

SAUDI ARABIA AND QATAR: The Incendiary Role of the West's Arab Clients

In the Latest Twist, Gulf Monarchs Accused of Shielding Iraqi 'Death Squad Leader'

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Fugitive Iraqi Vice President Tareq Al Hashemi, who is wanted on terrorism charges in Iraq, has fled to Saudi Arabia amid growing controversy over the role of the Gulf monarchies in the region's volatile geopolitics.

Hashemi, a leading Sunni politician, is facing charges that he ran death squads at the height of the Shia-Sunni sectarian conflict in Iraq, which saw thousands killed, during the US-led nine-year occupation of that country. Hashemi denies the charges, but the authorities in Baghdad claim they have evidence that he personally directed Sunni death squads.

A warrant was issued for Hashemi's arrest last December, days after the US military officially withdrew from Iraq.

Calls for his prosecution were led by Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki, who heads the mainly Shia government in Baghdad. However, Hashemi evaded arrest by fleeing to the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region in northern Iraq.

Last week, the Iraqi Vice President further evaded justice when he flew to the Persian Gulf emirate of Qatar. In a move that infuriated the Baghdad government, Qatar's Al Thani rulers pointedly refused a request to hand over Hashemi. Qatar, a Sunni monarchy, claimed that Hashemi would not receive a fair trial if he were returned to Iraq, where the majority Shia hold power.

Now the fugitive politician has taken refuge in neighbouring Saudi Arabia. The Sunni monarchs in Riyadh have struck a less confrontational pose towards Baghdad than Qatar's flat refusal to repatriate Hashemi. The House of Saud claims that the Iraqi politician is in the country to perform the "Umrah" – a Muslim pilgrimage.

Nevertheless, the conduct of Saudi Arabia, as with Qatar, is being interpreted as a snub to the Iraqi government. Their boorish attitude towards Baghdad is no doubt because of the Maliki government's cordial relations with neighbouring Iran and Syria, both of whom are the targets of regime change for the Western powers and therefore also targets for the West's client autocrats in Riyadh and Doha.

But the undiplomatic posturing by King Abdullah and his Qatari counterpart, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, leaves the Gulf monarchs open to the accusation that they are provoking regional tensions, obstructing justice and shielding an alleged terrorist mastermind.

Superficially, the diplomatic shenanigans seem at odds with the purported roles that Saudi Arabia and Qatar have asserted in recent months where they have appeared to advocate the rule of international law and protection of human rights in Libya and more recently Syria.

The Gulf monarchs' strident denunciation of Libya over alleged human rights violations was instrumental in creating the political conditions for NATO's bombardment of that country and eventual regime change. Similarly, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been at the forefront of condemning Syria's President Bashar Al Assad – again for alleged rights violations – and have called for his removal from power.

At a deeper level, however, there is no discrepancy. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have both emerged as the main financiers of armed groups in Libya and Syria in order to destabilize those countries. Only last week, at a conference in Istanbul, the Gulf monarchs pledged \$100 million to fund the armed factions in Syria that have for the past year been tearing that country asunder, with car bombings, mass murders, kidnappings and sabotage.

Then, of course, there is the ongoing brutal suppression of pro-democracy movements within Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

So, the obstruction of Baghdad's sovereign right to prosecute in the case of the fugitive Iraqi Vice President is therefore fully consistent with the increasingly, but under-reported, malevolent role that the Gulf Arab monarchies have been playing across the Middle East and North Africa region to further the geopolitical interests of the Western powers.

The apparent, superficial mismatch between the Saudi/Qatari positions is only a contradictory issue because of the distorted way the mainstream media, such as BBC, CNN and Qatari-run Al Jazeera, have reported on regional events. These outlets have given scant coverage to the uprisings and repression in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, while going into overdrive over Libya and Syria where they have presented the authorities as criminal, the so-called rebels as valiant heroes, and the Western and Gulf Arab monarchs as benevolent champions of human rights and democratic reform. The latter is an amazing feat of double-think that could only be achieved by corporate, government-controlled media shamelessly toeing a political agenda, or, in a word, propaganda.

The real incendiary role that these despotic monarchs are playing cannot be underestimated. Libya is left in shambolic ruins at the mercy of internecine tribes where dozens of people are ending up dead every day. Syria is on the brink of renewed all-out war if the Arab-funded mercenaries hold true to their word of rejecting the Annan peace plan. And now the ratcheting up of tensions with Shia neighbour Iraq, and by extension Iran, is another can of petrol that the Gulf monarchs are tossing on to a regional bonfire.

Added to this are the stockpiles of weapons and missile defence systems that the Western sponsors, Washington, London and Paris, are plying these reckless custodians of terror.

And yet all the while the Western mainstream media pretend that the oil and blood-soaked Shaikhs are the "friends of Syria" and on the side of a noble NATO protecting human rights and security across the Arab World. Give us a break.

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