The Geopolitics of the Sunni-Shi'i Divide

in the Middle East[1]

Samuel Helfont

In 2006, during the height of the American-led "Global War on Terrorism", a *New York Times* reporter met with American officials in Washington to try and determine how much they knew about the Islamist ideologies associated with terrorism. Remarkably, senior officials and lawmakers – including the Chief of the FBI's national security branch, and members of the U.S. House of Representatives' committees on intelligence and counter terrorism – had "no clue" whether actors such as Iran, Hizballah, or al-Qa'ida were Sunnis or Shi'is.[2] This essay provides a brief historical overview of the Sunni-Shi'i divide, as well as outlines its importance in the post-"Arab Spring" Middle East.

Who are Sunnis and Shi'is?

The division between Sunnis and Shi'is originates in the dispute over the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632 C.E.). In brief, the Sunnis believe that Muhammad did not name a successor, and that the best of his followers should lead the community of Muslims. In other words, succession should not be hereditary. The Shi'is reject this view. They claim that Muhammad designated his cousin and son-in-law, 'Ali, as his successor. Muhammad had no surviving sons

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[2] Jeff Stein, "Can You Tell a Sunni From a Shiite?" *The New York Times,* October 17, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/17/opinion/17stein.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&

and therefore 'Ali was his closest male relative. As such, the Shi'is believe that leadership of the Islamic community should be hereditary.

The first three immediate successors ("caliphs") of Muhammad were not the Prophet's kinsmen. However, 'Ali's followers succeeded in installing him as the fourth caliph, and his legitimacy was recognized by all Muslims. Following 'Ali's death, however, violent clashes broke out between his followers, who insisted that his sons had the right to rule, and their opponents, who insisted that leadership of the Islamic community was not limited to 'Ali's hereditary line. This conflict came to a head at the Battle of Karbala (680 C.E.) in what is today southern Iraq. In the battle, representatives of the Sunni Umayyad Empire (661– 750 C.E.) defeated the followers of 'Ali and slaughtered his offspring – including his son (and Muhammad's grandson), Hussein.

The battle marked a major turning point in Islamic history from which the Sunnis emerged triumphant. From that point forward, they would become the dominant sect in the Middle East, and would come to rule most of the Islamic world. Even today, the Shi'is continue to mourn the martyrdom of Hussein in the annual 'Ashura ceremonies, which are a major marker of Shi'i identity.

Following Karbala, the Shi'is became a powerful, yet largely marginalized minority. They continued to insist that the line of 'Ali should rule, but they soon began to disagree over which of his descendants possessed that right. The dominant faction believed that 'Ali was the first of twelve leaders, or Imams, who possessed a divine right to rule the Islamic community. The twelfth Imam, they claim, went into hiding, or occultation, to protest corruption in the Islamic community and will eventually return as a messianic figure. Shi'is who believe this are known as "Twelvers." Other Shi'i sects believe that there were only five, seven, or nine Imams. Some Shi'is believe that the Imam never went into hiding and thus continued to rule into the modern period, e.g. the Shi'i Imams from the Zaydi branch of the sect, who ruled the highlands of Yemen until the 1960s. Some Shi'is splintered even further, forming heterodox sects such as the Druze and the 'Alawis, who hold many Shi'i beliefs but are generally considered to be outside of the *umma* ("community of believers").

Throughout the centuries, various Shi'i factions have risen to power in a variety of places. At times, they even coalesced into powerful empires such as the Fatimids (10th to 12th centuries C.E.), but in most places and at most times, they have been oppressed minorities in a larger Sunni-dominated region.

Where are Sunnis and Shi'is?

The primary locations of Sunnis and Shi'is have shifted dramatically over time. The medieval Fatimid Empire, for example, was based in Egypt, which today has

almost no Shiʿis. Iranians were mostly Sunni until the establishment of the Safavid Empire in 1501, which encouraged their conversion to Shiʿism. The Shiʿis of southern Iraq are descendants of Sunnis, who converted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The regional geography of Sunnis and Shiʿis today is, to a large degree, a product of pre-World War I imperial borders. Turkey and most of the Arabic speaking lands fell under the rule of the Sunni Ottoman Empire and remain mostly Sunni today. Iran, on the other hand, was ruled by various Shiʿi dynasties and continues to be predominantly Shiʿi. Of course, this general description of Sunni-Shiʿi population distribution is not exact. Some Sunnis remain in Iran, and pockets of Shiʿis survived in Ottoman lands. Tellingly, many of the Shiʿi areas of the former Ottoman Empire were found in geographically isolated territories or in border regions, which allowed them to resist homogenizing imperial trends. Thus, today, Arab Shiʿis are found in the mountainous terrains of northern Yemen and southern Lebanon as well as along the old imperial boundaries between the Ottomans and Iranians in southern Iraq. There are more than two million Twelver Shiʿa in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province, as well as more than 200,000 Shiʿa in Bahrain, which contributes to the geopolitical rivalry between Sunni-Wahhabi Saudi Arabia and Twelver Shiʿi Iran. There are also sizeable Shiʿi communities in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Nevertheless, the clear demographic and political center of Shiʿism today remains Iran.

Does the Sunni-Shiʿi divide matter?

Despite sectarian conflicts in the Middle East today, the political importance of sectarian differences is not straightforward. While at times, the Sunni-Shiʿi divide has appeared to define Middle Eastern geopolitics, at other times it has played a more attenuated role. For example, the Iraqi general ʿAbd al-Karim al-Qasim, who overthrew the Iraqi monarch in 1958 to become the first ruler of republican Iraq, was half Sunni and half Shiʿi. From his biography, we learn not only that it was acceptable for Sunnis and Shiʿis to intermarry, but also that the offspring of such marriages could rise through the ranks of the military and eventually garner enough support to rule the country.

Another example of sectarian ecumenism comes from an unlikely source – revolutionary Iran. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was clearly a Shiʿi leader. The revolution that brought him to power in 1979 was deeply rooted in Shiʿi political philosophy and Shiʿi power structures. At the same time, Khomeini made an effort to reach out to Sunnis. He insisted that Iran was an Islamic state, rather than a Shiʿi state. He instilled a policy of "*takrib*," meaning the bringing together of sects, and he abolished prohibitions concerning praying behind a religious leader from another sect. He also adopted a number of Sunni assumptions about

Islamic law and promoted Sunni Islamist heroes in Iran. The Egyptian Sunni Islamist Sayyid Qutb was even put on an Iranian postage stamp.

Khomeini's outreach bore fruit. The Sunni Muslim Brotherhood across the Arab world largely supported the Iranian Revolution.[3] The Brotherhood adopted some aspects of Khomeini's political theology, and some Sunnis, such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, broke with their Sunni counterparts to adopt an explicitly Khomeinist ideology.[4] As these examples demonstrate, geopolitics in the Middle East have not always been defined by Sunni-Shi'i strife.

However, in many cases, they have. Furthermore, when sectarianism matters, it *really* matters. Conflicts in Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s, and in Iraq during the 2000s, highlight the sheer ferociousness that often accompanies sectarian clashes. These conflicts were defined by mass violence against civilians in which the belligerents employed tactics that were creative in their brutality.

The Geopolitics of Sunni-Shi'i Relations

The current wave of sectarian tensions in the Middle East emerged following the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Saddam Hussein was a Sunni Arab, but Iraq was then, and remains today, a majority Shi'i state. Geographically, Iraq links several of the Shi'i, and quasi-Shi'i communities in the Middle East. On one side are the Shi'is of Iran and the Persian Gulf. On the other side are the 'Alawis of Bashar al-Asad in Syria and the Lebanese Shi'is, including Hizballah. The 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein brought representatives of the Shi'i majority to power in Iraq. Consequently, an arc of Shi'i power beginning in the Persian Gulf and Iran, running through Iraq and Syria, and ending in the southern Lebanese highlands extended across the Middle East. This configuration was labeled the "Shi'i Crescent" by King Abdullah II of Jordan. For the first time in centuries, the Sunni Arab heartland of the former Ottoman Empire had been bisected by Shi'i powers. This caused a good deal of consternation among traditional Sunni Arab elites and hardline Sunni clerics.[5]

To be sure, Sunni-Shi'i tensions were certainly not the only factor shaping Middle East conflicts during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Other than Iraq, the two major issues that dominated regional politics were the Arab-Israeli conflict and the rise of Iran. On both of these issues, regional actors were

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[3] The main exception to this trend was the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. The Syrian branch of the Brotherhood opposed Iran because it had allied with the'Alawi Syrian president, Hafiz al-Asad.

[4] For more on this phenomenon, see Samuel Helfont, "The Muslim Brotherhood and the Emerging 'Shia Crescent'" *Orbis*, 53:2 (2009).

[5] Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

divided, but not along sectarian lines. In Israel's conflicts with the Sunni Palestinian Hamas and Shi`i Lebanese Hizballah, each of the latter were supported not only by the other but also by Shi'i Iran, 'Alawi Syria, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, and increasingly by the Sunni AKP government in Turkey. Conversely, the opponents of war with Israel included Sunni Arab leaders, who were allied with Western powers, and hardline Sunni clerics, who opposed Shi'ism on theological grounds. A similar alignment was evident on the issue of Iran's rising power. While pro-Western Sunni Arab regimes and hardline Sunnis clerics opposed Iran, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and increasingly the Turkish government did not oppose Iranian ambitions.

However, the "Arab Spring" upheavals during the last three years transformed the geopolitics of sectarianism in the region. The Saudi-backed Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) military intervention in the Bahrain uprising in March 2011 led to polarizing sectarian tension between Iran and the Arab Gulf states, as well as increased internal hostility and mistrust between the majority Sunni and minority Shi'i communities in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

In Syria, sectarianism emerged in a growing conflict between the minority 'Alawi-dominated regime and an increasingly radical Sunni Islamist-led insurgency. Asad's traditional Sunni allies such as Hamas, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and the AKP government in Turkey eventually abandoned him, lining up their fellow Sunni Islamists. By contrast, Shi'i Iran and Hizballah continued actively to support Asad. Thus, the Syrian conflict segregated the region along sectarian lines in a manner that had not occurred previously. The breakdown in inter-communal relations has metastasized across the region. Other states with mixed Sunni-Shi'i populations, such as Bahrain, Iraq, and Lebanon, have seen a sharp rise in sectarian violence and are increasingly worried about the prospects of civil war.

Looking Forward

The conflict in Syria has, more than any other factor, reinforced and exacerbated sectarianism across the region. However, the Syrian civil war will not continue forever. No one knows for sure when or how it will end. Nevertheless, one day it will end. The question observers of the Middle East need to ask is what will happen next. Will the scars of the conflict be too deep to heal? In that case, sectarianism could shape regional geopolitics for the foreseeable future. However, that is not the only possibility. The sectarian strife, which currently defines Middle Eastern geopolitics, was not inevitable. As we have seen, Sunni-Shi'i divisions have not always shaped regional politics. Regional actors may

move beyond the Syrian conflict and other interests may eventually shape their actions.

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