



Iranian Arabic Rivalry – Causation Flaws in dominant Media Narratives

ADITYA AGRAWAL

Contents

1.0	Background	3
2.0	Main Purpose of Current Paper	4
3.0	Three Dimensions of Arabic – Persian Rivalry	4
4.0	Origin of Conflict: Cultural & Linguistic Differences	5
5.0	Origin of the Conflict – Intra Islamic Differences	6
5.1	The concept of Mawla / Mawali	6
5.2	Understanding the deep rooted Shi’ite sense of Injustice	7
5.3	Understanding Muharram	8
5.4	Shia Muslims - Some Numbers	8
5.5	Linkage of Religious and Political Thoughts	10
6.0	Instances that showcase the Unstable Equilibrium of Saudi Arabia- Iran relationship.....	12
7.0	Arabic Persian Rivalry: Who would lead the Islamic World?	14
8.0	Revisiting latest strife in view of our argument.....	16
9.0	Role of West in fomenting the strife.....	16
10.0	Conclusion.....	17

On 30th December 2006, When Saddam Hussein, former dictator of Iraq was being taken to gallows, he spoke 3 sentences loudly. He said “Palestine is Arab”, “I denounce the west” and “I denounce the Persians (Iranians)”.

One can sense Saddam’s deep seated belief in these three ideas that he was repeating these ideas right upto his death bed. Was Saddam resentful of Iran only because of the Iran-Iraq war, or was there something more to that?

1.0 Background

On 2nd January 2016, Saudi Arabia, that ironically heads a U.N. Human Rights Council panel, carried out 47 executions in a single day¹. One of the persons that were executed was Nimr-Al-Nimr a prominent religious leader from Saudi Arabia's Shia minority. This action by Saudi Arabia created massive outrage in neighbouring Iran, which has a majority Shia population (to the extent of 90-93 % of total Muslim Population in Iran). Iranian protesters ransacked and set fire to the Saudi embassy in Tehran, along with the Saudi Consulate in Iran’s second-largest city, Mashhad. This development prompted Saudi Arabia to end diplomatic ties with Iran, as Riyadh believed that the attack on embassy was supported and encouraged by Iranian establishment. The Saudi action was followed by few more countries such as Sudan, and Bahrain, severing ties with Iran and United Arab Emirates withdrawing its ambassador from Tehran and reducing number of Iranian diplomats in the UAE.

Iran on the other hand has strongly criticized the execution of Al-Nimr and has downplayed the attack on Saudi embassy / consulate. Iran also slyly hinted at the on-going unease / crisis in the Saudi Royal Family² as the reason for sudden spate of executions.

Wall Street Journal reports this as: ***“Sectarian Tensions in Middle East Deepen as Saudi Arabian Allies Join Rift With Iran”***.

Why is this development a sectarian tension? We would try to answer this aspect and also explore the historical reasons of this conflict.

¹ <http://www.vox.com/2016/1/4/10708682/sunni-shia-iran-saudi-arabia-war>, 6th para from top.

² <http://asia.nikkei.com/Markets/Commodities/Tensions-in-ruling-family-could-bring-more-chaos-to-Mideast-oil-market>. Note: King Salman deposed Crown Prince Muqrin and replaced him with Prince Muhammad bin Nayef. The reason was Prince Muqrin’s opposition to Yemen intervention.

2.0 Main Purpose of Current Paper

Main purpose of current paper is to discuss a statement: “**Existing political realities drive the wedge between Saudi Arabia and Iran**”, a statement that is becoming a dominant media narrative.

A related argument is that differences in the Middle East, if any are propped up by the West. Does it mean that the differences are extremely minor in nature and it is the West that encourages these developments for its gains?

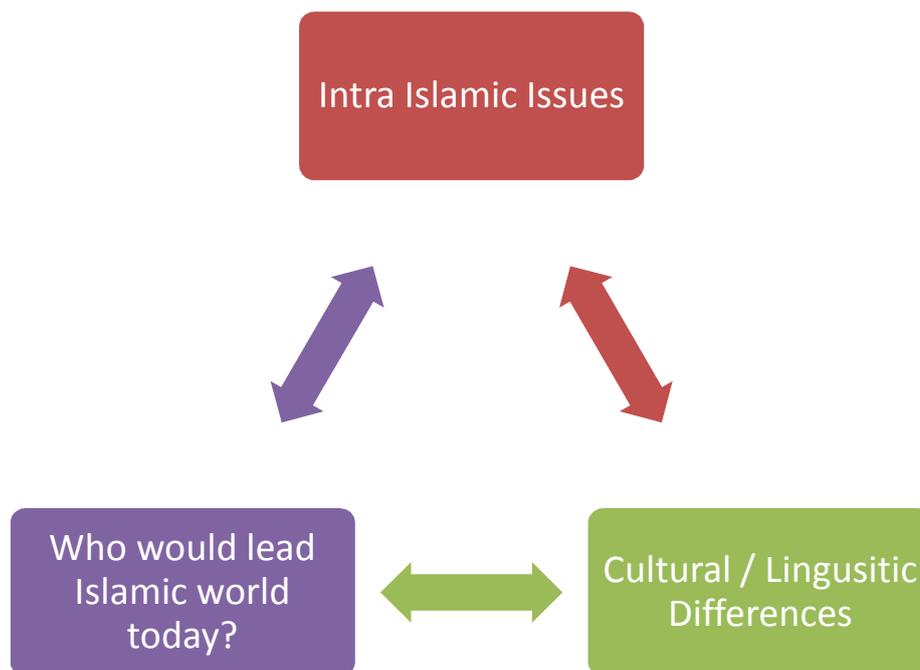
Following questions arise:

1. Could it be that the differences between Arabic and Persian positions are so fundamental that given the smallest of provocation, differences come to the fore?
2. What was the status of relationship between Arabic and Persian sides when current political realities did not exist?
3. Could it happen that the West does not amplify these differences, but does use them for its benefit?

This paper proposes that deep rooted inherent conflicts between Islamic sects are more fundamental in nature and as such these conflicts are the **Cause** and the political clashes are the **effect** of this Causation.

3.0 Three Dimensions of Arabic – Persian Rivalry

There are 3 dimensions to the Arabic - Persian Rivalry. Two of these are historic: Intra-Islamic Issues and Cultural / Linguistic Issues. Then there is an issue of leading the current Islamic World.



This paper also highlights the point that the third point is subservient to the first two points.

Section 4.0 explains the cultural & linguistic reasons behind this rivalry. **Section 5.0** explains the reasons linked to Islam itself that have contributed to this Arabic-Persian rivalry.

4.0 Origin of Conflict: Cultural & Linguistic Differences

In the Middle East, two different identities exist: Arabic and Persian.

The Arabic identity prides itself as being the birth place of Islam and the Saudi King takes the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques".

The Iranians pride on their rich cultural heritage dating back to 500 BC when ancient Achaemenid Empire was there, an empire that had once defeated the combined forces of formidable Greek kingdoms.

The Iranians are Indo-European people. So they are more close to Pashtuns, Tajiks and Kurds. "Arabian" on the other hand is a rather loose term that is used to refer to anyone who speaks one of the Arabic dialects and/or lives in Arabian peninsula (or has a Arabic bloodline). Arabs are basically Semitic people, more closer to Jews than they would like to admit, and as such are different from the Indo European family.

The language is another major difference. Most of the "Arab" countries speak Arabic whereas language of Iran is Persian. (Persian was the court language of India during Mughal period.). Arabic is derived from Semitic languages (Hebrew, Aramaic etc.), whereas Persian is closer to Indo European languages. Although Persian and Arabic share a similar alphabet, in terms of grammar and morphology the languages are very different.

Iranians pride themselves on their rich cultural heritage in the field of music, paintings, and cuisine and often scoff the Arabs as unruly, uncultured and nomads (Quite similar in lines to the French who have a rather low opinion of the British).

The hostility is mutual. Wikileaks report Arabs mentioning their Iranian counterparts as "liars" and "snakes"³.

When the Abbasid dynasty came to power in 752 AD, there was a concerted effort to preserve Persian language and Persian culture. The "Shahnama" written by Firdausi celebrates Iran's ancient history, its ancient cultural values, its pre-Islamic Zoroastrian religion, and its sense of nationhood.

It is important to recognize that during this period Iran was predominantly Sunni and Shi'ism was not wide spread, still a concerted desire to establish prominence of Persian language and culture did exist.

³ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/12/01/why-cant-arabs-and-iranians-just-get-along-2/> - 1st para

Bernard Lewis in his paper⁴ makes some important observations. I have tried to summarize those here:

1. Spread of Islam took a far greater time in Iran (200-300 years). Modern day countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt were Islamized and Arabized in a remarkably short time. In each of these countries, their old religion was abandoned, old languages were discontinued and ultimately disappeared and infact their separate identity vanished.
2. So in Iran **Islamization occurred but Arabization did not occur.**
3. Infact Persian civilization impacted Islam itself and it was this version of Islam that became more popular in Central Asia, Turkey (and then Spain) and eventually Indian Sub-Continent. By 13th century, Iranian version of Islam was the dominant version.
4. Arabic was of course the language of scripture and law, but Persian was the language of poetry and literature. This later aspect actually created a lasting impact
5. In the Indian Sub-continent, a major role in spread of Islam was played by the mystics / Sufis.
6. An example cited by Prof. Bernard is that we do not find Iraqis calling their sons Nebuchadnezzar or Sennacherib, nor Egyptians calling their sons Tutankhamen or Amenhotep. Whereas Iranians use Ali, Muhammad, Ahmad, but they also use distinctively Persian names: Khusraw, Shapur, Mehyar and other names derived from a Persian past.
7. Finally, Prof. Bernard says that there is some reason that Shiism developed in Persia. European writers like Gobineau see the triumph of Shi'ism as the resurgence of the Aryanism of Iran against the Semitism of Islam.

5.0 Origin of the Conflict – Intra Islamic Differences

5.1 The concept of Mawla / Mawali⁵

During formative years of Islam, Islamic identity and Arabic identity were indistinguishable. As Islam spread, there were issues related to the status of Non-Arab Neo-converts.

By the time Iran was conquered, the term “Mawla or Mawali” was used for a non-Arab convert. As many Persians, Africans, Turks, Kurds converted to Islam, they were called Mawalis.

The Mawalis were a victim of cultural bias and ill treatment⁶. A Mawali was barred from any task involving authority such as Governor, Judge or Imam. Some early converts continued to pay a similar tax that was required from the people of the book. This treatment as second

⁴ [http://www.great-iran.com/PDFs/History/Different-files/Iran-History-\(Great-Iran-com\).pdf](http://www.great-iran.com/PDFs/History/Different-files/Iran-History-(Great-Iran-com).pdf), Bernard Lewis, 1999 lecture

⁵ Idea taken from the book “Citizenship in the Arab World: Kin, Religion and Nation-State by Gianluca Paolo Parolin”

⁶ Ibid.

class citizens by the ruling Arab elite had an enduring impact on the Persian mindset and defined their hatred towards the Umayyad dynasty. The Abbasid Revolution in 750 CE put an end to the political and social privileges held by the Arabs. The capital of the caliphate was moved to Baghdad and Persian influences increased.

5.2 Understanding the deep rooted Shi'ite sense of Injustice

Majority of recent articles dealing with Arab-Iran rivalry have downplayed the sense of injustice that the minority Shi'ite community feels. Giving credence to abstract theories propounded by Western authors, most of current political writers ignore (or are simply unaware of) the deep rooted emotional scar on the Shi'ite mind-set. The fact of the matter is that a deep sense of repeated injustice is fundamental to the Shia theology and to the political stance that is subsequently taken.

The seeds of the split between the Shia and Sunni are associated with the selection of Caliph: an activity that was to be done after demise of Prophet Mohammad. The first four Caliphs were: Abu Bakr, Omar, Osman, and Ali. Ali was the Son-in-Law as well as nephew of the Prophet. Shias believe that Ali should have been the first Caliph and that he was unfairly passed over. Sunnis believe that the prevailing political realities of that time necessitated certain decisions and accept these developments as such. They reject any divine right of Ali or his family. Ali did become Caliph but only after a wait of around 34 years.

In particular the Shias resent the passing of Caliphate to Osman who was from a clan Banu Umayya. Banu Umayya was a politically strong clan that was at the forefront of opposing Islam in its formative years. This clan had waged fierce battles against Prophet Mohammad. However, later this clan also accepted Islam. Prophet Mohammad and Ali were from the clan of Hashim.

After demise of Ali (who was murdered), Hasan, Ali's elder son agreed to surrender his right on the Caliphate to the militarily powerful Banu Ummaya chief Muawiyah, who was the governor of Damascus. Later Hasan was also murdered. Caliphate passed to Muawiyah's son Yazid (According to Shias, this was a breach of treaty). Husayn, the second son of Ali, refused to accept Yazid as Caliph. Husayn and his family members were slain down at Karbala and Husayn's severed head was sent to Yazid in Damascus

The brutal death of Husayn at the Battle of Karbala made a permanent division in Islam between Shias and Sunnis.

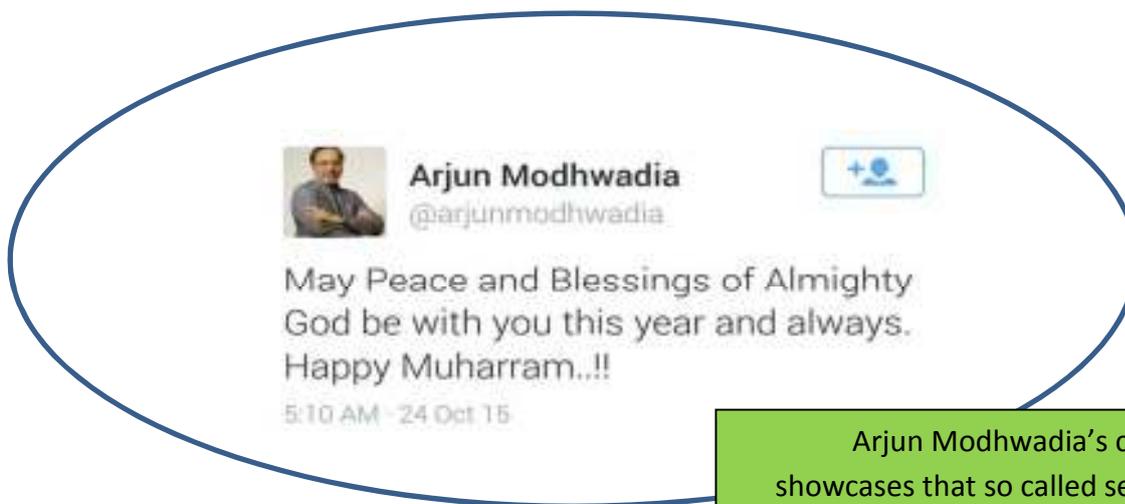
Shias believe that Umayyads usurped the religious and political power from rightful heirs. Ali was married to Fatimah, Prophet's daughter and was also his nephew. Therefore Shias believe that Hasan and Husayn carried the lineage of Prophet both from Father's side and Mother's side.

The Shias highlight and remember the injustice that was first meted out to Ali, and to then his sons. In particular the martyrdom of Husayn is lamented during Moharram.

5.3 Understanding Muharram

Unlike Id-ul-Fitr or Id-ul-Adha, Muharram is not a festival. Actually it is a month in Islamic Calendar. In remembrance of the martyrdom of Husayn, Shias observe the first 10 days of the month of Muharram (the date of the battle of Karbala according to the Islamic calendar) as **days of lamentation**.

During this period, extremely emotional discourses are made depicting the tortures that Husayn's family had to undergo when they were besieged at Karbala. There are passion plays, and processions of Taziyas⁷ in which the participants, in a state of emotional frenzy, beat their chests with heavy chains and sharp instruments, inflicting wounds on their bodies.



Arjun Modhwadia's comment showcases that so called secularists really do not know anything about Islam or its History.

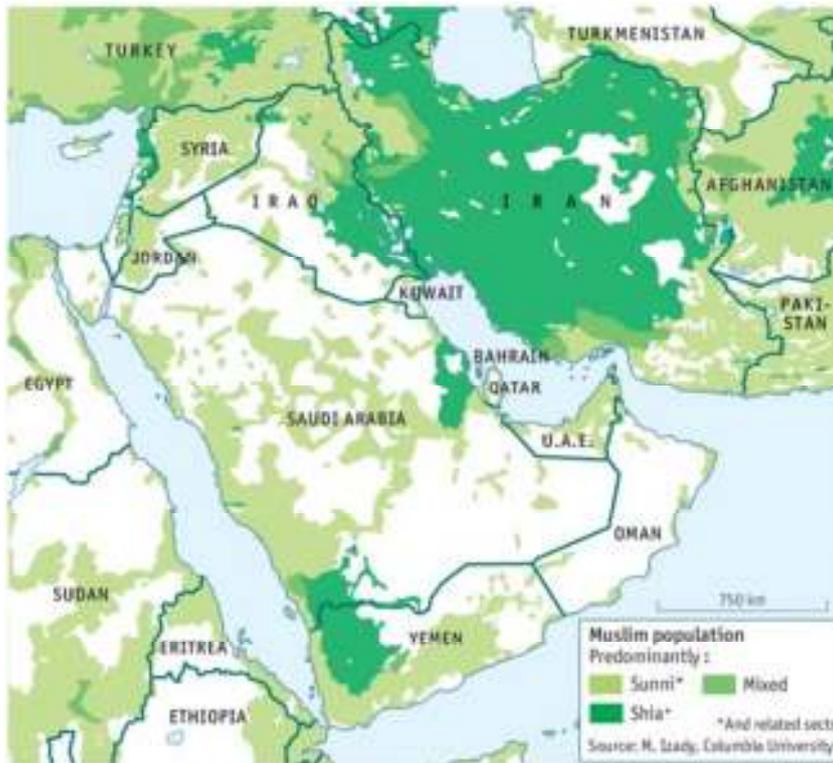
The Shia identity is based on redeeming the legacy of Ali and taking revenge for the injustice meted out to Prophet's family. This emotional aspect is one of the two fundamental causes of split and mistrust between Iran and Saudi Arabia

5.4 Shia Muslims - Some Numbers

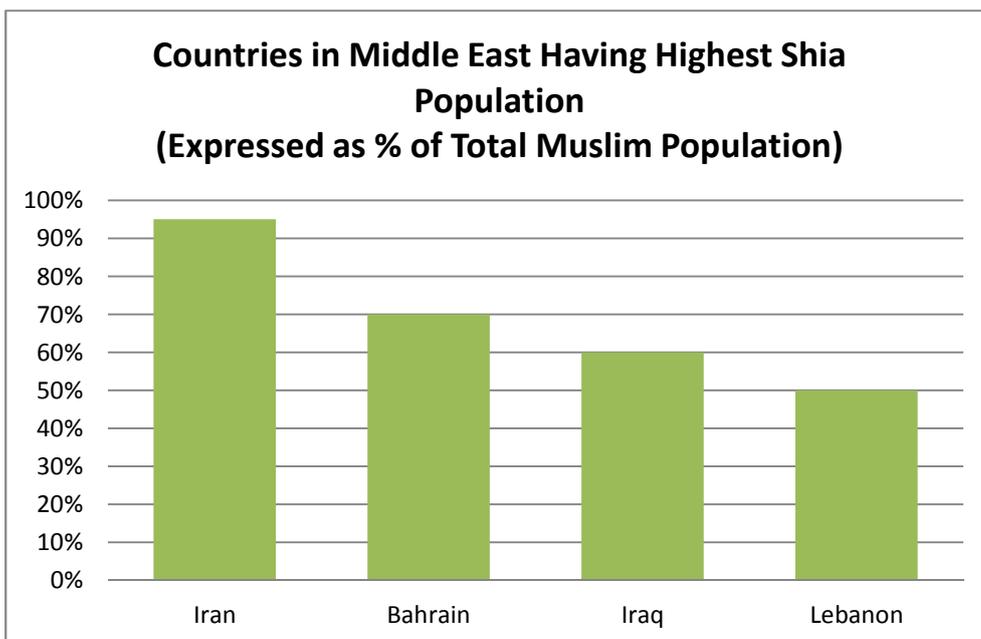
- Shias are around 10-13 % of total Muslim Population in the world.
- Iran has around 92 % Shia population (out of total Muslim Population)
- The graphical distribution of Shias in Middle East can be seen from the following image taken from The Economist⁸.

⁷ Taziya is a religious procession in which models of Tombs of Ali / Hasan / Husayn are carried by the Shia community during the month of Moharram. This is a specific practice of Indian subcontinent. The procession usually moves silently. The procession culminates in a ground called Karbala (To commemorate the legacy of Husayn who was slain in a place called Karbala). There have been occasions when incendiary slogans against first three Caliphs have been raised. This is objected to by Sunnis and there have been instances when riots have broken out.

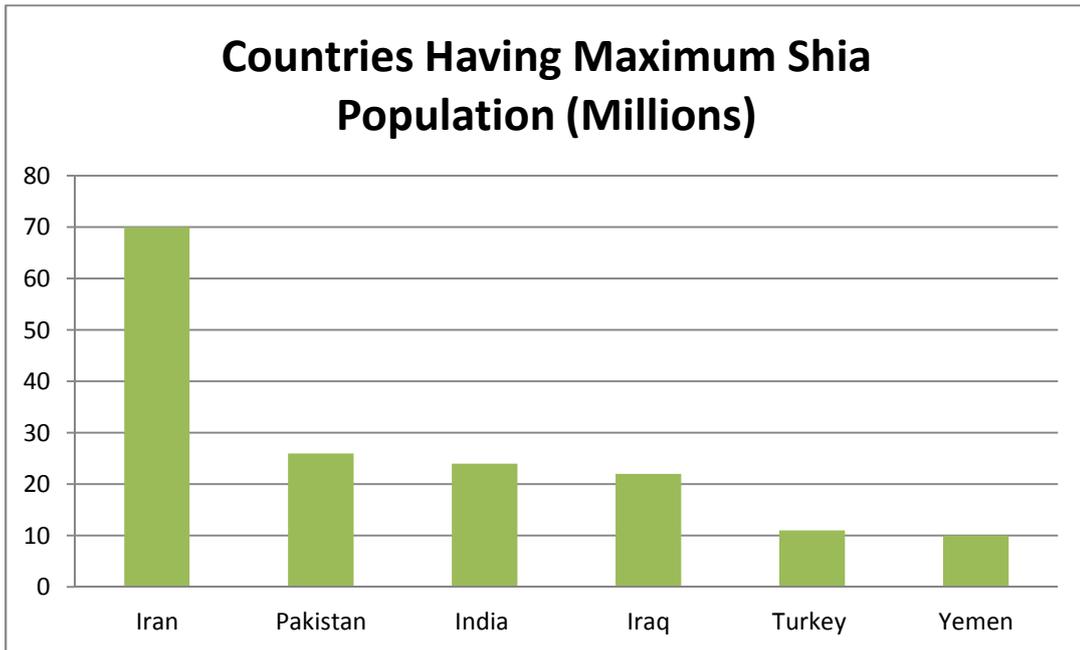
⁸ <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2016/01/islam-middle-east>



- Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon are Middle East countries (having Arabic language and culture) having majority Shia Population. Refer following graph. (data taken from Pew research)
- Iran, on the other hand is a country in Middle East that has Persian language and a distinctly Persian culture. Iran has a majority Shia Population. Refer following graph. (data taken from Pew research)



- If we consider the entire world then the countries having highest population of Shias in terms of actual numbers are (In Million) (Data taken from Pew Research)⁹



It may be noted that while Sunnism spread due to official patronage (most of the invaders/ rulers were Sunnis), Shias often migrated to India (and Pakistan) because of persecution. Even within Shias, minority sects such as Bohras and Khojas (Agha Khan’s sect) finally got refuge in India.

5.5 Linkage of Religious and Political Thoughts

Sunni Political Ideology	Shi’ite Political Ideology
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sunnis do not give credence to any specific family or lineage. For them the prevailing political realities are important • Sunnis (Wahabi) believe in the concept of Khilafat • This is the reason that in the Middle Ages most Kings / Monarchs preferred Sunni ideology. • It was this Political opportunism that led to Sunnite acceptance of Ummayyad clan (the clan that had bitterly opposed Prophet Mohammad) and even foreign caliphs (Ottomon Turks). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Religious legitimacy of Prophet’s families and lineage of Imams is important • Shias do not believe in the concept of Khilafat. They believe in the concept of Imam¹⁰. • Belief that sure and true knowledge can come only through a contact with the infallible Imam. • Lineage and Imam¹⁰ will supersede political control.

⁹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/>

¹⁰ Imamate means that the legitimate rulers (Political+religious) can only be Imams who are from Muhammad's family called Ahl al-Bayt. They believe that only such divine persona can be free of any worldly sin or fallibility. They reject the idea of majority choice, or election.

One important point: The Supreme Leader of Iran has to have a lineage of the Hashemite family - that is he should be from the same clan as the Prophet.

The present day Saudi Arabia is ruled by the House of Saud. This is technically the third Saudi state but it honours the commitment that was made between Al-Wahhab, a religious leader and Mohammad Bin Saud, the political leader in 1744, who established the first Saudi state. Both agreed to foster the "true" principles of Islam¹¹. It was agreed that that al-Wahhab would be responsible for religious matters and Ibn Saud would be in charge of political and military issues. This agreement has remained in place for 300 years and has given legitimacy to the Saud Family and its rule. The Saudi King is considered the custodian of Islam's two holiest mosques at Mecca and Medina but he derives his legitimacy and authority from a powerful group of spiritual leaders, the ulema¹².

Saudi government has at times overtly and covertly supported the Sunni ideology of Wahabism - an ideology that has inspired Al-Qaeda and the ISIS. This rather late realization pushed US to have a political understanding with Iran.

The establishment of Islamic Republic of Iran, was a major challenge to the very basis of a single Monarchy, that is based on inheritance. Based on Shi'ite concept, the core ideas of Imam Khomeini gave absolute weightage to the guardianship of the Islamic Jurists (Refer above table that discusses Sunni and Shia Political Ideologies). The importance of jurists over traditional monarchies was disturbing for many regional countries as most of these were Sunni dominated monarchies with little or no linkage with Prophet's family. The countries included Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the other Persian Gulf States. The Iranian revolutionaries called specifically for the overthrow of such monarchies.

Khomeini linked the house of Saud to the Umayyad dynasty¹³ and mentioned them as "*people hiding the sword of blasphemy and division*", "*Yazid¹⁴'s followers*" and "*descendants of the Umayyad dynasty*"¹⁵.

Iranian leaders frequently taunt their Saudi counterparts for closeness with USA. When Saudi Arabia banned Iranian citizens to perform Hajj, Ayatollah Khamenei said: "God's shrine is safe for U.S. advisors and oil company owners, but unsafe for selfless Muslims"¹⁶

¹¹ Madawi al-Rasheed, A History of Saudi Arabia

¹² <http://www.meforum.org/482/the-power-of-saudi-arabias-islamic-leaders>

¹³ Recall that for the Shiites Ummayyads epitomized misrule, injustice and evil. They had opposed Prophet during his lifetime and were involved in brutal killing of Prophet's grandsons.

¹⁴ The Caliph who ordered assassination of Husayn, son of Ali.

¹⁵ <http://martinkramer.org/sandbox/reader/archives/khomeinis-messengers-in-mecca/>

¹⁶ <http://martinkramer.org/sandbox/reader/archives/khomeinis-messengers-in-mecca/>

Loud shouts by Iranian pilgrims during Hajj, “Death to America”; “Death to Israel”: also served to establish primacy of the Iranian regime as more unforgiving towards the West.

Apart from Historical and cultural background, the first point (Intra-Islamic Rivalry) that was discussed, comes into play and infact further accentuates this cultural-lingusitic rivalry. **Saudi Arabia is a predominantly Sunni country and Iran is a predominantly Shia country.**

While espousing their respective sectarian causes both Saudi Arabia and Iran vie for the leadership of Islamic world.

6.0 Instances that showcase the Unstable Equilibrium of Saudi Arabia- Iran relationship

The two countries exchange terse comments / insults and sometimes even snap diplomatic relations. Some instances are given below:

1. The Wahhabi doctrine regards the Shi’ite respect of the Imams and their tombs as blasphemous idolatry. In 1802 Wahabi Sunnis desecrated the revered tomb of the Imam Husayn¹⁷.
2. The cemetery of Al-Baqi, near Madina was also plundered and destroyed in 1926. This is the reputed resting place of the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatima and four of the Twelve Imams. These events alienated the Shias (and Iranians further).
3. A brief correspondence between the Saudi King Khalid and Imam Khomeini in October 1981, highlights the level of mistrust between two countries. King Khalid strongly hinted to Khomeini that the Great Mosque had been defiled by blasphemous Iranian pilgrims. According to Khalid, Iranian pilgrims in the Great Mosque had performed their ritual circumambulations while chanting “God is great, Khomeini is great,” and “God is one, Khomeini is one.” The insinuation was that this excessive veneration of their Imam was a form of blasphemous polytheism¹⁸.
4. After Iranian revolution, in 1982, Iranians chose the cemetery of al-Baqi in Medina as the site for a series of demonstrations. Iranian pilgrims used to recite prayers outside the high wall which the Saudis had built to seal off the cemetery. Specific mass prayer services were conducted there, and were led by visiting Shi’ite clerics. These activities antagonized the host country – Saudi Arabia¹⁹.
5. The fervour of Iranian pilgrims also rallied other Shia pilgrims from various countries. The emotional and highly demonstrative Iranian prayers attracted huge audience. This led to further bad blood and mistrust not only among the political leaders but also among the clergy and common people.
6. **1987 Hajj Riots:** There was a skirmish between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi riot police. The ensuing violence killed 400 people, mostly Iranians. In 1988, Saudi Arabia

¹⁷ <http://martinkramer.org/sandbox/reader/archives/khomeinis-messengers-in-mecca/>

¹⁸ <http://martinkramer.org/sandbox/reader/archives/khomeinis-messengers-in-mecca/>

¹⁹ Ibid

severed ties with Iran, citing the 1987 hajj rioting and Iran's attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf. Iranians boycotted the hajj in 1988 and 1989.

Subsequent to this development, Imam Khomeini declared Saudi rulers as vile and ungodly Wahhabis²⁰ and announced that Mecca was in the hands of 'a band of heretics'²¹. The top Iranian leader, Rafsanjani recalled various atrocities by "Wahhabi hooligans"²²

This was also the first instance when both sides undertook major campaigns to influence Muslim opinion abroad. Separate conferences were organized in both countries.

The Saudi conference condemned Iran alone for the Mecca violence: Iran's government—a government "accustomed to terrorism and a thirst for Muslim blood"—"solely bears the responsibility for the outrage in God's holy mosque."

Iranian leader dismissed the conference as a narrowly Wahabi Sunni gathering that served the rulers, not Islam²³. In their separate conference, Iranian leader floated the idea of declaring Mecca as a free city. The control of holy shrines was compared to the illegal occupation of Jerusalem by Israel²⁴. To make matters worse, one cleric denouncing the Saudis as Jews. This cleric echoed an old piece of Shi'ite bigotry that attributed Jewish origins to the Saudi ruling family²⁵. Being labelled as a Jew, is the worst form of libel for a Muslim and for a ruling clan this insinuation can be totally damaging.

7. The Satanic Verses controversy

In 1989, Imam Khomeini, declared a Fatwa for death sentence for Salman Rushdie, who had written the Satanic Verses. This single action while hugely criticized in the west did serve to position Khomeini as the leading Islamic figure who was unapologetic and uncompromising.

By extension, this action established Iran as a major player in issues affecting Muslims all over the world.

This Fatwa was opposed by Saudi Clerics who said that Salman Rushdie should be tried in an Islamic Court and then the verdict can be passed.

8. Stampede during Hajj:

In September 2015, the two countries had sparred over a major stampede at the annual Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca. Iran had roundly criticized the Saudi Government for its "ineptitude".

²⁰ <http://martinkramer.org/sandbox/reader/archives/khomeinis-messengers-in-mecca/>

²¹ Ibid.

²² Rafsanjani's speech, Radio Tehran, 2 August 1987, quoted in *BBC Summary*, 4 August 1987

²³ <http://martinkramer.org/sandbox/reader/archives/khomeinis-messengers-in-mecca/>

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ For a Shi'ite collection of alleged proofs of the Jewish origins of the Saudis, see Nasir al-Sa'id, *Tarikh Al Sa'ud*, vol. 1 ([Beirut]: Ittihad sha'b al-jazira al-arabiyya, n.d.): 392-403.

While this paper was being written, some other incidents happened:

1. On 7th January, Iran accused Saudi Arabia of deliberately bombing their embassy in Yemen. This bombing was a part of Saudi-led campaign in Yemen²⁶.
2. On 29th January, there was a suicide bomb and gun attack on Shia worshippers, in eastern Saudi Arabia²⁷. This attack is one among the many in a spate of attacks on the kingdom's Shia minority. At least 18 people were wounded in the assault on the Imam Rida mosque.
3. As recent as on 31st January ISIS bombers have killed more than 60 people near Syria's holiest Shia shrine in Damascus²⁸. This attack was a part of on-going strife in Syria in which both ISIS and Shia militia are involved. The site where bombing took place is a site of pilgrimage for Shia from Iran, Lebanon and other parts of the Muslim world. It houses the grave of Zeinab, the daughter of Ali ibn Abi Talib, whom Shias consider the rightful successor to the prophet Mohammad.

So, on pretext or the other the simmering hatred and discontent comes to the surface.

7.0 Arabic Persian Rivalry: Who would lead the Islamic World?

Above episodes indicate that there is an inherent mistrust and conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. These differences are real and due to this the political goals are also totally different. So it is incorrect to say that current Political realities decide the action of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Fact is that the Religious Differences and Cultural Differences are fundamental between these two countries and they intervene in any existing crisis.

Just as two fiercely competitive bidders contest for every tender in a fixed pie market; similarly the two countries ensure that in any major struggle involving Muslims, their effective presence has to be there. Be it opposition to Israel, or the comparatively confined crisis in Yemen, or the more involved in Syria - both countries are involved in political one-upmanship. They back respective militant groups²⁹ in various conflict zones. In each of these conflicts the sectarian alignment decides which party will be supported. So Iran will always support a Shi'ite group and Saudi Arabia will always support a Sunni group.

Irrespective of any "Political Cause" the relations between Iran and other Arabic countries have always remained tense. A para used elsewhere in this paper is being re-printed here:

The importance of Islamic jurists over traditional monarchies was disturbing for many regional countries as most of these were Sunni dominated monarchies with little or no linkage with Prophet's family. The countries included Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the other Persian Gulf States. The Iranian revolutionaries called specifically for the overthrow of such monarchies.

²⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/08/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-arabia-yemen.html?_r=0

²⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/29/shia-mosque-attacked-saudi-arabia>

²⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/31/damascus-syrian-double-suicide-bombing-sayeda-zeinab>

²⁹ <http://www.vox.com/2016/1/4/10708682/sunni-shia-iran-saudi-arabia-war> - 3rd para

The article from Foreign Policy.com highlights this issue in a most succinct manner:

Arab-Iranian hostility is not uniform. Iranians enjoy correct if not warm relations with Qatar and Oman. Relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are icy; and those with the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait fall somewhere in the middle³⁰.

Situation of Bahrain is interesting to note. It is an island nation with a Shia majority population and ruled by a Sunni King. Bahrain has often accused Iran of fostering unrest and inciting the Shi'ite population.

Some other examples are as follows:

1. **Israel:** Saudi Arabia funds Sunni dominated Hamas whereas Iran supports the Shi'ite Hezbollah.

2. **Iraq – A special case study**

Iraq is an Arabic country but it has a Shia majority. So religious affinity wise there is a tilt towards Iran, whereas ethnically and culturally the Iraqis are closer to Arabs. Saddam Hussein, who was a dictator of Iraq from 1979–2003, was a Sunni. The Iran-Iraq war that went on for 7 years was a clash between two distinct cultures. In this war Saudi Arabia had supported Iraq. Note that although sectarian issues were never highlighted (Iraq having a Shi'ite majority), Arabic identity became the war cry of Iraqis, and the Shi'ite/Persian identity was the rallying point for Iranians.

When US led Iraq's invasion and removed Saddam, there was a vacuum and both Iran and Saudi Arabia rushed in to fill that vacuum. Iraq became engulfed in a sectarian tension – each group being supported by Iran / Saudi Arabia. Saddam's government was replaced by a Shi'ite government that was deemed to be too close to Iran. Saudis extended their support to the Sunni extremists. This sectarianism further fomented a Sunni uprising in Iraq that ultimately led to development of ISIS. In retaliation to Al-Nimr's execution, on 4th January, two Sunni mosques in Iraq were bombed and the Sunni imam of another was killed³¹.

3. **Yemen:** Iran is backing the Shi'ite groups, Houthis, whereas Saudi Arabia is backing Abd Mansur Hadi, a Sunni, who was President of Yemen, till January 2015, when he was overthrown by Houthis. Saudi Arabia gathered a coalition of UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, Egypt, and Pakistan, and began airstrikes on Sana'a on 26th March 2015. It may be noted that all Nations are either Sunni dominated or ruled by Sunni elite (Bahrain being an example)

4. **Syria:** Iran is supporting the present President Bashar Al Assad through Hezbollah, the Shi'ite militia. Saudi Arabia is supporting the Syrian rebels that are mainly Sunnis.

³⁰ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/12/01/why-cant-arabs-and-iranians-just-get-along-2/> - 2nd para

³¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35222365>

8.0 Revisiting latest strife in view of our argument

One of the major reasons that Al-Nimr's execution sparked such an outrage was that he was a Shi'ite Minority leader in a predominantly Sunni Saudi Arabia.

Why did Saudi government took such a drastic step?

This is because unlike other Shi'ite leaders of Saudi Arabia, Al-Nimr was quite vocal in his support of Iranian policies.

What was the reaction in the Muslim world on this execution?

It was on predictable lines: The Shias all over the world were outraged. *Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi condemned the execution, warning of "repercussions" for regional security*³². Protests broke out in Bahrain and in Shia communities in Pakistan and India. The *Iranian Revolutionary Guards told Saudi Arabia to expect 'harsh revenge'*³³.

Sunnis maintained studied silence at first. As soon as Saudi embassy and consulate were attacked, immediate diplomatic actions were taken by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and Sudan.

9.0 Role of West in fomenting the strife

There is no denial that West has used the existing strife for its advantage. However our limited point is that the basic strife is due to inherent Intra-Islamic conflicts. Even if there were limited western interventions, political situation would still have been turbulent.

After all the Ottoman empire (Sunni) and Safavid³⁴ empire (Shi'ite) clashed regularly and that was way before any western intervention.

The west should also be wary of its overtures towards Iran. If USA is main enemy of Al-Qaeda, it is the Great Satan (Shaytan-e-Bozorg) for Iran.

As late as September 2015, the Supreme leader of Iran, Ahmed Khamenei had said the following for Shaytan-e-Bozorg³⁵: "*The US, both seduces and murders people.....all the warmongering in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, are all the US' doing.*" He also sends a message to his domestic Doves - "*Yet, some people want to adorn and decorate this 'Great Satan' and turn him into an angel.*"

Above speech from the highest Iranian Cleric shows that it would be completely misplaced to expect Iran as a moderate Islamic state.

³² <http://www.vox.com/2016/1/4/10708682/sunni-shia-iran-saudi-arabia-war> - 8th para

³³ ibid

³⁴ Many Indian will recall that when Humayun was defeated by Sher Shah Suri, he fled to Iran and sought refuge at the court of Shah Tahmasp, a Safavid ruler. Under his influence Humayun converted to Shia Islam. Tahmasp helped Humayun in regaining his territories.

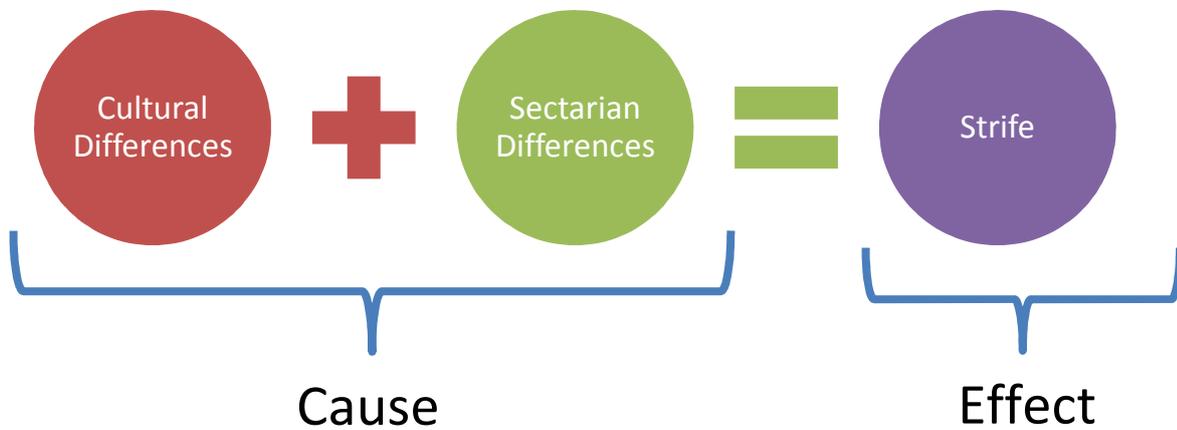
³⁵ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/09/great-satan-150920072643884.html>

10.0 Conclusion

The latest event (execution of a Shi'ite Cleric by Saudi Arabia) and the sudden breakdown of talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran once again show-cases the unstable equilibrium that exists between these two countries.

The Al Saud dynasty wants to continue its hold on the kingdom and for that it has to continue getting support of the Wahabi clerics; clerics who are against any "innovation" in Islam. On the other hand, Iran seeks to rectify the past injustices / aberrations and insults particularly in the religious sphere.

So we see from these recent examples that Individual political events have not caused strife. The divide actually exists and due to this strife, both Iran and Saudi Arabia handle the political events so as to increase their religious-political sphere.



As Indians we would do better to learn from above strife and do the following:

1. Can we emulate the Western strategy and benefit from this internal strife? We have to understand the importance of learning more about these internal differences.
2. We have our internal differences. Are we aware of the benefits that West is already taking?
3. Are we aware that our opponents are having a concerted strategy to accentuate these differences of caste, religion, and languages?

###