

Regional Power Struggles Between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Arab Spring Era

Written by David Maggs

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DAVID MAGGS, AUG 24 2011

When the Arab Spring reared its head, power struggles between regional Middle Eastern powers quickly emerged. This article gives a very general examination of the ways in which Saudi Arabia and Iran have competed and to what extent each has been successful in increasing their influence in the region over the past year. The main argument is that Saudi Arabia has been able to finance struggling regimes in the Middle East, whilst Iran has not; illustrating that it is Saudi Arabia and not Iran that is in the lead. Although Turkey should be considered a third regional power I will not examine its role as I feel the issue has recently been treated sufficiently on the site by Fadi Hakura.

Iran has long been keen to exert influence across the region through developing a strong sense of Pan-Shiism through its Alawite allies in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Its desire to exert this was noted in March of this year when it very publicly released the highly rhetorical propaganda video, "*Signs of the Apocalypse*", which hailed the coming of the Messiah in the forms of Khomeini and Ahmadinejad. As part of this drive for further power and influence, Iran has also sought better relations with Sunni populations and governments across the Middle East, in order to thwart its nemesis, Saudi Arabia. They have done so by pledging their support to the notion of Arab democracy, though they have given it the title of an "Islamic Awakening", aligning themselves with players like the Muslim Brotherhood.

However, Iran has met with limited success in strengthening its influence in both ways. The Fars News Agency, one of Tehran's state newspapers has been keen to stress its government's support for "*regional nations' quests' for democracy*". As Al-Jazeera has been keen to point out at the bequest of its masters in Qatar, this appears quite ridiculous when one looks at the crushing repression in Syria. The claim that Iran is striving to support the revolutions across the Arab world is even more absurd when one remembers Iran's response to its own citizens' demands for democracy in 2009.

Furthermore, regardless of who wins in Syria in the end, Iran is likely to lose out. If Assad stays, he will have to distance himself from Iran to appease the growing sense of sectarianism amongst Syrian Sunni's. Alternatively he could consolidate his position with closer ties to Iran, which would only further illustrate his increasing isolation. However, Iran's support for Assad has not won it any favour with the politicised masses of the awakening Arab world, especially the more religious, who detest Syria's repressive secularism. This result would mar its attempts to portray itself as welcoming the "Islamic awakening".

On the other hand, if Assad falls, Iran will likely have to deal with a hostile Sunni regime, angry about Iran's support of a former dictator. For potential Iranian allies, it is also patently clear that Iran's support is not enough to check unrest (unlike for example Saudi Arabia, who managed to prop up Bahrain's regime when it faced significant unrest).

Despite this, there have been two steps forward for Iran. The first is Hezbollah effectively staging a coup in Lebanon and taking the reigns of governance through its progeny Mikati. This is a hugely important development in terms of gaining influence in the Arab world. With Lebanon now under the control of Hezbollah, and the increasingly antagonistic posturing towards Israel this will cause, Iran and its allies appear to be the champion of this most important of Arab/Islamic causes.

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However, Iran's financial backing of Hezbollah has actually fallen significantly in recent years. Some US officials estimate that it had actually dropped by around 40% at the beginning of 2010. We have to query whether Hezbollah is willing to toe the antagonistic line plugged by Iran, and whether now in power Hezbollah seeks to stabilise its position.

The other potential success is in Iran developing relations with Egypt. Mubarak, due to his close ties with the US and Saudi Arabia maintained a hostile approach to Iran. Now, despite re-assurances from top Generals in the Supreme Council that Egypt's new military government will not pursue greater ties with Iran, they are undoubtedly moving closer together. Egypt has explicitly signalled its willingness to open up a relationship with Iran, whilst visits between politicians and high profile religious leaders from both countries have significantly increased.

However, we should not exaggerate Iran's successes here either. One of the likely reasons Egypt is warming up to the idea of a relationship with Iran is that with Hosni Mubarak gone, Egypt wants to take a more pro-active stance against Israel, relaxing the border with Gaza and developing its support for Hamas. Hamas however is currently in the Iranian camp, and co-operation with Iran is required for an initial step in this direction.

To understand this better we should consider Egypt's foreign minister since March, Nabil al-Arabi. His policy with regard to Israel is to win the confidence of Palestinians in light of Turkey's failure (see Fadi Hakura's article), as well as to prove the new governments credentials to its own seething populace. For example, his first step as foreign minister was to open the border crossing into Gaza at Rafah, and he was instrumental in brokering the peace deal between Hamas and Fatah. However, to improve Egypt's damaged relationship with the Palestinians further, he requires the diplomatic support of Iran, which would have been impossible under the antagonistic relationship maintained by Mubarak.

Relations developing beyond this point are unlikely however. Crucially, Iran would never be able to provide financial support to match that of Saudi Arabia (which we examine later). For the time being then, whatever Egypt's desires, it will have to toe the Gulf's conciliatory line, and the Gulf does not want the Arab-Israeli conflict to heat up, nor for Iran to make extensive headway with Egypt.

In Libya, Iran's stance has appeared contradictory and confused. It criticised Gaddafi for his repressive response to protests and accepted the Arab League's vote for a no-fly zone, whilst simultaneously complaining about Western and Zionist interference. Iran has attempted to court the rebel forces but this appeared empty when Europe began supplying them with arms. Iran supports the uprising in Libya, but doesn't want it to be dictated by Europe. Unfortunately for Iran, it has so far been powerless to prevent this.

Whether Iran scored a point in Bahrain is yet to be seen. Whilst both Iran and the Gulf monarchies were keen to dress the uprising as politically sectarian in nature, it is unclear to what extent Bahrain's Shia's really identify with the regime of the Ayatollah's and whether Saudi Arabia is really in danger of a Bahraini "Hezbollah" (which it was claimed was the reason for its sending troops across to Bahrain). The presence of many Sunni's amongst the protestors highlighted the fact that this protest had a very local dynamic, and focused on economic and political inequalities in general.

However, Saudi Arabia's response may actually have exacerbated the sectarian nature of Bahrain's protest movement. The destruction of mosques and the targeting of Shia' communities has led Bahrain's minority to mistrust anything their rulers offer them in terms of political reform.

Iran's situation can be summarised as follows. In Syria it is a matter of damage limitation, in Egypt they have so far been unable to lay down the foundations of a long-term relationship, in Libya they cannot back up words with action whilst Europe maintains its presence, and in Bahrain any successes are yet to arrive.

Saudi Arabia on the other hand has succeeded in using its financial muscle to draw a tight bloc of supporters around it, all of them terrified of the unrest gripping the region. Its financial support for struggling regimes has been backed up by a series of treaties bringing more co-operation between the Arab monarchies. So far the Arab Spring looks set

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to propel Saudi Arabia to a position of unrivalled power in the Middle East.

As in many cases of political unrest, the trigger is usually to be found in increasing food prices and a drop in standards of living. This has been happening in many Arab countries for a long time, indeed Egypt has seen consistent protesting about food prices in the last decade, for example in the summers of 2008 and 2009. At this time it was estimated that Egypt spent an annual \$850m on subsidising bread, a figure which has only increased in recent years as food prices have continued to rise and wages have stagnated.

The knee jerk reaction to quell unrest is thus to tackle this trigger. Saudi Arabia has cut the price of the fuel it sells to struggling countries, it has increased its investment in local businesses across the Middle East and given out charitable donations and aid packages. Jordan for example recently received a staggering \$1billion worth of aid, allowing it to reduce its huge deficit whilst increasing the food subsidies that stave off discontent. Egypt has so far accumulated around \$4billion in aid (backing up the point about it now being very indebted to the financiers in Riyadh); indeed they were able to turn down a substantive package from the IMF in favour of money flowing in from the Gulf. Tunisia was also one of the main recipients of a \$10billion fund that was spread across several other countries.

Saudi Arabia has combined this economic support with an expansion of the GCC from a strictly geographic alliance into a monarchical one. Jordan was invited into the GCC in May, (its official membership expected to begin in September 2011) and Morocco too has been asked to join. At the same time, the GCC is seeking to increase the size of the "Peninsula Shield", its combined military forces. The signal is that of the legitimacy of conservatism and counter-revolution, and the success of monarchical Sunni solidarity in the face of Iran.

The only places where Saudi Arabia has ignored popular revolt is in Syria and Libya. In Syria, they are delighted to see Assad, Iran's ally under intense pressure; it illustrates not only the folly and weakness of Iranian support, but also represents a potential u-turn in Syria's alliances. In Libya, officials from across the Gulf, spearheaded by Qatar have advised rebel forces on how to run their oil trade. Saudi Arabia is happy to see the back of a notorious trouble maker.

Whilst flailing Arab republics go cap in hand to Saudi Arabia to prevent their internal collapse, the GCC is building up a counter-revolutionary alliance stretching from the Gulf to north-west Africa.

It has not all been positive however. Saudi Arabia has struggled to help contain the protests in Yemen and though it first pledged to support Saleh staying in power, it has been forced to accept his fall. Riyadh is now waiting to see whether a faction from among the Hashed tribal federation can be relied upon to provide stability or whether official government forces in the hands of Saleh's family will survive. Their policy then is to simply not decide... yet. However, the sheer scale of factionalism, coupled by the over-riding issue of secessionism and radical Islamism in the South means this is a dangerous game to play.

As mentioned earlier, Saudi Arabia has also lost its ally in Lebanon, Hariri. This entails that Saudi Arabia has potentially lost the grain of influence it had in Lebanon previously. Any desire to hinder Hezbollah's activities there through Hariri has been lost.

A more pressing issue lies ahead for Saudi Arabia though. It is patently clear that many Arab countries are ill-equipped to deal with their struggling economies. Countries like Jordan, Tunisia and Egypt have been recipients of international aid for so long (a huge proportion of which has been used to create artificially low food prices) that now their economies could not survive without it. As long as Saudi Arabia aims to maintain the status quo in the Middle East then, it will have to bankroll these countries for an indefinite period of time. The issue thus comes down to whether Saudi Arabia's wallet can take on this strain.

Saudi Arabia is currently in the lead against Iran. Riyadh has consolidated allegiance from states with huge payouts and also strengthened the GCC. Though Saudi Arabia faces huge difficulties in Yemen, and uncertainty in Syria and Libya, Iran has failed to make any inroads in increasing its influence at Riyadh's expense, except in Lebanon. The other exception may turn out to be Bahrain, where sectarian differences have possibly been encouraged by Saudi

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Arabia's policies, i.e. by singling out, and punishing the Shia' population. Iran's progress in Egypt is limited and its progress in Lebanon could be a double edged sword – how will Hezbollah cope in government, and will it continue to play to Iran's tune if Tehran's support has decreased? Iran is simply not rich enough to match the grand ambitions it has for the Middle East, whereas Saudi Arabia currently is.

Is Saudi Arabia ready to take on the burden of propping up the economies of the Arab world? By maintaining the status quo, it is merely allowing the tension and frustration for political reform to build up until the next breaking point. Saudi Arabia thus needs to back up its financial packages with demands for political reforms in the countries it supports, but the Kingdom's conservative nature means the opposite is more likely.

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