

Perspectives on the Sunni-Shi'ite Sectarian Conflict

Some degree of rivalry has always existed between Shi'a and Sunnis in Islam. The conflict waxes and wanes. Over history, however, coexistence rather than conflict has been much more the rule.

Nevertheless, this century seems to have ushered in a renewed and virulent phase of Sunni-Shi'ite conflict. While the causes are multiple, the new outbreak was most immediately sparked by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which precipitated a sea change in the balance between Sunni and Shi'ite power in the eastern Arab world. Iraqi Arab Sunnis, who had long constituted the ruling minority within the state, lost control of the state with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Ba'th regime. Shortly thereafter the Iraqi Shi'a gained dominance over the new Iraqi government through new and free elections that reflected their majority status in the country. The repercussions of this power reversal across the region were powerful and are still far from over. Forces unleashed by the Arab Spring starting in 2011 further exacerbated this new sectarian confrontation.

Yet the actual character of this sectarian conflict is mostly not about Sunni and Shi'ite theology. We need to explore the roots of this old split in the Muslim world in order to understand how they affect present circumstances—which currently have culminated in a major anti-Iran, anti-Shi'ite campaign most directly by Saudi Arabia. This confrontation is driven by far more than religious issues.

First, a few basic facts: The Shi'a today make up perhaps some 13 percent of all Muslims worldwide. They tend to be concentrated in a population belt stretching from Syria, Iraq, the Persian Gulf, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India (where Shi'a make up as much as 25 to 30 percent of the overall Muslim population).

ORIGINS OF THE CONFLICT

The actual origin of the conflict is straightforward: It stems from a factional struggle between two groups over succession to the leadership of the new Muslim community after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE. This successor (Caliph, or *Khalifa* in Arabic) would represent the political leadership of the new community, but would have no prophetic function. As the first, victorious group, the Sunnis advocated the selection of a successor from among leading notables of the Muslim community. These notables included heavy representation from the dominant Quraysh tribe that, at an earlier juncture, had actually perceived the Prophet's mission as a threat to their authority and had fought the new Muslim community. The second group advocated transmission of the leadership via the Prophet's *bloodline*, in this case, to 'Ali, an early convert, close confidant and the Prophet's son-in-law. This group was known as the "partisans" (*shi'a*) of 'Ali.

'Ali was passed over three times in favor of non-bloodline Caliphs but was finally selected as the fourth Caliph. With the eventual assassination of 'Ali, however, leadership of the new Muslim community came quickly to be dominated by Sunnis who held military power. In a traumatic and fateful moment the grandson of 'Ali was "martyred" in a military battle over leadership of the community—an event forever commemorated across the Shi'ite world in the annual mass grieving ceremonies during the month of 'Ashura. (Such power struggles over religious authority are of course well known in the annals of the bloody conflict over control of the Papacy in the Christian tradition, too.)

Once the Muslim community had split and blood had been shed over the succession issue, the two communities began to diverge over time; each community—as communities tend to do—gradually took on specific characteristics: lore, tradition, literature, myths, community rituals, and celebrations. Thus the original issue of succession to the Prophet was no longer a live question, but evolved into a rivalry between communities. (We can likewise see this in Western history with the evolution of distinctive, rival Catholic and Protestant communities—at odds more over questions of power and authority than over theology.) Both Muslim communities worshipped the same God, shared the same Qur'an, and large numbers of the

same traditions of the words and deeds of the Prophet (*Hadith*). The Shi'a, however, additionally venerated 'Ali, an act which, according to strict Sunni interpretation, was blasphemous; many Shi'a were believed to curse the earliest Caliphs, especially 'Umar, for his early opposition to the Prophet before the new Muslim community was formed. The Shi'a additionally venerated a tradition of successor Imams from the bloodline of the Prophet through 'Ali, and even developed a mystical view of the lives of these successors and their transcendent spiritual roles. There were up to eleven such revered "Imams" or successors to 'Ali, representing different schools of theology in Shi'ism. These schools variously venerated either the fifth, seventh, or twelfth Imam (to come); this latter school constitutes the major Shi'ite tradition today (the so-called "Twelvers" in Iran.) There is no strong tradition of conflict among these Shi'ite schools.

Additionally, although 'Ali himself is the founding figure of the Shi'ite tradition, he also happens to be held in deep esteem by many Sunnis, who see him as an early, brave ("lion-hearted"), and loyal follower of the Prophet from the earliest days, a man whose writings and poetry on moral issues is widely regarded. It is not that Sunnis dislike 'Ali; they object to Shi'ite veneration of him which is seen by some as blasphemous, as *shirk*, for any sharing of pure devotion to the one God. (Even the Prophet himself is not to be revered or worshipped in strict Salafi/Wahhabi Islam. There is to be no intermediary in man's relationship with God.) Caliphs in the Sunni tradition have largely been *de facto* power-holders (sultans, kings, emirs) within the Sunni community and not often so venerated.

The strong Shi'ite reverence for 'Ali is regarded with particular suspicion and hatred by fundamentalist Sunnis (Salafis), who blame the Shi'a for the early and terrible split in the facade of unity of Islam. These Salafis, particularly in the Saudi version of Wahhabism, display an additional hatred for any kind of mysticism or saints, or Sufi (mystical) religious tradition, or miracles. Wahhabis even destroyed the very tomb of the Prophet himself in later centuries lest the Prophet's grave should become a site of pilgrimage, or an object of worship and reverence in its own right.

Questions of ethnicity also crept into the Sunni-Shi'ite schism. In a perhaps strangely contemporary perspective, Islam as a faith has little tolerance for

ethnic difference. The Qur'an says "Truly, the noblest of you with God is the most pious." (Quran, 49:13) The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: "O people! ... An Arab is not better than a non-Arab and a non-Arab is not better than an Arab, and a red (i.e. white tinged with red) person is not better than a black person and a black person is not better than a red person, except in piety."

However, since Islam began in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, there was a tendency among some early Arab Muslims to assume that—just as the Jews had Judaism as their own religion, making them God's chosen people—Islam was God's religion for the Arabs. Yet orthodox Islam fought this racial concept persistently. Nonetheless, fairly early on with the spread of Islam to Persian-speaking regions, some Arabs assumed they themselves were the "truer" Muslims since the message of Islam had been delivered in Arabic and to an Arab. There was some tendency toward jockeying for power and position in the newly emerging empire on an ethnic basis; Shi'ism, as an alternative community and religious tradition to the Sunni power structure, thus proved attractive to many non-Arabs. These events tended to lend a tinge of ethnicity to matters of religion. The superiority of Arabs as the first Muslims even today remains a subtle prejudice among some Arab Muslims. Islam itself is very clear, however, in rejecting any element of ethnicity or race—in principle—as playing any role in Islam and the Islamic community.

The Shi'ite branch of Islam itself is hardly monolithic; as we noted, there are at least four major schools distinguished primarily by which early Imam (and descendant of the Prophet) they hold as their guide. This includes followers of the fifth Imam (Zaydis or "Fivers"), Isma'ilis (or "Seveners"), and Ja'faris ("Twelvers," the largest single group). Alawites in Syria also represent a heterodox form of Shi'ism. These schools are rarely in serious conflict with one another, though, while anti-Shi'ite pressures from Sunnis also serve to stimulate a greater unity among these Shi'ite schools.

Shi'ism and Power: As with all religions, the power of religious belief as a motivating human force is too important to be ignored by political leaders; they regularly seek to press it into the service of the ruling authority. Because of hostility of the Sunni state—the overwhelmingly dominant force

in the first half-century of Islam—Shi'ite political thinking developed an early suspicion of the flawed moral nature of the State that seemed to be driven more by power than religious impulse. Shi'a also recognized the corrupting quality of proximity to power. Whereas Sunni clerics often played a major role in providing the religious support and justification to the actions of rulers, some traditions of Shi'ism instinctively warned clerics away from too close association with power (as state-supported clergy) as a potentially corrupting element. Some Shi'ite clerics often took the position of standing aloof from day-to-day politics of the state, choosing to intervene or speak out on political issues only on the most important of occasions, and only in speaking of general principles. This tradition of political distance came to be known as the “quietist tradition”; in principle it shielded clerics from the corrupting force of power and the state.

In point of fact, when the Ayatollah Khomeini, in exile before the Iranian Revolution in the 1970s, began to espouse his revolutionary theories of the Rule of the Jurisprudent (*Velayat-e-Faqih*), he turned Shi'ite thinking on its head in calling for an Islamic state in which the clerics would actually rule. As noted earlier, true to the long-held fears that such proximity could easily lead to the corruption of the clergy, that is what happened in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where corruption of the state clergy has been a major bane of the Iranian State.

Shi'a of course had come to power in various places and times in Muslim history, though usually in smaller local states and ruling dynasties, especially in the Indian sub-continent. The really major exception was the spectacular Fatimid Dynasty, an Isma'ili Shi'ite dynasty, which ruled from Cairo in a Caliphate that lasted for some 250 years beginning in 900 CE; it came to span all of North Africa and Red Sea coast of Arabia. It also produced some of the greatest glories of Islamic architecture in Cairo and elsewhere. All Arabs share in their pride of this Caliphate, despite its Shi'ite character—and indeed its “Shi'ite character” is usually overlooked or even forgotten in popular Sunni admiration for the Fatimids. The Shi'a never again attained major state power over such a large region for an enduring time until the 16th century in Iran—despite many smaller and often short-lived dynasties or families in southern India and in Iran.

Iran is popularly assumed to have “always” been a Shi’ite state, but the surprising fact is that it did not adopt Shi’ism as a state religion until as recently as 1500, when the Safavid Dynasty came to power. Anxious to assert their Persian distinctiveness against the dominant, powerful, Turkish-oriented—and Sunni—Ottoman Empire, the early Safavid rulers embraced Shi’ism to highlight their dramatic political difference from Ottoman power. Interestingly, at the time Persia was very poorly informed about Shi’ite practice. As a result, it was compelled to reach out to the distinguished body of Shi’ite clerics long resident in Lebanon. They supplied Iran with a group of religious scholars who could instruct the Iranian Sunni population in the basic principles of Shi’ite theology and practice. (Iran would return the favor under the Shah in the 1980s when it provided major stimulus to the downtrodden Lebanese Shi’ite community to organize their community anew in a striking recrudescence of Shi’ite power in Lebanon.) Persia/Iran has remained heavily Shi’ite ever since.

After officially adopting Shi’ism, the newly established Shi’ite state of Iran then fell into a 200-year cold war with the Ottoman Empire, each vilifying the other via harsh propaganda campaigns—accompanied by regular military conflict along the borders of the two empires. The intensity of this rivalry had markedly decreased by the mid-18th century, however. Typically the two empires in confrontation were driven largely by geopolitical considerations over regional power, influence, and territory. Since that highpoint of Ottoman-Iranian confrontations, geopolitical (and religious) conflicts between the two states markedly declined. In modern times their bilateral relations, while sometimes wary or prickly, have been strongly distinguished by a practical working relationship between them, at present for well over a century. Indeed, Iran has sometimes seen Turkey in many respects as a model for its own development (although far less so under the Islamic Republic).

HOW DOES IRAN FIGURE TODAY IN THE MAJOR SUNNI-SHI’ITE CONFLICTS OF THE REGION?

The Iran-Iraq Relationship

Today Iran still represents the major Shi’ite power in the Muslim world. But with the US invasion of Iraq, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and the

collapse of the long-time ruling Sunni elite, Iraq's Shi'a, in a portentous event, assumed dominance over national power. In every sense Iraq has now become the second most important Shi'ite state in the world. It is not officially a "Shi'ite state" however, nor will it be, since it of course contains a very large Sunni minority of both Arabs and Kurds.

Ever since the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and Saddam's subsequent invasion of Iran, Iran has lent moral, theological, and at times financial support to the Shi'ite community in Iraq, especially as it suffered persecution from Saddam's regime. Leading Iraqi Shi'ite clerics regularly took refuge in Iran, often escaping jail or death in Ba'thist Iraq. Many of these clerics were also schooled in Iran's religious institutions at Qom. With the fall of Saddam and the Sunni regime, however, most of these Iraqi clerics in exile returned to Iraq to play a major role in post-Saddam politics. Iran trained and often bankrolled several Shi'ite militias, many of which carried out resistance against the US military occupation of Iraq as well as asserting their power over Sunni militias. Iran has exerted major influence over the policies of the new Shi'ite-dominated government in Baghdad, though not unchallenged. We should not assume, however, that Iran will permanently exert major influence over Iraq. Indeed, over time Iraq may well emerge as a rival to Iran in the Persian Gulf on several grounds.

First, in historical terms, Iraq, and not Iran, has been the leading center of Shi'ism over long centuries, especially based in the two major shrines and theological centers of Najaf and Karbala. That is even truer today, now that Iraq has been liberated from Saddam's Sunni Ba'th Party rule.

The acknowledged leading Shi'ite theologian of the world is Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani, who has long resided in Najaf and speaks out periodically on crucial political issues in Iraq. He is Iranian by birth (as his name indicates) but is deeply established in Iraqi culture and writes in Arabic. He is revered by a majority of Shi'ites around the world and of course in the Persian Gulf. Najaf and Karbala are shrine destinations for Shi'ite pilgrims far more than any comparable place in Iran, especially since the tomb of 'Ali himself is in Najaf. These facts lend Iraqi Shi'ism a special power.

As a result, it is nearly certain that Arab Shi'a in the Gulf will increasingly look to the new state of Iraq as a center of Shi'ism and the seat of major Ayatollahs. This comes at the expense of Iran, which will lose its former monopoly over theological issues relating to Shi'ism. Such a situation suggests the emergence of a clear rivalry between the two states for influence among Arab Shi'ite populations, and maybe beyond.

Some sense of solidarity among Iraqi Shi'a at present, however, is driven by feelings of insecurity; they are not yet confident that their emergence at the top of the political order is a permanent reality. Certainly the diplomatic reaction of Saudi Arabia, for example, has been to suggest there is something not quite legitimate about the new Shi'ite dominance of Iraqi politics. This insecurity has tended to push Iraqi Shi'a more deeply into unwise sectarian politics, moving to consolidate their power within the state at the expense of greater power-sharing and guarantees of Sunni community security. Over time, as the Iraqi Shi'a grow more confident about their position in Iraqi politics and society, chances are good that they will move toward a more inclusive order. It is, after all, in their interests to maintain their position over a united and stable Iraq rather than dominating—and contributing to—a divided and unstable Iraq.

Finally, most of the Shi'ite population on the Arab side of the Persian Gulf are themselves Arabs—although there are many big families of Iranian origin, now mostly Arabized. They more naturally look to Iraq as having the closest cultural links, and of course as the most important center of Shi'ism.

The “Shi'ite Threat”

What is the so-called “Shi'ite threat” that is so broadly invoked in the Gulf, most vigorously by Saudi Arabia? There is in fact a threat of sorts from Iran, though not in the way it is usually presented by Riyadh. The threat is actually more ideological and geopolitical than sectarian/religious.

First, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 is one of the genuine “revolutions” in modern times. Many countries in the Middle East have undergone military coups, palace coups, and power shifts, yet rarely anything reflecting the same widespread and deep social revolution that swept away the old order in Iran with the fall of the Shah. In the political and social turmoil follow-

ing the flight of the Shah, the balance of politics in Iran was up for grabs with multiple popular movements on the right and the left struggling for power. In the end the Islamists managed to outmaneuver all other political forces and take power, bolstered by the triumphant return from exile of Grand Ayatollah Khomeini. Few other regional states have witnessed such a sweeping popular revolution; the event was admired with some envy by Arab populations in the region who felt still trapped in many of the old and seemingly immutable authoritarian Arab political orders.

Second, Khomeini's proclamation of an Islamic state represented a major ideological event in the Middle East. It represented perhaps the first serious intellectual effort to create a modern Islamic state with modern institutions while still reflecting Islamic values. The result was a striking blend of a basically democratic structure, a parliamentary process conducted by elected MPs, in addition to Islamic "oversight" carried out by several key committees to pass on the Islamic legitimacy of legislation, as a kind of Islamic Supreme Court. The very concept of calling the new Iranian state a "republic" represented a major ideological statement among Islamists, many of whom would have called a republic and a parliament "Western innovations."

A major shortcoming of Iran's democratic order—at least in the eyes of its liberal critics—was the ideological threshold that prospective candidates for Parliament needed to cross in order to qualify to run for office. This ideological screening resulted in a skewed system that heavily favored pro-regime and obviously religious candidates. Yet even within this context elections were hard fought; offered a significant range of candidates, meaningful debates; and the outcomes mattered a great deal in the evolving policies of the Islamic republic. Presidential elections in Iran have brought major change to national policies with each change of president. The country also enjoys a lively press with a considerable spectrum of debate, even though journalists are often jailed and newspapers are periodically closed down, often to reopen under a different name. Everything in the end depends on the tolerance of the Supreme Leader, that is, the supreme religious and political leader of the state who is appointed by a clerical council, not popularly elected.

In short, Iran has demonstrated something of a democratic process—albeit skewed—that is not to be found in most Arab states. It was, however, accom-

panied by socially restrictive laws on dress, public meetings, and elements of artistic expression. Opposition figures were often jailed. Still, taken as a whole, Iran's expression of a modern Islamic state offered a far greater dynamism with meaningful elements of democratic process than is present in most other regional states—apart from Turkey.

This stands in marked contrast to Saudi Arabia, which claims to be an Islamic state and whose constitution is the Qur'an. Needless to say, Saudi Arabia lacks even the most basic trappings of a modern democratic state or the intellectual and artistic openness, vigor, or dynamism of Iran.

The Islamic Republic of Iran also adopted a radical Islamic perspective of hostility toward kingship as an inappropriate form of Islamic governance. Islam has never promoted the idea of kingship as such; inherent in the root of the Arabic word for king—*malik*—is the suggestion of possession which does not accord with a just Islamic ruler's power, since that authority should remain contingent upon upholding of Islamic religious, social, and economic precepts, however defined. In reality, of course, kings, sultans, and emirs have been the dominant reality throughout Islamic history, as it has in the history of most of the rest of the world. Rule in Islam is made legitimate by just rule, consultation with the people, protection of Islamic lands and values. Contemporary regional monarchs nonetheless basically feel threatened by this critical approach to kingship in Islam.

Third, Iran extended its revolution to its foreign policy in its declaration of a universal vision of revolution, not just for Shi'ites but for all Muslims; indeed, at the outset of the revolution Iran claimed it was speaking for all the "oppressed of the earth"—clearly influenced by Third World revolutionary rhetoric. Furthermore, the Iranian Revolution has never declared itself a "Shi'ite revolution," but strictly an "Islamic Revolution." It never hesitated to embrace the quintessentially Sunni international Muslim Brotherhood as a sympathetic revolutionary Islamic force. It espoused the Palestinian cause as well, whose population is almost entirely Sunni, and has also supported Hamas, the Sunni militant wing of the Palestinian movement. Additionally, it has endorsed the Shi'ite Hizballah movement in Lebanon, another movement dedicated to resistance against Israel's power as well as the Israeli invasions and occupation of southern Lebanon in 1982. This Iranian support for

resistance against Israeli power was widely admired by Arab public opinion at a time when most other Arab leaders were perceived as timid and unwilling to oppose the pro-Israel American policies in the Middle East.

Monarchies in the Gulf were also disturbed at the potential impact of revolutionary ideas on the Shi'ite populations living in the countries (shaykhdoms) of the Gulf. There are very significant Shi'ite minorities in every Gulf state, and in Bahrain the oppressed Shi'a constitute a dispossessed majority. The emergence of the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic galvanized many of these minorities who hoped that the existence of the new Islamic Republic would bolster their own claims to greater rights within the states in which they lived, as well as lessen their oppression there.

During the 1978-1985 Iran-Iraq War, every one of the Gulf states and virtually every Arab state (except Syria and Algeria) fully supported Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran with money and weapons after the Iranian Revolution. Faced with an existential threat, Iran in turn supported terrorist acts against the Gulf states in retribution. Iranian "subversion" in the Gulf largely came to an end after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, but many Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, continue to question the loyalty of Shi'a populations—which naturally sparks insecurity among the Shi'a populations under continuing discrimination. These suspicions of Shi'ite loyalty indeed contain elements of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Some Sunni Gulf Arabs actually refer to democracy as a "Shi'ite agenda," especially in Saddam's Iraq and in today's Bahrain—both places where they represent a majority. To be sure, Gulf state ruling elites believe that Shi'ite unhappiness and unrest is a product of Iranian agitation rather than a situation rooted in discriminatory local conditions.

Iran has been one of the few states in the Middle East to routinely defy US power and policies in the region—causing Washington to define it as a "rogue state." (In the Washington lexicon, a "rogue state" means a small state that openly resists the American blueprint for the regional order.) Iran's seemingly fearless stance against US power over the years is widely admired by Arab populations—though not by their rulers—for its gutsiness and courage. Syria, for over fifty years, has been the other major Arab state to pose long-term resistance to US dominance in the region—not because it is led by a quasi-Shi'ite leadership, but because it is strongly Arab nationalist.

Furthermore, outspoken Iranian resistance to the expansion of Israel—an obvious, yet self-willed US ally—into the Palestinian territories of the West Bank garners much popular support for Iran.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has not been successful in promoting its own model of official state piety as expressed in its rigorous, even oppressive imposition of Wahhabi norms on daily life in the Kingdom. The Saudi reputation for hypocrisy among the ruling elite further undermines the Saudi claim to be a bulwark of Islam. The royal family is well known for its profligate and ostentatious lifestyle abroad in which gambling, drinking and womanizing make a mockery of Islamic public values and respect for Shari'a law. These problems are far less evident in Iran's own conservative public morality.

These, then, are some of the political grounds on which many of the Gulf rulers, and especially Saudi Arabia, believe Iran to pose an ideological threat to them, far more than any military threat. In fact Iran has not initiated war in over 200 years, so Tehran hardly offers a belligerent profile at the military level. That so many Gulf rulers claim to find Iran to be such a threat represents more a political rather than military or theological threat, and reflects their own insecurities. Intense Saudi dislike of Iran also stems from the particular religious precepts of Wahhabi Islam. (Qatar also identifies itself with "Wahhabism," but it expresses itself quite differently in a more open and tolerant society that enjoys generally good pragmatic relations with Iran.)

In sum, despite general Arab prejudice against Persians in general, there has been much widespread admiration for Iran as a strong self-confident, independent regional state willing to resist American pressures.

The Syrian conflict: The outbreak of an ugly civil war in Syria in 2011 was initially rooted in domestic issues and discontents but fairly rapidly took on the character of a complex and cross-cutting proxy war among the US, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Russia, in addition to a number of minor players. Residual Arab popular admiration for Iran has receded with Iran's strong support for the now harsh and brutal Syrian regime of Bashar al-Asad. Turkey's President Erdoğan, once a mentor to Asad, turned against him when Asad refused to heed Turkey's advice and his fall appeared imminent. Erdoğan had initially hoped that a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated

Syria might emerge in place of Asad, closer to Erdoğan's liking. Iran's strong support for its long-time ally Asad is perceived by many as an anti-Sunni campaign, especially by Arab rulers and elites. Islamists and would-be democrats resent Iran's support for Asad's autocracy. Nonetheless Syria, for all its close ties to Iran over three decades, has almost never acted as a Shi'ite power, but as an Arab nationalist geopolitical power that has regularly supported Sunni radical causes and a number of Sunni Arab nationalist leaders.

With the fall of Sunni power in Iraq and its new domination by the Shi'a, Saudi Arabia decided to strike back by casting its antipathy to Iran in sweeping sectarian terms across the region. Riyadh called for a united Muslim front against Iran and has so far created deep cleavages in the region that were not strongly evident over the past many decades. It pits the Saudi state—a representative of the forces of the reactionary past in Middle East governance—against forces in Iran that are somewhat more representative of future regional governance: non-sectarianism against sectarianism and a trend towards democracy rather than authoritarianism. In this regard, Turkey is not a natural ally of Saudi Arabia, either, despite all of Riyadh's efforts to enlist Ankara in the anti-Shi'ite campaign. Turkey represents the forces of globalization, non-sectarianism, soft-power, democratic institutions, and secularism. Saudi Arabia stands for the exact antithesis.

In effect, Iran is offering a contemporary version (still evolving) of an Islamic state that directly challenges the Saudi model whose main claim to Islamic legitimacy is its custodianship of the two holy places of Mecca and Medina. Indeed, the Saudi king uses this as his chief legitimizing designation, not the title of King of Saudi Arabia.

The royal family's Wahhabism is furthermore deeply hostile to the Sufism (Islamic mysticism) present in the Sunni tradition, but especially strong in the Shi'ite tradition. Wahhabism detests any suggestion of an intermediary between the individual and God; hence almost any shrine to any saint (including the Prophet Muhammad himself) is considered blasphemous and to be destroyed.

Lebanon: The Shi'a in southern Lebanon have been poor and oppressed for centuries under Sunni rule. Yet beginning in the 1980s, the Lebanese Shi'a,

who constitute the single largest community in Lebanon, built up their communal power with Iranian help and created a powerful militia, Hizballah. Hizballah has impressed all Arabs with the courage and commitment of its resistance against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon on several occasions. Today Hizballah represents a major political and social as well as military force in Lebanon; it is deeply integrated into Lebanese politics. Iran's support has strengthened it, but it is not a creature of Iran and is solidly rooted in Lebanese society. Saudi Arabia, however, views Lebanon as yet another place where Iran has conspired to strengthen Shi'ite forces against the Saudis' preferred clients there.

Yemen: Yemen is a fourth major site of Iranian-Saudi geopolitical rivalry, especially after Yemen was struck by Arab Spring rebellions. Clear Sunni-Shi'ite lines are not easily drawn in this conflict, however. For the time being the victorious power in Yemen is the Huthi clan, a major Zaydi ("Fiver" Shi'ite) tribe. They rebelled against the policies of another Zaydi leader, Yemen's former president of 23 years, who had been under heavy Saudi influence. Riyadh has accused Iran of backing the Huthi rebellion, which by the end of 2015 had taken over most of the country. Although Iran has indeed given some rhetorical support to the Huthis, as well as probably some limited military support to be used against Saudi military intervention in Yemen, few political observers consider Iran's modest contribution to the Huthi rebellion to have meaningful military significance.

Nonetheless Riyadh perceives Iran's marginal involvement as part of a "Shi'ite encirclement" of the Kingdom and has subsequently conducted a brutal air war against Yemen since 2014 in order to restore its own preferred leader. Civilian deaths reached 300,000 in mid-2016, with over two and a half million people displaced. Saudi Arabia has always considered its domination of Yemen to be an essential part of Saudi geopolitical strategy; for decades it has dispersed lavish funds to maintain its preferred leadership in Yemen despite widespread popular hostility against Saudi Arabia.

Bahrain: Bahrain has been the fifth arena of confrontation between Riyadh and Tehran. Although the Shi'a of Bahrain constitute some 60 to 70 percent of the population, the Sunni ruling al-Khalifa family has consistently discriminated against the Shi'a and excluded them from a voice in governing.

Periodic uprisings by Shi'a in demand of greater rights and freedoms have been frequent for decades. In 2011, when the Arab Spring sparked yet a new phase of anti-Khalifa agitation and rioting in Bahrain, the al-Khalifa called for Saudi Arabia to send troops to put the uprising down. Saudi troops have been there ever since, a situation criticized even by many Western leaders, including the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Iran over the years has consistently lent vocal support to the oppressed Shi'ite community. The ruling al-Khalifas have regularly accused Iran of fomenting the troubles and arming the low-key uprising. While Iran has contacts with some of the top leadership of the Bahraini opposition movement, there is little evidence that the uprising is anything but a local uprising against long-time oppressive anti-Shi'a policies. Bahrain, an island connected to the Saudi mainland by a causeway, is now effectively under Saudi domination. The close family ties that exist between Bahraini Shi'a clans and the Shi'ite clans of the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, create additional anxiety for Riyadh, fearing its own restive and oppressed Shi'ite population. The Bahrain situation strengthens Riyadh's anxieties regarding encirclement by an Iran-orchestrated Shi'ite threat.

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In the final analysis it is hard to escape the conclusion that it is the Sunnis who have a problem with Shi'ite Islam, rather than Shi'a having a problem with Sunni Islam. Sunnis fundamentally view all Shi'a as illegitimate and *rawafidh*, or "rejecters," of the mainstream Sunni tradition from early on. Sunni fundamentalists view them as worse than any non-Muslim threat since they represent an internal schism. Still, there is little that Shi'a living in a Sunni society can do to remedy their problem. When the Shi'a suppress their Shi'ite identity and try to integrate into Sunni society they are viewed as "infiltrating" and have their Shi'ite identity thrown at them. When they call for equal treatment as Shi'ites and insist on their Shi'ite identity, then their loyalty to the state is challenged as a threat to the whole "Sunni narrative" of history.

Tensions between Shi'a and Sunni have varied greatly over history. Yet there is reason to believe that the present state of tensions, now largely exacerbated and exploited by Saudi Arabia, will eventually decline again with time.

What is more urgent is that Muslim politics must shift its ground: ethnic, religious, and sectarian identities ultimately must give way to other social identities as the chief element of political and social discourse. Transient and optional identities—professional, class, economic, political, and ideological—need to become the primary arena for political debates, as in most countries, rather than factors of religion and ethnicity which are not optional and are immutable.

In the coming decades Turkey and Iran are the two major regional powers that fundamentally do not self-identify or promote themselves as Sunni or Shi'ite states, and which will likely be the key external players in the politics in the Arab world around them. Iran and/or Turkey (and even eventually Iraq) could well come to play the key role in adjudicating the fate of the smaller Persian Gulf shaykhdoms. This will be especially relevant in the face of a potentially resurgent and expansionist Saudi state in the future—particularly one driven by the narrow and intolerant expansionist vision of Wahhabism that has sent its militant forces twice in two centuries against the populations of the Gulf, right up to Basra and Karbala in Iraq.

It is in this context that Saudi Arabia, as the regional bastion of Wahhabism/Salafism, perceives the greater political and social flexibility of Shi'ism and even Sufism (Sunni and Shi'i) to be a major challenge and threat to the narrowness and rigidity of Saudi doctrine that represents the ideological underpinnings of the Saudi state. The mere existence of Shi'ism as a different sect embodies an alternative in Islam that is not acceptable to the deeply unitarian (*tawhidi*) Saudi approach to Islam, which accepts no straying from its view of the one true path. Riyadh has furthermore been willing to support violent jihadi groups outside of Saudi Arabia to further its Islamic agenda.

More than in just theological terms, though, Iran also poses a political and ideological threat to Saudi Arabia as Riyadh sees it. It has taken political positions in the Middle East that are popular among the masses—both Sunni and Shi'i alike—offering an outspokenness which rulers beholden to the West feel they cannot do. Thus Iran is outspoken on the plight of the Palestinians; some Iranians (and non-Iranians) suggest that a Jewish state that excludes or discriminates against Palestinians is not a legitimate state in the Middle East. Iran has called for an end to the Zionist state, though

not to drive Jews into the sea as is commonly interpreted. Rather—much as many in the US had called for an end to the Communist state in Russia and not the destruction of the Russian people—so, too, Iran wants an end to the present Israeli Zionist and racially oriented state as opposed to a binational one. Iran has similarly dared to stand up to US power—even defy the US in many respects—in ways that few other leaders in the region would dare do, even if their own populations wanted it. In effect, through its political positions Iran offers an alternative, contemporary view of Muslim power that has appeal despite its Shi'ite character.

And of course Iran represents a rival in regional oil and gas production and pricing; yet in this respect Iran is just one of many oil (and gas) states involved in contentious pricing issues.

In the final analysis, therefore, it is misleading to analyze the harsh sectarian war in the Middle East today as either permanent or as representing the essence of the conflict. Actual theology has little to do with it, even though Riyadh has chosen to propagate its geopolitical struggle in theological terms. This Saudi strategy is dangerous and destabilizing and has led to the strengthening of extremist jihadist groups such as al-Qa'ida and ISIS and civil conflict in Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Lebanon, and elsewhere. It is high time to abandon these camouflage ideologies and look to solutions for the real geopolitical and (non-religious) ideological issues at stake.

