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# The Slumbering Giant Awakens

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At last the giant has awakened! Saudi Arabia, that great Sunni desert nation, has decided enough is enough. It has watched nervously as Iranian trained and financed Shia militias have gained an increasing foothold in Iraq, claiming to protect sacred Shia shrines and to be engaged in fighting Islamic State terrorists. The Saudis stood back as their sworn enemy Iran financed and armed Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. They bit their lips in frustration when Iran poured arms and personnel into Syria to prop up the bloody dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad. But when the Iranian-funded Shia Houthi rebels overthrew the internationally recognised Yemeni government and occupied the capital city Sana'a and began to march on Aden, it was the straw that broke the camel's back. Now 150,000 Saudi troops are massing on the Yemeni border and Saudi warplanes have begun pounding targets in Sana'a and Aden.

The Saudis are no fools. They have put together a formidable Sunni coalition, embracing Jordan, Sudan, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and even Egypt, who say they are ready to send in aircraft, warships and troops to oust the Houthi rebels from Yemen. The Iranian Supreme Leader reacted angrily, accusing Saudi Arabia of "genocide" in Yemen and stating: "This move in the region is not acceptable and I warn them to stop their criminal act in Yemen." The conflict now looks set to escalate into the religious war between the Sunnis and Shias that the international community has long feared. Iran's attempt to spread its brand of theocratic fundamentalism across the Middle East is now meeting its first serious challenge, as the Saudi giant lumbers to its feet. The message from Riyadh to Tehran seems clear – "Stop this Persian interference in Arab affairs, or suffer the consequences."

The signs are ominous. On Wednesday 8th April two Iranian naval vessels moved into the strategic Bab al-Mandab straits, raising tension further in the region. What perplexes and increasingly angers moderate Sunnis is that the US often accuses them of double standards in their foreign policy, especially in the Levant, yet the Americans are openly supporting Riyadh while at the same time negotiating a deal with the Iranians that will release them from the iron fist of sanctions. If a full deal is reached, Iran will become much stronger economically, enabling them to extend their influence and reach across the Middle East, thus creating further tension and destabilisation. Many argue that the emerging mega-conflict in the Middle East is largely political, but increasingly it is about identity and is clearly sectarian in nature.

The Iranian mullah's geopolitical octopus has stretched its tentacles into Damascus (which Iran essentially controls), Baghdad, Beirut and now Sana'a. They are also slowly edging into Eritrea and the Horn of Africa will rapidly fall within their grasp. What the West fails to recognise is that allowing the Iranians to be freed from sanctions will have negative consequences for the West in the long-term. Energy companies and investment banks desperate to enter the underdeveloped Iranian market, may reap short-term rewards, but will be caught up in any ensuing Sunni-Shiia conflict, which is more than likely to engulf the region in the medium-term. Pakistan's stated reluctance to become an active partner in any military action in Yemen is perhaps an indication of their ultimate fear of Iran's increasing power.

Meanwhile Iran's Supreme Leader has undermined any potential early settlement of the nuclear impasse by insisting that all sanctions must be lifted the minute any Treaty is signed. This runs directly counter to John Kerry's insistence that sanctions will be phased out in stages as Iran complies with the numerous decommissioning clauses. Khamenei has also insisted that all Iranian military establishments will be strictly off limits for future nuclear inspections, effectively removing almost all of their uranium enrichment plants from future scrutiny. This surely cannot be acceptable to the West, but it further exposes how the knee-jerk reaction of the Iranian mullahs has been to accelerate their race to produce a nuclear weapon, which will enable them to hold the Middle East to ransom.

Throughout the shambolic negotiations, Iran has cleverly exploited the fact that Barack Obama seems determined to secure his historical legacy by doing an historic nuclear deal with them, almost at any price. The world will pay dearly for Obama's page in the history books. Only a month ago in a Washington press conference, the Iranian Opposition – the People's Mojahedin of Iran – disclosed another hitherto unknown nuclear site, hidden away inside a sprawling military base in the suburbs of Tehran. Known as Lavizan 3, this top-secret underground facility is using advanced centrifuge technology to produce weapons grade plutonium, hidden from the eyes of the international inspectors. But Obama seems to be unfazed by this news, determined to sign a breakthrough treaty with the mullahs.

Worse still, the Americans, the British and even the Jordanians, provided air cover for the Shiia militias enabling them to re-capture the former home of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi city of Tikrit, which had been held by ISIS terrorists since last summer. General Qasem Soleimani, the most

senior general from the terrorist Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), is leading the Shia militias, trained and funded by Iran. America and Britain have become Iran's de-facto allies in the war against the Islamic State in Iraq, while, ironically, we have sided with the Saudis and their Sunni allies to bomb the Iranian-backed Shia terrorists in Yemen. This is a catastrophically foolish and dangerous situation. We have to listen to the Saudis and to Binyamin Netanyahu. Although they are sworn enemies, both have identified Iran as the biggest danger to the Middle East and ultimately to world peace.

We must stop supporting Iran in the conflict with ISIS. Instead we should demand the integration of the Sunni tribes into the Iraqi military, to drive ISIS and the Iranian-led Shia militias out of Iraq. We should then throw all our resources into backing the moderate Syrian rebels in their bid to topple Bashir al-Assad. This would be a further deathblow to the theocratic Iranian regime; and we should redouble our support for the Saudi coalition to oust the Houthi rebels from Yemen. As the Saudi Arabian giant lumbers into action, the US, EU and UN should provide it with full support and recognise the fact that only regime change in Iran will restore peace and security to the Middle East.

## **STRUAN STEVENSON**

Note: Struan Stevenson was a Conservative Euro MP representing Scotland from 1999 to 2014. He was president of the European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with Iraq from 2009 to 2014 and is now President of the European Iraqi Freedom Association (EIFA).