

Policy Alert

Holy War of Words: Growing Saudi-Iranian Tensions

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September 7, 2016

Relations between Riyadh and Tehran are in a downward spiral, raising the urgent need for a U.S. and international response.

In the coming days, hundreds of thousands of Muslims will visit the Saudi city of Mecca to partake in the annual Hajj pilgrimage. Unlike last year, there will be no Iranians there. Tehran and Riyadh were unable to agree on visa allocations and security arrangements intended to avoid the type of tragic stampede that killed hundreds of pilgrims last time around -- an incident in which Iran suffered more victims than any other country. Two days ago, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei declared that Iranians who were injured last year and subsequently died were "murdered" by the kingdom's inadequate emergency response. He went on to suggest that Saudi Arabia was not a proper custodian of the holy places -- effectively a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the kingdom's Sunni royal family, since the monarch has been styled "Custodian of the Two Holy Places of Mecca and Medina" since the 1980s.

Khamenei's words prompted a damning response yesterday from the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, the country's chief cleric, who described Iran's Shiite majority as "Zoroastrians" and "not Muslims." Anti-Shiite sentiment is common in Saudi Arabia, and the "Zoroastrian" jibe (meaning fire worshippers) is sometimes mentioned in the press. But the very public use of such words by a mainstream religious leader is extraordinary -- though hardly surprising given Khamenei's comments.

The verbal escalation did not stop there: a few hours later, Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif entered the fray, tweeting about the "bigoted extremism that Wahhabi top cleric & Saudi terror masters preach." This was no doubt a direct response to the Grand Mufti (since the Saudi brand of Islam is often labeled "Wahhabism"), and a reiteration of the longstanding Iranian claim that Riyadh supports the Islamic State terrorist group.

The situation is arguably as bad as it was in 1987, when Iranian pilgrims in Mecca shouted political slogans that prompted trigger-happy Saudi National Guard forces to open fire, killing scores. Even without Iranians in Mecca this year, the risk of further escalation between the two countries is high.

In this regard, a key decisionmaker on the Saudi side will be Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, who will likely favor a resolute rather than conciliatory approach. As defense minister, he has been the main proponent of the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, which was prompted by Iranian support for the Houthi rebels. That campaign is now a proxy war between the two countries, as are the struggles in Iraq, Syria, and, to a more limited extent, Bahrain. Saudi Arabia's own Shiite minority, concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province adjacent to Bahrain and the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, will likely be inflamed by the war of words, and miscalculation is possible, even direct military clashes. In light of this danger, the international community -- collectively and individually -- should urge both sides to calm the rhetoric.

At the very least, the tension represents a setback for U.S. policy, since the Obama administration had hoped that such animosity would be reduced at least somewhat by last year's nuclear agreement with Iran. In a January 2014 interview with the *New Yorker*, the president stated, "It would be profoundly in the interest of citizens throughout the region if Sunnis and Shias weren't intent on killing each other"; he also expressed his hope of "an equilibrium developing between Sunni, or predominantly Sunni, Gulf states and Iran in which there's competition, perhaps suspicion, but not an active or proxy warfare."

Part of the challenge of quieting the situation is coping with the apparent belief in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states that the Obama administration favors Iran. The president's April interview with the *Atlantic* caused considerable surprise in Riyadh and other capitals, particularly when he stated, "The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians...requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace." Four months prior, Saudi Arabia had broken off diplomatic relations with Iran after its embassy in Tehran was gutted -- an incident that followed the kingdom's execution of a leading Saudi Shiite preacher.

Given recent reports of aggressive maneuvering by Iranian Revolutionary Guard naval units in the Gulf, a confrontation with U.S. forces is also possible. Accordingly, Washington's response to the spike in tensions should combine diplomatic and military components -- for example, dispatching Secretary of State Kerry or another senior official to the kingdom while visibly reinforcing the Fifth Fleet. America's allies in the region will be hoping

for nothing less. Without a significant U.S. response, Saudi Arabia will likely be tempted to consider a more independent and perhaps dangerous course of action.

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