

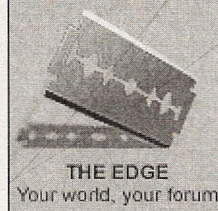
Nov 14, 2009

<http://www.atimes.com>**A witches' cauldron brews in Yemen**

By M K Bhadrakumar

Lebanon has always been the cauldron where the alchemy of the regional politics in the Middle East can be tested. The formation of the unity government in Beirut this week signifies a considerable advancement of the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Syria that began with the visit of King Abdullah to Damascus last month. Clearly, the Saudis have accommodated Syria's preponderant influence in Lebanese politics.

The speech on Martyr's Day in Beirut on Tuesday by Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah indirectly underscored that the political deal behind the unity government stemmed from a

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Syrian-Saudi understanding and, more important, that Iran is not party to it. He said:

We also take positively the Syrian-Saudi summit and we were the first to reap its fruits. We look positively at any rapprochement in the region ... Even more, we call for a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement to establish communication between the two countries. Let there be an Iranian initiative toward Saudi Arabia, or a Saudi Arabian initiative toward Iran.

The big question now is how far there could be a similar Syrian-Saudi collusion over Iraq, or more accurately, whether such collusion can gain traction in the critical period of transition ahead as Iraq heads for crucial parliamentary elections in another two months and the

Ads by Google Top withdrawal commences in 2010.

Saudi Arabia has reciprocated the Saudis on an issue that poses a formidable challenge to Riyadh's interests - Yemen. It is all the more helpful for Riyadh that the Syrian divide the Red Sea, just a day after Tehran strongly condemned Saudi intervention in Yemen's "internal affairs". Damascus is doing very well to cash in on Saudi gratitude. The youthful Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is indeed a chip off the old block - brooding in the shadows and striking when it's real hot.

Electricity
 Syria merely stated one single principle (among many) in inter-state relations, saying, "Syria supports the legitimate right of the [Saudi] kingdom to defend its sovereignty and the integrity of its territory." Yet Riyadh is delighted.

Saudi nexus with the Taliban

As **Yoon Bank** daily al-Watan succinctly put it, "The Arab states have entered the [Iran] nuclear conflict already." Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen - three different theaters have appeared where the Saudis have moved in to challenge Iranian regional influence. All indications are that Yemen is increasingly taking the form of a major regional crisis and Riyadh faces an existential threat here.

First, Afghanistan. To be sure, Saudi Arabia aspires to play a **Calvin Home** any reconciliation process between the US and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Much of the funding for the Taliban has come from Saudi Arabia - including during the current phase of the war - and that has been evidently with a degree of connivance on the part of US intelligence. The heart of the matter is that Saudi influence over a staunchly Wahhabist movement in Afghanistan has been all along considered a "strategic asset" by the US, ever since the inception of the Taliban movement led by Mullah Omar in 1994.

The thrust of the Saudi intervention in Afghanistan in the coming phase on the pretext of reconciling the intractable Taliban will also be principally aimed at sidelining Iran's role in a future power structure in Kabul, and to that extent Riyadh will be acting in sync with US (and British and Pakistani) geopolitical objectives.

All signs are that Tehran is cognizant of the US-British-Saudi-Pakistani game plan. Tehran can be expected to safeguard its interests as it fears that if the Saudi drive succeeds, Afghanistan will tomorrow turn into a sanctuary for Jundallah, the Sunni terrorist group that is in league with the Taliban in spearheading subversion in Iran's eastern region.

Quite clearly, Iranian statements on Afghanistan have "hardened" lately. While reiterating Tehran's support for President Hamid Karzai's government, Iranian statements have begun vociferously stressing the imperative need of a US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Any hint of Iran's readiness to work with the US in stabilizing Afghanistan has receded, especially after last month's massive terrorist strike by Jundallah in Iran, where Tehran sees concerted US, British, Saudi and Pakistani collusion.

To put it mildly, there is extreme wariness in Tehran about this condominium over Afghanistan. Interestingly, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki is due to visit New Delhi on Monday, where the focus will be on cooperation with India in stabilizing Afghanistan. (India is obsessed with a different route than the Iranian one, namely, hitching its wagons with Uncle Sam's, if only the Barack Obama administration recognized Indian primacy in the Indian Ocean region and discarded its unsavory Pakistani baggage.)

Sectarianism vs nationalism

Equally, Iraq is fast turning into a testing ground of a Saudi challenge to Iran's influence. The Saudis seem determined to whittle down Iranian influence by supporting the forces of Arab nationalism (as against "sectarianism"). It takes the vague form of support of a future Iraq that is a "civil democratic pluralistic society" that incorporates Iraqi national heritage in which religion occupies its distinctive and spiritual place (unlike in Iran). The stress is on Iraq's Iraqi identity.

There are indeed contradictions between the Saudi and Syrian stances on Iraq, and Riyadh is quite some way from empathizing with the erstwhile (Iraqi) Ba'athist ideology, but a proximity is fast developing with Damascus. The Saudis feel the urge to look beyond their earlier approach of "either/or" toward Iraq, taking into account the arrival of modern political thought in Iraq and the inevitability of majority rule in contemporary politics. Riyadh is increasingly willing to trade with the Iraqi Shi'ite groups (including personalities such as Grand Ayatollah Hussein Ismail al-Sadr) that may harbor resentment toward Iran's shadow over Iraqi politics.

The speaker of the Iranian Majlis (parliament), Ali Larijani, paid a visit to Iraq last week and met with Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has openly criticized Saudi policies as "unhelpful". Iraq has also accused Syria for harboring Ba'athist officials it says were responsible for the October 25 suicide car bomb attacks in the heart of Baghdad, killing over 150 people, the deadliest terrorist attack in the past two-year period.

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According to Maliki, all efforts by his government to improve relations with Riyadh have reached an "impasse". "All the signals confirm that the Saudi position is negative regarding Iraqi affairs," he said, echoing Baghdad's allegation that the Saudis are deepening sectarian divisions in Iraq by funding and supporting extremists and al-Qaeda insurgents.

In August, a group of Iraqi legislators openly accused the Saudis of employing Ba'athists and al-Qaeda terrorists to root out the Shi'ite faith in Iraq. Indeed, many of the terrorists captured in Iraq are Saudi nationals who have embarked on jihad against the perceived domination by the "apostate" Shi'ites.

Yet another Hezbollah?

Whereas the Saudis are on the offensive in Afghanistan and Iraq, they are very much on the defensive in Yemen. Like Iraq and Afghanistan, Yemen, too, has become a safe haven for al-Qaeda elements. But here the table is turned against the Saudis. The al-Qaeda elements use Yemen to make incursions into Saudi Arabia. The rebellion by the Shi'ite Houthi clan in mountainous northwest Yemen has also made the Saudi Arabia-Yemen border highly volatile. (To compound matters, there are Yemeni-Saudi border disputes waiting to be reopened.)

The Houthis lack modern weaponry, but they are strong in numbers, highly motivated and are reportedly skilled in the use of land mines. The Saudis see in the Houthi militia a potential Hezbollah-like movement based on egalitarian ideals of political justice and equity, with a highly disciplined and trained cadre that may come to inhabit Saudi borders. There is virtual paranoia in Riyadh as to how to deal with the rising specter of a Yemenese-style Hezbollah right on its borders.

The archetypal Saudi fear - which is scrupulously left unspoken due to its extreme sensitivity - is that the Houthi-dominated region of northern Yemen also borders Saudi Arabia's restive eastern province, which is Shi'ite (and oil-rich) and seething with resentment over Wahhabi intolerance.

A 32-page report by Human Rights Watch in August documented that Saudi Arabia was passing through its sharpest sectarian tensions in years. To quote the HRW director for the Middle East, Sarah Leah Whitson, "All the Saudi Shi'ites want is for their government to respect their identity and treat them equally. Yet Saudi authorities routinely treat these people with scorn and suspicion."

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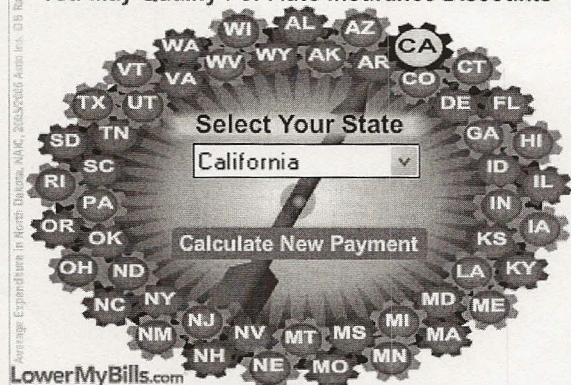
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"The Saudi government has long regarded its Shi'ite citizens through the prism of Wahhabi dogma or state stability, branding them as unbelievers or suspecting their national loyalties." According to the HRW report, state discrimination against Saudi Shi'ites extends to realms other than religious freedom. It cites discrimination in education freedom, bias in the judiciary (with Sunni judges disqualifying Shi'ite witnesses on the basis of their religion), and exclusion from employment.

Riyadh seems to have no clue on how to respond to the boiling Yemenese cauldron, especially as the Saudi regime is in transition. Throwing traditional Saudi caution and circumspection to the wind, Riyadh has used excessive force against the Houthis, who have claimed to be subject to phosphorous bombings by Saudi aircraft. It seems King Abdullah has passed the baton to the Gen-Next in Riyadh to handle the developing situation.

According to well-informed American scholars, this new generation of Saudi princes inclined to the use of muscle power includes assistant defense minister Prince Khaled bin Sultan, (son of the ailing Crown Prince Sultan); counter-terrorism chief Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, who recently escaped an al-Qaeda strike on his life; the governor of Najran, capital of Eastern province, Prince Mishal bin Abdullah; and the local government minister, Prince Mishal bin Miteb, who is also the king's nephew.

The young Saudi authorities have a three-pronged plan: create a "buffer zone" in northern Yemen by bombing the Houthi communities that inhabit the border region to retreat; fence the 1,500-kilometer long Saudi-Yemenese border to keep the impoverished Yemenese from infiltrating; and effect a naval blockade of northern Yemen so that the Houthis cannot source arms. The efficacy of the Saudi approach is highly doubtful and it may end up only in creating a "Yemenese Hezbollah" that sooner or later taps into the Shi'ite resentment in Saudi Arabia's Eastern province.

A time bomb is ticking. In all probability, the hot-headed Saudi policies may only end up incrementally driving Yemen into a "failed state" resembling nearby Somalia. (To cap it all, the US is gearing up to offer a new front in Yemen in the "war on terror".)

Saudi commentators allege that Tehran is supporting the Houthis and is hoping for a Saudi quagmire. The allegation remains to be tested as the crisis evolves. Conceivably, Tehran will feel greatly relieved if a situation emerges whereby Riyadh has no time or energy to spare to mess around with Iraq and Afghanistan - or with Jundallah.

One thing is certain. Tehran will do nothing adventurous that sullies its reputation as a "responsible" regional power. A confrontation with the US is the last thing that Tehran is looking for, either. Persians have a keen sense of history and have always preferred brain over brawn. Tehran cannot be oblivious that in any case, it is well placed to garner political mileage out of excessive Saudi involvement in Yemen, which will tarnish Riyadh's regional standing and inevitably produce a Houthi (Yemenese nationalist) backlash. To call such a backlash Hezbollah or not becomes a minor detail.

Israeli army chief of staff, Gabi Ashkenazi, couldn't have summed it up better when he said recently in Knesset (parliament) testimony, "Iran is very radical on one hand, but on the other hand you can't say that it is an irrational country."

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