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Reshaping the Middle East: UAE Leads the Counter-revolution

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

The United Arab Emirates backed by Saudi Arabia and Egypt is spearheading a conservative Arab effort to reshape the Middle East and North Africa in their mould, in parallel with the US-led war against Islamic State jihadists in Syria and Iraq. The effort targets the Muslim Brotherhood and seeks to preserve the status quo against expressions of political Islam.

Commentary

WAR PLANES from oil-rich Gulf states play a supporting role in the US-led air campaign to counter the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Despite their massive weapons acquisitions in recent years the Gulf states' participation may make little military difference in the war against the jihadists, but it serves everyone's political purpose.

It shields the US against accusations that the West is waging war against Islam and the Gulf states and from claims that they are unwilling to play their part in confronting what constitutes first and foremost a threat to regional stability rather than to the homeland security of the United States or Europe. It further allows the Gulf states to project themselves as pro-Western beacons of modernity; the United Arab Emirates in particular milking its deploying of the first woman fighter pilot for all it is worth.

Filling the vacuum

Under the radar, Gulf participation has enabled Saudi Arabia and the UAE to step up their effort to thwart the Muslim Brotherhood, political Islam and its Qatari backers as well as squash hope for political change across the Middle East and North Africa. The Saudi-UAE effort went into high gear with support for last year's ousting by the military of President Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brother and Egypt's only democratically elected president, and the withdrawal of their ambassadors from Doha earlier this year. The effort reflects a new assertiveness of Gulf rulers to further goals that the US may not fully share.

Writing on the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya network, Saudi journalist Mohammed Fahad al-Harhi noted that the alliance between Saudi Arabia and the UAE has raised the "real possibility that the current

power vacuum could be filled... Saudi Arabia and the UAE have always shared similar views on how to tackle problems in the Arab world, including their approach on creating a future free from extremism and terrorism”.

The UAE, long distrustful of the Brotherhood and Qatar, has taken the lead in cementing the Brotherhood's downfall and countering Qatari support for political change in the region as long as conservative Gulf monarchies remain ring-fenced. UAE warplanes operating from bases in Egypt are believed to have in recent months launched several attacks on Islamist forces associated with the Brotherhood in divided Libya. The attacks supported rogue Libyan general Khalifa Haftar who is known for his opposition to the Brotherhood.

According to Middle East Eye, the UAE supported efforts of ousted Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh to use his erstwhile Houthi rebel opponents to derail political transition in Yemen as well as President Abd-Rabbuh Mansur Hadi's government in which the Brotherhood-aligned Islah Party is represented. Saleh is believed to have worked through his son, Ahmed Ali Saleh, a former commander of Yemen's Republican Guard and the country's ambassador to the UAE. Houthis, a Shiite Muslim sect, last month effectively took control of Sana'a, the Yemeni capital, and have since agreed to join the Hadi government as its dominant force.

Gulf differences

Ironically, Saudi Arabia, unlike the UAE an implacable ideological and political opponent of Shia Islam, has been caught in a Catch-22 situation. The Saudis suspect the Houthis of having ties to Iran. Yet, the Houthis oppose the Muslim Brotherhood that was influential in the Yemeni government until the Houthis invaded the capital Sana'a. If that were not complicated enough, Saudi Arabia would like to limit the degree of change in Yemen, a country on its border that is slated to join Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). GCC foreign ministers have warned that the Houthi advances threatened regional stability and demanded the restoration of government authority in Yemen.

The counter-revolutionary Gulf strategy has opened a window on potential differences not only between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain on the one hand and Qatar on the other but also within the conservative counter-revolutionary camp itself. Beyond apparent tactical differences between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Bahrain, virtually a Saudi outpost, joined the Saudis and Emiratis earlier this year in withdrawing its ambassador from Doha but has refused to ban the Brotherhood or label it a terrorist organisation.

More fundamentally, the strategy faces potential pitfalls given the fact that the Brotherhood, with the backdrop of almost a century of repression, has proven to be a cat with nine lives and that Arab autocracy has helped produce ever more virulent forms of political Islam as evidenced initially by Al Qaeda and more recently by Islamic State.

Rising from the ashes

In a recent book, *Answering the Call: Popular Islamic Activism in Sadat's Egypt*, historian Abdullah Al-Arian documented how the Brotherhood, after being crushed in the 1950s and 1960s by former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, rose from the ashes in the late 1970s propelled by a rebellious student movement.

“As we ponder the future of the Muslim Brotherhood—and popular activism in Egypt more generally—it may be instructive to consider the historical precedent for the resumption of activism following a period of severe repression... It is more instructive to examine these movements, not as an alien force committed to the widespread destruction of society, but rather as a natural product of the societies from which they emerge,” Al-Arian said in a recent interview with *Jadaliyya*. It is a lesson that appears to go unnoticed in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

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