



# Riyadh and Tehran on a collision course

## Saudi assertiveness betrays a deepening insecurity

**A SHARP** escalation of tension between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran has raised fears that these two neighbors and rivals, already engaged in a cold war, are now on a collision course.

Back in the 1960s and '70s, Saudi Arabia and the Shah's Iran were closely aligned against radical Arab nationalists led by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and the pan-Arab Ba'ath party ensconced in Syria and Iraq. Indeed, the Nixon doctrine emphasized their importance as twin pillars of regional stability in the Persian Gulf.

All of this changed with the overthrow of the Shah in 1979. Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic republic promoted a potent mix of Shi'ite empowerment and broader Islamic opposition to the ruling conservative pro-Western Sunni Arab regimes.

For Saudi Arabia, whose legitimacy is based on its self-defined role as the guardian of Islam's most sacred shrine and strict adherence to fundamentalist Sunni Wahhabi tenets, ambitious Shi'ite Iran now posed a clear and present danger. To be sure, the two countries have periodically pursued a semblance of normalcy, according to the dictates of realpolitik.

But overall, and particularly since the US's toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Saudi Arabia has viewed Iran's growing power projection throughout the region – in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, among disaffected Shi'ite populations in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province (who constitute 10-15 percent of the country's total population), Bahrain and Kuwait; and, of course, its ongoing nuclear program – as a threat to its very being.

The latest round of tension was sparked by Riyadh's execution on January 2 of a dissident Saudi Shi'ite cleric, Nimr al-Nimr, who had been imprisoned since July 2012 following violent clashes between Saudi Shi'ites and the security forces, and sentenced to death in October 2014 for "seeking foreign meddling in Saudi Arabia, disobeying its rulers and taking up arms against the security forces."

Iran sharply condemned the execution, as did Shi'ites throughout the region. The Saudi Embassy in Tehran was attacked and burned by a mob, prompting Saudi Arabia to break off diplomatic relations and suspend all flights and trade with Iran. On January 7, Iran accused Saudi warplanes of targeting its embassy in Sanaa, Yemen, where the Saudis have been conducting a military campaign against the Houthi rebels.

Why did the Saudis go ahead with the execution? The move was certainly in line with the country's overall increased assertiveness in recent years. King Salman's son and defense minister, 30-year-old Mohammed bin Salman, is the point man for this position, particularly the intervention in Yemen. He exuded confidence in a recent wide-ranging interview with the UK weekly, *The Economist*, emphasizing his country's determination to block Iran's regional ambitions.

He insisted that the execution of al-Nimr was an internal Saudi affair carried out according to due process; that Saudi-led military



Flames rise from Saudi Arabia's Embassy, after a Tehran mob attacked it, January 2

operations in Yemen were fully justified and producing results, and that his country was poised to adopt a fundamental reorganization of the country's economy in order to cope with the challenges posed by a no longer viable model of cradle-to-grave subsidies, and by a huge demographic bulge (70 percent of its 21 million citizens are under the age of 30; eight million foreign workers do the bulk of the heavy lifting).

But Saudi assertiveness also betrays a deepening insecurity – owing to the perfect storm of a collapsed oil market and resulting \$100 billion budget deficit, fear that the virus of jihadi Islam is infecting its youth (al-Nimr was executed along with dozens of al-Qaida operatives convicted of violent acts more than a decade ago) and a growing loss of faith in America's 70-year commitment to the Saudi regime and its traditional Arab allies, in light of the US's strenuous efforts to achieve a nuclear deal with Iran. Hence, the executions were designed to send a sharp message to Sunni radicals and Shi'ite militants alike.

Of course, the likelihood of a direct Saudi-Iranian confrontation remains low. But one never knows, given the crosscutting geopolitical and sectarian conflicts in the Middle East and the paradox of Saudi-Iranian relations, as described by the US Carnegie Institute's Karim Sadjadpour. "The Saudis," he said, "have a superiority complex vis-à-vis the Shi'a and an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the Persians." ■

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