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“Hopes” for the Trump administration: motivations of Saudi Arabia and Israel regarding Iran

On January 20, 2017, Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States of America. As is well known, Trump was elected after advocating a ban on entry into the United States by Muslims, construction of a wall on the border with Mexico, and other such exclusionary policies along with his “America First” message during the campaign.

But will the Trump administration really bring stiffer adverse winds than any previous U.S. administration for the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, in which Muslims make up majority of the population? The answer is: probably not.

From the perspective of relations with Iran

On January 2, 2016, about one year before the birth of the Trump administration, the news about the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a Saudi leader of the Shiite sect of Islam, by Saudi Arabia, one of the major Middle Eastern countries, was publicized throughout the world. Demonstrators protesting this execution set fire to the Saudi embassy in Tehran, the capital of Iran, which is the biggest Shiite-majority country. The next day on January 3, Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations with Iran.

Saudi Arabia and Iran face one another across the Persian Gulf, and the confrontation between these two major countries is sometimes reported as one between the Sunni and Shiite sects of Islam. In essence, however, their confrontation does not stem from a difference of religious interpretation. Today's Iran was born after the revolution that overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty. This is precisely why it is viewed as a threat by Saudi Arabia and other countries with monarchical systems along the Persian Gulf. In short, the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia goes all the way back to the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. The establishment of the Republic was followed by the occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, which led the United States to sever diplomatic relations with Iran. Shortly after, war broke out between Iran and its neighbor Iraq. When it ended in 1988, on its heels came the outbreak of the Gulf War. Following the Gulf War, the United States imposed sanctions on both Iraq and Iran, and a balance of power took shape along the Persian Gulf with Saudi Arabia positioned as the pro-U.S. country on the opposite coast.

What changed this established order was the Iraq War, which began in 2003. Originally, Iraq had a larger population of Shiite Muslims than of Sunni Muslims. In spite of this, the Sunni continued to be accorded preferential treatment under the administration of Saddam Hussein. After the Hussein administration was overthrown in the Iraq War, it was clear to all that the Shiites would have the edge in numbers when elections were held. Upon the birth of the administration led by the Shiite politician Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq, the country was no longer the kind of enemy it had once been in the eyes of Iran.

Additionally, a change has occurred in Iran as well. Inaugurated as president of Iran

in 2013, Hassan Rouhani is a moderate, unlike his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He was the first Iranian president since the Islamic Revolution to make direct contact with the U.S. President (Barack Obama). About two years after his inauguration, in July 2015, a final agreement was reached in the negotiations over Iran's nuclear development activities between Iran and the P5+1 group (the five members of the UN Security Council and Germany). To Saudi Arabia, this agreement was a jolt that shook the existing order.

Israel and Saudi Arabia

Although Iran abandoned the idea of developing nuclear arms, the agreement allowed it to maintain the capability for such development. As such, Israel, which is hostile to Iran, also vehemently denounced the agreement and voiced strong criticism of the U.S. Obama administration.

Unlike the Arab countries, Iran did not adopt a hostile stance toward Israel right from its creation. The Iran of the time cast a vote against the resolution for the partitioning of Palestine in the United Nations in 1947. When the founding of Israel was proclaimed in 1948, however, it was the first Muslim-majority country after Turkey to recognize the new state, and relations between the two remained close until the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution. When it became an Islamic republic as a result of the 1979 revolution, nevertheless, Iran made a wholesale shift to a policy of enmity toward Israel. Ahmadinejad (president, 2005 - 2013) in particular repeatedly made hardline comments about Israel.

Even after the moderate Rouhani became president, there was no change in regards to the hostile relations between the two countries. For this reason, in its opposition to the agreement with Iran, Israel bitterly criticized the Obama administration, and relations between the United States and Israel deteriorated while Obama was president.

Beginning in 2006, when suspicions that Iran was attempting to develop nuclear weapons were widely reported in the international community, Israel repeatedly hinted at the possibility of launching an attack on Iran. Because Iran and Israel are not neighboring countries, Israeli military aircraft would have to pass through the airspace

of a third country to actually attack Iran. Saudi Arabia reportedly gave its permission for such passage by Israeli aircraft. As this suggests, the relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel can be perfectly summed up in the adage “the enemy of an enemy is an ally.”¹

“Hopes” for the Trump administration

As outlined above, although it was welcomed as a “historic agreement” internationally, the nuclear deal with Iran was a “betrayal” as far as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other pro-U.S. countries of the Middle East were concerned. Each expressed disappointment with the Obama administration, which worked for the agreement. They consequently had high hopes for improved relations with the United States once Obama came to the end of his second term.

Traditionally, the pro-U.S. Arab countries have had more of an affinity with U.S. Republican administrations than with Democratic ones. The inauguration of Trump, who not only was heading a Republican administration but also viewed Iran as an enemy, was regarded as a golden opportunity by these countries. It is obvious that both Saudi Arabia and Israel are placing top priority on their own national interest and security as opposed to the historic importance of the nuclear agreement as viewed from a global standpoint.

Considered in this context, it was not at all odd that no critical remark whatsoever was made by Saudi Arabia, which prides itself as the Protector of Mecca and Medina, the two “holy cities” of Islam, when media around the world were filled with editorial comment about the executive order issued by Trump on January 27, banning entry into the United States for 90 days from seven Middle Eastern and North African countries (Iran, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, and Yemen).² It might be added that this was in spite of the fact that Saudi Arabia was in a position to voice sharp opposition to the ban, because the list of seven countries included its allies Sudan and Yemen. Its

¹ The Times of Israel “Saudis ‘would let Israeli jets use their air space to attack Iran’” February 25th, 2015. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/saudis-said-to-mull-air-passage-for-israeli-jets-to-attack-iran/>).

² On March 6, the executive order was revised to remove Iraq from the list along with persons holding a U.S. green card, indicating the right to permanent residency.

neglect to do so clearly stems from its attachment of greater importance to the anti-Iran factor. The situation is similar for the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which, like Saudi Arabia, is hostile to Iran. Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, its Minister of Foreign Affairs, made a statement defending Trump, insisting that the ban was not aimed at Muslims.³

Two days after issuance of this executive order, Trump had telephone conversations with Salman bin Abdulaziz, King of Saudi Arabia, and Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Crown Prince of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi in the UAE. Although he repeatedly criticized the agreement with Iran beginning in the election campaign, more than a year has passed since it was concluded, and investment in Iran from Europe and North America is quickening. This suggests that the United States will probably not scrap the agreement per se, as this step could invite its isolation. In a recent (late January) telephone conversation between the Saudi King and Trump as well, the language was toned down to the level of calling for “rigorous enforcement” of the agreement. It remains fully possible, however, that the Trump administration may impose tougher sanctions that will rankle Iran and make the situation in the region more unstable.

The increasing risk of terrorism

Saudi Arabia, one of the major Middle Eastern countries that is supposed to be the Protector of the Two Holy Cities, is so wary of Iran that it gave its tacit consent to the Trump administration’s exclusionary policy extending to Muslims, and this provided Islamic extremists with excellent material for propaganda. It was Saudi Arabia’s permission for a continued U.S. military presence in the country after the Gulf War that turned Osama bin Ladin and his followers decisively against the United States. This consent similarly holds the risk of heightening the cohesion and pull of so-called Islamic State (IS) and other extremist groups. On March 21, the Trump administration announced that, to prevent terrorism, it was prohibiting passengers from bringing laptop computers and tablet devices on board in direct flights to the United States from ten

³ Reuters “UAE says Trump travel ban an internal affair, most Muslims unaffected” February 1st, 2017. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-immigration-emirates-idUSKBN15G43U>)

airports in eight Middle Eastern and North African countries (Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Morocco, Turkey, and the UAE). This measure applies to passengers using any of nine airlines in these eight countries; it does not apply to those flying with U.S. airlines. The following day on March 22, the United Kingdom also announced the same measure for direct inbound flights from six Middle Eastern and North African countries (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia). Both the U.S. and U.K. measures cover King Khalid International Airport in the Saudi capital of Riyadh, and King Abdulaziz International Airport in the Saudi city of Jeddah, and Saudi Arabian Airlines. Nevertheless, the Saudi government has remained silent on the subject.

In April 2016, Saudi Arabia announced its Vision 2030 plan and commenced activities aimed at lowering its economic dependence on oil.⁴⁵ Saudi Arabia is faced with a worsening of its finances caused mainly by the protracted sagging of prices for crude oil. Meanwhile, people aged 25 or less account for a huge share of its population at about 44 percent. As such, it is being pressed for the resolution of difficult issues in the form of rebuilding its finances and restructuring its industry and employment.

The deterioration of public security would undoubtedly be a factor hindering the success of Vision 2030. It goes without saying that Iran's adherence to the nuclear agreement is indispensable for stability in the region, but it is also advisable for both Saudi Arabia and Israel to refrain from trying to capitalize on the Trump administration's provocative policy on Iran and to exercise caution in their actions toward it.

⁴ A Japanese translation of the entire text of Vision 2030 is available for viewing on the official website of the Saudi Arabian government: http://vision2030.gov.sa/SVpdf_jp.pdf.