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Saudi Arabia, Militarism and New Conflicts

A Shia-Sunni Confrontation?

by FARHANG JAHANPOUR

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Recently Saudi Arabia staged its largest-ever military exercises codenamed “Abdullah’s Shield”. The exercises involved 130,000 Saudi troops and showcased some of the latest weapons purchased by the kingdom from the United States and China.

They included the Chinese CSS-2 intermediate-range ballistic missiles with a range of 2,650 kilometers (1,646 miles) which are capable of carrying nuclear warheads. The Chinese version of these missiles is already equipped with nuclear warheads. This was the first time that these missiles had been seen in public in Saudi Arabia.

Crown Prince Salman presided over the exercises, which were also watched by a number of prominent foreign guests, including King Hamad of Bahrain and more pointedly by Gen. Raheel Sharif, the Pakistani chief of the army Staff, but Qatar pointedly did not send any representatives. This was yet another sign of a growing rift between Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

A Unified GCC Command and Monetary Union

At a recent GCC summit, the Saudis called for a unified GCC military command to have 100,000 forces. However, some GCC members opposed the idea as they saw it as a move that would undermine their independence.

Oman openly expressed its opposition to the proposal and Qatar and Kuwait also followed suit.

Having failed to form a unified GCC command, the Saudis invited Jordan and Morocco to form a military alliance. After the military coup in Egypt, the Saudis warmed to the new military government and donated billions of dollars to keep it going. They are hoping that their military union will also include Egypt.

With Saudis' close links to Pakistan, the Saudis hope to form a large Sunni military alliance consisting of GCC, Egypt, Pakistan, Morocco and Jordan, to counter what they see as a Shi'a crescent involving Iran, Iraq, Syria and the Lebanese Hizbullah.

Apart from trying to build a military command, the GCC had also decided to have a common currency by 2010, but due to the opposition of some member states the monetary union did not materialize either.

Disagreements Between GCC Members

The disagreements between GCC members were not limited to a unified military force and a common currency.

With the toppling of the minority Sunni government of Saddam Hussein and its replacement with a Shi'a government, most GCC countries particularly Saudi Arabia opposed the new government, and in the case of the Saudis they have refused to send an ambassador to Iraq.

The Arab Spring and Opposition to Muslim Brotherhood

In the wake of the Arab Spring, GCC monarchies felt very vulnerable. After Mubarak's fall, Qatar supported the Muslim Brotherhood, but Saudi Arabia has called it a terrorist organization and has supported the military coup against President Muhammad Morsi.

This has caused a rift between the two countries, which came into the open during a March 2014 meeting of the council, after which Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain recalled their ambassadors to Qatar.

The unprecedented decision to recall the ambassadors hints at significant changes in the GCC.

Conflict in Syria

The conflict in Syria has forced Saudi Arabia to face a number of daunting challenges. Saudi Arabia wanted to remove Bashar Asad at any cost, but disunity among the Syrian opposition and the ascendancy of the jihadi militants in the conflict have persuaded the United States that any alternative to Bashar al-Asad may well be much worse than the present incumbent.

Saudi Arabia had also called for US attacks on Iranian nuclear sites, but instead there is a strong prospect for a peaceful resolution of Iran's nuclear dispute and even a rapprochement between Iran and the United States.

The recent visit by President Obama to Saudi Arabia to some extent calmed the nerves of Saudi leaders, but did not dispel many mutual disagreements.

One of the positive effects of the visit for the Saudis was the U.S. agreement to supply anti-tank missiles to the "moderate" rebels, but the White House has opposed providing the rebels with anti-aircraft Manpads, in case they may be used against Israel at a future date.

A Syrian opposition figure has already confirmed that it has received a dozen BMG-71 TOW missiles and is being trained on them by an allied country. It remains to be seen if those missiles will change the course of the conflict in Syria or not.

US Military Sales to GCC

In recent years, the Americans have been urging greater defense cooperation in the GCC, including block sales of American arms to the organization, hence the proposal for the formation of a joint military command.

According to the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the United States has sold a total of \$66.3 billion in weapons system in 2013 (75 percent of the global market) and a large chunk of it went to GCC countries.

In 2012, Saudi Arabia alone purchased helicopters and fighter jets worth \$33.4 billion. Although in the wake of North American shale oil and gas boom, the United States is less reliant on Saudi or GCC oil and gas, nevertheless, America cannot overlook the lucrative arms market that the GCC provides.

Enlarging the GCC

The insecurity in the Persian Gulf cannot be enhanced by supporting the Sunni militants in Iraq and Syria or intensifying hostilities towards Iran.

On the contrary, one way of resolving most of the regional conflicts is to enlarge the GCC and, as its name implies, to admit the other two major Persian Gulf littoral states, namely Iran and Iraq. Iraq has already expressed its desire to join the GCC.

Ever since coming to power, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has said that he intends to improve relations with all Iran's neighbors, "especially with Saudi Arabia". The enlargement of GCC and rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia will establish greater security in the region as a whole.

Domestic Reforms

Finally, the main problem that the GCC countries face is not external, but is much closer to home.

The resolution of internal problems requires representative government, more equitable distribution of wealth, a more open society and equal rights for women.

For religious and ethnic minorities, there is a need for a reformed interpretation of Islam that is compatible with the modern world, and learning to live in peace with their neighbors in a pluralistic world.

Any attempt to stem the tide of history is futile and is bound to fail.