

# The United States and the Issue of Iran-Saudi Arabia Rivalry

Written by Sohail Mahmood

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SOHAIL MAHMOOD, JAN 20 2016

Iranian Saudi animosity was deep rooted and goes back centuries to the old Shia-Sunni rivalry over the succession issue of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. The differences between the Shias and Sunnis are more a matter of style than theology and these differences have become pronounced in the contemporary period because of many factors, primarily political. The extremists on both sides view the others as heretics. Overall today the Sunnis are in a very large majority in the Islamic world, while the Shias are a very small minority. Iran assumes itself to be the leader of the world Shias and the promotion of their interests is a foundation of the Islamic republic's ideology. Similarly, Saudi Arabia is the custodian of the Holy Kaaba in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, considered to be the two holiest mosques. It is also considered to be the bastion of Sunni Islam. Saudi Arabia believed that it was the base of the Islamic world's leadership, while Iran objects to the Saudi rule as being antithetical to Islam. However, the old rivalry between the two sects wasn't the primary reason of the Iranian Saudi animosity. The reason of the recent escalations was the regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia for regional domination. Contemporary Iran was a theocracy while Saudi Arabia a monarchy. The competition for regional influence had resulted in a broad conflict on a number of issues – ranging from religion, to oil policy, to support for opposing regional groups, and relations with the United States. Saudi Arabia had maintained a close relationship with the United States while Iran had ended relations with it after the 1979 revolution. After the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the empowerment of the Iraqi Shias and subsequent growth of Iranian influence at the cost of Iraqi Sunnis, sectarian regional alliances and sectarianism had escalated. Iran and Saudi Arabia had competed for regional dominance and had frequently clashed in proxy arenas such as Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. Iran and Saudi Arabia were rivals for influence in the region and are engaged in a proxy war stretching across the region, they are increasingly competitive over the leadership of Islam itself. Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran's rivalry goes back centuries to the rivalry of Shia and Sunni Islam. In the contemporary period the Saudi Kingdom was an important Western ally and was supported by successive Western governments. Saudi Arabia had vast oil wealth and was a reliable customer of Western goods, including military equipment.

Recently, the rivalry had taken an ugly turn. The Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al Nimr was among the forty-seven people executed on January 2, 2016. Nimr's execution had resulted in Shia protests in several countries of the region. He was a fierce critic of the Saudi rulers and had once even advocated the establishment of a separate Shia state in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia which had a large Shia population. Iran had quickly promised revenge for the execution and so did the Shia Houthis in Yemen. After the execution of Nimr protesters in Tehran responded by torching part of the Saudi Embassy. On January 3, 2016, Saudi Arabia severed ties with Iran. Several other countries, like Bahrain, Sudan and the UAE, followed Saudi Arabia's lead and either downgraded or severed their relations with Iran. The development was seen as "a dangerous escalation of the rivalry with potential implications for the peace process in Syria and the ongoing conflict in Yemen". In response to a breakdown of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia that had brought in other regional countries into the rivalry, Saudi Arabia had requested an emergency Arab League[1] meeting which had met very recently. The Arab League released a statement after the meeting which "condemned" Iranian attacks on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran and maintained that it was Iran that "purposefully acts in contrary to peaceful objectives and is fomenting sectarian tension between Shiite and Sunni Muslims in the Middle East". The Arab League statement was endorsed by every member nation except Lebanon, which was a majority-Shia country. United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister

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Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed AlNahyan declared that “Iran doesn’t have qualms and doesn’t hesitate to use the sectarian card as a way to dominate the region and interfere in the internal affairs of Arab countries”. Nabil al-Araby, secretary-general of the Arab League had said that the organization “won’t accept Iranian intervention in the Arab region and sowing sectarian strife said following the meeting”. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir had declared that “Saudi Arabia and the Arab world have reached a point where we need to say ‘enough,’” he said, and continued “if Iran wants to play a positive role in the region then it must deal with its neighbors based on the principle of good neighborliness.” Very recently Al-Jubeir had also chaired a meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Riyadh to discuss Iran, and the GCC maintained that it would “support action to prevent Iran from meddling in the affairs of Arab nations.”

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia was also commanding an Arab coalition in Yemen against Houthi rebels supported by Iran. Nearly 6,000 people had been killed since the Saudi-led coalition began bombing Yemen in March 2015, about half of them civilians. Undoubtedly, the war was an ill-conceived adventure of the Saudis and the Gulf States. After all, their strategic partner and strong ally Pakistan did not join the coalition to the utter surprise and dismay of their Gulf Arab brothers. The war in Yemen has caused large destruction in the country and had had resulted in grave human rights violations, as per international watchdog agencies and the United Nations. An editorial in the Independent stated that Saudi Arabia was the source of most of the current problems between the Sunnis and the Shias. The latest aggravations had come from Saudis Arabia because of the recent JCPOA- the last year’s nuclear deal to curb Iran’s nuclear ambitions in exchange for sanctions relief. The agreement was the first and most critical step in the possible improved relations between the West and Iran. The Saudis didn’t like it and thus the inflaming up of tensions grows from that development. The cruellest display of the changed behaviour of Saudi Arabia was its ruthless war against Shia Houthi rebels in Yemen. However, the Saudis need to be convinced that their very survival was dependent in changing their behaviour and the gory aggravations instigated by the new king must end. Saudi Arabia and Iran were indulged in an unprecedented blame game. Very recently, the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif blamed Saudi Arabia for destabilizing the Middle East. The accusation was immediately repudiated by Arab League countries who argued that it was Iran which responsible for seeding sectarian conflict. Zarif said that Saudi Arabia had guilty of the heightened regional conflict because it was fearful that Iran’s normalizing ties with the world would expose its vigorous patronage of vicious extremism. He said that very recent JCPOA brought the hope that the world would be free to be attentive to the serious challenge of extremism that was destroying the region. Zarif further said that Saudi Arabia only continue to hinder the normalization but was resolute in its efforts to drag down the region into a conflict. Zarif maintained that Saudi Arabia has long fostered “Iran phobia” and desired to wreck the nuclear deal because it portends to normalize relations between Iran and the world. The final agreement reached recently had begun a new era of cooperation between Iran and the United States, and Saudi Arabia was fearful it would bring Iran closer to the United States at the its cost. Zarif argued that the Saudi strategy meant to disrupt the nuclear agreement and aggravate regional tension has three elements: directly irritating Iran, pressurizing the West; stimulating regional volatility through conducting war in Yemen and backing extremism. Zarif declared that Iran’s sensible control had thus far avoided from taking action against Saudi Arabia even with these incidents.

The Saudi-Iran row is going to get worse very soon. How can the tension be reduced to avoid a real crisis in the making? Is a sectarian conflict going to get worse now? Who is to be blamed for the recent problems?

Many blame Iran for the troubles and point out the Iranian fingerprints over many incidents of terrorism. For example, Hezbollah had attacked on the United States Air Force personnel in 1995 in which 19 Americans were killed. The Hezbollah group in Saudi Arabia was connected to the parent Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran supports the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

In a policy brief Henderson “Saudi-Iranian Diplomatic Crisis Threatens U.S. Policy” Simon Henderson argued on January 4, 2016 that the US needed to quickly attempt to thwart a full-blown diplomatic clash with military dimensions. The United States had looked as being not only indecisive and unwilling to confront Iran but also as being feeble to its Gulf allies. In December 2015 Saudi Arabia formed a grand coalition of Muslim states to fight the Islamic State (IS). The move by Saudi Arabia aligns itself to thinking by the United States that a Sunni Muslim military force was the paramount method of opposing and eventually eliminating he IS. The United States would

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provide the coalition with intelligence and logistical assistance.

Previously, Saudi Arabia had been assisting fighters trying to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria. However, the bilateral relationship between United States and Saudi Arabia was now under great stress and perhaps review, at least in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the United States must take action quickly to decrease the tension in the Persian Gulf. The United States should assure Saudi Arabia of its backing by preventing Iranian troublemaking more openly and strongly.

Boot argued that the United States had not penalized the Assad regime in Syria which was guilty of crimes against humanity. Meanwhile, after the JCPOA Iran knew that it could do anything and not endure any costs. Therefore, Iran was precisely doing that which was producing a very dangerous precedent for the future. The shocking loss of credibility of the United States meant that in future the country would have a hard time restoring its deterrent power and persuading Iran not to secretly engage in its nuclear ambitions. As the value of American security guarantees weaken, Saudi Arabia was pushing back against the Iranian threat in its own unsophisticated fashion, for example by executing a Shiite trouble maker and by bombing Houthi rebels in Yemen. In short, it meant that the Middle East would continue to become more perilous and more antagonistic to the interests of the United States.

What does this all mean?

In reality both Iran and Saudi Arabia must be blamed for the troubles. Saudi Arabia was a medieval kingdom seemingly obsessed with religion and trampling human rights and Iran was also a medieval theocratic state trampling human rights. The Shia government has persecuted Sunni Baluchis bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan. Over the decades the Islamic regime in Iran has persecuted Kurds bordering Turkey. Iran has also supported Shia proxies in various places like Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain and Pakistan. In Pakistan it has supported the Shia Tehrani Nifas i Fiqah i Jafria (TNFJ) which has opposed Sunni majority interpretation of Islam. On the other hand, the Saudi rulers have supported the extremist Sunni entities fighting the Shia extremists. The proxy war has lasted for decades.

Undoubtedly, the January 2 executions had signaled Saudi Arabia's increasing anxiety over instability. The Saudi monarchy faced challenges from several directions, including economy. The Kingdom faced a high deficit of \$98 billion in 2015 and also a drop in foreign exchange reserves from \$728 billion to \$640 billion. Saudi Arabia's regional assertiveness had also presented a threat to the country's future. Spending on defense and security, had grown from 7% of GDP in 2012 to 10% in 2015, and was set to rise again in 2016. Meanwhile, there had been a collapse in the price of oil, from \$115 a barrel in 2014 to below \$35 which had resulted in a large budget deficit of 15% of GDP. Saudi Arabia's foreign reserves had fallen by \$100 billion, to \$650 billion. It was argued Saudi Arabia's public finances were sustainable for only a few years, even with a minimal debt of 5% of GDP.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's quest of a new alliance was proving costly. The Saudis had recently promised \$8 billion for Egypt. Saudi Arabia was conducting a full-scale war in Yemen, which had gone on longer than originally thought. It was also financing a proxy war in Syria. Yet, some people wanted to see Saudi Arabia stand up powerfully for Sunnis against Shia Iran which was considered as an element of the solution to the jihadists' evil ideology.

The Saudi actions of late don't seem to be moved by ideology and are born of compulsion. The conjunction of a geopolitical crisis, a "hyperactive" prince, and a fall in oil prices afford a unique chance to transform the country. The times indicate that the post-colonial Arab state system is surprisingly dysfunctional and that advanced grave reservations on the capacity of Saudi Arabia's ability to transform. However, Saudi Arabia had little choice in the matter as its very survival might depend on reform.

The US must take initiative through quiet diplomacy and avoiding the media glare. Quickly move to signal both that tensions will destabilize the region. The US must seek support of allies on this issue. Get the UK, France, Gulf states, Turkey, and Pakistan on board. Only proactive diplomacy can defuse tension now. Also, employ the good offices of the UN Secretary General and top EU foreign affairs personnel. Only the US can do it. The US cannot take sides in a historic Shia-Sunni dispute at all. The US has to have leverage and influence on Iran. It should gain this by

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recognizing the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is for starters. Iran has to come out from its isolation now. The US recognizes many countries in the world with which it has serious differences. The aim is to gain some leverage to influence Iran. The Iran nuclear deal was an important first step in the direction.

Notwithstanding any misconception by Saudis, the regime in Iran must be recognized as it is essential for the US to conduct diplomacy with it. The US doesn't have to tilt towards Iran at all. Just recognize that the time has come to open up relations with Iran. After all, the Obama administration, to its credit, worked very hard to get the nuclear deal signed recently. It is now right to take the further step and recognize the Islamic Republic.

To allay Saudi fears, the US must indirectly support the Kingdom through support of the new large Muslim countries alliance the Saudis just announced. The US can, and should, move through allies like Turkey and Pakistan to support Saudi defense. The US can provide some defense equipment and training to the new alliance setup, if and when it is up and kicking. The point is to stay neutral and engage both discreetly. It requires quick action.

Can Russia be included?

Russia is close to Iran but distant with Saudi Arabia. Given the seriousness of the matter, all are welcome to pitch in. However, the key is to have neutral facilitators. In sum, neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran are any models of good governance, rule of law, constitutional rule, respect for human rights. Therefore, it would be unwise to openly support either of the two countries. The United States doesn't want to be dragged in serious and deep conflicts in the region yet again. Iraq and Afghanistan wars are fresh in the minds of the American public. The Syrian crisis has made Iran an unlikely ally because of its enmity with the IS. It is best to remain neutral, at least outwardly. Meanwhile, the US is seemingly reluctant to intervene despite calls for taking sides with the Saudi against the Iranian regime. It is best to engage with both to defuse tensions. The United States, along with Turkey and Pakistan, act quietly behind the scenes to defuse tension. It would be inappropriate for the Obama administration to come out openly against Iran or to even openly support the Saudis. A cautious approach is required. In sum, the appropriate role for the United States would be to stay neutral officially and to try to facilitate a rapprochement between the two rivals through back channel diplomacy.

The Muslim world has its own international organization – the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) which can be utilized for the purpose of a third party facilitation. Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Pakistan can become the force behind such a move. The Secretary General of the OIC can initiate a bit of shuttle diplomacy to organize a special conference for the purpose of finding a solution to the crisis. Pakistan was a likely candidate as it had relations with both countries and didn't join the Arab coalition against Yemen, despite the insistence of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-Pakistan relations are deep undoubtedly and yet close to Iran also. Pakistan can be assisted by Turkey in this important task. However, the only country with real clout remains the United States. Therefore, the United States must take the lead on stabilizing the region. The United States must act quickly now to defuse the situation. A safer and stable Middle East makes the world a safer place.

## Notes

[1] A 22-nation bloc of Arab countries that aims to promote cooperation in the Middle East.

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## About the author:

**Sohail Mahmood** is an independent political analyst and the author of several books, monographs and research articles on Middle East and South Asian politics, governance and development issues. He has taught for about 30 years in various universities of Pakistan and US and has worked as a consultant for the World Bank, CIDA, SDC, IUCN and UNDP. Sohail is based in Raleigh, NC.

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