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Preface

Riyadh hosted an important Conference under “fight against terrorism” last week. Most of the leaders of Islamic world including President Ghani had participated in the meeting. The new US President Donald Trump, who was not expected to soften its policy towards Saudi Arabia and who even one month ago had criticized Saudi Arabia, visited Riyadh in his first trip overseas and attended the conference.

While Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a cold war in the region, Iran was not invited to the conference, and the conference was somehow anti-Iranian as well. During their speeches in the conference, both King Salman and Donald Trump criticized Iran and called Tehran as the supporter of terrorism in the region and the world.

Since the past several years, Tehran-Riyadh relations have come to low levels, and with the election of the new President in the US, the Washington-Tehran relations are also deteriorated. But the Riyadh-Washington ties, on the other hand, is improving, one of the main reasons behind it is Riyadh and Washington’s enmity towards Tehran.

In the first part of the Weekly Analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS) you would read about the “Arab-Islamic American Summit” and its impacts, and in the second part of the analysis, the Iran-Saudi-US relations are analyzed.

The Arab Islamic American Summit and its impacts on the Islamic world



On 21 May 2017, the “Arab-Islamic American Summit” was organized in the capital of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh where most of the Muslim countries’ leaders attended. An important participant in this meeting was the US President Donald Trump who delivered the keynote speech besides the Saudi King Salman.

Except for Iran, Syria and some Central Asian countries, almost all Islamic countries (around 55 countries) had attended the conference. This gathering in Riyadh had three parts. First, the bilateral meeting between the US and Saudi Arabia; Second, the conference of Gulf Cooperation Council and the US; and the third, was the Arab-Islamic American conference.

The primary purpose of the summit was to discuss the fight against extremism and “terrorism”, but what are the anti-terrorism policies of the US and Saudi Arabia? What happened in the 2017 Riyadh Summit? What is the impact of this pivotal political event in the Islamic world and particularly Afghanistan? These are the questions that are analyzed here.

The US and Saudi Arabia's counter-terrorism policies

Although “terrorism” is a vague term and does not have a precise definition, many agree that it is the use of violence, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political, religious and ideological aims. The term is mostly used to label the non-governmental individuals and groups, but some states clandestinely back most of these groups. The counter-terrorism policies, however, is the military and security tactics and technics undertaken by government organs to prevent or eliminate “terrorism”.

The first “anti-terrorism” policy was undertaken in the 19th century in the United Kingdom, where the British Minister of Interior Affairs formed a special counter-terrorism unit to prevent and control the Irish freedom fighters. Later-on, the countries largely relied on intelligence services to tackle terrorism and terrorist incidents. Therefore, powerful intelligence bureaus were created in most of the countries, but gradually terrorism and terrorist incidents became more and more complicated, which followed by the change in counter-terrorism strategies as well.

During the cold war, the US counter-terrorism strategies mostly relied on intelligence services, but then it undertook policies such as enhancing the capacity of security forces, passing some laws, creating some administrations, forming anti-terrorism units within the existing administrations, bringing reforms in the banking systems so that the financial resources of terrorists be frozen, etc. In the post-2001 years, the attack on Afghanistan was also carried out under the fight against terrorism. Under the same strategy was waging war in Syria and Iraq.

On the other hand, after the terrorist attack during the pilgrimage (Haj), Saudi Arabia also largely relied on its spy bureaus. Following Al-Qaeda's attacks in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, to a greater extent, tried to freeze Al-Qaeda's assets. However, after 2001, these efforts were increased, and Riyadh sought to uproot the financial resources of “terrorist groups”. In this regard, in Donald Trump's recent trip to Saudi Arabia, the US and the Gulf Cooperation Council signed an agreement as well.

The Riyadh 2017 summit

The summit in Riyadh was divided into three conferences. First, the US-Saudi Arabia bilateral meeting, where the US and Saudi Arabia signed a \$350bn trade agreements. In these agreements, \$110bn was in areas of military and defense which includes in providing tanks, airplanes, missile defense system particularly radar system and cooperation in areas of cyber security.

The second conference was organized between the US and Gulf Cooperation Council. During this meeting, the US President met the leaders of the council and discussed the issue of stability, security and Iranian influence in the region as well as the issue of Yemen. Before this conference, to cut the financial support for “terrorism”, an agreement was signed between the US and Saudi Arabia.

The third meeting was between the Arab-Islamic Countries and the US where the leaders and representatives of 55 countries had participated. In this meeting, the Saudi King and the US President Donald Trump give keynote addresses. The participants of the conference emphasized on such cooperation that either prevents or removes the increasing threat of extremism and terrorism and supplant it with moderation and tolerance.

Riyadh summit's impacts on Islamic world and Afghanistan

Some of the impacts of this summits on Islamic world and Afghanistan is analyzed bellow:

The US-Saudi Arabia ties; in the past years especially in the second term of the former US President Barrack Obama relations between the US and Saudi Arabia was deteriorated. Now, Trump's travel to Saudi Arabia could have deep impacts particularly now that the two countries signed \$350bn agreement in areas of economy and security. In the meanwhile, in his speech to the participants, Donald Trump used harsh rhetoric against Iran.

The effort to reduce Islamophobia; before seizing power in the US, Trump's remarks regarding Islam and Muslims had concerned the Muslims around the world. Trump's assigning of Islamophobic individuals (those who have unjustified fear from Islam) in the White House and banning of migration from seven Muslim

countries further increased these concerns. But Trump began his official trip overseas from the heart of Muslim world and was moderate in his speech and, in other words, was not the Trump he was before. However, if one evaluates the issue, one can say this behavior was mostly due to US's anti-Iran stance and economic and trade agreements with Saudi Arabia. Trump's position can be assumed changed only if he did not blame all Muslims in case a terrorist attack occurred in the US.

Extremism and "terrorism"; the Riyadh Conference is primarily aimed to fight against terrorism and extremism in the region. But the conference will be successful in this regard only if the term "terrorism and extremism" is clearly defined. However, if these terms remain unspecified and it was used to label some Islamists, it would have negative rather than positive impacts. The conference has paved the way for the signature of an agreement between the Gulf Cooperation Council and the US in order to eradicate the financial resources of terrorist groups and the "Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideologies" was also created in Riyadh.

The power balance in the Middle East; after the signature of the agreement between the US and Iran over Iran's nuclear program, international sanctions on Iran were lifted which influenced the power balance in the Middle East. Riyadh was suspicious about the deal even from the beginning, and when it was signed, Saudi relations with the US deteriorated. However, it is not clear whether the \$110bn purchase of military equipment by Saudi Arabia would how much influence the balance of power, but it will certainly increase rivalry in the region and will further inflame Saudi-Iran proxy wars in other Islamic countries. On the other hand, criticizing Iran, Trump said in his speech that some countries are supporting terrorism.

The opposition between Sunnite and Shiite; among the Islamic countries, Iran mostly represents Shiite groups. In pursuit of Shiism, Iran interferes in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq and hence supports Shiites. In some other countries, however, instead of interference provides financial, economic and cultural contributions for them. Since Iran was not invited to the conference and in the

meanwhile, the US President and Saudi King fiercely criticized Iran, the opposition between Sunnites and Shiites will further deepen.

Afghanistan; after the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG), Kabul-Riyadh relations improved; but these relations were rather based on promises. The Afghan President Ashraf Ghani had also participated in the Riyadh Conference to strengthen relations with Saudi Arabia and to meet the senior US and Saudi officials. But the issue of Afghan workers' passport in Saudi is still unsettled. Also, although, in his speech, the US President praised the Afghan forces, his not meeting Afghan senior officials was a negative point of the trip.

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The Tangled Triangle of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the US



Speaking at the gathering of around 55 Muslim countries, the US President Donald Trump and the Saudi Arabian King Salman called Iran a terrorist supporter last week and reiterated to confront the measures undertaken by this country.

The US and Saudi Arabia accused Iran of destabilizing the region and the world at a time that in the Friday Elections (19 May 2017) in Iran, Hassan Rohani was elected for the second time as Iranian President. In response to Trump's remarks, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Jawad Zarif has said the US, which was the born place of democracy, had criticized Iran-which is a country that has just passed a democratic election.

The US President Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia is said to have opened a new chapter in Washington-Riyadh relations. Before this, in March 2017, the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman had traveled to Washington and in his meeting with Donald Trump had discussed the bilateral relations between the two countries. In the meanwhile, tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have escalated and after Donald Trump became the US President, tensions in Washington-Tehran have also increased.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are two regional competitors that have accused each other of supporting terrorist groups and are engaged in a regional cold war with each other. Moreover, Iran was not only not invited to the Riyadh Summit but also was the subject of fierce criticism by the US and Saudi Arabia. Here we have analyzed the relations between the US, Saudi Arabia and Iran and US's policy in the Middle East.

The Riyadh-Washington ties

The US and Saudi Arabia have old economic and military ties. The US is one of the primary customers of Saudi's oil while Saudi Arabia is a key buyer of US weapons.

Before 1979, oil was the main booster of bilateral relations between Washington and Riyadh. In 1933, oil put the foundation of relations between the US and Saudi Arabia and from this year on the bilateral diplomatic relations between the two countries began. During the Second World War, the two countries had reached an agreement on the scheme of "oil for security".

In addition to oil, another factor in the bilateral relations between the two countries was opposition against communism. After the World War II, communism and capitalism, two opposing ideologies, stood against each other. The former Soviet Union was leading the communist side, and the US was leading the capitalist side and Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, was a country that, due to its religious structure, opposed communism. Hence, Saudi Arabia and the US were allied.

Although during the Israel-Arab war in 1973, Saudi Arabia used its oil as a weapon and issued oil bans on the US, even these sanctions did not deteriorate relations between Washington and Riyadh.

After 1979, there were some common points in US-Saudi relations that prevented the US-Saudi alliance from falling apart. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, both Saudi Arabia and the US supported the Afghan Mujahidin. In 1991 when Iraq under Saddam Hussain invaded Kuwait, Saudi opposed the invasion and allowed the US presence in its soil.

Overall, during the cold war and after that, the US and Saudi Arabia had strategic relations which were based on containment of communism, oil, Islamist groups, and the threat posed by Iran, especially its nuclear program. However, after the 9/11 incident in 2001, since most of the attackers were identified as Saudi citizens, relations between the two countries come to lower levels and the deterioration of relations between the two nations during the second term of Barack Obama is due in large part to various reasons including the nuclear deal with Iran.

After Trump seized power in the US, despite the earlier concerns, now it seems that some common factors such as economic and weaponry agreements and opposition with Iran have improved relations between the two countries.

Tehran-Riyadh relations

Diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia dates back in 1929, and in the same year, the two countries signed friendship agreement as well. However, until 1979, relations between the two countries experience many ups and downs. Between 1929 and 1979, due to territory claims by Iran (The islands of Abu Musa, Tunb islands, strategic Strait of Hormuz), relations between the countries were deteriorated.

In addition, when in 1973, Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations used their oil as a weapon against Israel and Western countries, Iran did not do the same. Moreover, Iran's investment on its military and purchasing of new weaponry further inflamed tensions between the two nations because Saudi Arabia was concerned about Iran's expansion of influence in the region. In the meanwhile, in the cases of controlling the expansion of communism and opposing Gamal Naser, the two countries had similar stances.

After the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, the new government was established based on Shiite ideology and, from that time on, Iran appeared as the founder and protector of the interests of Shiites in the world. On the other hand, the revolutionary leaders of Iran undertook the policy of complete opposition to the West and, in the meanwhile, condemned monarch states in the Islamic world. Thus, the opposition between Iran and Saudi Arabia began, and the two countries

faced each other ideologically. Later-on the Iran-Iraq war and the killing of hundreds of Iranians, who had come to Saudi Arabia for Haj had profoundly impacted relations and following the storming of Iranian protestors on the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Tehran, where one Arab diplomat was also killed, relations between the two countries were severed.

Tensions began to ease again when Khatami and Rafsanjani traveled to Saudi Arabia, and in 1997 Malik Abdullah went to Iran to participate in a conference. Recently, the countries have signed an agreement as well. In 2007, the countries called each other “brothers”. Mahmood Ahmadi Nezhad traveled to Saudi Arabia, and Malik Abdullah personally went to the airport to welcome him. However, later, due to the issue of Arab Spring and Iran’s nuclear program, relations between Riyadh and Tehran deteriorated, and Saudi asked the US to attack Iran and destroy Iran’s nuclear program.

Washington-Tehran ties

Official relations between the US and Iran began in 1883 when the US opened its consulate in Iran. During the First World War when Russia and British violated Iran's neutrality, the US, whose slogan was to support the rights of weak nations, established “the aid committee for Iran”.

After the Second World War, the US seemed friendly to the Iranians, because Iranians were exhausted by Russians and British and they saw the US as a third party that could, to some extent, serve the interests of Iran. On the one hand, the US supported Iran’s demand for independence and, on the other hand, did not want the independence of its oil reserves.

When during the government of Doctor Musadeq Iran’s oil industry began to be nationalized, the US and British became united to overthrow the Iranian government. Finally, in 1953, Musadeq’s government was overthrown, and after that, the US and British’s influence in Iran increased.

In 1979 with the Islamic revolution in Iran, due to its interference in Iran’s internal affairs, the US had lost its soft power in Iran and faced the slogans of “Death to

the US". After the Islamic revolution in Iran, Iranian King went to the US in response to which people stormed on the US Embassy in Iran and captured it. The US, on the other hand, undertook some anti-Iranian measures as well and first of all severed its political and military relations with Iran and issued sanctions on Iran.

Another issue which further escalated tensions between the two countries after the Islamic revolution was Iran's nuclear program. Iran's nuclear program had begun in 1957 when the US signed an agreement with Iran "Atom for Peace". But later and even now, most of the oppositions between Iran and Washington are based on Iran's nuclear program. Furthermore, regional geopolitical changes are another factor that has increased tensions between the two countries.

In recent years, especially in the second term of Barak Obama's presidency, the nuclear deal between the West and Iran has eased tensions between the two countries. However, with Trump's success in US elections relations between the two countries have, once again, begun to deteriorate. Even from the beginning, Trump opposed the nuclear deal with Iran, and now Trump's remarks in Saudi Arabia further clarifies his anti-Iranian stance.

Middle East under US's focus

Since the past several decades, the Middle East has gained a particular strategic importance. During the Ottoman Caliphate, the Middle East was the heart of the Islamic world. After the First World War and with the defeat of Ottoman Caliphate, the interests of world powers (France, British and the US) increased in the Middle East.

After the Second World War, the countries located in this region gained their independence at a time that cold war between the US and the Soviet Union had already begun and competition between the two rivals had reached its peaks. Due to vast oil reserves, strategic straits and the rise of the Islamic movements, this regional has attracted the attention of the world particularly the US.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the US countered issues such as the fight against extremism, Iran's nuclear crisis, the issue of oil, Iraq, and Libya in the Middle East. However, currently, war in Syria, Iraq, Yemen...and Iran's nuclear crisis are the main challenges in this region. The US, Russia and the EU are the international players that are engaged in the crisis in this region along with regional powers such as Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

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Note: Please let us know your feedback and suggestions for the improvement of Weekly analysis.

