Riyadh is Aggravating the Sunni-Shia Face Off

The execution of a Shia preacher, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, in Riyadh on January 2, 2016 has provoked a massive wave of protests in Shia communities all across the Middle East: in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, and other countries densely populated by Shiites. As most must know, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr was arrested a couple of years ago by the Saudi authorities on accusations of organizing mass protests during the events of the so-called “Arab Spring.” At that time the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia sought greater regional autonomy and insisted on proportional representation of the Shia minority in the central government. The Saudi authorities chose to brutally suppress all protests, subjecting Shia activists to violent repressions.

Despite the fact that during his trial in 2012, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr claimed that he never was in possession of any kind of weapons and did not call for violence, he was sentenced to death all the same. Saudi authorities have been well aware of the fact that the execution of this influential Shia cleric would be regarded as a blatant injustice by all Shiites across the entire region, yet still he was executed -- together with jihadists to stress the fact that Saudi authorities see no difference between terrorists and fighters for civil rights and freedoms. Not surprisingly, the violent death the preacher faced has made him into a martyr, whose only fault was his devotion to Islam and his criticism of the ruling Al-Saud clan that he sometimes voiced. On January 3, the Iranian spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that Saudi politicians are going to experience holy wrath brought down upon themselves for this crime. As for the West, its reaction to this medieval act of barbarity has been predictably muted.

But Iranians are not satisfied with massive demonstrations and protests all across the country, broke into the Saudi diplomatic missions in Tehran and Mashhad, destroying property and setting fire to everything in sight. Still, local police units were quick to restore order. In response, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir announced that Saudi Arabia was breaking off its diplomatic ties with Iran due to its “explicit interference in the internal affairs of the kingdom.” Saudi diplomats were immediately withdrawn from Iran, while Iranian diplomats were asked to leave the KSA (Kingdom Saudi Arabia) within 48 hours. In addition, Saudi authorities said they’re planning to cancel all flights to Iran and prohibit their subjects, except for pilgrims, from visiting Iran. Washington tried to soothe tensions between the two states but hasn’t found much success. However, the leaders of Saudi Arabia made it clear to their overseas partners that they will not tolerate the fact that Iran, with the tacit approval of the United States and other Western countries, continues to improve its offensive military capabilities.

Following Saudi Arabia’s example, Bahrain and Sudan announced that they were also breaking off diplomatic ties with Iran. Additionally, the United Arab Emirates has already announced that it’s going to cut back the number of its diplomatic representatives in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moreover, as stated by the Deputy Secretary-General of the Arab League, Ahmed Ben Helli, this organization is going to hold an emergency meeting to discuss the diplomatic conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran.
It is obvious that the execution of the Shia preacher served as a pretext for a new wave of tensions between Iran and the Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia. In a situation where there’s a growing number of political and economic conflicts between Riyadh and Tehran, the intensification of the aggressive war of words was just a matter of time.

The agreement between Tehran and the West on the Iranian nuclear program and, as a consequence, the expected withdrawal of economic sanctions from Iran brings this state out of artificially imposed international isolation, allowing it to once again become one of the leading regional powers. It’s no secret that Iran is the center of one of the main branches of Islam – Shia fundamentalism, which serves as an antithesis to the Sunni-Wahhabi version of Islam that prevails today in Saudi Arabia and among several other Persian Gulf monarchies. Tehran’s influence in the Middle East in recent years has considerably strengthened, be it in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Libya, or Bahrain’s Shia community. The Gulf monarchies are terrified by the strengthening “Shia arc” in the region, so they have been reluctant to share power or resources with Shia minorities. The greatest irritation among all for the Wahhabi regimes is their inability to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria or suppress the Houthi uprising in Yemen. That is why, despite the formal claims that they are fighting international terrorism, the Gulf monarchies continue supporting radical Islamist groups in the region.

Moreover, Iran makes no secret of the fact that it is going to grab its own part of the oil market and restore the pre-sanction levels of oil production. Allegedly, Iran could be providing the market with up to 1 million barrels of oil per day. Moreover, it prepared to pursue the collapse of OPEC if the members of this organization fail to agree to return to all of its quotas. The conflict between Riyadh and Tehran has already caused some increase in oil prices. Thus, Brent grew by 3.35%, breaking the mark of 38 dollars per barrel, while WTI grew by 3.5%. The dollar has also went up since investors are traditionally buying American dollars against a background of immediate geopolitical threats. Paradoxically, Washington benefits from the Middle Eastern face-off.

There’s no telling how far Iran and Saudi Arabia will go amid this current confrontation, but one cannot exclude any further provocations from either side and even attempts to use armed force in this conflict. But, for the sake of objectivity, it should be noted that any direct military confrontation would not serve the interests of either state. Tehran is determined to see the withdrawal of the sanctions imposed upon it by the UN and Western countries to become a full member of the international community. In turn, Riyadh has to reckon with the increased military and economic potential of Iran and should avoid aggravating its relations with Washington any further. Yet, the situation can get out of control very quickly...

Stanislav Ivanov, PhD in History, leading research fellow of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations and the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.
