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Iran, Saudis give battle on proxy stage

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A frequent Western interpretation of Iranian and Saudi Arabian maneuvers in West Asia and in the Levant is to depict them as part of a sectarian proxy war. However, a more appropriate portrayal is to describe them as hybrid proxy war, with a heavy emphasis by both actors to promote their respective strategic dominance in West Asia and the Levant - Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. A secondary purpose for their maneuvers is to exploit their respective sectarian advantages in Iraq and Syria, which, in turn, would be used to promote their strategic dominance. In these

maneuvers, the United States also remains an important player, even though the focus of its own interactions with Iran and Saudi Arabia are starkly different.

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have a discernible history of maneuvering in West Asia for gaining advantages over the other.

In the realm of strategic maneuvers, Iran is a highly skillful player. Since its transformation into an Islamic Republic, it has been successfully dealing with the grand champion of global maneuvers, the United States.

The United States has a long record of adopting a number of abortive policies to bring about regime change in Iran since the Ayatollahs captured power. It even went to the extreme of siding with Saddam Hussein in the bloody Iran-Iraq war that lasted from 1980-1988.

Even the US Navy directly clashed with the Iranian navy during that war. It also spearheaded a global arms sale ban on Iran during that war, while Saddam's military was enjoying access to all available global sources. Iran could not win the lopsided war with Iraq; however, the collective endeavors of the United States and Iraq failed to bring about regime change in Iran.

After surviving that contest, the Islamic Republic expanded the scope of its own proxy war against Washington and Israel in Lebanon in the 1980s. Who can forget the worst American loss of 241 military personnel occurred in the Lebanon bombing of 1983? The chief suspect was the shadowy terror group Islamic Jihad, which later evolved into the Hezbollah party. Washington accused Iran of being responsible for it; however, no open-source evidence was ever presented to the global community.

The Iran-Syrian alliance, which was the basis for Syria's support of Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, focused on the pursuit of the twin objectives of undermining America's strategic dominance in Lebanon and eventually expelling Israel from Southern Lebanon, which it had occupied since 1982.

Syria had been the occupying power of the rest of the Lebanon from 1976 to 1982. It needed the strong military and diplomatic backing of Iran, and Iran came through. Even after the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005, Syria never abandoned its aspirations to keep Lebanon under its sphere of influence, and Iran shared those aspirations.

The ultimate achievement of Iran's strategic maneuvers against the United States and Israel in Lebanon in the early 1980s was its creation of Hezbollah. That entity not only emerged as a powerful paramilitary organization, but also as an astute political party in the confessional power play of Lebanon.

The political clout of Hezbollah witnessed a new zenith when it played a crucial role in bringing about the humiliating Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in 2000, but especially when it survived an intense bombing campaign by the Israeli Air Force during the Hezbollah-Israeli war of 2006.

As Hezbollah's chief weapons supplier, Iran also reaped a bonanza of kudos in the Arab streets at a time when the Sunni Arab leaders felt largely marginalized because of former US president George W Bush's ambitious invasion and continued occupation of Iraq.

Saudi Arabia, on the contrary, has been a relative newcomer in the realm of exercising strategic maneuvers independently of the United States. As a long-standing US ally, it did not have to be concerned about instituting an independent foreign policy to ensure its regime's survival.

The US has been there since the mid-1940s to guarantee regime survival, whether the threat to the regime came from Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s or from Saddam Hussein in 1990. Saudi Arabia, in turn, guaranteed the security of oil supplies to the United States and its Western allies and Japan for reasonably high prices. I say "reasonably high prices," because, in the 1970s and early 1980s the Saudi government had to stave off frequent demands for skyrocketing oil prices from Iran, Libya, and Algeria.

The price hawks' argument was that the oil prices were deliberately being kept very low by the Western transnational oil companies. Riyadh often succeeded in finding a happy medium between its own preferences for moderate price increases and the oil price hawks' demands for dramatic price escalations.

Saudi Arabia did diverge from the US in 1974, when it led the imposition of the Arab oil embargo on the United States and a number of leading Western supporters of Israel in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war - which is described as the "Yom Kippur War" by the Israelis and as the "Ramadan War" by the Arabs.

Even the very short duration of the imposition of that embargo added a lot of political clout to Saudi Arabia in the global arena. Consequently, it earned its right to be a major player in the then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's famous "shuttle diplomacy". Under that rubric, Kissinger successfully brought about the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from lands occupied during that 1973 war.

Never since the Arab oil embargo did Saudi Arabia and the United States experience another major diplomatic breakdown or spat. In fact, Saudi Arabia, along with Pakistan, played a crucial role in the conduct of the US-sponsored "Jihad" against the Soviet Union and its occupation of Afghanistan starting in 1979.^[iv] Another example of the durability of that alliance was the fact that, even after it was revealed that 15 out of 19 terrorists of the 9/11 attack on the US homeland were citizens of Saudi Arabia, the US-Saudi friendship, though it came under tremendous stress, never reached the verge of collapse.

What also has helped sustain US-Saudi cooperation since 1979 (the year of the collapse of Iran's imperial rule) was the fact that Iran - which was a close US ally during the imperial rule of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi - became America's permanent adversary. The old US tradition of balancing between Saudi Arabia and Iran under the days of Pahlavi's rule never resurged. Instead, Riyadh emerged as one of the pivots of America's foreign policy in the Middle East.

However, as the United States and Iran started negotiating to resolve the long-standing nuclear conflict in 2013-2014, the prospects of a US-Iran rapprochement appear to be within the realm of feasibility, but still with a lot of caveats when it comes to Syria and Iraq. However, calculating the implications of a potential US-Iran rapprochement for their country's proximity with Washington, the Saudis felt ignored when the Obama administration did not allow itself to be swayed by their contentious interpretations of Iranian foreign policy.

As much of a major hurdle as the resolution of the nuclear conflict between the United States and Iran still remains as an issue of high dispute between Washington and Tehran, Iran's unwavering support for Syria in its war with insurgent forces is looking even more divisive. However, those two countries might still find a modus vivendi in Iraq because ISIS (known as Daish in Arabic) is a mortal enemy of Iran, of the US, and of the al-Maliki regime.

In this escalating civil war in Iraq, both Iran and the United States have the same objective to save the al-Maliki regime. The United States is realistic enough to know that, since it is no longer an occupying power in Iraq, its lack of support for al-Maliki does not automatically mean

that every other group in Iraq will come to attention and accept that stance as a fate accomplished, as they did when the Bush administration handpicked al-Maliki.

Iran wants to save al-Maliki because, aside from remaining a favorite of that country, Iran has bigger fish to fry in Iraq right now - namely, fighting ISIS - than to bicker over who is going to replace him. It is fully cognizant of the fact that its influence in Iraq is such that no anti-Iran candidate would be able to capture the premiership of Iraq. Iran was somewhat disappointed that the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani also seems to be signaling that al-Maliki should step aside in the name of uniting Iraq.

In the final analysis, Iran is likely to accept a compromise candidate, who does not have a profound record of opposing Iran. Thus, there seems to be ample room for a compromise on this issue between Washington and Tehran. The bottom line for Washington and Tehran is that they want to ensure that the Shiite-dominated government survives the ISIS invasion.

As the chances of a US-Iran modus vivendi escalate in Iraq, Saudi Arabia is becoming increasingly edgy. It has to remain cautious, however, about not appearing to be favoring ISIS, even though the Wahhabi ideology of the Riyadh regime and its acute anti-Shiite stance are two variables on which they agree.

One also wonders why US intelligence is not making any public utterances about the interactions between Saudi intelligence and the self-styled jihadist groups of Syria. It is highly questionable whether anyone who opposes the Assad regime has enough intelligence available to clearly identify groups that have no affiliation or affinity toward ISIS or any other radical Islamist group.

Thus, one is fully justified in remaining highly suspicious of any Saudi support for the Islamists. By the same token, one has to remain extremely cautious and even be dismissive of any claims on the part of the Obama administration that it is arming and training "moderate Islamists." Today's alleged "moderate Islamists" can change their color in a heartbeat.

What may be keeping the Obama administration discreet about the questionable Saudi role in both Syria and Iraq is the fact that it also wants the ouster of the Assad regime, and it knows that it does not have a strong hand in the case of Iraq, despite the fact that it has now inserted 300 US Special Forces into that country.

What emerges from the preceding is that there is more of a convergence of Saudi and American interests in Syria than in Iraq. In Iraq, there is more of a convergence of interests between Iran and the United States.

But these convergences will have no effect on the sectarian aspect of an Iran-Saudi hybrid proxy war. This war also has a long history. It has been brewing since soon after the Iranian revolution, but at a very low intensity - less from the Iranian side than the Saudi side.

The Wahhabi ideology of Saudi Arabia is the chief reason. That ideology does not even recognize the Shias as Muslims. As such, they have been repressed for several decades in Saudi

Arabia's Eastern province. More recently, the world has witnessed in horror when Saudi "security forces" rolled in Bahrain to brutally suppress the civilians (primarily Shias) who were legitimately protesting the patently discriminating practices of their Sunni rulers.

Now Iraq and Syria have also become theaters for a Shiite-Sunni conflict.[vi] However, Iran has been attempting to remain coy about not playing up the fact that its presence in Syria is for the purpose of saving the Alawite-Shiite Assad regime, but not with much success.

When it ordered Hezbollah of Lebanon to come to the rescue of that regime, it became very clear that the sectarian aspect of the Saudi-Iran hybrid proxy was very much on. The ISIS invasion of Iraq only adds further fuel to the fire of sectarianism.

The United States is fully aware of it, but wants no part of it. That is why Secretary of State John Kerry, during his latest visit to Saudi Arabia, diplomatically reported to have suggested to the Saudis to control the flow of money into Iraq from "private Saudi sources." [vii] That has to be just one recent example of America's doublespeak regarding the fast-changing strategic profile of the Middle East.

The intricacies of the Saudi and Iranian hybrid proxy war in Iraq would probably favor Iran, if the United States expresses no objections to Iran's use of its Quds forces to save the rule of the Shias, with or without al-Maliki. Of course, Iran would very much prefer him to stay in power. However, those intricacies are increasingly favoring Saudi Arabia in Syria because the Obama administration is gradually getting more involved in arming and training the insurgents in the Syrian war.

President Obama seems to be giving in to pressure from his Republican Party critics who are volubly advocating a highly escalated American involvement in the Syrian conflict. One remote possibility in Syria would be a scenario whereby Iran, Russia, and the United States agree on who should succeed Assad. However, that proposition is more or less moot, unless the tide of war in Syria decisively turns against the Assad forces.

As the chances of a US-Iranian rapprochement escalate, Riyadh has shown a strange proclivity to start a dialogue with Iran. Thus far, Iran has remained cool toward such overtures. The Ayatollahs are signaling Riyadh that it has to prove the earnestness of their intentions toward Iran by lowering the support for Sunni insurgents - and lower the tone of "exclusionary" policies of al-Maliki - in Iraq, and also by disengaging from their support for the self-styled jihadists in the Syrian conflict.

However, being convinced of the victories of its side in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, the Saudi rulers are not about to oblige the Ayatollahs by lowering their support for those jihadists. Thus, this ostensibly unending hybrid proxy war continues. If Iraq remains as chaotic as it is right now, the sole winners are likely to be ISIS, which is betting on further escalating the chaos to strengthen its presence in Iraq and then using that strength to oust Bashara Assad of Syria. No wonder America's national security planners are nervously watching and trying to predict the next twist of events in both Syria and Iraq.