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The Shia-Sunni divide: Tunnel vision prevails

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Tunnel vision prevails on opposite shores of the Gulf where governments execute policies based on perception rather than reality. They run the risk of being incapable of managing tensions that could threaten shipping through the strategic Strait of Hormuz as well as create domestic turmoil in both Gulf states and Iran.

Commentary

A WIDENING schism along sectarian lines between Sunni and Shia Muslims was highlighted in two recent conferences, one in Bandar Abbas, Iran, the other in Bahrain. Both were designed to promote opposing government views of popular unrest and discontent sweeping the Middle East and North Africa and the Islamic republic's role in the region. Senior Iranian officials stressed the geo-strategic importance of minority Shia communities, who inhabit oil and water-rich regions in Arab Gulf states, while Bahrainis, supported by senior representatives of the US Republican Party, dismissed domestic unrest in their part of the world as the result of Iran's interference.

Yet, the widespread popular discontent was palpable in March just metres away from the conference halls in both Bandar Abbas and Bahrain. That discontent is being fuelled by increased repression in Iran in advance of presidential elections in June and a refusal in Bahrain to address the issues that sparked a popular revolt on the island two years ago. Bahraini security forces brutally suppressed the uprising that continues to smoulder in villages outside the capital of Manama and is fracturing Bahraini society.

Paying a heavy price

The government response to the uprising turned what initially was a call for reform by both Bahrain's Shia majority and members of the Sunni minority into a proxy tug-of-war between two of the region's foremost powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, with the island state paying a heavy price. Sunni teachers often refuse to cross sectarian lines to give classes in Shia majority neighbourhoods and view some areas as no-go zones. Students miss lectures because of security road blocks. Shias and Sunnis segregate themselves in university classrooms and reject professors' efforts to get them to mingle. Youths regularly die in clashes with security forces.

Few Bahrainis expect a national dialogue between the government and the opposition to produce any results despite US and Saudi pressure. Opposition demands that Crown Prince Salman Al Khalifa - who has favoured granting Shias historic concessions, including a larger number of seats in parliament - participate in the

dialogue have so far been rejected by a dominant hard-line group within the royal family that has gained control of security and intelligence. The opposition, for its part, has signalled its lack of confidence in the dialogue by only sending lower-ranking officials to the talks.

Few further believe that either the United States, which has its Fifth Fleet headquartered in Bahrain, or Saudi Arabia want to upset the apple cart. Saudi Arabia, which two years ago dispatched troops to Bahrain, is unlikely to want to see Shia majority rule in a country that is a mere 45-minute drive from its restive, oil-rich, predominantly Shia Eastern Province. Yet, it has recently signalled that it would favour concessions to the Shias provided the Sunni monarchy remains in place.

In contrast to Saudi Arabia, US pressure for a compromise has cooled relations with the Obama administration. Speakers at the Bahrain conference under the auspices of the University of Bahrain included conservative former US ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton and Dan Burton, a Republican from Indiana who was until January head of the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, but no Obama administration officials or spokesmen for the opposition. In fact pro-government newspapers referred to the US president as "Ayatollah" Obama.

US presence and Iranians' bunker mentality

To be sure, Bahraini concern about Iranian encouragement of dissent is not without reason. As early as in the first year of the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran hosted a miniscule group that called for the liberation of Bahrain. Moreover, Iran's decades-old occupation of three islands in the Gulf that are claimed by the United Arab Emirates, inspires little confidence in its designs for the region.

Nevertheless, with talks in Kazakhstan in early April between the five members of the UN Security Council plus Germany and Iran over the Islamic republic's nuclear program producing little progress, Iranian officials labour under the psychological impact of international isolation and hard-hitting sanctions. The impact is obvious in the regime's increasing pervasiveness, its fear-inspired penchant for control, a preference among officials for monologue rather than dialogue, and a dread of foreigners reminiscent of the former Soviet Union and North Korea.

Foreign academics invited to the Bandar Abbas conference encountered among senior Iranian officials and scholars a self-righteous bunker mentality and a bazaar merchant's penchant for deception and half-truths. In a break with a culture that prides itself on its diplomatic, artistic and gastronomic sophistication, officials and clerics embarked on diatribes of at times crude propaganda. Iranian speakers played up Iran's role as a regional power, the strategic geography of Shia Muslims in oil and water-rich parts of the Gulf, the discrimination suffered by Shias in countries like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and the alleged subservience to the United States of wealthy Gulf states who blame Iran for stirrings of unrest within their own borders.

Discontent bubbling at the surface

Foreign ministry officials and associated think tank figures used their role as moderators to rudely cut off their foreign guests so that they could embark on a drumroll of lengthy, highly politicized and ideological speeches. The degree of control became further obvious when several foreign participants who ventured into town on a shopping spree were intercepted by security officials allegedly for their own protection.

Foreigners are not the only ones to run afoul of the regime's suspicions and bunker mentality. Ahmad Shaheed, the United Nations' monitor for human rights in Iran, warned in a report last month that the crackdown was intended to stymie potential protests linked to the upcoming election. Iran brutally suppressed protests in the wake of its 2009 presidential election. Iranians say that the government in recent weeks has established absolute control of access to the Internet, making impossible circumvention of censorship with specialised software.

With tension building on both shores of the Gulf, the stakes are high for regional governments as well as the international community as they could threaten shipping in the Straits of Hormuz as well as create domestic turmoil in both the Gulf states and Iran. As a young Iranian soccer fan sums up the situation: "Its bubbling at the surface. Who knows if or when something will erupt?"

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