

Iran vs. Saudi Arabia: What a Pity Only One Side Can Lose

Who will be the dominant power in the Middle East: Sunni Saudi Arabia or Shia Iran? The theological divide between the two versions of Islam, now 1,400 years old, is unbridgeable.

About 85 percent of the world's Muslims are Sunnis. Only Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain, have a Shia majority.

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy ruled by the Sunni Saud family, currently Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, in which 90 percent of the population is Sunni. Saudi Arabia is custodian of Islam's two holiest sites at Mecca and Medina, and the site of the annual pilgrimage of the world's Muslims. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, 95 percent of citizens is Shia.


Coupled with this theological divide between the two countries are five other factors: tension between an absolute monarchy and a ruthless Islamic republic, struggle for political hegemony in the Middle East, the historic conflict between Arabs and Persians, the Iranian interest in nuclear weapons, and the dramatic decline in the price of oil.

A familiar spectacle in the Middle East is of angry mobs taking pleasure in killing those they dislike and in destroying the property of foreigners. Israel has long suffered from this, and so has the United States. A disgraceful low point was the event in 1979, when a mob in Iran took 52 U.S. diplomats hostage for 444 days. Even more disgraceful is that the anniversary of the event is still a day for national celebration in Tehran. Britain also suffered when in 2011 its Embassy in Tehran was ransacked, leading Britain to expel all Iranian diplomats in its country.

Yet even in the violent and tumultuous Middle East, the beheading by Saudi Arabia in early January 2016 of 47 men,

including the Shiite cleric Nemer al-Nemer (aka Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr) for alleged terrorism, and the consequent violence by Iranians, storming and burning the Saudi embassy in Tehran, and attacking the Saudi consular offices in the city of Mashhad, was startling.

The immediate Saudi response was to break diplomatic relations with Iran and suspend air and commercial links between the two countries. There are no innocents in the story. For years, Sheikh Nemer, a disciple of Ayatollah Khomeini, has been calling the state of Saudi Arabia illegitimate, and he was one of the leaders of an armed terrorist group in the east part of the country.

Of course, both of the two regimes, fundamentalist Islamic,  are violent and intolerant. However, Saudi Arabia has been protected by the West because of its oil resources. It is a sick joke, and thus appropriate that the Saudis have the chair of the absurd U.N. Human Rights Council. Neither side is innocent about inflicting death on non-believers. Saudi Arabia was responsible, by beheadings and firing squad, for 158 executions during 2015, while Iran, using hanging, according to estimates of Amnesty International, executed 743 in 2014, and more than 850 in 2015. Iran is world-famous for stoning adulterers and repressing dissent.

Are the two countries at war? Are they sleepwalking toward conflict, as did the Great Powers in Europe in 1914? The two sides do confront each other in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. But they are unlikely to repeat the historic European experience of the bloody struggle between Catholics and Protestants for territory and converts. It was gratifying that the Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, condemned the violence as “totally unjustifiable.”

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia, and also Bahrain and Sudan, did cut diplomatic ties with Iran. The Saudis and Iran are already fighting a proxy war on opposite sides in the Yemen

civil war between the recognized government and the Houthi rebels. They differ on Syria, where Iran is supporting the regime of President Assad while Saudi Arabia is supporting some of the Sunni groups who are fighting Assad. They differ on the price of oil. Saudi Arabia is maintaining its oil production, producing an oil glut that has led to oil prices currently being less than \$40 a barrel. Saudi Arabia so far can afford the cut even if it reduces spending and energy subsidies, but Iran cannot.

Iran has been acting in a belligerent fashion in general. It fired rockets close to the U.S. aircraft carrier *USS Truman*, though President Barack Obama did not admit that it had happened and did not react to it. Many will now agree that the nuclear deal with Iran has led it to be more aggressive. Iran is violating United Nations resolutions that ban it from testing ballistic missiles. Iran has conducted two such tests since July 2015 with missiles that can deliver nuclear weapons, and it is now obvious that it is accelerating its missile program. This acceleration will be strengthened after Iran, according to the nuclear agreement, receives \$100 billion in frozen assets.

Again, the Obama administration has been unclear on the issue. On Wednesday December 28, 2015, the president told Congress the U.S. would target some Iranian companies and people responsible for the ballistic missile program. A day later, he changed his mind and said sanctions would be delayed.

One thing is clear. A terrible bargain, one of the worst alliances in history, was made in the 18th century between the founder, Muhammad ibn abd al-Wahhab, of an extremist version of Islam and the then-ruler, Muhammad ibn Saud, of a part of Arabia. Saudi Arabia exploited Wahhabism in order to control the holy places of Mecca and Medina. In turn, Saudi Arabia has used its vast income from oil to spread the Wahhabist version of Islam throughout the world. The world is now

familiar with this aggressive Islamist point of view, one of excommunicating apostates; influencing or controlling education, law, and social affairs, enforced by a religious police force; and waging violent jihad against non-believers.

No end of the conflict between the two countries is in sight.

The Arab League may call an extraordinary session to discuss the issue but is unlikely to take action. Again President Vladimir Putin has stepped in, and Russia has volunteered to be an intermediary, though this will not be accepted.

Secretary of State John Kerry has limited the U.S. role to calling for diplomatic engagement and direct conversation to calm tensions.

No one wants the United States to be involved in any conflict between the two Islamic powers. What the Obama administration should do is to begin considering immediately its nuclear deal with Iran – and cancel it before Iran becomes too strong.

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