

Out in the Open: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Execution of Sheik Nimr al-Nimr

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BINOY KAMPMARK, JAN 25 2016

In the opening days of January 2016 the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia signaled its intentions on various captives convicted of terrorist related charges. It announced, rather blandly, that it had executed Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and various members of the Shiite community. All in all, 47 made the list, most of whom were al-Qaeda members and purported associates. It was a process carried out, according to a statement of the Saudi Interior Ministry, after much 'reason, moderation and dialogue' (Press TV, 2016).

The executions took place, however, against individuals with varying records. Many may well have had links to al-Qaeda. The action, however, signaled a direct political move on the part of Riyadh to poke Tehran in what has become a long standing proxy war between the two powers.

In particular, the execution of the Shiite cleric al-Nimr brought the proxy warring out in the most overt way to date. Iran treated it virtually as an act of war. Saudi Arabia, treating the reaction from Tehran with similar gravitas, severed relations with the Iranian state, a move that was followed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Sudan. The following overview considers, to that end, the importance of this continuing proxy conflict, and how this next stage brings the opponents into a dangerously open confrontation that threatens regional security even further. It suggests that both states, as leading representatives of respective Islamic religious faiths (Shia in case of Iran; Sunni in case of Saudi Arabia), face a dangerous internationalisation of their grievances that transcend territorial self-interests.

The Shia Crescent

The emergence of the Iranian Republic in 1979 after the religious revolution that deposed the Shah, heavy with a particularly militant brand of Shia Islam, placed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on notice. Western powers had lost an ally; Saudi Arabia had gained a new enemy. Geopolitical rivalry seemed imminent.

In 2004, King Abdullah II of Jordan expressed his alarm at what he considered to be an Iranian stretch of influence across what has been labeled a "Shia Crescent" (The Economist, 2015). The warning was apt in so far as it came in the aftermath of a disastrous US-led invasion of Iraq, which toppled a secular Baathist regime, leaving the road open for sectarian contestation. The change in Iraq was dramatic enough to see a pro-Shia regime installed, much to the chagrin of regional Sunni states.

Tehran's political influence has entailed a range of aggressive moves signalling an intention on its part to transform the political map. In 1981, Bahrain almost witnessed an Iranian-sponsored regime change. This was far from surprising, given the state's majority Shiite population, run by Sunni rulers in the form of the al-Khalifa monarchy. The result of such moves has been an effective use by the regime of an Iranian threat, and that posed by such Shia conservative groups as al-Wefaq, to maintain power. This is beside the point of whether many Bahraini Shiites are even interested in seeking inspiration from Iran's al-Khamenei, who seems to be held in less regard by such figures as Sheikh Isa Qasem than Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani of Iraq (Hiltermann, 2012). The latter, it should be noted, is quietist about political inclinations.

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The creation of a Hezbollah franchise in Hejaz, western Saudi Arabia, suggested that Tehran was willing to take the battle right into the heart of the Kingdom (Mabon, 2015). With the rise of Islamic State, Iran has inserted itself as an indispensable balancing agent in Iraq and Syria, sponsoring what has effectively become a transnational Shia force. In Syria, Tehran, with Moscow, supports the Assad regime, which Western powers and their Sunni allies wish to overthrow. In Iraq, it backs the ground effort by Shia militias against the onslaught of Islamic State.

Saudi Arabia, in contrast, looks more isolated, accused of having closer ties to the Sunni jihadis than they ought to, and being a sponsor of various fundamentalist Sunni groups in the Syrian civil war. Of considerable concern to Riyadh was the diplomatic breakthrough made by the Iranian Republic over its nuclear program last June, one which finally broke the sanctions regime and enables the state to export more oil (Johnson, 2016). Since 2012, Iranian exports were limited to 1 million barrels a day, in contrast to 2.5 million barrels a day prior to the imposition of Western sanctions occasioned by Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Another aspect of the proxy conflict has also opened up in Yemen, where a Shiite rebel force publically supported by Iran remains entrenched after seizing power in 2014. Saudi-led air-attacks have reduced the Yemeni capital to rubble, and it remains a largely under-reported conflict relative to operations taking place in Syria. Furthermore, the Ansar Allah movement, known as the Houthis, has not received anywhere near the support granted Hezbollah (Jafari, 2015).

The Al-Nimr case

Since his violent 2012 arrest in the Saudi Arabian eastern province of Qatif, al-Nimr had become something of a talismanic figure, having openly supported mass anti-government demonstrations in the region in 2011 and expressing open sympathy with fellow Shiites. The lot of the Shiite community in that part has been a disgruntled one, giving the cleric ample room to insist on elections and criticism of the ruling al-Saud family.

The Saudi authorities have been left in a dilemma as to how best to respond. Arresting al-Nimr for the charges of sedition was considered acceptable, but executing him would be another matter. Warnings had been issued by Tehran about the consequences of doing so, making the issue more incendiary than usual.

The execution on January 2 took place alongside various al-Qaeda figures such as Faris al-Shuwail and those involved in a series of lethal attacks between 2003 and 2006. In doing so, the Kingdom was making its position on dissent and disagreement clear. Contentious anti-government rhetoric was to be deemed as dangerous as bombs themselves.

The Sheikh was on public record as being against any violent resolution of grievances in the Kingdom, a position that has been reiterated by some of his close supporters. Prior to his arrest, Sheikh al-Nimr had told the BBC in a 2011 interview that he called for "the roar of the word against authorities rather than weapons... the weapon of the word is stronger than bullets, because authorities will profit from a battle with weapons."

He was also suggesting an alternative structure of religious governance, one that invariably signaled a challenge to the house of al-Saud. Such views will have undoubtedly been influenced by ten years of religious studies in Tehran and a few in Syria. For al-Nimr, governance should be conducted through a process somewhere between that of a single religious leader ('wilayat al-faqih') and consultation, a philosophy of 'shura al-fuqaha' in which a council of religious leaders hold sway (WikiLeaks, 2008).

The execution of Sheik al-Nimr has been interpreted as the killing of a democrat in swaddling clothes. In actual fact, his execution can only be understood against a range of calculations in an ever more violent conflict between Sunni and Shia Islam and their respective chief representatives. To that end, comparisons seeing the cleric as a liberal enlightenment figure, or a democratic revolutionary facing pure authoritarianism offer inaccurate distractions rather than useful analysis. A sense of his worldview can be gathered in a US cable via WikiLeaks from August 2008. It speaks of his opposition to the 'authoritarianism of the reactionary al-Saud regime' and support for 'the people' in any conflict with the authorities (WikiLeaks, 2008).

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It is also hard to go by his open advocacy for 'the right of the Saudi Shia community to seek external assistance if it were to become embroiled in a conflict.' This, accompanied by his open encouragement of the Iranian regime and its nuclear ambitions, was always going to niggle the Saudi authorities. Assistance, in any international law context, comprises a range of responses.

The trial followed the grandest traditions of display over legal substance, an attempt less to redress strict matters of law as those of political expediency. Eyewitnesses, for one, were not called to testify. The authorities were determined to neutralise al-Nimr, finding that he had been responsible for 'foreign meddling'.

Whatever the supposedly peaceful views of the Sheikh, such historical reactions tend to be of the violent sort. The battles against Riyadh are unlikely to be resolved with a mighty pen over a weaker sword. Fearing this exact point, the kingdom deployed hundreds of armoured vehicles to Qatif to quell protests in the aftermath of the executions.

Any such overt confrontation of a Shia position, as it does with that of the Sunni, defies conventional territorial borders rooted in concepts of statist secularity. The diplomatic and security implications of this conflict between Riyadh and Tehran transcend sovereignty, effectively pitting religious camps against each other. In response to the execution of al-Nimr, protests in Shia-dominated states, and Shia communities within Sunni states, were organised with varying degrees of fury. But the move was deemed so perturbing, it also troubled Pakistan's Muslims Unity Assembly, in a country with traditionally strong ties to the Kingdom (PressTV, 2016).

The Bahraini village of Abu Saiba witnessed tear gassing from security forces. The result of this bloody venture has been to enrage the Shiite community in the country while antagonising those outside it as well.

Warnings and unfavourable predictions regarding the al-Saud regime have come in a flurry. Former Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, went so far as to claim that the move would see the regime in Riyadh collapse. In a released statement, al-Maliki insisted that his countrymen 'strongly condemn these detestable sectarian practices that affirm that the crime of executing Sheikh al-Nimr will topple the Saudi regime as the crime of executing the martyr [Muhammad Baqir] al-Sadr did to Saddam' (Sinclair, 2016).

The words of the ever active – some might say iconic – figure of the Shia cleric politician Muqtada al-Sadr was bound to carry even more weight. Having resisted US forces during its Iraqi occupation, al-Sadr's words of condemnation will have purchase in Shiite communities beyond Iraq, including Saudi Arabia itself. In the aftermath of the execution, he insisted that the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) take actions to protect Muslim minorities.

The domino effect of pure indignation continued in other countries with large Shiite representation. Yemen's Houthi Ansar Allah movement deemed al-Nimr a 'holy warrior' whose human rights had suffered a 'flagrant violation' (Press TV, 2016). Hezbollah in Lebanon, which receives active support from Tehran, insisted that the move amounted to an assassination (Press TV, 2016).

Within Iran itself, the Saudi embassy was stormed with Molotov cocktails, with some of the offices being ransacked. The influential strike arm of Tehran's military influence, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, made their position to the execution unmistakably clear via a statement carried by the Mehr news agency. 'A harsh revenge will strike at the Al Saud in the near future and cause the fall of its pro-terrorist, anti-Islamic regime' (Reuters, 2016).

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (2016a) took to Twitter in a rage to suggest that, 'Doubtlessly, unfairly-spilled blood of oppressed martyr #SheikhNimr will affect rapidly & Divine revenge will seize Saudi politicians.' The religious figure also threw in the ultimate provocation, suggesting that any instrumental difference between the ISIS executioner and his Saudi counterpart was minimal. One was merely 'black' as against the other's 'white', a theme that was given graphic illustration on Khamenei's website (Khamenei, 2016b).

The diplomatic freeze then took precedence. Tehran summoned the Saudi ambassador to express its condemnation of the execution, a favour which was returned to Riyadh's Iranian ambassador by, more or less, telling the Iranian

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regime to mind its own business. Diplomatic ties were subsequently lessened, and the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (2016) would make the case a week after the executions that Riyadh's officials were bent on impeding 'normalization' and 'determined to drag the entire region into confrontation.'

The move on the part of Riyadh may well be seen as an attempt to steal a march on recent Iranian gains, one designed, in the words of Alireza Miryousefi, head of Middle Eastern Studies at the Iranian Foreign Ministry's Institute for Political and International Studies, to 'deflect attention from its domestic and regional challenges' (Hasham, 2016). The effects of it, however, have dragged the protagonists out into the open of a broader conflict that will have implications in a range of Middle Eastern states and their local regimes. The spectacle is an ugly one when Muslim factions urge interventions by other states to prevent the oppression of other Muslim factions. But all in all, it remains a political battle of influence with a veneer of religious justifications. At the heart of such confrontations lie very secular interests.

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