



## Shiites vs. Sunnis: A Region at War

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Three important events in the fight between Sunnis and Shiites took place this week, including the removal of global sanctions on Iran, and Pakistan's announcement that it would respond to any attack on Saudi Arabia. Is the world's only Muslim nuclear nation about to intervene in the Middle East?**

Three very important events took place recently in the Sunni-Shiite battle of titans being waged across the eastern part of the Arab world, the region between Turkey to the north, Saudi Arabia to the south, and Iran in the east.

The most important event is the removal of sanctions from Iran. As part of a process that began when the agreement on its nuclear program was signed, Iran is returning to the world with an American stamp of approval as a regional power. Iranian intellectuals understood this as soon as the interim deal was signed between Iran and the world powers in November 2013 and explained at conferences throughout the world that that recognition was a clear right of the Iranians given their country's importance, strength, history, and achievements in the region in general and in the nuclear negotiations in particular.

Doubtless, this sense of power and international legitimacy in Iran jumped following the final nuclear deal and the removal of sanctions this week. This means that from now on, Iran will keep growing economically and militarily while living up to the agreement, as least until its economy improves significantly.

During this upcoming period, Iran will behave like a regional power, and anyone who does not accept its status will have to deal with its increasing power and the strength of its emissaries in the region. The American move in making the deal, and its

ramifications for Iran's stature, serve as a kind of proof for the Sunnis of an American decision to align with the Shiite side of the struggle.

Moreover, Sunni heads of state see it an American license, if not an overt one, for Iran to take more aggressive action that will pose a risk to the Sunni world, led by Saudi Arabia.

The second-most important event was the response of the Saudis. The Kingdom executed a Shiite preacher who was imprisoned after a trial (the sentence was handed down a year and a half ago) to send a clear message to the Iranians, as well as to Saudi Arabia's own allies in the Sunni world, that Riyadh would not give up on its fight against the Iranian Shiites – certainly not when it comes to Iran's attempts to attack Saudi Arabia's intactness by stirring up its Shiite minority.

This decision was similar in principle to an earlier Saudi decision to employ force in Yemen and battle against the Houthis, whom the Saudis perceived as agents of Iran.

Saudi Arabia has undoubtedly changed its behavior under its new king, Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, and steered by his son Mohammed bin Salman, the country's 30-year-old defense minister. This means that Saudi Arabia is prepared to take risks and pay prices that it was not prepared to pay in the past. In this case, the price of severing relations with Iran, a step the Saudis decided to take after Iranian demonstrators set fire to the Saudi embassy in Tehran in protest over the execution of the Shiite preacher.

Other Sunni states followed, breaking off relations with Iran -- the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Sudan -- while Egypt, which is receiving substantial economic aid from Saudi Arabia, has not. Sudan, which had former ties to Iran, has actually cut it off entirely.

The Saudis are spearheading a Sunni challenge to the Shiite efforts of the past 35 years, which the Sunnis have thus far been able to check. The results are clear in Iraq and Lebanon, and are the underlying cause of the ongoing war in Syria and the conflict in Yemen.

The third event slipped under the radar of most of the Israeli media. This was an announcement by Pakistan made during a visit to that country by the Saudi defense minister and heir to the throne. The host declared that Pakistan would respond severely to any attack on Saudi Arabia.

This declaration is of utmost importance, since this is the only Muslim country that has nuclear weapons. It is generally accepted that Pakistan has a special obligation to Saudi Arabia in the field of nuclear weapons, because Saudi Arabia funded part of Pakistan's investment in and development of a nuclear bomb.

Whether or not that is true, the Pakistani threat comprises an interesting development. Thus far, Pakistan's nuclear weapons have been portrayed as an element of the conflict between Pakistan and India, and now all of a sudden they're being used in a Middle Eastern context, in a conflict between the Shiite superpower and the entity who wants to be perceived as its Sunni counterpart.

This is a real change in the balance of power throughout the entire Middle East. If Pakistan moves from a one-time declaration to actual intervention in these tussles, the regional balance of power will change, but past experience indicates that they will be very careful about committing themselves.

What will be the ramifications of the intensifying conflict? First, it is quite clear that it will be much harder to deal with the war in Syria properly. That war is not just a civil war between different factions of Syrian society. It is a war between Shiites and Sunnis, with Iran standing behind one side and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, and Turkey, to a certain extent, backing the other.

Even if there were some agreement in Syria about peace talks, which is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future, Iran and Saudi Arabia will not take any steps toward each other, so the Syria war will continue. The Iranians will also seek out Saudi Arabia's soft underbelly, probably via the many Shiites in Saudi Arabia and in some Gulf states, and the Saudis will respond with all their strength, mainly through economic and other forms of aid to anyone in the Middle East who opposes the Shiites.

The Saudis' success in winning Sudan's heart and removing it from Iran's circle of influence should be noted and is very important, to Israel as well, because Sudan was a key stop on the weapons smuggling route from Iran to the Gaza Strip.

The very possibility that a nuclear nation will join this bitter struggle raises serious questions and concerns about the consequences of a possible deterioration, since it's very hard to control endless battles colored by religion.

Pakistan moving its attention to the heart of the Middle East does not bode well for an already complex and conflicted region. A Pakistani change like this one, if it is not a one-time case of lip service for its Saudi friend, could make the regional reality even

more complicated and could eventually turn out to be very influential for the region. In the meantime, it appears to be a one-time event, not a turning point, even if it is important in and of itself. It will be necessary to keep constant tabs on whether Pakistan is headed toward that kind of direct intervention.

The lesson Israel should learn from all these recent events is clear: Israel must not be drawn into such a complex and deep-running battle as the intra-Islamic conflict between Shiites and Sunnis, or between the Arabs and Persians in the Gulf region. Israel must take care to safeguard its own interests, including taking a risk if force should be exerted, but after great consideration, without arrogance, and with precision.

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