

Iran and Saudi Arabia Mix It Up.  
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In January, active warfare almost erupted when the Saudis decapitated a Shiite cleric, enraging Iran. On the surface, this seemed to be the ongoing hostility between the two major sects of Islam, the Sunni majority and the Shiite minority. Most Arabs and most Muslims around the world are Sunni; most Iranians, with pockets in the Middle East, are Shiite.

This antipathy is often compared with the Protestant-Catholic religious wars---a theological dispute. However, there is little theological difference between these sects. The problem started with a political dispute: those early Muslims who believed that Mohammad's successor should be his blood descendant (Shiites, or Party of Ali), and those who believed that the successor should be chosen by negotiation of the elders (the Sunni, or Orthodox).

Had the first group that promoted bloodline accepted the decision of the majority, there would have been no problem. But the losers in this dispute took their fight to the battlefield, where they were defeated. This was 1400 years ago, but the Shiites have never forgiven that loss. Every year, thousands march in a funeral procession to commemorate the defeat.

Over the centuries, despite a long history of antipathy between Persians and Arabs, this difference rarely flared up into combat. Most Iranians became Shiites and most Arabs (and other converts across the world) remained Sunni. The Persians always resented the Arab conquest of their sophisticated land, and were not sincerely attached to Islam, a religion forced on them. Over time, the only protest possible to Persians was to attach themselves to Islam's dissident sect, Shi'a.

One flare-up in the 11th century was the creation of the world's first Muslim Shiite terrorist cult, a mountain stronghold where young men and women were trained as assassins (Hashish-eaters) who could murder anybody anywhere in the world of their day. They held the world in thrall until their stronghold was brutally dismantled by worse terrorists, the Mongol hordes.

The antipathy between Persians and Arabs continued through the centuries, but after the Mongol destruction of Baghdad and the rise of the Ottoman Empire, in which Turks overran all the Arab lands and kept the peace through force, no open conflict was possible. The Persians, from 1600 onward, declined in prestige and population for the first time in 1500 years.

European powers began encroaching on every once-powerful land no longer able to defend itself. The Russians and British dismantled half of Persia in the 19th century, but never bothered to colonize them. World War I completed the process of the Russians, British, and French taking charge of Muslim lands that had not enjoyed autonomy for centuries. New states were created with a mandate to modernize.

Persia was fortunate enough to avoid colonization, and a modernizing monarch, Reza Shah Pahlavi, through fierce will, started the process of creating a modern Iran. This modernization continued with the help of oil money, a new commodity that financed this process. Shia Islam was downplayed by the Pahlavis, until the Islamic Revolution overturned them.

Turkey, the remnant of the Ottoman Empire, rapidly modernized and secularized thanks to their great first president (dictator), Kamal Ataturk. Even without oil money, they became a player in the modern world (currently being undone, however).

Arabia, a backwater in the Ottoman Empire, secured its freedom during World War I with British help, but despite oil wealth, rejected the opportunity to modernize. The twin strangleholds of a very backward literalist Muslim cult (the Wahhabis) and a warlord who started a dynasty (Ibn Saud) kept the country backward and isolated.

Oil money has fueled an ongoing power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. What started as a political quarrel about influence in the Middle East between the modernizing Pahlavis and the repressive Saudis has changed because of a religious revolution in Iran that unseated secular rule. Now it appears to be a Shiite-Sunni conflict, which masks the political roots of the hatred.

The Saudis decapitated a Saudi Shiite cleric, a dissident, and an Iranian mob trashed the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Had the crisis not been defused, it could have become war, which both countries could lose.

684 words

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