



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

An Eye for an Eye: Iran Promises to Partition Saudi Arabia If Iraq Is Partitioned

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 605, October 6, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Iran is now openly threatening to dismember Saudi Arabia for its support for Kurdish independence and secession from Iraq. This ratcheting up of tensions has implications not only for those two countries but for the region and the world at large. Israel would do well to remember that the Middle East is growing ever more volatile, and the US should sharpen its resolve to contain Iran.

The Iranian-Saudi struggle over primacy in the Middle East is hardly new. As early as the 1980s, in Tripoli, Lebanon, the Saudis supported Sunni militia forces in their struggle with the Alawites for control of Lebanon's most important city in the north. Even then, the newly created Hezbollah, Iran's first and most important proxy militia in the Arab-speaking world, sent fighters to the city to support the minority Alawites together with agents of the Assad regime in Syria that by then had allied itself with Iran. This was to become the longest, most durable, and most resilient strategic relationship between any two states in the Middle East.

From that time on, the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia has expanded, sometimes in fits and starts, at other times in an almost linear fashion, as new battlefields between the proxies of both states have emerged. By far the most important were the battlefields of Syria and Yemen, the indirect consequences of the so-called Arab Spring. Instead of yielding democracy, the uprisings descended into deadly civil war in which the proxies of both states battled it out.

Iran, which over the past year has had the upper hand in the struggle with the Saudis in Syria (thanks to Russian air power and hopeless division among the Sunni proxies of the Saudi state), is now threatening to dismember the Saudi

state itself. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, speaking on behalf of his Iranian patron at his annual address on the anniversary of the Ashoura Massacre (at which Ali, revered by the Shiites, lost to the Sunni Caliph as a result of perceived Sunni treachery), warned Saudi Arabia that if it continues to support the beleaguered Iraqi Kurds after their pronouncement of independence, it will act to dismantle the Saudi state.

Hardly anyone in the Middle East needed Nasrallah to spell out the exact nature of this threat. Shiites populated the Hasa region in Saudi Arabia long before the region became the center of Saudi oil discoveries and production. The more oil was discovered and produced in the region, the more intense became the marginalization of the Shiite minority in Sunni Saudi Arabia. This dynamic preceded the Iranian Revolution but intensified as Iran, under the ayatollahs, embarked on a revolutionary and imperialist foreign policy to weaken the Arab states. Its principal targets were Saudi Arabia, the wealthiest Arab state; and Egypt, the most populous and presumably the most powerful.

Nor is it surprising that Nasrallah chose the Ashoura “festivities” (one is speaking of parades of self-flagellating Shiites denoting the oppression visited upon them by the Sunni world) to deliver this threat to Saudi Arabia. No event on the Shiite calendar better evokes the enmity between the two religious strains. Over the past fourteen years, the commemoration of Ashoura has been marred by massive suicide attacks launched by Sunni extremist groups in Iraq’s holy Shiite cities. Iran, the Iraqi government, and many Shiites are convinced that Saudi financial support was crucial in launching these attacks and subsequent massacres as individuals in the crowds crushed each other as they attempted to flee the scene.

Iran is declaring a quid pro quo: if Saudi Arabia participates in the partitioning of Shiite-dominated Iraq by supporting the Kurds, Iran will partition Saudi Arabia. This threat seems to show that Iran has the upper hand in its struggle with the kingdom. It will strike out at Saudi Arabia to defend its proxy, Iraq, not only to defend itself.

This perception is not altogether accurate. No doubt, Iran under the ayatollahs is a formidable regime despite regular pronouncements by experts of its impending demise. Yet as strong as the regime may be, the Persian ethnic and linguistic element that is at the core of the regime accounts for only half the population of Iran. Throughout its periphery live linguistic and ethnic minorities, including a Kurdish minority in the northwest of the country, which have shown in the past an inclination for autonomy if not a clear desire for independence.

Nevertheless, Iran is in the stronger position because with regard to the Kurdish issue at least, it has a powerful Sunni ally in Turkey. For the Saudis, playing the Kurdish card comes at the great cost of dividing the Sunni camp. The Turks are livid over the Kurdish move. The Egyptian elite, who champion territorial sovereignty because of Egypt's domestic Coptic problem (which has drawn international meddling), is cool if not hostile to Kurdish independence. This leaves Saudi Arabia in a solitary standoff against Iran. The kingdom might have money, but so does Iran – and Iran has many more guns and men to shoot them. In the Middle East, it is usually the guns that count.

The new higher stakes in the Saudi-Iranian conflict have wide implications. For the US, this should mean greater resolve to contain if not punish Iran. For Israeli policy makers, it should bring home that the Middle East is becoming more volatile, dangerous, and unpredictable. Caution is called for, which should include treading very carefully on the Palestinian issue.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family