

When Sunni Gets Blue

On July 17, 2015 the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir met President Barack Obama in the White House to discuss security in the Middle East and specifically the nuclear agreement signed three days earlier with Iran. On the same day, King Salman met in Mecca with a group hitherto considered unfriendly political adversaries, the leaders of Hamas, including Khaled Meshal their political leader who lives in Qatar.

In both these conversations and in the speeches in Teheran the nature of the agreement will be discussed differently. One might hear in the White House the need to evaluate it based on the facts, not on politics, that the only option to an agreement was the use of military force against Iran, and that once the agreement is fully implemented it will effectively cut off all of Iran's pathways to a nuclear weapon.

In Teheran, the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has spoken of victory because the agreement does not require Iran to stop all its enrichment of uranium, and that thousands of centrifuges will exist. What won't stop is the chanting in the streets of Iran of slogans, "Death to the United States," and "Death to Israel." For his part Iranian Prime Minister Hassan Rouhani proclaims that "constructive engagement" works.

It is the meeting in Mecca that is most meaningful since it underscores the startling recent change of policy for the Saudis. They were previously bitterly hostile to Hamas not only because the terrorist group is connected to the Muslim Brotherhood whose government in Egypt the Saudis had opposed, but also because they were aware that Hamas has been assisted materially, in finance and in arms, by Iran.

Is the Iran agreement an earthquake or only a shock? Is it an achievement of diplomacy, a substitute for military action, or

appeasement of a violent religious regime that has American blood on its hands? The agreement, that President Obama calls "a comprehensive long-term deal," is considered by many, at best, as imperfect.

Simply stated, Iran nuclear program and its capacity to build a nuclear weapon may be limited for a decade. It will reduce its enrichment capacity, it will sharply cut its stockpile of low enriched uranium, it will halt its development of heavy water reactors, and UN inspectors can enter sites under certain conditions, which are not exactly clear.

However, Saudi Arabian and other critics question certain non-technical aspects of the deal with Iran. According to the agreement, all sanctions against Iran will be lifted over a period of time. Iran was already selling about 200,000 barrels of oil on the black market. Economic and financial sanctions are supposed to end when Iran complies with specific obligations to reduce centrifuges and uranium stockpiles. The United Nations ban on access to ballistic missile technology will end within 8 years, and the arms embargo will end in five years. After a decade, Iran can buy nuclear-related goods, and then after five more years can increase its nuclear program and can enrich uranium above the 3.67 per cent level.

One inherent problem is concern about the reality of the provisions for inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency. That agency in November 2011 caught Iran cheating on twelve areas of its activity, an incident that raises questions about Iran's genuine willingness to allow inspections and provide information.

As a result of the deal with Iran, Saudi Arabia will continue in a heightened way its more assertive actions and policies in the Middle East. The Saudis realized that the sanctions imposed on Iran since 2011 were having an impact on the country that had a high inflation rate and a sharp decline in

its dollar reserves. They also realized that the U.S. had given waivers to Japan to import Iranian oil, and that the U.S. had not imposed sanctions on global financial institutions that did business with Iran. They fear that the billions that Iran will gain by the removal of sanctions – at least \$150 billion in frozen assets – will cause greater problems as Iran will finance activity in the Middle East.

The challenge of Iran for the Saudis is the interrelationship of two factors, religious and geopolitical. As the major Sunni power Saudi Arabia is leading the fight against the Shia threat, led by Iran and its allies Hizb'allah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, to the 90 per cent of the Muslim world that is Sunni. It is obliged on religious grounds to challenge Iran that defines itself as an Islamic Republic based on the Twelver sect of Shiite Islam as the official religion. Supreme leadership is presently held by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, successor to Ruhollah Khomeini.

Saudi Arabia is fearful that Iran can dominate the Shia world, and the Middle East, and that it is doing so to some degree by alliances with part of Sunni Islam, especially with the Muslim Brotherhood, and until recently with Hamas which became unhappy with Iran's involvement with Sunni rebels and the regime in Syria.

The Saudis have been confronted with an increasing number of terrorist attacks and suicide bombings, one of which was carried out by a man dressed as a woman, on its own territory, in May, June, and November 2014, and in May 2015 when a bomb killed 21 people in the village of al-Qudeeh in the east Qatif region. Saudi Arabia is aware that the Islamic State (IS) has been successful in recruiting some of its citizens. On July 18, 2015 it arrested 431 persons who were planning attacks in the country on mosques and security forces.

A new game of international politics in the Middle East has emerged. The Saudis want to prevent Iran from being the

dominant Middle East power. An alliance, perhaps temporary, of interests exists between Saudi Arabia, the Gulf countries, Egypt whose leader President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has received large sums of money from the Saudis, and Israel. This alliance is aware that Iran has sent 7,000 troops and considerable finance to support the regime of President Assad in Syria. The Saudis are now planning to use air power to target Iranian and Hizb'allah forces in Syria and to provide air support for the anti-Assad Free Syrian Army.

The Saudis have been trying to reduce Russian and Chinese support for the allies of Iran in Syria and Yemen. Some rapprochement may have resulted from the visit on June 17, 2015 of Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Mohammed bin Salman to see Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg. Some agreements were signed on oil cooperation, and on nuclear technology sharing, as well as discussions on the war in Yemen and Saudi's military actions there.

Paradoxically, in order to check the advance of Iran and the IS, Saudi Arabia has been assisting the Islamist forces, who are linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, against the rebel Houthis in Yemen because that group is linked to Iran. For four months, the Saudis have carried out air strikes in Yemen, and may send in special forces. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has collaborated with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in backing Islamists opposing President Bashar al-Assad in Syria who has killed thousands of Sunnis and who is supported by Iran.

One troubling problem resulting from the Iran deal is whether the Saudis contemplate pursuing a nuclear program in order to produce a bomb. In examining and voting on the agreement, which is not a U.S. treaty, members of Congress might well consider the implications of this.

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