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Soaring Unrest After Saudis Execute Top Shi'ite Cleric

By Jason Ditz
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While the United Arab Emirates defended the killings as in keeping with Sharia law, Saudi Arabia's mass execution of 47, including top Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, has fueled a new round of international condemnation and riled Shi'ites the world over.

Shi'ite political figures in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon all lined up to condemn the killing of Nimr as a deliberate provocation, followed by Shi'ite militias as well as top religious leaders. Hezbollah said it holds Saudi ally the United States responsible for the executions.

In Iran the response was more straightforward, as Shi'ite demonstrators marched on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran. The situation got out of hand before long, however, and the embassy was set on fire, leading the Saudis to condemn Iran as "terrorists."

Another Saudi embassy at risk is the one in Baghdad, which only opened for the first time in decades last week, and which several high-profile Iraqis are demanding be immediately closed in protest. Iraqi politicians warned the execution would benefit ISIS by exacerbating tensions between Sunnis and Shi'ites.

Nimr was detained in 2012 for his role in organizing a protest demanding an end to discrimination against the Shi'ite minority in Saudi Arabia. Nimr's detention was already wildly controversial, and he was reportedly tortured while in custody.

Nimr's trial centered around charges of "disobeying the ruler" and "inciting sectarian strife," and the evidence against him was primarily the text of sermons he gave, leading to condemnation from human rights groups. In October of 2014, he was sentenced to death.

In addition to the international fallout, Nimr's death has fueled new protests among Saudi Shi'ites. Though a small minority in their country, they live predominantly in the coastal, oil-producing regions and their unrest subsequently could be more impactful.

Western nations have by and large not responded to the killing, in keeping with their desire not to upset the Saudis. The European Union's chief diplomat Federica Mogherini did, however, declare the killing to raise "Serious concerns regarding freedom of expression."