

מרכז עזרי לחקר איראן והמפרץ הפרסי



The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies

The Persian Gulf Observer

Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf



**"After Rouhani's Election:
Looking into Saudi Arabia's Policy towards Iran"**

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"After Rouhani's Election:

Looking into Saudi Arabia's Policy towards Iran"

By Dr. Eran Segal

Ever since the election of Hassan Rouhani, Iran's new president, and the acceleration of negotiations between Iran and the West, what has naturally received emphasis is the growing opposition to this process by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Although the Saudis provided few official statements on the matter, it is clear to everyone that they do not share the Western countries' optimism. The Gulf States and Israel have become strategic partners, so it seems, in persuading the West to reject the Iranian "smile offensive"

Nevertheless, history teaches us that the matter is far from self-explanatory. During the 1990s relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia experienced a gradual thaw, that climaxed in 1997 with the surprising victory of Mohammad Khatami in Iran's presidential election. In a manner resembling recent events the West and especially the US were at first hesitant on how to react to the change, but at that juncture it was primarily Saudi Arabia who pushed to accelerate rapprochement between Iran and the West. A series of mutual visits culminating in the reciprocal visits by Saudi Crown Prince 'Abdallah (currently King 'Abdallah) and Khatami, as well as the renewal of flights between the countries for the first time since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, symbolized for the West the Saudi desire for change. This warming of relations ran counter to the intensified conflict between the US and Iran during those years, that reflected President Clinton's Dual Containment policy designed to check both Iran and Iraq simultaneously. Saudi Arabia, like the other Gulf States, had greater reservations about the overt aggressiveness of the American approach and sought to exploit change in Iran, in order to erode this hostility and openly demur from it.¹

This therefore raises the question of why the current Saudi Arabian reaction to a similar situation is the very opposite of what it was 16 years ago? The answer lies in the change produced by the "Arab Spring", but primarily in the internal tensions engendered by it rather than in terms of foreign relations. A few months ago, Toby Matthiessen published his book *Sectarian Gulf*² where

¹ For details see for example: Joshua Teitelbaum "The Gulf States and the End of Dual Containment," *MERIA*, vol. 2/3 (September 1998) pp. 21-26.

<http://gloria-center.org/meria/1998/09/teitelbaum.pdf>

² Toby Matthiessen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring that Wasn't*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013)

he argued that the main reason why the Gulf did not experience an Arab Spring was that the countries' rulers and primarily the Saudi ones, successfully diverted public discourse from the issues of democracy, representation and participatory decision-making to the sectarian question, in other words Shiite-Sunni relations. This sophisticated counterrevolutionary measure promoted by the Saudis included emphasis on the Shiite component of those forces demanding change as well as external Iranian involvement. Additionally, these regimes operating through PR firms disposes of an extensive system that includes ambassadors, academics and businessmen who take pains to emphasize the centrality of the Iranian Shiites to various events in the Middle East in general and the Gulf in particular. Many Sunnis were involved in the push for changes in the Gulf but due to the success of the measure the liberal demands were driven into a corner and the Sunni activists were apprehensive about being being portrayed as Shiite supporters.³

Given the appreciable success of this measure, especially last year, the major fear of the Gulf States, and primary Saudi Arabia is having the discussion revert to the issues of democratization, representation and human rights. Rouhani's rise greatly enhances the possibility that the Iranian issue could fade from the global agenda as well as the issue of Iranian influence over the Middle East. Paradoxically, it is a plausible assumption that Iran as well prefers a continuation of the "sectarian discussion" over the democratic discussion though economic considerations currently constitute a more serious counterweight.

The Saudis are noticeably troubled by the American position towards the problems in Syria but it appears that their main concern centers on accelerated internal change. The country's foreign relations always took a back seat the issues of internal stability and the survival of the ruling family. The Saudi exposure to the West has increased significantly in the last decade and has begun to leave its impact in social changes that the regime finds difficult to contain. The Shiite enemy emerged as the main common denominator around which one could unite Saudi Arabian society and to certain degree society in the entire Gulf. Therefore playing up the centrality of the "Iranian discourse" and the sectarian motive is vital for regime stability in the Gulf

³ One can read a concise version of this idea here:

<http://mideas.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/10/08/thesectionariangulfvsthearabspring#.UlfuUBjshBU.twitter>

One can see a similar argument in the article:

Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, "11/3, (2011), pp. 513-26.