



## Center for Strategic & Regional Studies Kabul

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## Preface

Former Saudi King, Abdullah died last January and his younger brother, Salman succeeded him. After Salman's succession to the throne, the foreign policy of the Kingdom got more dynamism with the Iran-US talks and the emergence of IS.

Since the Kingdom fears the influence of Iran on middle-east, it has taken some speedy measures recently to form an anti-Iran *Sunni* alliance and invited leaders of different countries including Afghanistan to discuss these issues. Keeping the background of Saud-Iran relations in view, what are the reasons behind the strained relations between them? And also to what extent Saudi efforts are likely to form a *Sunni* alliance?

On the other hand, the Afghan President Ghani once again asked Saudi authorities to cooperate in Afghan peace process and to convince Pakistan for being determined to its promises. Also, the chief executive of National unity government visit to New-Delhi and a conference between Afghan and Chinese authorities in Kabul are considered part of the efforts in this regard.

The questions arising are: To what extent the commencement of peace negotiations are really a fact? Can Afghan government make Pakistan remain loyal to its promises? And in general, will the fresh peace efforts of Afghan government prove fruitful?

Center for Strategic and Regional Studies in Kabul's this week's analysis discusses the aforementioned topics:

## Saudi efforts towards Anti-Iran Alliance



In recent few weeks Saudi King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz invited considerable number of leaders *Sunni* countries to the Kingdom. The leaders included the coup-president of Egypt Abdul Fatal Al-Sisi, Turkey President Recep Tayyeb Erdogan, the Amirs of Kuwait and UAE, the PM of Pakistan Mohammad Nawaz Sharif, and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. In these meetings, the main agenda of talks was the increasing influence of Iran in middle-east (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen), the IS group and the US-Iran talks which is perceived to broker a deal regarding Iran's nuclear program in the near future.

The considerable issues are the background of Iran-Saudi relations, the reasons of strained relations, the Saudis current concerns and the efforts of forming a *Sunni* block.

### Saudi-Iran relations (1929-1979)

The Saud dynasty of Saudi Arabia has long term relations with Iran which go back to the time when the dynasty took over the power in *Hejaz*. During that period, "Saud" had some differences with "Sharif" of Makkah, and the then Persian King *Raza Shah* made a failed effort to reconcile them. Later when *Abdul Aziz* reached the power in Saudi Arabia, he invited a delegation from Persia to the Kingdom.

The two countries established diplomatic relations in 1929, and in the same year they signed a friendship agreement. Their relations faced ups and downs during the five succeeding decades (till Islamic Revolution).

In the period (1929-1979) the relations started deteriorating due to Iran's claims of ownership over some Arab territories. Iran had claims over Bahrain, and in Hormuz strategic strait on Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb (Tunb Buzorg and Tunb Kochak), and now these islands are under Iran's control and territory.

The second reason to deteriorate the relations was when Saudi and Arab countries used oil as a tool against Israel and the western countries in 1973, but Iran denied accompanying them. During *Yom Kippur* war Saudi and Arab world used oil as a weapon against Israel which caused inflation in the west and bankrupted their economies. This crisis is still called as "Oil Embargo 1973" and economic crisis.

Another reason was when Iran invested on military sector that scared Saudis and called it the "expansionist efforts" of Iran.

Although, the aforementioned are the reasons of the strained relations between the two countries, but in the meantime, *Mohammad Raza Shah Pahlawi* supported the policies of King *Faisal* which formed few organizations for Muslims. Besides this, both countries opposed the policies of former USSR in middle-east, and they also remained in the same page against *Jamal Abdul Nasser*.

A Saudi academician who conducted research over the relations of Iran and Saudi writes: "In that period, the two countries learned to cooperate in certain sectors and both will try not to allow the existing differences affect their relations."<sup>1</sup>

### **Saudi-Iran Relations: from Islamic Revolution until Present**

The famous Islamic Revolution of Iran (February 1979) worsened the relations of Saudi and Iran. It was because the revolutionary leaders took an anti-western stance and denounced the kingdoms in Muslim World. In this time, the fundamental points of differences were *Sunni-Shia* rivalry and export of Iranians views into the Muslim World.

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<sup>1</sup> Saeed M. Badeeb, *Saudi-Iranian Relations 1932-1982*, London: Centre for Arab and Iranian Studies, 1993, pp 64

The relations became more strained when Iraq-Iran war took place and Saudi supported Iraq. Later on an incident in Hajj (pilgrimage) ceremony claimed the lives of 400 pilgrims. Since the victims were Shias and Iranian citizens, therefore Iran sought the *Diyah* (the money being paid to the deceased family from the killer according to Islamic Sharia) and excuse, which finally caused the cessation of Saudi-Iran diplomatic relations and Saudi imposed ban on Iranian pilgrims. The ban continued until 1991.

Later in the 90s, the relations got better to some extent. Khatami and Rafsanjani paid visits to Saudi, and then King Abdullah traveled Iran to participate in OIC conference held in Tehran in 1997. In late 90s the two countries signed an agreement as well.

For the first time the two countries called each other “Brother Countries” when Ex-Iranian President *Mahmoud Ahmadinejad* paid a visit to Saudi and King Abdullah welcomed him in person at the airport. Although the relations became strained later due to Iran’s nuclear program and the Arab Spring. Abdullah even demanded US to attack Iran and destroy its nuclear program, WikiLeaks later disclosed.

### **Why Saudi Needs a New Alliance?**

The question arises that the relations of the two countries have already been tense and they have already been involved in a cold-war against each other, which has also transformed to a hot-war in some Arab countries; why Saudi feels the need of an anti-Iran *Sunni* alliance now? There are few reasons that emerged out of the Geo-Political changes:

1. Iran-US talks on Iran’s nuclear program;
2. Huthi coup in Yemen;
3. The decrease in oil price;
4. IS (Islamic State) group: Beside the rest of the reasons, the main reason of Saudis fear from IS the Salafi-inclined views of the group. Saudi never wants its people to have a revolutionary Salafi ideology like that of IS.

### **Iran-US talks and Saudi Concerns**

United States has been criticizing Iran’s nuclear program for two decades and imposed embargos too. Beside this, Saudi has pressurized other countries not to sign any

economic agreement with Iran. A clear example of it is the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline which has not been implemented yet due to US pressures.

However, the United States has given the green lights of attacking Iran many times, the long wars of Afghanistan and Iraq snatched the potential to wage another war against Iran.

The Iran-US relations were very tense during *Mahmoud Ahmadinejad* era. But when *Hassan Rohani*, who is famous as a mainstream politician in the west, reached the power, the reconciliation process restarted. There have been rumors since two weeks that the two –once enemies- may conclude a nuclear deal. The rumors not only provoked the concerns of republicans in US, but also of Israel and Saudi leaders.

It has been said that according to the deal, Iran would allow international inspectors to visit its nuclear facilities anytime and anywhere. Iran would not enrich more Uranium than the specified limit and would remove the already enriched one, which would not enable them to create atomic weapons. In response, US will remove economic embargos and the country would be allowed to take part in international trade.

If US and Iran reach such an agreement, history would remember Obama for a great achievement and also Iran would emerge out of economic embargos and would develop. But the two countries face some internal and external challenges. President Obama is already under pressure of the Republicans whose 47 members sent a letter to Iran demanding them not to trust their President. The Republican members invited Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu too. Externally, Obama would be under pressure of its strategic friend, Saudi. In the same way, President *Rohani* is under the influence of the clergies inside the country.

## Yemen

Yemen having border with Saudi and some Shia population has long remained another ground of Saudi-Iran cold war. The *Hothies* having ideological linkages with Iran have the intentions of revolution against Abdullah Salih since 2011. In 2014 the *Hothies* came out of their strongholds and established contacts with Yazedis which made them even more powerful.

Hothies occupation of the presidential palace made the President *Mansoor Hadi* resign. Previously, Saudi enjoyed good relations with Sanaa and had close cooperation with it. But now, it is a source of concerns to see the increasing influence of an Iranian backed group. Both, Iran and Saudi try to surround each other. In a same way, in 1980s Saudi enjoyed strategic friendship with Afghan *Mujahiddin* and Pakistan. It supported Iraq in Iran-Iraq War. Saudi tried to surround Iran. Now, Iran tries to surround Saudi. It supports *Bashar al Assad* in Syria, *Hezbollah* in Lebanon and *Hothies* in Yemen. In 2009 the *Hothies* also killed five Saudi soldiers in a border clash.

## Oil

Although, the oil issue previously deteriorated the relations between the two countries, currently, the oil not only tensed the Saudi relations with Iran but also with Russia. This was the reason when Putin denied to meet the Saudi Foreign Minister in November 2014.

Saudi has the capacity to produce 6 to 12 million barrel oil daily. Iran and Russia consider US and Saudi behind the falling oil prices. As Russia is more dependent on oil, now US wants to pressurize it for the Ukraine dispute and Saudi aims to make Iran face economic defeat.

Saudi produces a massive amount of oil to fall its prices in international markets. It has bad impacts on its own economy also, but due to great oil reserves it can hit the economy of the countries having less reserves.

## Saudi Active Diplomacy and Afghanistan

Saudi has been very active in few months since early 2015. At the end of January, President Obama visited Saudi and then the England Prince visited King Salman. But when Iran-US talks and when the Yemen issue emerged in the region, Saudi invited Egypt, Turkey, Kuwait, UAE and Afghanistan leaders for the talks. The countries are not only *Sunni*, but also surrounding Iran geographically. Although the answer for question “will Saudi be able to form a *Sunni* anti-Iran alliance?” is related to the decisions of the countries.

Pakistan and Turkey may not enter an alliance whose core aim is to surround their neighbor. . They would rather prefer their cordial relations with both. Pakistan has already rejected the Saudi demand for more troop's deployment, as Dawn newspaper reports.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has also paid a visit to Saudi based on the invitation of King Salman. Though, the Afghan media considered peace talks with Taliban as the main aim of visit, the analysts think the IS issue and the increasing influence of Iran in Arab world were the agenda of talks.

Since Afghanistan faces instabilities at home and yet Saudi is not ready to give work visa for Afghans. From the other side, Saudi has not invested in Afghanistan's reconstruction in the last 15 years. It would not be fair for Kabul to be a victim of others rivalries and once again became the ground for proxy war. Kabul can cooperate Iran and Saudi regarding IS's threat, because it is a common threat. If Afghanistan supports Saudi against Iran, it will have negative impacts on Afghanistan.



## Afghan Government Peace Efforts; from Riyadh to Delhi & Beijing



Recently, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah visited Saudi Arabia and India; in the meantime, ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan organized a seminar in Kabul with the participation of some Chinese officials.

The main goal behind Ghani and Abdullah's visits and the seminar in foreign affairs ministry was to gain support of the regional countries to the peace process of Afghanistan. President Ghani asked Saudi officials to exert pressure on Pakistan to cooperate in Afghan peace process.

### The Dilemma of Fresh Peace Talks

Since the Pakistani Military officials in their latest visits to Kabul promised that Afghan Taliban would soon start peace negotiation with Afghan government, some rumors swirled around in the media about the peace process but Taliban has termed all such reports as rumors.

Previously, usually the spokespersons of Taliban used to publish newsletters in refusal of such rumors, but this time, the Taliban political office in Qatar, in an unprecedented action, rejected any type of contacts with Afghan Government. Although peace is

considered as long-awaited wish of the Afghan people, but ending Afghanistan's occupation is the main precondition for peace negotiation since so far.

The statement in which the recent peace talks called as rumors or "Propaganda War" and moreover, it expressed that there have not been any peace talks and no one was appointed for continuing the talks. If any peace talks are to be held, the process would not be covert and Taliban Office in Qatar would inform people regarding any development, the statement maintained.

Therefore, one party of peace talks (The Taliban) regarded their talks with the Afghan Government as "Propaganda War" and defeat of their enemy in the war.

### **Giving information or publicizing rumors?**

Since the beginning of these rumors, Pakistani media agencies have been the sole reference of peace talks and they have always quoted ambiguous sources. Then, based on the mentioned sources, the Afghan media quotes the peace related news and as a result, some political analysts even criticize President Ghani for the "covert" talks that are not clear where they took place.

Pakistani media spread rumors while their country's commitments regarding peace talks are under question. In latest instance, Pakistani media considered the delay in starting peace talks was due to the internal disputes among Taliban regarding the peace talks between Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor and Mullah Zakir. The first one supports peace talks while the other one is against it, media reported.

### **If Taliban obey Pakistan Commands!**

Taliban are a more religious movement with their very particular beliefs rather than being a political group. Their vision of war is completely different compared to the conventional standards of war and peace among the political groups. The Taliban never consider success in negotiation by getting more seats in power. They believe success is to implement Sharia in the political system of Afghanistan. The members of the movement are ready to offer sacrifices very easily for this cause.

If we suppose that the Taliban agree with what Pakistan demands, and set around the negotiations table for power sharing with Afghan Government, what would be the fate of the group?

During the last 13 years, Taliban leaders assured that they do not have any other goal rather than the liberation of Afghanistan from US occupation and the implementation of Sharia. Now, if their leaders join peace talks with the Afghan government, the fellow fighters of the group would think that the 13 years' war waged against Americans was under the command of Pakistan and their leaders were impotent. This would have only one outcome that the fighters would take their own ways from their leaders which will pave the ground for ending the Taliban scenario as a military power forever.

The IS (Daesh) group which has just started its propaganda war by kidnapping the 31 Shia Hazaras from Kabul-Kandahar highway, puts Taliban in a sensitive situation. In such a condition, their simple mistake would pave the way for their fighters to join IS which would make the clash inevitable between the two groups.

On the other side, the US does not have a stable stance regarding its troops pull-out from Afghanistan. There are even rumors, that the US use IS presence as pretext for its continuing presence in Afghanistan.

Therefore, if Taliban consider the rumors of peace talks as "Propaganda War" besides expressing willingness for peace talks, how would they be really joining negotiations? In prevailing scenario, doing so would be considered as a suicide.

### **Taliban, the "Real Enemy"**

The disputes over the peace talks inside the Afghan government are higher than that of Taliban. The pre-conditions from pro government figures that the group should accept the constitution completely, means that Taliban must agree with the prevailing system. If Taliban agree with this condition, the leaders would face the question of their fellow fighters "if the system has not had any legitimate deficiency why we waged war against it for 13 years?" Some Sharia-related questions will pose whether the war has been *Jihad* or *insurgency*? Their fellow fighters were *killed* or *martyred*?

On the other hand, there is no united stance inside Afghan government regarding peace talks with Taliban. When Zahir Tanin, the permanent Afghan envoy in UN calls Taliban the real enemy, there is no way for peace talks!

### **Afghan authorities' visits: the goals and outcomes**

The reasons of Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah's visits and outcomes.

When Pakistan promised the new Afghan government that it would make Taliban set around the negotiations table, some Afghan personalities expressed doubts about Pakistan's commitment and the country's changed stance was considered a new game. Now, it looks like President Ghani also gradually reached to the same conclusion. His visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was to ask the Kingdom to use their influence over Pakistan to hold on its promises to bring the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table.

From the other side, it is thought that the visit of National Unity Government's chief executive was based on the invitation of an Indian newspaper, but it can have a message to Pakistan that in case of no cooperation, Afghanistan still enjoys close relations with India.

Meanwhile , a joint session of talks was held in Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan with number of Chinese officials . The participants once again emphasized on China's role in Afghan peace process, because it has influence over Pakistan. It means China should ask Pakistan to remain committed to its promises. But, will the visit have beneficial outcomes for Afghanistan and can they pressurize Pakistan? Looks not likely based on what we have said earlier.

The End

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