

## Fanack.com by Carolien Roelants

Not only have the Turkish media been given unprecedented freedom to cover the disappearance or murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The Iranian press are also celebrating happy times. For once, it is not Iran or its supreme leader who are the bad guys in the eyes of the world, but Iran's major rival Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. "Saudi Arabia is looking horrific," an Iranian press agency reported. Indeed. How wonderful this is.

Before you all raise your hands in protest: Iran itself is of course no stranger to assassination campaigns – assuming that Khashoggi has been killed, as the Saudis now seem to have confirmed after ten days of official denials. But I remember very well how former Iranian Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar was assassinated in France in 1991, and how four Iranian Kurdish opposition leaders were gunned down in a Greek restaurant in Berlin the following year. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and then President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani were deemed by a German court to be *at least* aware of the liquidation plans. Of course, Iranian media do not mention these cases in their coverage of the Khashoggi case.

But, as some Iranian commentators *do* acknowledge, Khashoggi will eventually fade from the headlines, but the problems between Iran and Saudi Arabia will remain. And Iran will be the villain once again.

If the Iranian-Saudi power struggle were a game, Saudi Arabia would for the moment hold the winning hand, and this is mainly because of US support.

The Saudi crown prince considers Iran and its supreme leader as the personification of Evil. As he said in April 2018 in an interview with *The Atlantic*: "I believe that the Iranian supreme leader makes Hitler look good. Hitler tried to conquer Europe. But the supreme leader is trying to conquer the world."

Iran has undeniably increased its influence throughout the Sunni Arab world since the Islamic revolution in 1979, although not always under its own steam. Yes, in Lebanon Iran spread its influence through its creation of Hezbollah, which is now the dominant force in the country. But in Iraq, its influence was thanks to US President George Bush who eliminated Iran's special enemy Saddam Hussein. In Syria, Iran consolidated its position as an ally of President Bashar al-Assad who is now winning his war – thanks to Russia, incidentally, not Iran. In Yemen, Iran is not as influential as the Saudis allege – the Houthi rebels who still control the capital Sanaa are no puppets of Tehran.

But by the way - I seem to remember Saudi Arabia in the past years has been busy supporting Islamist Sunni parties in Yemen against Houthis. And didn't Saudi Arabia support Sunnis in Lebanon, fund Islamist rebels in Syria and help general Sisi to overthrow Muslim Brother president Morsi in Egypt?

The Iran-Saudi power struggle is a *two-way street*.

I believe the portrayal of Iran as a new Nazi Germany - but worse – and threat to world security is nonsense. In the predominantly Sunni Arab world, Iran remains an outsider as a Persian and Shiite-majority country. On the global stage, Iran is a medium-sized state with a weak economy and military capabilities that have been very much restricted by international sanctions. Moreover, it is being throttled by President Donald Trump who considers Saudi Arabia a friend and Iran a force of evil – (although he also depicted Iranian President Hassan Rouhani as a lovely man; Trump is very flexible).

How will this power struggle end?

It won't. Iran and Saudi Arabia will remain rivals. Which is really bad news for states like Yemen that find themselves caught in the middle.