Middle East Shashank Joshi

The Persian Illusion

A spectre is haunting the Persian Gulf – the spectre of Persia. The era of the Gulf's most iconic bête noire, Saudi born and raised Osama bin Laden, has drawn to a close. But outsiders persistently underestimate the degree to which it is a state – the Islamic republic of Iran – rather than a non-state group, al Qaeda, which today captures the strategic attention of those in the corridors of power in Riyadh, Manama, and Amman.

A woman passes a wall that has been repeatedly spray-painted with anti-government graffiti in Bahrain.

AP PHOTO/HASAN JAMALI

Dangling a few hundred kilometres above the Gulf states, like a geopolitical Sword of Damocles, post-revolutionary Iran has long been the principal strategic concern for the sheikdoms and emirates on the other side of the water.

And yet, the strenuous efforts to place Iran at the heart of pro-democracy uprisings reveal a more cynical and self-serving effort at threat inflation, distracting attention from the unavoidable reform agenda dodged for so long by the Gulf autocracies.

Of course, the Iranian threat is not without pedigree. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the export of revolution – *sudur inquilab* – was adopted as official policy. Even after its Office for Global Revolution closed in the late 1980s, Tehran was abetting (mainly, but not exclusively, Shia) armed movements in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and elsewhere.

Saudi Arabia responded in kind by backing the Taliban in Afghanistan, Sunni militias in revolutionary Lebanon, and extremist parties in Pakistan, to mention but a few. Saudi state institutions disseminated a retrograde and radical interpretation of Islam – its Wahhabi variant – around the world drawing, from the 1970s, on their extraordinary oil wealth. Both these sets of actions were largely destabilising and often subversive of nascent democratic currents.

Then, in the five years after 9/11, Iran found not only that two long-standing adversaries – the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq – had been eliminated by the United States, but also that its ally Hezbollah had been emboldened and aggrandised by an urban war with Israel. Iran's regional clout was at a high, though no one was quite clear on whether this 'clout' was usable. Moreover, its opaque nuclear programme raised the troubling question of whether, like Pakistan with its support for Lashkar-e-Taiba and other jihadi groups, Iran might soon possess a nuclear shield behind which it could safely wield the instrument of proxy militants.

It is therefore unsurprising that states like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are seemingly convinced that pro-democracy protesters are Iranian fifth columnists, less interested in basic rights for downtrodden Shias than in clerical rule and Iranian hegemony over Arab lands. It is even less surprising that western observers have bought this line, and are muted in their criticism for the de facto Saudi occupation. After all, Iran claimed Bahrain as its own territory for many years, and has been locked in a pseudo-sectarian cold war with the wider Saudi-led bloc.

But the truth is likely to be less sinister. Firstly, Bahraini protesters agitated not for the overthrow of minority Sunni rule, but for their fair treatment within existing political structures. Their demands for political liberalisation were predicated on the royal family's own pretensions to reform, which have stalled or regressed in the past five years.

In 2002, the king tore up the results of an earlier referendum and introduced his own constitution that gave greater power to the forty appointed parliamentarians rather than their forty elected colleagues. In the interim, widely accepted allegations of torture and arbitrary detention have been rife.

Protestors hold Bahraini flags in protest against Saudi and Bahraini leaders for cracking down on Bahraini opposition, at the Azadi stadium in Tehran, Iran.

During this crisis, it was the regime's use of often indiscriminate violence, divisive sectarian rhetoric, and imported Sunni mercenaries that transformed a restrained and cross-sectarian protest movement into something more unruly, with a distinctly anti-Sunni inflection. The Bahraini and Saudi monarchies know this, but are obviously unwilling to articulate that their violent techniques are aimed at the perpetuation of their rule rather than national security.

Secondly, the effort by the Saudi and Bahraini monarchies to slander the protesters as Iranian stooges was a disturbing echo of early modern Europe's obsession with 'Popish plots' concocted by subversive Catholic minorities.

In fact, most Bahraini Shias are Arabs and have little interest in serving Iran's regional ambitions. Iran responded to the Saudi injection of troops into Bahrain by withdrawing its ambassador and urging 'resistance', but this was of little relevance or interest to nationalist protesters, many of whom had constructively worked within Bahrain's progressively enfeebled parliament and had set out with a gradualist, not radical, agenda. Al-Wefaq, the paramount Shia political grouping, formed in the aftermath of an anti-Shia crackdown in the 1990s, has worked inside Bahrain's parliament for five years despite continuous gerrymandering and repression. Many Shia groups have also noted the example of Lebanon, where Iran had helped Hezbollah shatter that country's institutions, as a cautionary tale.

Thirdly, the Iraq war ought to chasten western policymakers about the dangers of threat inflation. It can undercut efforts at engagement, harden already rigid differences in perception, and induce reckless and disproportionate policy responses. This does not require appeasement, but does require identifying between actual and amorphous threats.

A sign of how low the threshold for alarm has fallen is the reaction to Iran's transparently diversionary effort to send two warships through the Suez Canal for the first time since 1979. Aside from undertaking a perfectly legal journey, neither they nor Iran's creaking navy present any conceivable military or intelligence threat to Israel or Gulf states. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's regime acted not from strength, but weakness. Yet regional powers, both Arab and Israeli, unwisely rose to the taunt, and expressed dark and implausible visions of encirclement.

None of this is to deny that Iran is likely, willing, and probably able to foment some degree of violence inside Bahrain and its anxious neighbours, if it was determined to do so. It is prudent to warn off Iran, given its history of intervention and impetuous diplomacy.

But what is more likely to render aggrieved Shia groups receptive to Iranian meddling: peaceful dialogue and meaningful reform, or bitter sectarian accusations and crushing violence?

The Saudi-led effort to vilify essentially moderate demonstrators will, in the long-term, radicalise these groups, harden confessional fault-lines, and thereby produce the very Iranian backlash on which these policies are conditioned.

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