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Fear and loathing in House of Saud

By Pepe Escobar

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Every sentient being with a functional brain perceives the possibility of ending the 34-year Wall of Mistrust between Washington and Tehran as a win-win situation.

Here are some of the benefits:

- The price of oil and gas from the Persian Gulf would go down;
- Washington and Tehran could enter a partnership to fight Salafi-jihadis (they already did, by the way, immediately after 9/11) as well as coordinate their policies in Afghanistan to keep the Taliban in check post-2014;
- Iran and the US share the same interests in Syria; both want no anarchy and no prospect of Islamic radicals having a shot at power. An ideal outcome would balance Iranian influence with a power-sharing agreement between the Bashar al-Assad establishment and the sensible non-weaponized opposition (it does exist, but is at present marginalized);
- With no more regime change rhetoric and no more sanctions, the sky is the limit for more trade, investment and energy options for the West, especially Europe (Iran is the best possible way for Europeans to soften their dependence on Russia's Gazprom);
- A solution for the nuclear dossier would allow Iran to manage civilian use of nuclear energy as an alternative source for its industry, releasing more oil and gas for export;
- Geopolitically, with Iran recognized for what it is - the key actor in Southwest Asia - the US could be released from its self-imposed strategic dogma of depending on the Israeli-Saudi axis. And Washington could even start pivoting to Asia for real - not exclusively via military means.

Ay, there's the rub. Everybody knows why the Israeli right will fight an US-Iran agreement like the plague - as Iran as an "existential threat" is the ideal pretext to change the debate from the real issue; the occupation/apartheid regime imposed on Palestine.

As for the House of Saud, such an agreement would be nothing short of Apocalypse Now.

I'm just a moderate killer

It starts with Syria. Everybody now knows that shadow master Bandar bin Sultan, aka Bandar Bush, has been fully in charge of the war on Syria since he was appointed Director of National Intelligence by his uncle, Saudi King Abdullah.

Bandar is taking no prisoners. First he eliminated Qatar - the major financier of the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA) - from the picture, after having a helping hand in Qatar's emir, Sheikh Hamad, deposing himself to the benefit of his son, Sheikh Tamin, in late June.

Then, in late July, Bandar spectacularly resurfaced in public during his now famous "secret" trip to Moscow to try to extort/bribe Russian President Vladimir Putin into abandoning Syria.

Notoriously, the House of Saud's "policy" on Syria is regime change, period. This is non-negotiable in terms of dealing a blow to those "apostates" in Tehran and imprinting Saudi will on Syria, Iraq, in fact the whole, mostly Sunni Levant.

In late September, the Jaish al-Islam ("Army of Islam") entered the picture. This is a "rebel" combo of up to 50 brigades, from supposedly "moderates" to hardcore Salafis, controlled by Liwa al-Islam, which used to be part of the FSA. The warlord in charge of Jaish al-Islam is Zahran Alloush - whose father, Abdullah, is a hardcore Salafi cleric in Saudi Arabia. And the petrodollars to support him are Saudi - via Bandar Bush and his brother Prince Salman, the Saudi deputy defense minister.

If this looks like a revamp of the David Petraeus-concocted "Sunni Awakening" in Iraq in 2007 that's because it is; the difference is this Saudi-financed "awakening" is geared not to fight al-Qaeda but towards regime change.

This (in Arabic) is what Alloush wants; a resurrection of the Umayyad Caliphate (whose capital was Damascus), and to "cleanse" Damascus of Iranians, Shi'ites and Alawites. These are all considered *kafir* ("unbelievers"); either they submit to Salafist Islam or they must die. Anybody who interprets this stance as "moderate" has got to be a lunatic.

Incredibly as it may seem, even Ayman al-Zawahiri - as in al-Qaeda central - has issued a proclamation banning the killing of Shi'ites.

Yet this "moderate" tag is exactly at the core of the present, Bandar Bush-concocted PR campaign; sectarian warlords of the Alloush kind are being "softened", so they are palatable to a maximum range of Gulf sources of funds and, inevitably, gullible Westerners. But the heart of the matter is that Jaish al-Islam, essentially, sports just a slight chromatic difference with the

Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) - the al-Qaeda-linked umbrella which is the prime fighting force in Syria; as in a bunch of weaponized fanatics on varying degrees of (religious) crystal meth addiction.

Paranoia paradise

To complicate matters, the House of Saud is in disarray because of the succession battle. Crown Prince Salman is the last son of King Abdul Aziz, the founder of the Saud dynasty, to have a shot at power gradually by age.

Now all bets are off - with hordes of princes engulfed in the battle for the great prize. And here we find none other than Bandar Bush - who is now, for all practical purposes, the most powerful entity in Saudi Arabia after Khalid Twijri, the chief of King Abdullah's office. The nonagenarian Abdullah is about to meet his Maker. Twijri is not part of the royal family. So Bandar is running against the clock. He needs a "win" in Syria as his ticket to ultimate glory.

That's when the Russia-US agreement on Syria's chemical weapons intervened. The House of Saud as a whole freaked out - blaming not only the usual suspects, UN Security Council members Russia and China, but also Washington. No wonder the perpetual foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, snubbed his annual address to the UN General Assembly last week. To say he was not missed is an understatement.

The House of Saud's nightmare is amplified by paranoia. After all those warnings by King Abdullah for Washington to cut "the head of the snake" (Iran), as immortalized on WikiLeaks cables; after all those supplications for the US to bomb Syria, install a no-fly zone and/or weaponize the "rebels" to kingdom come, this is what the House of Saud gets: Washington and Tehran on their way to reaching a deal at the expense of Riyadh.

So no wonder fear, loathing and acute paranoia reign supreme. The House of Saud is and will continue to do all it can to bomb the emergence of Lebanon as a gas producer. It will continue to relentlessly fan the flames of sectarianism all across the spectrum, as Toby Matthiesen documented in an excellent book.

And the Israeli-Saudi axis will keep blossoming. Few in the Middle East know that an Israeli company - with experience in repressing Palestinians - is in charge of the security in Mecca. (See here and here (in French)). If they knew - with the House of Saud's hypocrisy once more revealed - the Arab street in many a latitude would riot en masse.

One thing is certain; Bandar Bush, as well as the Saudi-Israeli axis, will pull no punches to derail any rapprochement between Washington and Tehran. As for the Bigger Picture, the real "international community" may always dream that one day Washington elites will finally see the light and figure out that the US-Saudi strategic alliance sealed in 1945 between Franklin D Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud makes absolutely no sense.