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## Reports

# The American-Saudi-Iranian Triangle: Limitations of Confrontation



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8 October 2011

This report aims to present the objectives of the American-Saudi accusation directed against Iran of allegedly conspiring to murder the Saudi ambassador to Washington D.C. and the potential effect of such on the turn that may be taken by the three parties in the upcoming stage. This will be done by placing the accusation in a broader context that encompasses American strategy in the Arab region during the reign of President Obama and Saudi and Iranian regional policies, in addition to the historical moment the Arab world is living in the backdrop of the eruption of unprecedented popular uprisings that have brought about the overthrow of three of the oldest Arab rulers [Ben Ali, Muabark and Gaddafi]. The proposed reading here of the American-Saudi accusation against Iran dismisses the possibility that it may be a pretext to an approaching military attack on Iran. In fact, it sees the accusation as a warning and punitive action.

This report is divided into two parts: the first part reviews broad outlines of the three countries' strategies in the Arab east while the second part addresses the significance of the timing in which the accusation was made and potential objectives of the accusation.

## **The Three Countries' Strategies**

### **One: the United States**

Barack Obama entered the White House during a period of unprecedented stagnation of the United States' political and economic stature in the world as a result of preceding policies that entangled in two failed wars. Also, Bush's unilateral and overbearing actions produced a crack in the Atlantic Alliance (or the NATO) and created tension between himself and some the United States' main Arab allies, such as the former Egyptian president in the framework of Bush's plans to spread democracy in the Arab world. In such conditions, it was only natural for the new American administration to make rebuilding the United States' international alliances its priority(\*\*) especially after it became apparent that the U.S. economy could not bear the cost of the two failed wars any longer and that the United States is in dire need of its allies assistance to leave the Afghani and Iraqi swamp in a manner that would still enable it to save face and fill the strategic gap that will follow its withdrawal from the two countries.

If Obama's administration relied extensively on military force to address the Pakistani and Afghani files (which has been proven to be the case by increasing numbers of civilian casualties especially in Pakistan), it has resorted in the Arab east to soft power illustrated by visits and Obama's speeches, capitalizing on the sympathy he had received from the Arab public in the beginning of his presidency. Furthermore, its policies focused on activating cooperation with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Mubarak's regime in Egypt to encircle an Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis and deprive it of the gains it attained in 2006, paving the way for its disintegration. Turkey occupies a central position in this American strategy. Perhaps this is what drove Obama to visit it before Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as follows:

- Firstly, American-Turkish cooperation within the scope of the NATO can be utilized by the United States as proof of the truth of Obama's claim that his country has not waged war against Islam but against terrorism contrary to the doctrines of Islam, and this is a central motto in the discourse the Obama administration addresses to the Islamic world.
- Secondly, and more importantly, after its media promotion of Arab public opinion as an "Islamic" model, Turkey has become prepared to extract from Iran's popularity in the Arab public without replacing Iran as a source of threat to American and Israeli interests, a role that was meant for post-Saddam Iraq which instead became a model for sectarian cleansing. According to the American point of view, Turkey possesses two additional merits unavailable in the new Iraq even if the former had succeeded in restructuring the latter in accordance with the American vision.

The first merit pertains to the Sunni Muslim majority in Turkey which renders the Turkish model more appealing to non-Salafi Sunni Islamist groups than a model led by Shiite politicians. The second merit is that the Turkish "Islamist" model does not wager the continuity of relations with Israel on the establishment of a Palestinian state. In this setting, it should be noted that the current crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations, even if it had come in the context of Israeli attack on a fleet of solidarity heading towards Gaza, concerns Israel's refusal to apologize for killing a number of Turkish nationals rather than the crimes it has committed against the Palestinians. This cannot be ignored by any Turkish officials regardless of his or her political authorization without risking the anger of Turkish voters which the United States is familiar with.

Also, official Turkish support of the Palestinian cause has not yet surpassed the limits of humanitarian moral support – which the United States does not oppose – and cannot be compared to the financial, military, and logistic support offered by Iran to Palestinian and Lebanese resistance, thus causing Washington to see Iran as one of the countries that supports terrorism the most.

- Thirdly, Turkey's geographic location near Iraq and Syria enables it, in Iraq's case, to contribute to the policing of Iranian influence after the withdrawal of American forces and to the competition with it. As for Syria, the economic cooperation between the two countries theoretically could have impacted the Syrian political position and led to the distancing, albeit gradually, of Syria from Iran after a period of time. It has been noted that since the eruption of protests calling for the overthrow of the Turkish regime, Turkey has provided an vital depth to the Syrian opposition, thus placing the Syrian regime under great pressure.

Turkey's focal position in U.S. strategy does not undermine the significance of the Saudi and Egyptian roles within it. The United States relies on the two countries in areas in which Turkey does not have much influence such as Lebanon, in which Saudi Arabia has established a network of alliances over the past two decades among Sunnis and Maronites. Also, unlike Turkey, Saudi Arabia enjoys great influence over Salafi groups owing to the financial support it provides them. Egypt, however, participated with Israel during the reign of the former president in the blockading of Gaza claiming that it sought to prevent the spread of Iranian influence in Gaza, and its official media has persisted in launching severe campaigns against the Syrian regime and Hezbollah.

It should be noted that the United States' reliance is a principle of indirect leadership and the cooperation of its three allies in the execution of its strategies does not mean that they are puppets being manipulated by America behind the curtain as this cooperation is founded on what political and economic elites in these countries regard as mutual interests.

### **Two: Saudi Strategy**

The elimination of politically and socially radical regimes and movements in the Arab world and its vicinity has been considered the main objective of Saudi Arabia's regional strategy since the 1950s. The interests of the Saudi regime met the objectives of the United States in the thrashing of the Nasserist in the fifties and sixties. Afterwards, their interests met in fighting the Islamic revolution in Iran after it had overthrown the Shah's rule. Despite the kingdom's insistence on giving its internal and regional policies a religious and doctrinal character, pragmatism is regarded as one of the most prominent features concerning the application of regional policy and could be considered a model of what is known as a realist policy that only considers interests and does not acknowledge permanent animosity or friendship. For example, sectarian differences were not resolved without Saudi Arabia's support of Yemen's Shiite Imam and his advocates against republicans backed by Abdel Nasser in the sixties. However, in the beginning of the new millennium, the kingdom regarded the Shiites in Yemen as part of an Iranian conspiracy

and supported the current Yemeni regime whose socialist opponents it had aided in the nineties when they had reattempted to separate south and north Yemen. This also applies to Saddam Hussein's regime of which Saudi Arabia was the greatest supporter during its war with Iran despite Saudi Arabia's animosity towards Baathist ideology.

The current regression Saudi Arabia suffers from stems from its abandonment of this pragmatic disposition in dealing with Saddam Hussein's regime after the first U.S.-Iraqi war in the early nineties. Rather than seek the Iraqi regime's rehabilitation and integration into its greater Arab counterpart especially after the option to overthrow Saddam Hussein through a military coup failed, it continued to support economic sanctions against Iraq and take action to isolate it. This allowed Iran to reclaim its position as the greatest regional force in the Gulf and created a condition in Iraq that was impossible to endure indefinitely. The following events proved that the makers of Saudi foreign policy like Bandar bin Sultan had the same unrealistic ambition as those of neoconservatives to create a new Middle East through the downfall of a number of regimes in the region with Saddam at the forefront. The failure of the neoconservative project and the rise of Iranian influence led to Saudi Arabia's confrontation of a critical strategic deadlock it tried to correspond to by following a policy uniting openness to Iran for the sake of avoiding increased tension in the Arab Gulf and direct evasion of Saddam Hussein as well as to compete with it and blockade its influence in Iraq and Lebanon, and resort to a military settlement in areas Saudi Arabia considers its backyard, like Yemen and Bahrain to prevent Iran from extending its influence to them.

In a quick glance, it can be said that only the first part of this strategy accomplished substantial success in recent years as a result of Iranian cooperation in this matter as Iran desires direct evasion of Saddam Hussein in the Gulf as well. As for Iraq, Saudi Arabia has failed to offset Iran's allies from rule in spite of the support it offered to their opponents in the recent Iraqi elections. As for Yemen and Bahrain, although Saudi military intervention facilitated the defeat of the Houthis in North Yemen and the suppression of the popular uprising in Bahrain, this is a temporary success in the absence of any serious political initiatives to address the reasons for the rebellion and the uprising.

### **Three: Iran's Strategy**

Since Ayatollah Khomeini and his disciples seized control of Iran after the disposal of Banisadr and the other political forces that participated in overthrowing the Shah, Iran has become a prominent example of what international relations researchers call "the revolutionary state," which is defined as the state that feels that it does not possess the stature it deserves in the current international or regional order and, therefore, seeks to rearrange the conditions of this order if not replace it with one that provides it with a role and stature it finds appropriate.

Iranian ambition clashed with regional and international alliance in support of Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran early on, eventually compelling it to agree to a ceasefire. Although Khomeini compared the agreement to swallowing poison, Iran was able to achieve restitution within a few years. Also, it has adopted a new regional strategy centered on four different focuses:

1. First, the establishing and consolidating of its traditional and untraditional military force, especially its missile and naval capabilities, in order to develop its deterrence capabilities;
2. Second, defeating attempts to isolate it politically by solidifying its alliance with Syria and using this alliance to influence Arab-Arab relations;
3. Third, capitalizing on the marginalization of and discrimination against Shiites in a number of Arab countries to install itself as the protector of Arab Shiites, which enabled it to affect the internal conditions of a number of these countries;



4. Four, adopting a discourse supporting the Palestinian rights and providing all forms of aid to the resistance in Lebanon and Palestine against Israel, which helped it gain great popularity among the Arab populace.

However, the main factor behind the strategic successes that Iran has achieved in the last stages stems from its ability to benefit from the mistakes of its opponents, especially:

- Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and the failure of Arab regimes to find an Arab solution for this crisis;
- The control of revenge mentality on a number of Arab regimes after Saddam Hussein's expulsion from Kuwait, which occurred without reintegrating Iraq into the Arab regime and regaining its power;
- The withholding of Arab regimes of adequate political support for Syria for the reclamation of the occupied Golan heights or investments necessary for the development of the Syrian economy, and often, the exercise of pressure on it to adopt positions that correspond to American objectives, which caused Syria to see Iran as the only ally it could depend on;
- The adoption of many Arab regimes of hostile positions on resistance in Lebanon and occupied Palestine, which helped Iran appear as the main supporter of resistance forces;
- The adoption of many Arab countries of severe sectarian discourse and discriminatory policies against their Shiite citizens, which helped push them toward Iran after they had been supporters, cadres, and leaders of nationalist and Leftist parties in the recent past;
- The American invasion of Iraq supported by a number of Arab regimes which led to the transformation of Iraq from a bulwark against Iranian ambition to Iran's front line of defense and an additional factor in Iran's balance of power.

It has been noticed that Iran, since the beginning of American failure in Iraq, behaves as though it were the most important force in the Arab Gulf and east. This has been reflected by its nuclear policies and the movements of its marine divisions since that time. The Bush administration's obligation to renounce its negative statements about Iran and launch talks with it about Iraq reflect the reality of the current balance of power in the region and fortified Iran's confidence in its abilities.

### **The Objective of the American-Saudi Accusation against Iran**

On the basis of the review of the outline of the three countries' strategies above, it is very possible to discount the idea that the purpose of the American-Saudi accusation is to pave the way for an American attack on Iran with Saudi assistance. Similarly, it is not expected Iran will effect any escalation in response to this accusation as the two matters conflict with the logic that shapes these strategies and is based on conflict but without any direct military confrontation between the three countries.

Currently, there is a number of regional developments and internal factors exclusive to each country causing them to adhere more to this orientation than ever before. In the forefront of these regional developments come the popular uprisings in a number of Arab countries that created a case of political fluidity in the region with which it is difficult for the planners of the three countries to accurately predict the gains and losses of any military action. They also have made planners give priority to the use of other means of guiding these uprisings to the paths that serve their interests.

Correspondingly, the upcoming deadline of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq undermines the United States' ability to launch an attack on Iran and renders it unconcerned with undertaking any action that may delay this withdrawal. Regarding the United States' internal factors, which make it difficult for the Obama administration to undertake such a risk at this time, in the lead are the upcoming presidential elections. It is difficult to imagine Obama win a second term if a poll is conducted during or after a war that cost American society thousands of casualties especially as he reached the White House because of his opposition to the war on Iraq and his promises to withdraw American forces. From there after, he failed to revive the U.S. economy, which in led to the decline of his popularity.

Even if these three factors render the imminent advance of the United States to attack Iran unlikely, they help shed light on the aims of the United States and Saudi Arabia to announce this accusation now months after they had discovered what they call an Iranian conspiracy to murder the Saudi ambassador in Washington D.C. as the accusation can be considered a warning and punishment to Iran for its allies' disapproval of the stay of any U.S. military forces in Iraq after the end of this year. It could also be explained as a message of warning and punishment aiming to pressure Iran to end what Saudi Arabia considers the incitement of Saudi Shiites against the ruling family.

The accusation accords with the main American-Saudi is aim to undermine the axis of reluctance by putting its components under persistent political pressure. In this context, it can also be considered punishment to Iran for its economic support of Syria, enabling it to maintain its regime.

With regards to the U.S. presidential elections, Obama can use this accusation, ensuing European sanctions against Iran to prove the success of his administration in preventing terrorist activity on American territory and impose the political isolation of Iran, both of which his predecessor failed to achieve. He may need such an election card because of his failure to achieve several of his election promises like the revival of the economy and the closing of Guantanamo Bay detention camp.

The high unlikelihood of the occurrence of an American attack on Iran soon will not prevent the next U.S. administration from using the accusation to justify a military strike on Iran which will be in favor of neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia. All in all, it can be said that the next U.S. administration's strategy towards the countries of the region and their causes will stop essentially at what the current confrontation in Syria will elucidate, and at the new strategic environment produced by the Arab popular uprisings whose features will have become clear when the next U.S. president is sworn in. Until then, no great change is likely to happen in the foundations that control relations between the three countries unless Israel launches a surprise attack on Iranian nuclear facilities, and thus muddling all considerations.

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(\*\*)To see U.S. national security strategy especially that concerning alliances, click [here](#).