

Sectarian Divisions, Proxy Wars and Chaos

Written by Satgin Hamrah

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SATGIN HAMRAH, SEP 27 2015

The regional power struggle between Shias and Sunnis is evident throughout the Middle East and North Africa. This conflict dates back more than a thousand years and stems from religious differences between the two sects. Like in the past, Shia and Sunni leadership are currently using these differences to increase their spheres of power, prestige and influence. These divisions have aggravated already existing tensions in the Islamic world with Shia Iran supporting Shia groups – and Sunni nations, such as Saudi Arabia supporting Sunni groups. These endeavors are based on opposing strategic interests. As such, sectarian conflict will continue to shape the region into the foreseeable future. This is evident by examining proxy conflicts throughout the region, such as in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. The political framework that will eventually emerge will have profound strategic consequences for the region and beyond. In order to better understand modern sectarian conflict it is essential to understand its historical context.

Background

The split of the Muslim community into two denominations occurred soon after the death of Prophet Mohammad in 632 CE. The individual that would succeed him would serve as both a religious and political leader of the Muslim world. Sunnis asserted that the successor should be appointed and the Shia argued that succession should be based on lineage. The split occurred when Abu Bakr, Prophet Mohammad's father in law and close friend was appointed as the next leader of the Muslim world. The Shia (the party of Ali) did not accept Abu Bakr's succession. They believed that Ali should have succeeded Prophet Mohammad, as Ali was his cousin, son-in-law and close friend. They further believed that Prophet Mohammad explicitly named him as his successor.

This core disagreement between the two sects has served as the premise for conflict between the two factions and "continues to shape the history of the Islamic world and the broader Middle East". Like today, the schism was as much about religious leadership, as it was about power and influence. Currently, the schism is being used to fan the flames of animosity and distrust that has existed between Shias and Sunnis since 632. More specifically, leaders are still using sectarianism as a tool to strengthen their own legitimacy, power and influence. Similarly to the supporters of Abu Bakr and Ali, modern religious leaders are also fighting for the leadership of and hegemony over the Muslim world and the region. This includes Iraq, Syria and Yemen where sectarian conflict has reached destructive levels and has created a humanitarian crisis.

Proxy Battlegrounds

The Middle East is in the midst of a regional power struggle between Iranian allied Shias and Saudi allied Sunnis. These key players are primarily motivated by politics and competition for influence and power. As such, Saudi Arabia and Iran are taking advantage of instability in the region and are using religion and ancient grievances as instruments of policy. This has translated into a wide scale proxy conflict that has destabilized the region.

Saudi Arabia fears Iran's quest for regional hegemony and sees its growing influence as an alarming shift in regional balance. As such, undermining Iran and its allies, such as Iraq and Syria, and ideally reversing Iran's gains motivate Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Iran is using the changing geopolitical landscape to enhance its influence and to become the dominant regional power. To achieve their goals these powers frame geopolitical contests within a religious framework and play up sectarian tensions. Thus, resulting in the conversion of the Middle East into their

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battleground without ever directly confronting each other. Moreover, their proxy war has exacerbated the volatile situation in the region, including in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. In Syria alone, as of August 2015, “almost a quarter of a million people, including nearly 12,000 children, have been killed...since [war] broke out in March 2011...” and millions have been displaced. Additionally, in Iraq there have been approximately 163,521 civilian deaths and in Yemen more than 1,670 civilians were killed in the violence since March 26, 2015.

Conclusion

The magnitude of conflict in the region and the role of external players on its continuation will have profound strategic consequences far into the future. As such, it is important to have a firm grasp of the role that religion and sectarianism play as mobilizing forces in regional politics. Moreover, by understanding the complexities associated with the Sunni-Shia conflict and how conflict within Islam may come to shape regional relations with the outside world, the West will be better able to protect its interests and security.

About the author:

Satgin Hamrah is a PhD student in History at Tufts University and has earned a Master of International Relations degree from Boston University and a Master of Public Administration degree from the University of Southern California. She is also a Doctoral Fellow at the Fares Center For Eastern Mediterranean Studies at the Fletcher School at Tufts University and a PhD Fellow at the South Asia Democratic Forum.