The Future of Islamic State Systems in Light of Rising Sectarian Tensions

https://www.e-ir.info/2016/01/04/the-future-of-islamic-state-systems-in-light-of-rising-sectarian-tensions/

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Sectarian tensions have been steadily rising in the Middle East and South Asia since the mid-1990s. They were first manifested in South Asia, especially Afghanistan, following the withdrawal of the Soviet troops in 1989 and the onset of the Civil War in that country, and in Pakistan. The worsening sectarian tensions were reflected in the highly sectarian character of the Sunni extremist Afghan group, the Taliban, and their systematic attacks on the Shias of Afghanistan, notably the 1998 massacre of nearly 8,000 Shias belonging to the Hazara ethnic group.[1]

During the 1990s, sectarian relations also became tense in Pakistan. These relations had begun to deteriorate by the early 1980s following legal changes introduced by President Zia-ul-Haq and his policy of Pakistan's further Islamisation according to a stricter Sunni legal system. These changes were viewed as discriminatory towards the Shias, causing protests on their part and leading to the formation of Shia political groups. Since that time, sectarian relations in Pakistan have continued to deteriorate.[2] In Pakistan, too, the Hazaras have been a particular target of attacks by Sunni extremist groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Sipah-e-Sahaba, especially in places such as Peshawar, in the North West Frontier, and Quetta, in Baluchistan.[3] However, Shias in Punjab and Sind have also been attacked.

By contrast, during the 1990s the Middle East remained immune from any particularly sectarian-tinged violence. The situation changed following the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The US invasion ended the historic Sunni Arab domination of Iraq. Therefore, soon after Saddam Hussein's fall, Iraq's Sunnis organised militias and other armed groups in order to undermine the new Shia-dominated political setup in Iraq. Meanwhile, various Shia militias, such as the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr, were also formed. These were, however, largely for the purposes of intra-Shia competition for power.[4] But following attacks by Sunni extremists on the Shia holy shrine in Samara in 2006, other Shia militias, such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah, were also formed.

The US invasion of Iraq and the change in that country's political setup disrupted regional balance of power in Iran's favour, as well as enhanced the position of the Shias in the region. At least, this was the perception of Sunni Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and others, plus Turkey. In response they became more deeply engaged in Iraq's internal politics and tried to prevent the consolidation of Iran's influence and the Shias' position by recourse to sectarian factors. Iran, meanwhile, tried to establish its influence in country by using its ties to the Shias.

Changes in Iraq also encouraged other Shia minorities in places such as Saudi Arabia, as well Bahrain's Shia majority, to agitate for more rights, thus further intensifying the Gulf Arabs' unease over Iraqi developments and causing them to try and stem the rise of the Shias in Iraq by funding and arming Sunni militants. These efforts further exacerbated sectarian tensions and increased the occurrence of sectarian violence. Sectarian tensions even reached places like Kuwait, which historically had a reasonable record of sectarian coexistence.[5]

The Arab Spring and the Spread of Sectarian Tensions to Syria and Beyond

Nevertheless, until December 2010—when political disturbances which began in Tunisia and later extended to Egypt resulted in the elimination of presidents Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, respectively, and came to be known as the Arab Spring—sectarian tensions in the Middle East were largely limited to Iraq and places like Bahrain, with a long history of Shia grievance against the ruling Sunni Al-Khalifa family. The Arab Spring eventually reached Syria and impacted its political conditions and, by doing so, extended sectarian tensions to that country, as well to Egypt and Turkey, and further exacerbated conditions in Iraq and Bahrain.

In particular, Shia protests in Bahrain acquired very large dimensions, resulting in violent repression by the government. It even caused Saudi Arabia, together with the United Arab Emirates, to militarily intervene in that country under the umbrella of the so-called Peninsula Shield arrangement, although this mechanism was intended for dealing with external aggression against the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and not for suppressing internal dissent.

The Bahrain crisis and the brutal suppression of Shia protests, especially Saudi Arabia's military intervention, further inflamed Shia sentiments in Saudi Arabia's Shia-inhabited regions, such as Qatif. It also angered the Shias in Iraq and Iran, and worsened significant sharpening of sectarian animosities throughout the Middle East. However, because of the presence of Western military bases in Bahrain and general Western support for the Al-Khalifa ruling family, neither Iraq nor Iran could help Bahrain's Shias in any meaningful fashion and had to limit themselves to condemnation of Bahrain's governments.

The Syrian Civil War and its Ramifications

Initially, it seemed that the Arab Spring would not reach Syria, but by March 2011 protests had spread to Syria and eventually grew into a full-scale civil war. Unlike the case of Bahrain, which experienced large-scale repression by the Al-Khalifa leadership, soon after the outbreak of protests in Syria, the United States and other major European countries, together with such regional players as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, called for Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's removal from office, as illustrated by President Barak Obama's statement that 'Assad must go.'[6]

However, Assad refused to succumb to regional and international pressures and set upon a strategy of resistance to growing internal and external challenges to his authority. He was supported in this decision by Syria's long-time ally Iran, the Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah, and Russia. China, meanwhile, adopted a position of low-key support for Assad.

The Syrian conflict soon acquired a sharp sectarian dimension, despite the fact that Bashar al-Assad's regime is essentially secular (although the Alawite community forms the basis of its top military and political leadership). The Sunni countries of the region, notably Saudi Arabia and Turkey, plus Qatar, began to form, fund and even train Sunni groups to challenge the Assad regime and counter the influence of countries such as Iran and groups like Hezbollah. These groups included such entities as the Jabhat al-Nusra. Al-Nusra shared the ideological outlook of Al-Qaeda, including a visceral hatred of the Shias, and later officially joined the organisation. It exhibited sectarian hatred hitherto unseen in Syria, as reflected in its attacks on Shia shrines and wholesale massacre of Shia villages. These acts inflamed the passions of Shias in other Shia-majority countries, notably Iraq, and led them to send volunteers to Syria in order to guard Shia holy places, in this way creating a rift among various sectarian conflicts in the Levant and the Persian Gulf region.[7]

Sectarian tensions in Syria and Turkey's growing interference there negatively affected such relations in Turkey, where the Shia and Alevi communities came under increasing pressure from the government.[8] Even in Egypt, anti-Shia sentiments surfaced, as reflected in the brutal killing of an Egyptian Shia cleric by Salafi Sunnis.[9]

The Rise of ISIS, the Call for Khilafat and the Challenge to the Established State System[10]

Despite significant international pressure, the Assad regime proved more resilient than expected. The divided nature

of the anti-Assad forces, the conflicting goals of the countries supporting them and assistance from countries such as Iran and Russia enhanced the Syrian regime's staying power.

Consequently, by late 2013, the focus of sectarian conflicts again shifted to Iraq. Partly because the Iraqi government had supported Assad and the Iraqi Shia volunteers had joined Syrian forces, the principal goal became undermining and even replacing Iraq's Shia-dominated government. Such a change would have eliminated Iraqi support for Syria and would have also undermined Iran's position, another supporter of Assad. Failing that, the goal was to block the road linking Iraq to Syria by creating a Sunni entity on the Iraqi-Syrian border.

One instrument used for this purpose was a new Sunni militant group known as ISIS. The ideological and leadership roots of the group were similar to those of earlier Sunni militant groups such as al-Qaeda, al-Nusra, and others in Syria. But the ambitions of ISIS surpassed those of these groups, as it declared that it wanted to create an Islamic caliphate whose borders would roughly correspond to those of the Abbasid caliphs. Earlier, such diverse groups as the Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Taliban had also called for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate, but it was only ISIS that, by gaining control of large swathes of Iraq and Syria, seemed to have any chance of creating the nucleus of such an Islamic entity and thus potentially redrawing the existing map of states in the Middle East.

Moreover, the worsening of political and sectarian crisis in Iraq and Syria also raised the possibility of the territorial disintegration of both states, with the risk of similar disintegrative processes reaching other countries, such as Iran and Turkey.

The Root Cause of Sectarian Problems: Religion or Politics and Inter-state Competition?

The rise of sectarian tensions in the Middle East and South Asia in the past two decades, and especially since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, has given greater credence to the view that religion is increasingly a more important factor in determining the behaviour of various actors and, hence, in shaping the character of international relations, than the more traditional motivations of behaviour. It has also enhanced the position of those who believe that religion is eroding the foundations of the post-World War II state system by giving rise to transnational, non-state actors organised along sectarian lines.

Clearly, since the late 1970s, religion has become a more significant force in the domestic politics of most states in the Middle East and South Asia. At times it has caused the collapse of old systems, as was the case in Iran in 1979, or their significant transformation, such as Turkey under the AKP. These changes, in turn, have shifted the external behaviour of these states and, thus, have altered the dynamics of regional and, to some degree, international politics. Non-state actors at least partly created under religious impulses and to some degree motivated by them, such as the Taliban, Hezbollah and more recently ISIS, have also significantly impacted the dynamics of regional and international relations.

Similarly, sectarian divides and deep-rooted animosities are real enough, as is the failure of most states in these regions to develop national identities transcending ethnic and sectarian divisions. However, sectarian divisions and dislikes have existed for centuries, and yet at least for the last three hundred years there had not been any significant conflict caused by sectarian differences; certainly nothing of the magnitude of recent events.

What the above means is that it is not correct to assume that religion has replaced other determinants of either state behaviour or those of semi-state actors, such as the Taliban, Hezbollah or ISIS. Nor have these new sectarian actors replaced states as the main players within the international system. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that religion, including in its sectarian version, has increasingly been used as an instrument of state policy and for advancing largely non-religious strategic and political goals. In fact, most of the apparently religious non-state actors, such as the Taliban, Hezbollah and ISIS, have been the creations of states and cannot function without their assistance. For example, Pakistan was instrumental in the creation of the Afghan Taliban.[11] Certainly Pakistan has trained and partly funded the Taliban with the diplomatic and financial support of Saudi Arabia.[12] Similarly, the Saudis have funded many of Iraq's Sunni militant groups and those of Syria, as has Turkey.[13] Meanwhile, Iran has been instrumental in transforming Hezbollah into a formidable political and military force. Moreover, it was a state

action, namely Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, that afforded Iran the opportunity to help create Hezbollah. Even today, Hezbollah to a large degree follows Iran's policy directions and, therefore, its behaviour changes according to shifts in Iran's foreign policy priorities.[14] In short, the main non-state actors of the category of the Taliban and Hezbollah are, in reality, proxies for states; although, as in any relationship between the sponsor and the proxy, the latter could manipulate the former, or the sponsoring state could, in time, lose control over its proxy.

Furthermore, these types of actors do not want to dismantle the state. Instead, they want to gain control over it, reshape its character, or replace it with a new one. In short, the state is still the principal unit of international system.

If the above thesis—that religion has not been the main cause of rising sectarian tensions and new religious formations are not about to replace the state—is accepted, then the question becomes what has triggered the recent sectarian conflicts. The answer lies in the systemic changes, at both international and regional level, caused by the USSR's collapse, the US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the American policy of reshaping the politics and governments of the region and, in particular, the US policy of containing Iran. In other words, politics and quests for security and influence by states have been behind rising sectarian conflicts.

The Soviet Collapse, the Struggle for Eurasia, Dual Containment and the Rise of the Taliban

The USSR's dismantlement produced significant changes in the character of the international system and the dynamics of regional sub-systems. At the international level, by eliminating the Soviet counterweight to the NATO power it encouraged more interventionist and transformative policies on the part of America, especially in regard to the Middle East and South Asia.

At the regional level, by eliminating the common Soviet threat and opening up the Muslim-inhabited regions of the USSR to new actors, it intensified the competitive and conflictive aspects of regional relations, including those between Iran and Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and Iran and Turkey. The impact of this factor is clearly reflected in Pakistan's decision to create the Taliban.[15] This development prompted these regional rivals to more systematically exploit each other's sectarian fault lines.

The US policy of containing Iran, under President Bill Clinton, and, later, President George W. Bush's policy of regime change in that country contributed both to the worsening of regional relations and to sectarian tensions. For example, until 1998, when US embassies in Africa were bombed by the Taliban's ally al-Qaeda, the US saw the group as a counterweight to Iran because of its anti-Shia, and hence anti-Iran, tendencies. In fact, America did not object to the Taliban's obscurantist version of Islam and remained silent in the face of atrocities committed by them. The Bush administration, as part of its strategy of regime change, not only did not prevent Pakistan and Saudi Arabia from manipulating Iran's Sunni minorities, especially in its Baluchistan province, but might have done so itself.

Reshaping Middle East Politics

US policies of reshaping the Middle East further exacerbated sectarian tensions. The most consequential was the invasion of Iraq, which, by disrupting the regional balance of power, intensified regional rivalries, notably those between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and involved Turkey more deeply in Middle East rivalries. Similarly, US efforts to reshape Lebanon's politics through the Cedar Revolution, partly to weaken Hezbollah and thus Iran's influence there, and later efforts to eliminate the Assad government worsened sectarian tensions. Here it is important to note that opposition to the Assad regime by some Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia, was not because of its Alawite character but rather because of its alliance with Iran, which was based on political considerations. This view is supported by the fact that until 2010 Saudi Arabia was courting Assad in the hope that he would abandon his ties to Iran.

After its invasion of Iraq in 2003, as part of its strategy of containing Iran and preferably changing its regime, the US encouraged and supported a Sunni-Israeli alliance against Iran. Gary Sick, in 2007, noted that 'an emerging strategy is developing that brings the United States, Israel and Sunni Arab states in an informal alliance against Iran'.[16] The intention might not have been to cause sectarian conflict, but that is what happened.

Conclusions

Despite a widespread belief to the contrary, the rise of sectarian tensions in the Middle East and South Asia is not solely or even principally attributable to religious factors, although the existence of religious differences creates a receptive environment for the emergence of such conflicts. Rather, politics and conflicting security and other interests of international and regional actors and their competition for power and influence are the principal culprits. What has happened is the increased use of religion as an instrument of policy, as secular ideologies were used in the past. However, the use of religion has not meant that states have stopped manipulating their competitors' other vulnerabilities, such as ethnic divisions.

Moreover, despite the rise of non-state actors ostensibly motivated by religion, the main impetus behind their emergence has been state action, and they cannot easily function without continued state support. Therefore, these actors are unlikely to supplant states, although they might form new state governments.

Nevertheless, religion has become a far more important factor in the domestic politics of regional actors, and since external behaviour of international actors is partly determined by the nature of their domestic politics, religion has become a more significant, albeit not determinant, factor in shaping the character of internal relations. Similarly, the rise of religious non-state actors has been added to other sources of stress on the states.

Notes

[1] "UN Report Derails 'Taliban Killing Frenzy'", *News International*, 6 November 1998, at http://www.rawa.org/killing.htm

[2] For more details, see Shireen T. Hunter, 'The Regional and International Politics of Rising Sectarian Tensions in the Middle East and South Asia', ACMCU Occasional Papers, May 2013.

[3] Syed Fazel Haider, 'Nowhere Is safe for Pakistan's Hazaras', *Asia Times*, 20 February 2013, at http://www.arimes.com/atimes/South Asia/SOU-04-200213.html

[4] On the Mahdi Army and Muqtada al-Sadr, see Nimrod Raphaeli, 'Understanding Muqtada Al Sadr', *The Middle East Quarterly*. Vol. XI, no.4, Fall 2004, at http://www.meforum.org/655/understanding-muqrada-al-sadr

[5] Mona Kareem, 'Shiaphobia Hits Kuwait', *Jadaliyya*, 17 May 2011, at www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1603/shiaphobia-hits-kuwait

[6] Scott Wilson & Joby Warrick, 'Assad Must Go, Obama Says', *Washington Post*, 18 August 2011, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/assad-must-go-obama-says/2011/08/18/gIQAelheOJ_story.html

[7] For more detail, see 'The Regional and International Politics of Rising Sectarian Tensions in the Middle East and South Asia'.

[8] Gareth Jenkins, 'Turkey's Beleaguered Alevis', *The Turkey Analyst*, vol.7, no.11, 11 June 2014.

[9] 'Egypt: Mob Attack Kills Four Shia Muslims', BBC News/Middle East, 24 June 2013, at http://www.bbc.com/news/worlld-middle-east023026865. Among those killed was Hassan Shehata, a leader of the Shia community.

[10] The group changed its name to IS, standing for Islamic State, in August 2014.

[11] Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: a History of Struggle and Survival*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004, pp.220-221.

[12] Anthony Davies, 'How the Taliban Became a Military Force', in William Maley (ed.), *Fundamentalism Reborn*:

Afghanistan and the Taliban, New York: New York University Press, 2001, p.74.

[13] Ahmed Rashid, 'Pakistan and the Taliban', in Ibid., p.74.

[14] Fred Halliday, 'A Lebanese Fragment: Two Days with Hezbullah', *Open Democracy*, 20 July 2006.

[15] Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*, p.221.

[16] 'Sick: Alliance against Iran', Council on Foreign Relations, 23 January 2007, at http://www.cfr.org/israel/sick-alliance-agianst-iran/p12477.

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