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Saudi Arabia's Shaken Pillars: Impact on Southeast Asian Muslims

By Saleena Saleem

Synopsis

Recent geopolitical developments in the Middle East have shaken Saudi Arabia's long-standing ideational "pillars" that underpin its domestic and foreign policies. For Muslims in Southeast Asia where Saudi Arabian soft power influence is relatively significant, the developments can create the conditions for a fragmentation of the Sunni Muslim landscape.

Commentary

LAST WEEK, Saudi authorities received Iranian delegates who came to negotiate this year's Haj arrangement for Iranian pilgrims, in what was the first bilateral dialogue since Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic and commercial ties with Iran. The political stand-off between the Middle East's main Sunni and Shia powers had occurred after Iranian protesters attacked a Saudi embassy in Tehran following Saudi Arabia's execution of prominent Saudi Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr in January.

Reports indicate that the Iranians pressured the Saudi government to allow a Shiite ritual during the Haj, which includes political protests against the West and the Saudi kingdom. The negotiations reached an impasse after Saudi Arabia rejected Iran's demand on grounds that such an allowance would disrupt the Haj process, which involves some two million pilgrims from around the world. Iran now has barred its citizens from participating in this year's Haj.

Iranian Political Influence in Iraq

Iran's emboldened stance is reflective of recent geopolitical developments in the

region, which have shaken Saudi Arabia's long-standing ideational "pillars" that underpin its domestic and foreign policies. These developments have affected Saudi Arabia more than they have Iran, which in turn results in Saudi responses that contribute to the political tension with Iran. It also underscores the sectarian nature of the on-going conflicts in the Middle East.

One key event is the outbreak of the Iraq civil war between the majority Shia and the minority Sunni population, which was sparked off by a series of missteps after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the deposing of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. The missteps included the unchecked rise of Iranian political influence in Iraq, and the subsequent Sunni Iraqi marginalisation and persecution by the Shia-dominant Iraqi government.

This localised Sunni-Shia power struggle in Iraq had spill-over effects elsewhere in the region as civil conflicts surged in Syria and Yemen.

Not only was Iran arming Shia Iraqis against the Sunni Iraqis, it also openly supported sides with Shia affiliation, such as Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Abdul Malik al-Houthi in Yemen. The Sunni perception that Iran's involvement was a planned intervention toward regional hegemony grew. While Saudi Arabia stayed neutral in Iraq, it supported Sunni factions in Syria and Yemen. The civil wars took on a more pronounced Sunni-Shia divide with the involvement of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia's Shaken "Pillars"

Saudi Arabia did not interfere in Iraq because it would have contradicted US policy there, and would have affected one of Riyadh's key foreign policy "pillar" – the long-standing alliance and friendship with the US based on a tacit agreement where Saudi Arabia catered to the energy needs of the US, in exchange for support against perceived regional threats.

This pillar is shaken today as the international community normalises diplomatic and trade ties with Iran; the US engages Iran as a partner toward restoring stability in the region; the US-Iranian nuclear deal moves forward; and US legislators appear willing to mirror the anti-Saudi ground sentiment by passing a bill that opens Saudi Arabia to lawsuits by families of the 9/11 victims.

Even though there are serious points of contention for the US, given Iran's stance against Israel and alliance with Russia, Saudi Arabia has to contend with the possibility that the US regards Iran as a beneficial ally.

Another pillar that is being shaken is the Wahhabi pillar that has been inculcated as part of the Saudi national identity. The strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam rejects those who undermine legitimate authority and helps protect the position of the Saudi royals at the domestic level. Wahhabism is also critical of certain Shia practices, which keeps possible influences of Iran at bay.

However, since the emergence of ISIS, also known as ISIL, the perception of Wahhabism (and Salafism in general) as a contributory factor to extremist ideology

has become re-ignited globally. While Saudi Arabia has vested interests in retaining the Wahhabi religious establishment for legitimacy at home, heightened criticism about Wahhabism brings about an increased level of scrutiny over the numerous Saudi-funded religious institutions around the world.

This affects Saudi Arabia's soft power influence, which it had financed through aid to governments, charities, religious schools, mosques and cultural centres worldwide over decades. In doing so, Saudi Arabia propagated the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, which was aimed at diminishing Shia Islam's appeal to the broader Sunni world.

Money from robust oil sales, which has been one of Saudi Arabia's strong pillars, has been shaken with two years of prolonged oil price slump at a time when Riyadh has to deal with the high costs of financing the various wars in the Middle East. This could potentially shake Saudi Arabia's ability to maintain the same level of soft power influence through aid and charitable giving.

Impact on Southeast Asian Muslims

While traditional Sunni Islam is predominant in Southeast Asia, Wahhabi-Salafi dogma has nevertheless been propagated through Saudi-financed institutions since the 1970s, as well as through local religious leaders who have studied in Saudi Arabia. In Malaysia, some argue that Salafism is becoming the mainstream interpretation of Islam as Salafists are now to be found in the religious establishment, political parties and civil society organisations.

As such, anti-Shia sentiment is present – Shi'ism is considered deviant and banned in Malaysia, as well as in the Indonesian provinces of Aceh and West Java. The longer the turmoil persists in the Middle East, the more it serves to legitimise increased governmental and societal restrictions on the practice of Shi'ism, on the rationale that it could lead to similar sectarian problems as in the Middle East.

Restrictions on religious practice or outbreaks of violence against Shias in Muslim majority Southeast Asian countries that are nonetheless plural societies, can lead to minority religious groups banding together to defend themselves, which can exacerbate societal polarisation.

With the negative international scrutiny on Wahhabism (and by extension, Salafism), Muslims in Southeast Asia are becoming more aware of the distinctions between the different interpretations of Sunni Islam. When efforts are made at either associating with or dissociating from particular Sunni groups (e.g. Salafis vs. traditionalists vs. Sufis) because of negative perceptions on heightened differences, a fragmented Sunni landscape can be created where people become less tolerant of intra-religious differences than in the past.

The Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict played out in the Middle East is unlikely to be replicated in the same form in Southeast Asia because there are relatively far fewer Shia Muslims in this region than in the Middle East. A rise of tension within a fragmented Sunni community is more likely instead.

Saleena Saleem is an Associate Research Fellow with the Malaysia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She can be reached by email at issaleena@ntu.edu.sg

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg