

SAUDI REGIONAL STRATEGY: THE POWER OF MEDIATION

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On February 8, 2007, Saudi leaders brought warring Palestinian factions together in Mecca to hammer out an agreement on a unity government that would end the Fatah-Hamas violence in the Palestinian territories. Some Western and Israeli observers expected the Saudis to follow-up on their success by moving to revive the long-dormant Arab-Israeli peace process through the vehicle of the Arab peace plan (originally a Saudi one) adopted in 2002 at the Beirut Arab summit conference. A few weeks later, on March 3, Saudi King Abdullah met with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Riyadh to address the spiraling Sunni-Shi'a tensions and violence in the region, and Iran's increased assertiveness.

To Riyadh's satisfaction, it was duly praised, particularly in the West, as being both a worthy peace broker and coordinator of a new Sunni-Arab regional coalition designed to counter Iran. However, it is worthwhile to look beyond the praise and examine the logic and consequences of the Saudi strategy. In fact, the Saudis have been exercising inter-Arab mediation since the 1970s, which proved to be a complex strategy that was not always compatible with Western, notably U.S., interests.

Unlike other leading states in the Middle East, notably Egypt and Syria, which sought to assert their regional leadership at various junctures through displays of revolutionary fervor, military

power, and bombastic rhetoric, the Saudis have long adhered to a different approach, that of coordination and mediation among Arab states. It is a more subtle method, exercised primarily behind the scenes, and aimed first and foremost at reinforcing the kingdom's security. Saudi Arabia is geographically large, with nearly 2.15 million square kilometers of territory. It has long borders adjacent to nearly every important zone of conflict in the Middle East, from the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea/Horn of Africa, to the Fertile Crescent. Its vast oil wealth (22 percent of the world's proven reserves) has made it an inviting target for radical opposition movements and states alike, whether religious/fundamentalist or secular-leftist. In view of this troublesome and sometimes threatening environment, Saudi Arabia has chosen not to exercise military power as its primary mode of defense. Instead, the Saudis have usually preferred to employ diplomacy, notably mediation, in an effort to defuse conflicts before they reached the Saudi borders. Mediation is intended to bestow on the Saudis the image of an Arab patriot acting for the general good of the Arab nation as a whole. In addition, playing the role of an essential arbiter of disputes ideally provides Saudi Arabia with immunity from regional attacks.

Prominent historical examples of Saudi mediation include the 1981 Fahd plan for the Arab-Israeli conflict, which became the all-Arab

Fez Summit Resolutions of 1981-1982; the Ta'if agreement in 1989 regarding Lebanon's political crisis; and King Abdullah's 2002 initiative, which subsequently became one of the bases for current Arab-Israeli peace formulas.

Saudi Arabia's latest burst of activist diplomacy emanates from its leaders' perception of rapidly evolving regional dangers. Iran is trying to become a regional hegemon and in the near future may pose a potential nuclear threat to Saudi Arabia. As the bastion of the Sunni-Wahhabi denomination, Saudi Arabia also feels threatened by the rising Shi'a power in Iraq and Lebanon, and fears that these states could collapse or fragment, with concomitant effect on its own society, particularly its Shi'a minority (10% of the population, located mainly in the oil-rich Eastern Province). The Saudi mediation between Fatah and Hamas was prompted by Riyadh's desire to prevent a full-blown destabilizing civil war in the Palestinian territories which, among other negative consequences, would provide Iran with further opportunity to expand its influence in Palestinian affairs.

In order to tackle these threats the Saudis embarked once more on a strategy of mediating regional conflicts, albeit in a convoluted fashion. On the one hand, the Saudis went as far as negotiating directly with Iran, the Saudis' (and West's) main adversary in the region. By openly seeking Iran's cooperation in lowering the temperature of a variety of conflicts, Saudi Arabia negotiations implicitly acknowledged Tehran's major regional role. In so doing, Saudi leaders ignored, even defied, the more aggressively hostile U.S. position regarding Iran. On the other hand, the Saudis also wanted to show they have coercive tools at hand as well: hence their apparent cultivation of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq and support for a Sunni opposition to Hizballah in Lebanon, thereby signaling to Iran that there were red lines that were best not crossed.

Similarly, Western states and Israel were hoping that the Saudis negotiated the Mecca agreement with an eye to reigniting an Israeli-Palestinian peace process that would obtain European and U.S. support. But in fact, the Mecca agreement focused only on establishing Palestinian unity and ignored the peace process. Similarly, hopes for Israeli-Sunni Arab cooperation against Iran that had been nurtured by the unannounced meeting in September 2006 between Saudi National Security Adviser Prince Bandar and high-level Israeli officials were also dashed. The Saudis apparently viewed promoting peace between the Palestinians and Israelis as secondary to the more important issue of inter-Arab cooperation that would prevent the Palestinian Authority from succumbing to Iranian influence. To that end, the Saudis contributed \$1 billion to promote a Palestinian unity government, thus substantively surpassing the \$250 million of Iranian aid to Hamas.

One may thus see that through active mediation of regional disputes, the Saudis were again able to enhance their state security and improve their regional standing. They did so, however, by employing contradictory tactics and without developing an evident comprehensive strategy. Hence, the Saudi kingdom continues to rely on U.S. military forces to protect it against an invasion or ballistic missile attacks, while in defending against terrorism, regional insurgency, state fragmentation, or the rise of hostile ideological trends – e.g. Shi'a Islam – Saudi leaders recognize U.S. limitations and adopt measures that may be contradictory to Washington's interests. In the end, Saudi mediation tactics are often convoluted and unclear. As the Saudis prepare to host the Arab League summit in Riyadh in the coming days, the question is: Will the Saudis propose a comprehensive approach that addresses the interests of the West, Arab states, and Israel, or will this year's summit be the scene for another piecemeal approach to Saudi inter-Arab and regional mediation?