

*The following paper is the second in a series of papers focused on current issues in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. The views herein are solely those of the author and do not represent the official positions of the Saudi Arabian government, other members of the Saudi royal family, or any other public or private institutions within the Kingdom. Commentary and/or ideas for further development of any of the opinions expressed in this paper are welcome.*

### **Know Your Enemy, Embrace Your Friends: A Call For Caution on Relations with Iran**

Entrusted with guardianship over Islam’s most holy sites, Saudi Arabia has been and will continue to be a pivotal force in the Muslim world. Each year, the Kingdom welcomes over one million Muslim Pilgrims (Sunni, Shia, and Sufi...) across its borders, risking its internal security and straining its infrastructure to host men, women, and children from around the world as they fulfill obligations to their faith. Fortunately, Saudi Arabia’s natural resources have provided the wealth necessary to host these millions, and our leaders have worked ceaselessly to improve accommodations and to provide for the safety of these pilgrims; indeed, over one hundred thousand security officers, doctors, paramedics, nurses and volunteers are deployed each year. No other country on earth faces the same challenges on an annual basis. No other country has invested so much time and so many resources to ensure that the faithful will have the opportunity to perform a religious duty. The Kingdom does this without discrimination, and neither begrudges nor persecutes those who make the journey across its borders. The enormity of this undertaking is easy to underestimate and overlook, but its value to the faithful is enormous and real. Despite these accomplishments, the headlines tend to seek or manufacture failure, focusing only on the tragedies, rather than the sheer magnitude of the effort itself.<sup>1</sup> And for this, Saudis and their leaders do not brag or gloat, or try to find scapegoats when something goes wrong. Instead, the Kingdom and its leaders acknowledge that this is a mantle that we have chosen to bear and that, as much as we try, we cannot be the perfect host one hundred percent of the time, even though our annual goal is to provide a truly holy experience for every pilgrim, regardless of nationality or sect. As Prince Turki Al Faisal noted, our oversight of the Hajj is “a matter of sovereignty and privilege and service,” even though it requires preparation and security for the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Iran – and most of the Western media – strongly criticized of the Kingdom following the tragic Mina stampede in September 2015, in which over 2,000 pilgrims lost their lives. Almost immediately, the Iranian regime used this tragedy to disparage the Saudi government, calling it “irresponsible,” and allowing demonstrations through the streets of Tehran with protestors chanting “death to Al Saud.” This criticism was levied despite the fact that the Saudi government immediately launched an investigation into the incident, and has promised both accountability and reform if any Saudi officials made mistakes leading up to or during pilgrimage.

movement of millions of people over a series of eight days (the equivalent of mobilizing for ten Super Bowls every day for week). This, I believe, epitomizes the Saudi character, for it reveals a sense of duty and loyalty to our Muslim brothers and sisters that is both real and deep, and which is truly the fabric of who we are as a people.

But why is this relevant – what bearing does it have on current events in the Middle East or within the Kingdom itself? Superficially, perhaps very little; however, viewed in light of current events that have been unfolding since the beginning of the year, appreciating Saudi Arabia’s character and role in the Muslim world is, in fact, crucial to understanding the Kingdom’s actions both internally and on the international stage, particularly with respect to Iran. Suddenly, it seems, Saudi Arabia is being portrayed as waging a proxy war against Iran, giving rise to claims of a “Cold War in the Desert” with Saudi Arabia and Iran battling for control of the dominant political and religious ideology in the region. Such characterizations dominate the Western media and even leading publications in political science and international affairs, with some even suggesting that armed conflict may erupt over our mutual animosity. While there is no doubt that tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran are high, and that the rhetoric on both sides is strong, viewed from the ground – from the streets of Riyadh, Bahrain, Dubai, and even Cairo and Islamabad – the reality of the current state of affairs is quite different, with the emergence of Iran as a “prodigal son” being the number one cause for concern for most of us who follow the news. Iran, we are being told, has changed, and yet despite these assurances we are struggling to understand just exactly how this change has occurred.

Indeed, recent coverage of the Islamic Republic of Iran suggests that a turning point has been reached, and that a country that was once a pariah is positioned to re-enter the international community as an equal among its peers. Sanctions have been lifted, Iran has a deal that will – many believe - allow it to develop nuclear weapons in less than two decades, (*see*, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The agreement restricts Iran’s efforts to enrich weapons grade uranium for the next fifteen years), and gives Iran a legitimacy that it has not possessed in years. These developments have been welcomed by some as a new chapter in the story of Iran’s strained relationship with the rest of the world, but for those of us in the front lines, for those of us living and working in the Middle East at the doorstep of Iran’s expansionist ambitions, Iran remains the greatest threat to regional peace and security that we have known since the end of the Cold War (but again, this is *not* a Cold War). For those of us paying

attention to the facts, Iran's actions speak louder than its promises. The JCPOA has been in force for less than six months, and already Iran has fired missiles [over French and U.S. ships in the Arabian Gulf]; already, Iran has flown drones over military vessels sailing in international waters to obtain and publish photographs; already, Iran has seized American military personnel who mistakenly entered its territory and used them as propaganda. Far from indicating a "new beginning," Iran's behavior seems to us to suggest nothing more than a new, and quite dangerous, sense of bravado.

In fact, as Iran continues along its path of subversion and deceit, we in the Arab world look in both dismay and concern. How can the West be so easily duped, we wonder, and why are all of our efforts to contribute to the dialogue and abide by the rules of the international community ignored? These are the questions being asked and debated on the streets and the cafes throughout the Middle East. These are the sentiments shared by millions of Arabs, both in Saudi Arabia and around the world, all of whom wonder why the United States and the Western media have, for the most part, turned a blind eye to Iran's human rights abuses, support of terrorism throughout the world, and intent to destabilize the Middle East with its radical ideology. While we understand that sanctions could not last indefinitely, and that the Iranian people needed relief from their devastating effect, it is difficult for us not to wonder whether the pendulum has not swung too far, too fast, in the other direction as we watch President Rouhani make his tour across Europe like a long lost friend who has suddenly returned to play by the rules. Why, we wonder, is the West rewarding Iran for bad behavior, while at the same time condemning Saudi Arabia and its allies for their efforts to confront radical Islamic groups and, more importantly, to promote regional stability in times of increasing economic and political uncertainty? Iran, it seems, can commit atrocities and defy international law, but will be praised and rewarded when it complies with agreements meant to contain its bellicose ambitions.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are criticized for their "Stone-Age" political and legal systems, and censured for their efforts to quell internal threats. Iran executes dozens, and gets a pass because it agrees not to develop nuclear weapons; Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, executes forty-four Sunni terrorists and three Shia radicals following a full series of legitimate, fair and open trials and the Kingdom is condemned for its imprudence and desire to incite sectarian division across the Middle East. At no point did the Kingdom or its judiciary segregate or discriminate based on whether the alleged terrorist was

a Sunni or a Shi'ite, but instead it was the Iranians themselves who singled out this distinction in order to meddle in Saudi Arabia's internal affairs and promote division and violence. Quite simply, the forty-seven individuals who were executed were Saudis, *not* Iranians, thus making Iran's condemnation of the punishment completely unjustified. When the Iranian regime executes its citizens, the Saudi government does not interfere or incite protest, regardless of the religious beliefs of affiliation of those executed. Further, Iran exports radicalism, funds and arms terrorist organizations – U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry recently affirmed during a visit to the Kingdom that Iran is a chief supplier of weapons to Hezbollah - and maintains “Death to America” as a national anthem. The Iranian regime allows for attacks on foreign embassies, supports plots to assassinate foreign diplomats, and supports Bashar al-Assad, a [leader who has committed atrocities against his own people]. Guided by a constitution that calls upon its leadership to continue the Islamic revolution throughout the world, the Iranian regime uses its Revolutionary Guard to oppress its own people and to foment conflict around the region. And yet, despite these flagrant affronts to international law and diplomacy, Iran is on the verge of success of its quest for legitimacy.

In response to these developments, Saudi Arabia has above all else exercised diplomatic and political restraint. America is, after all, an old and important ally, and Saudis don't abandon relationships easily or at first offense. Make friends with a Saudi, and you're generally a friend for life. Still, however, the United States' recent apparent rapprochement with Iran cannot help but be a cause for concern, making re-affirmance of Saudi-U.S. relations more important than ever. For most Saudis, Iran's actions are well known and speak for themselves; however, the full range of Iran's transgressions must be known in order to appreciate the reasons to mistrust Iran's intentions. Failure to recognize and denounce Iran's transgressions will only further exacerbate the lack of trust felt by many Arab states towards Western powers, and particularly the U.S., following the Arab Spring and, more recently, the exclusion of all key regional players (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, etc.) in the negotiations on Iran's nuclear program. Having been shunned from talks that directly impact their security, many in the Arab world cannot help but feel skeptical about the West's commitment to the Gulf region and its allies. Indeed, despite the fact that the U.S. has supported the Saudi Arabian government's efforts against the Iranian backed Houthis in Yemen, many Arabs feel that the West does not appreciate the threat that these rebels present to Saudi security and ignores the legitimacy of our fight for the Yemeni

people. Further, while Saudi Arabia is by no means immune from criticism, the Kingdom remains open to engagement with – not defiance of – the Western world, and for that reason alone, Iran’s true character must be acknowledged by examining both its past and present actions.

### **Embassy on Fire: Iran’s War on Diplomats**

Any analysis of Iran’s relationship with the Western world and its neighbors in the Middle East must be framed around three key features of the Iranian regime: its commitment to developing a nuclear weapons program; its support for terrorist groups and illegitimate leaders, and its desire to divide the region along sectarian lines in the effort to export its form of radical revolution to other states. Working both independently and in conjunction with one another, these policies continue to define Iran’s actions, as can be seen in most recently in the regime’s complete disregard for diplomatic norms and international law when it allowed the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran and a Saudi consulate to be attacked following the execution of the Shia Saudi cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who had been accused and convicted of terrorism, inciting violence, and causing the death of Saudi policemen (Nimr was captured during a shootout between Saudi forces and Nimr’s personal militia). Notwithstanding the fact that Iran’s anger over Nimr’s execution was completely unjustified and itself emblematic of the regime’s strategy of promoting sectarian violence (which will be discussed further below), the Iranian government’s failure to protect and defend the Saudi embassy from protesters illustrates the country’s disdain for the Vienna Convention and other customary standards of security and protection afforded to diplomats. Although Supreme Leader Khamenei and other Iranian officials condemned the attacks, their response came only after the international community, including the U.N. Security Council, rebuked Iran for allowing such transgressions to occur. Meanwhile, the Saudi response to these direct threats and attacks upon its citizens and sovereignty has been marked by restraint and respect for international law: there were no attacks on the Iranian embassy in Riyadh, or its consulate in Jeddah, nor were there mass protests in the streets against Iranians or Shi’ites; instead, the Kingdom condemned the attacks and cut ties with Iran. No buildings burned in Saudi Arabia.

Further, it is important to recognize that the attack on the Saudi embassy was by no means an isolated event, but instead represented only the latest transgression in a decades long campaign of aggression against international interests and diplomats both within Iran and around

the world. Indeed, the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and the subsequent hostage crisis in 1979 marked only the beginning of Iran's promotion of violence against foreign diplomats and officers with the Iranian regime either directly ordering or failing to act against threats to those it deemed a threat to its own legitimacy. The 2011 storming of the British embassy in Tehran, over which the Iranian government expressed "regret," exemplifies the regime's flagrant disregard for its responsibility to protect foreign diplomats and, with other hostile actions – for instance, its orchestration of a plot to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the U.S. in 2011 – serves as an unfortunate precursor to the attacks on the Saudi embassy in January. Further, through its support of terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran has aided in attacks on U.S. embassies (Beirut and Kuwait in 1983), as well as other Westerners throughout the world (Argentina, Bahrain, Pakistan, to name only a few). The purpose of this paper is not, however, to catalogue Iran's many transgressions against diplomatic protocol and international law, but rather to illustrate how the regime's consistent and systematic violations cannot and should not be overlooked. This is particularly true in light of the recent attacks on Saudi interests in Iran, where many have sought to chastise the Saudi government for being "reckless" and "inviting" Iranian retribution. Instead, as Iran's track record makes abundantly clear, the execution of Nimr al-Nimr served only as a pretext for the Iranian government to unleash its supports against Saudi interests and to continue its campaign against international law.

### **Sunni vs. Shia: Myth vs. Reality**

Taking one step further back to examine the event that allegedly led to the attacks on the Saudi Arabian embassy, the Iranian regime's duplicity is further evidenced through its support of claims that al-Nimr was targeted by Saudi security forces and executed not because of the crimes he had committed, but purely because he was Shia. The Iranian government promoted this characterization of both al-Nimr himself and the events leading up to his trial and sentencing in order to provoke outrage against the Kingdom, and for the most part the Western media and even several governments have used this argument to contend that the Saudi government is actively persecuting its Shia citizens, and particularly those who are outspoken, which they condemn. While some of this censure of Saudi Arabia is rooted in critics' opposition to capital punishment and the royal family (which are issues outside the scope of this paper), the claim that al-Nimr was executed based on his Shia faith spawned a flurry of articles and analyses on the plight of Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia, many of which seemed determined above all else to find segregation

and discrimination even before the inquiry began. While incidents of prejudice against Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia do occur – just as instances of prejudice against African-Americans and Hispanics, Jews and Muslims, and most other minorities occur in the United States – those of us living in the Kingdom know that there is neither state sponsored discrimination against Shi'ites nor widespread animosity towards Shi'ites among the majority Sunni population. Throughout the Kingdom, Shia businessmen work unhindered, leading companies and obtaining government contracts, while other Shias serve as politicians or work for the government.<sup>2</sup> We are, above all else, all Muslims, and the Kingdom's duty to welcome *all* Muslims serves as the cornerstone of its very legitimacy. Any attempt to oppress or discriminate against a fellow Muslim would run counter not only to our faith, but also to the validity of the state itself. Indeed, contrary to prevailing opinion, Saudi Arabia's "proxy war" with Iran stems not from the desire to establish Sunni domination and to eradicate all Shi'ites. Instead, the Kingdom's grievances with Iran are based on the Iranian regime's destabilizing actions throughout the Middle East – some of which were recounted above – and its failure to abide by international law.

Further, critics of Saudi Arabia's alleged discrimination against Shi'ites within the Kingdom consistently overlook or ignore the plight of Sunnis in Iran, who arguably are treated far worse than *any* Saudi citizen would be treated while living in the Kingdom. In fact, Sunnis constitute approximately ten percent of Iranians, with an estimated one million living in Tehran alone, where not a single Sunni mosque exists (most others tend to live in poorer regions of the country), and they are almost completely excluded from all government jobs and, moreover, lack basic civil rights within the country. Although Iranian President Rouhani has publically stated that Sunnis in Iran should be afforded equal rights, the fact remains that the regime continues to maintain a policy that allows for the systematic repression of Sunnis. Not surprisingly, Iran's status as the world's leading country for executions (on a per capita basis) has translated into the death of countless Sunnis, many of whom are sentenced for "insurrection" after converting from Shia. Although recent events have led some commentators to acknowledge "Iran's beleaguered Sunnis," the vast majority have focused solely on Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia, ignoring the fact that Iran is actively persecuting its own citizens while we in the Kingdom look on and ask, "why the double standard?"

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, Nimr's wife at one time worked for the Saudi Ministry of Interior and had all of her medical expenses – including a trip to the United States for treatment – paid for by the government, while Nimr's children were attending U.S. schools on a full government scholarship.

## **Welcome Peaceful Overtures, But Beware of the Trojan Horse**

After years of sanctions and political isolation, the Iranian regime continues to act with impunity, and yet the world seems content on appeasement. While some sanctions persist, and the U.S. has yet to take the step to declare Iran a “friend,” there is no doubt that a concerted effort to warm relations with Iran has characterized American foreign policy for the past several years. This approach, which appears to be a reaction to failed or stagnant policies of the past, purports an objective to “move forward” by allowing Iran once again to participate in international economic and political forums. Unfortunately, as a result of this new embrace of Iran, those who challenge Iran’s intentions or who allegedly act against Iranian – and, by proxy, Shi’ite - interests are criticized for inciting sectarian violence, even where Islam is not a motivating factor.

Today as ever, Saudi Arabia remains committed to welcoming *all* Muslims to the Holy Land, and we open our country to our brothers and sisters in the faith no matter where they come from, and we likewise remain committed to defeating prejudice against Shi’ites both within and outside of the Kingdom; in fact, even despite the fact that the Saudi embassy in Iran was attacked, *no* Shi’ite Iranian will be barred from the Hajj (King Abdullah even invited then Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Mecca in 2007) – we simply will not allow politics to interfere with the obligations of our faith. Likewise, on the political front, the Saudi government seeks to build coalitions and to strengthen regional security through organizations such as the Arab League, the GCC, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Such bridge building illustrates the Kingdom’s belief in promoting unity throughout the region, rather than division, as well as its vision to increase prosperity and secure peace for *all* Muslims. Iran’s track record indicates that the regime in Tehran does not share such a commitment, and that Iran remains set on destabilizing the region by funding radical Islamic groups and attacking the Saudi government.

Iran defies, while Saudi complies. Iran condemns while Saudi supports. Iran makes mischief, while Saudi makes friends. Though not apologizing for my country – we need to make a better case for our positions and values – I believe that the time has come for Iran to be called to the table and to be held to a higher standard. Compliance with the nuclear agreement simply isn’t enough when a country is exporting terrorism across the globe. The international

community needs to take a harder line with Iran; continued complacency will only embolden its already defiant regime, and it is those of us in the Middle East who ultimately will pay the price.