

Persian Gulf 'Rivals' Join Forces For Peace

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

One of George W. Bush's undeniable foreign policy achievements has been to unify forces, otherwise at odds with one another, in a common front. As one editorialist put it: Bush unites the world—against himself.

This is definitely the case of the alliance recently begun to be forged between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Traditionally, Shi'ite Iran and Sunni (Wahabite) Saudi Arabia have been presented as rivals for influence in the region. Whereas Tehran has thrown its weight behind Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, and the Shi'ite political factions in Iraq, Saudi Arabia has supported the Fuad Siniora government in Beirut, Fatah among the Palestinians, and the Sunnis in Iraq. It was this factional lineup that Vice President Dick Cheney tried to exploit, in his late November meeting with Saudi King Abdallah, when he attempted to lure the Saudis into joining a broader alliance of so-called "moderate" Sunni Arab states, against the "extremists" (read: Iran and its allies). This is the same grouping that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice tried to assemble into a "GCC+2" coalition, bringing the Gulf Cooperation Council members together with Sunni Egypt and Jordan together to back an attack against Iran.

Their machinations seem to have run into a brick wall, however. Instead of allowing themselves to be played against each other, Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic have joined forces in an effort not only to cool down those hot spots which threaten to trigger wider conflict, but to seek through diplomatic means, to find solutions leading to a durable peace. The reason is very simple: Both realize that, with the Iraq crisis careening out of control, any further escalation of conflict in other theaters, would explode the entire region, engulfing themselves, as well. Iran knows it is targeted for direct attack, and the Saudis know that, if that were to occur, the Kingdom would be one of the first to feel the repercussions, in the form of uprisings among its Shi'ite minority.

In late January, Ali Larijani, the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council and lead negotiator on the nuclear dossier, made a landmark visit to Riyadh, during which he delivered letters from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to the Saudi monarch, proposing joint action to stabilize Lebanon and Iraq. Reports of the mission, repeatedly covered in Iranian media, stressed that the Saudi response was positive. Saudi Foreign

Minister Saud al-Faisal himself reported on Jan. 30 that Iran had approached the Kingdom for help in “averting strife between the Sunnis and Shi’ites in Iraq and Lebanon,” adding that his country “wants only peace in the region.” He added that a Saudi envoy was in Iran to discuss the crisis areas, “exploring what Iran can contribute.”

At the same time, intensive diplomacy was going on between Iran and Syria, with Larijani and at the foreign ministers’ level, in an attempt to strike an agreement with the Iraqi government to convene a conference of Iraq and its neighbors, to map out security arrangements and a long-term stabilization plan. Once a preliminary deal had been reached, with Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari’s okay for a Baghdad conference, Saudi Foreign Minister al-Faisal quickly signalled his approval.

Averting Lebanese Civil War

Although Iraq is the biggest fire burning in the - region, Lebanon and Palestine are not brush fires. In Lebanon, after the opposition led by Hezbollah and allied Christian forces of Michel Aoun, plus the trade union confederation, organized a Jan. 23 general strike, violence broke out between rival camps, leading to the deaths of seven people. For the first time in over a decade, a curfew was imposed on Beirut, and fear swept the country, that a bloody civil war like that which had raged from 1975 to 1990 would be visited on the country again.

Instead, all sides intervened to calm down the situation. Especially important was the message from Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrullah to his followers, that they should stay off the streets, and allow the Lebanese security authorities to restore and maintain order.

Reports then appeared in the Lebanese press, that leaders of the government, like Saad Hariri and Prime Minister Siniora, might be willing to meet with the opposition. Among the Christian camp, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea announced his readiness to talk to Aoun.

The Saudi and Iranian role was aimed at bringing together Siniora and Parliament speaker Nabil Berri, a Shi’ite close to Hezbollah. Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Abdel Aziz-Khoja met with them separately on Jan. 27. He told the press, “Iran has a critical regional presence and role, and we have been in constant contact with the officials there, and one of the issues discussed is the current situation in Lebanon.” Radwan Say-

yed, an advisor to Siniora, was quoted by the *New York Times* saying, “The only hope is for the Iranians and the Saudis to go further in easing the situation and bringing people back to the negotiating table.” Arabic press organs, including *Al-Asharq al-Awsat*, which is usually aligned with the Western neo-cons, stated explicitly that a civil war in Lebanon had indeed been averted at the 11th hour, solely due to the intervention of the Saudis and Iran.

The Broader Picture

In Palestine, as well, where armed conflict had broken out between the Fatah and Hamas factions, leading to more than 30 dead in a matter of days, Riyadh and Tehran also intervened. Saudi King Abdallah invited the leaders of the two factions to meet with him in Mecca, to try to overcome the crisis and pave the way for a unity government. This effort has not yet been successful.

In addition, Russia has intervened to throw its weight behind the forces of reconciliation, and is being looked to as a superpower which might be able to broker solutions to the conflicts. Contacts with the Iranians and the Saudis have been made, as well as with the Lebanese and Hamas. Russian President Vladimir Putin has announced an upcoming visit to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan, on the invitation of the monarchs there. Putin also sent his national security chief, Igor Ivanov, to Tehran at the end of January. There he argued that “all sides must abstain from actions and statements that might become an add-on factor” to the current tensions.

The question now is: What will the United States do? As political figures in Lebanon and other Arab countries have repeatedly told *EIR*, the main force fomenting conflict has been the Cheney faction in the United States. Secretary Rice has been deployed to insist that all parties toe the Administration line: Siniora must be supported at all costs in a hardline resistance against the opposition’s demands, and Fatah should be backed, including with weapons, in its conflict with Hamas, the *bête noire* with which no one should have contact. And Iran, accused of being the destabilizing factor in the entire region, should be dealt with through sanctions and, as she, Bush, and Cheney have increasingly indicated, also through military means.

Thus, the last thing this grouping wants, is for Iran to play a positive role. As the *New York Times* put it Jan. 30, the “unusual collaboration” between that “diplomatic odd couple,” Iran and Saudi Arabia, “could complicate American policy in the region,” because American policy under the current regime is for war on all fronts.

It is the political battle of the new Democratic majority in Congress against the war party in the Administration, that has made possible the bold initiatives launched by the Saudis (themselves seriously factionalized) together with Iran. To the extent that the battle in the United States can be won by the opposition, there is hope that the steps taken by the regional powers can yield results.

“Who Is Sparking A Religious War in the Mideast?”

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