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The Saudi-Iranian Meeting: Momentary Reconciliation prior to Escalation?

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King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and Iranian President Ahmadinejad met in Mecca last week at an emergency summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which decided to suspend Syria's membership in the organization. This decision is mainly symbolic, but Ahmadinejad's participation at the OIC meeting on Saudi soil at this time was as surprising as was the invitation itself. Ahmadinejad, who headed a delegation of senior officials, had visited Saudi Arabia previously (December 2005 and March 2007), but given the events in Syria and the increased tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia, his visit carries significant weight. The two main ideological and geostrategic rivals in the Middle East appear to be attempting to bridge their differences and maintain open channels of communication, if only for tactical reasons.

A year ago, King Abdullah spoke publicly against Assad for the first time. The exceptionally tough statement by the Saudi king, who demanded "to stop the killing machine," was additional evidence that Saudi Arabia was pitted against the radical axis led by Iran, after a similar stance in Bahrain. Saudi Arabia, which is aiding the opposition in Syria, would like to see Assad fall, if only because this would cause Iran to lose its main ally, undermine the radical alignment, and give the Saudis the opportunity to lead a Sunni camp that is larger and more cohesive than in the past. This would occur if the Sunnis do in fact seize power in Syria. Saudi Arabia's hosting of many defectors from the ranks of the Damascus regime, including General Manaf Tlass, could indicate the kingdom's ambitions in this regard. For his part, the Iranian president declared before the summit that his country was creating an opportunity to solve disputes through mediation and politics, rather than through military force.

Do the two sides, understanding that the situation in Syria is near the decision point, seek to reach an agreed-upon formula concerning the nature of the future Syrian regime in the country? It is not clear. Either way, the meeting indicates their desire to mitigate the tension, which increased with the escalation in Syria that was largely ethnically based. Indeed, Abdullah stated that the goal of the emergency summit was to aid in closing ranks

in the Islamic world and in solving the crises in the region, particularly – but not only – in Syria.

The two countries are in fact positioned on different sides in the conflict in Syria, as well as with regard to events in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, and even northeast Saudi Arabia, where violent agitation is increasing among the kingdom's Shiite minority. Perhaps the Saudis hope that a dialogue with Iran will curb the growing domestic Shiite protest and help maintain relative quiet among the Shiite minority.

The Arab spring provided a boost to the Shiite population, and the eastern province, where most of the kingdom's Shiite minority are concentrated, has experienced much unrest over the past year and a half, in spite of efforts by the royal house to maintain calm through the use of force and economic incentives. The funerals of those killed in the demonstrations have become a demonstration of force, the likes of which have not been seen in the province since the Islamic Revolution. While the events are on a small scale compared to what is underway in Syria, they are substantive in Saudi terms. The Shiites present a security problem for Saudi Arabia, not only because of their geographic and ideological proximity to Iran, but also, and perhaps mainly, given their residence near the largest oil reserves in the world. In Saudi Arabia's view, the Shiites are being stirred up in order to illustrate, inter alia, what the price would be of harming Iranian interests in the Gulf or elsewhere, e.g., Syria.

Although Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in a struggle to shape the balance of power in the Middle East, they are both seeking to keep their struggle covert through the use of soft power, inter alia, through mutual incitement and psychological warfare by means of radio and television networks, and through funding of domestic opponents and proxies. For example, while Iran has some influence among the kingdom's Shiites, Saudi Arabia has ties with the Baluches and the Arab minority in Khuzestan. Meantime, while economic and diplomatic channels remain open, as proven by Ahmadinejad's visit.

Iran came to the OIC at a disadvantage: talk of an attack on its nuclear facilities is being stepped up, Saudi oil is flooding the markets, Iran is having difficulty finding buyers for its oil, and its economy is in crisis. Assad, Iran's main ally in the region, is in a highly unstable position, and it appears that Chinese and Russian support is not as strong as in the past. Furthermore, Iran must assume that the Syrian opposition's military capabilities will gradually increase, inter alia, thanks to aid provided by the Gulf states. If these assessments are correct, then every passing day bringing the end of the Syrian regime closer.

Although it is difficult to see how Ahmadinejad's visit will lead to significant agreements, the two countries are clearly endeavoring to manage the deep-seated rivalry, and may even

be making preparations for the day after Assad. It has been reported that Tehran is attempting to promote a temporary ceasefire that will suit its interests, as it understands that the conditions on the ground are not in its favor. Iran, which will host the summit of the non-aligned states at the end of the month, is making an intensive diplomatic effort to prevent Assad's fall, or at least to maintain its influence day after his fall. It is also attempting to improve its tense relations with Saudi Arabia by keeping open the channels for dialogue.

Any attempt to influence the day after Assad will require Saudi cooperation, and Iran understands this. The fact that it seeks ties with Syrian opposition elements and is thus attempting to influence the makeup of the future regime is evidence that it is preparing for the day after. The Iranian president's visit also had immediate tactical motives – an attempt to stop the tide against Syria in the Arab and Muslim world, even slightly, and to ask, as Iran previously did with Qatar and Turkey, that Abdullah intercede for the release of the Iranians captured in Syria. For its part, Saudi Arabia, if it seeks to establish a friendly regime in Syria, also needs Iran, which has considerable influence there. Iran is capable of making any attempt to establish an alternative government in Damascus very difficult, causing the civil war to drag on and thereby prolonging instability.

Albeit for different reasons, neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran is satisfied with the position of the international community in general, and the West in particular. While Saudi Arabia wishes to see more outside intervention, Iran does not wish to see any. The background to the visit may be an Iranian understanding that it is a matter of time until Assad falls, and both countries are interested in avoiding a widening of the conflict.

King Abdullah's conciliatory approach toward the Iranian president during the OIC summit (in a token act of formality, they were seated next to each other at the reception), was apparently intended to help reach an agreement on Syria. However, the chances of finding a formula that would satisfy both sides are slim because for both countries, the events in Syria are to a large extent a zero-sum game. The civil war has reached the point that Iran and Saudi Arabia will have a hard time retreating from the positions they have presented and the (contradictory) commitments that they have given to the respective sides.