



PERSPECTIVES

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Domestic and Regional Implications of Escalated Saudi-Iran Conflict

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: By executing a prominent Shiite leader, the Saudi King and his son the Deputy Crown Prince sent a strong signal to Iran, to the kingdom's beleaguered Shiite minority, and to the world. To its Iranian Shiite rival, Sunni Riyadh was saying that it would absolutely not tolerate intervention in its internal affairs. It was telling its own Shiites that it would not allow "Arab Spring"-like dissent. And to the world, Salman and Muhammad were signaling that the Saudis were growing into their new role as a defender and leader of the Sunni Muslim countries; especially since the Obama administration appears to be siding with Iran.

On January 2, 2016, Saudi Arabia announced the execution of the Shiite religious leader Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr (and 46 other prisoners). In the region, this was the climax of escalating tension between Saudi Arabia, which perceives itself as defending the world's Sunni Muslims, and Iran, which claims the mantle of Shiite leadership.

In Saudi Arabia, the execution was a stark warning to the country's embattled Shiite minority. And for King Salman bin Abd al-Aziz, only a year in office, and his young son and Minister of Defense, Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, this was a further demonstration of a developing muscular and assertive foreign policy.

About Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr

Shaykh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr was the star of the "Arab Spring" demonstrations, which broke out in the kingdom's Eastern Province in 2011-2012. Relations with the Shiite minority are an open sore in Wahhabi Saudi

Arabia. Since the 18th century, these interactions have been marked by cycles of persecution, oppression, demonstrations, violence and terrorism, and sometimes even dialogue. But Saudi Arabia is still at its core a Wahhabi state, and traditionally Wahhabism abhors Shi'ism as a perversion of the true Islamic creed.

The Saudis had hoped to give the Arab Spring a miss. Its Sunni majority never took to the streets, limiting its remonstrations to social media. But its politically active Shiite minority demonstrated forcefully, sometimes even violently, particularly in solidarity with Bahrain's Shiites after the Saudis joined their fellow Sunni rulers in putting down the Shiite rebellion in Manama in March 2011. The Saudis pulled no punches in suppressing the Shiite protests at home, resulting in many casualties, on both sides.

Nimr stood at the forefront of these demonstrations. His charismatic rhetoric was sharp and harsh. He called openly for God to take the lives of the Saudi dynasty. Upon the death of the feared Minister of the Interior, Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz, Nimr expressed his wish that worms would devour his corpse. He did not directly call for violence, but some Shiites and certainly the Saudi regime saw his fire-breathing speeches as a call to arms. For the Saudis he was a leader who had to be stopped.

The circumstances of Shaykh Nimr's arrest in July 2012 are not entirely clear, but he was shot, thrown into the back of a car by Saudi authorities, and whisked away. This ignominious picture was Tweeted, You Tubed and Facebooked all over Saudi social media, further enraging the kingdom's Shiites.

He was executed along with 46 others terrorists (that's the Saudi term), mostly Sunnis associated with al-Qaida.

Domestic Considerations

King Salman and his young protégé Muhammad are just about a year into their respective jobs. It has been a tumultuous period: a war in Yemen and Syria, world acquiescence to a nuclear threshold Iran, not to mention the notorious Islamic State. The Saudis lead the counter-revolution to the Arab Spring. Shiites are the ultimate other in Saudi Arabia – they are not popular with the majority Sunnis, and they led the Arab Spring demonstrations in the kingdom.

Domestically, executing Nimr may have been a way to kill two birds with one stone. The precipitous drop in oil prices will likely soon necessitate slashing

subsidies and promised jobs and housing that quelled economic griping during the Arab Spring. Putting Nimr to death is an easy way to beef up Wahhabi credentials, show who is boss, and turn attention away from cost-cutting measure.

Although Nimr's execution received most of the press coverage, the Saudis were "balanced"; 46 others, mostly Sunni al-Qaida sympathizers, also met their end. Islamic State has struck several times in the kingdom, so putting fellow Islamist fanatics to death put that organization on notice as well. Salman wants to drive home that Saudi Arabia is the Sunni boss in the neighborhood. And politics is also personal. Nimr may have called for worms to devour the body of Minister of Interior Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz, but Nayif's son, current Minister of Interior and Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Nayif, appears to have had the last laugh.

International and regional implications

Saudi Arabia's regional and international position in the past several years has been shaped by two challenges: Iran and Islamic State. In the background is the perception in the kingdom, not unfounded, that the Obama administration is abandoning its traditional allies.

In the zero-sum game of Middle Eastern politics, Washington's acquiescence to the Iran deal, which left Iran a nuclear threshold state, unfettered to continue its military ballistic missile program and advance a hostile regional agenda, means in Riyadh that President Obama is essentially pro-Iran. His comments about needed reforms in Saudi Arabia, or his view that a strategic balance is needed between Sunnis and Shiites, only strengthen this perception.

The execution of Nimr is King Salman and son Muhammad bin Salman's way of signaling both Obama and Iranian Supreme Leader Sayyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei that the Saudis are still in the game. They are filling the vacuum left by American retrenchment with a muscular, pro-active foreign policy that includes playing hardball in Yemen and in the oil market.

The Iranian response has played into Saudi hands. Harsh statements from Iranian leaders and the sacking of Riyadh's embassy in Tehran demonstrated to the Saudis that Iran was interfering in their internal affairs. The Sunni-Shiite game is a transnational one. Just as Iran claims the mantle of Shiite leadership, the Saudis do the same with Sunni leadership, as demonstrated late last year by the cobbling together of a 34 member Sunni Islamic Military Alliance.

The Saudis have broken off diplomatic relations with Tehran, and several other fellow Sunni states have done so as well in solidarity. Foreign Minister Adil al-Jubayr is heading the Saudi diplomatic effort. Jubayr, Riyadh's former ambassador to Washington, remembers that in 2011 the Iranians tried to have him assassinated.

On June 7 Iran claimed that Saudi planes had bombed the Iranian embassy in Yemen. Tit for tat? It remains to be seen. Saudi Arabia's muscular foreign policy might just be in for its first serious test. What is certain is that these two leaders of competing Islamic camps are heading for very rough waters.

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