiny, forever?

I recently came across this, decidedly unwonkish, blog, ^[4] consisting mostly photos taken by an American traveler in Iran. It too made me think these people shouldn't be America's permanent enemy. No matter if Israel and the Saudis, our so-called great allies, tell us they don't agree.