

# Saudi Arabia's Sectarian Move: Executes Sheik Nimr al-Nimr and Leading Members of the Shiite Community

Riyadh's Sectarian Move: Executing Sheik Nimr al-Nimr

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*Riyadh has stoked the sectarian fires at the start of 2016 with its decision, and carrying out, of the executions of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and various members of the Shiite community. All in all, 47 were dispatched in a Saudi orgy of state-sanctioned violence.*

Since his 2012 arrest in the Saudi Arabian eastern province of Qatif, al-Nimr had become something of a talismanic figure, having openly supported mass anti-government demonstrations in the region in 2011 and expressing open sympathy with fellow Shiites. The lot of the Shiite community in that part has been a disgruntled one, giving the cleric ample room to insist on elections and criticism of the ruling al-Saud family.

The Saudi authorities have been left in a pickle as to how to respond. Arrest him for the charges of sedition was considered acceptable but executing him would be another matter. There had been various warnings issued by Tehran about the consequences of doing so, making the issue more incendiary than usual.

Furthermore, executing him alongside various al-Qaeda figures such as Faris al-Shuwail, and those involved in a series of lethal attacks between 2003 and 2006, betrayed a rather distorted perspective. This is not to say that members of al-Saud had no reason to fear him.

For one, the Sheikh was on public record against any violent resolution, which is precisely what made him terrifying to a regime positively addicted to it. Prior to his arrest, Sheikh al-Nimr had told the BBC in a 2011 interview that he called for "the roar of the word against authorities rather than weapons... the weapon of the word is stronger than bullets, because authorities will profit from a battle with weapons."

He was also suggesting an alternative structure of religious governance. Such views will have undoubtedly been influenced by ten years of religious studies in Tehran and a few in Syria. For al-Nimr, governance should be conducted through a process somewhere between that of a single religious leader ("wilayat al-faqih") and consultation, a philosophy of "shura al-fuqaha" in which a council of religious leaders hold sway.[1]

Pigeonholing the cleric as firebrand revolutionary or moderate democrat is tempting, though it is very obvious that al-Nimr was far more complex, a creature of religious politics rather than liberal awakening. A sense of his worldview can be gathered in a US cable via WikiLeaks from August 2008. It speaks of his opposition to the "authoritarianism of the reactionary al-Saud regime" and support for "the people" in any conflict with the

authorities.[2]

It is also hard to go by his open advocacy for “the right of the Saudi Shi’a community to seek external assistance if it were to become embroiled in a conflict.” This, accompanied by his open encouragement of the Iranian regime and its nuclear ambitions, was always going to niggle the Saudi authorities.

The trial that followed the grandest traditions of display over legal substance, an attempt less to redress strict matters of law as those of political expediency. Eyewitnesses, for one, were not called to testify. The authorities were determined to pot al-Nimr, finding that he had been responsible for “foreign meddling”.

Whatever the supposedly peaceful views of the Sheikh, such historical reactions tend to be of the violent sort. The battles against Riyadh are unlikely to be resolved with a mighty pen over weaker sword. Fearing this exact point, the kingdom deployed hundreds of armoured vehicles to Qatif to quell protests in the aftermath of Saturday’s executions.

The international dimension has also seen similar reactions. The Bahraini village of Abu Saiba witnessed tear gassing from security forces. The result of this bloody venture has been to enrage the Shiite community in the country while antagonising those outside it as well.

Warnings and unfavourable predictions regarding the al-Saud regime have come in a flurry. Former Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, not necessarily the paragon of accurate crystal ball gazing, has suggested that the move will see the regime in Riyadh collapse.

In a released statement, al-Maliki insisted that his countrymen “strongly condemn these detestable sectarian practices that affirm that the crime of executing Sheikh al-Nimr will topple the Saudi regime as the crime of executing the martyr [Muhammad Baqir] al-Sadr did to Saddam.”[3]

The words of the ever active, some might say iconic figure of the Shi’a cleric politician Muqtada al-Sadr, was bound to carry even more weight. Having resisted US forces during its Iraqi occupation, al-Sadr’s words of condemnation will have purchase in Shiite communities beyond Iraq, including Saudi Arabia itself.

The domino effect continued in other countries with large Shiite representation. Yemen’s Houthi movement have deemed al-Nimr a “holy warrior”. Hezbollah in Lebanon have insisted that the move amounted to an assassination. The Saudi embassy in Tehran was attacked on Saturday with Molotov cocktails, with some of the offices being ransacked.

Politically sharpened eyes were invariably trained on the official Iranian response. They did not have to wait long. The tinderbox had been lit. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards issued an unmistakable response to the execution via a statement carried by the Mehr news agency. “A harsh revenge will strike at the Al Saud in the near future and cause the fall of its pro-terrorist, anti-Islamic regime.”

Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei took to Twitter to suggest that, “Doubtlessly, unfairly-spilled blood of oppressed martyr #SheikhNimr will affect rapidly & Divine revenge will seize Saudi politicians.” The religious figure has also gone so far as to suggest that any instrumental difference between the ISIS executioner and his Saudi counterpart is minimal. One is merely “black” as against the other’s “white”.

Teheran summoned the Saudi ambassador to express its condemnation of the execution, a favour which was returned to Riyadh's Iranian ambassador more or less telling the Iranians to mind their own business.

The response from pro-Saudi governments, notably that of the United States, has been true to form. Since they have been as responsible for stoking sectarian violence in the region as any, public condemnations have been modest.

For them, the concern is less about victims in a mercenary power tussle than strategic balance. "We are particularly concerned that the execution of (al-Nimr) risks," claimed a meek John Kirby of the US State Department, "exacerbating sectarian tensions at a time when they urgently need to be reduced." [4]

The move on the part of Riyadh has been one of indifference to consequences. In that sense, the kingdom has shown itself immune to the external world which it has sought to control, with limited success. That said, it has been allowed a degree of impunity – oil, the usual venality of strategic calculations, and the blind eye – have all served to exempt the kingdom from closer inspection.

This execution has proven to be a jolt, but it is unlikely to see the iron rule of the Saudi regime loosened. The most likely scenario here is an intensification of existing proxy confrontations, with more deaths. Reform will be distinctly off the agenda.

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Notes

[1] [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH1283\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH1283_a.html)

[2] [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH1283\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH1283_a.html)

[3] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/nimr-al-nimr-execution-protesters-tear-gassed-in-bahrain-after-saudi-arabia-carries-out-death-a6793761.html>

[4] <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/03/middleeast/saudi-arabia-executes-dozens-terror/index.html>

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