

Report

Saudi's Strategic Invitation to Iran

*Mansour al-Marzoqi al-Bogami **

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Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif (right) and his Saudi counterpart, Prince Saud al-Faisal [AJazeera]

Abstract

It is symbolically significant that Saudi Arabia chose a platform that it hosted, the Forum on Economy and Arab Cooperation with Central Asian States and Azerbaijan, to invite Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, to visit Riyadh. This report addresses the sudden change in Saudi's position, examining possible reasons for such an unexpected shift from refusing to receive any Iranian officials even with Tehran's repeated attempts for a diplomatic meeting, to publicly welcoming Zarif's visit to Riyadh. This is the second strategic shift at the core of Saudi Arabia's geopolitics, the first being the deal between Saudi and the US during King Abdul Aziz al-Saud's reign in 1945, also known as "security for oil". Three factors create the context for this invitation: Saudi Arabia's largest ever military drills during April 2014, Saudi's now-secured interests in Egypt and third, benefits from the Ukrainian crisis. The report concludes that cessation of Saudi Arabia's snubs to Iran can be attributed to instability in what can be called the "anti-Iran front", comprised of the UAE, Jordan, Egypt and Morocco. Saudi Arabia's chances for successfully enhancing its regional status meant the time was ripe for Riyadh to sit at the negotiating table with its key rival in the region, Iran.

Introduction

In the past, Iran had persistently attempted to secure official meetings with Saudi Arabia, even resorting to mediation by Gulf countries such as Oman and Kuwait, other Arab states like Algeria, and regional powers such as Pakistan. Saudi Arabia had not been keen to receive any high-ranking Iranian official, including Rouhani and Zarif, even

though both the Iranian president and the foreign minister had frequently expressed their wish to visit Riyadh.⁽¹⁾ On Tuesday, 13 May 2014, Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal revealed that his country had extended an invitation to the Iranian foreign minister to visit Riyadh. Saudi Arabia announced the invitation at the first Forum on Economy and Arab Cooperation with Central Asian States and Azerbaijan. Its role as host makes this a symbolically significant announcement.

Iran has two global outlets. The first is economic, represented by oil and gas resources. However, given sanctions imposed on Iran and its weak technical capacity, Iran is unable to completely tap its full potential in the energy market. The other outlet is political, represented by Tehran's distinguished ties with various countries and peoples in the region. By utilising its diplomatic capital in countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain and Yemen, Iran has secured its place among influential players at the regional and international levels.

Iran can only expand westward in the direction of the Arab world. There are three reasons for this. First, it is surrounded by countries that are militarily, economically and politically powerful, as well as internally stable – namely, China, India and Russia. Second, since Iran's strategic edge lies in expanding on the basis of religious creed, Iran cannot sell the notion of "oppression [of Shiites throughout history]" in China with its Buddhist majority or in India with its mainly Hindu majority or in Russia with its communist heritage. Third, the weakness and fragmentation of the Arab world (as a result of external invasion, regional competition and the failure of regimes to build citizen-based states) leaves room for Iran to expand. Consequently, Iran has established considerable influence in some Arab states over the past few decades.

The move by the Arab world towards Central Asia, Iran's backyard, also gave Saudi's invitation to Iran symbolic significance, especially since this move towards Central Asia was led by Saudi Arabia. This report analyses this drastic change and discusses this second strategic shift that lies at the core of Saudi Arabia's geopolitics, the first being the deal Saudi Arabia concluded with the US during King Abdul Aziz al-Saud's rein in 1945, also known as "security for oil". Three factors form the context for the invitation to Iran's foreign minister to visit Riyadh: Saudi Arabia's largest ever military drills during April 2014, Saudi now-secured interests in Egypt and third, benefits from the Ukrainian crisis.

Saudi war games

In April 2014, Saudi Arabia carried out the largest-ever military drills in its history, deploying 130,000 troops in three areas of differing terrain and combat environments in its eastern, northern and southern regions. The combat operations were managed by

one command centre in Riyadh and the drills involved both the National Guard and Interior Ministry forces. In addition to placing Saudi forces in a simulated war environment, the exercises featured another noteworthy sign. For example, Saudi Arabia, for the first time ever, showed off its CSS-2 Chinese-made ballistic missiles which are capable of carrying nuclear heads. They are the Saudi Armed Forces Fifth Division's key weapon, also known as the Royal Saudi Strategic Missile Force (RSSMF).

Saudi Arabia has worked on developing the RSSMF and setting up strategic missile bases in the northern, eastern and western regions since 2009, when Riyadh announced it might exercise the option of developing a nuclear weapon.⁽²⁾ It began preparing the infrastructure for a nuclear programme, including the development of the strategic missile force. The display of such a weapon occurred before a line-up of distinguished guests, including Pakistan's army chief, a very close ally of Saudi Arabia. It should be kept in mind the Saudis financed the Pakistani nuclear programme and were the first to visit Pakistan's nuclear facilities in the late 1990s.

The military exercises, which occurred less than a month after President Barack Obama's visit to the kingdom in March 2014, indicate that Saudi Arabia intends to become the key defender of its own security. In other words, the Saudis were signalling they had found a replacement for the US' role as its defender for the past six decades. Traditionally, the US has been the front-line of defence for Saudi Arabia, but that is about to change. This necessarily means that the kingdom will be less closely associated with US influence and policies. The row between the two countries that surfaced recently and their contradicting policies in Bahrain and Egypt are clear signs of the US' receding influence on its Saudi ally. However, the boundaries of this independence and how far it will go are still unclear.

Saudi Arabia has adopted policies independently from the US, especially after the downfall of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Riyadh began to doubt whether it could rely on the US, and subsequently the kingdom acted as the front-line defender of its own security and worked extensively with its allies in Egypt to secure its status as a regional power.

Stability in Egypt

In outright contradiction of US policies in Egypt, Saudi Arabia strongly supported the toppling of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. Within the same context, and sending a symbolic message to the US, Riyadh encouraged Egypt to improve its ties with Russia, presumably to pressure the US to change its stance on the new arrangements in Egypt. That move paid off. These two moves, ousting Morsi and enhancing Egyptian-Russian ties, reflect the widening margin of independent Saudi

foreign policy. In addition, the success of Saudi Arabia in changing the political leadership in Egypt has enhanced its status as a regional power.

Ukrainian crisis

The ongoing crisis in the Ukraine highlighted two highly significant points. The first is that regional powers – Saudi Arabia and Iran in particular – cannot trust Western guarantees of reliable security support. Consequently, this means that these powers will focus on increasing their own military might to defend themselves.

The US and Russia, backed by the international community, gave Ukraine guarantees to protect its security if it would relinquish its nuclear arsenal. That was in 2007. President Putin reasserted his country's commitment to Ukraine's security in 2009. However, the events unfolding in east Ukraine, especially the annexation of Crimea by Russia, have highlighted the international community's failure to keep its promises to protect this country, even after it submitted its nuclear arsenal. Saudis and Iranians have both learned a lesson from the Ukrainian crisis: there is no alternative to a country's own might in defending its national security.

The second point is that the crisis has revealed Russia's ability to take advantage of receding US influence, which emanates from the new American strategy that may be termed "sharing spoils and losses". Russian President Vladimir Putin has succeeded in placing mounting pressures on Western countries, which have limited options, as they rely heavily on Russian oil and gas.

Overall, the Ukrainian crisis has benefited two regional players in particular: Turkey and Saudi Arabia, whose strategic value skyrocketed. Turkey is Russia's gateway into the Mediterranean and any Western effort to contain Russia must be coordinated with Turkey. As for Saudi Arabia, the West seeks to use the kingdom's large weight in the international energy market to limit Russia's ability to play the energy card against it. Furthermore, the West wants to diminish Russian influence in the Arab world in order to prevent Moscow from using such influence against it as they continue to engage in the Ukrainian crisis. Saudi Arabia can be very useful in this regard, but the increasingly independent kingdom will not cooperate for nothing. Undoubtedly, Riyadh wants to take part in the negotiations going on between major powers and Iran.

For some time Saudi Arabia has urged the West to engage it in the talks with Iran, but these requests have been in vain. Now it seems clear that it is in the interest of Western parties to engage KSA in any deal with Iran. This, in addition to its success in facilitating regime change in Egypt, has allowed Saudi Arabia to reinforce its regional influence and ensure a competitive edge over its main rival, Iran.

Shift in Saudi geopolitics

Saudi's invitation to Iran can also be understood in light of the Saudi geopolitical shift. As he announced the invitation, Prince Saud al-Faisal said that "regional crises have provided superpowers with the opportunity to interfere in our affairs....Iran is a neighbour and we seek to end any dispute with it".⁽³⁾ In other words, Saudi Arabia wants to cooperate with Iran to find solutions to regional crises without any interference from the "superpowers". In fact, the Saudi decision to step forward and defend its own security has earned the Kingdom several gains. One of the major benefits is the relatively greater independence from its allies among the "superpowers" and becoming less associated, on a strategic level, with its Western allies.

These alliances still exist and they are vital, but the announcement of this invitation represents the beginning of the end of the 1945 "oil for security" deal with the US. Accordingly, the alliance has moved to a new level that involves short-term cooperation based on mutual interests. Contrary to most analyses, the temporary agreement between Iran and the West is not permanent or stable. The provisional period might extend to years because rapprochement was not built on the West's realization of Iran's importance and potential, but rather on the latter's need to find a way out of its deepening economic crisis. The basis of rapprochement, therefore, is an Iranian compromise after they found themselves in a weak position.

If the détente was based on the Iranians' desire to improve their national economy, Iran's cooperation with its Arab neighbours is one way to achieve that. Iran's agreement with the West is not a barrier to such cooperation, which means that the Gulf States can still influence the Iranian economy. The invitation extended by Saudi Arabia to Iran highlights Riyadh's intention to put pressure on Iran, including its ability to influence the international energy market and the GCC-Iran trade, apart from its success in reinforcing an anti-Iran front, crowned by Marshal Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's rise to power in Egypt. Saudi Arabia plans to exercise such pressure within the framework of direct negotiations, separate from the West-Iran track. Based on that, the new Saudi openness to Iran can be understood in light of the change in Saudi Arabia's alliance with the West, especially the US, which has shifted to another level.

GCC countries and Iran

GCC-Iran ties cannot be examined only from the perspective of the agreement between the West and Iran, or based on the assumption that all the GCC member states act as one bloc vis-à-vis Iran. Rather, these relations should be tackled from a bilateral-historical perspective. For example, there are Iranian-Omani ties that existed well before the agreement, characterised by a significant strategic and economic dimension. A good

example is the in-principle agreement to extend a gas pipeline from south Iran to Sahar, north of Oman.(4)

As far as Qatar is concerned, Doha has adopted “a moderate stance” towards Iran, given that Qatar seeks to balance its ties with its biggest neighbour (Saudi Arabia).(5) Qatar and Iran share the north gas field in the Arabian Gulf, which dictates a relationship based on interlinked interests, albeit partially. The ties between Qatar and Iran date back to the Gas-Producing Countries Forum launched 2011, long before the Iran-West deal.

The UAE’s ties with Iran are defined by two cases: the three Emirati islands occupied by Iran since 1971 and Saudi Arabia-UAE relations. Both cases predate the West’s deal with Iran. Accordingly, the UAE’s interests are strategically connected to Saudi Arabia, not Iran. This is also the reason for the formation of a joint committee between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to oversee the implementation of Saudi-Emirati strategy in response to regional challenges.(6) Therefore, no UAE-Iran détente is expected outside the framework of Saudi Arabia-UAE ties.

Kuwait has consistently maintained a policy avoiding a clash with both the Iranian regime and Riyadh, its biggest neighbour. Accordingly, the visit by the Kuwaiti emir to Iran in early June cannot be viewed except in light of the declared purposes of the visit: ‘the relentless efforts by Hassan Rouhani to open up to Arab neighbours’. There is no competition over strategic interests or substantial differences between the two countries. Based on that, Kuwait-Iran ties can be understood from the perspective of Kuwait’s policy of distancing itself from regional rivalry and President Rouhani’s endeavours to improve ties with this neighbour. There is insufficient justification for blanket references about “Gulf openness” to Iran, as there is a bilateral-historical perspective that has several dimensions. The exchanged visits between GCC officials and their Iranian peers should be viewed from this perspective.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia’s past snubs of the frequent Iranian official requests for meetings can be attributed to instability in what we can call “the anti-Iran front”, comprised of the UAE, Jordan, Egypt and Morocco. Therefore, Saudi Arabia’s success in enhancing its regional status means that the time was ripe for Riyadh to sit at the negotiating table with its key rival in the region, Iran. It appears that Saudi Arabia has begun to restore its strength lately by way of endeavours to become the front-line defender of its own security, giving it further ability to gain independence in its foreign policy. Nevertheless, while rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran will have a significant impact on the entire Middle East, prospects of reconciliation are still obscure.

***Mansour al-Marzoqi al-Bogami** is a Saudi politics academic and researcher based at Sciences Po Lyon in France.

Endnote:

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- 2) The Guardian, "US Embassy Cables: Saudi Official Warns Gulf States May Go Nuclear", The Guardian, 28 November 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/189229>.
- 3) Transparentsham, "Saud Al Faisal: 'We Wish to End All Differences with Iran'", Transparentsham, 14 May 2014, http://www.transparentsham.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=735:2014-05-14-00-15-58&catid=1:arab&Itemid=22.
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- 5) Mansour al-Marzoqi al-Bogami, "Resolving the Gulf Crisis", AlJazeera English, 16 April 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/04/resolving-gulf-crisis-2014415131237869630.html>, accessed 5 June 2014.
- 6) Al-Quds Al-Arabi, "Saudi-Emirati agreement to set up higher joint committee to respond to regional challenges", AlQuds Al Arabi, 20 May 2014, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=170282>, accessed 12 June 2014.