

Bill Beeman's current thoughts on Iran

From Ed Harris, 1/25/18:

I just got this through my Peace Corps/Iran connections. Bill Beeman is Chair of the Anthropology Department at the University of Minnesota and is a Middle East specialist with many publications. I have heard him speak at two PC/Iran gatherings. He just got back from Saudi Arabia, etc. and is reporting on his observations.

Of course Trump is badly out of step with the P5+1 allies, but he is fixated on his stupid campaign promises, and has been egged on by people like Tom Cotton and Stephen Miller (not to mention Netanyahu) to pursue his reckless and, I would say, illegal course. Tillerson is useless, having almost no expertise in actual foreign policy. Despite all that, Trump's ability to create chaos is still very great. He makes messes that others have to clean up.

I have just returned from three weeks in Saudi Arabia and two weeks in China/Singapore/Malaysia. Here are a few of my conclusions.

1. The attacks on Iran are entirely driven by Mohammad bin Salman (btw. he is not "Prince Salman"--the way nomenclature works in the Arab world is that there are no family names, only genealogies, so his father is King Salman. His name is Mohammad bin Salman, or "Mohammad, son of Salman" called MBS for short--even in Saudi Arabia). Among ordinary citizens there was some hesitation to discuss Iran, but among young people there was puzzlement about the attacks on Iran. They told me that they don't view Iran as an "enemy," and wonder why MBS is continually attacking them. Shiraz has been a summer retreat for Saudis for decades, and historic ties with Iran are long and historic. Iran has an active embassy in Riyadh and a consulate in Jeddah.

What frightens MBS and the Saudis is an active Shi'a resistance movement inside the Kingdom. I visited Al-Qatif, a prominent city inside the Eastern province where all the oil fields are located. To my surprise, there had been a kind of insurrection there. A number of Shi'a activists who had bombed police stations and other facilities had been caught and arrested. In addition, the bridge to Bahrain is just up the road about an hour, and of course, Bahrain is majority Shi'a. There are many Shi'a workers in the oil fields and petrochemical industries in the Eastern province. The Saudi Royal Family views them as a threat, and is blaming Iran for any trouble in the region. This masks the fact that Shi'a are in fact repressed, and it is easy to blame Iran. The other Shi'a problem is on the southern border of KSA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) with Yemen, where the Zayidi Muslims--a Shi'a sect that ruled Yemen from the 9th Century until the mid-1970s--spill over the border into Saudi Arabia. The movement to take Yemen back from Sunnis--the Houthi movement (named after their leader, now deceased) frightens MBS because he sees it eventually threatening the Southern province which is dangerously close to Mecca and Medina. Again, blaming Iran is a useful ploy to distract from this indigenous threat.

One other problem is that Iran (along with its partner, Qatar) is a direct competitor in the area of natural gas and petrochemicals. The North Pars gas field in the Persian Gulf is the largest natural gas field in the world. Iran and Qatar share this, and this is the reason for the Qatar alliance with

Iran--it is economic. The gas and petrochemicals developed from this field are all over Asia, undercutting the Saudi chemical products.

2. In China, Iranian presence is everywhere. The Chinese have set up Confucius Institutes in Iran and Iranian young people are learning and becoming fluent in Chinese. I saw two television documentaries praising China-Iran relations and met a number of Iranians in Shanghai, again, speaking fluent Chinese and engaging in commercial activities. In addition, Chinese tourists are flooding Iran. When I was last there, I met several Chinese honeymoon couples vacationing in Iran. (I speak Chinese as well as Arabic and Persian).

3. The Russians are everywhere in Iran and vice versa. And the former Soviet Union states-- Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have an active presence in Iran. Iranians vacation in Tajikistan where they can gamble and drink.

4. The Iranian presence in Malaysia is very great. Iranian students are attending the University of Malaya (sic) and the Science University of Malaysia in Penang. There are non-stop flights from Tehran to Kuala Lumpur, and Iranians vacation there. Malaysia is an English speaking country, so it is easy for smart young Iranians to study there.

5. Of course, European trade missions to Iran continue, and a recent statement from Javad Zarif announces an additional push on Iran's part to encourage tourism.

So, the idea that Iran is "isolated" is ridiculous. Nor can anything Trump is doing counter these now well-established developments. Our enormously foolish and ignorant president is met with ridicule every time he opens his mouth, but sadly that doesn't mean that he can't do damage.

The things I have told you are largely unreported. I really just got back from my travels, and if any of this information is useful to you, please share it with the K-street denizens, most of whom are almost as ignorant as Trump.

~ William Beeman
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