

THE IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA CONFLICT: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

Sohail Mahmood (PhD)

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The Shia cleric Nimr al Nimr was among the 47 execution on January 2, 2016. Nimr’s execution had resulted in Shia protests in several countries of the region. He was a fierce critic of the Saudi rulers and had once even advocated the establishment of a separate Shia state in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia which had a large Shia population. Iran had quickly promised revenge for the execution and so did the Shia Houthis in Yemen.¹ After the execution of Nimr protesters in Tehran responded by torching part of the Saudi Embassy. On January 3, 2016, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir announced Saudi Arabia was severing ties with Iran. Bahrain had also announced it will sever ties with Iran. Both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were close U.S. allies.² Sudan and the UAE also joined in though the UAE's action was limited to downgrading diplomatic relations.

¹ Bruce Riedel, “Saudi executions signal royal worries”, al-Monitor, January 4, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/saudi-arabia-iran-execution-nimr-al-nimr-concerns-stability.html#>, accessed January 4, 2016

² Saudi Arabia, Bahrain Cut Ties with Iran After Protests over Execution, Democracy Now, January 4, 2016, http://www.democracynow.org/2016/1/4/headlines/saudi_led_coalition_pounds_yemeni_capital_after_ending_ceasefire, accessed January 4, 2016

What does this all mean?

These executions signal Saudi Arabia's increasing anxiety over instability. The Saudi monarchy faced challenges from several directions, including economy. The Kingdom faced a high deficit of \$98 billion in 2015 and also a drop in foreign exchange reserves from \$728 billion to \$640 billion.³

Iran and Saudi Arabia are rivals for influence in the region and are engaged in a proxy war stretching across the region, they are increasingly competitive over the leadership of Islam itself. Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran's rivalry goes back centuries to the rivalry of Shia and Sunni Islam. In the contemporary period the Saudi Kingdom was an important Western ally and was supported by successive Western governments. Saudi Arabia had vast oil wealth and was a reliable customer of Western goods, including military equipment. The Saudi-Iran row is going to get worse very soon. How can the tension be reduced to avoid a real crisis in the making? Is a sectarian conflict going to get worse now? Who is to be blamed for the recent problems? An editorial in the Independent stated:⁴

Yet it is a fact that Saudi Arabia is the source of most of the recent problems between the two sects...The latest round of provocations from the Saudis stems from the successful conclusion of talks to limit and monitor Iran's development of its nuclear capacity. The melting of the pack ice between the West and Tehran, in which this agreement was the first and most crucial step, was taken badly in Riyadh, and the ratcheting up of tensions stems from that event. The pitiless war waged by a Saudi-led coalition against Shia Houthi rebels in Yemen is only its most brutal manifestation.... But the Saudis need to be made aware that if they are to survive, they must mend their ways. In particular, the bloody provocations initiated by King Salman since his enthronement one year ago must cease.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia was also commanding an Arab coalition in Yemen against Houthi rebels supported by Iran. Nearly 6,000 people had been killed since the Saudi-led coalition began bombing Yemen in March 2015, about half of them civilians.⁵ Undoubtedly, the war was an ill-conceived adventure of the Saudis and the Gulf States. After all, their strategic partner and strong ally Pakistan did not join the coalition to the utter surprise and dismay of their Gulf Arab brothers. The war in Yemen has caused large destruction in the country and had had resulted in grave human rights violations, as per international watchdog agencies and the United Nations. Tragically, it has ravaged the poorest Arab country, even further.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See editorial "*Saudi Arabia: However repellent the regime, its collapse would be worse – we must do what we can to aid reform*", *Independent*, January 3, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/saudi-arabia-however-repellent-the-regime-its-collapse-would-be-worse-we-must-do-what-we-can-to-aid-a6795066.html>, accessed January 4, 2016

⁵ Saudi-Led Coalition Pounds Yemeni Capital After Ending Ceasefire Democracy Now, January 4, 2016, http://www.democracynow.org/2016/1/4/headlines/saudi_led_coalition_pounds_yemeni_capital_after_ending_ceilsefire, accessed January 4, 2016

Others blame Iran for the troubles and point out the Iranian fingerprints over many incidents of terrorism. For example, the Hezbollah had conducted an attack on the United States Air Force personnel in 1995 in which 19 Americans were killed. The Hezbollah group in Saudi Arabia was connected to the parent Hezbollah in Lebanon. ⁶Iran supports the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

In a policy brief Henderson “Saudi-Iranian Diplomatic Crisis Threatens U.S. Policy” Simon Henderson argued on January 4, 2016 that the US needed “to move quickly to prevent a full-scale diplomatic confrontation with military dimensions” US appeared to its Gulf allies of “indecision and unwillingness to confront Iran, as well as ineffectiveness”.⁷ In December 2015 Saudi Arabia had announced the formation of a grand coalition of Muslim states to fight the Islamic State (IS). The Saudi move “fits U.S. thinking that a Sunni Muslim force is the best way of confronting and ultimately destroying IS. With U.S. logistical and intelligence support”.⁸

Saudi Arabia had been assisting fighters trying to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria. But now the U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship was under “considerable strain and perhaps reconsideration, at least in Riyadh”.⁹ The US “must act swiftly to defuse the tension in the Gulf. Deterring Iranian troublemaking more openly and vigorously should reassure Saudi Arabia of Washington's support -- even if this support is sometimes mixed with criticism -- against the Islamic State and the challenge represented by Iran”.¹⁰

Boot argued that:¹¹

And of course there has been no real U.S. pushback against Iran for its support for the Assad regime in Syria which is guilty of crimes against humanity — the kind of crimes that United Nations Ambassador Samantha Power has spent her career denouncing. Nor does the U.S. inflict any kind of cost on Iran for

⁶ Bruce Riedel, “Saudi executions signal royal worries”, al-Monitor, January 4, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/saudi-arabia-iran-execution-nimr-al-nimr-concerns-stability.html#>, accessed January 4, 2016

⁷ Simon Henderson, “Saudi-Iranian Diplomatic Crisis Threatens U.S. Policy”, *The Washington Institute*, January 4, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-iranian-diplomatic-crisis-threatens-u.s.-policy>, accessed January 4, 2016

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ MAX BOOT, “Why Iran is Pressing Its Luck”, *Commentary*, January 4, 2016, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/foreign-policy/middle-east/iran/iran-pressing-luck/>, accessed January 4, 2016

holding five Americans hostage, or for the rather hostile habit that Ayatollah Khomeini and other Iranian leaders have of regularly chanting “Death to America.” Whenever Iran acts up, the U.S. looks the other way. This is particularly egregious given the fact that Iran has not actually received its sanctions relief yet. Soon — possibly in a matter of weeks — Iran will get access to over \$100 billion in frozen oil assets. Until that happens all of the leverage is on the American side. Iran should be on its best behavior until it gets its payoff for signing the nuclear deal. But that’s not the way Tehran sees it.

The Iranian regime knows that President Obama is so desperate to implement the JCPOA that Iran can get away with murder and not suffer any consequences. So that is precisely what Iran is doing. This is creating a very dangerous precedent for the future. The devastating loss of American credibility means that a future president, even if he or she is so inclined, will have a hard time restoring our deterrent power and convincing Iran not to secretly pursue its nuclear ambitions. It also means that the value of American security guarantees continues to erode, which helps to explain why allies such as Saudi Arabia are pushing back against the Iranian threat in their own crude fashion, e.g., by bombing Houthi rebels in Yemen and by executing a Shiite rabble rouser. In sum, it means that the Middle East (and indeed the rest of the world) will continue to become more dangerous and more hostile to American interests — hard as that may be to believe.

In reality both must be blamed for the troubles. Saudi Arabia is a medieval kingdom trampling human rights and Iran is a theocratic state also trampling human rights. The Shia government has persecuted Sunni Baluchis bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan. Over the decades the Islam regime in Iran has also persecuted the Kurds bordering Turkey. Iran has also supported Shia proxies in various places like Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain and Pakistan. In Pakistan it has supported the Shia Tehrani Nifas i Fiqah i Jafria (TNFJ) which has opposed Sunni majority interpretation of Islam. On the other hand, the Saudi rulers have supported the extremist Sunni entities fighting the Shia extremists. The proxy war has lasted for decades.

In sum, neither of the two are any models of good governance, rule of law, or upholders of human rights. Meanwhile, the US is seemingly reluctant to intervene despite calls for taking sides with the Saudi against the Iranian regime. It is best to engage with both to defuse tensions. The United States, along with Turkey and Pakistan, act quietly behind the scenes to defuse tension. It would be inappropriate for the Obama administration to come out openly against Iran or to even openly support the Saudis.

A cautious approach is required. In sum, the proper role of the United States would be to stay neutral officially and to try facilitating a rapprochement between the two rivals through back channel diplomacy.