

Iran-Bahrain talks on horizon signal more sunset on US hegemony



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OPINION

In a seemingly minor diplomatic event in the Persian Gulf, the Kingdom of Bahrain has just agreed to begin talks with Iran to reestablish long-broken diplomatic relations between the two countries.

While Bahrain is a small island in the Gulf with little latitude in policies largely controlled by its giant neighbor, Saudi Arabia, this event carries greater significance than may readily meet the eye. For starters, Bahrain happens to be the headquarters of the American Fifth Fleet with security responsibilities for the Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea. Any Bahraini rapprochement with Iran will be unsettling for Washington, which might even move to try to block it.

Bahrain is also an oppressive regime run by a Sunni minority that has harshly suppressed its majority Shia population. The Shia majority has long been restive under these policies of discrimination, much abetted by a fiercely anti-Iranian Saudi Arabia that dominates Bahrain's foreign policy.

Indeed, this situation has been part and parcel of a broader pattern of American policies globally that has routinely sought to identify enemies in various regions in order to establish and maintain favorable "security arrangements" in any area in question. In the Persian Gulf, Iran has long been designated the "enemy" of choice and Washington's Gulf policy has been centered around rallying regional military and political opposition against Iran — heavily supported and encouraged by Israel.

Unsurprisingly, Iran has reciprocated in kind by lending support to various groups in the region as counter-balancing instruments against American power. Never mind that a significant case can be made that the US did not have to maintain on auto-pilot its anti-Iranian hostility for 45 years, but such a policy has served Washington's regional strategic and military hegemony well. (Readers of history will know that once the United States has identified and declared another state to be on an "enemy list," it is exceedingly difficult to get off.) Thus, a cornerstone of American Gulf policy for decades was the establishment of a military presence in the region in order to "protect the free flow of oil". Never mind that virtually every anti-American dictator in the region was happy to sell their oil to the world and the "free flow of oil" almost never needed protection.

The first deep hole in that American military and strategic "wall" was made by the Chinese who two years ago orchestrated an astonishing rapprochement long viewed as nearly inconceivable by pseudo-experts because "everybody knows" that Sunnis and Shias are mortal enemies. The Beijing-engineered diplomatic rapprochement between the Saudis and Iran was the first stunning indication of major shifting geopolitical realities in the Gulf.

Now, with the prospect of Bahrain mending ties with Tehran, we can see more clearly the shift that the Chinese (and Russian) presence in the Persian Gulf is affording. Bahrain could never have undertaken such a shift without Saudi concurrence as well — which had itself just preceded Bahrain in de-demonizing Iran.

In one sense, much of this is reminiscent of the revolutionary turnaround in Turkish regional policy over three decades under the inspired leadership of academician and former foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu, who declared a new "zero enemies" foreign policy for a Turkey that would undertake to mend relations with all surrounding countries (that had long been hostile in the NATO or other contexts.)

Davutoglu was held in much contempt in Washington precisely because such a stance was seen to be undermining NATO policies of "enemy identification" used to justify the military alliance. (Indeed, there is virtually no independent European foreign policy today permitted to exist outside the structures of American-dominated NATO.)

But approaches such as Davutoglu's striving for "zero enemies" have given pause for thought as to whether "intractable" hostilities in the region might not just turn out to be manageable after all, especially if one assumes countries have agency to alter negative or hostile postures.

Indeed, in this regard, one questions the



Iran's acting Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani (R) meets with Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani in Tehran on July 23, 2024, on the sidelines of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) summit.
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very foundation of so much of American policy that is so heavily based on the "identification of enemies" requiring ever-deeper military engagement and confrontation.

Meanwhile, the latest events serve to strengthen to some degree Iran's legitimacy as a significant regional actor consistent with its new membership, along with Saudi Arabia, in the BRICS bloc — an organization very much part of the emergence of a new Global South.

Of course, there can be no millennium on the horizon with peace breaking out all over. In international relations, it is im-

possible to have everybody in full harmony with everybody else all the time and a total absence of conflict.

Yet, it is certainly a worthy aspiration for states to make the assumption that hostility does not have to be automatic or reflexive, that states indeed do have agency and can make major decisions about whether to foster improvement or exacerbation of their relations with other countries.

But the United States, currently possessing the world's most ideological foreign policy, at least since the fall of the Soviet Union ("global war on terror;" "bringing de-

mocracy to the world via regime change," etc.), might well take a page out of this book in its own relations, with Russia and China for starters.

Diplomacy, a seemingly lost art in Washington today, was designed specifically to lubricate such tensions rather than exacerbate them. Yet, exacerbation seems to be the course Washington often follows to maintain the vision of enemies that require American military solutions and American hegemony.

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The map shows the Persian Gulf and all its littoral states, including Iran and Bahrain.
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