

Iran and regional politics of good neighbourhood - implications with regard to extremist tendencies

Tehran, August 25th 2014

THIS ARTICLE IS BASED ON AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED WITH MR. MEHRDAD KIAEI, DIRECTOR PERSIAN GULF STUDY GROUP OF THE INSTITUTE FOR POLITICAL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (IPIS), TEHRAN - IRAN

Throughout times, with much ups and downs, we can observe a strained relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia. There are many theories to explain this strained relationship. Some of these theories are based on the following observations :

- religion : Sunni (Wahabbism) in Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Islam in the Islamic Republic of Iran
- Political influence : both states being a regional superpower striving for supremacy in the region
- International arena : Saudi Arabia as an U.S.A. ally while Iran following and independent anti imperialistic course
- A combination of all above

The sometimes strained relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia is in the first place not a religious conflict between both countries. Although Iran is an Islamic Republic based on Shi'a Islamist ideology and Saudi Arabia is an Islamic state based on the Sunni branch of Islam, it is important to stress that Shi'a Muslims and Sunni Muslims are not enemies. The ruling elite in Saudi Arabia is a small elite consisting of the extended royal family. They identify themselves to the outside world as the custodian of the two holy shrines Mecca and Medina. Although the Saudi ruling elite is sometimes using the Wahabbi political discourse as a tool in their foreign policy, they realise that Wahabbism can and will be a threat against themselves. The Wahabbis, which are geographically much more spread far above the limitations of the Saudi Kingdom are trying to install an Islamic caliphate which do not take into consideration the existing national borders. From this point of view they also represent a direct threat to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its ruling elite.

The rivalry between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is more connected with ideological matters of how to give shape to an Islamic State. It's about legitimacy. About who represents the true Islamic governance. Saudi Arabia with its small elite representing themselves as the guardians of the two holy shrines or the Islamic Republic of Iran with its own ideology based on the teaching of Shi'a Islam and being a popular democracy. In this regard the rivalry between both states is a regional rivalry based on legitimacy.

There is although an international dimension to it as Saudi Arabia is using a lot of petrodollar diplomacy to gain the support of its international allies, mainly the Arab States around the Persian Gulf and it's main Western ally the United States of America, in its struggle of legitimacy.

Is Syria experiencing a proxy war nowadays between Saudi Arabia on the one hand which is logistically, financially and military supporting the extremists groups in its fight against the Syrian government and on the other hand Iran which is allied with the Assad government and Hezbollah in Lebanon?

There has always been a kind of disagreement between the Syrian government led by the Syrian Ba'ath Party which has a secular character and socialist roots and the Islamic nature of the Saudi Kingdom. This wide divergence has throughout modern history always caused limits in reciprocal good relationships between the two countries. There are also other causes nowadays and in recent history as the way how to handle the Palestinian case and, during the Iran - Iraq war (1980 - 1988), Syria's support for Iran which brought it in direct confrontation with a majority of Arab States including Saudi Arabia. The essence of the bad relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia is the

totally opposite ideological nature and foundations of Syria and Saudi Arabia with Saudi Arabia making use of the events in Syria to expand its influence. Saudi Arabia is of course well aware of the strategic relationship between Tehran and Damascus but it's not as much a proxy war as the Saudi actions are in the first place directed against the Syrian government itself and not against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

What is the exact relationship between ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), now using the abbreviation I.S. (Islamic State) and Saudi Arabia? My personal opinion is that ISIS was created or at least supported by Saudi Arabia to defeat the Assad government but things spiralled out of control with ISIS now being a uncontrollable monster and possibly becoming a threat for Saudi Arabia itself. What is your idea about this theory?

Saudi Arabia is using ISIS as a tool to gain certain political goals but as explained before this is a dangerous game as ISIS is in the same time a threat to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its ruling elite. One can say that Saudi Arabia may support ISIS as long as it's a tool to reach its goals abroad but once ISIS will become so strong that they become a direct threat to Saudi Arabia itself their support for ISIS will certainly stop.

Was the attack from ISIS against Iraq, still a weak state with weak state institutions more than 10 years after the U.S. Led invasion, predictable? For a lot of people this seemed as being a surprise but for me it was a quite a logical and predictable action as the Syrian national army is proving to be, after more than 3 years of war, a formidable foe and Iraq, also being regarded as an Iranian ally, an easier victim.

Yes, the ISIS offensive in Iraq was quite logical and predictable. ISIS originates and grew in Iraq as an offshoot of al Qaeda but has now become a force in itself. With the events taking place in Syria starting in 2011 ISIS launched an offensive against the Syrian government. But they had no popular support there. So after an initial failure in Syria they took advantage of the vulnerable situation in Iraq. They were helped in this strategy by two elements present in Iraq. First of all there was a deep discontentment of the Sunni population against the policies of former prime minister Nouri al Maliki. Secondly, there are the remnants of the dissolved former Iraqi Ba'ath Party and it's army officers which are more numerous and better organised than most people realise. Although ISIS and the remnants of the Iraqi Ba'ath party are natural foes, they work now together trying to topple the government in Bagdad. But one can be sure that this cooperation will have a temporary character as the opposite ideological nature of ISIS with its Wahhabi and Salafist roots and the secular Ba'ath party will come into conflict as soon as their common cause has been achieved or even sooner. We probably will see in the future a conflict breaking out between today's allies ISIS and the Iraqi Ba'ath members.

It's also important to realise that the majority of the Sunni community is strongly opposed to the so called flavour of political Islam as propagated by ISIS. Their savagery and excesses are contradicting the real Islamic values. Their rule in the areas which are under their control is based on fear and terror, not on popular support. This explains why ISIS is constantly on the move directing their focus from one place to another. They have no popular support and local communities are organising to defend themselves and get rid of this terrorist plague. So, it is a wrong perception to describe the actions of ISIS as a battle between Sunni and Shi'a. Both Sunni and Shi'a are opposed to ISIS and what it stands for.

Do you think that Saudi Arabia was aware of the ISIS assault on Iraq or did it come as a surprise for them too? Do you think Ryad should be worried of a regional spread of this terrorist offensive and of becoming a target itself?

It's difficult to say if Saudi Arabia was aware of the ISIS assault on Iraq or not. In any case, some institutions in Saudi Arabia are using ISIS as a political tool for the moment but it's also 100% sure that the Saudi Government is aware of its own vulnerability. They tolerate ISIS as long as they stay

outside of the Saudi Kingdom but once ISIS becomes a real threat against the Kingdom itself they will for sure retract all support to ISIS and will fight them themselves.

Do you see in the near future an improving of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia vis à vis the common threat in the region? Some media speak already about the creation of new alliances as a result of the current situation which were a few months ago unthinkable with Iran and the U.S now on the same site with regard to ISIS both faced with a common enemy. Do you think that such a rapprochement is also possible between Iran and Saudi Arabia? A regional alliance out of the need to face this common threat?

According to Iran's foreign policy ISIS as well as other problems in the region should be tackled from an international perspective. Iran is cooperating with Saudi Arabia on numerous fields and relations are improving but the aspect of terrorism in the region needs a much broader platform of cooperation. Not only between Iran and Saudi Arabia but between all regional states and even on a world scale.

Concerning Iran's relations with the United States, there is a need to build trust between each other and the nuclear file is a good test case to see if the rapprochement between the U.S.A. and Iran is sincere. If the nuclear file can be resolved in a satisfactory way and the sanctions against Iran are lifted one can study the next stage of cooperation. It all depends on the future attitude of the U.S. with regard to Iran. If the U.S. are sincere and will truly respect Iran.

Also Qatar is supporting the extremist groups active in Syria with financial aid and providing them with weapons. Qatar is openly supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and this took them on a collision course with Saudi Arabia which stands for a Salafist form of Islam. Saudi Arabia, as other Arab Persian Gulf states, even recalled their ambassador in Qatar. How would you describe relations between Iran and Qatar especially in perspective of the Syrian scene?

Relations between Qatar and Iran are good and both states are closely working together on numerous fields, including the energy sector. There may be some differences but these are not threatening the fundamental good relations between Iran and Qatar.

The reality is that Qatar is a very small state in the orbit of influence of Saudi Arabia which is a regional power broker and that the Saudis are sceptical when a tiny state as Qatar is pursuing its own foreign policies especially when they differ from the policies of Saudi Arabia.

One of these points of disagreement is Qatar's close relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood has a lot of influence in the Middle East and for Qatar to succeed in expanding its foreign influence their relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood is essential as it gives the Qatari a leverage to achieve their ambitions. For Qatar the Muslim Brotherhood is a key which opens many doors in the MENA region. One example was Qatar's influence in Egypt during the presidency of President Mursi. It was astonishing to observe the scale of tiny Qatar's influence in another Arab superpower as Egypt.

From a Saudi point of view, the Muslim Brotherhood is representing an opponent to its own supremacy in the region. It's once again a question of legitimacy of Saudi Arabia representing all the Muslims and being the custodian of the two holy places of Mecca and Medina. They regard the Muslim Brotherhood a threat to this supremacy and this explains their animosity against Qatar supporting the Muslim Brotherhood.

Also Iran has, after a short break in the beginning of the Syrian crisis, rebuild a good and constructive relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. I am referring here to the Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people in Gaza and Iran's support for the Palestinian people and the Hamas movement. Iran also strongly supported the presidency of President Mursi in Egypt.

In the same time the Hamas leadership dropped its support for the Assad government in Syria and their leadership moved to Qatar. How does Iran cope with this situation as being an ally to both Syria and Hamas in the same time? Do you think a reconciliation between Syria and Hamas with the help of Iranian diplomacy is possible in the future?

During the Syrian crisis a lot of mistakes have been made, not only by regional players but also between the Western countries and Syria. A lot of the upheaval we witness now in the region with regard to Syria but also Iraq is a result of these mistakes. But slowly things are changing in the right direction. With the current instability prevalent in the region these mistakes become more and more clear and also the fact that Syria is needed as an integral part of a comprehensive solution is becoming more and more acceptable.

On top of this, Syria has always supported the Palestinian people in its struggle against the Zionist occupation. Even in times the Palestinians were abandoned by other Arab states, Syria remained faithful to the Palestinian cause. Hamas knows this very well and probably, when the time is ripe, they will acknowledge this and repair the relationship between Hamas and Damascus.

If things in Iraq and / or Syria will spiral totally out of control, is Iran prepared to intervene military directly?

Any intervention in the region should be based on a coalition against terrorism and only by request and consent and cooperation of the host country. Iran considers it a bad idea to act unilaterally. The struggle against terrorism can only succeed if all actors in the region work together for the same cause.

Also, Iran don't see an immediate threat coming from ISIS because of several reasons.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is based on the Shi'a teachings while ISIS is claiming to represent the Sunni's. ISIS has nothing to look for in Iran as they have zero support here in Iran. They will from the first attempt be repelled by the Iranian people.

Secondly, Iran has a very strong and powerful army and ISIS is aware of this. It would be suicidal for them to attack Iran. But referring to the first reason, an attack of ISIS against Iran is purely hypothetical as they have nothing to gain by attacking Iran, nor militarily nor ideologically.

Jordan and Saudi Arabia are the ones to fear to be the next victim of the ISIS terror. They have a majority Sunni population and are dealing with widespread discontent from the people with their respective governments because of economical and social reasons. In such a scenario ISIS can calculate to obtain a reasonable popular support among these two countries respective populations. Both countries are well aware of the disastrous implications when getting involved in the conflict.

What are Iran's contingency plans if such a scenario would occur... the disintegration of the Iraqi state, the fall of the Assad government or both?

This is a very hypothetical question as Iran don't foresee in the near future a political takeover of the legal government in Syria or Iraq because these terrorist and extremist groups, be it ISIS or other groups, don't have wide popular and stable support. Sometimes they make irrational coalitions as with the former Ba'ath members and officers in Iraq but once they install their governance in the occupied areas the people are surrendered to the cruel atrocities and harsh policies of these wicked groups and they start to organise themselves to get rid of them. This explains why ISIS is constantly on the move. If they are stable and stall still then the problems begin to rise up. Once they occupy an area and the people see their real faces they get confronted with local resistance groups fighting the terrorist occupation.

But to go back to the question, if hypothetically the central government in Damascus or Bagdad will fall, Iran has to adjust its foreign policies to the new situation. The popular groups who are now in support of Iran's policies because of rational real politics will still be there and support Iran, with or without central government. If this happens we will observe a transformation in the region from nation states into ethnical, religious and social groups. With such a strategic change in the region it is natural that different players' strategies will change and new alliances and balance of powers will appear. According to new dynamics of the region and new realities of the international arena Iran will rearrange its elements of power. During thousands of years of our history we proved to be able to manage such crises.

Kris Janssen
Writer and Analyst on Middle Eastern affairs
Belgium

With special thanks to Mr. Mehrdad Kiaei