Sectarian Identity Politics in Iran–Saudi Arabia’s Rivalry

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Abstract
The regional expression of the contention between Sunnis and Shias that is becoming the major center of many recent debates on sectarian schism is the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran: they both perceive and are perceived as leading players in the battle to proclaim themselves and their polities to be the true Islamic state, their societies to be the representatives of Islamic normative values, and their regimes to be the governments of the divine law and Sharia. The beginning of 2016 has seen a series of executions across Saudi Arabia. When news broke about the prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr’s execution, a group of demonstrators protested at the Saudi embassy in Iran’s capital, to which Saudi Arabia responded by severing diplomatic ties with Iran, worsening the already hostile relations between two powers. This event has been one of the most recent in many illustrations and symbols of Sunni–Shia schism in the Middle East. Then, debates has mushrooms in which, many has described the event and many others as the manifestation of a fight that has been brewing for centuries as position of Islam as one of the key components of politics has been entrenched in the Middle East and deeply rooted in its history and culture. By the same token, other events, from Iran’s nuclear deal to Saudis’ involvement in Yemen and two countries’ relations with the US, all have been more or less drawn to the issue of sectarianism. Saudi Arabia’s frustration of the US and Iran’s nuclear deal has been expressed in its declaration to take up “all options, including the acquisitions of nuclear weapons, to face whatever eventuality might come from Iran”. This study aim a discussion in this statement might be seen as a sign of sectarian rivalry between the Iranians and the Saudis, but Saudi Arabia’s other recent statement of a possible partnership with Israel suggested that the calculations against the nuclear threat are based on a series of tectonic shifts in the region’s power politics rather than on the sectarian rivalry or differences.

Key Words: Sectarian Identity, Iran, Saudi Arabia.