

Middle East Tensions Escalate in Wake of Saudi Mass Beheadings

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Tensions within the war-ravaged Middle East have escalated sharply in the wake of Saudi Arabia's January 2 mass executions of 47 prisoners, including a prominent Shia cleric who had criticized the ruling monarchy and its suppression of the country's Shia minority population.

Saudi Arabia cut all diplomatic ties with Iran on Sunday, using angry protests against the beheading of the Shia cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, as the pretext. Demonstrators Sunday stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran and firebombed a consular facility in the Iranian city of Mashhad. At least 50 of the protesters were arrested and no Saudi functionaries were injured.

On Monday, the Saudi monarchy followed up its severing of diplomatic links with the announcement that it is also banning all flights to and from Iran and also cutting trade ties.

The Saudi actions were followed Monday by Bahrain and Sudan severing diplomatic ties with Iran as well. Bahrain, which is host to the US Fifth Fleet, is a majority Shia country ruled by a dictatorial Sunni monarchy. Saudi troops and tanks played the decisive role in suppressing mass protests that swept the country in 2011.

For its part, Sudan, a former ally of Iran, switched allegiances last year after heavy Saudi investments in the Sudanese economy, including a reported deposit of up to \$4 billion from the Saudis and their Gulf Cooperation Council into Sudan's central bank.

Another Sunni gulf oil sheikdom, the United Arab Emirates, downgraded its diplomatic relations with Tehran, but stopped short of severing all ties with Iran, which is a major trading partner.

Iran's Foreign Ministry condemned the Saudi regime for using the protests as a pretext to cut ties and ratchet up tensions. "Saudi Arabia sees not only its interests but also its existence in pursuing crises and confrontations and attempts to resolve its internal problems by exporting them to the outside," ministry spokesman Hossein Jaber Ansari said Monday.

He insisted that Iran was committed to providing diplomatic security, adding, "Saudi Arabia, which thrives on tensions, has used this incident as an excuse to fuel the tensions."

Evidence emerged Monday that, indeed, the mass executions and the subsequent breaking of relations were part of a well-planned Saudi provocation.

The British daily *Independent* made public the contents of a leaked Saudi government memo showing that the ruling monarchy “knew the mass execution of 47 people would spark an angry backlash and ordered its security services to be on full alert before going ahead.”

The memo, directed from the head of security services to police agencies across the desert kingdom, placed the regime’s extensive repressive apparatus on a high state of alert.

The British human rights group Reprieve, which first received the leaked memo, said it pointed to the “politically motivated” character of the mass beheadings.

“This letter shows the level of preparation the Saudi authorities went to ahead of Saturday, having predicted the outrage that would follow their politically motivated executions of protesters,” said Maya Foa, head of the death penalty team at Reprieve.

Mass protests have continued in the wake of the state killings. A crowd of several thousand gathered in Tehran again on Monday, while demonstrators in Iraq besieged the recently reopened Saudi embassy in Baghdad’s Green Zone and took to the streets of the predominantly Shia cities of Basra, Karbala and Najaf.

In a disturbing sign that the Saudi action is stoking sectarian strife, two Sunni mosques in the area of Hilla, 50 miles south of Baghdad, were rocked by bomb blasts. A muezzin was killed at one of the mosques. In a separate attack, the Sunni imam of a mosque in Alexandria in central Iraq was shot and killed by gunmen.

Meanwhile, the Saudi regime itself reported a deadly shooting incident in Sheikh Nimr’s hometown of Awamiya, in Saudi Arabia’s predominantly Shia Eastern Province, on Sunday night. While the regime claimed that its security forces had come under fire, the only victims reported were a civilian who was killed and a child who was wounded.

As the linchpin of repression and reaction in the Arab world, the Saudi monarchy has been the foremost instigator of sectarianism, deliberately exacerbating and exploiting tensions between Sunni and Shia as a means of dividing popular opposition within the country and isolating Iran, its principal regional rival.

Until now, the ruling monarchy has refrained from murdering leading figures within the Shia community—arresting and harassing them, suppressing demonstrations, but ultimately releasing them in an attempt to assuage anti-regime sentiments.

The beheading of Nimr, together with the 46 others, was clearly organized for political ends. He himself had been in prison since 2012, while the bulk of those whose heads were chopped off or were shot to death were Sunni accused of involvement in Al Qaeda attacks inside the kingdom. They had been jailed for upwards of a decade. Joining Nimr’s execution with theirs was meant to signal that Shia opposition to the monarchy’s absolute rule was tantamount to terrorism.

The political purposes of this bloody provocation are both foreign and domestic. It was staged barely three weeks before Syrian peace talks were set to begin in Geneva and less than two weeks before UN-brokered talks on a settlement of the bloody nine-month-old Saudi war in Yemen were due to resume.

The Saudi monarchy, which has been a principal financier and sponsor of the Al Qaeda-linked Sunni Islamist militias unleashed in the war for regime change in Syria, has no interest in ending the more than nearly five-year-old conflict short of toppling the government of President Bashar al-Assad, Iran's principal Arab ally.

Nor does it want to end its war in Yemen under the present conditions, with the Houthis, a Shia-based insurgent movement, undefeated. The mass beheadings coincided directly with the Saudi announcement that a supposed ceasefire declared on December 15 had formally ended.

The war in Yemen has claimed nearly 6,000 lives since the Saudi military began launching indiscriminate air strikes last March. The US has aided the intervention with arms, intelligence and midair refueling of Saudi bombers, which have dropped American-made cluster bombs on civilian targets and struck at least 100 hospitals. While it is an increasingly costly debacle for the Saudi monarchy, to end the war without defeating the Houthis would be seen as a humiliating defeat.

Ultimately, the aim of the Saudi regime is to disrupt any rapprochement between Washington and Iran in the wake of the recent nuclear deal and, if possible, to drag US imperialism into a wider war against Iran itself.

Domestically, the fomenting of sectarianism and clashes with Iran serves as a means of diverting explosive social tensions away from the monarchy itself. The kingdom faces an increasingly intractable economic crisis driven by the collapse in oil prices for which its own policies bear major responsibility. It has already implemented cuts in gasoline subsidies and increases in fees for water and electricity in an attempt to confront its fiscal crisis. More drastic austerity measures, aimed at social subsidies used to quell popular unrest, are expected.

Within official Washington, the reaction to the mass beheadings and the judicial murder of Sheikh Nimr has been muted at best. There has been no direct condemnation of the grisly mass killings, and no senior official has so much as issued a statement.

Within the ruling political establishment, policy toward the Saudi monarchy, the number one arms market for the US and Washington's closest Arab ally, is, like most basic foreign policy questions, an issue of conflict and divisions.

This was expressed Monday in editorials published by the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*.

The *Journal*, expressing the views of the most right-wing layers within ruling circles, as well as the constituency of the military-industrial complex and finance capital, which have both reaped super profits off the Saudi monarchy, posed the issue not as a matter of Saudi crimes or even crisis, but rather of the supposed danger of Iran and Russia "toppling the House of Saud," and the question of whether the Obama administration "would do anything to stop them."

The *Journal* editorial chided the Obama administration for having "walked back" sanctions against Iran over recent ballistic missile tests. While acknowledging problems in Saudi support for the export of Wahhabism, the ideological underpinnings of Al Qaeda, ISIS and similar outfits, the *Journal* concluded: "But in a Middle East wracked by civil wars, political

upheaval and Iranian imperialism, the Saudis are the best friend we have in the Arabian peninsula. The US should make clear to Iran and Russia that it will defend the Kingdom from Iranian attempts to destabilize or invade.”

The *Post* took a somewhat more concerned approach, recognizing that the execution of Nimr “was an act that appears bound—and maybe was intended—to further inflame conflict between Shiites and Sunnis across the Middle East.” It warns against the Saudi ruling family “sowing chaos in an already stricken region while undermining itself.”

However, it attributes Riyadh’s “reckless moves” to “Saudi perceptions that the United States is no longer willing or able to stop Iran’s drive for Middle Eastern hegemony, forcing Sunni regimes to act in their own defense.”

In the end both editorials point to the same supposed remedy for the destruction and bloodshed wrought by both US imperialism and its Saudi client state in the Middle East: the escalation of militarism and the preparation of new and even wider wars directed against both Iran and Russia.

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