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## Saudi Arabia and Iran: a New Burst of Confrontation

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Before the beginning of the Hajj and the Great Islamic Holiday of Eid al-Adha (Sacrifice Feast) of 2016, a conflict flared up in the Islamic world between Saudi Arabia and Iran came with a new force. It has not only deepened the gap between the two countries but has driven another significant wedge between the world of the Sunnis and the Shiites.

It's important to remember that Riyadh and Tehran already cut off diplomatic ties back in January. This occurred following the attack on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran, including its Consulate in the city of Mashhad, which was set on fire, which itself was a response to the execution of Shiite preacher Nimrah al-Nimrah in Saudi Arabia on charges of terrorism.

And now there is a new confrontation, this time it's around the Hajj. As in the previous stage of the confrontation, both sides consider themselves to be right.

The direct reason for the next outburst of the conflict was the fact that the Iranian Hajj mission refused to send pilgrims from Iran to the Hajj of 2016. According to Saudi Arabia, this happened because the Hajj Ministry refused to provide Iranian pilgrims with exclusive rights and declined to authorize demonstrations.

Iran accused the Saudis of inflexibility when considering the matter of visa issue during a period of diplomatic breakdown, which resulted in the fact that the two rounds of negotiations were unsuccessful.

Dissatisfaction with the outcome of the talks spilled into the sphere of public policy on September 5. It was expressed by Iran's spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who called to review the management system of Islamic holy sites. He also strongly criticized Saudi Arabia's organisation of the Hajj.

"The Islamic countries should change the management system for the two holy sites and the organisation of the Hajj. Saudi Arabia's leaders must be held accountable for the incidents, which were the consequence of their actions," Iranian news agency IRNA quoted Ali Khamenei.

Ali Khamenei reminded Saudi Arabia of last year's tragic incident during the Hajj when, due to a stampede in Mina, 460 Iranian pilgrims lost their lives. The Ayatollah blamed the Saudi authorities for what happened. According to Iran's spiritual leader, the authorities are unable to organise the Hajj properly. Similar statements were made by the Iranian Foreign Minister M. Javad Zarif and the former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Saudi Arabia was not slow to respond. The Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the head of the Interior Ministry of the Kingdom, responded on the same day claiming that the Iranian authorities are trying to politicise the situation around the Hajj and do not want the citizens of the Islamic Republic to undertake the pilgrimage.

"The Kingdom provides the same conditions for all guests of God (pilgrims), whether they are Iranians or not. Before the season the Iranian Hajj Mission demanded special conditions for its citizens, which are different from the standards followed by other countries," clarified Mohammed bin Nayef.

This was not the end of the story. Verbal escalation continued and tensions reached fever pitch. The Grand Mufti of KSA Abdul-Aziz Al ash-Sheikh and Minister for Hajj and Foreign Minister of KSA Adel al-Jubeir came out with the harsh statements against the Iranian leadership. The statement by the Grand Mufti was particularly hard-hitting as he said on September 6 that Ali Khamenei's attacks on Saudi Arabia in connection with the annual pilgrimage of Muslims were "not surprising." "We must understand these are not Muslims, they are children of Magi, and their hostility towards Muslims is longstanding. Especially towards Sunnis."

Denying Shiites the right to be Muslims, the supreme spiritual authority of Saudi Arabia raised the bar of controversy to a new level. Previously, Saudi theologians who belong to the Hanbali schools of thought might have been able to state that the Shia were heretics and dissenters but none of them had declared them non-Muslims. In other words, the Saudi religious leader ‘theoretically’ justified refusing Shiites the right to visit Mecca! In subsequent interviews, he continued his harsh criticism of Iran, accusing it of supporting terrorism, intervening in the affairs of Arab States and holding ‘proxy wars’ in them, clearly alluding to the participation of the Shiite Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict.

To be fair, it should be highlighted that the Saudi authorities still admit the Iranians may take part in the Hajj. Minister of Hajj Mohammad Saleh bin Taher informed that Saudi Arabia has agreed to issue visas to Iranian participants in the pilgrimage, provided they enter the Kingdom through the third countries. He stated that transit is possible through the states of the European Union and Africa, the USA, Australia and New Zealand (not the simplest way!).

In an extensive propaganda campaign currently being waged in Saudi Arabia, beyond the overbearing controversy in purely religious issues, Riyadh maintains that it is offensive that the Iranians, recalling the incidents with the pilgrims in 1987, 1989 and 2015 (history repeats itself), cast aspersions on the huge efforts made by the Kingdom in order to admit pilgrims. In numerous articles published in the Saudi and pan-Arab media, there is mention of the level of organisation of the Hajj and security that has increased annually since the days when the King and founder Abdulaziz became the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in 1926 (this function was previously performed by Sharif Hussein of the Hashemite dynasty): the communication infrastructure between the holy cities is developing; the Grand mosque in Mecca is expanding; a large number of security forces are being recruited (27,000 persons in 2016); checkpoints and permits issuing system are in development, serious liability for illegal Hajj has been introduced; the latest technologies (electronic GPS bracelet) are being implemented; ventilation and fire safety systems have been improved (fire-resistant materials for tents in Mina valley), the level of management is increasing (through structuring pilgrimage groups, setting the exact time for exit and officiations); facilities for disabled people are provided; the spread of diseases is prevented (though the need to provide medical certificates upon obtaining visas, improved medical services on site).

A few days after the Iranian statements, it became clear that Saudi Arabia would not only defend itself against Iranian accusations, talking about how much it did for pilgrims, but would engage all its political resources to make Tehran not just isolated in the Arab and Islamic world, but also strongly condemned by all its members after its verbal attacks on Riyadh.

As of September 7, the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) issued a statement wherein it criticised the Iranian leader Ali Khamenei for his accusations of poor organisation of the Hajj.

The six Arab countries forming the Council have expressed surprise at those “unacceptable expressions contained in the statement of the Iranian leader,” because “they ought not to be uttered by any Muslim, and, especially, the leader of a Muslim state.” The GCC Secretary General Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani said that the member states of the Council considered

the statements of the Iranian leadership regarding Hajj as “aggressive attacks and a desperate attempt to politicise this great Muslim ceremony that unites Muslims in these Holy days in the land of the two Holy sites”. According to the GCC Secretary General, the Muslim world recognizes the great efforts made by the leadership of Saudi Arabia and its people in order to organise the Hajj, admit pilgrims and ensure their safety.

Statements made by Iranians – Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani, who called on Muslim countries to unite and punish Saudi Arabia for crimes committed (“they support terrorism and the bloodshed of Muslims in Iraq, Syria and Yemen”) and the Foreign Minister of Iran M. Javad Zarif (“Indeed; there is no resemblance between the Islam of Iranians, the majority of Muslims and the bigoted extremism that Wahhabi top cleric and Saudi terror masters preach”), was drowned out in the chorus of condemnation from the Arab League, the OIC and a number of religious leaders of the Sunni world.

Thus, starting with the conflict over the Hajj, the controversy between the leaders of the Sunni and Shiite worlds resulted in a sharp exchange of accusations and extremely hostile rhetoric against the policy pursued by the two countries in the region. It came to the point that Adel al-Jubeir accused Iran of supporting al-Qaeda adding that the documents that became available to the United States after the killing of Osama bin Laden, indicates Iran’s relationship with the terrorist organisation. The Minister has also stressed that Iran was involved in the attacks in Europe, Asia, Africa and even in Latin America, as well as in the murder of American and British soldiers in Iraq.

The Saudi Arabian also blamed Tehran for the troubles faced by Iraq, saying that the problem of Iraq is Iran and its interference in the internal affairs of Iraq and the support of their armed Shiite groups that have committed a great deal of bloody crimes (massacres), which led to an increase in sectarian struggle. And this, in turn, was the reason that the ISIL had strengthened its position in the country, and many Sunnis had joined this organization, after the bloody crimes (massacres) were committed in Fallujah and other places.

In response, the Iranians stated that on September 7 they eliminated a group of 12 militants in the northwest of the country, in the area of Serdshet, alluding that it had been trained and brought to Iran by Saudi Arabia, which was categorically denied by Riyadh.

It is clear that the escalation of hostile rhetoric will not only lead to further degradation of the Saudi-Iranian relations, but will also deepen the gap between the Shiites and the Sunnis, who have become hostages of the geopolitical struggle between the two regional giants of the Islamic world. If both countries do not stop in time, it threatens to escalate from mutual public accusations and political controversies into a poorly controlled conflict