

The Obama Administration and the New Cold War

The Cold War has returned in a new form, not between the United States and Russia, but between the two countries, Saudi Arabia and Iran, now epitomizing the historic rift between Sunni and Shia Islam. They are engaged in a struggle for geopolitical hegemony of the Middle East, as well as the rivalry over the different versions of Islam and appeals to jihadist activity.

However, unlike the former Cold War that lasted until the fall of the Soviet Union, which was limited to two ideological blocs that did not engage in military conflict, this new Cold War involves not only other Muslim Middle East parties, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Hizb'allah in Lebanon, and ISIS, busy with wars and terrorist activities, but also outside powers in various ways.

The key problem is that the U.S. administration is not one of those countries exhibiting any meaningful leadership in the Middle East. In his interview with Tom Friedman on April 5, 2015, President Barack Obama defined his doctrine concerning Iran and the contemplated nuclear deal as "we will engage but we preserve all our capabilities."

It is not easy to understand this opaque statement, but no engagement took place at the moment of truth. On October 10, 2015 and again in November, Iran violated international law agreements by conducting tests of ballistic missile capable of delivering a nuclear warhead. President Obama had said, regarding such tests, that the U.S. reserved the ability "to snap back sanctions (on Iran) if they violated their agreement on tests.

Though the imposition of sanctions on Iran was suggested by

the U.S. Treasury Department in early January 2016, on the eleven individuals and facilities developing a ballistic missile program in spite of UN declarations, the Obama administration took no action, engaging in a form of benign neglect. The administration must be concerned that a number of Democratic Party members of Congress on January 6, 2016 called for sanctions to be imposed, and declared that Iran must be held accountable for its support of terrorism.

The dissenting Democrats might have gone even further in two other ways. One is opposing the decision of the International Atomic Energy Agency, though it had been denied inspection of Iran's key military sites, to close its file on Iran's nuclear program. The other was to respond to the provocative and impertinent statement of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that imposition of sanctions against Iran because of its ballistic missile tests would violate the nuclear agreement.

Obama has stated that the nuclear deal with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was a potential expression of a different kind of U.S. relationship with Iran. It is one thing to argue for a more fruitful conversation with Iran but in view of Iranian belligerence that conversation is not a once in a lifetime opportunity. Fruitful conversation depends on whether Iran is expanding its missile program in terms of range and accuracy, and even being close to building a nuclear weapon.

Perilous as their relationship is, there is something enticing and amusing in the current tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran and in the rhetoric and arguments used by both sides. This is particularly the case as the Iranian Supreme Leader invokes "divine revenge" against the enemy Saudi Arabia for its execution of a Shia cleric.

Even the absurd UN Human Rights Council would not consider Iran as a paragon of virtue and morality, especially when

remembering its execution of more than 1,000 people in 2015. One can therefore not appreciate the extent of the Iranian revulsion at the seemingly inexplicable execution by the Saudis of the Shite cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, as well as 46 others, which led a mob to burn the Saudi Embassy in Teheran.

Even more pertinent, the Iranian mob, apparently helped in its vicious activity by the Iranian police, did not understand that only 4 of the 47 executed were Shia, and the rest were Sunni terrorists mostly linked to al-Qaeda. Nor did not they heed the Saudi claim that the Shia Nimr was inciting terrorism.

We need a political Casey Stengel with a scorecard to sort out the positions of the players in the new Cold War in the Middle East today, and who is playing on what team in order that a suitable U.S. policy might be formulated. During the failed Arab spring of 2011, the majority Shia population in Bahrain protested against the minority Sunni government. However, the attempt to overthrow King Al Khalifa, probably fostered by Iran, failed as forces of Saudi Arabia helped end the protests.

Iran is supposedly divided between hard liners and moderate reformers with whom President Hassan Rouhani is said to be aligned. The burning of the embassy was an opportunity for hardliners to embarrass the supposedly more moderate president.

Iraq did not voice approval of the Saudi execution. Yet the Iraqi Shia Badr Organization, led by Hadi al-Amiri who fought with Iran against his own country in the war between the two countries, is backed by Iran, and has been, or is said to be, fighting ISIS. One problem here is that if the Shia majority in Iraq uses violence against minority Sunnis that group in response might begin helping ISIS.

Conflict between the Saudis and Iran extends to Syria and Yemen. Shia Iran supports the Alawite regime of President Bashar Assad, derivative from Shia Islam. The Assad regime is opposed by rebels, mostly drawn from the majority Sunni population who are getting support from Sunni Saudi Arabia and Sunni Gulf countries.

In Yemen, Zaydi Shia Houthis, linked to former President Al Abdullah Saleh, and backed by Iran are fighting the regime of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi that is supported by a Sunni coalition of Saudi Arabia and other states.

What explains the Saudi execution of the Shia cleric? One can argue that it was the result of Saudi frustration and anger at the nuclear deal with Iran, and the absence of American leadership. The Saudi king, who has only occupied the office for a year, and other Saudi officials are now acting in a stronger, more assertive fashion, both in foreign policy and in their own defense against terrorism. In December 2015, Riyadh suggested the formation, unlikely though it is, of a coalition of 34 Muslim members to fight ISIS and terrorism.

This gesture is a response to the Obama policy that the regional powers in the Middle East must carry more of the burden of responsibilities. The U.S. has long held friendly relations with the Saudis. The question must now be raised whether the Obama administration is leaning towards Iran. Noticeably, the U.S. State Department has called on Riyadh not to exacerbate sectarian tensions. Yet the danger is that the Cold War between Riyadh and Teheran may develop into a hot one. Worst of all, if Iran continues its nuclear program and makes a bomb, Saudi Arabia may pursue one of its own.

In this complex and uncertain situation, for the U.S. two priorities are desirable: it should not call for removal of sanctions on Iran nor release its assets until Iran definitively ends its nuclear weapons program; and the U.S. should join Russia and France in a real undertaking to destroy

ISIS.

First published in the