



NATO Foundation
Defense College

Gulf September 2017

The Ethnic Card. How Saudi Arabia is playing with Arabism against Iran

In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has been increasingly playing the “ethnic card” to contain and compete with Iran. Riyadh’s tactic aims to acquire, or enhance, political leverage towards Shia Arabs, so separating them from Shia Persians.

In the same way, the Saudis work to rally around Riyadh’s flag all the Shia Arabs (communities, movements and militias) already far from the Iranian outreach, so attempting to reduce Teheran’s first, confessional-based basin. As a matter of fact, the “ethnic card” gives to Saudi Arabia a broader audience with respect to the confessional one: Arabism allows Riyadh to overcome the Sunni-Shia divide, even more poisoned after years of sectarian discourses and policies, in the framework of the “Middle Eastern Cold War”.

On July 30, 2017, the prominent Iraqi Shia leader Muqtada Al-Sadr unusually met with Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi crown prince and defense minister, in Jeddah [Reuters, “Iraqi Shi’ite leader Sadr makes rare visit to Saudi Arabia”, July 30, 2017]. They agreed on the necessity to contain Popular Mobilization Forces’ power (PMF/Hashd al-Shaabi, the Iraqi predominantly-Shia militia supported by Iran) now that Mosul returns to the state, so countering Iranian penetration in Baghdad.

Al-Sadr, who has always denounced the Islamic Republic’s role in Iraq, proceeds from a renowned family of religious scholars, based in Najaf, can mobilize thousands of militants as chief of the former Mahdi Army (especially in Baghdad’s southern neighbourhood and in the South), and is able to intercept low classes’ consensus, speaking about politicians’ corruption and the lack of political reforms. On August 13, 2017, Al-Sadr travelled also to Abu Dhabi [The National, “Iraq Cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr meets with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed”, August 13, 2017], by an Emirati private jet.

Last August, Saudi chargé d’affaires in Lebanon, Walid Boukhari, had a consultation in Beirut with shaykh Abdel Amir Kabalan, head of the Supreme Islamic Shia Council in Lebanon [Scarlet Haddad, “Spéculations sur un changement dans les relations entre Téhéran et Riyad”, *Décryptage*, L’Orient le Jour, August 26, 2017]. This was a highly symbolic meeting: the message is that the Saudis speak with the Lebanese Shia community notwithstanding their firm stance against Hezbollah, with the purpose to enhance or create relations with alternative Shia voices in Lebanon. Such a dynamic could also impact on Riyadh’s diplomatic position on Syria.

A recent statement made by Thamer Al-Sabhan corroborates the “ethnic factor theory”. Al-Sabhan, former Saudi ambassador in Iraq and current minister of Gulf affairs, has been rapidly emerging as a visible personality in Mohammed bin Salman’s diplomacy: he also participated at the meeting with Muqtada al-Sadr in Jeddah. In September, he vehemently tweeted against Hezbollah, writing that “the Lebanese people must choose to either be with it (Hezbollah, ndr) or against it”, since “the blood of

Arabs is precious” [Al-Arabiya, “Saudi minister denounces Lebanon’s Hezbollah as ‘Party of Satan’”, September 5, 2017]

However, Saudi Arabia’s outreach towards the Shia Arabs is an ambivalent tactic. As a matter of fact, Riyadh could capitalize on closer relations with Shia Arabs as in the case of long-lasting tension with Iran, as well as in the case of gradual de-escalation with Teheran. Therefore, the “ethnic factor” tactic leaves all the scenarios open, looking also at the development of the crisis with Qatar.

Moreover, such a political choice allows Riyadh to acquire new relational and political tools vis-à-vis Gulf’s Shia Arabs, especially in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

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