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An Arabian warrior prince in Putin's court

BY M.K. BHADRAKUMAR

JUNE 19, 2015

The unannounced arrival by the Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Defence Minister Mohammad bin Salman al Saud in Russia and his meeting with President Vladimir Putin on Thursday is a dramatic development in the politics of the Middle East. It might draw comparison with Henry Kissinger's secretive China visit forty-four years ago.

Without doubt, to borrow the immemorial words from the English poet Matthew Arnold, the sea seems calm and the air is sweet, and yet if you come to the window, you can hear the grating roar of pebbles, which the waves draw back, and fling at their turn at the high strand. To be sure, the Sea of Faith between the United States and Saudi Arabia that was full and round the earth's shore ever since the improbable meeting between Franklin Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia on board a cruiser 70 years ago in the Great Bitter Lake in the Suez Canal, seems reduced to a melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, retreating.

And on a darkling plain, ignorant armies seem preparing for a clash by night. The many-splendored Arnoldian metaphor reduces itself to several templates of Middle Eastern and global politics.

King Salman of Saudi Arabia has sent his most beloved son as a personal envoy to meet Putin. The king's choice of Mohammad bin Salman (MbS), a young man, thirtyish, as the trusted interlocutor with Putin at a momentous point in the Kingdom's history is hugely symbolic, because the prince is also widely regarded as hugely influential figure today in steering the Saudi

foreign and security policies in a radically new direction, as the kingdom steps out of the shadows of the seven-decades old alliance with America.



Mohammad bin Salman al Saud

The US' engagement with Iran has profoundly upset Saudi Arabia. One may agree or disagree with the legitimacy of the Saudi grievances, but their gravity is indisputable.

Saudi Arabia sees the imminent US-Iranian nuclear deal as signifying the commencement of a new era in Middle Eastern politics characterized by a much broader entente between Washington and Tehran in regional politics.

The Saudis tried hard to dissuade Washington from deepening its engagement with Iran and it pulled all stops in the US political establishment with all the money power at its command. But it hasn't worked.

It hasn't worked, primarily because the US and Saudi interests no longer converge vis-à-vis the deepening Middle East crisis.

Their respective priorities are different, with the US feeling the urgency to impart gravitas to its "pivot" to Asia, the emerging locus of world politics.

Meanwhile, the shale gas revolution has reduced the US' dependence on the Middle East's oil and an element of competition has crept in with America's potential emergence as the world's leading energy exporting country in a conceivable future.

The Saudis also realize that the US is no longer willing (or is capable) in the Cold-War era business of perpetuating the authoritarian regimes in the Persian Gulf region and could be instead sensing the imperative to be on the "right side of history" by encouraging an orderly transition from autocracies to a democratic transformation as a prerequisite of enduring and long-term security and stability in the region to prevent the ascendancy of extremist groups that could pose threats to the West's security.

The regime in Saudi Arabia is, in every sense, at a crossroads, hearing the forces of history knocking at the gates and yet unwilling to reform itself, afraid of the mounting pressures to reform, and in turn feeling insecure in the absence of an iron-clad guarantee forthcoming from the US as the provider of blanket security as it used to be.

Simply put, the emergence of Iran as a regional power deepens the Saudi “angst.” Saudi Arabia always felt threatened by the fact that the 1979 Islamic revolution was anti-monarchical and that the successor regime to the Shah is based on the principles of representative rule (howsoever imperfect), which is antithetical to everything that the House of Saud represents.

Besides, the widening gyre of the Shi’ite empowerment in the region (Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, etc.) cannot but impact the restive Shi’ite-dominated oil-rich eastern provinces within Saudi Arabia itself, which also happens to be where the great oil fields lie.

Iran poses an existential challenge to the House of Saud and the deepening US-Iranian engagement is only making the challenge insurmountable. Saudi Arabia’s riposte could have been in the nature of putting together a united regional Arab front to meet the challenge posed by Iran, but with the departure of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt is a pale shadow of what it used to be, coping barely with its own internal upheaval, and as for the six GCC states, they not only do not make sturdy allies but some amongst them have their own independent dealings with Tehran and anyway they always resented the Saudi overlordship over them.

To be sure, Saudis need an external benefactor. Who could it be? The bottom line is that the benefactor should be someone who doesn’t get along with the US and would have similar gnawing worries as Saudi Arabia as to the potential trajectory of the US-Iranian entente.

Could it be Israel? Out of the question, despite Riyadh and Tel Aviv having common concerns over the rise of Iran and the rapid transformation of US-Iranian relations. Israel, which is pretty much isolated too in its region, might be keen, but there can never be an open alliance between the Saudi Arabia and Israel as that will inevitably lead to a popular Arab revolt against the House of Saud.

Suffice it to say, Saudis have scanned the horizon and concluded that its best bet is up north – Russia. The Saudis estimate that the US-Russia tensions will encourage Moscow to hold the hands of an estranged erstwhile ally of America in the prevailing circumstances. But what seductive offer can Saudi Arabia make that Russia cannot afford to spurn?

For one thing, the Russian economy is reeling under western sanctions and Saudi Arabia can offer a lifeline by buying weapons from Russia or high-tech products such as nuclear power plants.

Again, Russia, although a non-OPEC country, is terribly interested in reaching an overarching understanding with Saudi Arabia as the world’s leading oil producing country at a juncture when Iran is about to flood the world oil market with a huge quantum of oil once the sanctions are lifted.

Indeed, Moscow is also watching uneasily the blooming US-Iranian engagement. As Russia would see it, there is more than a 50-50 possibility that Iran will seek a close integration with the West, given its acute needs of technology and economic upgrade.

Such misgivings are not without reason, given the prevalence of a big “pro-western” faction among the Iranian elites. Interestingly, an opinion piece on Thursday featured by the Tehran Times newspaper, which usually reflects the thinking of the foreign-policy establishment,

analyzed the implications of a nuclear with the US for Iran's relations with the US and the West in general on the following lines:

***Iran and the US:** The nuclear negotiations between Iran and the World Powers has enabled a forum for Iran and the United States to engage on bilateral basis at Foreign Minister level for the first time in over 35 years. This development has brought about a sea change in having a direct line of communication between the two capitals. This track could open up the possibility of direct negotiations and cooperation between Tehran and Washington over multiple theaters of conflict raging in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Iraq and instability in the Levant with increasing efforts to counter extremism and terrorism.*

Iran and the West: relations between Iran and the West deteriorated during the 8-year presidency of Ahmadinejad and following the election of the moderate Iranian president Rouhani we are finally witnessing both sides coming out of their coma. The European powers involved in the nuclear talks, have made major strides in a short time to rectify their relations with Iran. The key to more stable and secure Middle East will have to include the Iranians at every juncture. To this end, Iran and Europe should take constructive steps combating rising trend of new terrorist groups such as ISIS and AL Qaeda and crisis management in the Middle East.

Make no mistake, the Russians have every reason to feel nervous which way the balance of forces in the Middle East would go once the US-Iranian normalization gains traction.

Actually, the writing is already there on the wall. The US no longer objects to Iran's participation in the UN-sponsored Geneva process over Syria; Australia has demanded Iran's inclusion in the contact group sponsored by the US to deliberate on the war against the Islamic State (IS); the US and Iran are tacitly cooperating (coordinating) in their respective military campaigns against the IS in Iraq and are in consultation over the conflict in Yemen; they are virtually on the same page as regards the Shi'ite empowerment in Bahrain.

Russia has not been standing still, either. It has made big efforts to renew ties with Egypt; it keeps close links with the Israeli leadership and political elites; it continues to woo Turkey. Of course, all these three Middle Eastern countries share similar worries as Russia and Saudi Arabia have regarding the shift in the tectonic plates in the politics of the Middle East.

Unsurprisingly, Putin was at his charming best while receiving MbS yesterday. The photo on the Kremlin website featured the president and the prince wearing a wistful look. The Kremlin readout quoted Putin as saying that Russia "highly values" the relations with Saudi Arabia. He renewed the invitation to King Salman to visit Russia.

MbS responded by mentioning Russia as "an important state in the modern world" with which Saudi Arabia has a "long history" of relations. He underscored the Saudi desire to "work to develop bilateral relations in all areas."

MbS also conveyed an invitation to Putin to visit Saudi Arabia. King Salman seldom travels abroad. The Saudis seem to prefer Putin scheduling a visit to Riyadh in the near future. Putin accepted King Salman's invitation.

The statement by the Saudi Royal Court on MbS's visit to Russia mentioned it as an official visit "at the behest" of King Salman "following an invitation" from Putin. It added: "In addition to strengthening bilateral ties, the visit will also witness the signing of a number of agreements between both countries." But then, no details were given – by either side. Possibly, some major defence deals have been agreed upon.

The official Saudi Press Agency quoted the Saudi Ambassador to Moscow Abdulrahman Al-Rasi as saying, "The visit (by MbS) is extremely important and will make clear a number of future prospects, and (explore) joint efforts to boost strategic relations which are based on a firm foundation and mutual respect, (aiming) to produce a paradigm shift and commence a new era in relations between the two countries, who share fruitful cooperation in a number of different areas and a historic relationship."

So, is it going to be a replay of the cold-war era Ogaden War (1977-78) when the former Soviet Union disapproved of the Somali Democratic Republic's invasion of Ethiopia, ceased its support of Somalia and instead began supporting Ethiopia, whereupon the US conversely ceased its support of Ethiopia and started supporting Somalia?

No, far from it. There is no cold war today. There are no pretensions of ideology. Both the US and Russia are openly pursuing their self-interests in a grim power play where there are no victors. In all probability, therefore, Russia will choose to be nice to both Iran and Saudi Arabia. That will also be the smart thing to do.

It is in Russia's interest to keep friendly ties with Iran, which is a mutually beneficial relationship. It is gratifying on the economic side and politically it is factor of stability for the Caspian and Central Asia. It creates space for both to negotiate with the US.

Russia's Syria policies become unsustainable without Iran's cooperation. Russia will not want to see Iran competing with it in the European energy market, something that the European Union and the US is promoting.

Above all, Iran is Russia's neighboring country and its gravitation to the West will be detrimental to its core interests. The chronicle of the Anglo-Russian great game in Persia testifies to it.

On the other hand, the US-Saudi estrangement presents a unique opportunity for Russian diplomacy and economic interests that Moscow will not fail to exploit. A visible rise in the Russian-Saudi ties will help Moscow to leverage its delicate relationship with Iran, which has never been an easy neighbor to handle.

Conceivably, Russia would even have a zero sum mindset insofar as the erosion in the US-Saudi relations gives scope for expanding the Russian influence in one of the most strategic regions of the Middle East, the GCC territories, which have been the exclusive playpen of western powers in modern history.

In sum, it means the optimal diversification of Russia's Middle East policies – with a breathtaking array of friendly relations ranging from Israel, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt and the GCC states – that could be the envy of any big power.

There is a serious contradiction, however, that Moscow and Riyadh will have to grapple with. Saudi Arabia's main geopolitical tool to hurt Iran and force it on to the back foot is its sponsorship of the extremist Islamist groups, including some affiliated with al-Qaeda.

Saudi Arabia has a history of having deployed the extremist Islamist groups in the past to hurt Russian interests – in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Syria, etc. And King Salman has shown the audacity to openly sup with the al-Qaeda to bleed Iran.

Russia's experience would tell it that "jihad" is a virus that cannot be contained once the genie is let out of the bottle. Paradoxically, Russia has a convergence of interests today with the US in muzzling King Salman to see the light of reason and bid farewell to the al-Qaeda.

Whereas, expediency demands that Russia overlooks King Salman's dalliance with the al-Qaeda.

It all, therefore, depends on what assurances MbS held out to Putin at yesterday's meeting in the interests of forging a pragmatic relationship based on common interests at the present point in time.