

Middle East: Iran and Saudi Arabia, the conflict between the counter revolutionary forces

Wednesday 13 January 2016, by [DAHER Joseph](#) (Date first published: 12 January 2016).

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Political tensions have continued to increase between the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and Saudi Arabia since the execution on January 2 by Riyadh of the political opponent Sheikh Nimr,[i] a leader of the popular demonstrations against the Saudi kingdom started in 2011 in the eastern regions of the country populated in its great majority of Shi'a population, and 46 others, including 43 jihadists affiliated to Al-Qaeda, which has led to protests in Iran, where the Saudi Embassy in Tehran and the Consulate in Mashhad were stormed and burned, and in several other countries of the region as well, particularly in Bahrain and Iraq. Saudi Arabia has cut its diplomatic relations with Iran, and this decision was followed by Bahrain, Sudan and Djibouti. The UAE have decided to cut diplomatic ties with Tehran, while Kuwait, as well as Qatar, recalled their ambassador to Iran. Jordan has in turn summoned the Iranian Ambassador in Amman.

Few days later, on January 7, the leaders of the IRI have accused the Saudi air force of bombing its embassy in Yemen and have banned the entry of all Saudi products in response.

The sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shi'as, from Syria to Yemen passing through Iraq and Lebanon, will be exacerbated once more by these events. These two states have continuously used the weapon of sectarianism to foster their political interests.

Political rivalries

Since the fall of the Shah and the establishment of the IRI in 1979 under the leadership of Khomeini, relations between Tehran and Riyadh have been sources of tension in the region and of rising sectarianism. Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran were strained almost to breaking point in July 1987 when 402 pilgrims, 275 of whom were Iranian, died during clashes in the Muslim holy city of Mecca. Protesters took to the streets of Tehran, occupied the Saudi embassy and set fire to Kuwait's embassy. A Saudi diplomat, Mousa'ad al-Ghamdi, died in Tehran of wounds sustained when he fell out of an embassy window and Riyadh accused Tehran of delaying his transfer to a hospital in Saudi Arabia. Diplomatic relations were severed by Saudi Arabia's King Fahd in April 1988.[ii] After a short lull in the early 2000 with the election of Mohammad Khatami as president in 2001, rivalries will resume in the wake of the US and British invasion of Iraq the gradual fall of Baghdad into the hands of Shi'a fundamentalist Islamic forces allied to the IRI. Political tensions between the two countries have continued to make the situation in the region more volatile and fragile.

In the early 1980s, the establishment of the IRI and the will of the leadership of the new regime in Tehran to export the model of “the Islamic revolution” in the region by funding some Shia fundamentalist religious groups caused a reaction of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, which were one of the main targets of the propaganda from Tehran. The IRI, groups allied with it and Shi’a populations in the region in general therefore gradually became the main enemy and target of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, instead of nationalist and progressive forces which were the target of these latter in the decades before by promoting Islamic fundamentalist movements. The monarchy of Bahrain had for example supported Shi’a Islamic fundamentalist forces (Al-Dawa party and the members of the Shirazist movement), which are now repressed and accused of being mere instruments of the IRI, against Arab nationalist and leftist in the 1950s to late 1970s.

The ruling family of the Saud sees until today the expansion of the political influence of the IRI in the Middle East as a threat to their security and their ambition to play a leading role among the Arab states. In addition, the new young generation in power in the Saudi kingdom, illustrated by the crown prince and interior minister Mohammed Bin Nayef and Crown Prince and Deputy Defence Minister Mohammed bin Salman, do not hesitate to act out of the US strategic supervision and demonstrate that the kingdom can take initiatives without US approval.

In the Saudi kingdom, the social and political discrimination against the Shi’a minority, which were already the subject of a heinous Salafi and wahabi discourse, were strengthened and they were the target of a political propaganda stigmatizing them as elements of a “5th Iranian column”. This situation has not particularly change until today.

An investigation into attacks on Shi’a religious gatherings in Dalwa in Eastern Province actually found that 44 out of 77 suspects in the attacks were prior beneficiaries of the “rehabilitation” and “deradicalization” munasaha (“advising”) program, which was established in 2004, by then Deputy Minister of the Interior (now Minister of Interior and Crown Prince) Mohammed bin Nayef, and aims to redefine jihad and integrate extremists back into their community by handing out financial aid and helping them find jobs. Another attack on an Isamili mosque in Najran on October 26 was claimed by a Saudi member of Daech, who was released just months ago from the program. This is not surprising as the main religious Sunni discourse in Saudi Arabia is filled with hate speech and conspiracy theories against the Shi’a.[iii]

In addition to this, the situation is even more exacerbated by the political use of the Sunni-Shi’a divides to promote the policies of the Saudi Kingdom in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen. In Yemen, the Saudi military intervention since March 2015, justified to struggle against the Iranian and Shi’a expansion, against the Houthis forces, supported by the IRI, and the former dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh killed more than 5,800 people, including 2,800 civilians, and injured more than 27,900 people, while over 2.5 million people have been displaced within the country.[iv] A statement issued by Saudi religious scholars on October 3 in response to Russian involvement in Syria to assist the Assad regime also reflected this support for jihad against Shi’a. The scholars called upon “true believers” to fight against “Safavid” government of Syria and its allies, portraying the conflict in Syria as a reenactment of the crusades, with “Shi’a heretics” joining forces with the Russian crusaders.[v]

The IRI also has pursued policies discriminating, politically and socially, its Sunni Arab populations, and Tehran has banned all the construction of Sunni mosque in the capital. As a reminder, in 2011, Sunni politicians and residents of the capital Tehran were forced by the security services of IRI to join the official days of prayer to show their loyalty to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

Moreover, both countries have supported Shi’a and Sunni extremist groups in Iraq leading to a civil war between 2006 and 2008, which has also fueled sectarian tensions across the region. Iraq has fallen after the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein’s regime into the pro-Iranian orbit with the arrival

of Islamic fundamentalist Shi'a forces allied to the IRI. These groups were guilty of political and socio economic policies of discrimination against the Sunni population of Iraq, in addition to committing numerous abuses and sectarian crimes on a mass scale.

Faced with the popular uprisings that have shaken the region since the winter of 2010-2011, Saudi Arabia and the IRI have made use of sectarianism, among other tools and discourses, to justify interventions in the region, support dictatorships, or discredit popular movements by presenting them as conspiracies supported by one or few foreign powers. In Syria, each actor has also supported some sectarian and reactionary forces, while promoting a sectarian discourse. Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah, which is linked ideologically by the Willayat al Faqih and politically and financially to the IRI, have not hesitated sometimes to justify their military intervention in Syria along the Assad regime by sectarian propaganda. At the same time, Saudi Arabia with other Gulf monarchies supported financially mainly fundamentalist Islamic forces in Syria, while promoting a religious discourse on their satellite channels, to transform this popular revolution for freedom and equality into a sectarian civil war.

The weapon of sectarianism has especially been used by both regimes to divert local populations from increasing economic and social problems. Faced with falling oil prices, Saudi Arabia adopted earlier this year its 2016 budget with a projected deficit of nearly 80 billion euros and austerity measures including increases of over 50% of the price of gasoline. Riyadh also intends to increase taxes on services, impose new taxes and finalize "arrangements for the introduction of a VAT," in coordination with other Gulf monarchies. These measures will certainly impoverish further the 25% of the Saudi population already living below the poverty line.[vi] In 2011, three Saudi bloggers were actually jailed for two weeks after a film describing poverty in Saudi Arabia.

In Iran, inflation is around 20% (according to official figures), and the deficiency of basic products such as drugs continue,[vii] while the unemployment rate is around 25%, and 40 % of the population lives below the poverty line.[viii] Neoliberal policies of previous governments, including and especially those of the populist Ahmadinejad, continued. Eshaq Jahangiri, vice president of Hassan Rouhani, also said in early 2016: "The regime is caught in a particular political and economic situation which requires significant actions. We must respond to important issues, including unemployment, which is prominent ", while adding that " Iran has a large population of young people. If we are not able to solve these problems, this opportunity will become a threat ".[ix]

Similarly both countries repress severely workers and trade unionists. In Iran, the government and the bosses are attacking constantly workers trying to establish independent trade unions by imprisoning them. They systematically dismiss spokesperson of strikers in arresting them for "economic sabotage crime"... In Saudi Arabia, the interior ministry declared that it had expelled more than 370,000 foreign migrants in the last five months of the year, while 18,000 others are still currently in detention.[x]

It should also be noted that these two countries also compete in terms of number of people executed. In Iran, more than 800 people were executed in the first nine months of 2015, a record since 1989, [xi] while in Saudi Arabia more than 135 people were executed in the same period.

Another message also in these executions: against jihadist movements

The executions of January 2nd were also directed against another group that worries the Saudi kingdom: jihadist movements such as Al-Qaeda and Daech. The executions of Riyadh of the 43 jihadists members of Al-Qaida, condemned for bombings and gun attacks in the kingdom, [xii] had indeed intended to send a clear message that any support or involvement in these movements would

be repressed with the utmost firmness. The “antiterrorist coalition” composed of 34 countries, led by Saudi Arabia, announced December 14, 2015, must also be understood in this perspective of fighting against jihadist movements.

Al-Qaida and Daech, which both vowed to overthrow the regime of the Saud, promised to avenge these executions. Al-Qaeda has accused Saudi Arabia of having carried out the executions “of mujahidins” in order to consolidate the rule of the Saud dynasty and as a gift to the “Crusaders”, in other words the Western allies Riyadh, for the new year. [xiii]

The branch of Al-Qaeda in Yemen had already threatened in December 2015 to “shed the blood of the soldiers of Al-Saud” if its members were executed, while in early 2016, Daech threatened to destroy Saudi Arabian prisons holding jihadists after the executions. Both organizations are fighting against Saudi Arabia, which has declared them terrorist groups and locked up thousands of their supporters. Daech has claimed responsibility for a series of bombings and shootings in Saudi Arabia since November 2014 that have killed more than 50 people, most of them Shi’as but also more than 15 members of the security forces.[xiv]

Al-Qaida has on its side began its terrorist actions within the Saudi kingdom since 2003, killing several hundred people. The organization of Al-Qaeda has “excommunicated” the Saudi kingdom, considering it as un-Islamic, especially for its collaboration and associations with “infidels” States in the war against Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban.

This is not the first time in the history of the Kingdom that the Saud family is threatened internally by fundamentalist and ultra fundamentalists movements:

- The armed rebellion of “Ikhwan” between 1927 and 1930, a Islamic fundamentalist military force at the service of Saud (allowing it large territorial conquests, and to impose an authoritarian Wahhabi Islamic order on the conquered populations and committing massacres against Shi’a population in 1913 in Hasa and in the Hijazi resort of Ta’if in 1924)[xv] that turned against the kingdom, the reasons included notably the relationship of the Saud with Great Britain (relations with non Muslims, considered infidels, were banned), the nature of kingship, the Islamic legitimacy of Ibn’s Saud taxes, and his personal conduct (for example his serial marriages with daughters of tribal shaykhs and slaves, and his luxurious lifestyle), the necessity of Islamizing the Shi’a population of the kingdom, the prohibition of practices deemed as un-Islamic such as music and singing, etc ... [xvi]

- The siege of the Great Mosque in Mecca in 1979 for two weeks by Jouhaymane Al-Utaybi (himself born in a settlement of the “Ikhwan” in Saudi Arabia and Muhammad Al-Qahtani and their group of several hundred people (between 200 and 400). They presented their action as an Islamic uprising in protest against the religious and moral laxity and degeneration of the ruling family of Saud, diplomatic relations with “infidel states”, etc ...[xvii]

- In the beginning of the 1990s, the “Al-Sahwa” Islamist opposition, although very different from any other fundamentalist opposition by notably refusing the use of violence and by their recognition of the legitimacy of the ruling family of Al-Saud, were demanding the opening of the political system, criticized the call made by King Fahd to “infidels” to assist the kingdom during the liberation of Kuwait from the Iraqi occupation, and demanded the islamisation of state’s policies in economic, social, political, media and military spheres.[xviii]

This war between on one side the Saudi kingdom and the other side Al-Qaeda and Daech must not however make us believe that their fundamentalist and reactionary ideologies would fundamentally be different. The Saudi kingdom has declared for years that the ideology of these organizations is

foreign to its country and institutions, but is the result of the radicalization of the Muslim Brotherhood's movement and of the writings of Sayyeb Qutb and Ayman al-Zawahiri. This explanation does not convince anyone, and have stopped for a while now. Sayyeb Qutb and Ayman al-Zawahiri are of course sources of inspiration for some forms of jihadisms, but ultra fundamentalists movements such as Al Qaeda and Daech find already and in a much deeper way an ideological breeding ground within the official Wahhabi discourse broadcasted by clergy and institutions of the Saudi kingdom. As a reminder, the Saudi official speech denounce secular ideologies such as Arab nationalism (considered "as an atheist" jahaliyya "(ignorance), a movement of ignorance whose main purpose is to fight Islam and destroy its teachings and rules... All Arabs adopting it are enemies of Islam... Arab nationalism is European in origin, Jewish in motivation... Arab nationalism is a conspiracy promoted by the West and Zionism to undermine the unity of Muslims")^[xix] and communism (considered as a "movement leading to the enslavement of the individual by materialism and the abandonment of moral and spiritual qualities"),^[xx] while the danger of "al-taghib" (Westernization) "leads to the loss of Islamic ideals and practices". Politically, westernisation is understood as the adoption of "Western political system, political parties and parliaments at the expense of cohesion and social consensus". Socially, Westernization undermines the Muslims conduct and leads to the mixing between men and women, the opening of bars and nightclubs, celebrating non-Muslim holidays such as Mother's Day, Christmas, or Labour Day.^[xxi] Many of these themes are now found in the propaganda of Daech and Al-Qaeda.

A number of Saudi jihadists takes as references the earlier texts of Wahabism, which are the sources of official Islam in the country, and other authors of Wahabi references, but with different interpretations.

More generally, the main source of recruitment of these organizations in Saudi Arabia is in political and socio economic reasons: in the authoritarian nature of the regime and the absence of democracy, the fierce repression of all forms of opposition to the ruling family, social inequality, poverty and growing unemployment, especially among the youth, alliance and collaboration with the imperialist Western powers committing crimes against other Arab and Muslim populations, etc ... Once more, we have to understand that these movements are rooted in our present and modern time, not in a distant history. These are the products of the current modernity in which these populations live.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these two regimes and their allies are reactionary and destructive forces for their own societies and the region that we need to oppose relentlessly. To believe that one of these two powers can be a support in the popular revolutions for freedom and dignity that occurred in the region is illusory and strategically dangerous. These two powers are counter revolutionary powers that oppress their own populations and others as well, and assist other dictators and reactionary groups, while promoting and increasing sectarian tensions. We must support and show our solidarity with all democratic and progressive forces in both countries that challenge their ruling classes.

Neither Tehran nor Riyadh

Solidarity with the peoples of the region in their struggle for emancipation and liberation

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[i] In Saudi Arabia, a person is considered a terrorist under the new law enacted in 2014 if he or she pursues an activity "aimed at weakening the political system," to "damage the reputation of the

kingdom” or involving propaganda for atheism. It is under this law that a Saudi court sentenced to death Sheikh Al-Nimr

[ii] <http://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-iran-idUSKBN0UI14020160105>

[iii] http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=61878&mkt_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRohs6vMZKXonjHpfsX54uouUK6g38431UFwdcjKpMjr1YQHTsJ0aPyQAgobGp5I5FEIQ7XYTLB2t60MWA%3D%3D

[iv] <http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-external-situation-report-32-january-8-2016>

[v] http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=61878&mkt_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRohs6vMZKXonjHpfsX54uouUK6g38431UFwdcjKpMjr1YQHTsJ0aPyQAgobGp5I5FEIQ7XYTLB2t60MWA%3D%3D

[vi] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/01/saudi-arabia-riyadh-poverty-inequality>

[vii] <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36770>

[viii] <http://www.lcr-lagauche.org/iran-la-population-ecrasee-paye-la-crise/>

[ix] <http://www.ncr-iran.org/fr/actualites/economie/17149-iran-adjoint-de-rohani-les-jeunes-menacent-le-regime-si-les-problemes-economiques-ne-sont-pas-resolus.html>

[x] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabias-human-rights-abuses-10-examples-a6794576.html>

[xi] <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/irani/blog/131115/la-fidh-et-les-intellectuels-les-violations-en-iran-ont-considerablement-augmente-depuis-hassan-rohani>

[xii] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-security-alqaeda-idUSKCN0UP0ZX20160111>

[xiii] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-security-alqaeda-idUSKCN0UP0ZX20160111>

[xiv] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-security-alqaeda-idUSKCN0UP0ZX20160111>

[xv] Madawi Al-Rasheed, (2010), A history of Saudi Arabia, 59

[xvi] Madawi Al-Rasheed, (2010), A history of Saudi Arabia, 63

[xvii] Madawi Al-Rasheed, (2010), A history of Saudi Arabia, 139

[xviii] Madawi Al-Rasheed, (2010), A history of Saudi Arabia, 224

[xix] Madawi Al-Rasheed, (2010), A history of Saudi Arabia, 185

[xx] Madawi Al-Rasheed, (2010), A history of Saudi Arabia, 185

[xxi] Madawi Al-Rasheed, (2010), A history of Saudi Arabia, 185

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* Syria Freedom Forever. Posted on January 13, 2016:

<https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2016/01/13/iran-and-saudi-arabia-the-conflict-between-the-counter-revolutionary-forces/>