

Sectarianism, Riyadh's Weapon Against International Demands

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There is no doubt that Saudi Arabia is now wary—as are the rest of the Arab countries—of something like the Arab spring breaking out in the region. As a result, Saudi Arabia under the leadership of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud is keen to distract attention away from internal and external pressures demanding democratic reforms. These are reforms that, if allowed to open one door, may open Pandora's box to other existing power structures, directly threatening Saudi rule.

As such, Saudi Arabia has employed a policy of escalation: the execution of 47 men during this precarious time, convicted on charges of “embracing takfiri thought and involvement in terrorist attacks.” The most prominent among those executed was the Saudi religious cleric Nimr Baqr al Nimr, a leader of Saudi Arabia's Shiite minority. The international fallout escalated quickly on both official and popular levels, immediately intensified polarization and provoking an exchange of loud threats and condemnation between Iran and its Shiite allies in Iraq on one side and Lebanon, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and other Sunni allies on the other. Yet despite the predictions of some analysts, Riyadh does not dare enter a direct war against Iran with the Saudi army still mired in Yemeni swamps and a developing economic crisis against the global drop in oil prices. So what is the actual background and purpose of Saudi Arabia's provocations of its Iranian-Shiite rival at this particular time?

King Salman, head of the House of Saud wants to deliver a message to emerging dissenting factions that the House of Saud will apply an iron fist towards the increasing domestic criticism of Salman's policies, especially towards neighboring Yemen. . These threats have increased in the wake of the Arab Spring revolutions. Al-Nimr's criticisms of the House of Saud goes back to a speech he delivered in 2011 that offered a scathing critique bigger and bolder than any previously delivered in the Kingdom. In this speech, Nimr said that “I am 55 years old, and I have not felt safe since my birth. Nor do I feel that there is security in this country today!” Later in the speech, he added, “no State has any governance over us, authority is not given to the State, no legitimacy is given to the State. Our loyalty is to God only, and not to the House of Saud!”

Such strong-worded statements may have catalyzed Al Nimr's execution. And his execution delivered the message that there is no one above the House of Saud, for they are the keepers of the Kingdom and are therefore above criticism in any form. Despite current common interpretations of events, the message is in fact directed more to the Sunni community than the Shiite community—Shiites, even when demanding reforms, are still a minority—because the Sunni community has both numbers and influence. However, the real danger for the ruling family lies in a liberal trend, whether Sunni or Shiite, that continues to demand reforms.

It is no secret that the Kingdom has spent a good deal of (funds) to bury the effects of the Arab Spring revolutions, such as funneling money into Sisi's Egypt to minimize the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood there, which it considers a terrorist group. Similarly, the Kingdom considers every state (or movement) that goes against Wahabism to be an adversary. Wahabi thought lends itself to its imposition upon others, which has already consolidated the Saudi regime since Muhammad bin Saud establishment of the first Saudi State in the 18th century, which was

characterized by the expansion of Wahhabism. Nevertheless, the Kingdom remains in step with the region's secular military regimes.

Saudi Arabia's domestic concerns have been complicated by international shifts in prioritization. On a regional level, the United States has become closer with Iran during the process of the Iran Nuclear Agreement. While this agreement has laid out potential consequences for Iran nuclear proliferation, it simultaneously helps bring Iran out of global isolation. This development worries Riyadh and deepens the fear that Saudi Arabia will lose its leadership role in the region and its diplomatic relations with Washington.

Moreover, Riyadh is experiencing one of the toughest periods in its relations with the United States, facing particular difficulty communicating directly with the Obama administration. At a World Bank seminar a few weeks ago, Princeton University Professor Bernard Haykel emphasized that the Saudi government had preferred the method of direct communication that was possible with former President George W. Bush, finding difficulties with the current methods of communication. He went on to say that the neglect the Saudi government feels from the United States is compounded by their lack of satisfaction with U.S. policies in the region and in the Syrian crisis specifically.

The U.S.-Iranian rapprochement process on the one hand and U.S.-Saudi estrangement on the other has raised the ire of the Kingdom and helped prompt these provocative executions. Their action sends a message to Iran that the alliance formed by the Kingdom with the United States is stronger, and that Iran will not enjoy influence no matter what kind of unrest is ignited in the region. Yet although the seemingly ominous exchanges between Saudi Arabia and Iran are apparently something deeper than the flexing of political muscles, neither party is fully prepared to enter into a direct war with the other.

These challenges have only been expedited by Iran's interference in the Syrian crisis in support of the Assad regime. This move, angrily condemned, led to Saudi Arabia's political discomfort as a leader of the Sunni coalition, which has so far failed to clearly define itself or its objectives. As the fighting in Syria continues, it has become incumbent on Riyadh to develop implementable actions to thwart a crisis threatening to drag the entire region into sectarian conflict.

The Saudi executions were clearly in part an attempt to push the tensions between the Saudi and Iranian axes forward. Oddly, Iran swallowed the bait quickly, with some Iranians attacking the Saudi embassy in Tehran and intensifying an already sensitive and sectarian climate in the region. The response allowed Riyadh to take full advantage of the attack by cutting diplomatic ties with the Iran, thereby achieving its political goals.

What is also surprising about these events is that they all boil down to the execution of one Saudi Shiite man. There is a noticeable disregard for the other forty six men executed, most of whom were Saudi Sunnis

Moreover, al-Nimr's Saudi nationality explains the sectarian manner with which his political dissent and execution has been dealt. Had the contention been framed on the basis of doctrine, it is possible that al-Nimr could have changed opinions of fellow Saudis and perhaps avoided the expected bloodshed. Although Al-Nimr stated that he did not like to be treated on the basis of his sectarian affiliation, and he seemed to expect his own death amidst the clamor of sectarianism and the madness of authorities. Both Arabic and Western media have been fomenting sectarian issues by referring to al-Nimr as a Shiite clerk rather than a Saudi Shiite clerk, downplaying the point of his citizenship, rather than his sect, he emphasized when he was alive in one of his speeches.

In the post-Arab Spring era, it seems that the region will witness an escalated cold war between Riyadh and Tehran. Their influence and alliances are likely to shape the future of the Middle East. It remains to be seen whether this event will serve as the spark that ignites the region in its entirety, or if the voice of wisdom and reason prevail and the previous uneasy peace returns, governed by the two blocs' ulterior motives. ❖

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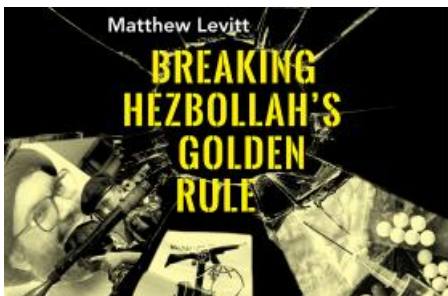
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