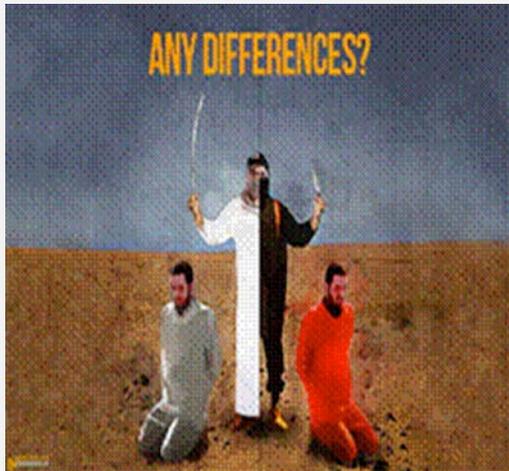




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## Crisis in Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations

### Dr. Raz Zimmt



Iranian propaganda comparing Saudi Arabian terrorism to ISIS (Website of Iran's supreme leader January 2, 2016)

## Deterioration of Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations – Overview

1. The execution of Saudi Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Baqer al-Nimr and the subsequent attacks of Iranian rioters on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and consulate in Mashhad **caused unprecedented damage to the relations between the two countries and brought them to a new low.** Although the Iranian authorities strongly condemned the rioters and Iranian President Rouhani even demanded that those who attacked the Saudi legations be tried in a court of law, **Saudi Arabia cut off diplomatic relations with Iran.**
2. **The execution of Sheikh al-Nimr enraged Iran, which threatened revenge and warned that the end of the Saudi regime was close.** Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei strongly condemned the execution and threatened the Saudis with "divine retribution" against the heads of the regime. **The administration of President Rouhani, on the other hand, tried to defuse the crisis.** In response to the attacks on the Saudi legations, Iranian security forces detained more than 50 civilians. In addition, the deputy governor of Tehran Province for security and the commander of the special police forces were removed from office. A suggestion made by Tehran's

council to change the name of the street where the Saudi legation was located and to call it after Sheikh al-Nimr instead was met with reservations by the foreign ministry).

3. In the wake of the dramatic deterioration of Saudi Arabia-Iran relations, other Arab-Muslim countries cut off diplomatic relations with Iran, including **Bahrain, Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti and the Comoro Islands**. **The UAE lowered the status of its relations with Iran and the governments of Qatar and Kuwait** recalled their ambassadors for consultation. Jordan joined the protest against Iran retained diplomatic relations.

4. The decision of several Arab countries to follow Riyadh was met with **fierce criticism in Iran, and calls were heard to reconsider its relations with the Arab world**. Editorials in the Iranian media complained that **Iran's generous aid to the Arab states had been repaid with hostility and betrayal**. It was up to Iran, they said, **to exploit regional circumstances and the nuclear agreement with the West to distance itself from the Arab world**. So far the senior Iranian leadership has apparently not responded to the suggestion.

## Analysis

5. The crisis in Iran's relations with the Arab world, especially Saudi Arabia, **reflects its growing regional isolation**. The political changes of recent years presented Iran with opportunities to expand its regional influence, but also **deepened the Sunni-Shi'ite rift and made the Arab states more suspicious of Iran**.

6. Iran's policies encouraging Shi'ite separatism and its relentless subversive activities in neighboring countries contributed to the worsening of its relations with the Sunni Arab states, especially **Saudi Arabia**, which also seeks regional hegemony. Ever present are the age-old Sunni-Shi'ite religious rift, **the ethnic-cultural conflict** (Arab vs. Persian) and **the nuclear agreement between Iran and the West** (making the Gulf States more fearful of Iran's growing power). In addition, there have been **significant changes** in the Saudi leadership, transforming Saudi Arabian regional policy from passive to active and clearly anti-Iranian.

7. It is too early to say if the current crisis has passed or if relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia will continue to deteriorate. So far, apparently **neither country feels it would be in its own best interests to turn the crisis into a direct military confrontation, especially since both face serious challenges, both internally and externally in the fighting in Syria and Yemen**.

8. If Iran does in fact decide to escalate the confrontation with Saudi Arabia, **it has four possible avenues of action:**

1) **Using proxies:** Iran may decide to increase support for the forces loyal to it in Syria and Yemen, where both it and Saudi Arabia are fighting through proxies. In the fighting in Syria Iran supports Hezbollah and Shi'ite fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, who fight alongside the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) against the rebel organizations (some of which are supported by Saudi Arabia). In Yemen Iran supports the Shi'ite Houthi rebels fighting the central government, which is supported by Saudi Arabia.

2) **Intensifying efforts to subvert the Shi'ite minority in Saudi Arabia's eastern province:** After the Islamic Revolution, Iran worked to export the revolution to Saudi Arabia's eastern province, where the country's Shi'ite minority is centered. The Shi'ites make up about 10% of the Saudi Arabia population and throughout modern history have suffered from discrimination. The eastern province is considered highly sensitive because it is the region with the greatest concentration of oil fields. Between 1979 and 1981 the Shi'ites there rioted, and were supported, according to Saudi claims, by Iran. At the end of the 1980s, especially after the death of Khomeini in 1981, Iran sought to improve its relations with Saudi Arabia and to a great extent abandoned its efforts to encourage Shi'ite separatism. However, it continued supporting the Shi'ite struggle for equal rights, and in general supports the protest (and possibly subversive) activities of Sheikh al-Nimr which began in 2011.

3) **Terrorist activity in Saudi Arabia and abroad:** During the past few years Iran has tried a number of times to assassinate Saudi Arabian officials abroad. In October 2011 the United States revealed it had prevented an Iranian attempt to assassinate **Adel al-Jabeir, the Saudi Arabian ambassador to Washington**, currently the Saudi foreign minister. Party to the plot were a man with dual Iranian-American citizenship and senior officers in the IRGC's Qods Force, including its commander, Qasem Soleimani. In May 2011 the Qods Force was apparently also involved in the assassination of **Hassan al-Hatani, the head of security for the Saudi Arabian legation in Karachi, Pakistan**. According to Saudi and American sources, the Qods Force or its proxies were behind the assassination, because the assassin was a member of a local Shi'ite separatist group which had close ties to the Qods Force (Washington Post, October 13, 2011).

4) **Cyberterrorism:** On August 15, 2012, Iranian hackers attacked the Saudi oil company Aramco. The cyber attack affected 30,000 workstations and about 2,000 servers. According to private Western Internet security experts, Iran was behind the attack (Haaretz, September 11, 2012).

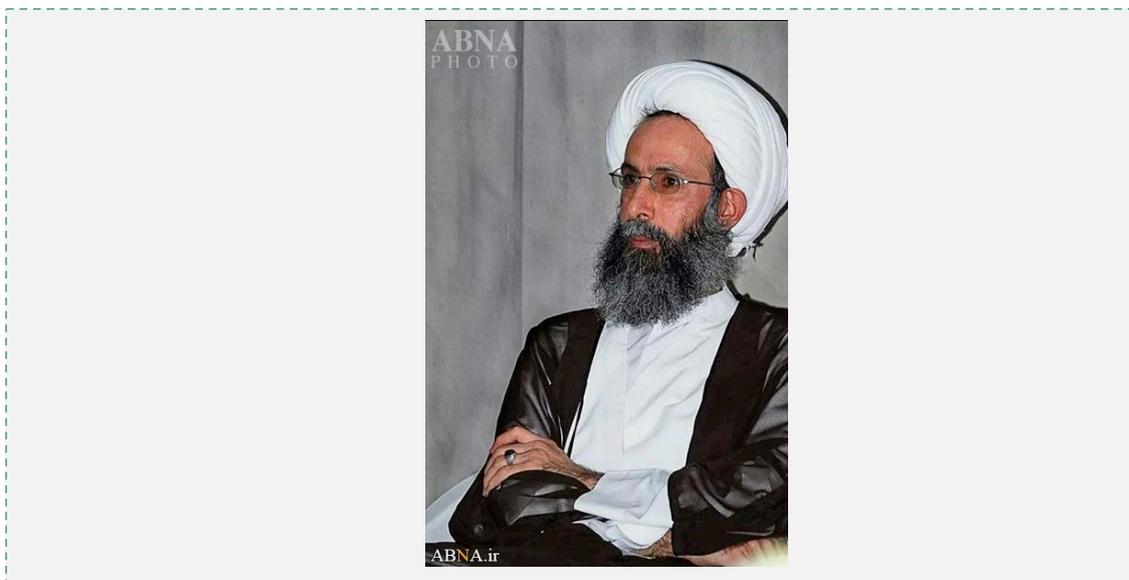
9. Whether or not Iran and Saudi Arabia resolve the current crisis, it can be assumed that their previous history, religious-cultural-ideological differences, conflicting interests and power struggle for regional hegemony will, in the foreseeable future, prevent a significant improvement in their relations.

## Appendix

### The Iranian-Saudi Crisis Caused by the Execution of Nimr Baqer al-Nimr

#### Iranian Responses to the Execution

1. The execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Baqer Nimr and the subsequent attacks by Iranian rioters on the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran and its consulate in Mashhad **caused unprecedented damage to the relations between the two countries and brought them to a new low.** Although Iran strongly condemned the rioters who attacked the Saudi legations and Iranian President Rouhani demanded bringing the perpetrators to trial, diplomatic relations between the two countries were cut off. Commercial relations were later also cut off and civilian travel was banned.



Sheikh Nimr Baqer al-Nimr (ABNA, October 19, 2012).

2. **Ali Khamenei**, Iran's supreme leader, not only condemned the execution but also warned the Saudi regime that "divine vengeance" would be meted out to Saudi politicians. He called the execution of the Saudi cleric a political error, and said that the blood unjustly spilled would quickly return to strike Saudi politicians (Fars News, January 3, 2016).

3. The crisis worsened when Iran accused Saudi Arabia of an aerial attack on its embassy in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen. On January 7, 2016, Hossein Jaber Ansari, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, claimed the Saudi aerial attack had damaged the embassy and wounded security guards. He said the attack had

specifically targeted the embassy and violated international conventions regarding the security of diplomatic facilities. **Hossein Amir Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs**, also condemned the attack, saying Saudi Arabia was responsible for the security of the Iranian embassy and the safety of Iranian diplomats in the Yemeni capital (ISNA, January 7, 2016).

4. Other responses included the following:

1) **Hossein Salami, deputy commander of the IRGC**, warned Saudi Arabia that unless it mended its ways it would collapse in the near future. He said the Saudis were following the path of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, who had attacked Iran and executed prominent Shi'ite clerics. Salami called Riyadh's decision to cut off diplomatic relations with Tehran "hasty and unreasonable," and said the bloodshed in Iraq and Syria was the direct result of Saudi Arabia's regional policies (Sepah News, January 7, 2016).

2) **Mohammed Reza Naqdi, commander of the IRGC's Basij militia**, said the martyrdom of Sheikh al-Nimr would be a certificate of burial for the royal house of Saud. He accused the Western countries of supporting Riyadh's policy of regional aggression and destruction, and said both Shi'ites and Sunnis would wreak vengeance of Saudi Arabia and its supporters (Defa Press, January 3, 2016).

3) **Senior Iranian clerics also condemned the execution. Ayatollah Hossein Nouri Hamedani** said such actions threatened the entire world and that Shi'ite and Sunni clerics had to respond to the "wicked" execution of Sheikh al-Nimr (Rasa News, January 2, 2016).

4) **Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iranian foreign minister**, wrote an editorial published in the New York Times on January 11, 2016, in which he accused Saudi Arabia of sponsoring terrorism, calling the country "a global threat." The editorial, entitled "Saudi Arabia's Reckless Extremism," claimed Saudi Arabia had attempted to defeat the nuclear agreement because it feared the exposure of "its active sponsorship of violent extremism." He added that "the perpetrators of many acts of terror...[including] the horrors of Sept. 11... have been either Saudi

nationals or brainwashed by petrodollar-financed demagogues..." [by implication, Saudi Arabia].<sup>1</sup>



Iranian anti-Saudi cartoon (Tasnim News, January 10, 2016)

## Rouhani's Attempts to Defuse the Situation

5. Despite the crisis in Iran-Saudi Arabia relations, President Hassan Rouhani made attempts to defuse the situation. He issued a statement after the execution of Sheikh al-Nimr which also referred to the attacks on the Saudi legations, and said they humiliated the regime and marred Iran's image. He called on the ministry of the interior, the intelligence services and the legal authorities to locate the attackers and bring them to justice (Website of Hassan Rouhani, January 3, 2016).

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/11/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-saudi-arabias-reckless-extremism.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/11/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-saudi-arabias-reckless-extremism.html?_r=0)



The Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran goes up in flames (Twitter account, January 2, 2016).

6. The Iranian security forces arrested more than 50 people allegedly involved in the attacks. **Saffar Ali Baratlou, deputy governor for security in Tehran Province was removed from office, as was Hassan Arabsorkhi, commander of special police forces in Tehran Province**, both apparently because of the attacks. **Hossein Ali Amiri, spokesman for the ministry of the interior**, said that no one in Iran had the authority to break the law with the excuse of defending his ideals (ISNA, January 4, 2016).

7. **The Iranian foreign ministry expressed reservations with a suggestion made by Tehran's municipal council to rename the street where the Saudi Arabian legation was located for Sheikh al-Nimr. Hossein Jaber Ansari, spokesman for the foreign ministry**, said his ministry was in favor of commemorating al-Nimr, but streets could only be named for him in consultation with the foreign ministry and the Supreme Council of National Security (Press TV, January 11, 2016).



The street of the Saudi embassy, newly, if temporarily, renamed (Twitter, January 2, 2016).

## Calls in Iran to Reexamine Ties to the Arab World – Analysis

8. Following the dramatic deterioration of Iranian-Saudi relations, other Arab states followed suit. **Bahrain, Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti and the Comoro Islands followed suit and severed diplomatic relations with Iran as well. The UAE** lowered the status of its relations with Iran and the governments of **Qatar and Kuwait** recalled their ambassadors for consultation. **Jordan** joined the protest against Iran after the Saudi Arabian embassy was attacked. The Jordanian foreign ministry summoned **Mojtaba Ferdowsipour, the Iranian ambassador**, to Amman for clarifications. The Jordanians issued an announcement condemning the attacks on the Saudi legations and Iran's interference in the internal affairs of Arab states (ISNA, January 7, 2016).

9. **The actions taken by the various countries were harshly criticized in Iran** and even led to calls for reconsidering Iran's relations with the Arab world. **Mohammad Masjed Jamei, Iran's former ambassador to Morocco**, called on Iran to distance itself from the Arab world for the time being. He posted an editorial on the conservative Khabar Online website on January 10, 2016, in which he discussed the increasing influence of radical Islamic thought ("*takfiri* thought") on Saudi society. He claimed in consequence it impacted on the entire Muslim world because Saudi Arabia' had status and capabilities. **The example he gave was Sudan, which for twenty-five years had received a significant and unprecedented amount of Iranian economic, political, military and medical support, but joined Saudi Arabia in cutting off diplomatic relations with Iran.** Iran's common interests with

the Arab world, claimed Jamei, had lessened in view of regional developments, **and Iran would be wise to distance itself from the Arab states.**

10. **Asr-e Iran website** also called for a reexamination of Iran's relations with the Arab world. According to an article posted on the website, after the Islamic Revolution, extending relations with Arab-Muslim countries became one of the principles of Iran's foreign policy. **For years Iran stood shoulder to shoulder with the Arab states, and its support for the Palestinian cause was greater than that of the Arab countries themselves.** Iranian support for the Arab states had not ended even when they supported Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. However, while Iran showed it had only good intentions towards the Arab states, they, with the exception of Syria, were hostile and betrayed Iran. **Now, after four decades, the time had come to examine what Iran gave to the Arab countries and what it received in return.** The improvement in relations between Iran and the West following the nuclear agreement gave Iran **a historic opportunity to reconsider its foreign policy and invest most of its efforts in improving relations with countries with which it could have balanced and more beneficial relations** (Asr-e Iran, January 11, 2016).

11. At this stage it does not seem that the call to reexamine Iran's relations with the Arab world is supported by the senior Iranian leadership or that any such examination is being conducted by the regime's institutions. In addition, the Iranian leadership seems to be committed to strengthening its relations with the Arab world to bolster Iran's regional position and out of ideological and propaganda considerations. Nevertheless, the call for reexamination was made by a former senior Iranian diplomat and disseminated by websites affiliated with conservative circles. It may therefore represent a significant trend in public opinion that could gain a foothold among Iran's decision makers, especially in view of the expected improvement in relations between Iran and the West, now that the nuclear agreement has been signed and the sanctions have been lifted.

## **The Iran-Saudi Arabia Crisis Seen through the Prism of Iran's Policies during the Regional Upheaval**

12. The current crisis between Iran and the Arab states reflects its growing isolation. The political changes in the Arab world in recent years gave Iran new opportunities to expand its regional influence. During the so-called "Arab Spring" Iran's leaders represented the changes as an expression of Islamic rebirth inspired by the Islamic Revolution, which they claimed would change the face of the Middle East.

13. Iran's intention to exploit the developments to consolidate its influence and spread its revolutionary ideas was reflected in the speech given by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei at the opening session of the international Islamic Awakening conference held in Tehran in September 2011. He called on the peoples of the region to promote Islamic unity and guard against the plots of Western countries desirous of continuing their rule. He said the principles of Islam had to be preserved, as they were the foundation of the uprising of the Arab world, and the Middle East should not stray from the path of resistance and the slogans of the revolution (Fars News, September 17, 2011).

14. The dramatic events in the Middle East presented Iran not only with opportunities but **considerable risks and challenges**. It quickly became evident that **Arab politics were more complex** than what the Iranians had initially imagined and it was doubtful whether the Islamic Republic could serve as a role model for the Arab world. The Shi'ite uprising in Bahrain in 2011 increased Arab concerns of Iran's growing influence and deepened the already great mutual suspicions between Iran and the Sunni Arab states. The civil war in Syria, Iran's greatest strategic ally in the Arab world, was an additional challenge and threatened to subvert the Iranian-led "resistance axis." Iran was also challenged by ISIS, whose achievements forced it to send weapons and advisors to Iraq and Syria, including Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force.

15. Iran used its propaganda machine in an effort to form a joint Islamic front against radical Sunni Islamists, especially ISIS. **Senior Iranian officials tried to gloss over the secular rifts**, called for Shi'ite-Sunni unity and touted Islamic unity as the way to solve the problems of the Middle East. **Iranian President Hassan Rouhani**, speaking at the international Conference of Islamic Unity in Tehran in December 2015, claimed Iran made no distinction between Shi'ite and Sunnis, but rather championed Islamic unity transcending the differences between the various branches of Islam. He rejected the claims that Iran was forming a "Shi'ite crescent" and claimed that as far as Iran was concerned there was neither a "Shi'ite crescent" nor a "Sunni crescent," only the "Islamic full moon." Iran, he claimed, supported Islamic unity, and Muslims had only one identity, their Islamic identity (Fars News, December 27, 2015).

16. Such statements indicate Iran's realization that **defining the regional conflicts as Shi'ite-Sunni** increases the Arab world's fears of the "Shi'ite threat," worsens existing suspicions of Iran, and makes it difficult to promote a march towards regional hegemony. **In reality, however, Iran continues its subversive activities and**

**encourages Shi'ite separatism in Middle Eastern countries.** Iran dealt with the regional upheaval by using the IRGC's Qods Force to exploit the weakness of the Arab states for its own needs, and invested considerable effort in exploiting new opportunities in order to promote its regional hegemony. For example, **Mohammad-Ali Jafari, commander of the IRGC**, recently said one of the positive outcomes of regional developments in recent years was the recruitment [by implication, by the IRGC] of close to 200,000 armed young men in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen (Fars News, January 12, 2016).

## **Iranian Support for Terrorism and Political Subversion in Arab States**

17. During the past year there were several indications of **Qods Force involvement in terrorist activity and subversion in several Arab states.** Iran left its fingerprints on a series of terrorist attacks planned or carried out in **Jordan, Bahrain and Kuwait.** Iran also supports the Shi'ite Houthi separatist revolt in Yemen and at least in the past supported subversive activities in eastern Saudi Arabia.

18. In July 2015 **Jordan** reported it had arrested an **Iraqi national** on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack; he was working under the direction of the Qods Force (Al-Ra'i, July 6, 2015). In June 2015 the **Bahraini** police said it had exposed a direct Iran-Hezbollah link to an attack carried out on July 28, 2015, in which a bomb killed members of the security forces. According to the Bahraini police, the five suspects arrested admitted they had ties to the IRGC and Hezbollah. In October 2015 Bahrain announced it had recalled its ambassador from Tehran and expelled the Iranian chargé d'affaires from Manama, the capital city, to protest Iran's involvement in planning terrorist attacks in Bahrain. The announcement was made a short time after the Bahraini ministry of the interior said its security forces had uncovered a large facility in the southern part of Manama where bombs were being manufactured, and had arrested several suspects who had ties to the IRGC. At the facility more than 1.5 tons of explosives were found, and there was an underground network of bunkers where bombs were made. Iran denied any connection to terrorist attacks carried out in Bahrain (Reuters, October 1, 2015).

19. After broke off diplomatic relations with Iran, Bahrain revealed the exposure of a **terrorist cell with ties to the IRGC and Hezbollah.** The Bahraini ministry of the interior said several members of the cell had been arrested after planning to carry out terrorist attacks. According to Bahrain's claims, the main suspect in the affair, **Ali**

**Ahmad Fakhrawi**, had received \$20,000 from Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah while visiting Lebanon (Fararu, January 6, 2016).

20. **Kuwait also exposed Iranian involvement in terrorism and subversion.** The Kuwaiti prosecution brought 25 Kuwaitis and one Iranian to trial on accusations of possessing weapons and explosives to be used in terrorist attacks in Kuwait, and of spying for Iran and Hezbollah. According to the prosecution, 22 of the accused had been trained in the use of explosives and weapons. Their plan had been to carry out terrorist attacks in Kuwait to destabilize the country and damage its territorial integrity. Eleven were accused of illegal possession of communications equipment (Gulf News, September 1, 2015). In January 2016 a Kuwaiti court sentenced two men to death for spying for Iran and Hezbollah. They were also convicted of the illegal possession of weapons. One was an Iranian, sentenced in absentia and the other was a Kuwait citizen (Tasnim News, January 12, 2016). Thus it can be assumed that **the Saudi accusations of Iranian involvement in subversion in the Shi'ite region in the eastern part of the kingdom have a basis in fact.**

21. Iran's religious-subversive policies contributed to the deterioration of its ties to the Arab world, especially **Saudi Arabia**, which also wants regional hegemony. The tension is also influenced by past events, opposing religious views (Sunni vs. Shi'ite) and ethnic and cultural differences (Arab vs. Persian), Iran's nuclear agreement with the West (which increased the concerns of the Gulf States regarding Iran's' military buildup) and changes in Saudi Arabia's internal political scene. All of the above led to transforming Riyadh's foreign policy passive to active, and to its adoption of an unequivocal anti-Iran stance. The trend culminated in Saudi Arabia's attacks on Yemen which began in March 2015.



Iranian anti-Saudi cartoon (Fars News, January 4, 2016).

22. The Iranian administration, led by President Hassan Rouhani, made attempts to alleviate the tension between the two countries. However, a number of incidents between Iran and Saudi Arabia that occurred during the past year marred his attempts. In April 2015, Saudi police allegedly harassed two young Iranian pilgrims at the airport in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. In September 2015 the relations between the two countries deteriorated further after the catastrophe in the Mina Valley near Mecca during the hajj, where hundreds of Iranian pilgrims were trampled to death.