

COMMENTS BY PAUL AARTS

1. My first remark relates to Cohen's observation about the 'Sunni-Shia competition'. I doubt that is as relevant as he might imply. Surely, I have my qualms when an explicit reference is made to the battle at Karbala (680). By doing so, doesn't he risk overestimating the role of religion, i.e. religious differences, when the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia can better be understood as another form of a Cold War rivalry – [with each country] looking to expand its regional sphere of influence?

Having said that, yes, it's true that increasingly sectarianism has been creeping in, also in more recent Iran foreign policy acts (here I refer explicitly to bringing in Shiite militias from Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan to the war zones in Syria). However, generally speaking, comparing Iran and Saudi Arabia's foreign policies in this regard, for sure Saudi Arabia has a much more 'Sunni'-focused orientation than Iran has a 'Shia'-focused orientation.

2. I beg to differ with Cohen's notion that "if the Saudis really do curb Wahhabism, that will change our world". Of course, that would be a welcome development. But the statement presupposes – if I understood it correctly – that curbing Wahhabism would lead to less Islamic radicalism and maybe even less terrorism. If that's the assumption, I tend to disagree. First, Wahhabism indeed preaches an ultraorthodox, puritan and intolerant form of Islam, but in its Saudi format, it's quietist politically and thereby expounds the rule of subservience to the ruler (i.e. al-Saud). Second, later developments, after the victory of the mujahideen in Afghanistan and the rise of al-Qaeda, the Saudis lost control of global Salafism, if they ever really had it. In other words, leaning on the Saudis to become 'less Wahhabi' is unlikely to have much effect on jihadist movements like al-Qaeda and Islamic State. Third, there is always a 'demand side', next to the 'export side'. One should carefully examine – case by case, context by context – to what extent the export of religious ideas is a reaction to a certain demand for those same ideas, i.e. one should always ask oneself, do people choose ideas? Or do ideas choose them?

3. And then, finally, a critical observation about 'the youth' and its supposedly inherently progressive character. We all know the Dutch phrase 'De jeugd heeft de toekomst' ('The future belongs to the youth'), which generally speaking might be true. But I am a strong opponent of using 'the youth' as one, homogeneous category. It simply doesn't exist. Indeed, one should compartmentalize this much too imprecise group label. I don't think this needs further elaboration. Breaking up 'the youth' into its different sub-categories will very likely lead to a much less rosy picture of Middle Eastern countries' future than Cohen (and many others) would assume. Just like the much-hyped concept of 'civil society' includes 'the good, the bad and the ugly', the same goes for 'the youth'.