

ABDULAZIZ OTHMAN BIN SAGER

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Volker PERTHES

Abdulaziz, to add another theatre to the conflicts we are talking about, in any confrontation between Iran and either the United States, its neighbours in the Gulf, or Israel, Saudi Arabia would probably be on the receiving end, as it seemed to happen when Saudi oil installations were attacked by whoever it was. Saudi Arabia itself has come under closer scrutiny from the international community and also its friends in the United States, particularly in Congress, in relation to human rights issues, the murder of our friend Jamal Khashoggi, the Yemen war. It seems to have reduced its regional engagement a bit - not in Yemen but in Syria where, also with your participation, Saudi Arabia was very instrumental and active at some point. Has Saudi Arabia overreached a bit and is now trying to limit its engagement, trying not to attract the limelight of international attention concerning Yemen and human rights? Is it withdrawing a bit to try to mend its own affairs or is that the wrong interpretation?

Abdulaziz Othman bin Sager

It is a bit of a complex situation. If I look at the current situation in Yemen, for example, it is very much directly linked to the conflict with Iran. Without the Iranian support to this militia, which to my surprise the rest of the world and the community call the de facto government or reality on the ground. If we are supporting as the reality on the ground a militia that overthrew a legitimate government and took over and we then endorse that behaviour, I think there is something wrong, because where do you stop and where do you put the limitation there.

Of course, the Saudi Arabian agenda today, yes, we are involved in Syria and in the beginning, we tried to help the Syrian people to reorganize themselves. We extended a lot of support with the coordination of the international community, but I think on the Syrian situation today the three levels have failed. Direct discussion in Arab circles have failed, as has the OIC, the Organization of Islamic Countries and as a result it went to the international level. Once that happened it started in Syria as a request for a little bit of freedom and ended as a platform for a major international conflict zone, with everybody trying to exercise their power and interests on that territory.

There is no disengagement in Saudi Arabia. I think the engagement is still there but at the same time, if you look at the US agenda today you would say that China, Iran and North Korea. If you look at the Saudi agenda today, yes, for me the first priority would be Yemen, where we have a 1 450 kilometre border. Of course, my second would be the Iranian policy of aggression, intervention and expansion and I need to deal with that situation as a second priority. Of course, today, Saudi has very strategic challenges on both its north and south borders, because on the north side Iran continuously supports all the militia groups, which we call [inaudible] in Iraq, which are fully-funded, trained and supported by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and at the same time in Yemen. Being on both sides and also seeing the chemical threat in the Gulf waters; September 14 changed the name of the game. If the international community today does not condemn a real act, though I think it is a good thing that Europe at least recognized despite the strong relations between Europe and Iran. I was in New York and I was very happy to hear President Rouhani saying that he would like to have a new sort of Hormuz regional security framework, which would be based on two principles: non-aggression and non-intervention.

This is what we have been suffering from regarding the Iranian policy, but I would add that we would like to see an international guarantor, a role for the United Nations, to be the guarantor for such a policy to be implemented. If they are willing to move towards the real implementation of non-intervention and non-aggression, trust me we would all be happy to move towards that regional arrangement. We do not want to see more of an international presence. Somebody like President Trump coming out and saying, why do we need to be involved in the Middle East war; we should be out of that. I think he is mistaking about two things; he has the two strongest enemies and a friend. Israel is the strongest friend for the United States in that Middle East geographical location and Iran, is his biggest enemy, or second on the list for him, is there. Through disengagement or having double-standards, withdrawing your soldiers



from the north of Syria but at the same time being willing to send 3,000 soldiers to Saudi Arabia, while saying that you have agreed with the Saudis to pay for the cost of that.

If it is really a matter of cost and pricing maybe we should have an international tender and see who has the cheapest price and come-up with the right RFB and then see who will provide the best security at a cheaper rate. It is unfortunate to see such a policy coming out of the US where we would have expected see much more real engagement in bringing peace and stability. Did the 2003 invasion of Iraq really bring stability to Iraq? Do we have a stable, secure, safe unified Iraq today? We do not.

Your first question when we started was whether the involvement and engagement of the external powers was for or against the interests of the region. It depends on the role that involvement plays. Without withdrawing President Obama's red lines, as he called them, we would not have seen the Russians back in the region with such a strong desire and presence and today in Saudi Arabia we are receiving President Putin's visit. That makes it a much more complex scene in the region. However, Saudi Arabia will still be involved in the four different layers of course: our own interests with each different country; through the GCC, despite its current situation ; through the Arab League; and through the IOC and the United Nations. There are all these different layers. Saudi Arabia did condemn Turkey's role in the north part of Syria and despite that, I personally understand the interests of the different... I do not think that Turkey would have taken such a step without a consensus, maybe I should not call it a consensus, but without disagreement from the different strong players in the region, whether Russia, the US or the other powers.

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That could well be. You already pointed to the fact that Saudi Arabia compared to the Kurds in Syria, has the advantage to be able to pay for American soldiers. I think there is one important point I would like to stress, and I do not know how far you want to reveal things. I know that you are personally involved with your Research Center, in second tracks with the Iranians. Without going into too much detail, you do not want to reveal, would you see real opportunities for de-escalation and security building across the Gulf, based on the contacts you have with the Iranian counterparts?

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Wikileaks did leak the information so it is no longer secret, about our Track Two that we started in 2012. At the same time, the last meeting was in New York at the end of September after the Assembly. My feeling today, since the Iranians came for the first time saying that they would have regional security based on the two principles of non-intervention and non-aggression, I think that with a strong presence of the UN as a guarantor as I said, it will be welcomed. I do not think there will be any rejection of that from the Saudi side and we have very clearly indicated that. Also, when we talked about Yemen and how the situation will be there, Iran realizes that it is not even in their best interests because they also have a different militia and different groups, so if the international community starts to recognize the role of the violent MENA state actors and giving them a role to play where will it stop. Every country will then have similar problems. Today, whether I am pessimistic or optimistic all depends on Iran. If Iran realizes that they cannot live in a league of hatred in the region, then they need to fix their relations and address the various issues, from Hezbollah to the militia in Syria, that they have created through the Afghani, Pakistani and Iraqi militia. They need to look at [inaudible] in Iraq. They need to look at [inaudible] in the south. If they change their attitude and are willing to be – because by the way they have chosen to deal through these militia for two reasons. One is to support the regime they want if they decided to, as they did with Hezbollah in Syria. The second is to use them as leverage and a disturbance for the same thing, which is like what they did in Lebanon where they delayed the government's role and they became much more aggressive in that way. I think I would still call for a real, major, constructive global engagement in solving a lot of the regional problems we have starting with Libya and going all the way to Yemen, going through everything here.

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Thank you.