



THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE SUNNI-SHI'Ī DIVIDE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

By Samuel Helfont



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In 2006, during the heart of the Global War on Terrorism, a New York Times reporter went to Washington in an attempt to ascertain the extent that American officials understood the ideologies underpinning Islamist terrorism. The reporter began with a simple question: could senior counterterrorism officials identify which groups were Sunnis and which were Shi'is? Remarkably senior officials and lawmakers – including the Chief of the F.B.I.'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, Hezbollah, or al-Qaida were Sunnis or Shi'is.¹ A number of questions emerged from this encounter. First, who are the Sunnis and Shi'is? Second, where are they located? And, finally, does it matter?

As this essay will outline, sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shi'is are even more pronounced today than they were in 2006. Thus, the questions that the New York Times raised seven years ago remain pertinent. Accordingly, this brief essay will attempt to answer the who, what, and where of Sunni-Shi'ī relations and attempt to address the extent to which any of this matters for the geopolitics of the Middle East today.

WHO ARE SUNNIS AND SHI'IS?

Sunnism and Shi'ism are the two most important sects in Islam. The division between them traces its origin to debates over the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad. In brief, the Sunnis believe that Muhammad did not

¹ 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&

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

Immediately following Muhammad's death, those who would later become Sunnis triumphed. The first three Caliphs (literally successors) were not the Prophet's kinsmen. However, the Shi'is succeeded in installing Ali as the fourth Caliph. Both Sunnis and Shi'is recognized the legitimacy of his rule. Nevertheless, following Ali's death, violent clashes broke out between the followers of Ali, who insisted that his sons had the right to rule, and his rivals, 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 (680CE) in what is today southern Iraq. In the battle, representatives of the Sunni Umayyad Empire (661–750 CE) 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 disenfranchised minority. They continued to insist that the line of Ali should rule, but they soon began to diverge 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 sub-sects of Shi'is believe that there were only five, seven, or nine Imams. Some Shi'is believe that the Imam never went into hiding and that Imams continued to rule into the modern period. For example, Shi'i Imams from the Zaidi branch of the sect ruled the highlands of Yemen until the 1960s. Some Shi'is splintered even further, forming pseudo-Shi'i sects such as the Druze and the Allawis, who hold many Shi'i beliefs but are often considered heterodox by mainstream Muslims.

Throughout the centuries, various Shi'i factions have risen to power in a number of instances. At times, they even coalesced into powerful empires such as the Fatimids (10th to 12th centuries CE), 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 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 Shi'is. Iranians were mostly Sunni until the arrival of the Safavid Empire in 1501, which encouraged their conversion to Shi'ism. The Shi'is of southern Iraq are descendants of Sunnis, who converted in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Geographical divisions between Sunnis and Shi'is in the Middle East today owe a great deal to pre-World War One imperial borders. Turkey and most of the Arab-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 Shi'i dynasties and continues to be predominantly Shi'i. Of course, these borders are not exact. Some Sunnis remain in Iran, and pockets of Shi'ism survived in Ottoman lands. Tellingly, many of the Shi'i 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 Shi'is 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 and on the western shore of the Persian Gulf. The clear demographic and political center of Shi'ism today remains Iran.

DOES THE SUNNI-SHI'I DIVIDE MATTER?

Despite sectarian conflicts in the Middle East today, the political importance of sect is not straightforward. While at times, the Sunni-Shi'i divide appears to define Middle Eastern geopolitics, at other times it plays a more attenuated role. For example, the Iraqi general Abd al-Karim al-Qassim, who overthrew the Iraqi monarch in 1958 to become

the first ruler of republican Iraq, was half Sunni and half Shi'i. From his biography, we learn not only that it was acceptable for Sunnis and Shi'is 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. It is difficult to imagine such a career would be possible in a political climate defined by sectarian conflict.

Another example of sectarian ecumenism comes from an unlikely source – revolutionary Iran. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was clearly a Shi'i leader. The revolution that brought him to power in 1979 was deeply rooted in Shi'i political philosophy and Shi'i power structures. However, Khomeini made an effort to reach out to Sunnis. He insisted that Iran was an Islamic state, rather than a Shi'i state. He instilled a policy of “*takrib*,” meaning the bringing together of sects, and he accordingly 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.² 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.³ As these examples demonstrate, geopolitics in the Middle East are not *always* defined by Sunni-Shi'i strife.

However, in many cases, sectarian divides do appear to define politics in the region. 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 tremendously creative in their brutality. Such sectarian violence, when it breaks out, is extremely difficult to quell.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF SUNNI-SHI'I RELATIONS TODAY

The current wave of sectarian tensions in the Middle East was inaugurated by 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 communities in the Middle East. On one side are the Shi'is of Iran and the Persian Gulf. On the other side are the Allawis – and thus pseudo-Shi'i leadership in Syria of Bashar al-Assad – and the Lebanese Shi'is, including Hezbollah. The 2003 the toppling of Saddam Hussein brought representatives of the majority Shi'i population 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 aptly became dubbed by King Abdullah II of Jordan as the “Shi'i Crescent.” For the first time in centuries, the Sunni Arab heartlands of 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.⁴

However, one should not overemphasize the role of Sunni-Shi'i tensions in the first decade of the 21st 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 divided, but not along sectarian lines. Khomeini's old ties with the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood continued to influence geopolitics. For example, Israel fought two wars during the decade – the first in 2006 against Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the second in 2008-9 yet again against Hamas. In each of the conflicts, Israel's opponents were supported by Shi'i Iran, Shi'i Hezbollah in Lebanon, the pseudo-Shi'i regime in Syria, Sunni Hamas, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, and increasingly by the Sunni AKP government in Turkey. Clearly, this grouping was a mixed sectarian bag. The opponents of war with Israel included Sunni Arab leaders, who were allied with Western powers, and hardline Sunni clerics, who opposed Shi'ism theologically. 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 Sunni Muslim Brothers, and increasingly the Sunni AKP government in Turkey did not oppose Iranian ambitions. Accordingly, regional alliances during the decade were not defined by a Sunni-Shi'i divide.

² 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 pseudo-Shi'i Syrian dictator, Hafez al-Assad.

³ For more on this phenomenon, see Samuel Helfont, “The Muslim Brotherhood and the Emerging ‘Shia Crescent’” *Orbis*, 53:2 (2009).

⁴ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

However, the upheaval of the Arab Spring transformed the geopolitics of sectarianism in the region. The conflict in Syria has been particularly transformative. Prior to the Arab Spring, the pseudo-Shi'i regime in Syria was closely allied with Shi'i Iran and it hosted the headquarters of Sunni Islamists, such as Hamas, in its capital, Damascus. The regime also enjoyed strong ties to the Sunni AKP government in Turkey and the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

The Arab Spring brought waves of protests across the region, which Sunni Muslim Brothers supported and sometimes led. These protests intended to overthrow the various dictatorial regimes in the Arab World. In Syria, this manifested in a conflict between the pseudo-Shi'i dictator, Bashar al-Assad, and a growing Sunni Islamist-led insurgency. In that conflict, Assad's Sunni allies such as Hamas, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and the AKP government in Turkey were forced to choose between their pseudo-Shi'i ally, Bashar al-Assad, and their fellow Sunni Islamists. After a period of indecision, all of the Sunni actors in the region eventually turned against Assad and his regime. However, Shi'i Iran and Shi'i Hezbollah continued actively to support Assad. Thus, the Syrian conflict segregated the region along sectarian lines in way that had not occurred previously. On one hand, many Sunni Islamists, including in the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, blamed Iran for supporting Assad's brutal crackdown on their Sunni Islamist counterparts in Syria. On the other hand, Iran and the Syrian regime felt betrayed by Sunni groups such as Hamas, which they had aided for many years. This drove a wedge between the erstwhile allies and helped define the conflict as a sectarian war between Sunnis and Shi'is. The breakdown in sectarian relations has metastasized across the region. Other states with mixed Sunni-Shi'i populations, such as Bahrain, Iraq, and Lebanon, have seen a 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, helped proliferate sectarianism in the region. However, the Syrian civil war will not continue forever. No one knows for sure when, or how it will end. It could last for years, or only a few more months. Nevertheless, one day it will end. The question observers of the Middle East need to ask is what will happen next. Are the scars of the conflict 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. This is an important fact to keep in mind as we look toward the future. Regional actors could move beyond the Syrian conflict. As was the case prior to the Arab Spring, other interests could again shape their actions.

Either way, the length and outcome of the Syrian civil war will certainly have an impact on future political alignments in the region. To take just one example, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, having been forced from power in a military coup, may find it convenient to rekindle its alliance with Iran, which also opposes Egypt's current military government. Such an outcome would be greatly aided by a quick end to the conflict in Syria, especially if Assad's regime is toppled and Iran is seeking new allies. In contrast, if the conflict drags out, a renewed alliance between Iran and the Egyptian Brotherhood would be strained at best. This is only one of many scenarios that will be affected by the length and outcome of the Syrian violence.

As dissatisfying as it sounds, the best conclusion one could draw is that sectarianism may, but will not necessarily, shape future geopolitics in the region. Either way, all eyes need to be on Syria. The ramifications of the conflict there will provide the best indicator of future regional alignments.