

Saudi clash with Iran rashly complicates Mideast affairs

Financial Times, 05 January 2016.

Ahmed Rashid

Protests against the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr outside the Saudi embassy in Tehran © Getty Images
Even before the rash decision to execute the Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, the Middle East was being riven by failed states, civil wars and religious sectarianism and Saudi Arabia was facing acute problems of its own.

The collapse of the oil price has put an enormous strain on the Saudi budget; there is a lack of cash to pay for the huge subsidies on basic commodities for the populace; and controlling Islamist dissent is becoming more challenging. Yet the Saudi move has vastly complicated the international peace efforts in Syria, Yemen and Libya.

After the 47 executions on 2 January – mostly of Sunni convicted terrorists, along with four Shia who were only charged with violence against the police – an Iranian mob burnt down the Saudi embassy in Tehran, Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations with Iran and, even as the world urged caution, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Kuwait have also ended relations with Iran. In a foretaste of what is to come, there were Iran's protests were followed by anti-Saudi demonstrations by Shia, in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bahrain and Lebanon.

This all comes amid unconfirmed reports of feuds within the Saudi royal family and speculation that a strong lobby is developing within the family against Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the 30-year-old eldest son of King Salman bin Abdulaziz, 79.

The deputy crown prince is in charge of the state oil monopoly and economic policy and is the minister of defence responsible for the war in Yemen and those being fought against Syria's President Bashar al-Assad and the Islamist group Isis. No prince has ever acquired so much power at such a young age before – and it is creating resentment in the family.

The prince seems to be banking on his more rash acts of policy – such as going to war in Yemen and snubbing Iran – ensuring his future popularity. In fact, from what they have told me, many modern and younger Saudis will be repulsed by the turn of events.

The nine-month-long invasion of Yemen by Saudi forces, the Gulf states and their Yemeni allies has been a disaster. The rebel Shia Houthis have been hanging on while last month, the UN Security Council voiced “deep concern about the humanitarian situation in Yemen, which continues to worsen”, saying that more than 80 per cent of the country's 21m people require some form of humanitarian aid.

But the more dangerous problem in the Middle East is the unprecedented growth, thanks to Isis, of Sunni-Shia sectarianism. Last year, for the first time there seemed to be a healthy debate in both Saudi Arabia and the Arab world at large on how to calm it down. Commentators and world leaders weighed in begging the Saudis – considered the fountainhead of Sunni leadership through their control of Mecca and of extremism through the Wahhabi doctrine – and the Iranians to give up their sectarian battles as the world tried to find a solution for Syria.

The Saudis have upped the stakes considerably by taking Iran head on. Now they have everything to lose. In most countries in the region the Shia constitute a minority, but a militant and emotional one that no Muslim government wants to antagonise. Riyadh had just announced an alliance of 34 Sunni states to fight terrorism. Now that initiative risks being blown out of the water because other states fear that what the Saudis really want is an alliance against Iran.

Much is hanging by a thread: the peace talks in Libya and Yemen and most importantly the Vienna process on Syria on which the US and the EU have staked so much – partly in a bid to stop the massive flow of Arab migrants to Europe. Everything depended on Iranian compliance and Saudi patience despite their sectarian enmities, but the two are unlikely even to sit at the same table.

There is also the risk of more outsiders being sucked into the civil wars. Already Iran is recruiting Shia from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Iraq and putting them into the fight to defend Mr Assad, while hundreds of Columbian mercenaries are reportedly fighting in Yemen for the Saudi-led coalition.

For the diplomats and peacemakers, it is back to square one. Before anyone can make progress on Syria, some modicum of a patch-up between Iran and Saudi Arabia has to take place. The rhetoric needs to be toned down. Other states have been begging these two enemies to do precisely that for years but to no avail. Things are not looking much more hopeful now.

The writer is author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and central Asia, most recently ‘Pakistan on the Brink’