

Charlie Pratt comments at length on Nehad Ismael's article on the Saudi Arabia - Iran stand off.

Finally, the diplomatic crisis surrounding the execution of Shi'a cleric Nimr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia faded out. Iran and Saudi simply ran out of steam in the end, distracted by the lifting of sanctions on Iran, and the lowering oil price. So while Nimr al-Nimr was always a cause celebre for the Iranians, no Iranian died for him, nor did any Saudi. No hot war broke out. But this is yet another step in the war for Islamic hegemony waged between Iran and Saudi across the Middle East. Like the others, it will not quickly be forgotten. Instead the latent sectarianism from both sides adds to the cumulative increase in tension. And so, weeks later, Nimr al-Nimr is just one more martyr in this war, one that is sectarian and ideological in dress, but is about nothing more than power.

Of course, Saudi Arabia is the pre-eminent Sunni power, and Iran their Shi'a rival. But the sectarian divide is merely the most convenient tool to further a dispute between the two pre-eminent powers in the region, both with designs on shaping the Middle East to their own advantage. The areas where the two powers abut each other, either geographically, religiously or ideologically – Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon – are where the power plays are made, and where lives are really lost. Here, in these lands, split between different sects, striated by tribal loyalties and scarred by wars, the ambitions of Iran and Saudi to mould the Middle East are fully realised. Both want nothing more than governments that are entirely pliant to them, capable of supporting their endeavours, providing them forward security from each other, moral and international support and aligned economic markets.

But the ramifications of this battle for power and supremacy go far beyond the local and regional. It is instead the fundamental reason why the Middle East is failing so drastically today, and why global security is so endangered. The struggle for power between the two countries has stymied the growth of the states in which it takes place, and the abuse of sectarianism has created cracks in the body politic of Islam through which ISIL and other vicious groups have grown. At least Bahrain, Yemen and Syria would be vastly different if both parties proved capable of pursuing their own agendas over the scorched land of each. But the Middle East itself would be fundamentally different if Saudi and Iran could find an accommodation, and a common enemy in extremism.

In this sense, the cold war allusion is apt. The proxy warfare that marks this struggle is identical to that waged by the USSR and USA which did little other than visit instability and hopelessness on a range of African and Asian countries. Then, ideology was a cover for power, and the world

was fundamentally more insecure because of it. The same is coming to pass here in the Middle East. The countries where the proxy warfare occur have little control over their own destiny, as Saudi and Iran unlock forces that jointly supercede and diminish state power. Even if sectarianism is simply a tool in conflict, it has taken deep root in the societies it is landed upon. It is force that no state can control, and is exacerbated by the continued involvement of Saudi and Iran.

The scenario in each state victim of these proxy wars is hauntingly similar, as Saudi and Iran play their rivalry out over the national destiny of each one. In Lebanon, the continued support of Iran to Hizballah and Saudi to Sunni groups means that the Lebanese state remains in a state of confessional stillbirth. Bahrain cannot transcend its sectarian difficulties as long as Saudi continues to see it as the front-line of its own security and Iran continues to supposedly support the radical Shi'a militants in the poverty-stricken villages south of Manama. Similarly, Syria is split between Sunni and Shi'a militias supported by both, allowing the space for the out of control growth of Al-Nusra Front and ISIL. And in Yemen and Iraq neither is playing a positive role to promote reconciliation, reconstruction and peace, instead favouring support to their own proxy forces and governments, each of whom are slowly trying to tear apart inside their geographical boundaries.

And through it all, the most virulent sectarian force of all, ISIL, continues to grow, breeding hatred in the sectarian divisions summoned by Iran and Saudi. Their presence is the sharpest indicator of the battle for the soul of Islam that is ongoing. They are the most extreme answer to a critical question Islam faces of how it meshes with state power and creates a new form of politics, concomitant with the wishes of its citizens. As long as Iran and Saudi pursue sectarian agendas in support of their own hegemony this question, so fundamental to the future of the Middle East, will remain un-asked, or answered only by sectarian extremists given voice and strength by the rift.

Nowhere were the ill-effects of this struggle for power clearer than in the immediate aftermath of the spat around Nimr al-Nimr. Muhammad bin Salman and others may so that no-one will die, and no war will be fought. Certainly no Saudi or Iranian will die, but those in the furnace of proxy wars certainly will. The night after the storming of the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, Saudi unleashed a bombardment "without precedent" on the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, and the Huthi rebels who control it, and who are accused of being an Iranian proxy. 2 civilians died, adding to the 7,500 who died last year; the unwitting victims of Nimr al-Nimr's execution. IS-Yemen remained untouched, growing in the fertile ground Iran and Saudi left; the twisted mirror of the conflict both have unleashed.

