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Paul Aarts

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Saudi Arabia Walks the Tightrope

Paul Aarts

These are times of ascendancy for Saudi foreign policy. In the past, Saudi Arabia mostly adhered to a subtle, behind the scenes approach, playing the role of arbiter of disputes both in inter-Arab arenas and in the Arab-Israeli conflict (illustrated by the 1981 Fahd plan and Crown Prince Abdullah's 2002 initiative¹). Much in contrast with this limited regional role which consisted of pulling strings in the shadows, the moment seems to have come for a more assertive and open attitude. King Abdullah is trying to take the lead on virtually every sensitive issue that is haunting the Middle Eastern region.

This burst of activism stems from the House of Saud's perception of rapidly evolving regional dangers. Three developments may explain this U-turn: the outcome of the summer 2006 Israeli-Arab war in Lebanon; the armed confrontation between the Palestinians of Hamas and Fatah in the Gaza Strip; and the civil war in Iraq with its Sunni-Shia and al-Qaeda dimensions. In all three events, the "Iran factor" comes to light and this is what worries Riyadh the most. With growing apprehension, Riyadh observes Iran's growing influence and has set out to contain Tehran's role in the region. This article will show that this is being done in a wavering and sometimes confusing way, though largely in line with Saudi Arabia's long-established pattern of developing "polygamous" relations.² On all the issues mentioned, Riyadh is now, more than ever before, taking a bold position, but at the same time it is seeking, again in each of the cases, a kind of *modus vivendi* with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Blaming Hezbollah

First, a few lines on Saudi Arabia's increasing involvement in Lebanon. The Kingdom has never been absent from Lebanon,³ but in recent times it has deviated

Paul Aarts teaches International Relations at the University of Amsterdam; Email: p.w.h.aarts@uva.nl

¹For the Fahd Plan, see http://www.knesset.gov.il/process/docs/fahd_eng.htm; for Crown Prince Abdullah's initiative, see Kostiner, "Coping with Regional Challenges" and "Saudi Regional Strategy".

²Nonneman, "Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy"; and Aarts and Van Duijne, "The Saudi Security Environment".

³Trabulsi, "Saudi Expansion"; and AbuKhalil, "Characteristics of Saudi Role in Lebanon".

from its low-profile role to pursue a more active policy, hence its cultivation of Sunni opposition to Hezbollah, which it sees as an ally of Iran. During Israel's incursion into Lebanon in July 2006, the Saudis harshly criticised Hezbollah for its "irresponsible adventurism" (though it later nuanced that judgement), thereby laying the blame for the bloody events that followed not on Israel but on Hezbollah. It looks like Saudi Arabia has entered a "new era" in Lebanon, which has become a major centre for Saudi propaganda. Even Syria has not yet dared to openly criticise Saudi Lebanese policy.

According to some sources, the Saudis' support for Sunni forces in Lebanon has also involved clandestine operations intended to weaken Hezbollah. Apparently, the Saudis have funded sectarian political movements and paramilitary groups (not only in Lebanon but also in Iraq, Iran and the occupied Palestinian territories), something that has met with the approval of the US government.⁴ Strikingly, however, Saudi Arabia has also played a major role in easing tensions between the Hezbollah-led opposition, on the one hand, and the Siniora government and the Saad Hariri camp, on the other. Without a doubt, Iranian cooperation was crucial here and visits and exchanges of letters between Saudi and Iranian dignitaries have contributed to calming down sectarian and political tensions in Lebanon.

Luring Hamas

Saudi Arabia has also been taking a more prominent posture in the Arab-Israeli arena. Much to its annoyance, and to that of Egypt and Jordan for that matter, Iran has been able to get closer to Hamas, both politically and financially. This provided the strategic motivation behind the Saudi-brokered "Mecca agreement" between Hamas and Fatah in February 2007 (when the Saudis also called for the end of the US and European boycott of the Palestinian administration). A unity government was hammered out and almost a year of increasingly bitter internecine fighting was brought to a halt. The Saudis were trying to bring Hamas back into the fold, thereby "clipping the wings" of the Iranians, as one observer put it.⁵ Obviously, the Iranians were not happy about the Saudi success in Mecca; nevertheless, they seemed confident that the Saudis would not be able to displace their influence over Hamas completely, so they did nothing to undermine the deal.⁶

⁴Hersch, "The Redirection"; and Samuels, "Grand Illusions".

⁵Greg Gause, "Saudis Aim to Roll Back Iranian Influence", *Council on Foreign Relations* (online), 16 March 2007 <http://www.cfr.org/publication/12895/>. The relaunch in April 2007 of the Abdullah peace plan should be seen in the same perspective; to date it has not been very successful.

⁶Mahan Abedin, "Iran ponders aims of Saudi mediation as US ratchets up 'psy-ops' against Tehran", *Saudi Debate* (online), 21 February 2007 http://www.saudidebate.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=510&Itemid=165

During the summer of 2007, renewed clashes between Fatah and Hamas in the occupied Palestinian territories turned into a struggle for control of the Gaza Strip. Sooner than expected, well-organised Hamas-led Islamist forces overran Palestinian Authority security installations, and on 14 June, after Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, President Mahmoud Abbas dismissed the national unity government which had taken office in March. Obviously, these violent events sealed the fate of the Mecca power-sharing agreement. The Saudi king expressed his disappointment with both sides, though he evinced more understanding for Hamas than did, for instance, Egypt.⁷ At the time of writing, it looks as though Saudi Arabia is in no hurry to reopen its mediating efforts with respect to this issue. Sooner rather than later, however, diplomatic initiatives will have to be resumed.⁸ In that context, in particular with the unceasing international boycott, the further deterioration of living conditions in the Gaza Strip and more calls for help from Hamas, Riyadh realises that Tehran will still be part of the equation.

The Iraqi mess and Saudi confusion

When it comes to Iraq, the third issue, the Saudis have now taken a more active role there, too. Until late 2006, they seemed paralysed, not knowing what to do.⁹ It appeared that the Saudi leadership faced a dilemma: cognizant of Iranian ambitions and wanting to keep open the channels of communication, at the same time it did not want to antagonise the United States too much. The Saudi leadership also seemed to have learned its lesson from its support of the Islamists who fought in Afghanistan in the early 1980s and now realised the risks involved in sponsoring militants (the “blowback phenomenon”). There is certainly not much official encouragement in Saudi Arabia for countrymen to go fight Shias in Iraq; many Saudis are nevertheless doing so. Nobody knows the numbers.

It was only after the release of the Iraq Study Group’s recommendations (December 2006),¹⁰ when the contours of a possible US withdrawal that could leave an Iran-friendly regime in place became clear, that the Saudis started showing more interest in Iraqi politics. Undoubtedly, Riyadh does not like the government of Nouri Maliki, which it sees as a client of Tehran. That is why, as is rumoured, former Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi is being funded and urged by the Saudis to form an alternative coalition. It is, however, rather difficult to determine the exact weight of this specific form of closer involvement. Confusing signals abound, such

⁷International Crisis Group, *After Gaza*, 33.

⁸To date, the Saudis have said that a US-backed Middle East peace conference will be pointless unless it tackles key issues and sets a timetable for a final deal.

⁹Greg Gause, “US Trying to Soften Saudi Hard Line toward Maliki Government”, *Council on Foreign Relations* (online), 6 August 2007, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/13988/gause.html>

¹⁰http://www.usip.org/isg/iraq_study_group_report/report/1206/iraq_study_group_report.pdf

as King Abdullah's unexpected denouncement – during the Arab League summit of March 2007 – of the US occupation as “illegitimate”.

What is obvious, on the other hand, is that developments in Iraq – positive or negative – will have an influence on Saudi Arabia's own security situation.¹¹ It seems quite unlikely that things will turn out favourably in Iraq, meaning that jihadists – Saudis and others – would leave Iraqi territory, but even if they did, Saudi Arabia would still be adversely affected in that the jihadists would most probably look for safe havens elsewhere in the region, Saudi Arabia included. In the negative case, the one generally expected, this “jihadist effect” would be multiplied. In the worst-case scenario (the disintegration of Iraq into mini-states), the jihadists would claim victory, feel emboldened (“after Afghanistan and Iraq now the Peninsula!”) and turn their eyes and energies to the US-supported monarchies and emirates in the Gulf region. In each of these scenarios, it would be wise for Riyadh to remain on speaking terms with the Iranians. Now, and in the future, they definitely have the strongest cards in Iraq.¹²

Classic balance-of-power logic

On the basis of the foregoing, one might be tempted to conclude that the Middle East is witnessing the emergence of a Sunni-Shia divide, in which Saudi Arabia figures prominently on the Sunni side. Even before the 2006 Lebanon war, several Sunni heads of state delivered extraordinary, near-hysterical statements on “the rise of the Shias”. In late 2004, Jordan's King Abdullah paraded fears of a new “Shia crescent” cutting across the Middle East.¹³ In April 2006, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, a country much like Jordan with hardly a meaningful Shia minority among its population, opined “Most of the Shi'ites are loyal to Iran, and not the countries they are living in.”¹⁴ Then, as set out earlier, as fighting broke out in Lebanon in the summer of last year, these Sunni leaders were joined by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Astonishingly, all publicly opposed Hezbollah's actions – leading them into a new strategic convergence with Israel. Indeed, the Saudis have been involved in indirect and direct talks with Tel Aviv as well (Prince Bander bin Sultan, the Saudi national security advisor, plays a key role here).¹⁵

¹¹Aarts and Van Duijne, “The Saudi Security Environment”.

¹²International Crisis Group, *Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?*

¹³Three years later, the Jordanian king asked at one point: “Do you want Iran on the banks of the Jordan?”; *Ha'aretz*, 20 April 2007.

¹⁴Blanford, “Shiite-Sunni ‘Rift’ a Worry Across Region”, *USA Today*, 13 April 2006, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq-2006-04-13-iraq-rift_x.htm

¹⁵Hersch, “The Redirection”, 2. Both countries picture Iran as an existential threat and share the conviction that greater stability in Israel and Palestine will give Iran less leverage in the region.

At first glance, this sectarian frame of reference may appear persuasive, but upon closer inspection, the picture becomes more complicated. As Valbjorn and Bank convincingly argue,

What initially appears as a Sunni-Shi'i split may in fact be a pattern of alliance making with motives far less sectarian in nature. The split not only coincides with the divide between pro- and anti-US orientations, but it also nicely complies with a classic balance of power logic, according to which other regional states will ally in order to balance a rising regional power, *Shi'i or not*.¹⁶

In other words, conservative Arab leaders like Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah do not fear adherents of Shiism *per se* as much as the growing power of popular radical groups like Hezbollah. Much to their exasperation, the latter has developed into the torchbearer of a new kind of Arabism that has electrified the Arab streets. This makes a too explicitly anti-Iran policy controversial and explains the anti-Shia rhetoric "as a way of selling a policy based on non-sectarian motives".¹⁷

Hedging its bets

Mainly due to Hezbollah's rise as a "model of resistance", the Saudi leaders are under pressure from public opinion, both inside the country and in the region. This is pushing them to attempt to reassert their role as leaders of the Arab and wider Muslim world, and it is in this new framework that they sometimes have to talk tough against Washington. By distancing himself from the US, King Abdullah is trying to gain credibility in the vital fight against Tehran for Arab hearts and minds. As early as September 2005, Turki bin Feisal, then Saudi ambassador to Washington, publicly complained that US policy was "presenting Iraq to the Iranians on a silver platter". And in May 2007, his brother, Foreign Minister Saud al-Feisal, told President Bush that he had "two nightmares: one is that Iran will develop a nuclear bomb, and the other is that America will take military action to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear bomb".¹⁸

Despite the problematic rhetoric of Iran's President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, there have been frequent contacts between the two regional competitors and there seems to be a wary understanding in Riyadh and Tehran that there is a convergence of interests in oil and regional stability. At the same time, however, word has spread that Saudi Arabia secretly supports a more aggressive line against Iran and "its clients".¹⁹ So the Saudis are sending conflicting and confusing messages. Why is that?

¹⁶Valbjorn and Bank, "Signs of a New Arab Cold War", 7 (italics added); and Fuller, "The Hizbullah-Iran connection".

¹⁷Valbjorn and Bank, "Signs of a New Arab Cold War", 7.

¹⁸Dickey, "A Desert's Lion in Winter"; and Karen Elliot House, "Saudi Balancing Act", *Wall Street Journal*, 4 April 2007.

¹⁹Hersch, "The Redirection"; and Samuels, "Grand Illusions".

What we are witnessing is a clear act of balancing competing pressures. The Saudi leaders realise that the Bush administration has become deeply unpopular in the Arab world, prompting them to take distance from Washington – without giving up their well-preserved ties with the US. They are simply hedging their bets (also by “looking east” towards China and India). Navigating in contradictory alliances has long been a skill of the House of Saud and flirting with Iran may be part of that. Saudi Arabia wants to contain Iran’s ambitions but at the same time does not want to clash with it – quite a tightrope to walk.

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