

THE GEOPOLITICS OF DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN SUNNIS AND SHIAS: A GLOBAL OVERVIEW

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With the ‘Arab Spring’, the general misunderstanding that prevails between Sunnis and Shias seems to have gained momentum. While the ‘Sunni–Shia issue’ is by no means limited to the Arab world, it is this region that witnesses the most obvious examples of sectarian unrest. The roots of the global disagreement between Sunnis and Shias go back 14 centuries, but this rivalry also has to do with political matters. It is important, therefore, not to exaggerate the role of sectarianism in contemporary issues. Today, there is obvious social unrest that is linked to religious matters, but it has to do first with state rivalries. The intertwining of political and religious matters is in itself part of the history of Islam. Nevertheless, what can we expect from the rise of sectarianism that we are witnessing in the region? Will it remain mainly political and limited to relations between regimes and governments? Or will it extend more and more to the lives of citizens, transforming progressively the divergences between Sunnis and Shias into a global and violent fight? To answer these questions, we must first remember the main facts that contributed to the split of Islam into various branches, starting with Sunnism and Shiism. Then we will explore concrete examples of the contemporary Sunni–Shia disagreement and how it translates into violent representations. Finally, we will formulate some suggestions relating to the future of Sunni–Shia relations and how disagreements can be overcome in the future.

BETWEEN POLITICS AND RELIGION: THE REASONS FOR A DETERMINANT DISAGREEMENT

The roots of the disagreement between Sunnis and Shias seem to be mainly theological. But on looking closer, it is easy to notice that they also have to do with politics and rivalry over power. Indeed, the seeds for this major inter-Muslim conflict were sown as soon as Muhammad—the Prophet of Islam—died in 632, leaving no successor. With his death, his companions (people who had converted to Islam and adhered to his thoughts and teachings) convened in al-Saqifa, a roofed place located in the town of al-Madina. They designated Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad’s followers and companions, as the first caliph of Islam (632–634). He was followed by Omar (634–644), Othman (644–656) and Ali (656–661). The serious problems occurred when Moawiya, the military governor of Damascus, rejected the legitimacy of Ali.¹

This attempt by Moawiya to delegitimise Ali’s earning of the title Caliphate of Islam has to be understood first and foremost in its political dimension.² From a religious point of view, Ali’s skills and legitimacy were at least as high as those of the caliphs who preceded him. Ali was the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad. He also had a special position having lived for many years in the house of the Prophet, becoming almost an adoptive son to him. But perhaps most important is the fact that Ali was the first Muslim man to have converted to Islam, while it had taken Abu Bakr, Omar and Othman more time to adhere to Muhammad’s calls to embrace Islam. Why then was Ali not chosen as the first successor to Muhammad? History has it that while Ali was washing Muhammad’s body ahead of burying him, the other companions of the Prophet were meeting in al-Saqifa, designating Muhammad’s successor. Ali’s absence weakened his position, and this is why he had to wait more than 20 years before being designated a caliph. But Moawiya’s challenge to Ali’s authority in Islam did not provoke serious religious argument. And since caliphs hold both spiritual and temporal powers in their hands, the governor of Damascus had to refer to politics to reach his objectives.³

Moawiya argued that Ali was responsible for the killing of his predecessor, Othman. Ali rejected the accusation but Moawiya’s position allowed him to build on his military capacities. He proposed to Ali that both their troops engage in a fight, in order for people to see which of them had the greater strength and therefore the greater legitimacy over Islam. But while Moawiya and Ali’s troops were standing face to face, ready for combat,

1 Maxime Rodinson (2013). *Mahomet*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

2 For insightful details about the points that follow and the political dimension of the Sunni–Shia conflict vs religious aspects, some of the recommended books are: Roy P. Mottahedeh (2008). *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*. Oxford: Oneworld; Mohammad Ali Amir Moezzi and Christian Jambet (2004). *Qu’est-ce que le Shi’isme?* Paris: Fayard; and Hichem Djaït (2008). *La grande discorde: Religion et politique dans l’islam des origines*. Paris: Gallimard. Most of the points that follow are based on the facts and explanations that can be found in these books.

3 There are several ways to understand Moawiya’s strategy: one is comprehensive, generally defended by Sunnis; the other is critical and mostly defended by Shias. To understand the Shia narrative of these events, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Institute of Ismaili Studies (2011). *The Spirituality of Shi’i Islam: Beliefs and Practices*. London: I.B. Tauris. Also useful is Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub (2005). *The Crisis of Muslim History: Religion and Politics in Early Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld.

Ali suddenly renounced the fight. His act was quickly recuperated by Moawiya, who saw Ali's decision as an act of cowardice that confirmed his lack of legitimacy. Islam's main rift, between Sunnis and Shias, began here. Summarising perspectives, we can say that those who supported Moawiya in his action are the Sunnis; and Ali's supporters are the Shias. Both have gone their own way ever since, and the incident has led to a violent coexistence for the two schools in one and the same region. Moawiya had shown himself capable of exploiting his military strength and using it for the benefit of his political ambitions. The empires that were to follow the reign of the Umayyad (Abbasid, Ottoman etc.) all pretended to political and religious 'legitimacies' following their combats and conquests.⁴

Shias do not recognise Islam's three first caliphs. They consider Ali to be the first caliph of Islam and the only legitimate successor to Muhammad. Sunnis do recognise Ali's legitimacy but criticise the Shia rejection of his three predecessors. This disagreement persists today. It is so deeply rooted in each of these religious inter-Islam trends that nothing indicates relations between the two communities could embark on a positive track anytime soon. Islam is complex and its realities and disagreements go far beyond the Sunni-Shia issue. The many communities that are part of Islam all have their own appreciations and beliefs, and this situation only adds to the religion's fragmentation. Nevertheless, the Sunni-Shia polarisation is without a doubt Islam's main and most threatening rift. Today, the attempts of Sunnis and Shias to pretend to both political and religious legitimacy may reflect less on people's feelings and claims, depending on the country or region we are talking about. But governments that allow the Sunni-Shia rift to be one of the main drivers for their policies are far more obvious. Events that go back more than 1,400 years old find an echo in contemporary geopolitical issues, adding more complexity to the challenges of a region that is already under heavy pressure.

The Middle East is the object of rivalries and a quest for leadership. The main players in the region are Saudi Arabia and Iran. Though they have to include other players and strategies in their calculations, both countries are concentrating a significant part of their prospects in the region. This is not to say that the Saudi-Iranian quest of influence in the MENA region is necessarily the leading issue. With the Arab Spring in particular, events have demonstrated the individuality possessed by each of the countries in the Arab world. Each uprising evolved in its own way, though they sometimes happened to share commonalities too, as highlighted by the revolts that led to the falls of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt. Nevertheless, none of the states in the region can pretend to be fully hermetic to external influence. This is where Saudi Arabia and Iran's respective attempts to place their pawns in the Arab world and gather the maximum number of actors to defend their policies and points of view reveal how much each of them is constantly trying to gain momentum.

4 For more on Islam, its history and evolution, see John L. Esposito (ed.) (1999). *The Oxford History of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

THE CONTEMPORARY QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY

Saudi Arabia sees itself as the legitimate protector of Sunni interests. As well as the presence of two of the three sacred Sunni shrines on its soil (Mecca and Medina) and the official ideology of the state (Wahhabism), there's the country's active development of a pan-Islamic, Sunni-based strategy of education (symbolised by the example of Madrasas) and its support of Islamic fighters, which has been ongoing for decades. The case of Afghanistan in the 1980s, when Saudi Arabia supported the Mudjahideen in their combat against the Soviets, is one of the most telling examples.⁵ But this does not necessarily mean that Saudis engage in a blind strategy of supporting religious Sunni groups for the sake of their beliefs. Saudi Arabia's main focus consists of controlling regional shifts and any dramatic trends, in order to ultimately avoid paying a high price. Saudi Arabia has been the diplomatic giant of the Arab world throughout the past four decades at least, and it has been able to fill the gap left by the death of Egyptian president Nasser in 1970 with discretion and success.⁶ But Saudis fear any change in the regional balance of power could alter their position, and this is why they want to have the upper hand. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was when their first anti-Iranian and anti-Shia fears really developed.⁷ While Saudi Arabia always took advantage of its alliance with the United States to contain the Shah of Iran's ambitions to get access to important military means (nuclear being among them), the 1979 revolution got the country obsessed with the idea of Iran being able to take advantage of its Shia dogma to influence Shia communities and spread revolution in the Arab world. Some 25 years later, in 2003, following the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the end of Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq made Saudis aware how damaging it could be if Shias held power in this neighbouring country. While Saudis felt Iraq had been neutralised since the end of the 1991 Gulf war, Iran's ability to develop a political influence in this country made them feel there was a direct risk at their door. This only added to their fear of being surrounded by a 'Shia crescent'.⁸

Iran, too, is trying to secure influence in the Arab world. The Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988) that followed the Islamic Revolution rather stood in its way. This important regional conflict weakened Iran and forced it to concentrate on the Gulf states-supported war it was facing. Nevertheless, Iran was able to find benefits in the evolution of the region. While Syria's Hafez al-Assad decided to engage in a strategic alliance with Iran beginning in 1980, Tehran also supported (in 1982) the creation in Lebanon of a militant Shia Islamic group known

5 See Barnett R. Rubin (2013). *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

6 For more on the history of Saudi Arabia, see Madawi al-Rasheed (2010). *A History of Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

7 See James G. Blight, et al. (2012). *Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979-1988*. Lanham (Md.): Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

8 The expression 'Shia crescent' was first popularised by King Abdallah of Jordan in 2004, followed by Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

today as Hezbollah.⁹ For two decades, Iran's strategy in the Arab world was based on these two pillars. But the aforementioned American-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq allowed Tehran to extend its regional means. Iran's political alliances in Iraq are obvious today, such as the good relations it has with Nuri al-Maliki, the Shia prime minister.¹⁰ From a commercial point of view, there is also Iran's importance in the trade and economic balance of both Syria and Iraq, not to mention Tehran's contribution to both the Syrian regime and Hezbollah's military capacity. At the same time, many things have been said during this past decade concerning Iran's ability to influence the Huthi Shia rebel group in northwest Yemen and Shia anti-regime protesters in Bahrain. Countries extending from Morocco to Egypt have officially referred to Iran's threatening strategy of converting Sunnis to Shiism in order to achieve more regional influence. So far, paradoxically, most of these accusations seem obvious while at the same time difficult to prove. Morocco, Egypt and even Jordan's denunciation of Iran's 'demoniac' aims in the region seem to be linked primarily to their fears of ending up with popular 'subversive' attitudes influenced by Iran's anti-Western views and policies. This is something these countries, and others in the region, share with Saudi Arabia, which also happens to be an important funder for many Arab states.

Saudi Arabia and Iran's primary aims do not have to be considered through the lens of their respective claims for religious legitimacy. Their rhetoric and the symbols they constantly refer to concern religion. It becomes easy, therefore, to believe that both are guided by a messianic duty that leaves no room for other religions, sects, currents and beliefs. Yet their path is far from being that narrow. History has proven that countries which try to make rigid ideologies or beliefs the main argument for their legitimacy are sentenced to lose power in the long run. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and its impact on the USSR stands as a perfect example. Saudi Arabia and Iran are aware that their power must find various channels of expression. This is why the things that really matter are not official statements but what is happening on the ground. The array of allies that Saudi Arabia and Iran are looking for go far beyond their religious beliefs. If common religious affiliations happen to also allow the building of alliances and strong political links, then neither will disregard them. But the main aim for both remains first and foremost political. The evolution of the Arab world has gained complexity, especially with the Arab Spring. Countries have to take into consideration both state levels and intra-state levels when it comes to defining and maintaining their strategies of influence. If Saudi Arabia and Iran had limited their policies solely to communitarian considerations, they would have ended up isolated and weakened. The degree of animosity that they feel towards each other requires activating policies and behaviours that sound appealing to a majority of players and actors, sometimes regardless of their religious belonging. Understanding the realities of the

9 Judith Palmer Harik (2004). *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. London: I.B. Tauris.

10 Toby Dodge (2013). *Iraq: From War to a new Authoritarianism*. London: Routledge, 2013.

regional geopolitics of disagreement between ‘Sunni Saudis’ and ‘Shia Iranians’ requires understanding that Saudis can decide to adopt a Shia-appealing attitude when needed, just as Iranians may employ a Sunni-appealing attitude when they feel it is justified. The longevity and the resilience of states depend on pragmatism before convictions.

CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SUNNI–SHIA DISAGREEMENT

Sunnis and Shias are not the product of the Middle East’s history alone. Both communities live in a region that extends from Morocco to Indonesia. Furthermore, both Sunni and Shia Muslims are a minority in the extended Muslim world. If events had to do with numbers, the challenges in the relations between Sunnis and Shias would lead us to focus more on Asian perspectives. Pakistan stands as a good example for the degree of violence and misunderstanding that prevails between the two communities.

Nevertheless, the degree of political tensions and the strategic rivalries that prevail in the MENA region are the main reason so much attention is given to the Arab world’s prospects. By extension, the regions of the world that are from a different religious tradition can seldom pretend to be preserved from intra-MENA tensions. In the European Union, for example, the post-September 11 context revealed the significant number of Sunni communities living on European soil. It was as if everybody was just discovering that religious radicalism also has an existence in the EU. This fact brought about several hypotheses regarding the degree of support Saudi Arabia was giving to these communities, as well as the potential links between Sunni Arabs, non-Arabs and the al-Qaida organisation. The media and several governments contributed to creating a direct link in people’s minds between the fact of being a Sunni Muslim and a natural inclination for supporting religious extremism. Suspicions over who was responsible for the 11 September attacks also reflected negatively on Saudi Arabia and its alleged support of various groups of Sunni Muslim radicals. But, in fact, many of these analogies—though not necessary all of them—were abusive.

The same situation prevailed in the case of Shias. Shias in general, and Arab Shias in particular, are not a majority in the US or EU. But they do form a significant section of the Arab Muslims that are settled in some Latin American and African countries, for reasons linked to the history of Arab migrations. Therefore, Iran and its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, were suspected of trying to get in touch with their Shia co-religionists around the world to encourage them to organise violent attacks in their respective countries. Examples were found in Argentina,¹¹ even Bulgaria.¹² Some Arab states added their voices to the growing concerns around the intentions of Iran and Hezbollah. Morocco expelled Iran’s ambassador to the country in 2009, while Hosni Mubarak often linked cases of conversion to Shiism to Iran’s desire to harm Egyptian interests. Similar accusations can also be found in the cases

11 With the Buenos Aires bombings of 1994, for which Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon are accused by Argentina.

12 In 2012, a bus of Israeli tourists was bombed in Burgas, also inciting suspicions against Hezbollah.

of Senegal and Algeria, though they sound exaggerated. The fears of many of the region's governments vis-à-vis Iran and its regional allies are the main reason behind their obsession with the threats of Shiism. Iran never denied the existence of such conversions, but this does not mean that Tehran is actively promoting a strategy of converting Sunni and non-Sunni Muslims to Shiism. Examples of such conversions exist but the idea that they are taking place on a large scale has yet to be proven. Furthermore, an individual adhering to Shiism does not necessarily have an automatic allegiance to Iran and its policies.

Indeed, from a theological point of view, Shias have to follow religious guides or leaders of their choice, who enlighten them on religious attitudes to adopt. These people, called *marja'*, often put their religious beliefs above patriotic feelings.¹³ Though there are no statistics made available on the matter, the general belief among Shias is that a majority of them follow Iraq-based Ayatollah Sistani's teachings and orientations. Sistani's official stance of non-interference in political affairs has to be put in perspective: the ayatollah is known for giving discrete indications concerning Iraq's political life, though he never does so publicly. And though a number of Shias may follow Iran's regional policy because of their intrinsic bias, this doesn't mean that their attitude can be attributed to a blind allegiance to the orientations of their *marja'*. Even if this were the case, in the case of Sistani his personal convictions and choices do not demonstrate any inclination to Iran, its official religious dogma or its policies. On the contrary, Iran's leader Ayatollah Khamenei is challenging the school of thought of Sistani. As for Shia Arabs, they tend to focus on their internal (local and national) perspectives, without necessarily knowing much about Iran's political life. Shias in general may agree with Iran on some important issues, such as opposing the policies of the US and its regional allies, and none could deny they are generally at odds with Sunnis, especially when it comes to dealing with their respective political beliefs. But none of this means that Shias in general could be heading towards a global and inevitable common agreement. The situation in Iraq, where Shias are in total disagreement over a large range of political and strategic issues, speaks for itself.

The Iranian clergy's authority over Shias in general is being challenged, as highlighted by the demonstrations that followed Ahmadinejad's re-election in 2009, as well as the youth's growing sense of disconnect with the country's religious rules.¹⁴ There is also less cohesion between Shias of the Arab world than what is generally said and thought. This limits the possibility for a country such as Iran to emerge as a subsequent regional leader.

Arab countries that have a majority of Shia nationals, such as Bahrain and Iraq, represent well the large diversity of Shiism. Both countries have something in common: 'their' Shias cannot disconnect their religion and beliefs from political considerations. In

13 For more on the *Marja'iyah*, its history and contemporary translations, see Barah Mikail (2006). *La question de la 'Marja'iyah' chiite*, http://www.iris-france.org/docs/consulting/2006_chiite.pdf [Consulted 15 December 2013].

14 Ahmadinejad does not follow Khamenei from a religious perspective, but he was the Supreme Guide's protégé for years, before the two leaders exchanged strong disagreements at the end of Ahmadinejad's second presidential mandate.

Bahrain, Shias—who represent more than 60% of the population—are homogenously united over one political objective at least: to get the ruling (Sunni) dynasty to change its attitude towards them by recognising their basic rights and putting an end to their social discrimination. But their views are different from the Iraqi Shias, who are split between different trends depending on which political (or more often political *and* religious) leader they follow.¹⁵ In contrast, more cohesion can be found among Sunnis of both countries. Bahraini Sunnis have a majority to defend the ruling dynasty and few seem ready to consider the access of Shia politicians to key positions. In Iraq, a somewhat similar sense of solidarity exists among Sunnis, though it has nuances too. That said, the Sunni minority's fears of ending up with a pro-Iranian (and, from their point of view, pro-Shia) regime have paved the way for the emergence of a *union sacrée* in recent years. As for the post-2003 context, it has deepened the rift between these communities—though the seeds were sown long before. The weakening of the feeling of national belonging has a lot to do with that.

To a certain extent, similar observations can be formulated in the case of countries where Shias form a minority. In Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria and Lebanon, sectarianism is part of politics. But it generally relates to internal perspectives and state regional policies, whereas in Bahrain and Iraq most of the challenges are national. Fifteen per cent of Saudi Arabia's nationals are Shias and, like their Bahraini counterparts, they have demands for citizenship rights. Yet while a majority of Saudi Sunnis would consider these complaints about abuses to exaggerated and/or unjustified, the Saudi ruling royal family sees in its Shia nationals a community that could be influenced by Iran. The case is the same in Yemen, where Zaydi rebels complain about poor access to their rights as citizens and the Yemeni government often sees their demands as motivated by an Iranian plot against the country. At the same time, the weapons and military means possessed by Zaydis reflect negatively on their claims of being an independent, transparent movement. In Syria, the current president, who succeeded his father in 2000, is an Alawite. Alawites are a minority in the country,¹⁶ and there are various accusations that Syria is favouring the interests of Alawites at the expense of all other communities. In Lebanon, the 18 coexisting communities faced a political struggle between four of the main political representatives for religious communities: Sunnis, Shias, Christian Maronites and Druzes. But the main conflict is the ongoing clash between Shias and Sunnis. While the Lebanese Hezbollah justifies its detaining of weapons by its willingness to defend the country's interests, the Sunni Future Party and its allies claim that Hezbollah is Iranian-led and holds a sectarian agenda. Ultimately, all of these situations lead to a regionalisation of internal issues. While

15 On the diversity of Shiism in Iraq, see Faleh A. Jabar (2003). *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*. London: Saqi Books; on Bahrain, see Laurence Louër (2008). *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. New York; Paris: Columbia University Press.

16 But Alawites should be seen as issuing from one of the ramifications of Shiism, not as a 'Shia orthodox' community.

Saudi Arabia involves Yemen in its struggle against Iranian influence in the region, the Syrian regime is leading—in parallel to its internal fight—a regional strategy, hand in hand with Iran and Hezbollah. Lebanon, too, is interacting with its regional environment: with Hezbollah being supported by Iran, and its rivals strongly supported by Saudi Arabia.

Countries in which Shias do not represent a significant community are also confronted with this same Sunni–Shia issue. This is particularly the case for Morocco, Egypt and Jordan. In 2004, Jordan was the first country to talk about the emergence of a regional ‘Shia crescent’, in part because of American policies in the region, and its fears were echoed by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Ten years later, the three countries are still attuned to the same thinking. Morocco also declared similar concerns, with Rabat regularly warning of conversions to Shiism occurring on its territory, and the Iranian ambassador to Morocco was expelled in 2009. Morocco, which has a Sunni majority, may be sincere in expressing concern over religious issues, but the country is also dependent on Gulf-originated funds. By developing accusations against Iran and its presumed regional policies, it opens the door to more support from its Gulf funders.

With the Arab Spring, these accusations have flourished. Similar to what we witnessed following Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution, it looked all of a sudden as if the Sunni states in the region were afraid of Iran’s capacity to exploit uprisings and encourage Arab Shias to take to the streets. Suspicions of a regional Iranian-led plot could not seriously explain the reasons for the ‘Arab uprisings’. Nevertheless, regional security issues became the easy target for pointing out Iran’s supposedly negative role, and the increasing destabilisation of the region was once again blamed on Iran and its quest for regional influence. That said, no new countries joined the initial group of states sceptical about Iran. Saudi Arabia remained the main, fierce critic of ‘foreign-led’ regional actors, whom it considered responsible for the violence. Egypt and Jordan became less vocal on the issue. Only Bahrain, anti-Hezbollah parties in Lebanon and Yemen made their ‘Iranian-Shia’ fears an official concern. As for Iranians, they rejected such accusations or tried to reassure Arab countries that they had no bad intentions towards them—though this does not mean Iranians do not share the same kind of concerns when it comes to fearing an ‘Arab–Sunni’ plot aimed at harming their interests. As an Iranian reformist cleric put it once: from Iran’s point of view, ‘there is no Shia crescent, but there is a Sunni one’.¹⁷

SYRIA: A STRONG INDICATOR OF THE WEAKNESS OF CENTRAL GOVERNMENTS AND INSTITUTIONS?

Sectarian issues are being used for political purposes. At the same time, and from a broader point of view, behind many of the regional fears lies the crisis of nation states. It is not easy to determine whether the region’s traditional boundaries will really change in the near future or not. But the partition of Sudan, the unrecognised but effective federalisation of Iraq, the fragile situation in Libya, sectarian rivalries in Lebanon and the uncertain

17 Interview in Qom, Iran, June 2006.

future of Syria are strong reasons for alarm. With the exception of Libya, which is mired in tribal and political rivalries for leadership, the aforementioned countries are the subjects of strong sectarian rivalries. These disagreements and/or fights often relate to national territories. In Syria, the feuds of Alawites, Christians and Kurds are known, and if the country happened to split, it would most certainly do so along these sectarian lines. In Lebanon, the situation is less homogeneous and tensions between communities often translate into conflicts between regions or districts. In Iraq, the same occurs with Kurds, Arab Sunnis and Arab Shias living in three distinct and identified geographical territories. The political tensions that prevail in all of these countries highlight a structural weakness in the central institutions. And if any of these countries had to split, there would be a significant chance it would provoke similar risks in its regional neighbourhood. This has become especially true in the case of Syria, and this possibility makes Gulf states in general and Saudi Arabia in particular feel uncomfortable. Countries of the Arabian peninsula consider their political structures to be strong, compared to most other Arab countries. But they don't want this 'stability' they believe in to be threatened by either the Arab Spring or a foreign-led plot. Fostered sectarianism could indeed reach their territories, where social perspectives are not homogeneous. The 'Shia factor' remains a considerable cause for concern from their point of view, not necessarily because of traditional theological disagreements, but more because such a situation would increase the risks of a 'Sudanisation' of the region, with communities pushing to declare their socio-political specificity.

MYTHS AND LIMITS OF THE SOLUTIONS FOR THIS GEOPOLITICS OF DISAGREEMENT

Talking about fast and efficient solutions to the geopolitics of disagreement between Sunnis and Shias would be neither realistic nor easy to define. The roots for the problems between both communities go far beyond sole issues of perception. The intertwining of too many elements explains the complexity of the issue. Nevertheless, it remains possible to try and determine what steps have proven limited up to now, as well as to try and foresee what possible institutional changes could either defuse regional tensions or give more pragmatic answers to regional challenges in the long run.

WOULD A MUSLIM 'VATICAN 2' SOLVE THINGS?

There is a general consensus that the Council of Vatican 2 (1962–1965) changed the Catholic Church. Clearly, the reforms that were adopted at that time contributed to giving Catholicism a new face. Without being altered, the principles of Catholicism sounded more adapted to the world and its realities. But would it be realistic to consider the same move in the case of Islam in general and/or Sunnism and Shiism in particular?

Both Sunnis and Shias have the same original common belief: they consider that Muhammad is the Prophet of Islam, and they read and share a common holy book, the Koran. But these elements are not enough to allow them to consider a common reform

under the banner of their mutual affiliation to Islam. Undoubtedly many of the teachings Muslims refer to, such as food restrictions, way of dressing and compatibility of some of their practices with the needs of contemporary world, would deserve an in-depth discussion before reform could be considered. However, the possibility of a 'Mecca 2' supposes that the beliefs of both communities are based on common and shared beliefs. Obviously, this is far from being the case with Sunnism and Shiism.

The positions of Sunnis and Shias are not irreconcilable. Trying to globalise perspectives in both communities is a mistake. Both have their own radicals and reformists—and reformists and pragmatics could be the way forward to bridging the gap between Sunnis and Shias. Nevertheless, politics and geopolitics seem to be the major obstacle to their possible positive contribution to the situation.

Regional drivers are being determined by the most influential countries of the region, who decide the topic and what should be understood from it—as highlighted by the regional media and the generally held ideas it defends. This is ground where states can play comfortably. Generally speaking, Sunnis and Shias have their own preconceived ideas and tend to rally around and/or believe the media that they feel cares about their interests. When it comes to satellite broadcasting channels, which are among the most influential media, it is easy to notice that the creation of several new channels over the past decade did not really impede the spreading of global, mainstream, preconceived ideas. This has important consequences. Most of the ideas that are developed in the media generally stick to one particular way for interpreting events. It is easy to notice that popular channels and newspapers in the Arab world are generally influenced by a Saudi and Qatari way of seeing and interpreting events. Both countries have developed an influential strategy, based on creating their own resources and funding popular media to get them defending their vision of events. Al-Jazeera is funded by Qatar, while al-Arabiya is co-funded by investors from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Lebanon. *Al-Quda al-Arabi*, one of the most popular newspapers in the Middle East, is funded by Qatar while *al-Hayat* and *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, two of its main challengers, are supported by Saudi Arabia. The negative impact on the independence of these publications is evident. It is not rare to read or hear in most of these media ideas that suggest a sectarian interpretation of events.

For reformists to follow a positive path there is a need to go beyond the regional sectarian climate and build a dynamic that would engage communities, their leaders and their representatives. While neither Sunnis nor Shias have their respective unique religious authorities, most of the official representatives of Islam have too close relations with governmental actors. Furthermore, the spirit of reformism does not seem to exist at the level of religious authorities or in places such as al-Azhar, Mecca, Qom or even Najaf. This only adds to the difficulty of moving forward, though authorities regularly say they are interested into bridging sectarian gaps.

THE UNACHIEVED DIALOGUES OF CIVILISATIONS

Many projects aiming at organising dialogues have been set up, particularly since the 11 September attacks. Some of these initiatives refer specifically to religion, while others prefer to use names such as 'dialogue of civilisations'. Nevertheless, the success of these initiatives has been limited so far. The organising of debates and talks between representatives and members of various communities has garnered a lot of interest. Whether in the case of the UN or with countries such as Saudi Arabia, which has opened an International Centre for Interreligious and Cultural Dialogue in Vienna, many actors try to prove that they are engaged in provoking more rapprochements between communities. But positive and real results have yet to show.

Interreligious dialogues may be motivated by good intentions. But they remain insufficient to bring solutions to the current global misunderstanding between some religious communities. Sunnis and Shias are among the most important groups worth consideration in this case. Many violent attacks in the Muslim world have Sunni or Shia targets, as highlighted by the examples of Pakistan and Iraq. Furthermore, the Arab Spring and the situation in Syria have given new life to a lexicon that focuses on the risks that would be represented by either 'Sunni forces' or 'Shia forces'. Once again, political and geopolitical realities prove themselves to be stronger than goodwill and aims to foster dialogue. Furthermore, when such dialogues happen to be promoted by states that are party to conflicts, they automatically arouse suspicion. Public-funded projects are often seen as public-relations operations that have the main objective of defending the image of governments, which happens to be true in most cases.

Figures of moderation do exist in the Muslim world, but their audience seems to be too limited. Political unrest and the worry of having to deal with people and communities motivated by a sectarian agenda have heightened fears. The reality of the Muslim world is that a global spirit of religious radicalism is gaining momentum. Communities fear more and more that they could be hijacked by their 'religious rivals'. The weakening of governmental and political structures does not help them believe in better prospects for the future. National affiliation can stand as an efficient barrier to sectarianism, but the absence of strong national structures can easily result in the feeling that communities would be left to themselves. This is where dialogue between communities seems to be a useless tool that can scarcely give answers to the ongoing challenges. States can hardly pretend to neutrality while they are engaged in geopolitical dynamics, as is the case with radical movements that do not even think about the idea of starting a dialogue, such as al-Qaida. It's unlikely that the legacy of misunderstanding and mutual mistrust can be reversed, especially in the ongoing context. The main representatives of both states and religious communities hardly give reason to believe in their strong commitment to overcoming their disagreements. At the same time, this does not mean that their stances engage all members of their respective communities. Thanks to the media and a more outward-looking attitude, the youth of the Muslim world are more open to facts and realities than their parents and

grandparents were before them. This inspires hope that a better state of affairs could exist in the future—though the time of pragmatic and moderate youth determining the nature of global evolutions seems not to have arrived yet.

IS SHIFTING FROM CENTRALISM TO FEDERALISATION A POSSIBLE SOLUTION?

On a broader level, there is a need to think about the pragmatic solutions that could help defuse the ongoing tensions. The current evolutions in some parts of the Muslim world provoke a crucial question: what if the future of some countries had to be considered in terms of concrete alternatives to nation states? As if so, would federalisation bring more positive prospects?

The unrest that continues between Sunni and Shia communities in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon only heightens non-sectarian situations, such as in Egypt and Libya. In parallel, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Yemen are also facing social unrest, though to different degrees. Without generalising, it is worth starting to consider whether a rethinking of the efficiency of central institutions could be part of the solution required for the future of some countries. Federalisation remains a taboo in the Arab world, and most people fear its institutionalisation would lead to a sectarian partition similar to that which recently split Sudan. But facts also speak for themselves. Iraq is already split between three communities that are each living in a specific part of the country. The central state is weak and increasingly less able to pretend it can guarantee the interests and preserve the security of its citizens. In Lebanon, sectarian tensions are nothing new. But the geographic concentration of communities in specific parts of the country has added to the tensions between the main political and religious leaders (namely Sunnis, Shias, Maronites and Druzes). This continues to jeopardise the country's future. In Syria, it is too early to determine whether the country will be preserved from a split or not in the long run, but sectarianism is obviously part of the war logic that prevails in the country. Though Libya is a more homogeneous country from a social point of view, many leaders and citizens of its three main regions (Tripolitania, Fezzan and Cyrenaica) claim their regional specificities and are increasingly demanding 'political autonomy' from the central state. Extending the same theory to the example of countries such as Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt or even Yemen would be risky: every country has its own specificities, and what could work in one does not necessary apply to all.

That said, we are forgetting too easily that national borders are the result of historical facts, and that the countries we are talking about today could have been born in another shape and even under another name. National affiliations have not been truly undermined up to now, and the feeling of belonging to a nation and a country remains a strong part of people's identities. Besides, history has seen brutal accelerations with unexpected consequences. The Sykes–Picot agreements are less than 100 years behind us, but while they generated a fragile situation they did not undermine the sense of religious belonging. With the Arab world in crisis, it is easy to notice that people who don't trust their governments seek to

find consolation in religion and spiritual beliefs. Efforts should always be made to create dialogue between communities and develop every possible method of forming bridges. But reality also necessitates preparation for the day when central governments lose their integrity and legitimacy. If not properly anticipated, a fragile Arab world, when combined with the growing tensions between religious communities, could produce a situation much worse than what we have witnessed up to now.

CONCLUSION

The prospects for the future of relations between Sunnis and Shias are rather worrying. Until recently, both communities seemed to contain their divergences. But things started to change following the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The emergence of a 'Shia-led government' in Baghdad with close links to Iran confirmed regional governmental fears. Gulf states became actively engaged in a strategy of denouncing the 'Shia crescent'. Their concerns soon translated into attacks and fights between communities, with Iraq being the most obvious representation of this unrest. With the 'Arab Spring', the degree of sectarian fears increased. More and more elements organised as if there was an emerging rivalry, opposing a regional 'Sunni leadership' to a 'Shia rival'.

Broadly speaking, communities adhere to this 'discourse of fear' that emanates from some governments. But this does not mean that they necessarily translate theory to practice. Though there are extremists everywhere, we are not on the eve of a new war of religions that would bloodily oppose Sunnis and Shias. The major issue is the one that involves anti-Iranian governments and their regional rivals. These political matters happen to reflect on relations between some communities, but this does not mean that sectarianism has become an appropriate lens for analysing the Arab and/or even the Muslim world. Some official speeches and statements may give such an impression, but the reality is that we have not entered an era of global religious combat... yet.

The disagreement between Sunnis and Shias remains mainly geopolitical, and it is hence limited to the political sphere. Only political rest is likely to bring a more peaceful environment. To guarantee such a positive result, it is important to keep in mind the importance of education. It will take a long time before states and governments decide to put aside their fears and rivalries. But, meanwhile, people and communities hold the key to better prospects for all and an overcoming of any fatalistic scenario based on the idea of a 'clash of communities'. With the Arab Spring, the idea of a powerful and efficient 'citizen power' has started to prove its relevance. But while the potential of citizen and 'netizen' trends is not a myth, it also has yet to be confirmed. It is up to the people to prove that, far away from political considerations, peaceful relations can prevail within communities that have decided to live in total and mutual respect and to turn their differences into assets. Waiting for a top-down approach to the matter will only increase the risk of ending up with more disagreements and less prospects for peace.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

Rivalries and the original misunderstanding between Sunnis and Shias go back to the origins of Islam. Politics and religion have both been at stake for 14 centuries, but facts emphasise that political issues and the quest for power have often been the main objectives of leaders of the Muslim world. This remains a reality today. Some states, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, are trying to achieve their geopolitical and strategic objectives by pretending indirectly to a religious sectarian-based legitimacy. Reading the evolutions of the region only through the angle of sectarianism would be misleading. But the growing importance of religion in state policies is a reality that must be kept in mind when trying to understand what is really at stake in the Arab world.

KEYWORDS

Islam, Sunnis, Shias, Arab World, Sectarianism, Iran, Saudi Arabia.

الملخص

يعود تاريخ التنافس و النزاع الإقليميين بين السنة و الشيعة إلى بداية ظهور الإسلام، لتختلط السياسة بالدين لمدة 14 قرناً، بالرغم من أن الأحداث بينت لنا بأن قضية السياسة و الصراع من أجل السلطة قد شكلا غالباً الهدف الرئيسي لزعماء العالم الإسلامي. و هو الأمر الذي لم يتبدل إلى يومنا هذا. و تحاول بعض الدول مثل المملكة العربية السعودية و إيران تحقيق أهدافها الجيوسياسية و الإستراتيجية بالتنافس الغير المباشر حول الشرعية الدينية القائمة على المذهبية. لذلك فمن الخطأ تفسير التطورات الحاصلة في المنطقة إنطلاقاً فقط من منطلقات مذهبية؛ لكن تزايد أهمية الدين في سياسة الدولة يشكل من دون أدنى شك حدثاً يجب أخذه بالاعتبار، إذا كنا نرغب في فهم التحديات التي تواجه العالم العربي اليوم.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الإسلام، السنة، الشيعة، العالم العربي، المذهبية، إيران، العربية السعودية.