

Security Council Update

Saudi Arabia and Iran

Current Situation

The tensions between The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia) and The Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran) have existed in varying capacities since the late 1979 Islamic Revolution. Within a decade of the Iranian Revolution, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran nearly broke down all together. In July 1987, hundreds of pilgrims, including over 200 Iranians, were killed in clashes in the Saudi City of Mecca.¹ This led to an eruption of violence in Iran, targeted at the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Unfortunately during the fray, the Saudi Ambassador was gravely injured and eventually died.² The Saudi King cut diplomatic ties the following year. It would not be until 1999 that tensions would ease with a visit to Saudi Arabia by the Iranian President, Khatami.³ Although relations were renewed, tensions remained high throughout the new millennium as both Member States tried to gain influence in the Middle East. Unfortunately, this rivalry led to renewed tensions, as Iran pursued nuclear ambitions under President Ahmadinejad, and Saudi Arabia cracked down on its Shia population out of fear of Iran's influence on them.⁴ By 2012, both Member States began backing rival forces in Syria and Iraq, thus beginning an extended proxy war, which eventually spread into Yemen, as Saudi Arabia began fighting Iranian backed Houthi rebels in March 2015.⁵

Although both Member States have a wide-spread regional influence, as both are original members of The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), their religious denominations and demographic are vastly different. More recently, tensions have remained high and steadily growing as both Member States place blame on the other for the increasingly unstable security situation. The catalyst for the potentially disastrous current state of affairs can be found in the midst of tragedy that occurred in September 2015. On 24 September 2015, thousands of Muslims making their traditional pilgrimage to the Saudi city of Mecca were faced with a ghastly experience after a pilgrimage route was temporarily closed. This closure resulted in a crowd of thousands of pilgrims piling onto one another, which in turn incited a panic, which led to a deadly human stampede. According to the Associated Press, the death toll reached as high as 2,177, while Saudi officials reported 769 fatalities.⁶ The cause of the stampede is still unclear, however Saudi officials claim it was the result of a plot by Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Meanwhile, Iranian officials alleged that a convoy carrying a prominent Saudi official caused the Hajj route to be closed, thus resulting in the catastrophe. Iran has also accused Saudi Arabia of kidnapping Iranian officials, including Iran's former ambassador to Lebanon, who was last seen being loaded into an ambulance at the scene of the stampede.⁷

Despite an already extremely strained relationship with Iran after the misfortune that befell the Hajj, Saudi Arabia began 2016 in an extremely provocative manner by executing 47 people on 1 January 2016. Included in the 47 executed was Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who spoke out repeatedly against the Saudi government and royal family. Sheik al-Nimr was condemned to death by the Saudi government for what they referred to as "sedition and intent to invoke sectarian violence." Many in the international community, especially in the predominantly Shiite Iran, have come out in protest of the executions, claiming Sheik al-Nimr's charges and execution were in violation of his human rights. Human rights watchdog group, Amnesty International claims that the case against the Shia cleric was

¹ "The Rocky History of Iran-Saudi Relations," *NBC News*, NBC News Network, 4 January 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iran-saudi-arabia-relationship-troubled-history-n489666> (accessed 27 February 2016).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Saudi Troops Enter Northern Yemen After Houthi Clashes," *Al Jazeera English*, Al Jazeera Media Network, 27 August 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/saudi-troops-enter-northern-yemen-houthi-clashes-150827075804711.html> (accessed 27 February 2016).

⁶ Erdbrink, Thomas, "Iran Accuses Saudi Arabia of Kidnapping Officials in Chaos of Hajj Stampede," *The New York Times*, 29 October 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/30/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-arabia-hajj-stampede.html?_r=0 (accessed January 24, 2016).

⁷ Ibid.

part of a systematic effort by the Sunni government of Saudi Arabia to stifle dissent and further repress the Shiite minority within the state.⁸

Almost immediately after news of the executions broke, many enraged Iranians took to the streets of Tehran in protest. As the riots carried into the night, the Saudi embassy came under attack by protesters, some of whom were able to enter the embassy, while others reportedly tossed home-made fire-bombs at the building.⁹ The attack prompted international condemnation of Tehran, including the United Nations (UN) Security Council, which called for Iran to fulfill the internationally recognized obligation of protecting foreign embassies.¹⁰ After the attack, Saudi Arabia declared it would be severing all diplomatic ties with Iran, including prohibiting its citizens from travelling to Iran. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) joined their Saudi allies by also severing diplomatic ties with Tehran.¹¹

Following the attack on the Saudi embassy and the severance of diplomatic ties with Iran by Saudi Arabia, it was hoped that the troubling situation would not escalate further; unfortunately, additional turmoil ensued. Not even a week after the executions and embassy attack, Iranian officials came forth and accused the Saudi military of deliberately launching an airstrike against the Iranian embassy in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa.¹² The Saudi military along with a coalition of other Arab states has been engaged in an effort to combat the Shia Houthi rebels, who captured Sanaa in 2015, and soon after attempted to establish a new government. Following the accusations, a spokesman for the coalition doubted the validity of the Iranian claims, stating that a full investigation needed to be conducted to determine the truth.¹³ Neither side has apologized since the attacks on both embassies, indicating a good probability for continued conflict in the region.

Implications

It should come as no surprise that two of the Middle East's largest powers engaging in conflict could spell disaster for the region. One of the most discouraging possible impacts of conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran would be the dissolution of the coalition currently fighting against the Islamic State (ISIL). As Saudi Arabia has played a central role in forming and organizing a coalition of 34 predominantly Muslim states, a conflict between them and Iran could jeopardize the mission to eliminate ISIL.¹⁴ At a point when progress is finally being made against ISIL, losing the attention of one of the region's strongest militaries to another regional conflict could spell disaster for the coalition, as many of those Member States are not independently powerful enough to carry on the fight, and several are close allies of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, these same allies would likely choose to stand by Saudi Arabia, should conflict erupt. Looking beyond regional impacts, a war between Iran and Saudi Arabia would also have the potential to drag other Member States into the fray. As the United States of America (USA) has been a very strong supporter of Saudi Arabia, especially with regards to supplying its military, it is possible that the USA would choose to stand by its ally and provide further support that could include direct combat action. This scenario becomes much more likely if the Russian Federation (Russia) decides to back its ally, Iran. Similar in nature to the militaristic trade relationships of the USA and Saudi Arabia, Russian arms are often sold to Iran, and have been expanded in their sophistication and capabilities as of late.¹⁵ Should either the USA or Russia choose to become involved in this brewing conflict, the other would undoubtedly step in as well, as both Member States have been vying for influence in the region.

⁸ Basil, Yousef, "Tehran Protest after Saudi Arabia Executes Shiite Cleric," *CNN*, Cable News Network, 2 January 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/02/middleeast/saudi-arabia-executes-dozens-terror/> (accessed January 24, 2016).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "UN Condemns Attack on Saudi Embassy in Iran," *BBC News*, 5 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35229385> (accessed January 24, 2016).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Botelho, Greg, "Iran Accuses Saudis of Striking Its Yemen Embassy," *CNN*, Cable News Network, 8 January 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/07/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-tensions/> (accessed January 25, 2016).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Payne, Ed, "34 Islamic Nations Form Coalition to Fight Terrorism," *CNN*, Cable News Network, 22 December 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/14/middleeast/islamic-coalition-isis-saudi-arabia/> (accessed January 25, 2016).

¹⁵ Eisenstadt, Michael, "Russian S-300 Missiles to Iran: Groundhog Day or Game-Changer?" *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 4 September 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russian-s-300-missiles-to-iran-groundhog-day-or-game-changer> (accessed January 25, 2016).

In summary, should the developing conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia expand into a full-scale armed crisis, not only will the entire region be horribly affected, but the impacts will also be felt worldwide, as global powers will inevitably be called to take action. Unless the two Member States cease their hostile rhetoric and retaliatory aggression, this dreadful situation could easily become reality.