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W. Andrew Terrill

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Strategic Insights: The Sinister Shadow
of Escalating Middle Eastern
Sectarianism

January 21, 2016 | Dr. W. Andrew Terrill

In one of the opening scenes of the 1973 movie, *The Exorcist*, an older Catholic priest stands among the ruins of the ancient Mesopotamian city of Hatra.[1] In the movie, he views an ancient statue of an Assyrian wind demon and stares directly into the stone representation of his enemy's face. In the background, two extremely vicious dogs are fighting and the sounds of their battle appear to be coming directly from the statue as the camera closes in on its face. Clearly, a horrifying ancient evil has awakened in northern Iraq.

   And now, we have a modern representation of an awakened and increasingly formidable Middle Eastern evil. The evil of sectarianism. Virulently sectarian bigots, in the Middle East and elsewhere, believe that other religions and sects are not only mistaken, they are also composed of heretics, apostates, and infidels. This outlook is every bit as frightening as the horror movie demon, and it is not to be easily dismissed after two hours of scares in the theater. Like the demon in the movie, sectarianism is not new, but also like the demon it is much stronger and more dangerous than it once was. Sectarianism, particularly between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, has grown dramatically in the Middle East in recent decades for a variety of reasons including the post-Saddam Sunni-Shi'ite bloodshed in Iraq, the rise of Iranian power and influence in the region, the Syrian Civil War, the Saudi-led 2011 invasion of Bahrain, the rise of the Islamic State organization often known as ISIS, and the Houthi war in Yemen.[2] As the world greets 2016, it now appears that against most previous expectations, the sectarian situation in the Middle East is actually getting dramatically worse. As this drama unfolds, two of the

most important players in the Muslim sectarian schism are Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite Iran, with Iraq, Syria, and Yemen also deeply involved and bearing much of the suffering.

In many ways the current animosity between Iran and Saudi Arabia is typical of a fierce ideological cold war where the two sides always assume the worst about their antagonists. If the enemy nation is behaving in a menacing manner, it is because that is their nature. If they are acting reasonable in any way, this is to be understood as a trick to lull you into a false sense of security. Viewed through such a prism, everything the other side does is nefarious. There are no moderates in the enemy government. Attempting to understand the enemy's point of view is fruitless, and the only acceptable policies toward such a power are unrelenting confrontation. Other regional states and groups viewed through this prism can quickly be divided into allies and enemy stooges. In this environment, the Iranians accuse Saudi Arabia of being comfortable with the same kind of extremism as ISIS, which is most certainly not the case. The Saudis, however, dismiss many of the legitimate claims of Shi'ites in places such as Bahrain and Yemen as solely the result of Iranian subversion and agitation. This subversion clearly exists, but no one in Tehran had to tell Bahraini Shi'ites that they are second class citizens or that many of them live in poverty. Likewise, the Houthis in Yemen (who embrace a form of Shi'ite Islam) are often viewed by Riyadh as little more than an Iranian chess piece. While the Houthis do receive weapons and other support from Iran, they also have a number of legitimate grievances against Yemen's Saudi-supported governments that ruled that country prior to the September 2014 Houthi coup.[3] These governments allowed Saudi-trained and financed clerics to serve as heavy-handed missionaries into Yemen's Houthi areas where they preached harsh anti-Shi'ite sermons to Houthi youth, essentially telling them that their parents are apostates.[4]

Into this toxic mix has been added the Saudi execution of Shi'ite Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and the waves of anger that have followed the event including the destruction of Saudi diplomatic facilities by a mob in Iran. Al-Nimr was a sectarian firebrand from Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province where most of the kingdom's 2-3 million Arab Shi'ites live. He was harshly critical of the House of Saud and openly delighted in the idea that at least one major Saudi prince would suffer the torments of Hell after his death.[5] He was a committed and important activist for greater Shi'ite rights and strongly asserted the need for peaceful (but still illegal) protests to secure these rights. The Saudi government maintains that al-Nimr incited violence and murder, but no serious evidence has been produced to support these charges. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon stated that he was "deeply dismayed" at the execution of al-Nimr and others due to problems with their trials.[6] While the imprisonment of al-Nimr seemed inevitable, the execution was surely politically unwise. A cynical interpretation would be that the decision to execute al-Nimr

could have been influenced by Saudi frustration with the difficulties of the war in Yemen and a domestic need to show firmness due to a sharp decline in export earnings (and possibly citizens' subsidies and benefits) due to falling oil prices.

Unfortunately, al-Nimr's execution quickly led to an escalating sectarian crisis that has not yet played itself out. Iranian demonstrators ransacked and burned the Saudi embassy in Tehran while also attacking their consulate in Mashhad in the aftermath of the al-Nimr's death.[7] Iranian leaders quickly apologized for the incident, but Riyadh responded to the outrage by severing diplomatic ties with Iran. Bahrain and Sudan also broke relations with Tehran while the United Arab Emirates has downgraded its ties. Jordan, Qatar, and Kuwait have recalled their ambassadors from Iran, although it is not clear that they are permanently reducing their ties with that country. Saudi airstrikes against the Houthis (whom Riyadh views as Iranian proxies) in Yemen also increased. Iran now claims that their embassy in Yemen has been struck in these airstrikes, although no damage to this building appears visible to Yemeni observers. These escalating problems do not look like they are going to end anytime soon.

In Iraq, the Shi'ite backlash against the execution led to anti-Sunni actions including the bombings of two Sunni mosques. Shi'ite demonstrators and militia members have also called upon their government to sever diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, although Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi has indicated his determination not to do so.[8] Rather, in an effort to seize the middle ground, the Iraqi leadership has offered to mediate the Saudi-Iranian controversy.[9] This offer will almost certainly go nowhere as a diplomatic initiative, but it is pitch perfect symbolism and wise politics. Religious reconciliation in Iraq is especially important since ISIS is a virulently sectarian Sunni organization waging war against a Shi'ite-dominated government. Moreover, the Iraqi government has made some progress against ISIS in the last year, but the toughest battles are yet to come. The late-December 2015 liberation of Ramadi was an encouraging development but this struggle was only the briefest glance into the potential nightmare of liberating the much larger city of Mosul. While Ramadi was once a city of around 500,000 residents, it was almost empty of civilians in the battle to seize it from ISIS.[10] Likewise, only 500 to 700 ISIS fighters and their allies fought to retain it against the onslaught of Iraqi Special Forces, U.S.-trained Sunni militias, and coalition airpower.[11] In Mosul, 900,000 people of the city's original two million inhabitants remain, and ISIS is prepared to defend it with tens of thousands of fighters. An unknown but potentially large number of Sunni Arab residents in Mosul may be prepared to support ISIS if their only perceivable alternative is the Shi'ite-led Baghdad government. The more anti-Sunni the Baghdad government appears, the more likely Mosul Sunnis are apt to support ISIS in future battles. Sectarianism maintains its potential to destroy the social fabric of Iraq.

Adding to these problems, the recent sharp uptick in sectarian-based anger comes at a horrible time for the United States and the region and has threatened a number of important initiatives for reducing Middle East conflict. Washington, the European allies, and a number of regional states are seeking diplomatic solutions to the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars, both of which are strongly sectarian and extremely bloody. Solutions to such intractable problems will be much more achievable if the interactions between key regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia reach at least some minimal level of civility. The United States is also interested in improving ties with moderates in Iran while marginalizing the most radical elements within that society. Unfortunately, Iran's hardliners tend to benefit from periods of sectarian confrontation and anger so long as they do not overplay their hand with actions that receive global condemnation.

A final problem is that reinvigorated sectarianism, like the Assyrian demon, is fantastically difficult to cope with once it emerges and gains strength. Sectarian strife is often easy to incite, but painfully difficult to contain or rollback. Lebanon fought a sectarian war from 1975 until 1990, which was only brought under control with the aid of the other Arab states after a long and exhausting internal struggle. Around 150,000 people were killed in that war, an astounding number for such a small country. Currently, countries such as Iraq and Syria could be rendered ungovernable for decades, if not indefinitely, by sectarianism which are the dominant forces in both countries' ongoing strife. The United States and its key allies therefore need to work with regional governments to curb the rise of sectarianism, and this effort requires struggling behind the scenes to make our views known on this subject with U.S. allies. Such efforts have not always been undertaken with the intensity that is required and the sectarianism of Iraq's Maliki government is a particularly clear example of a problem that was never fully understood until it led to a near meltdown of the Iraqi state in the summer of 2014. Under current conditions, U.S. leaders need to continually remind themselves of the raw power of sectarianism in the region and treat it as a major problem needing constant and focused analysis and nimble policy actions.

ENDNOTES

1. Hatra was destroyed by ISIS in 2014, along with a variety of other irreplaceable archeological sites in both Iraq and Syria.

2. On the emergence of this cold war see, W. Andrew Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, December 2011, available from *strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1094*.

3. W. Andrew Terrill, "Iranian involvement in Yemen," *Orbis*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Summer 2014, pp. 429-440.

4. Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, p. 248.

5. Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Execution of Shiite Cleric Draws Outrage," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2016.

6. Ben Hubbard, "Saudis Cutting Ties to Iranians as Tension Rises," *The New York Times*, January 4, 2016.

7. At this time it is uncertain if there was Iranian government involvement or the extent of that involvement if it does exist. Around 50 suspects have been detained by Iranian authorities and Iranian President Rouhani has called for rapid and conclusive trials for those involved. See Agence France Presse, "Iran's Rouhani wants urgent case against embassy suspects," *Daily Star* (Lebanon), January 6, 2016.

8. Agence France Presse, "Iraqi Shiite militias in mass anti-Saudi protest," *Daily Star* (Lebanon), January 6, 2016.

9. Agencies, "Iraq offers to mediate between Saudis and Iran, worried over fall-out," *Daily Star* (Lebanon), January 6, 2016.

10. Matt Bradley and Ben Kesling, "Militants Hold Iraqi City Hostage," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 2, 2015.

11. Michael R. Gordon, "Iraqi Forces Prepare Next U.S. Backed Attack on ISIS, with Mosul on Horizon," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2015.

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