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Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and Conflict: Shia Province as Casus Belli?

By Ahmed Salah Hashim

Synopsis

The diplomatic tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the ratcheting of their rivalry in the Middle East reflect the long-standing schism between Shia and Sunni Saudis. Could this internal Saudi conflict lead to war with Iran?

Commentary

THE HEIGHTENED diplomatic tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran following the execution of Saudi dissident Shia cleric Nimr al Nimr raises the prospect of conflict between the two rivals in the Middle East which are already at loggerheads over their respective Sunni and Shia affiliations. The roots of this conflict trace back to before the founding of the Saudi kingdom.

For many years the Middle East has been a battleground for inter-communal warfare between Sunni Salafi militants and the Shia communities outside Iran, who are located in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, Bahrain, Kuwait, Yemen and Oman as well as Iraq.

Saudi Shias of the Eastern Province

The Shias constitute 15 percent of the Saudi population of 29 million. Most of them live in the oil-rich Eastern Province but are politically marginalised and have not benefited from the country's oil wealth in any significant way, even though a number of Shias have risen to prominence in the economic and commercial sectors. The Saudis discriminated against Shias because the Wahhabi religious scholars who cofounded the kingdom, viewed them as deviants from Islam. In the 18th and 19th centuries Saudi Shias were subject to raids and mini-pogroms.

The grievances of the Shias are long-standing as is the sensitivity of the Saudis. The Shias began to mobilise and engage in political activism in the 1950s and 1960s. Initially, radical Arab nationalism and Communist ideas made headway among the marginalised Shia youth in the Eastern Province, southern Iraq, Kuwait, and Bahrain. Secular radicalism alarmed the governments and the Shia clerics in those countries. The clerics sought to wean the youth back from secular ideologies.

The Shia-Sunni divide deepened in the 1970s when Saudi Shias studying in Najaf followed the teachings of Iraqi Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and those of the Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Both men called for the clerics to exercise direct political power and not simply act as advisors to the powers that be. While Al Sadr was executed by Saddam Hussein for 'sedition' in April 1980, Khomeini succeeded in accomplishing the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Many Saudi Shia clerics departed for Qom, where they formed *Tajamu Ulama al-Hijaz* and then later *Hezbollah al-Hijaz*, which emerged with a military wing.

Almost concurrently with the occupation of the Grand Mosque of Mecca by Sunni millenarian rebels led by Juhayman al-Utaybi in 1979, thousands of Shias in the Eastern Province clashed with the Saudi National Guard. The rebels adopted the name Islamic Revolution Organization in the Arabian Peninsula. The rebels who survived sought refuge in Iran.

In 1987, over 400 people, most of them Iranian pilgrims were killed in a stampede outside the Grand Mosque in Mecca during the Hajj. Saudi-Iranian relations worsened and subversive actions were launched against Saudi personnel and interests by Hezbollah al-Hijaz, the Soldiers of Justice and the Holy War Organisation in the Hijaz.

The Emergence of Nimr al-Nimr

In 2009, clashes occurred between Shia and Sunni pilgrims at the al Baqui cemetery in Medina and the little known Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, emerged as the Shia voice of protest. Nimr delivered sermons calling for Shia-majority areas to secede from the kingdom and establish a state based on the Iranian system of governance. The sermons were regarded as seditious and Nimr went into hiding.

In 2011 Riyadh's relief at having been spared the violence of the Arab Spring, which broke out in several countries, was somewhat tempered by violence in the Eastern Province by disgruntled Shias excited by the changes occurring in the Arab world. Al-Awamiyah, the second largest town in the province, was the epicentre of the violence.

Nimr, who came from Awamiyah, attained a political following and Riyadh feared his transformation into a revolutionary leader. Nimr's revolutionary potential proved appealing to young men who disdained the pragmatic conservatism of the traditional community leaders. Nimr was eventually discovered and arrested.

In 2015, the state implemented laws to punish anyone who promotes sectarian hatred and authorities detained Sunnis for posting video clips expressing hostility

toward the Shia. Along with the carrot came the stick. On 2 January 2016, Nimr was executed, together with 44 other Saudis, both Sunni and Shia, all indicted and convicted on charges of promoting terrorism. The fallout from this execution continues to reverberate, but will it lead to war?

Proxy Wars and Subversion

Much of the inter-communal conflict between Sunni Salafi militants and the Shia communities has taken the shape of a proxy war between two of the most powerful countries in the Middle East - Saudi Arabia and Iran. Would Iran up the ante by direct subversion in Eastern Province? Or would Saudi Arabia expand its war against Yemeni Houthis to Iran's economic interests in the Gulf? While Iran has the capabilities to do so it is not clear that it intends such action at the moment.

Iran is coming out from the cold with the P5+1 nuclear agreement and is determined not to allow the Saudis to derail that by polemics about Iranian state-sponsored terrorism. Iran would only instigate problems in Eastern Province if the bilateral situation between the two countries worsens.

Should bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran deteriorate further, one scenario would be for Iran to revive Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia (AQAP), which would give it far more reach to cause mayhem for the Saudi dynasty than just relying on agitating the Shia minority in the Eastern Province.

A deliberately calculated 'hot war' between Saudi Arabia and Iran is not likely. Firstly, there will be constraints imposed by the bigger powers. They would most likely move quickly to put an end to it. Secondly, both the kingdom and the Islamic republic recognise that there are uncertainties associated with war; these uncertainties will negatively impact the tenuous conditions within both countries.

Saudi Arabia is mired in a quagmire of its own making in Yemen. Iran solidly hews to Ayatollah Khomeini's dictum expressed in 1987: that *maslahat-e-dawla* – the interests of the state -- supersede everything else including religion and promotion of revolutionary ideology.

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