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The Saudi-Iranian Blood Feud

Ted Galen Carpenter

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Tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have frequently flared over the years, reached full intensity this winter when the Saudi government executed 47 regime opponents, including the prominent Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr. Immediately, there were riots in Iran directed against Saudi targets, culminating in the burning of the Saudi embassy—an incident that even Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, condemned. Riyadh responded by severing diplomatic relations with Tehran, a step that several smaller Saudi allies and clients quickly emulated.

Animosity between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been building steadily for years. Among other things, the two governments support opposite sides of several civil wars, in what amounts to a regional power struggle between Sunni and Shia Islam. A few years ago, Saudi Arabia intervened militarily to prop up the Sunni ruling family in Bahrain against an increasingly angry majority Shi'ite population supported by Iran. More recently, the Saudis have launched air strikes against Shi'ite Houthis in Yemen to prevent a victory by that faction, which has also received material backing from Iran.

One cannot understand the bloody struggles currently taking place in Iraq and Syria without first understanding the roles played by Saudi Arabia and Iran. Although there are many complex factors involved, those conflicts are in large part local theaters in the Sunni-Shia struggle for regional dominance. Iran has supported Iraq's post-Saddam, Shi'ite-dominated government both financially and militarily. Tehran has provided even greater support to extremist Shi'ite militias in that country, which have pushed the Iraqi government to adopt retaliatory measures against the Sunni minority that ruled Iraq under Saddam Hussein and his predecessors.

Conversely, Saudi Arabia early on aided the Sunni tribes in Anbar province and elsewhere in western and northern Iraq that resisted the authority of the new government. Some of those groups eventually coalesced to form ISIS.

The Saudi-Iranian proxy war is even more evident in neighboring Syria. All too often, the Western (especially American) news media have portrayed that civil war as a Manichaean struggle between the evil regime of Bashar al-Assad and plucky insurgents seeking freedom and democracy. The reality is far more complex and sobering. Assad heads what amounts to a "coalition of religious minorities" regime. The main components of that coalition are Christians, Druze, and Assad's own political base, the Alawites, a Shi'ite offshoot. That faction receives strong support from Iran (and, more recently, from Russia).

Arrayed against that government coalition is an overwhelmingly Sunni insurgency. The rebels have also received extensive financial and logistical support from two of the leading Sunni powers in the region, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, much of that aid flowed to extremely radical factions. Some of the recruits filled the ranks of ISIS. Others formed the basis of the Al-Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria.

One might think that the United States would adopt a "plague on both their houses" attitude toward the quarrels between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, there are numerous reasons why Washington has little love for Tehran. Americans recall all too well the searing pictures of the American diplomats who were held hostage at the end of Jimmy Carter's administration. And Iran was implicated in attacks on U.S. forces in the Middle East, including the bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983 and the 1996 bombing of the Air Force quarters in the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia.

And yet, instead of asking what U.S. troops were doing in such volatile combat zones, which have little, if anything, to do with genuine American security interests, the American people have developed a visceral hatred of Iran. U.S. leaders have been equally hostile over the past three and a half decades. That official hostility has ebbed just slightly in light of the new agreement between the P5+1 powers and Iran concerning Tehran's nuclear program.

Americans have little reason to like Saudi Arabia, but that is not reflected in the attitude of the political elites or in any aspect of U.S. policy. Strikingly, in the 2016 primary debates, many of the GOP presidential candidates have repeatedly described Saudi Arabia and her allies in the Persian Gulf as "friends" of the United States. In fact, this is a bipartisan attitude. Obama-administration officials routinely refer to Saudi Arabia as a friend and an ally, a reality encapsulated by the infamous photo of President Obama bowing to Saudi King Abdullah to confirm Washington's devotion to the relationship with Riyadh. Rivaling that image was the galling photo of George W. Bush strolling hand in hand with the Saudi crown prince through the fields of the president's Crawford ranch.

Saudi Arabia's domestic behavior alone should probably disqualify the country as a friend of the United States. Riyadh's reputation as a chronic abuser of human rights is well documented. Indeed, even as Americans and other civilized populations justifiably condemned ISIS for its barbaric practice of beheadings, America's Saudi ally executed more than 150 people in that fashion in 2015—many of whom, like Nimr al-Nimr, had done nothing more than demonstrate against or publicly criticize the regime.

In addition to its awful domestic conduct, Riyadh has consistently engaged in actions that have undermined America's security. As far back as the 1980's, when the United States and Saudi Arabia were supposedly on the same side, helping the Afghan *mujahideen* resist the Soviet army of occupation, Saudi officials worked closely with Pakistan's intelligence agency to direct the bulk of the financial and military aid to the most extreme Islamist forces. Many of them became cadres in various terrorist organizations around the world once the war in Afghanistan ended.

Saudi Arabia's support for extremists in Afghanistan was consistent with her overall policy. For decades, the Saudi government has funded the outreach program of the Wahhabi clergy and its fanatical message of hostility to secularism and the West. Training centers (*madrasas*) have

sprouted like poisonous ideological mushrooms throughout much of the Muslim world, thanks to Saudi largesse. That campaign of indoctrination has had an enormous impact on at least two generations of Muslim youth. Given the pervasive program of Saudi-sponsored radicalism, it is no coincidence that 15 of the 19 hijackers on September 11 were Saudi nationals. It is troubling that Riyadh's friends in Washington still insist on keeping key pages of the 9/11 Commission Report classified—pages rumored to implicate members of the extended Saudi royal family in the funding of Al Qaeda's terrorist operations.

One would think that, given Riyadh's track record of disloyalty, U.S. officials would be extremely wary about supporting the initiatives of their Saudi "ally." But such caution has not been evident. Instead, U.S. policy has been characterized by equal parts hypocrisy and gullibility. The first characteristic was all too evident following the Saudi-led invasion of Bahrain to keep the Sunni royal family in power. That action constituted blatant interference in the internal affairs of another country and ran counter to strong evidence of what a majority of Bahrain's population wanted. Yet Washington had nothing but praise for Riyadh's conduct.

U.S. hypocrisy escalated with regard to Saudi Arabia's more recent military intervention in Yemen. In this case, the United States is actually providing intelligence information and logistical support for the intervening forces. This deepens U.S. meddling in a complex civil war, and arguably on the wrong side of that conflict.

But Washington is now flirting with endorsing a Saudi (and Turkish) initiative that could prove more damaging than the interventions in Bahrain and Yemen. Riyadh and Ankara have expressed their interest in sending ground troops into Syria—and not necessarily making that step contingent on the implementation of a reliable ceasefire and peace process. Instead of condemning Riyadh's ploy for what it is—a barely disguised move to assist increasingly beleaguered Sunni insurgents against their regime and Russian opponents—the Obama administration has praised the offer as a potentially constructive step. But if those troops are introduced absent an effective and comprehensive ceasefire, the Sunni-Shia proxy war in Syria could escalate to a dangerous new level. The current ceasefire, shaky as it is, represents a mildly encouraging step. So, too, does the drawdown of Russian forces—although Moscow retains considerable firepower inside Syria.

But even if a more effective ceasefire precedes their introduction, having Saudi and Turkish troops maneuvering around Syria, backing favored clients, complicates an already difficult situation. Among other things, it would increase pressure on Iran to escalate her own direct involvement on behalf of Assad's government. U.S. leaders exhibit a curious myopia if they do not see the underlying problems.

In confronting the Iranian-Saudi blood feud, Washington has three policy options. Ideally, it should refrain from backing either party and recognize that both governments are ugly, repressive regimes with policy agendas that do not usually benefit the United States. If U.S. leaders cannot bring themselves to adopt a policy of strict neutrality, they need to ask themselves which regime is the more repressive and which one pursues policies that inflict greater damage on American security interests. The reflex reaction since the overthrow of the shah at the end of the 1970's has been to assume that Iran is an implacable enemy and that Saudi Arabia is a crucial ally and friend.

The reality is much more complex and disturbing. Iran is a repressive theocracy, and is certainly no friend of the United States. Despite the current agreement, Tehran may even still harbor nuclear ambitions. But Iran looks like a Jeffersonian democracy compared with Saudi Arabia. To take just one example, Tehran's treatment of women may be less than enlightened, but Saudi women not only cannot vote or own property independently, but are not allowed even to drive. Iran's police and legal system is arbitrary and brutal, but Saudi Arabia's is decidedly more barbaric.

The foreign-policy picture is murkier. Iran's clerical regime considers America the "Great Satan" and tries to undermine American interests whenever possible. But it is also true that Tehran and its Shi'ite allies in Iraq and Syria are the principal barriers to ISIS and its expansion. If Washington regards the defeat of ISIS as a high priority, trying simultaneously to undermine Iran makes little strategic sense. And one should not forget that Saudi Arabia has been instrumental in fostering the rise of ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups. Riyadh has undermined America's security at least as much as Tehran has over the decades.

The bottom line is not especially comforting. The evidence indicates that Iran is bad, but Saudi Arabia is even worse. That situation should lead the United States to a policy of a "plague on both your houses." America's true interests do not reside in either camp.

Ted Galen Carpenter is senior fellow for defense and foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute.