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Issue Brief

The Saudi-Iranian Tensions

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Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubair visited Pakistan yesterday to hold consultations with Pakistan in the aftermath of escalating tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. During the visit, he met Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Advisor on Foreign Affairs, Mr. Sartaj Aziz. He also had an extended meeting with Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif to discuss security cooperation. Collective response from Pakistan was one of solidarity with Saudi Arabia while maintaining its neutrality in the latest spat between the two regional powers.

The Saudi-Iranian tensions, which had been building up for more than a decade, reached a boiling point on January 3, when Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic ties with Iran. Saudi Arabia's decision came a day after angry protesters attacked its embassy in Tehran. The protesters were reacting to the execution, on January 2, of a Shia leader, Sheikh Nimr al Nimr, by Saudi authorities on charges of inciting domestic terrorism and plotting to overthrow the government. Sheikh Nimr, a populist cleric who had often called for the secession of Kingdom's oil-rich eastern province where majority of the Saudi Shia lives, had been educated in Iran and was perceived to be close to its clerical leadership, which, after his execution, hailed him as a "martyr" and warned Saudi rulers of "divine revenge." The current state of Saudi-Iranian tensions, defined as "the biggest meltdown in relations between the two regional powers in three decades," (*Bloomberg*, January 3, 2015) will have consequences far beyond the geographical boundaries, and the ambit of bilateral ties, of the two states.

This meltdown in Saudi-Iranian ties, however, is neither a new phenomenon, nor has it come about unexpectedly. In fact, the ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been characterised, for much of the history, by mutual distrust, acrimony and even outright hostility. Though, beginning from the late 1990s, Saudi Arabia and Iran experienced some sort of rapprochement under the moderate leaderships of President Khatami and King Abdullah, their bilateral relations came under fresh strains in the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, which led to the demise of Saddam's Sunni-dominated regime and emergence of a pro-Iran Shia-dominated government in that country. Since then, the two countries have been engaged in a bitter struggle for regional dominance, which has been and is being played out across the region. Nimr's execution and subsequent developments are part of this long drawn-out struggle.

In this struggle, the two countries have been found supporting the opposing sides of the political divide not only in Iraq but also in Syria and Yemen. In Syria, Iran has been supporting, with every possible means, President Assad's embattled government, whereas Saudi Arabia has been the main supporter of

anti-Assad fighters. In Yemen, Shia Houthi rebels are believed to have been supported by Iran against the Yemeni government, supported by Saudi Arabia, which has even conducted a full-scale military operation in Yemen against the Houthi rebels.

The overall impact of these developments has been such that “since its inception in 1979, never has the Islamic Republic of Iran had such influence and control over a range of state and non-state actors” across the Middle East. Iran secured another diplomatic triumph with the signing of the Iran nuclear deal in July 2015, which could lead to lifting of all nuclear-related sanctions imposed by the western countries. Saudi Arabia had been staunchly opposing the deal, fearing that the lifting of sanctions and the resultant economic recovery will provide Iran with greater economic leeway to finance its aggressive foreign policy agenda aimed at expanding its influence in the region. It is this context which explains the Saudi decision to execute Sheikh Nimr: the Saudis have clearly taken a hard-line against pro-Iranian elements, whether outside or inside Saudi Arabia.

This new phase of Saudi-Iranian tensions is sure to aggravate the challenges confronting the regional stability. Both sides will pursue their respective agenda more vigorously. It was perhaps no coincidence that hours after Nimr’s execution, Saudis unilaterally ended the ceasefire in Yemen that had been in effect since December 15, claiming that Houthis and their allies had fired ballistic missiles at Saudi Arabia and targeted its border posts during the truce. The Saudi stance about President Assad is also likely to get hardened. The already active sectarian fault lines will get sharpened not only at societal levels within Muslim states but also at state level. Saudi Arabia’s announcement on December 15, 2014, to form a 34-country Islamic military alliance “to fight terrorism....share information and train, equip and provide forces if necessary for the fight against Islamic State militants” was seen by many as an attempt to form a Sunni alliance and isolate Iran and its allies. The decisions by Saudi allies - Bahrain, Kuwait, Sudan, Qatar, Somalia and Djibouti - to cut their diplomatic ties with Tehran in the wake of the Saudi decision are another indication of Saudi strategy to isolate Iran. The UAE recalled its ambassador in Tehran, and said it would also reduce the number of diplomats stationed in Iran.

The situation will pose particularly serious challenges for Pakistan, which had to struggle to balance its relations with Iran, a neighbour, and Saudi Arabia, its closest ally, in the wake of Saudi request for military help in Yemen. The Saudi request had presented Pakistan’s foreign policy makers with one of their most serious predicament as they could afford neither to send troops to fight in another Muslim country, nor to displease Saudis by out-rightly rejecting their demand. Moreover, deep-running

sectarian fault lines in Pakistani society and a history of sectarian violence, mean Sunni-Shia tensions in the Middle East could always spill over into Pakistan, triggering sectarian violence.

During the meeting with the Saudi Foreign Minister, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif called for resolution of differences through peaceful means in the larger interest of Muslim unity. Pakistan should be concerned about Saudi stability, while at the same time it should ensure that its relations with Iran were not adversely affected by these developments.

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran need to recognize that their growing tensions will only exacerbate security challenges confronting the region. The only beneficiary of this growing polarisation in the Muslim world will be the so-called Islamic State, the menace Muslims most need to fight against, and collectively.