

# Sunnis and Shi'a at the OK Corral

by Hugh Fitzgerald

From [al-Arabiya](#):

*A senior leader of the Iranian army has mocked Gulf Arab states for their disappointment in Syria and threatened that after the victory in Aleppo it would be the turn of places such as Bahrain, Yemen and Iraq's Mosul.*

*"The people of Bahrain will get their wish, the people of Yemen will be happy and the residents of Mosul will taste victory," the deputy commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, General, Hossein Salami, told his country's IRNA news agency. "All of this is God's promise."*

In announcing the retaking of Aleppo, by Assad's Alawites, with considerable help from Iran and from the Lebanese Hizballah, as well as from much smaller contingents of Shi'a from Afghanistan and Pakistan (two countries where the Shi'a have long been the object of murderous attacks by the majority Sunnis), the Iranian commander General Hossein Salami made clear that the victory in Syria would embolden Iran everywhere in the Middle East to further "conquests."

In Bahrain, the Shi'a are 70% of the population, and have been engaged for several years in a low-level revolt against the rule of the Sunni Al Khalifa family. The Ruler of Bahrain, Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa, has managed so far to suppress his Shi'a subjects by relying mainly on Saudi financial support and on Pakistani mercenaries. But if Salami's prediction that "the people of Bahrain will get their wish" was meant to signal that Iranian intervention could be expected, then a real war, between Iranian soldiers supported by the local

Shi'a population of Bahrain and the Sunni ruler with his Pakistani Sunni troops, could erupt.

Bahrain is geopolitically important. It is connected by a 16-mile causeway to the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, where almost all of that country's Shi'a are to be found. Shi'a are 10% of the total Saudi population, but 33% of the population in the Eastern Province. And, also important, almost all the Saudi oil comes from that Eastern Province. The Shi'a in that province have long been oppressed by the Wahhabis, discriminated against in education, in employment, in the religious practices they are permitted to publicly engage in. In every area of Saudi life, there is a glass ceiling for the Shi'a. And most disturbing of all for them, according to Freedom House, is that Saudi textbooks "promote an ideology of hatred toward people, including Muslims, who do not subscribe to the Wahhabi sect of Islam," with Shi'a Muslims presented as not real Muslims at all. It was the Shi'a cleric Nimr al-Nimr who in 2009 suggested that the Eastern Province should secede if the Saudi government did not cease to oppress and discriminate against its Shi'a. Taking no chances, the Saudi government executed Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016. Were Iranian forces, their appetites whetted by the part they played in the victory in Syria, to land on Bahrain for a similar "conquest" which, with Iran just across the Gulf, would not be impossible logistically, Saudi anxiety would go sky-high, not just at the loss of Bahrain itself, but also from the fear that a takeover of Bahrain by Iranian troops would embolden the Saudi Shi'a. Riots, or even an open revolt, by the Shi'a in the oil-rich Eastern Province, is always a worry, or rather, is the Saudis' worst nightmare.

Yet here is Brigadier General Hossein Salami, claiming that after the retaking of Aleppo, the "people of Bahrain will get their wish." So far, Iran has made good on its threats, intervening in both Iraq and Syria on the side of Shi'a. And as we all know, it recently pocketed a deal made with the

Obama Administration that did nothing to dissuade it from its aggressive behavior. Is Salami's prediction of more Shi'a victories merely the bravado of a braggart warrior, or a real threat? The Gulf Arab countries have reacted swiftly and angrily; they aren't treating the threat as idle.

Let's suppose that Salami means it, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards were to invade Bahrain, on the pretext of rescuing the largely Shi'a population from an oppressive Sunni ruler. The Saudis would have to respond, and one assumes the deep-pocketed Saudi government would hire as many Pakistani (Sunni) mercenaries as Pakistan's army can spare, sending them to Bahrain to counter the Iranians. And other Saudi forces could reinforce security in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The Iranians, whose anger at the Saudis has been steadily building (last year the Iranian government refused to allow Iranian pilgrims to make the hajj as a sign of their displeasure with Saudi Arabia as Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques), now have troops recently battle-hardened from fighting in both Syria and Iraq, and flush with victory in Aleppo, will not allow themselves to be defeated and humiliated by those who are paid by the hated Wahhabis, the very ones who regard the Shi'a as "the worst kind of Infidels." Compromise is not possible, given the depth of hatred; with parties so evenly matched, the struggle over Bahrain could go on for a very long time.

Hossein Salami also threatened to strengthen the Shi'a campaign in Yemen. Yemen is almost evenly divided between the Sunnis, who are 55%, and the Shi'a, who are 45%, of the population. Largely unnoticed by the great world, the Shi'a Houthis have steadily managed to conquer much of Yemen, despite a Saudi-led coalition of Sunni troops, and constant indiscriminate bombardment by the Saudi Air Force, of Houthi soldiers *and* civilians. The fighting continues, with Iran having delivered weaponry to the Houthis by sea, but not yet sending troops. Salami's statement suggests that men, as well

as materiel, may be sent. As with Bahrain, the Saudis simply cannot afford to have their southern flank in the hands of Shi'a supported by Iran. This means that the Saudis will likely keep raising their force level in Yemen in response to Iran's sending of soldiers (the threat implied by Hossein Salami when he announced that "the people of Yemen will be happy"). And a low-level military conflict will become steadily ever bigger, with both sides stuck to this Tarbaby Yemen, and neither side wanting to, or being able to, arrive at a compromise.

In the world of Islam, you end up as Victor or Vanquished. Iran has now publicly stated its intentions and signaled its determination to win further victories for the Shi'a in Bahrain, Yemen, and Iraq (Mosul). Saudi Arabia has not only used its own airmen (a first for the Saudis) for an extensive bombing campaign in Yemen, but has organized support for Yemen's Sunnis from a coalition of Sunni powers, including Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. Neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia is in a mood to back down or to let the Yemenis themselves decide their fate. The conflict has taken on a life of its own.

As for the Houthis, having won so much territory in Yemen, with very little outside support (the Iranians have sent supplies by sea, and one abortive attempt by air, but no Iranian troops appear to have yet fought in Yemen), they see no reason at this point to compromise. They've remained steadfast under the relentless Saudi-led bombing campaign (enduring many civilian casualties) and whatever else local Sunnis, and that coalition of eight Sunni countries, has managed to throw at them. And now, with Hossein Salami's triumphalist remark, one assumes that direct Iranian support – including soldiers – will be extended to Yemen. The Houthis can now expect not just more weaponry but also Iranian soldiers, and possibly members of Hizballah, too, both flush with their victories in Syria. Having tried, in the past, to

persuade Sunnis to treat them as full-fledged orthodox Muslims, and failed, and then having had to endure their excommunication from Islam by Sunni *takfirs*, the Iranians appear ready to establish that Shi'ite "crescent" that has been a deep Sunni worry for years and now, at last, appears being much closer to achievement. But Iran's position could blow up if, for example, Egypt were to send soldiers to Yemen, as a way of winning Saudi favor and money. After all, it has happened before; Nasser sent troops to Yemen for several years in the 1960s. At that time they were fighting *against* the Saudis. This is, after all, the Muslim Middle East.

What should the West, what should the United States do, in such circumstances? It should do absolutely nothing, but pull up a chair, and watch the spectacle unfold, and secretly wish that it might go on forever. Iran's threat to the U.S. is real, but attacking the U.S. is not first on Tehran's To-Do List, despite all the chants of "Death-To-America." First is countering the threat to Shi'a in lands dominated by Sunnis. Let the Iranians go on the offensive, and expend men, money and materiel *pari passu* with what the Saudis, and their coalition of lesser Sunni powers, are throwing into the fight to keep the Shi'a down in near Bahrain and far Yemen. Let those fights continue, as they will, without any need for Western involvement or encouragement. If the Saudis and other Arabs want to take the fight to Iran itself, there is always the southern Iranian province of Khuzistan to target, where 90% of Iran's oil is produced, a province peopled mainly by ethnic Arabs, who have been suffering from discrimination by the Iranian government, and rose in revolt, swiftly put down, in 1979. Thus it's a place where the possibility of outside Arab intervention must fill the Iranians with the same kind of anxiety as they've been giving the Saudis over the Shi'a in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have large and restive minorities (Arabs among Persians in Khuzistan, Shi'a among Sunnis in the Eastern Province) in their respective oil-producing regions. Right now, it appears

that the Iranian threat to Saudi Arabia is greater than that of Saudi Arabia to Iran. Because of the retaking of Aleppo, Iran is in a triumphalist phase, and sounding particularly aggressive, which is fine, as long as the target of that aggression remains Sunni Arabs.

The important thing for the American government is not whether the Shi'a win over here, or the Sunnis prevail over there. It is, rather, that it is highly desirable that both sides keep fighting each other, with no end in sight, and with each side continuing to pour greater assets of all kinds into the fight. We want Muslim enemies to become stuck in the waste of war, to endure what the European powers endured in the endless trench warfare of World War I. The Iran-Iraq War used up the aggressive energies of both Khomeini's Iran and Saddam Hussein's Iraq for eight full years (1980-1988); it was a war that, from the viewpoint of Infidels, should have gone on much longer. Now the Sunni-Shi'a conflicts in Yemen and Bahrain, in eastern Syria and western Iraq (both with swathes of territory even now under the control of Islamic State *takfiris*, anathematizing the Shi'a who make up the majority of the population in both countries), can have the same effect as the Iran-Iraq War did, consuming the men, money, and materiel of Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two Muslim powers that are now, in different ways, most dangerous to the West.

We should be able to recognize that if we leave the Muslim states of the Middle East to their own wretched devices, and do nothing to discourage (nor to too obviously encourage) their internecine conflicts, the civilized world can only benefit. The Sunni-Shi'a conflict has no logical endpoint, and though the Shi'a are only 10-13% of the world's Muslim population, in the Middle East itself the two sects are much more evenly matched, with Shi'a comprising 95% of Iranians and 60-65% of Iraqis and 45% of Yemenis, making it possible that the war between Sunni and Shi'a in that region will go on for a long time – if not exactly forever, then for a reasonable

facsimile thereof. And a war that uses up Muslim assets and Muslim energies and Muslim attention *on both sides* is a Good Thing. We don't have a dog in their fight. Our dog *is* their fight.

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