

Middle East: Moving Towards a Sectarian Political Order?

Written by Mohammed Nuruzzaman

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MOHAMMED NURUZZAMAN, DEC 1 2015

In the last few years, especially since the outbreak of sectarian violence in Syria in early 2013, the Middle East has gradually moved towards developing a sectarian regional political order. The surge in sectarian fighting between Shi'ites and Sunnis in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, the proclamation of the Islamic State by Sunni militants in the summer of 2014 and the competition for power and dominance between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite Iran have increasingly come to define and shape the current Middle Eastern political order. All these mark a noticeable, and probably a fundamental, shift from the pre-Arab Spring regional order chiefly characterized by US military dominance, Iran – US nuclear tussle and the never-ending Arab – Israel conflict.

The surge in sectarian violence has divided Muslims across the Middle East and beyond into two opposite camps – the Shi'ites led by Iran, and the Sunnis led by Saudi Arabia and the Islamic State. The rise of the Shi'ite Crescent, a politically-charged term which Jordan's King Abdullah II coined in 2004 to warn about the emergence of a Shi'ite ideological front stretching from Beirut via Damascus and Baghdad to Tehran, has now been effectively complemented by the recent appearance of a Sunni Crescent from Cairo to Amman to Riyadh and extending up to Dubai. While the Shi'ite Crescent under Iranian leadership is more homogeneous, the Sunni Crescent is divided in terms of loyalty and cohesiveness. The Islamic State, which is equally disdainful to the Shi'ites and the pro-West Gulf rulers and their cohorts, has recruited young Sunni Muslim fighters from nearly all over the world to defend and expand its self-declared caliphate covering territories across the Iraq – Syria borders. Saudi Arabia, on the contrary, primarily leads the Gulf Arab states and has managed to get Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Sudan to rally behind it.

Such divisive sectarian approaches and intra-Sunni differences, as primary sources of regional violence and insecurity, are tremendously shaking up the Middle Eastern political order today. They are also likely to dominate regional politics and political order for years to come.

Why Sectarian Outbursts in Regional Politics?

Sectarian violence in Middle Eastern politics is perhaps the ugliest part of the general resurgence of religion in contemporary world politics. Post-9/11 world, in general, has noticed the return of God to global politics, for different reasons. A slew of developments taking place in the 1980s and 1990s, including, but not limited to, the rise of the American evangelical right grouped under the Moral Majority and the American Christian Coalition, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the popularity of liberation theology in Latin America and in some Asian countries (the Philippines, South Korea), Hindu resurgence in India under the Bharatiya Janata Party, the gradual ascendance of Israel's 'Ultra-Orthodox' political forces etc., had already initiated a clear shift towards religion-based politics and policies. The 9/11 attacks further sharpened the religious turn to global politics creating permanent chasms between the Islamic jihadists and the West.

Some scholars have interpreted the religious resurgence in global politics as outcomes of inter-religious differences that breed violence, while others view it as the failure, or the absence thereof, of the modern liberal state to take roots worldwide to strictly separate and control the two domains of state and religion. A bevy of other scholars have concluded that the impact of religion on international relations and global governance is undeniable. Yet, very few

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scholars have attempted to account for the rise in sectarian tensions and internecine fighting between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis across the Middle East. It has very few historical parallels as well – the most notable being the Thirty Years' War (1618 – 1648) fought by rival European Catholic and Protestant princes and rulers. That war annihilated one-third of the total German population, seriously undermined the Holy Roman Empire but finally ushered in the creation of a system of nation-states with the policy of secularism, which is currently under threats, as a guiding principle. The Shi'ite – Sunni sectarian violence and bloodshed in contemporary Middle East promises no such thing like secularist practices on a regional scale but more hostility and chaos, as their past history seems to confidently suggest.

Tensions between the two sects of Islam – Shi'ites and Sunnis are nothing new. They date back to the seventh century and swelled first over the leadership succession issue that arose soon after the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E. The succession issue was resolved to the total dissatisfaction of the supporters of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, who rejected Abu Bakr as the first caliph of Islam and became known as Shi'ites (partisans of Ali). The Shi'ites consider all the Sunni caliphs of Islam as illegitimate, since none of the caliphs was a direct descendant from the Prophet's family. The seeds of discord between the two Islamic sects never dried out and their mutual hostilities never ceased to flare up. The last great and tragic showdown between them was the Battle of Karbala (in present-day Iraq) on October 10, 680 C.E., fought by the Prophet's grandson and Ali ibn Abi Talib's younger son Al-Husayn ibn Ali and the Damascus-based Umayyad caliph Yazid I. Al-Husayn lost the battle, his small fighting force was massacred by the large powerful Umayyad army and the Shi'ites were subsequently cornered by different Sunni caliphates. The Shi'ites mourn the historic defeat at Karbala through public holidays and religious festivities even today. At the turn of the sixteenth century, the Iranian Shi'ites, however, rose to power and glory in regional politics under the Safavid Empire (1501 – 1722) that adopted and patronized Shi'ism as the state religion and ruled over a vast territorial expanse covering modern day Iran, parts of Turkey, Georgia, Iraq and Central Asia.

In the contemporary context, the US invasion and occupation of Iraq in early 2003 opened the floodgate of Shi'ite – Sunni sectarian violence in the Middle East. Between 2006 and 2008, under American occupation, the rival Iraqi Shi'ite and Sunni groups bitterly fought and killed each other, perhaps on an unprecedented scale. Shi'ite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia rushed to the defense of their respective communal allies that further poisoned and destabilized the regional political environment. The ongoing sectarian outbursts in regional politics appear to be the second phase, if not the last, of the corrosive Shi'ite – Sunni conflict that started in Iraq after 2003. The Arab Spring further drove the Shi'ites and the Sunnis down the road to more hostilities and more violence. Three principal reasons behind this surge in sectarian violence can be identified: Iran-Saudi competition for regional dominance, the Arab movements for human rights and security (what the global press dubbed the Arab Spring), and the roles of external powers that have sided with this or that sect of Islam, unintentionally though.

Iran and Saudi Arabia, currently locked in fierce competitions for regional dominance, hold a zero-sum game view on most regional issues, where a slight gain for one is counted as a loss for the other. Iran sees itself as the natural preeminent power in the Gulf neighborhood, whereas Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states perceive Iran as a security threat and are bent on undercutting Iranian influence, a role previously played by Iran's regional nemesis Iraq. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia has never been a strong claimant for regional power status, nor was it the historic site for any great Muslim empire. Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, Isfahan or Istanbul played that historical role successively or simultaneously. A series of regional developments in the 2000s, such as the shift of political power from the Sunnis to the Shi'ites in Iraq, the rise of Iran-backed Hezbollah in Lebanese politics as a powerful force in the wake of the 2006 war against Israel and the absence of a countervailing regional power, after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, to check Iranian influence pushed the Saudis to the center stage. Riyadh, as a Sunni bastion and awash with petrodollars, appeared willing to assume a high-profile regional role to counter Iran and its Shi'ite allies in the region.

In the early 2010s, the Arab movements for human rights and security further pitted Saudi Arabia against Iran. The Saudis saw the anti-government protests in Bahrain, Syria, and also Yemen, through sectarian prism and clearly sided with Sunni groups in all three countries. Riyadh, supported by smaller Gulf neighbors of Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, sent troops to Bahrain in March 2011 to defend the Sunni Al-Khalifa dynasty, declared war on Yemen in March 2015 to subdue the Shi'ite Houthis, and has channeled arms and funds, simultaneously with Turkey

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and Qatar, to support the anti-government Sunni rebels in Syria. So has been the case with Iran that directly came to the defense of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad who comes from the Alawite community, an off-shoot of Shi'ite Islam, and solidified relations with the Shi'ites-dominated various Iraqi governments and other armed Shi'ite groups. Saudi Arabia also frequently complains of Iran's "meddling" in the affairs of the gulf neighborhood.

Clearly, the choice of weapon for both Iran and Saudi Arabia has been the weapon of sectarianism – the use of sectarian identities, beliefs or feelings to checkmate each other and thus advance their competing strategic interests. Both regional powers are seeking to expand their respective sphere of influence by broadly uniting and guiding their sectarian members and allies. While the dusts of the Arab Spring are yet to settle permanently, the recently concluded nuclear deal between Iran and the US has further angered the Saudis who chafe at US's compromising stance on Iran which, according to them, facilitates the rise of a new Persian Empire. The Saudi position on the deal was not that much different from that of Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu branded it as "a stunning historic mistake" and publicly declared that Israel would not be bound by "this deal with Iran". The Saudis and the Israelis suspected that the deal, set to gradually lift the US and EU-imposed crippling sanctions, is expected to refurbish Tehran with more resources which the Iranians might use to play a more assertive role in regional politics, to the detriment of Saudi and Israeli interests.

Post-2001 external involvements in Middle Eastern conflicts further fed into the process of sectarian resurgence in regional politics. The US military actions against the Sunni Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the Saddam regime in Iraq eliminated Iran's arch enemies in the east and in the west. The overthrow of the Saddam regime saw Iran-allied Shi'ite groups and leaders take over political power in Baghdad. After a brief withdrawal in 2011, the US again came back to Iraq by late 2014 to fight the Islamic State militants – a pro-Shi'ite action that contradicts Washington's anti-Iran posture and support for the Gulf Sunni Arab allies. Recent Russian military intervention to prop up the Bashar Al-Assad government in Syria, which Iran and Hezbollah openly welcomed, have clear pro-Shi'ite moorings, though Russia has its own strategic interests to take care of. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, roundly criticized the Russian military campaign against Sunni rebel groups in Syria and warned Moscow of "dangerous consequences" for its intervention.

Looking into the Future

Perhaps, it is not sectarian approach to regional politics, which was not unexpected given Iran – Saudi duel for regional supremacy, but its long-term consequences that seriously worry people in the Middle East today. The sectarian rivalry pervades all social sectors from politics to culture, hardens the mindsets of Arabs and Iranians of all ages, most notably the young generations. A new Iranian video game titled 'Beat the Arab', first released in 2009, where the players beat and force-feed an Arab a lizard is reportedly popular among Iranian youngsters. Prior to the release of this video game, several Saudi government-controlled websites uploaded a game called 'Wahdat al Nimr' ('Tiger Unit') that targeted Iran's Quds Force, Revolutionary Guard Corps' foreign arm to project force throughout the Middle East. Though the two offensive games were later filtered by the Iranian and Saudi authorities, they simply speak of the deep sectarian divide across the Gulf with lasting reverberations in Iran – Arab relations and, by implications, Shi'ite – Sunni relations.

At the practical level, the sectarian divide has narrowed down the road to cooperation between the two opposite sects of Islam, particularly between the Iranians and the Sunni Arabs. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, after signing the nuclear deal with the P5+1 powers (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany), launched a diplomatic offensive to jump-start dialogue with the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states to allay their fear of a resurgent Iran. Only Qatar is reportedly serious about the Iran – GCC dialogue while the Saudis have so far shown a lukewarm response by doubling down their support for Syria's Sunni opposition and sending ground troops to Yemen to seize power from the Shi'ite Houthi rebels. The same picture is more or less visible in the economic sector. In the absence of a political and diplomatic thaw, Sunni Arab states in the Gulf and elsewhere are streamlining little economic efforts, in contrast to European states, to exploit huge economic incentives in post-deal Iranian economy. Until today, there exist meagre cross-Gulf economic interactions in terms of import-export trade, investments and strategic development initiatives. Absence of economic linkages simply hardens their sectarian views that they could afford to sustain conflicts and avoid cooperation.

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Both Iran's and Saudi Arabia's inability to overpower and outmaneuver each other is also sustaining their sectarian approaches to regional politics. In the last four to five years, the Iranian armed forces, spearheaded by the Quds Force, have stretched too thin in Iraq and Syria; the economic costs of supporting the Al-Assad government in Syria have also considerably depleted Iran's scarce economic resources already hit hard by Western sanctions. In addition to channeling arms and funds to the Syrian rebel groups, the Saudis decided to wage a costly war against the Yemeni Houthis. A recent report by the IMF (International Monetary Fund) has warned that slumbering oil prices and the rising costs of involvements in regional conflicts might force the Saudis to run on empty by 2020. The grim economic conditions notwithstanding, neither the Saudis nor the Iranians are flexible enough to explore the art of diplomatic compromise; rather, they are trying to do the undoable – victories in sectarian warfare to bump up each other to achieve the region's dominant power status.

To wind up the discussion, this article makes the point that the Middle East political order has in the past few years developed specific characteristics to be branded as a sectarian political order. The spate of sectarian violence, unleashed by different factors, has vitiated regional politics and foreign policies clearly along sectarian lines. The Saudi-led Sunni Crescent and the Iran-led Shi'ite Crescent are the two clearly defined hostile camps jockeying for regional power and influence while banking on sectarian emotions and feelings. The fight between the Shi'ite and Sunni crescents is likely to continue since no camp is capable of prevailing over the other in the near future. In the process, it will keep hardening Shi'ite – Sunni sectarian psychologies and accordingly color their politics and policies from sectarian standpoints yielding negative consequences for the regional political order as a whole.

About the author:

Mohammed Nuruzzaman is Associate Professor of International Relations at the Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST), Kuwait. He earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Alberta in 2003 and has taught at different universities in Canada, Bangladesh, and Kuwait. Dr. Nuruzzaman specializes in international relations theory, global political economy, human rights and human security, great powers in the global order, political Islam, and politics and international relations of the Middle East. His major publications have appeared in leading peer-reviewed international journals, including Canadian Journal of Political Science, International Studies Perspectives, Cooperation and Conflict, International Studies, International Area Studies Review, Journal of Contemporary Asia, and Journal of Asian and African Studies, among others. He is also a contributor to influential global news magazines and online publication outlets, including The National Interest, E-International Relations, The Conversation, and Informed Comments. Winner of some prestigious scholarships and fellowships, including Durham Senior International Research Fellowship 2016 – 17, KFAS (Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences) research grants in 2013, the F.S. Chia Doctoral Scholarships (University of Alberta) in 1998, and the GUST – UMSL Summer Research Fellowship in 2011, his current research more focuses on contemporary Middle Eastern security issues.