

Saudi Arabia – Iran’s Foreign Policy Crisis: A Case Study of Execution of Saudi Shia Cleric Shaikh Nimr al-Nimr

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Abstract

Saudi Arabia and Iran have been in conflict since the Iran revolution in 1979. Three factors shape their relationship: 1) Sunni-Shia disagreement, 2) the rivalry to be the regional power in the Middle East, and 3) the politics in the OPEC. The execution of Saudi’s Shia cleric, Shaikh Nimr al-Nimr, is a continuing phenomenon of the protracted conflict between the two countries. The study found that the root cause of their foreign policy crisis is their rivalries for hegemonic ambition in the Middle East and a quest for leadership in the Muslim world. The sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia plays the most important role to ignite the hatred throughout the region. The impact of the execution was tense, whereby Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States cut diplomatic ties with Iran as a response to the burning of Saudi’s diplomatic places by a group of Iranians. However, the tendency toward a war between Saudi Arabia and Iran is unlikely because the highest-level of policymakers of the two countries are rational. They fully realize that if they waged war against each other, the result would be a catastrophe, not only in the region but to the entire world.

Keywords: *Foreign policy crisis, Saudi Arabia, Iran, execution of Nimr al Nimr*

1. Introduction

This research analyses the execution of Saudi Shia cleric Shaikh Nimr al-Nimr and tries to explain how it has turned to be a foreign policy crisis between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The relationship between the two countries has fluctuated between normal and poor. There are several reasons for that phenomenon. Saudi Arabia and Iran have been competing to be the regional power and the leader of the Muslim world. Since the Iran Revolution in 1979, sectarianism has gradually appeared to be a major factor that divides them up until now. The consequences of the Arab Spring reinforced by the proxy wars in many countries, particularly in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, have increasingly worsened Saudi Arabia and Iran ties, with Saudi Arabia and Iran supporting different groups in Syria and Yemen. On January 2, 2016, a decision made by Saudi Arabia to execute the outspoken Shia cleric triggered a foreign policy crisis between Saudi Arabia and Iran, followed by Iranian protests that set fire to the Saudi Embassy and Consulate. As a result, Saudi Arabia cut all diplomatic and trade relations with Iran, followed by different degrees of cutting diplomatic relationship of other Gulf countries against Iran, except Oman. This paper analyses how the crisis developed, why it has not caused a war or confrontation between the two countries, and what are the consequences or impacts of the incident concerning the reconciliation of Saudi Arabia and Iran.

2. Objectives of the Study

- a) To discuss the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran regarding the execution of Sheikh Nimr.
- b) To ascertain the root cause of the foreign policy crisis of Saudi Arabia and Iran.
- c) To examine the impacts to Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Middle East caused by the crisis.

3. Historical Background

Before proceeding to discuss the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, we must first look at the role of the U.S. in the Middle East. Understanding how the U.S. has implemented its policy will help form a clear picture of the dominant factors that prevail regarding the relationship between the U.S and Middle Eastern countries. The U.S. has both economic and political interests in the Middle East. It has established economic interest since the 1930s, mainly concerning oil interests (Jones, 2012). Currently, the

U.S. still depends on oil from the Middle East, though its dependence on oil from the region has substantially decreased. The presence of its military bases along the Gulf States proved that the oil is a primary interest that has to be protected. This is how oil has turned to be a security concern for both the U.S. and the Gulf States. The historic meeting between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud in February 1945 helped forge the strategic relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia (Jones, 2012). The Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, would receive the U.S.'s protection from any attempt of intervention. Politically, apart from the classical interest of the stability of Israel, the U.S.'s standpoint in the ongoing Syrian War to oust President Bashar Assad is another essential point for its strategic policy. The U.S. plays the role by providing support for several resistance movements in fighting against Assad's regime together with Saudi Arabia and some of the Gulf States. This initiative is to ensure that the new regime is supportive of its interests. On the other hand, the Syrian army has been given technical, military, and monetary support from the Russian army, Iranian army, Hezbollah militants, etc. The U.S.'s combating against the Islamic State (IS) is another key concern for the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. In fact, the U.S. has been involved in all wars from the Iran-Iraq War, War in the liberation of Kuwait from Iraq's invasion in 1991, and the Gulf War II or Iraq War in 2003. The involvement of the U.S. has served both its economic and political interests in the area.

There are similarities and differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran with regard to their internal factors. Both countries share the same root of religion which can be traced back to the early age of Islam. However, there are many differences in their respective beliefs and practical principles. This has resulted in the Sunni and Shia schism. This factor is of crucial importance to understanding how Saudi Arabia (Sunni) and Iran (Shia) have little trust of each other. Saudi is Arab and speaks Arabic whereas Iran is of a Persian origin and speaks Persian (locally known as Parsi or Farsi). Moreover, the regime type also differs. Saudi Arabia is ruled by the absolute monarchical system while an Islamic republic governs Iran. Both countries rival for regional leadership with ambitions to be the regional power and the leader of the Muslim world. Nevertheless, the two countries are founders and significant members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (*OPEC*). This reflects the mutual dependence of both countries on oil. That is why the oil has often been used as a political tool, especially for Saudi Arabia as the largest oil producing country. A higher oil price will certainly benefit both countries while a lower oil price will more severely affect Iran's economy than Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, when viewing the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran through the balance of power perspective, we observe that Iran has attempted to increase its military capabilities, especially the nuclear weapons development so that it is able to balance the military capabilities of its immediate hostile neighbour. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia sought to ally with the U.S. for its security purpose and target Iran as a perceived threat to the kingdom. Therefore, it is not surprising to see how Saudi policymakers play the oil card in keeping the oil price low to deter Iran from having more capabilities to economically and politically recover very soon, despite the huge loss of oil income for Saudi Arabia.

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been conflicting, though there have been attempts to normalize the relationship. Certainly, the negative relationship between both countries started from 1979 when Khomeini took over and overthrew the Shah regime via the Islamic revolution. The main driving force that led to deteriorating relationships was the Iranian idea of "exporting revolution", not only in the Middle East but throughout the Muslim world. This revolution has been understood by Saudi Arabia as a destabilising force due to its "repeated attempts to export its revolution" to other Gulf states (Kechichian, 1999). In contrast, Iran views Saudi Arabia as unfit to protect the holy lands of Islam. Iran's Khomeinist ideology was anti-monarchical which goes against the Saudi political structure. After the revolution, the relationship has been seen increasing mistrust between Saudi Arabia and Iran that ended their cooperative diplomatic relations and created bitter competition for power and influence in the region.

In revolutionary doctrine, Khomeini preached that revolt and especially martyrdom against injustice and tyranny were part of Shia Islam (Wright, 2000) and that Muslims should reject the influence of both liberal capitalism and communism, ideas that inspired the revolutionary slogan "Neither East, nor West – the Islamic Republic." Moreover, Khomeini developed the ideology of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) as government, that Muslims – in fact, everyone – required "guardianship", in the form of rule or supervision by the leading Islamic jurists (Dabashi, 1993). However, Kamal (2015) pointed out that the

revolutionary values here mean the Shia version of Islamic values which originate from the core Shia principle of Imamate.

The Iranian action of exporting revolution has gradually become a critical point of sectarian conflict that plays an important role in Saudi Arabia and Iran's relationship until now. However, it is worth stating that sectarianism had not been a conflicting issue between Saudi Arabia and Iran before the Islamic revolution in 1979 because of two reasons. Firstly, the two countries were identical regarding their type of regime. Both ruled the countries under a monarchical system; the Shah ruled Iran and the King govern Saudi Arabia. Another factor was their shared concerns regarding the overthrow of King Faisal of Iraq by the coup in 1958 (Jahner, 2012). The incident had politically and diplomatically united them and given them opportunities to consult one another on their regime's survival which was threatened by the Iraqi progressive movement. At the U.S. urging, Saudi Arabia forged a measure of security cooperation with the Shah of Iran. In order to maintain future security in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to cooperate in the defence of the region (Eilts, 2006). David Long pointed out that "prior to the Iranian revolution, the primary political confrontation in the Gulf was neither Sunni-Shiite nor Arab-Persian but conservative-radical" (Jahner, 2012). Consequently, the overthrow of Shah resulted in a major shift in Iranian foreign policy which was more threatening toward Saudi Arabia.

4. Foreign Policy Crisis

Based on Brecher's idea (2008), an international crisis starts as an external or foreign policy crisis for one or more states. It is interrelated with three following conditions; hostile act, disruptive event, and environmental change. These perceptions can be viewed from a state's policy makers of:

- a) Higher than a normal threat to one or more basic values,
- b) Finite time for response, and
- c) Heightened probability of involvement in military hostilities (war) before the threat is overcome (Brecher, 2008).

To summarize, according to Brecher (2008), "a foreign policy crisis for a state-actor arises from the highest-level political decision makers' image of pressure(s) to cope with externally focused stress. It also serves as the precondition, and marks the beginning, of an international crisis."

Then, the three defining conditions will be our main discussion on the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran pertaining to the execution of Saudi Shia cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr.

5. Perception of Threats

Before discussing the foreign policy crisis of Saudi Arabia and Iran over the execution of Shia cleric, Nimr al-Nimr, it is worth viewing the perception of the threats of the two countries have toward one another for insight into current events between both nations.

Iran perceives Saudi Arabia as seeking hegemony for its brand of Sunni Islam and that Saudi Arabia is working with the U.S. to deny Shia Muslim governments and factions influence in the region (Katzman, 2016). Secondly, the U.S. and its Gulf states have cooperated in a security agreement which established the U.S. bases in many Gulf States; Iran views this as an intention of the U.S. and its allies, especially Saudi Arabia to attack Iran. Iran remains angry over Saudi Arabia's handling of a stampede during the Hajj in September 2015 that left more than 2,400 pilgrims dead, including more than 450 Iranians (Gladstone, 2015).

For Saudi Arabia, its officials repeatedly refer to past Iran-inspired actions as a reason for distrusting Iran. Such actions include encouraging violent protests at some Hajj performances in Mecca in the 1980s and 1990s, which caused a break in relations from 1987 to 1991 (Katzman, 2016). Then Saudi Arabia saw Iranian exporting revolution as the attempt to spread Shiism in the Gulf States and an ideology that harms the Saudi monarchical regime. Moreover, Iran's nuclear deal is a crucial point of concern for the Saudi Arabia of its hegemonic goal in the region. It views the deal as a step toward more engagement to the west, particularly with the U.S. Particularly, after the Joint Comprehensive of Plan of Action (JCPOA) had been agreed, it opens the gate for Iran for all developments, politically and economically. Nevertheless, Saudi reassures a close relationship with the U.S., despite the lifting of the sanction on Iran. Saudi Arabia

had made known its displeasure of Iran's alleged involvement in the anti-government uprising in Eastern province (where Sheikh Nimr lived) and worries about the future of Iran's possible involvement to train the Shia to revolt against the Kingdom.

6. Pre-Crisis Period and Arab Spring

The Arab Spring that began on 18 December 2010 in Tunisia led to instability across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and today we see political unrest in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Lebanon. The events of the Arab Spring have been seen as a movement of people to liberate themselves from tyrannical leaders and authoritarian regimes. The entire MENA has drastically changed toward different degrees of success and failure from the movements. The most dangerous factor is sectarianism which has become widespread and gradually rooted in the proxy wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and other countries in the region. Saudi Arabia and Iran play a major role to widen the sectarian division by supporting different groups in those countries. For example, in the Syrian case, Iran has sent supports, including its revolutionary guards, to help President Bashar al-Assad fight against Sunni-Syrian opposition groups which receive big money mainly supported by Saudi Arabia. In this regard, Iran has given between \$14 - \$15 billion annually to support Assad's regime (Bloomberg View, June 9, 2015). Such support has also been given to the Shia-led government of Iraq to fight against Islamic State forces when occupied land just 50 miles from the Iran border. Iran responded quickly by supplying the Baghdad government as well as *Peshmerga* force of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with IRGC-QF advisers, intelligence drone surveillance, weapons shipments and other direct military assistance (Katzman, 2016).

The Saudi regime became more nervous when the revolution spread to Yemen, on its southern border, and Bahrain, a Shia-majority country ruled by a Sunni regime only 26 km from the Eastern Province. Saudi Arabia accused Iran of supporting the Bahrain uprising and sent troops in March 2011 across the causeway to help crush the pro-democracy movement (Bazzi, 2015).

Outside the Arab territory, protests occurred in Iranian Khuzestan by the non-majority Arabs in April 2011 (Abdel Salam, 2015). The Arab Spring movements in Saudi Arabia were small in scale but were led by a sectarian nature. King Abdullah responded to the Arab Spring by pledging to build half a million housing units for low-income Saudis; awarded two extra months of salary to all government employees, who make up a majority of the national workforce; and created more public-sector jobs. King Abdullah also granted about US\$200 million to organizations controlled by the Wahhabi religious establishment, including the morality police. In turn, the Kingdom's highest religious council issued a fatwa proclaiming that Islam forbids street protests. The ruling family also played the Shia card, declaring that the uprisings across the region were targeting Sunnis and being instigated by Iran (Bazzi, 2015). A demonstration occurred in the oil-rich Eastern province where in one of the protest leaders was Nimr Baqir al-Nimr known as Sheikh Nimr who lived in the Shia community of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

Nimr raised vocal support of the movement in regions where the Shia area majority and have frequently complained of marginalization. He was seen as the driving force behind the protests, giving him a hero status among Saudi Shia youth. To the Sunni Kingdom's ruling elite, Nimr had, however, become a high-profile thorn in its side. Inspired by the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia's mass anti-government protests in 2011 included the public speeches by Nimr that urged an end to the Al-Saud monarchy and pushed for equality for the state's Shia community. As his role in the protests became more prominent, he warned the Saudi authorities that if they refused to "stop the bloodshed", the government would risk being overthrown (Townsend, 2016).

According to Mark Townsend (2016), the state-run Saudi Press Agency announced in July 2012 that Sheikh Nimr had been arrested and charged with instigating unrest, a chaotic incident during which the Shia cleric was shot and injured by police. Nimr faced a series of serious charges, including "disobeying the ruler" and "encouraging, leading and participating in demonstrations". Human rights groups including Amnesty claimed those allegations violated free speech protections (Townsend, 2016).

In October 2014, Saudi Arabia's specialized criminal court sentenced Nimr to death for seeking 'foreign meddling' in the Kingdom along with "disobeying its rulers and taking up arms against the security forces" (Townsend, 2016).

7. Proxy War in Syria, Iraq and Yemen

As far as the proxy war in Syria is concerned, Saudi Arabia and Iran have blamed one another for supporting different groups in Syria. In this war, sectarianism has been utilized to legitimate actions. Iran insists that Asad's fate be determined only by the Syrian people and not by outside powers. It is worth noting that Iran appears to be seeking to keep Asad in power, because: (1) his regime centres around his Alawite community, which practices a version of Islam akin to Shia; (2) he has been Iran's closest Arab ally; (3) Syria's cooperation is key to the arming and protection of Iran's arguably most cherished ally in the Middle East, Lebanon's Hezbollah; and (4) Iran apparently fears that the Islamic State and other Sunni Islamic extremists will take power if Asad falls. Iran seeks to ensure that Sunni extremist groups cannot easily attack Hezbollah in Lebanon across the Syrian border. Both Iran and Syria have used Hezbollah as leverage against Israel in attempts to achieve regional and territorial aims (Katzman, 2016). On the contrary, Saudi officials have sought to position the Kingdom as a patron and protector of Sunni Arab interests in Syria while pursuing Saudi national interests in Syria relative to Iran. Saudi officials have consistently advocated for increasing pressure on pro-Asad forces in Syria, and the Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir has frequently repeated the Kingdom's view that President Asad must leave office either through negotiations or through military means. Many observers have interpreted this formulation as a commitment by the Saudi government to provide continued material support to anti-Asad armed groups in the event that efforts to find a negotiated solution to the Syria crisis are unsuccessful (Blanchard, 2016).

In Iraq, the U.S. military ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003 benefitted Iran strategically by removing a long-time enemy and producing governments led by Shia Islamists who have long-standing ties to Iran. Iran was a strong backer of the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, a Shia Islamist who Tehran reportedly viewed as loyal. The June 2014 attack led by the Islamic State at one point brought IS forces just 50 miles away from the Iranian border. Iran responded quickly by supplying the Baghdad government as well as *Peshmerga* force of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with IRGC-QA advisers, intelligence drone surveillance, weapons shipments, and other direct military assistance. Iranian leaders also reportedly acquiesced to U.S. insistence that Iran's long-time ally Maliki be replaced, helping engineer his replacement by the more inclusive Abadi (Katzman, 2016, pp.12-13). For Saudi Arabia, in December 2015, Saudi officials reopened the Kingdom's diplomatic offices in Iraq after a 25-year absence, marking a milestone in a normalization of Saudi-Iraq relations that occurred since the 2014 change in Iraq leadership from Nouri al-Maliki to Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi. Saudi leaders viewed Maliki as unduly influenced by Iran and have appeared willing to engage Abadi in pursuit of better bilateral relations and support of more inclusion of Iraq's Sunnis. Saudi officials likely view the increasing empowerment of Iran-linked Shia militia groups in Iraq with suspicion (Blanchard, 2016).

As for Yemen, it does not appear to represent a core security interest of Iran, but Iranian leaders appear to perceive Yemen's instability as an opportunity to acquire an additional leverage against Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Yemen's elected leaders have long claimed that Iran is trying to take advantage of Yemen's instability by a Zaydi Shia movement known as the "Houthis" (Ansar Allah) with arms and other aids. Even though there is lesser support for Houthis by Iran than that in Iraq and Syria, a senior Iranian official reportedly told journalists in December 2014 that the IRGC-QF has a "few hundred" personnel in Yemen training Houthi fighters. Iran reportedly has shipped unknown quantities of arms to the Houthis, as has been reported by a panel of U.N. experts assigned to monitor Iran's compliance with U.N. restrictions on its sales of arms abroad (Katzman, 2016). In September 2014, the Houthis and their allies seized key locations in the capital, Sana'a, and took control of major government locations in January 2015, forcing Saleh's successor, Abd Rabu Mansur al-Hadi, to flee to Aden. Saudi Arabia subsequently assembled a 10-country Arab coalition, with logistical help from the United States, which undertook military action against the Houthi forces. Some analysts have viewed Saudi support for President Hadi and the transition since 2011 as a hedge against potential threats to Saudi interests posed by a broad range of Yemeni political forces and armed movements, including pro-ousted Saleh movements, Houthi movements, the tribal and Sunni Islamist supporters of the reform movement, and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (Blanchard, 2016).

8. Crisis period and Execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr

On January 2, 2016, Riyadh announced the execution of Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, 56, who had voiced bitter opposition to the Saudi royal family, and 46 other "terrorists". Demonstrators rallied in Qatif, Eastern Saudi Arabia, where most of the Shia minority live. Nimr was arrested in 2012, three years after calling for the Eastern Province's Qatif and Al-Ihsaa governorates to be separated from Saudi Arabia and united with Bahrain.

Tehran warned that Riyadh would "pay a high price" for the execution, but the Saudis call Iran "a state that sponsors terror". Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, ratcheted up the rhetoric, declaring "God's hand of retaliation will grip the neck of Saudi leaders", and Saudi would face "divine revenge" for what he claimed was the killing of an "oppressed scholar", who opposed Saudi's ruling family (Ladane Nasser, 2016). The situation transformed into a foreign policy crisis when on January 2, 2016, hundreds of demonstrators in Tehran set fire to the Saudi Embassy before the police made 40 arrests. In Mashhad, north-eastern Iran, four more protesters were arrested after a crowd torched a Saudi consulate. Even though, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani denounced the attacks on the Saudi Embassy and consulate as "totally unjustifiable" and this wording of Rouhani was understood as his intention not to escalate the crisis which was opposite to hardliner stance, the next day Saudi Arabia's decision makers quickly responded by cutting all diplomatic relations with Iran and gave Iranian diplomats 48 hours to leave the Kingdom (Sinclair, 2016).

The situation became serious when Gulf monarchies expressed support for Saudi Arabia, in particular Bahrain, which faces chronic unrest among its Shia minority, and where police used tear gas to disperse demonstrators. Indignation flooded the Shia world. In Iraq, hundreds demonstrated in the holy Shia city of Karbala and prominent Shia lawmaker Khalaf Abdelsamad called for the closure of Riyadh's embassy in Baghdad, newly reopened after a 25-year rift (Ladane Nasser, 2016).

Not only in Iran did the execution create widespread anger outside the country. For example, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah slammed the Riyadh government as "criminal and terrorist". "This is not something we can ignore," he warned. Thousands of Shia demonstrated in Pakistan and violence broke out in Bahrain and Indian Kashmir ("Iran-Saudi cold war grows fiery hot", 2016).

Tehran accused Riyadh of seeking to stoke regional tensions and said the Saudi decision to cut ties would not deflect attention from Riyadh's "big mistake" of executing Nimr. Thousands of supporters of prominent Iraqi Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr protested in Baghdad to demand that it severed ties with Riyadh. Blasts rocked two Sunni mosques in central Iraq, killing one man, while a muezzin (a person calling for prayer) was gunned down in the south of Baghdad. Bahrain and Sudan cut diplomatic ties with Iran, and the United Arab Emirates downgraded its relations. In Tehran, 3,000 people protested against the Saudi royal family and burnt Israeli and U.S. flags. Saudi Arabia also cut all air and trade links with Iran (Townsend, 2016).

Another movement was the travel to Pakistan of Saudi officials to secure the commitments from Pakistan's military authorities that any attacks (perceived attack from Iran) on Saudi territory would elicit a strong response from Pakistan (Blanchard, 2016). While the crisis is partly rooted in the Sunni-Shia conflict, it is mainly a struggle for political dominance of the Middle East between Shia-led Iran and Sunni-led Saudi Arabia.

9. Crisis under Control

Post-crisis has not been well-reached; the crisis is still ongoing. It will probably take more than a year for its recovery as we had seen from the experience when Saudi-Iranian relations were at their worst since 1987. Saudi Arabia broke off relations with Iran following an apparent massacre of Iranian pilgrims in Mecca during a Hajj. That massacre led to a storming of the Saudi embassy in Iran by angry youths and the death of a Saudi diplomat. Saudi Arabia severed relations with Iran for four years in response.

While some scholars may be afraid of the crisis' escalation to war or confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, both countries are well aware of the catastrophe from war. If the war is intentionally or accidentally occurs, it will affect not only the two states and the region but the world at large, especially a great impact on the world economy given that the two countries are major oil producers. The oil prices would increase because of the limited supply in circumstances of high demand. However, major power

countries, particularly the U.S., will not allow that to happen because it will harm their national interests in the Middle East and slow down their economic development.

Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Defence Minister Muhammad bin Salman said in the interview in the Economist magazine that anyone pushing for a direct war between Iran and Saudi Arabia “is somebody who is not in their right mind. Because a war between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the beginning of the major catastrophe in the region and it will reflect very strongly on the rest of the world. For sure we will not allow any such thing.” Asked if he considered Iran to be Saudi Arabia’s biggest enemy, he said: “we hope not” (Blanchard, 2016).

10. Impact of the Execution

For Saudi Arabia, the worsening relationship with Iran could affect regime stability. There are emerging signs of disquiet with King Salman’s leadership, especially among the nation’s youths who are more attuned to events and developments outside Saudi Arabia. People are more open to questions about the monopoly that the royal family has in every aspect of the country’s political, economic and social spheres. Some protests have broken out over these issues, with some of the most high-profile unrest occurring among minority Shia populations in the Eastern Province. Moreover, with these challenges, Saudi Arabia could benefit domestically from the execution, which was popular among a number of Sunni clerics and pro-government loyalists. The execution may also be a reinforcement of the more assertive foreign policy stance of King Salman. By refusing to agree to Iranian pressure to release al-Nimr, King Salman may hope he has projected a position of strength at home and abroad (A Drum Cussac Global View, 2016).

For Iran, the current diplomatic tension with Saudi Arabia may play into an ongoing power struggle between hardliners and moderates. Since taking office for three years, President Hassan Rouhani has welcomed better relations with Saudi Arabia, as well as the rest of the world. Most prominently, Rouhani’s government has engaged with powers it considered hostile such as the U.S. on high-profile issues such as the landmark nuclear agreement signed in July 2015. However, Rouhani’s approach to improving relations with the Arab world has been criticised by conservative rivals determined to undermine him. Indeed, the attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran played into the agenda of hardliners, who enjoy the support of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Furthermore, hardliners in Iranian media outlets have called for attacks on Saudi government officials and military bases (A Drum Cussac Global View, 2016).

Currently, the Hajj affair is one of the consequences created from this hostility, specifically to Iranian Pilgrims in 2016, whereby Saudi consular services has not currently operated in Iran as it severed diplomatic relations with Iran on January 3, 2016, following the attack on its Embassy and Consulate in Tehran and Mashhad by angry protesters. It causes difficulty for Iranians to acquire Hajj visas for their travel and Saudi Arabia has also insisted that third country airlines have to transport the pilgrims, while the two countries would have previously each share half of the responsibility for their travels. Iranian Foreign Ministry official said that “it is obvious that a non-normal status is not acceptable to Iran” (Press TV, 2016).

Lastly, the impact of this execution has indispensably widened and continued the sectarian division between Sunni-Shia in the Middle East with ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and other countries in the region. Until the war in Syria and Yemen is resolved, the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran would be probably able to resume to the normal relationship. The proxy war environment will also be reduced. That pleasant environment will help lessened hatred and distrust between Sunni-Shia in the region, but rather impossible to reach of its total elimination.

11. Conclusion

The foreign policy crisis between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the execution of Saudi Shia Cleric, Shaikh Nimr al-Nimr, is a continuing phenomenon of a protracted conflict that has begun since the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979. The conflict derives from their competition for hegemonic ambition in the Middle East and a quest for leadership in the Muslim world. The rivalry has been reinforced by sectarianism, which was not the case before the 1979 revolution, but afterward, the division of Sunni and Shia has gradually appeared in their state-level relationships and has been empowered in proxy war scenarios, particularly in Syria and Yemen. The execution of al-Nimr has worried some scholars about its escalation to war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, it has confirmed their mutual rationality, not to

escalate to any possible confrontations but instead strengthened by sending more support to their allies, because both states know very well of a possible catastrophe that will not only affect them but the region and the whole world if they wage war against each other. The impacts are huge for Iran because it has cut diplomatic relations with some Gulf States where it seeks economic cooperation to improve their economy after sanctions were lifted. The Hajj affair is another difficulty for Iranian pilgrims, as they have to obtain a Hajj visa and take third country airlines after Saudi severed diplomatic ties and cut all air links with Iran. Saudi Arabia has been blamed for human rights violation especially in the case of the execution of Shaikh Nimr along with the majority of Sunni terrorists. The most critical impact here is a more deeply rooted sectarian division between Sunni and Shia in the region and its expansion throughout the world.

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