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GULF ANALYSIS

# THE GULF AND SECTARIANISM

## ABOUT

By virtue of their confined political environments, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and their most important neighbours often remain impenetrable to domestic and foreign observers. And yet, the evolving politics of Peninsula countries, their relationship to one another and to the wider region, pose some of the most significant and unanswered questions for the changing geopolitics of the Middle East. Gulf politics are entering the most unpredictable and volatile era since their establishment.

Understanding these new trends as they unfold will be critical if Europeans and other international actors intend to rely on the Gulf states as financial and political partners in the region. In the coming decade, the Gulf states will be irrevocably caught between aging, archaic governing models and new political and social forces beyond their control. In bringing together commentary and analysis from those observing these countries from inside and out, this series sheds light on key political debates and developments in the Gulf that have wider resonance for the region and the world.

## *Introduction by Fatima Ayub*

Has the Arab Awakening degenerated into a nightmare? After its first experiment with credible elections, Egypt has reverted to the strongman politics of the deep state. A free Libya looks to be in free fall. Yemen's managed political transition is stagnating. Bahrain's national reconciliation is less a dialogue than a monologue by its self-assured monarchs. Syria is unravelling into an ever more divisive and brutal internecine conflict, jeopardising the political and economic health of already anaemic Lebanon and Jordan. The war in Iraq, metastasizing anew as the Arab Awakening triggers new power struggles around it, claims hundreds of dead each month as it fuses with the war on its western border. Perhaps the most worrying trend is that of sectarianism and in particular the re-emergence of identity politics along the Shia-Sunni divide.

A handwringing discourse has emerged casting the moment as the onset of a new Thirty Years' War.[1] Implicit in this description is a fatalistic view of a region with fanatical

1 See for example Anne-Slaughter, "The Syria Lessons", Project Syndicate, 28 May 2013, available at http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/the-consequences-of-ruling-out-military-intervention-in-syria-by-anne-marie-slaughter; Thomas E. Ricks, "Is Syrian-related violence the beginning of the Muslim world's Thirty Years' War", *Foreign Policy*, 27 June 2013, available at http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/06/27/is_syrian_related_violence_the_beginning_of_the_muslim_worlds_thirty_years_war; Anatole Kaletsky, "Syria conflict invokes Europe's history", Reuters, 5 September 2013, available at http://blogs.reuters.com/anatole-kaletsky/tag/middle-east/.

powers exercising political and military resources to assert their supremacy. But the comparison is simplistic and dangerous, lending itself to binary choices that ignore the complexities of a region contending with deep and decades-long political, social and economic tensions. At one level, the ensuing conflicts since 2011, though not inevitable, are a predictable consequence of dramatic social and political change. In the eyes of powerful elites and Western allies, the old autocracies were both useful and successful in preserving their uneasy stability in the post-colonial order – in denying rights to anyone other than a privileged elite, they alternately tempered or inflamed rival nationalisms, competing identities and religious association as was expedient for consolidating the power of the state.

Not only does the phenomenon of sectarianism – the promotion and deliberate deployment of sect-based allegiance in the pursuit of political ends – have complex causes, it also manifests itself in a diverse ways and at different levels: personal identity, social attitudes, religious ideology, political organisation, national policy and transnational movements. As Middle Eastern governments confront the single greatest challenge to their power since the establishment of these regimes – all the more serious as it emanates from their own citizenry – and the political landscape shifts dramatically, new and old discontents are becoming more visible and extreme.

The highest concentration of the world's Shiite Muslims is in the wider Gulf region (which includes Iran). In Bahrain, Iran and Iraq, more than 65 percent of the population is Shiite. In Kuwait an estimated 25 percent and in Yemen an estimated 40 percent are Shiite. Where Shias constitute much smaller minorities of between 5-15 percent of the population – in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates – they face varying degrees of marginalisation and discrimination. Such treatment is most pronounced in Saudi Arabia, where the country's estimated 10 percent Shiite population are concentrated in the Eastern Province near Iran. Disenfranchised communities, including Berbers in Libya, Kurds in Syria and Shias in Saudi Arabia, have sought to capitalise on the changes created by the Arab Awakening.

## A major fault line

Complexity notwithstanding, the present geopolitics of the Middle East rest on a single major fault line: the competition for power and influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia in their wider neighbourhood. While the two countries have never gone to war with each other and are unlikely to, their mutual animosity continues to inflame serious and bloody conflicts across the region, with Syria now the most egregious example. Even more so than the lightning rod of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this fault line has divided the region for more than three decades. In particular, the political alliances between the Arab Gulf states were consolidated by the Islamic Revolution in 1979, which created a new model of quasi-participatory Islamist government in a country of 80 million people – that is, larger than the population of all the Arab Gulf states. Whether in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen or Syria, the incompatibility of Saudi and Iranian policies – for the former, limiting the rise of alternate models of Islamist governance, and for the latter, challenging a regional and Western order aligned against it – continues to shape politics and exacerbate tensions along sectarian lines in those countries.

No wonder, then, that recent a single telephone call in September 2013 between US President Barack Obama and Iranian president Hassan Rouhani was so momentous. The first contact between leaders of the two countries since the Islamic Revolution, it could signal the first glimmer of a reconciliation between Iran and the West, and eventually between Iran and its neighbours, including those in the Gulf. But within the Gulf, engagement with Iran is seen a zero-sum calculation; any positive movement to end Iran's international isolation is seen as abandoning the Arab Gulf states.

There are some pragmatists in both Iran and Saudi Arabia who support security and economic co-operation. In the 1990s then-Crown Prince (now King) Abdullah and President Mohammad Khatami were receptive to security cooperation. As head of Iran's National Security Council in 1997, Rouhani himself signed a security agreement with Riyadh, which was meant to initiate a process of regional security cooperation, but the efforts faltered and went up in smoke with the Iraq war. Potential spoilers for a reconciliation include the decades of antagonism and mistrust (memories of the Iran-Iraq war remain strong); Israel's pugilistic foreign policy towards Iran, with which the Gulf itself often quietly colludes; the legacy of President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad's populist-driven hostility; and an ever more conservative religious establishment in Saudi Arabia.

## Saudi Arabia: cultivating sectarian spaces

No single country is considered to do more to propagate sectarianism than Saudi Arabia. As Andrew Hammond writes in his essay in this issue of *Gulf Analysis*, the Saudi royal family sees itself as the rightful inheritor and guardian of Islamic orthodoxy. Saudi Arabia's formal interpretation of Islam is ideologically sectarian, condemning all other traditional schools of Islamic thought and religious communities as heresy. The state and private citizens put millions every year into evangelism (known in Arabic as *da'wa*), the establishment of schools and mosques worldwide and financial support to print and broadcast media that promote its interpretation of Islam.

As Shiite communities inside Saudi Arabia and around it constitute the largest and most organised group of such "heretics", it deliberately subjects them to particularly stringent criticism and discrimination. Even before the Arab Awakening, the rise of an Islamist, Shiite Iran, and then a Shiite Iraq had already posed a serious threat to a Saudi and Wahhabi influence over the region. In the last two years, Saudi Arabia has predictably turned to trenchantly

sectarian policies in Bahrain and Syria, where it fears Iranian encroachment, and within its own borders, where Shias have been protesting since 2011.

Saudi Arabia's responses at home and abroad are reinforcing the worst repercussions of sectarianism. With Hezbollah's public declaration of support to the Syrian regime earlier this year, Saudi media and Salafist groups in turn became noticeably more hostile. In the troubled kingdom of Bahrain, where protests against the government occur with weekly regularity beyond the eye of most reporting, Saudi Arabia has intervened militarily to protect the minority Sunnite kingdom against the grievances of a Shiite majority. Alarmed and perplexed at the spectre of democratic revolutions, Saudi officials took Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's statement of support to the Assad regime as vindication of its claims that the government's violence is Shia-inspired (thus, of Iranian pedigree) and should be challenged with force. This view has also shaped Saudi discourse towards its own Shiite citizens, whose protests against their marginalisation are cast as seditious unrest.

Countering Iran and its potential influence is as much about containing models of Islamist governance that contradict Saudi Arabia's own as it is about containing Shiism, and understanding this imperative is key to interpreting Saudi regional policy more broadly. Where Saudi Arabia has not been able to play on anti-Shiite sentiment – such as with the new Islamist forces in Egypt – it has sought both to undermine the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and to support more extreme Salafist parties, which adhere to Saudi interpretations of Islamic governance. It has cultivated the rivalry between the Brotherhood and the Salafists in order to prevent them making common cause against it. But in Egypt, the country whose branch of the Brotherhood gives the kingdom most cause for concern, this approach has already led to blowback: in June, Saudi and Egyptian Salafist clerics convened in Cairo and declared a religious obligation to wage jihad in Syria, a move that only served to inflame fears of a more radical Islamist convergence. The fact that President Morsi attended the rally reconfirmed Saudi fears that a Brotherhood government anywhere would also fan the flames of Islamist discontent against the kingdom.

## Qatar: blowback for brinksmanship

Qatar is not historically considered to have promoted an avowedly sectarian agenda in its regional policies. Hassan Hassan writes that Qatar, with a small and well-integrated Shiite minority among its 300,000 citizens, has miscalculated the consequences of its political adventurism in the last two years. Though its Sunni Muslims also adhere to Wahhabi interpretations of Islam, Qatar's leadership has disavowed the official enforcement of doctrine in the country as part of its intent to shape a more open society. But as in Saudi Arabia, the government must also pacify its very conservative religious establishment, which is not tightly regulated and is increasingly disconcerted by the liberalisation of the country. Under the former Emir Hamad, Qatar's interest in developing an ambitious network of alliances in the Middle East and North Africa and further afield meant it could not afford to embrace strictly sectarian policies. It has historically maintained better relations with Iran, with which it shares control of South Pars-North Dome, the world's largest gas field. But it also supports policies agreed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) such as the boycott of the Shia-led government in Iraq and support for the Bahraini monarchy in its fight against popular discontent from its Shiite citizens. In May, when the prominent Doha-based Egyptian cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi issued his now-infamous condemnation of Shias as heretics and called on Muslims to join in holy war against them in Syria, Qatar's own Shiite community also felt targeted.

However, in Syria Qatar has supported groups that espouse an avowedly sectarian agenda in hopes of boosting the chances of Muslim Brotherhood victory in a post-Assad order. Al-Jazeera, a key tool of Qatari soft power, has seen its viewership diminish across the Arab region and its sometimes biased reporting sustains criticisms that Qatar's policies serve the interests of its old and new allies. Fearing the impact in Qatar itself, the new Emir, Tamim, has slowly moved to rein in the most visible and problematic aspects of his father's foreign policy. Despite taking a quieter tone, Qatar is unlikely to abandon its new allies within the Muslim Brotherhood parties across the region. It is uncertain how it will navigate a more fraught regional climate in which Saudi Arabia and the UAE are increasingly hostile to Islamists.

## Iraq: The perils of rising sectarian conflict

Like Lebanon before it and Syria after, Iraq has also witnessed the destructive ramifications of neighbourly concerns premised on sectarian agendas. Iraqi Shias, long caught in a cycle of disenfranchisement, are politically dominant for the first time since the inception of the modern Iraqi state. Hadeel al-Sayegh writes that the political, social and economic crises that unfolded in Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003 remain fundamentally unresolved and risk pushing the country into even deeper violence. The process of debaathification, itself an attempt to reverse the balance of power between the Shia majority and Sunni minority, is widely considered as excessive and abusive and has left Iraqi Sunnis in a position of political and social vulnerability and without means of redress for legitimate grievances.

The ongoing violence inflicted on civilians by Sunni insurgent groups is as much a remnant of the preceding decade of conflict as it is a renewed effort to capitalise on the real and perceived grievances of Sunnite communities who feel themselves underserved by the state and besieged by the wider society. Neither has President Nouri al-Maliki done anything to reverse these perceptions. Since the 2010 parliamentary elections, when hundreds of Sunnite candidates were disqualified from running (ostensibly for links with the former Baathist regime but in reality because they were Sunnis) established a naked sectarianism in the

Iraqi government. With a standing army of a million strong and unreported numbers of intelligence officials, informants and private militias, built under US auspices as a bulwark against terrorism, al-Maliki has extended the reach of the presidency well beyond its constitutional limits. As a close ally of Iran – the only other Shia-majority and Shia-led government – al-Maliki's government antagonises the Gulf on sectarian and political grounds. The substantial but unquantifiable financial support that Iraq is providing to the regime of Bashar al-Assad underscores these ties.

## Iran: strategist or sectarian?

Does Iran, with the largest Shia population in the world, pursue an unwavering sectarian agenda? Mohammad Shabani explores the complex character of Iranian politics and argues that, despite the Islamist and Shiite character of the Islamic Republic, Iranian foreign policy has faced constraints in a Middle East in which neither Persians nor Shias are the majority. Whether under the Pahlavis or the clerics, Iran has always sought strategic, not sectarian, alliances. But since the establishment of the Islamic Republic and the policy of containment by the West and Gulf, Iran has had few partners to choose from.

Rather than pursue a "Shia-only" policy, Iran has also sought partnerships with countries and actors that both share its hostility to what it perceives as a Western-backed regional order and its own perceptions of security threats. This orientation accounts for its support of Sunnite Hamas well as Shiite Hezbollah and of the secular Baathist Alawite regime of Assad. The closeness of Baghdad and Tehran is not simply about building a relationship with the second-largest Shia-majority country – after all, in the Iran-Iraq war, Iraqis were perfectly willing to kill their fellow Shias in Iran and vice-versa.

When it comes to Islamists more generally, in particular since the advent of the Arab Awakening, Tehran's positions follow from the twin considerations outlined above. Though Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei initially heralded the uprisings as a triumph for revolutionary Islamism, Tehran's responses have been decidedly mixed. For example, whereas there was a brief attempt at a rapprochement with Egypt during the short-lived Morsi administration (a move that alarmed much of the Gulf), Tehran has been noticeably lukewarm to Ennahda in Tunisia and flatly dismissive of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. In Bahrain, where Iran could have been more interventionist in making common cause with Shiite communities, it has been more muted. But as tensions and conflicts elsewhere become increasingly divided on sectarian lines, Iran will find itself more and more constrained in its ability to build relationships with non-Shia groups.

## Breaking the sectarian cycle

The conscious exploitation of sectarian policies and discourse, which in turn strengthens sectarianism, is likely to be a feature of Middle Eastern politics for years to come as key governments and private citizens channel financial support to groups who espouse an avowedly sectarian agenda. Once such vectors of conflict are set in motion, they become very difficult to quash; those communities targeted now have a legitimate grievance against the groups that target them. Syria is the latest sectarian crucible not because Shias, Sunnis, Alawis, Christians and others can only manage to settle their differences violently, but because some groups are actively encouraged, inculcated and funded to do so on both sides. This cycle of grievance and vengeance continues to play out in Iraq and threatens to pull Lebanon into a similar downward spiral.

Breaking this cycle demands a complex, generational transformation in the Middle East, but ensuring the protection and fair political representation of minority groups will be a necessary first step. Insofar as policymakers in Europe and elsewhere have a role to play, it is in reassessing the approaches in other countries that deliberately or unconsciously align them with the Arab Gulf states against Iran, whether in Bahrain, Syria, Yemen or Iraq and in encouraging any prospect of a thaw in Saudi-Iranian relations. As so much of the region's wider instability is a product of this divide, any effort to bridge political divide in the Gulf will help diminish sectarian tensions more generally. Such a shift will come in small and incremental stages, but exploiting the opening offered by Rouhani's election and building on prior Saudi willingness for engagement as the potential resolution of the decades-long standoff between with Iran over its nuclear programme could be a start.

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# Saudi Arabia: cultivating sectarian spaces

Andrew Hammond

Sectarianism has long underpinned Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policy, and it has proved to be a particularly effective tool in the government's management of the Arab Awakening, the movement of protest and revolt that began in Tunisia in December 2010. Saudi Arabia deployed a sectarian narrative to describe the 2011 uprising in Bahrain, calling it an Iranian-backed movement of Shia empowerment that aimed to disenfranchise Sunnis, the "rightful" Islamic centre of which Riyadh sees itself as champion. Saudi Arabia readily applied this framework to the conflict in Syria as it developed later that same year: the government characterised it as a battle in which a majority Sunni population has had to defend itself from an alignment of deviant Islamic schools and ideologies that aim to subjugate Sunnis – an easy sell considering that Shia powers and actors, specifically Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria's own Alawi community, have been the most prominent supporters of President Bashar al-Assad.

The promotion of Salafism has also been an effective strategy to counter other forms of Sunni political Islam. It was especially critical as Islamist groups linked to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood came to power in Tunisia and Egypt, which in turn emboldened the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip. Saudi Arabia uses a formidable variety of means to promote Salafism, including political, military, and financial means, as well as the media. The discourse disseminated through these means filters down throughout society and across political lines to influence, to varying degrees, the thinking of liberals, Arab nationalists, leftists, and others, as well as the public arena in the Gulf and beyond.

Recent months have witnessed key developments: after Hezbollah publically declared in April and May that its members were fighting in Syria with Assad's forces, anti-Shia sectarianism spiked, but with the military coup against President Mohammed Morsi and Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt, the rhetoric receded as the Saudi regime shifted its focus to an assault on the ideas of Sunni political Islam, which, in the Saudi-Wahhabi telling, is a parvenu deviation from the classic Sunni sharia state as replicated in Saudi Arabia.

## The evolution of sectarianism in Saudi Arabia

Political power in the modern Saudi state is based on two pillars: the right of the Saudi family (al-Saud) to rule and the orthodoxy of Wahhabi Islam. Sectarianism of an ideological nature is an entrenched element of Wahhabi thought, which deems the practices and ideas of a range of Islamic legal schools and communities as deviations from devotion to the oneness of God. Particular animus has been reserved historically for Muslims within the immediate range of the Saudi-Wahhabi heartland in the Najd, especially Shias who remain the most numerous "other" who are resistant to orthodoxy. Wahhabi zealots sacked the Shia holy city of Karbala in Iraq in 1802, for example, and later, during the conquest of the Hejaz in 1924-1925, even murdered hundreds of Sunnis deemed heretics in the Ta'if area. Notably, while the founder of the modern Saudi state, Abdulaziz, restrained the Wahhabi establishment from warring on the Shias who dominated in the Qatif and al-Hasa oases – in what became the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia when they fell to Saudi control in 1913 – the Twelver Shia in the Eastern Province and Ismaili Shia in Najran in the south have long been easy targets for the clerics of Wahhabism.

Additionally, the emergence of Iran as a political power based on a novel, expansionist, and emancipatory theory of Shia governance from 1979 onwards created impetus for a form of political sectarianism, as King Abdulaziz began to view Shias in the Gulf as a possible fifth column for Saudi Arabia's rival Iran. But in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Saudi Arabia started to moderate both elements of this sectarianism: the government began a rapprochement with Iran, and a reformist camp within the ruling clique, led by then Crown Prince Abdullah, sought to reduce Wahhabi extremism in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks against the United States.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003, however, changed everything: it allowed Shia Islamists in Iraq to come to power via the ballot box and align the country with Iran, causing a seismic shift in regional geopolitics.[2] Invigorated by such an unexpected gift, Iran engaged in a new wave of expansionism as a political and military backer of the Syrian government, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza. This has led to a decade of conflict in the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which has often been referred to, appropriately, as a new Cold War in which each side – one intimately allied with Western powers, the other vigorously challenging them – identifies, creates, and activates proxies like chess pieces around the region. Since 2003, the Wahhabi view of Shiism as being outside Islam has found resonance beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia. Accompanying this development has been a shift in the language often used to refer to Shias: long labelled *'ajam* (non-Arab, Persian) to indicate their "outsider"status, they are now being described as *raafida*, or rejectionists.[3]

2 Fanar Haddad, "The Language of Anti-Shi'ism" *Foreign Policy*, 9 August 2013, available at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/08/09/the_language_of_anti_shiism.

3 Drama has become an arena for the sectarian tussle. Shown in July and August of this year, the TV series, *Omar*, about the second caliph, promoted the Sunni view that he was a model caliph, directly challenging the Shia belief that the first three caliphs were usurpers of the right to rule of the fourth, Ali. Egyptian Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, and Saudi Sheikh Salman al-Odah, a senior figure in the same organisation, approved the show in advance; Qatar funded it and the Saudi channel, MBC1, broadcast it. "Raafida" literally means rejectionist, a derogatory term used to describe Shias. It refers to a specific time in Shia Islam's history when, according to the most common narrative, followers rejected the teachings of Zayd bin Ali, the grandson of Hussayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet.

## Hezbollah declares the fight in Syria

Over three speeches in 2013, on 30 April, 9 May, and 25 May, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah justified the movement's support of Assad in Syria and explained why Hezbollah members were fighting against the Syrian opposition in al-Qusayr, a fight that the Saudi-backed rebels eventually lost. Avoiding direct mention of Saudi Arabia, Nasrallah said that he was fighting the spread of Salafi jihadists – terming them *takfiris*, or Muslims who denounce other Muslims as apostates – who are tools in the hands of Western powers plotting to destroy "the resistance", an array of anti-Israeli forces against the hegemony of the West and its regional allies.[4]

Nasrallah's comments unleashed a wave of sectarian mobilisation in the Gulf, especially from both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as reflected in their leading pan-Arab media outlets, Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera, local Islamist TV stations, more so in Saudi Arabia, internet forums, newspapers, seminars and conferences, as well as in their political actions.[5] Salafi groups, either based in Lebanon or Syria, were seen as the likely culprits behind two bomb attacks (claimed by a group calling itself the Aisha Brigade, a name that signals opposition to Shiism) in south Beirut in July and August 2013 with the apparent aim of killing Shias for the sake of being Shia (rather than focusing on specific Hezbollah targets), constituting an Iraq-style escalation in Lebanon's post-civil war history of political violence. The second bomb killed at least 18 people and appeared to be the provocation behind two car bombs in the Sunni city of Tripoli a week later that killed 42 people.[6]

The sectarian response manifested inside and outside of Saudi Arabia at the level of public debate. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, a Brotherhood-linked cleric who has been based in Qatar for many years and appears regularly on Al Jazeera, began to call on Sunni Muslims around the world to head to Syria for jihad against Assad's regime. "Iran is pushing forward arms and men, so why do we stand idle? Now we know what the Iranians want [...]. They want continued massacres to kill Sunnis", he said after Friday prayers in Doha.[7]

In a second intervention, al-Qaradawi issued a *mea culpa* over Hezbollah, telling Saudi Arabia's Al Arabiya that Wahhabism had been right and he had been wrong in defending Hezbollah in 2006 when Saudi clerics vilified the movement's war with Israel as the posturing of Shia infidels with an anti-Sunni Iranian agenda. "It turned out I was deceived and the kingdom's scholars were more mature than I was when it comes to the reality of this party", he said in June 2013.[8] The decision to give an interview to Al Arabiya was notable in itself – al-Qaradawi is given a regular pulpit to address Arabs across the region on Qatar's Al Jazeera satellite news channel – and was indicative of Saudi and Qatari alignment in the manipulation of sectarian themes.

In the same month, he used an appearance on Al Jazeera to launch a strikingly direct attack on Assad's religious community, the Alawis, employing the kind of language used by Salafis like Saudi-based Syrian Sheikh Adnan al-Aroor.[9] "Alawis don't pray and they don't fast, and even if they did pray they don't have mosques to do it in", al-Qaradawi said. "What's worse, Assad isn't even religious, he's secular; he doesn't believe at all", he added. Al-Qaradawi also ridiculed the Twelver Shia doctrine on the disappeared Mahdi, the 12th imam whose absence has played a key role in Shia community and political organisation, and he argued that Shias were flocking to Syria on the basis of "'*asabiyya ta'ifiyya*", or zealous sectarian partisanship.[10]

Al-Qaradawi's call was arresting because he is a respected religious scholar, seen as reflective of a Sunni Muslim mainstream outside the orbit of Saudi Wahhabism who was depicting the Syrian conflict in such stark sectarian terms; in this, he was ceding ground to Wahhabi sectarianism. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, taunted al-Qaradawi, viewed with disdain in Saudi official circles for his Brotherhood connections, for revising his previous position. Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist close to royal circles, particularly former intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal, called on al-Qaradawi to renounce fatwas issued since the mid-1990s supporting suicide bombings against Israelis whose application had been extended by others to justify al-Qaeda operations against the Saudi regime.[11] Al-Qaradawi should show "proper spiritual leadership" by adopting the positions of former Saudi mufti Abdulaziz Bin Baz rejecting the suicide bomb, Khashoggi said.[12]

4 "Nasrallah expressed concern over the safety of the Shia shrine of Zainab in Damascus, but did not use sectarian language.

5 The Gulf Cooperation Council announced measures to combat Hezbollah influence in the Gulf, declaring it a "terrorist organisation"; Bahrain announced its own measures, raising fears of a new round of expulsions of Lebanese after dozens were forced out following the uprising in 2011. See Habib Toumi, "Bahrain to probe Hezbollah activities", *Gulf News*, 5 June 2013, available at http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-to-probe-hezbollah-activities-1.1193238.

6 Saudi government links to such groups are nebulous and hard to pin down. Some groups fighting in Syria, such as the Farouq Brigades and Tawheed Brigades, have received unofficial aid from Saudi citizens; Intelligence Chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan managed co-ordination with rebel groups via Turkey and, according to news reports, shifted focus this year to organising activities via Jordan.

7 "Top Muslim cleric Al-Qaradawi urges Sunnis to join Syria war", *Al Ahram*, 1 June 2013, available at http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/72857/Egypt/Politics-/Top-Muslim-cleric-AlQaradawi-urges-Sunnis-to-join-.aspx.

8 "Sheikh Qaradawi makes U-turn, says Hezbollah is 'party of Satan'", *Al Arabiya*, 9 June 2013, available at http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/06/09/Sheikh-Qaradawi-renews-call-for-holy-war-against-Hezbollah.html.

9 Al Jazeera engaged in Wahhabi sectarianism elsewhere, running news items about the Saudi-backed Salafi leader in Lebanon, Sheikh Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal, when he called on 5 June for Sunnis to come and fight "the Safawi project". *Safawi* is a derogatory term used to refer to Shias. Its context is the Safavid Dynasty that ruled Iran from 1501 to 1736 and was responsible for converting Iran to Shiism, so the term implies that the person it is directed at is ultimately loyal to Iran and essentially a heretic in its strongest connotation. It could be argued as falling somewhere between *'ajam* (non-Arab/Iranian) and *raafida* (literally meaning rejectionist, a derogatory term used to describe Shias. It refers to a specific time in Shia Islam's history when, according to the most common narrative, followers rejected the teachings of Zayd bin Ali, the grandson of Hussayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet), hinting at both at ethnic and theological sectarianism.

10 Transcript available at http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/75d0fb00-186b-48c5-b84c-66fe7552312c.

11 Jamal Khashoggi, "What will be Sheikh Qaradawi's next bold move?" Al Arabiya, 30 June 2013, available at http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2013/06/30/What-will-be-Sheikh-Qaradawi-s-next-bold-move-.html.

12 Fatin Aman, "Qaradawi has passed his sell-by date" (in Arabic), *Elaph*, 10 July 2013, available at http://www.elaphjournal.com/Web/opinion/2013/7/823090.html.

## Perceptions of Saudi Arabia's Shias

Another widely circulated article by Khashoggi – who presents himself as a Saudi liberal – demonstrated how the sectarian nature of the Syrian war has influenced the views of Saudi Shias.[13] Rhetorically addressing a Shia acquaintance, he argued that Salafi extremists among the Syrian rebels are a small unrepresentative group who will not affect the future of Syria once Assad is overthrown; yet, at the same time, Hezbollah and Shias in general dominate among those who support the regime. The implication was that Shias were the ones to start sectarian warfare in Syria, this year, and not Salafi Sunnis (with Gulf backing), two years ago, and Saudi Shias needed to state which side they are on. "When we look at the Shia space in our midst we are shocked to see a cohesive bloc, ready to fight and die on Bashar's side", he said, citing Iraqi and Kuwaiti Shias. "In my own country, Saudi Arabia, Shia clerics and public figures have gone quiet about what's happening in Syria [...]. I don't want to be sectarian, and I hate my growing sectarian sentiments, but you [Saudi Shias] are not helping me."[14]

A product of the tense atmosphere after Nasrallah declared his fight in Qusayr, Khashoggi's comments ran against a trend, reflected most plainly in the media, to calm tensions domestically despite continuing unrest within the kingdom itself. Protests and clashes with police broke out during the first wave of the Arab uprisings in 2011 over long-standing complaints of marginalisation and state discrimination, the only sustained protest movement in the country since then. The interior ministry's response was harsh and has remained so through the terms of three ministers in the past year: Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz, his brother, Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, and, since November 2012, his son, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. At least 20 people have died, including 11 since he took over; security forces regularly stage house raids in search of men on a list of 23 Shias wanted over the unrest; Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr went on trial in March 2013 on charges of "sowing discord" and "undermining national unity" after he was shot in a car chase with police last year; and, also in March, the ministry claimed that it had uncovered an Iranian spy ring.

But earlier this year the interior ministry instructed Saudi media to avoid singling out Saudi Shias when discussing political issues involving Iran and Syria.[15] Two key appointments in the past year, governor of the Eastern Province, Prince Saud bin Nayef, and governor of the Qatif sub-region, Khaled al-Sufayan, were also welcomed by Shia community leaders who have acted as a conduit for dialogue with the authorities. In an apparent effort to prevent protests spreading from Qatif to al-Hasa, minister of the National Guard, Prince Mut'ib bin Abdullah, made conciliatory comments during a visit to the oasis last year.[16] Though there have been no formal talks between Shia community leaders and the authorities in Riyadh since 2011, there have been meetings with al-Sufayan since his appointment; the Shia community views the al-Hasa governor, Badr bin Jalawi, however, as a deeply sectarian figure. These ebbs and flows in sectarian approaches are typical of Riyadh's relationship with its Shia citizens and do not affect underlying sectarianism. In the view of Saudi Islamist thinker Mohammed al-Ahmari, "the level of sectarian language is different from six months ago – it's less, but that doesn't mean it's not there".[17]

## Attention shifts to the Muslim Brotherhood

With the Egyptian military's removal of the Brotherhood government of Mohammed Morsi in July this year, Saudi Arabia shifted its attention towards Egypt, supporting defence minister Abdulfattah al-Sisi and attacking the Islamists. Political Islam is a threat to Saudi Arabia because it represents an alternative Islamic model based on electoral politics. The contrast between the Brotherhood's Islamist project and the Islamic model of Saudi Arabia is stark. In Saudi Arabia, the class of religious scholars (*ulama*) oversee sharia courts, leaving the ruler to take care of the day-to-day business of running the state and sovereign issues of foreign policy in particular. While Islamist parties are in power in Tunisia and Gaza, it is the Brotherhood in Egypt that presents the biggest threat because of Egypt's size, proximity, and position as a political and cultural motor for the Arab region, as well as the sheer numbers of Egyptians who live in Saudi Arabia or are regular visitors on pilgrimage.

One key element of Saudi Arabia's response to the rise of the Brotherhood has been the promotion of Salafi parties, a relatively new phenomenon in Egypt.[18] Mainly represented through the Nour party and charities linked to the party that have received Saudi money, Salafis have checked the Brotherhood's advance as the most powerful force in Islamic politics and presented critical obstacles to the Brotherhood's efforts to open up to Iran after Morsi won presidential elections in 2012. Morsi's decision early on as president to attend an Organisation of Islamic Cooperation meeting in Tehran raised the possibility that one of the Saudi leadership's worst fears was about to be realised. But for every two steps forward with Iran, Morsi always appeared to take one step back as he tried to balance conflicting interests – during the

**13** Jamal Khashoggi, "I don't want to be sectarian, but you're not helping me" (in Arabic), *Al Hayat*, 22 June 2013, available at http://www.hattpost.com/?p=36371.

**14** Widely circulated, the article prompted a public response from Shia writer Tawfiq Alsaif: "What reasonable person hinges relations with his fellow countrymen on a question of foreign policy, no matter how important the issue is? Who would treat matters as serious as national unity and social peace in such a blithe manner?" See "Be sectarian or be whoever you want to be but don't sacrifice your homeland" (in Arabic), *al-Eqtisadiah*, 25 June 2013, available at http://www.aleqt.com/2013/06/25/article_765499.html (hereafter, Alsaif, "Be sectarian or be whoever you want to be but don't sacrifice your homeland").

**15** According to Tawfiq Alsaif, "There is a minor change from attacking Shia per se to attacking Iran and Hezbollah in particular. There were instructions that Saudi Shia shouldn't be involved in this." See Alsaif, "Be sectarian or be whoever you want to be but don't sacrifice your homeland").

**16** A "There's an intention to open a new page", said Jafar al-Shayeb, elected member of Qatif municipal council. See Hassan al-Baqshi, "Mut'ib bin Abdullah: there are some trying to put a wedge between Sunni and Shia" (in Arabic), *Al Hayat*, 10 July 2012, available at http://alhayat.com/Details/417413.

**17** Interview with author, August 2013.

**18** Khashoggi appeared to indicate Saudi hopes of an Egyptian government with a significant Salafi make-up in a column published on 20 July: "The 'spring' has ended, but democracy and political Islam will remain" (in Arabic), *Al Hayat*, available at http://alhayat.com/OpinionsDetails/534186.

Iran trip, for example, he conspicuously avoided a one-on-one meeting with then-president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

In March and April of this year, the situation became critical, from Saudi Arabia's perspective, when the Morsi government pushed forward with concrete measures to improve Egypt's relationship with Iran. The first commercial flight in 34 years from Cairo to Tehran took off, and some 50 Iranian tourists arrived in Aswan, visiting landmarks amid tight security. Fearful that Iranian tourists would take on the character of pilgrims visiting Shia historical sites, particularly those in Cairo from the Fatimid era, and that this would facilitate the spread of Shiism, Salafis staged violent protests outside the residence of Iran's *charge d'affaires* in Cairo. The protesters shouted slogans like "Jihad against Shia and Hezbollah" and "Morsi, you promised us sharia, not Shias" and daubed graffiti on the walls outside his home such as the "Muslim Brotherhood sold us to Iran".[19]

## Salafis convene in Cairo with Saudi support

Saudi Arabia wants Salafism to operate within specific boundaries, however, and Saudi and Egyptian clerics breached them at a week-long conference in Cairo in mid-June 2013 to support the Syrian opposition (in an apparent Brotherhood bid to win Salafi support ahead of the mass protest planned for 30 June).[20] At a speech before tens of thousands of people at Cairo International Stadium on 15 June, Morsi announced new policies towards Syria, including the severance of diplomatic ties. Egyptian and Saudi clerics, including prominent figures like Mohammed al-Arifi, declared jihad in Syria; participants denounced Shias as "filthy" and "non-believers who must be killed". "In the name of these good people and in the name of the Egyptian people, I implore you not to open the pure doors of Egypt to the *raafida*," Saudi cleric Mohammed Hassan said, addressing Morsi. "I implore you, Mr. President, to take the leadership and pioneering role that is appropriate for Egypt." [21] Leading Friday prayers at the Amr Ibn al-Aas Mosque in Cairo, Arifi prayed for God to smite "Assad and the *Sawafis*", another Shia slur.[22] The implications of rising anti-Shia sentiment directed against the estimated 250,000 Syrians living in Egypt are felt elsewhere: just over a week later a mob in a village on the outskirts of Cairo murdered four Egyptian Shias.[23]

The June conference contributed to the determination among a broad swathe of anti-Islamist groups and state players in Egypt that Morsi's rule must end, which, in turn, may have put an end to recent Saudi attempts at a rapprochement with the Brotherhood – Saudi Arabia received Syrian Brotherhood members in Riyadh after it took over from Qatar earlier this year in managing the Syrian opposition, for example.[24] Crucially for Riyadh, the conference raised the alarming prospect of an alliance between Egyptian and Saudi clerics, both Salafi and Brotherhood, using Islamist-ruled Cairo as their base. The repercussions for Islamist political activism in Saudi Arabia could have been huge, and the prospect of Islamists winning out among the Syrian opposition and assuming control if Assad were to fall would also rise markedly. Consequently, Saudi state-sanctioned religious authorities have explicitly condemned the use of the term jihad for fear that those Saudis currently fighting in Syria – with the permission of the Saudi leadership – may bring their fight to the al-Saud family.[25] For these reasons, the predictable confluence of interests and potential collaboration between Salafis and the Brotherhood anywhere in the region is not something Saudi Arabia can countenance.

Saudi support for the coup against Morsi on 3 July was immediate and absolute, exposing Saudi concerns about the Islamist trend at home. It created a sharp rift between the government and a significant section of public opinion generally, as clerics, preachers, and rights activists expressed forthright opposition to the country's official positions. The government reacted with a heavy hand: authorities briefly detained preacher Mohsen al-Awaji, placed Arifi under house arrest, and cancelled the the *You Have Rights* television show, broadcast on a private Islamist channel and presented by Salman al-Odah, a prominent cleric and former political prisoner.[26] Clerical opposition to the Brotherhood stemmed, in some cases from ideological sympathy with the Islamist movement and its democratic modus operandi and in others from a general sense that, despite Wahhabi reservations over electoral politics, Islamists were nevertheless creating in Egypt a more Islamic state.[27]

Encouraged by the coup in Egypt, the Saudi government moved to directly challenge the claims of political Islam. King Abdullah expressed "pride and appreciation to citizens of the nations generally for the deep religious and patriotic sense they had shown, and understanding and general

19 "Salafis write obscene phrases on the home of the Iranian *charge d'affaires* [in Egypt], and a Salafi curses Morsi" (in Arabic), 5 April 2013, Tahrir News, available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vN7FDMUOQSo&feature=player_embedded.

20 Though Nour, observing Saudi red lines, did not attend. At the same time, it flouted Wahhabi principles of obedience to the legitimate ruler by backing the army in ousting Morsi.

21 "A fiery speech by Sheikh Mohammed Hassan – to support the Syrian revolution" (in Arabic), Egypt TV News, 15 June 2013, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCDa1qlJH-Y.

22 "Raafida" literally means rejectionist, a derogatory term used to describe Shias. It refers to a specific time in Shia Islam's history when, according to the most common narrative, followers rejected the teachings of Zayd bin Ali, the grandson of Hussayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet. See also "Breaking News: al-Arifi announces jihad against Shias in Syria" (in Arabic), Al Kufi, 14 June 2013, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-VSURH-Ffk.

23 Some observers suspect that the Saudi clerics were being used by the Saudi government, which knew that their rhetoric in Cairo would be incendiary and help turn the military and the public further against Morsi.

24 Tawfiq Alsaif said, "That conference made the Saudi government change direction. Before it there were discussions in upper circles about possible reconciliation with the Brotherhood [...]. The government feared that some clerics, Salafis, and Brotherhood were about to form a political alliance, making use of Cairo as a stronghold." See Alsaif, "Be sectarian or be whoever you want to be but don't sacrifice your homeland".

25 Reese Erlich, "Saudi youth fighting against Assad regime in Syria", *GlobalPost*, 13 March 2013, available at http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/saudi-arabia/130312/saudi-youth-fighting-assad-regime-syria.

26 Al-Odah wrote on Twitter: "The murderous coup-plotters have shown what remains of their nefariousness. They will bear the consequences of the depravity they have practiced and they will be held accountable in this world before the next". See "Al-Odah attacks the murderers and al-Arifi condemns their arrogance" CNN Arabic, 15 August 2013, available at http://arabic.cnn.com/2013/middle_east/8/14/oudah.orifi-egypt/index.html.

27 A demonstration of this schism was a fight that broke out in one Riyadh mosque over the coup: "Fight erupts in Saudi mosque after cleric blasts Egypt's General Sisi", Al Arabiya, 24 August 2013, available at http://t.co/ISXp7eJXfA.

social awareness regarding the events, changes, and hateful ideological and party political pulls on the country and the Arab nation." Saudi Islamic values were "free from the partisanship and loyalty to anything other than our Islamic religion", he added.[28] In a similar vein, Abdulrahman al-Sudais, imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, said that some had "taken Islam and given it borrowed names, hiding behind ideological terrorism and deviant knowledge". "The sensible people among those of faith would wonder at those who twist the words of God according to partisan pathologies, party whims, and interests with agendas and subjugation", he went on to say.[29] The positions of both men provoked popular hash tags on Twitter, declaring that they "do not represent me".

## Preserving sectarianism to pre-empt threats

Keeping Sunni and Shia reform activists apart, locked in their regime-prescribed sectarian spaces, is one of the key strategies of Saudi's management of the Arab uprisings, thereby preventing the formation of a large-scale movement demanding political change via the street.[30] Regional events this year necessitated a sharp swing from Shiism to Sunni political Islam as the target of Saudi state sectarianism, typical of the short-term ad-hoc approach that tends to characterise Saudi policy.[31] It remains to be seen if this shift will come to dominate regime discourse at the expense of familiar Shia concerns in the coming period and indeed whether a wider strategy of attacking both Sunni and Shia Islamism simultaneously is either possible or sustainable. The litmus test is whether Shia unrest remains contained and Sunni protests in Riyadh fail to kick off over the situation in Egypt, which is likely to be the case without encouragement from influential clerics.

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**28** "Minister of Interior delivers the greetings of the Custodian of the two Holy Mosques to the citizens" (in Arabic), *al-Riyadh*, 21 August 2013, available at http://www.alriyadh.com/net/article/861285.

**29** "The importance of unity among Muslims", Speech by Abdul Rahman al-Sudais at the Sacred Mosque, Mecca, 23 August 2013, available at http://www.alminbar.net/alkhutab/khutbaa.asp?mediaURL=10803.

**30** The prosecution of democracy activists continued. Raif Badawi, founder of the Free Saudi Liberals website, was found guilty in June this year of insulting Islam through his online forum. He was sentenced to 600 lashes and seven years in prison. In the same month, seven others were sentenced to six to ten years in prison, each for "inciting protests" via Facebook. See "Saudi Arabia: 7 Convicted for Facebook Postings About Protests", Human Rights Watch, 30 June 2013, available at http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/29/saudi-arabia-7-convicted-facebook-postings-about-protests. And in July, Prince Khaled bin Farhan al-Saud, a minor figure in the ruling family, announced his "defection" to the camp to Islamist dissident Saad al-Fagih in London, citing political repression and corruption.

**31** Neil Partrick, "Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Discreet Persuasion?", *The World Today*, Volume 64, Number 7, 1 July 2008, available at http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/archive/view/167847.

# Qatar: blowback for brinksmanship

*Hassan Hassan*

Qatar is historically one of the least sectarian countries in the Middle East. Shia citizens make up around 10 percent of the rich Arab Gulf emirate's population of 230,000 and are fully integrated. It is extremely difficult to distinguish Shia citizens from their Sunni compatriots, as the former hold high positions in government and the private sector.[32] Notwithstanding such relative cohesion, the country's financial, political, and media advocates have nonetheless managed to inflame sectarian tensions in the Middle East since the outbreak of popular revolts in 2011 and particularly after the Syrian uprising. Consequently, sectarianism has found its way into the country, and fears are emerging that the social dynamics in Qatar are quietly changing. Recent indications suggest that the country's leaders, having noticed rising sectarian tensions within Qatari society, are taking steps to rein in the two most vocal inciters of sectarianism in Qatar and perhaps the region at large: Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the famous Egyptian religious cleric who holds Qatari citizenship, and Al Jazeera (especially its Arabic language service).

## An era of regional alliances

Qatar's support of sectarian forces does not necessarily mean that the leadership thinks strategically in sectarian terms. In 2006, after Qatar's former emir, Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, made a historic visit to Lebanon following the Israeli-Hezbollah war, Shia forces inside Lebanon hailed him as the "sheikh of resistance" and "the owner of the land, not its guest"; and in a show of gratitude, they offered him symbolic keys to Lebanon. A similar tone towards the emir was reflected in Iran, Syria, and Iraq, leading to warmer relations between these countries and Doha. The visit was indeed historic as it marked a breakaway from an established regional sectarian order – with Iran, Hezbollah, Syria, and Iraq on one side, and Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and other Gulf states on the other.

The decision to support sectarian forces once the so-called Arab Spring got underway came as part of Doha's attempt to establish influence with emerging grassroots powers, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and Egypt, as well as its effort to achieve geopolitical goals, particularly in its own neighbourhood, such as supporting the Bahraini government in the wake of the Arab Awakening. Though Qatar seeks new alliances in the wider region, the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council are increasingly acting in tandem when

**32** Michael Stephens, "Ashura in Qatar", Open Democracy, 26 November 2012, available at http://testing.opendemocracy.net/michael-stephens/ashura-in-qatar.

responding to domestic political and security challenges. If the inconsistency of supporting some uprisings and not others do not emanate from sectarian thinking or an attempt to tap into religious sentiments to win influence, like in Iran and Saudi Arabia, how did Qatar come to be a major exporter of sectarianism? An examination of the role of media and clerics inside Qatar in the context of the ongoing protests in Bahrain and uprising in Syria can begin to provide an answer.

## Sunni-Shia dynamics within Qatar

Qatar's Shia community comprises around 45 main clans divided evenly between two groups: the first comprised of the *baharna* (believed to come originally from Bahrain) and the ahsa (originally from al-Hasa oasis in Saudi Arabia), and the second of *ajam*, literally meaning non-Arab, but in this case referring to those believed to be originally from Iran. Shias have enjoyed freedom of worship in Qatar for decades and they have their own mosques, halls for religious ceremonies (*hussainias*), and even Jaafari courts (Shia religious courts, which are often a popular demand among Shia minorities in the Arab world). The largest mosque in Qatar was in fact Shia until 2011 when the emir inaugurated the state-funded Salafi Mohammed bin Abdulwahab Mosque.[33]

Additionally, Shias in Qatar tend to follow the teachings of Iraq's grand ayatollah, Ali al-Sistani, who belongs to the traditional Najaf "samita" Hawza, or conciliatory Shia seminary that opposes political activism in favour of traditional Shia scholarship, unlike Iran's Qom Hawza, which is more revolutionary and politically active. The Najaf Hawza is the oldest in the world and is highly revered by Shias, but it has been eclipsed by the rise of the Qom Hawza that followed the Iranian Revolution, which coincided with Saddam Hussain's suppression of Shia seminaries in Najaf. The Najaf Hawza rejects the principle of *vilayat e faqih* – propagated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and subsequently the Qom Hawza – that allows clerics to have power as guardians of the people until the return of the Mahdi, the 12th and final imam expected to reappear at the end of time.

Shias and Sunnis have lived side by side in Qatar in relative harmony. But although Qatar has so far been spared the popular protests sweeping the region – which have tended to exacerbate social divisions as can be seen in Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Tunisia – Qatari society has increasingly divided along sectarian lines as different groups support different sides in Syria, Bahrain, and elsewhere. According to informed sources in Qatar, for example, when Shias in Bahrain protested and then clashed with authorities there, members of the Qatari Shia community met to discuss how to respond to the violence.[34] Though publicly impassive, Qatar's Shias eventually decided to provide financial aid to help affected families rather than directly involve themselves in the conflict. Even so, the sharp regional polarisation due to worsening conditions in Bahrain and Syria have caused minor but steadily rising sectarian tensions to surface on social media platforms and in private forums.

Wahhabi Muslims have played a significant role in stoking these tensions. Wahhabis adhere to a puritan strand of Salafi Islam, founded by Mohammed bin Abdulwahab in the 18th century in the Arabian Peninsula; Abdulwahab's alliance with the al-Saud family helped establish the first Saudi state, and Qatar itself has embraced this brand of Islam. As puritans, Wahhabis tend to view Shias with suspicion and consider their rituals and doctrine as heretics. In Qatar, they have long controlled the Ministry of Endowment, which is responsible for managing mosques and other religious institutions. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Qatar is not involved in evangelism (*da'wa*) abroad and the state has pushed the boundaries of the conservative religious establishment in its effort to liberalise Qatar. But the dominance of Wahhabis, while notionally under the control of the state, has had significant implications for the Shia-Sunni relationship in Qatar.

The Wahhabi control of mosques and the Ministry of Endowment means that their sectarian discourse, even if it is directed at Shias fighting Sunnis in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, will trickle down to Shia Qataris. Also, mosques in Qatar are not extensively regulated in terms of content, allowing extremists to deliver sectarian sermons with impunity.[35] At the same time, privileges given to Salafi clerics, like building for them the largest mosque in Qatar or issuing restrictive laws, are often made to appease them as the country opens up – rather than signifying the Qatari leadership's embrace of Wahhabism as some have claimed. Taken together, it has become more and more difficult to contain hostile religious discourse.

Sectarian rhetoric on the part of Sunnis in general is largely to blame, leading to a feeling among Shia citizens that their Arab identity and Qatari loyalty are constantly questioned. Some Sunnis perceive Qatari Shias as sympathisers with the Alawi regime in Syria and Bahraini Shias as hirelings of Iran. Shia citizens are often described as *safawi*, from the Safavid Dynasty that ruled Iran from 1501 to 1736, which Salafis habitually blame for converting Iran into a Shia state.[36] Using this term to describe Shias today suggests that Arab Shias are mere Iranian lackeys who pledge loyalty to Persian culture rather than true Islam. Shias look around and see that their co-religionists in other Arab countries are being viewed suspiciously, persecuted, or politically and economically isolated by their own governments. This only adds to their anxiety and paranoia, increasing tensions.
It is also fair to say that many Shias have taken sides with

33 Mohammad Shoeb, "Emir inaugurates Qatar's biggest mosque", *The Peninsula*, 16 December 2011, available at http://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/qatar/176080-emir-inaugurates-qatars-biggest-mosque.html.
34 Author interview with Qatari sources in Doha, August 2013.
35 Hassan Hassan, "Reforms needed to curb extremism spread at the pulpit", *The National*, 25 October 2012, available at http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/reforms-needed-to-curb-extremism-spread-at-the-pulpit.
36 Dore Gold, "The Arab world fears the 'Safavid'", Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 9 June 2013, available at http://jcpa.org/article/the-arab-world-fears-the-safavid/ and "Under the microscope – guest Sheikh Masoud bin Bashir al-Mohammadi ... tools to prevent the expansion of the Safawi Shias" (in Arabic), Safa Satellite, available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLqOYMdjwGw.

their co-religionists. Some Qatari Shias and Shia residents of Qatar have supported the Syrian regime and provided financial support to Shias in Bahrain and Lebanon. According to an informed source, however, Gulf states have taken measures to stop such activities – Qatar expelled 25 Lebanese Shias in June as part of these measures.[37]

## The role of clergy and the media

Although Salafi Wahhabis have played a significant role in stoking sectarianism in Qatar in the pulpit and on social media, al-Qaradawi has caused the most damage. An influential cleric and close to Qatari authorities, he is highly revered in Qatari media and his sermons are aired regularly on local channels and on Al Jazeera. Al-Qaradawi, who has consistently supported the Arab uprisings from the beginning, described the protests in Bahrain as "sectarian". Though close to the government, he has largely acted independently, confident that his teachings are in line with state policy. His fiery sermons have also provoked tensions between Qatar and neighbouring Gulf states; notably, al-Qaradawi attacked the authorities in the United Arab Emirates in a Friday sermon last March (2012) following the expulsion of dozens of Syrian nationals for protesting illegally outside the Syrian Embassy in Dubai.[38]

But he struck the wrong note in Qatari society when he delivered an unequivocally and perhaps uncharacteristically sectarian sermon on 31 May this year.[39] In it, he called on all "capable Muslims" to travel to Syria to wage jihad "against Shias". He said that Alawis are "worse infidels than the Jews and Christians". On the same day, he gave another speech in which he praised Saudi clerics for being "more mature and far-sighted" than he was in judging Shias in general; he also said that he had been wrong to pursue inter-faith dialogue with Shias in Iran and Lebanon in the past. While such statements reflected the pervasive tensions due to the military intervention of Hezbollah in Syria's civil war on the side of the Alawi-dominated regime, they have had significant unintended consequences on Qatari society.

Al-Qaradawi words were particularly damaging because, in his capacity as head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (based in Qatar since 2004 and comprised of leading clerics from around the world) and in his writings and sermons, he had been long perceived as the tolerant face of Sunni Islam. He advocated for Sunni-Shia rapprochement, and in 2004, he was one of the key signatories of the "Amman Message" that recognised for the first time three Shia theological schools of thought as part of eight varying strains of Islamic theology and acknowledged that its adherents are Muslim and cannot be declared apostates.[40]

The sermon, in addition to al-Qaradawi's more recent public statements, did not sit well with Qatar's authorities. Shias in Qatar felt that the statements included them too as he did not distinguish between them and the Shia militias that were involved in the Syrian conflict. Moreover, he declared jihad from Cairo against Shias, together with a number of hardline Salafi clerics. Widely criticised as a dangerous precedent, that declaration preceded the lynching of four Shias in Egypt and the eruption of violence in Lebanon between Salafi Sunnis and Shias. It also triggered the infamous Islamist rally in June this year in which former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi took part. The rally was a controversial moment in Morsi's presidency, a rare event in which an Arab leader embraced the position of hardline clerics endorsing jihad in another Arab country.

Following this sequence of events, unconfirmed reports said that the Qatari authorities explicitly asked al-Qaradawi to curb divisive rhetoric in his sermons. Since then the sheikh has not appeared on his usual television show, his public statements have been limited to an occasional Friday sermon, and more importantly, Qatari media published a letter written by al-Qaradawi's son challenging his fatwa supporting Morsi against the Egyptian military.[41] The letter dealt a heavy blow to al-Qaradawi's authority and reverence. And the fact that Qatari media, which typically refrains from criticising al-Qaradawi, published the letter indicates that his recent statements were unwelcome.

Two other developments in Qatar suggest that is the case. In his first speech in July 2013 after he took power from his father, the new Qatari emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, spoke against sectarianism and said that Doha will not side with any religious party. Sheikh Tamim, given his military and security background, is believed to be more attentive to the country's fault lines. Also, Azmi Bishara, a Palestinian intellectual and the general director of the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies in Doha who is widely known to be close to Qatari authorities and often reflects their viewpoint, appeared on Al Jazeera to discuss the succession at length. In the interview, he rebuked Al Jazeera for its sectarian tone and called on the channel to tone down its sectarian rhetoric and bias. Bishara's statement is significant and unprecedented, suggesting that authorities have become less tolerant of sectarianism.

**37** "25 Lebanese Expats Expelled from Qatar, Mansour Denied", MTV, 19 June 2013, available at http://mtv.com.lb/en/News/214748.

**38** Mohammed Jamjoom, "Dozens of Syrian protesters lose residency permits in UAE", CNN, 28 February 2012, available at http://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/28/world/meast/uae-syria/index.html.

**39** Richard Spencer, "Muslim Brotherhood Cleric calls for Sunni jihad in Syria", *The Telegraph*, 2 June 2013, available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10094590/Muslim-Brotherhood-cleric-calls-for-Sunni-jihad-in-Syria.html.

**40** "The Amman Message", available at http://www.ammanmessage.com/.

**41** "Son disagrees with Qaradawi's fatwa to support Mursi", *The Peninsula*, 9 July 2013, available at http://thepeninsulaqatar.com/qatar/244460-son-disagrees-with-qaradawi's-fatwa-to-support-mursi.html.

## Qatar's regional rebalancing?

Sectarian tensions in Qatar are far from being irreversible and cannot be compared to divisions elsewhere in the region. There is also no evidence that Qatar adopts sectarian discourse as a strategy to bolster its standing in the region – even if it has provided support for politicians like Iraq's former vice president and Sunni, Tariq al-Hashemi, who fled the country after Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki accused him of running a sectarian death squad. Hashemi's episode can be seen through the prism of the regional opposition to al-Maliki's power grab by the Gulf states as well as by Turkey and Iraqi Kurds in the north. But whereas Saudi Arabia and others have deep reservations about the consolidation and growth of power in a Shia-dominated Iraq, Doha is more concerned with taking advantage of the popular revolts since 2011 and the changing regional dynamics. The Arab Gulf states have varying diplomatic ties and representation in Iraq, reflecting the diversity of their approaches to Baghdad. But among them, Qatar included, there is a general opposition to al-Maliki's closeness to Tehran.

Consequently, the nature of Qatar's relationship with Iran has changed over the course of the Arab uprisings, in particular owing to the differences in approach to the protests in Bahrain and Syria, but also due to its policies in Iraq in more recent years. According to one Gulf official, though Qatar has sought to maintain strong ties with Iran – as well as Russia – indirectly through Egypt during the Brotherhood-dominated presidency of Mohammed Morsi,their relationship worsened over Qatar's support for al-Hashemi against his rival al-Maliki. But after Sheikh Tamim took over and Saudi Arabia took the lead in supporting the Syrian opposition, Qatar's role in the region lessened, perhaps providing a path for improved relations.

And yet, Qatar's support of Sunni Islamists in the region has led to unintended consequences for its own society.[42] The social cohesion with which Qatar prided itself for decades is being challenged by the events in the region and by forces inside Qatar. Authorities appear to have recognised these side effects. Al Jazeera has noticeably reduced its religious tone in recent months, and al-Qaradawi has rarely made public statements in recent weeks. The question remains, however, whether this signals a new policy by Qatar to break away from its support of sectarian forces and to prevent further damage to its own society and the wider region.

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42 Michael Stephens, "Is Qatar guilty of sectarianism in Syria?", *Open Democracy*, 10 June 2013, available at http://www.opendemocracy.net/michael-stephens/is-qatar-guilty-of-sectarianism-in-syria.

# Iraq: the ongoing perils of sectarian conflict

*Hadeel Al Sayegh*

Sectarian tensions again threaten to pull Iraq into open and bloody civil conflict. The situation was very different as recently as 2009, when Shia Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki enjoyed widespread support from the nation's Sunnis after quashing a powerful Shia militia that had ignited a bloody sectarian conflict. Instead, growing conflicts on Iraq's borders and acrimonious politics have undone much of al-Maliki's cross-sect appeal. Despite an official policy of neutrality in the Syrian conflict, his own ministers have called for Shia men in Iraq to cross the border and take up arms against the Sunnis who are fighting Bashar al-Assad's Alawi regime. His government has also been accused of encouraging and abetting Iran's own involvement in support of Damascus.

The people of Iraq have come to view the wider region's troubles through a sectarian lens, with Shias blaming the Sunni monarchies of the Gulf and Sunnis finding fault with Iranian influence. Separately, al-Maliki has used the mandate of Shia "majority rule", enjoyed since elections after the US-led invasion, to push aside his Sunni political opponents, while doing nothing to roll back the de-baathification laws, widely viewed as excessive and abusive, that purged many Sunnis from power. This growing marginalisation of Sunnis, along with the deteriorating security situation across Iraq's borders, has again opened the door for extremist groups to promote violence as a means of political pushback. Coupled with growing economic challenges, which are exacerbated by a near-boycott of investment from Sunni Gulf states, Iraq's political trajectory is deeply troubling.[43]

## Renewed Sunni protests

In 2009, al-Maliki had reached the pinnacle of his political career. The Shia premier was seen as an Arab nationalist who had successfully persuaded his Sunni counterparts to put their faith in the political process. He had quashed a powerful Shia militia that had ignited a bloody sectarian war, earning him the position of a "national hero" among Sunnis. But today, al-Maliki's sectarian politics are undermining an already-fragile national unity. He has pushed out his rivals using the country's controversial counterterrorism law and resisted the incorporation of Sunnis into the security forces. Iraqi voters, however, have since challenged his policies at the ballot box: al-Maliki's State of Law coalition was passed over in the latest provincial elections in favour of previously unpopular rival factions such as the Iran-backed Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq and the Sadrists.[44]

43 The dinar has lost its value against the dollar in the secondary market, commercial activity has slowed since the outbreak of the recent surge in violence, and the majority of oil revenues go towards paying salaries of public servants and subsidies.

44 Nouri a-Maliki's State of Law Alliance came in first place but was unable to attain a majority in any of the provinces. It won a total of 102 seats in 2013, compared to 154 seats in 2009. See Ahmed Ali, "Iraqi Provincial Election Results: Final but not Decisive", Institute for the Study of War, 11 May 2013, available at http://iswiraq.blogspot.ae/2013/05/iraq-update-19-iraqi-2013-provincial.html. Due to the State of Law's inability to fulfil promises, Shias have looked to alternative parties that promise to curb corruption and improve security.

Meanwhile, protestors have taken to the streets in Anbar, Diyala, and Salaheddin, provinces with large Arab Sunni populations, to demand reforms that would put them on equal footing with their Shia compatriots. Among the most pressing demands are the abrogation of Article 4 of the counterterrorism law, in which a person can be imprisoned on accusations of terrorism without evidence or trial; the release of female prisoners held without charge – a common tactic used by the government to pressure the male relatives of these women who have been accused of committing a crime; and the release of prisoners held without charge and those who have served their term but remain in detention.[45] The failure of the Shia-led government to introduce genuine reforms has undermined domestic support for political engagement with Iraq's Sunnis and instigated a spate of violent attacks on Shia neighbourhoods across Iraq.

## The threat of destabilisation from Syria

Since 2011, the Sunni-led political uprising in Syria calling for the removal of President Bashar al-Assad has been met with alarm by Iraq's own Shia leadership, which for the last decade has controlled the levers of power after centuries of disenfranchisement. The ongoing protests in Iraq's Sunni-majority regions bordering Syria further threaten this fragile Shia dominance. While al-Maliki insists that Iraq has adopted a neutral position on Syria's sectarian war and engages with both Syria's Alawi regime and the opposition, the country has come under scrutiny for allowing Iranian planes carrying weapons to Damascus to fly over its territory, for securing bilateral trade agreements with the Assad regime, for sending US dollars to Syria in a bid prop up the country's depleted foreign reserves, and lastly for failing to prevent Iraqi militia members belonging to Iranian proxy groups, like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, from fighting in Syria.[46] Likewise, the zero-sum position of neighbouring states and the Arab League do not allow for neutrality, as they consider a lack of support for the opposition as support for the Assad regime.

Iraq's support for Damascus was made clearer after a powerful minister said that Iraq was ready to send men to Damascus in the event that a revered Shia shrine comes under attack again. "If another attack against Shias takes place similar to that of Deir al-Zor, or against the shrine of Sayyeda Zeinab, [...] thousands of Shia men will go to fight alongside the regime and against al-Qaeda and whoever backs al-Qaeda", said Hadi al-Amri, transportation minister and head of the Iran-backed Badr Organisation, whose members have infiltrated Iraq's security forces.[47] Close parallels are already emerging between Sunni militias in Iraq and those in Syria, with the names of groups and personnel in both countries virtually indistinguishable. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Levantine wing of al-Qaeda, has become a counterweight to Shia militants. The rise of these groups has turned the two countries into one battleground and ignited flames of sectarianism that has not been seen since the height of Iraq's civil war from 2006 to 2008.

The phenomenon of Shia jihadism is fairly new to regional politics and exists against the will of the clergy in Najaf. One of the two major seminaries in Shia Islam, Najaf has long insisted that religious clerics should not be directly involved in politics. This policy has helped the seminary, known as the hawza, to survive the most challenging of circumstances. It has also put Najaf at odds with its rival in the Iranian city of Qom, which is seen acting as a religious arm of the regime to exert broader influence in the region.[48] A fatwa issued by Qom's Ayatollah Seyyed Kazem Haeri earlier this year, for example, authorised jihad against Salafi groups in Syria to protect the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, located in the suburbs outside of Damascus. Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammed Sadegh Rouhani, another prominent Qom-based clergyman, also authorised jihad in Syria and dubbed fighters killed as "martyrs".[49]

The head of the Najaf Hawza, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, whose followers comprise about 60 percent of Iraq's Shia population, has remained aloof for fear of tainting the image of the hawza should controversy erupt. Today, the conciliatory stance of Najaf's clergy has been overshadowed by the fact that Shia militias are fighting against their Sunni counterparts in Iraq and Syria. Over the last nine months banners have been hung in Baghdad's Shia neighbourhoods and farther south of the city announcing that a funeral is taking place for a martyr who was killed while fighting in Syria; in fact, televised funerals take place on a near-daily basis for fighters killed in Syria. The majority of those involved in the neighbouring conflict from the Shia side are believed to belong to the Iraqi militia groups, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah.[50] But despite these rivalries, there is consensus that the survival of Assad will help prevent a renewed sectarian war in Iraq. The prime minister acknowledged as much as an interview: "the most dangerous thing in this process is that if the opposition is victorious, there will be a civil war in Lebanon, divisions in Jordan and a sectarian war in Iraq."[51]

**45** According to sources inside Baghdad, security forces, lawyers, and the even the Sunni population themselves have nicknamed Article 4 "four Sunna".

**46** Lina Saigol, "Iraq sends crucial fuel oil to Syria", *Financial Times*, 8 October 2012, available at http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/58b9de0e-1143-11e2-8d5f-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2eC3uo2TB; Hadeel al Sayegh, "Central Bank of Iraq tightens rules on buying US dollars", *The National*, 3 April 2012, available at http://www.thenational.ae/business/industry-insights/economics/central-bank-of-iraq-tightens-rules-on-buying-us-dollars (Hadeel al Sayegh, "Central Bank of Iraq tightens rules on buying US dollars").

**47** Samia Nakhoul and Suadad al-Salhy, "Thousands of Shi'ites ready to fight in Syria, Iraqi says", Reuters, 21 June 2013, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/21/us-iraq-syria-shiites-idUSBRE95K0RP20130621.

**48** Hadeel al Sayegh, "Iraq's clergy strive to maintain legacy amid rise of Shia militias", The National, 6 August 2013, available at http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/iraqs-clergy-strive-to-maintain-legacy-amid-rise-of-shia-militias.

**49** Ali Mamouri, "Shiite Seminarians Divided On Fatwas For Syrian Jihad", *Al-Monitor*, 29 July 2013, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/syria--jihad-fatwas-shiite-clergy-iran-iraq.html.

**50** Sam Wyer, "The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq", Institute for the Study of War, Middle East Security Report 7, December 2012, available at http://www.understandingwar.org/report/resurgence-asaib-ahl-al-haq; Mushreq Abbas, "Leader of Hezbollah in Iraq Threatens More Sectarian Violence", *Al-Monitor*, 21 July 2013, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/wathiq-battat-shiite-mukhtar-army-iraq-militia.html.

**51** Adam Schreck and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "AP Interview: Iraq PM Warns Syria War Could Spread", AP, 27 February 2013, available at http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ap-interview-iraq-premier-syria-war-could-spread.

## Once dominant, Sunnis are now marginalised

Under Ottoman rule, Iraq's Shias were the underclass, governed by a heavy-handed Sunni-led government. This divide widened after the creation of Iraq as a modern state in the 1920s, when the British administration installed as ruler King Faisal I, a Sunni from the Hejaz (which would later become Saudi Arabia). At the time, the clergy instructed Shias to side with the Ottomans against the British, in spite of the marginalisation of their community; because, even if the Ottomans were not Shias, they were at least Muslim. So while Sunnis participated in the new political process of modern Iraq, the Shias became disenfranchised as a direct consequence of their decision to boycott it.

Ironically, the same process that disenfranchised Shias under British rule would repeat itself more than 80 years later, this time disenfranchising Sunnis. The transfer of power to a Shia leadership was made possible after the 2003 US-led war on Iraq. In the early stages, the Iraq-based US administration considered handing the country over to an unelected transitional government. This enraged Ayatollah al-Sistani, who demanded "free elections and not appointments."[52] With the ayatollah's consent, Shias participated in the electoral process, while their Sunni counterparts rejected it following a fatwa issued by their religious authorities against actions that supported the US administration.

Also ironic is that Kurds and Iraqi Shias, who feared being under the reign of a strong central government, drafted a provision to the Law of Administration of the State of Iraq for the transitional period that confirmed the autonomous region of Kurdistan and the devolution of a state. But Sunnis at the time accused the two groups of advocating for the breakup of the country. In time, after elections paved the way for a strong Shia-led centralised government, it would be the Sunnis who would advocate for federalism against the wishes of Baghdad.

Today, a policy of retribution against Sunnis continues in retaliation for past oppression. Having survived widespread campaigns of revenge killings in 2006 and 2007 and fearing ongoing threats from Iranian proxy groups, like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, many Sunni Iraqis who previously lived in Baghdad's centre have moved out to Sunni-majority neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city. Inside Baghdad, pictures of Ayatollah al-Sistani appear in almost every neighbourhood, along with green and black Shia flags. Iraq's Sunnis see the hanging flags not just as a sign of religious devotion but as a means of marking territory.[53] Over the past five months, posters of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini and Khamenei have also popped up in Baghdad and the Shia provinces, further disconcerting Sunnis and even those Shias wary of foreign influence in Iraq.

## The polarising legacy of de-baathification

The process of de-baathification, the post-2003 purge of high-ranking Sunnis and most of the army that had enjoyed power under Saddam Hussein's rule, is the root cause of Sunni disenfranchisement. Their removal from power enabled Shias to become a majority in core state ministries and the security services for the first time in the history of the modern Iraq. Though de-baathification was meant to target all those complicit in abuses under Saddam's regime, whether Sunni or Shia, the Shia-led transitional government turned a blind eye to Shia Baathists, claiming that Saddam really only incorporated Sunnis into his sphere of influence. Today, al-Maliki's government uses de-baathification as a tool to exclude those Sunni candidates it disapproves of from the political process.

Unsurprisingly, one of the key grievances driving Sunni protests has been the desire to reverse aspects – if not all – of the de-baathification laws. Al-Maliki, working with Sunni allies, such as Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq, tried to devise some limited reforms in April 2013. To be sure, the premier faced pressure from the Shia clergy (Sistani to be specific) to respond to demonstrators' demands. According to a recent *Al-Monitor* article: "Since the outbreak of Sunni protests, Sistani has pushed Maliki to make concessions, and prompted him in January 2013 to make concessions and 'give justice to the Sunnis in Iraq.' As Maliki demanded the dissolution of parliament [...] the authority channels informed two envoys of the government that 'the supreme authority refuses to dissolve parliament, and recommends dialogue and maintaining calm.'"[54]

Negotiations failed after Shia hardliners voiced strong opposition to the reversal of the de-baathification law and after SWAT forces shot at protestors in Hawija, a town near Kirkuk, north of Baghdad, in April this year.[55] Iraq's SWAT forces, comprised of Shia soldiers and answerable only to the prime minister's office (and not the interior or defence ministry), are now being compared to Fedayeen Saddam (his private guard) in Sunni circles. MPs from both Shia and Sunni blocs are now trying to draft a legal framework that would control the SWAT forces' use of violence and shed light on their opaque budget.

## The polarising role of neighbours

The deadlock in Sunni-Shia reconciliation is aggravated by the real and perceived role and influence of neighbouring countries. Sunni protestors say that they are being oppressed by a "*Safavid*", or Iranian-led ideology, whereas Shias say that ongoing political tensions are fed by the Sunni monarchies of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the wider Gulf.[56] In

52 "Top cleric rebuffed on Iraq polls", BBC News, 12 January 2004, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3390939.stm.
53 Hadeel al Sayegh, "A sectarian tone again overcomes Baghdad's streets", *The National*, 28 December 2011, available at http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/a-sectarian-tone-again-overcomes-baghdads-streets.
54 Ali Abel Sadah, "Could Sistani Be Iraq's Last Hope?", *Al-Monitor*, 2 May 2013, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/iraq-political-crisis-solution-sistani.html.
55 "Iraqi Sunni protest clashes in Hawija leave many dead", BBC News, 23 April 2013, available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22261422.
56 Omar al-Shaher, "Anbar Protests Continue Amid Rumors of Foreign Support", *Al-Monitor*, 8 February 2013, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/02/iraq-protests-funding.html.

one example, a young activist reportedly assumed that the recent demonstrations in the Sunni provinces in Iraq had financial support from Gulf states: "The fact that 200 sheep were slaughtered in a single day by tribal leaders in Ramadi in order to prepare a banquet for 100,000 people raises suspicions", he said. "They are certainly obtaining funds from abroad", he added.[57] By contrast, a demonstrator in Ramadi deflected the allegation: "I swear, if Qatar had been providing money to support the protests, I would have taken some of it. Claims about external funding are an attempt to tarnish the reputation of the protest."[58]

In 2004, King Abdullah of Jordan warned of a Shia crescent forming across the Middle East.[59] A columnist for the London-based, Saudi-owned *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper chimed in, going as far to say that the clergy in Iran were "looking forward to a full Shiite moon, not just a Shiite crescent". Since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution that ousted the shah and established a modern Shia Islamic state, the country has been vocal in its ambitions to export an Islamic Revolution across the Gulf and the wider region. Under Saddam, Iraq was dubbed the "Eastern Gate" following its strategic role as a bulwark against Tehran's plans.

At Baghdad's Arab League summit in April 2012, the capital's first since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Qatar and Saudi Arabia sent low-level delegations as a "message" to the country to voice concern over the increasing marginalisation of Sunnis. In the same month, *Asharq Al-Awsat* published an editorial calling for sanctions against al-Maliki's administration "to prevent the emergence of a new Saddam or another Bashar".[60] Notably, four months prior, in December 2011, al-Maliki's son Ahmed – who many middle-class Sunni families now call "Uday" after Saddam's brutal son of the same name – ordered tanks and troops to surround the home of Sunni vice-president and al-Maliki rival, Tareq al-Hashemi of the Iraqiyya party. He was carrying out an arrest warrant issued by al-Maliki's government for al-Hashemi on charges of terrorism.[61] The vice-president managed to escape to the Kurdistan Regional Government, after which he fled to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and finally Turkey, where he is currently living with his family, indicating that all three governments have refused to honour the arrest warrant.

Al-Maliki's ousting of al-Hashemi was the first of several in a wider political witch-hunt. Since then, arrest warrants have been issued for two other high-ranking Sunni government officials: Minister of Finance Rafi Issawi and Nineveh governor, Atheel al-Nujaifi.[62] One only needs to look at the meagre investment in Iraq from the Gulf to understand the region's distrust of Iraq's Shia-led government.[63] The result has forced al-Maliki and his comrades to look to Iran's partners – namely China, India, and Russia – for Iraq's infrastructure needs.

## Al-Maliki continues to consolidate power

The Gulf boycott of Iraq has perversely resulted in a stronger state that has emerged as a Shia counterweight to Saudi Arabia. Al-Maliki's policies towards Syria and Iran are as much about entrenching his own hold on power domestically as they are about upholding alliances abroad. With its petrodollars, Iraq has been able to provide political and untold volumes of financial support to Bashar al-Assad's regime and Iran. From November 2011 to April 2012, demand for dollars at the central bank's auctions doubled to $300 million a day, putting pressure on the nation's foreign reserves of about $60 billion. In an interview with Mudher Kasim, the then-deputy governor of the central bank at the time, he said, "demand [for dollars] was rising sharply, but it wasn't in correlation with the budget [...]. We didn't see the foreign-exchange transactions translating to higher goods and services. Our interpretation was that the reserves were being affected by what is happening in the region, specifically Iran and Syria."[64]

More importantly, no reserve figures have been published since the removal of central bank governor Sinan al-Shabibi and deputy-governor Kasim following al-Maliki's demand that they be charged with financial impropriety. The accusations were made shortly after the US Treasury put Elaf Islamic Bank of Iraq under sanctions for "providing financial services to designated Iranian banks and facilitating the movement of millions of dollars worth of international transactions".[65] But it was al-Maliki's response to the sanctions that provided yet another opportunity to consolidate his hold over key state institutions. Abdelbasset Turki, the head of the board of supreme audit, replaced the governor to run the central bank indefinitely. The move contravened both the country's constitution and the independence of the central bank, as only parliament is authorised to make these appointments. In response, al-Shabibi said that the charges against him were a cover for a political manoeuvre by the government to use the central bank reserves. Al-Shabibi and Kasim's warnings over the flight of dollars in the months leading up to the charges against them leads observers to conclude

**57** Ibid.
**58** Ian Black, "Fear of a Shia full moon", *The Guardian*, 26 January 2007, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jan/26/worlddispatch.ianblack.
**59** Robin Wright and Peter Baker, "Iraq, Jordan see threat to election from Iran", *Washington Post*, 8 December 2004, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43980-2004Dec7.html.
**60** Hadeel al Sayegh, "Saddam's shadow still defines Iraq's dysfunctional state, *The National*, 6 April 2012, available at http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/saddams-shadow-still-defines-iraqs-dysfunctional-state#ixzz2eEb0R4Gt.
**61** Rania El Gamal, "Tensions rise as Iraq seeks Sunni VP arrest", Reuters, 19 December 2011, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/19/us-iraq-politics-hashemi-idUSTRE7BI1E020111219.
**62** "Iraq issues arrest warrant for resigned minister", *World Bulletin*, 5 April 2013, available at http://www.worldbulletin.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=106012; Ma'ad Fayad, "Iraqi government closes Mosul Airport, issues arrest warrant for governor", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 11 September 2013, available at http://www.aawsat.net/2013/09/article55316483.
**63** Most of the Gulf money has been channelled into property and tourism-related investments. For example, Damac Properties is developing the Princess Tower in Baghdad. See http://www.damacproperties.com/en/offer/offers/princess-tower.html.
**64** Hadeel al Sayegh, "Central Bank of Iraq tightens rules on buying US dollars".
**65** "Treasury Sanctions Kunlun Bank in China and Elaf Bank in Iraq for Business with Designated Iranian Banks", US Department of the Treasury, 31 July 2012, available at http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1661.aspx.

that their removal was politically motivated and carried out with a view to allowing the flow of money to Iran and Syria to resume freely. Today, the central bank has become an opaque institution, in which data and accessibility to press is limited.

Other signs reflect what appear to be al-Maliki's longer term plans to hold onto power. Last month, the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq overturned a law passed by parliament that would limit the posts of president, premier, and parliament speaker to two terms in office. The ruling has paved the way for al-Maliki to consider a third term. This is significant because the coming legislative elections in 2014 will be the first for Iraq without the impediment of foreign troops on the ground. A source close to al-Maliki has confirmed plans for the premier to run for a third term: "Everything is almost ready, and al-Maliki has communicated with international actors to make them new offers designed to persuade them to [support him in his run] for a third term."[66]

Gulf-backed media channels have also been under scrutiny by Iraq's government. Al Baghdadia TV, an Iraqi television station backed by Aoun Al Khashlouk who had made his wealth through a commercial partnership with Uday Hussein, had to close its Iraq bureaus in November 2010 after its failure to secure a renewal of its license following allegations that the network had served as a "mouthpiece for terrorists".[67] More recently, in April, the Iraqi government revoked the license of Al Jazeera, the Qatari TV network, for inciting sectarian tensions in its news coverage of the country.[68] The increasing crackdowns and censorship over coverage in Iraq, coupled with a lacklustre audience for stories from Iraq and the mounting financial costs to keep a bureau running – a majority of which goes towards hiring security staff – has led to the shutdown of many Western news agencies. In May, CNN announced it had shut down its Baghdad bureau and has relocated its resources to Beirut where its correspondents continue to provide coverage of Iraq.[69] The *Wall Street Journal* shuttered its Baghdad bureau immediately after the Arab League summit in Baghdad, though correspondents continue to cover the country from Iraq, Amman, and Lebanon.

## Is Iraq fragmenting?

Between the start of 2013 and August, attacks have claimed the lives of more than 3,900 Iraqis, according to an Agence France-Presse tally. As Iraq's government grapples with growing unrest and a surge in violence, the leadership has responded with mass arrests, arbitrary searches of people's houses, and maintaining an active network of security checkpoints throughout the country. The tightened security measures, however, have humiliated the Sunnis, adding insult to injury. Arguably, these measures have bolstered the main perpetrator of most terrorist attacks in the country, ISIS, which has tried to build credibility in Iraq by tapping into local Sunni grievances. Its finances come from smuggling oil from wells in eastern Syria and from private citizens in the Gulf region.[70]

According to Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, a fellow at Middle East Forum, the tendency for ISIS is to present itself as the defender and protector of Sunnis, carrying out revenge attacks in response to the government's heavy-handedness.[71] This stands in contrast with ISIS in Syria, where the group exercises quasi-governmental authority and is more open about its wider ideological agenda to establish a global caliphate under Islamic law. The lack of emphasis of this ideological agenda in Iraq, together with its reputation for defending Sunnis, has encouraged Sunnis to look to extremists once again, especially after their failed attempts to integrate into the political process from 2009 onwards.

The response has been met with alarm by al-Maliki and the broader Shia population in Iraq, which sees Gulf and Western attempts to weaken al-Assad in Syria as resulting in the growth of ISIS on both sides of the border. In a recent televised speech, the premier asked: "How can we fight terrorism in our country while supporting and reinforcing it in another? Didn't al-Qaeda attack New York [...] as well as Paris, Madrid, London, Algeria, Riyadh, Yemen, and Egypt? Didn't it carry out car bombings and kill Iraqi civilians in markets, mosques, and universities?"[72]

According to Feisal al-Istrabadi, who represented Iraq at the United Nations as deputy permanent representative, "The current leadership understands that it has made strategic errors in its dealings with Iraq's second largest ethno-confessional group." The premier's sectarian discourse, with phrases such as majority-rule, is "almost certain to be understood not in political, but in sectarian, terms, however he may claim to mean it", he added.[73]

**66** Ali Abel Sadah, "Maliki to Run for Third Term Following Court Decision", *Al-Monitor*, 3 September 2013, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/iraq-maliki-third-term-court-decision.html.

**67** Mohammad Al Efari, "What are al-Baghdadia's sources of funding?", *Buratha News Agency*, 26 December 2008, available at http://www.burathanews.com/news_article_56331.html; "Al-Baghdadia TV announces it is pulling out of Iraq for good", Reporters Without Borders, 30 November 2010, available at http://www.refworld.org/docid/4cf8a08e14.html.

**68** "Iraq bans al-Jazeera and 9 other TV channels over 'sectarian bias', *The Guardian*, 29 April 2013, available at http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/apr/28/al-jazeera-banned-iraq-sectarian.

**69** Alex Weprin, "CNN Shutters Baghdad Bureau, the Last U.S. TV News Bureau in Iraq", *Mediabistro*, 30 May 2013, available at http://www.mediabistro.com/tvnewser/cnn-shutters-baghdad-bureau-the-last-tv-news-bureau-in-iraq_b181431.

**70** Radwan Mortada, "Syria: ISIS Orphans al-Nusra Front, Cutting Its Funding", *Al-Akhbar*, 10 October 2013, available at http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/syria-isis-orphans-al-nusra-front-cutting-its-funding.

**71** Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham's Messages and Self-Presentation in Syria and Iraq", Jihadology, 9 September 2013, available at http://jihadology.net/2013/09/09/musings-of-an-iraqi-brasenostril-on-jihad-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-ash-shams-messages-and-self-presentation-in-syria-and-iraq/.

**72** Omar Sattar, "Maliki Proposes Initiative to Resolve Syria Crisis", *Al-Monitor*, 5 September 2013, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/09/maliki-proposes-syria-initiative.html.

**73** "Sectarian Visions of the Iraqi State: Irreconcilable Differences?", in Susan Williams (ed.), *Constitutionalism and Social Difference in a Pan-Asian Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Al-Maliki's mentality and those of his supporters pre-empt the possibility of genuine reconciliation and a shared national identity. It only contributes to the vicious cycle of violence and sectarian tensions, leading many to assume that al-Maliki has no grip on the country. On the back of the low turn-out in the provincial elections held in April, regardless of whether al-Maliki succeeds in running for a third term, Iraqi politics will continue to reflect the wider trends of sectarian polarisation.

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# Iran: strategist or sectarian?

*Mohammad Ali Shabani*

An examination of the recent evolution of political sectarianism in Iran, or rather the lack thereof, necessitates an understanding of how sectarianism in places like Bahrain, Syria, and Iraq plays out in Iranian political discourse. More broadly, such analysis needs to comprehend the fundamental pillars of Iran's relationships with its regional partners, in addition to the priorities of the Iranian policy agenda.

The former Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi saw Iran as a natural, regional hegemon by virtue of its large population, territory, ancient imperial civilisation, and self-perceived cultural superiority. To him, hegemony was about assuming a leadership role allowing him to inhibit decisions contrary to his interests.[74] He openly contested the sovereignty of Bahrain, only giving up after a United Nations' survey confirmed the majority of citizens wished the country to remain independent, and seized half of Abu Musa – an island shared with the emirate of Sharjah in the UAE – and the Tunb islands in the Strait of Hormuz.

His quest for hegemony led him to adopt seemingly counter-intuitive postures. The Shah did not hesitate, for example, to appeal to a norm of solidarity among Muslims to realise his regional ambitions, despite the staunchly secular nature of his regime. And even though he viewed Iran's position in the regional order as reliant on US military power, he opposed the presence of Western forces in the Persian Gulf. But despite his efforts, Arab fears of Iranian domination ultimately prevented him from institutionalising a permanent, multilateral security system in Gulf region.

## New approach, old objectives

The Islamic Republic's strategic objectives are strikingly similar to that of the shah. However, its approach to achieving hegemony has been quite different.[75] Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini regarded disruption of the regional status quo as a prerequisite for the realisation of Tehran's role and political ambitions.[76] But he had neither the opportunity to rely on US military power to maintain a leading position in the regional order – as the shah had – nor believed in the utility of such a doctrine.

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**74** R.K. Ramazani, "Reflections on Iran's foreign policy: defining the 'national interests'", in John Esposito and R.K. Ramazani (eds.), *Iran at the Cross Roads*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 211-213 (hereafter, Ramazani, "Reflections on Iran's foreign policy").

**75** Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Wheels within wheels: Iran's foreign policy toward the Arab world" in Hooshang Amirahmadi and Nader Entessar (eds.), *Reconstruction and Regional Diplomacy in the Persian Gulf*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 165.

**76** Kori Schake, & Judith Yaphe, "The Strategic implications of a Nuclear-Armed Iran, Institute for National Strategic Studies, May 2001, p. 28, available at http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/ ?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=10548.

Thus, rather than relying on a distant "other" for its security, as the Gulf Cooperation Council states have done since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Islamic Republic has regarded reconciliation with its Arab neighbours as necessary for its own hegemony; its closeness to Baghdad is as much a consideration of mitigating threats to itself from a neighbouring state as it is about finding allies within a Shia-majority state.[77] The logic is that Iran will never achieve its grander role of leadership of the Muslim *ummah* (world Muslim community) unless it can ensure its own security within the wider regional order. In this endeavour, political Islam has become the construct on which Tehran has sought to bridge the Arab-Iranian divide, widened by decades of pan-Arab policies on one side and the shah's Persianist policies that aim to deemphasise Iran's Muslim identity on the other.[78]

As part of this approach, there has been an Iranian *preference* for the presence of Islamist political forces in regional politics, regardless of their sectarian identity. This has been most clearly displayed in recent years in Iran's support for the Hamas movement in Palestine, as one example. There has also been something akin to an Iranian outreach to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the parent organisation of Hamas, despite the Brotherhood's reticence to engage.

This preference should not be confused with compulsion. Decision makers in Tehran have no illusions about the interests and motives of their potential Islamist partners. The *preference* for Islamist political forces is rooted in their tenuous or tense relationships with Western states backing the regional order and shared security concerns among certain actors in the region. When calibrating its relations with actors who are favourably predisposed to a Western-backed regional order or who do not share its strategic concerns, Iran has largely adopted a political posture ranging from lukewarm to outright hostile, irrespective of whether those actors are Sunni or Shia.

For example, Iran has maintained tepid relations with Tunisia's Ennahda party, which it views as being too friendly to the West. Moreover, in Iraq, Tehran views both militant Salafism and traditional Shia political quietism with disdain, though on wholly different levels. Given the strength of the existing Iranian relationship with the (secular, Baathist) Syrian government, Tehran's view of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is also coloured by the aforementioned perception; the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood neither shares Iran's tension with Western allies nor common threats.

## Islamic communitarianism, not caliphate

The essence of Iranian Islamism is its search for Islamic communitarianism as opposed to a pan-Islamic caliphate.[79] The Islamic Republic was born within the nation-state framework and does not seek to leave it. What is meant by communitarianism is a strengthening of the norm of Muslim solidarity, including via the empowerment and expansion of transnational Muslim organisations such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Indeed, this norm has become an institutionalised ideal type that has come to form an integral part of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy through its imprint in the Iranian constitution, which refers to "defence of the rights of all Muslims" in its first article on foreign policy.[80]

Yet, it was the Shia origin and identity of the Islamic Revolution coupled with its posture against the regional status quo that led to a lack of external recognition among ruling Sunni elites. The Islamic Revolution and its message were therefore restricted to Shia circles. Developments in the region since 2003, which have seen the empowerment of new political forces in the Arab world, have turned this Iranian disadvantage around to an extent. Nonetheless, these constraints have hardened in response to the way in which Western states have chosen alliances with status quo powers with Sunni majorities. In more basic terms, this is a variation of "my enemy's enemy is my friend." The most obvious exceptions to this "rule" dictating Iranian policy towards Islamist groups are al-Qaeda and its Salafi outgrowths, as these groups oppose Iranian (and hence Shia) hegemony even more than the West's.

The Islamic Revolution gave Iran access to the "Shia card", which had been inaccessible previously as a consequence of the shah's narrative of an Iranian state that emphasised a Persian, rather than Muslim, identity.[81] Indeed, up until 1979, the Iranian state was largely alienated from co-sectarians in places like Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Pakistan, and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. Ties that existed before the Islamic Revolution, such as those between Iranian revolutionary figure Mostafa Chamran and Lebanese Shia groups, were on an informal level.

However, despite its access to the "Shia card", the Islamic Republic has largely avoided cultivating an avowedly sectarian discourse and position in its policies. For example, support for Hezbollah is touted within the framework of the discourse of "resistance" against Israeli hegemony rather than Shia empowerment. This stands in contrast to Saudi policy and rhetoric towards Afghanistan under the Taliban, and more recently towards Bahrain, Syria, and Iraq, which

77 Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A Cultural Genealogy* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 70.
78 Andrew Brookes, "Air Attack Iran", *The Royal United Services Institute Journal*, June 2006, available at http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071840609442018#.UmQF6JRTLcE, pp. 52-55.
79 George Linabury, "Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic legacy" 1992, in Hooshang Amirahmadi and Nader Entessar (eds.), *Reconstruction and Regional Diplomacy in the Persian Gulf* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 36-39.
80 Ramazani, "Reflections on Iran's foreign policy", pp. 215-216.
81 Babak Ganji, "Main Currents in Iranian Strategy since 9/11", Conflict Studies Research Centre of the UK Ministry of Defense, 3 June 2005, available at www.da.mod.uk/CSRC/documents/middle_east/05(26)-BG.pdf, p. 5.

contain a heavy sectarian component. The Iranians have not responded to the kind of sectarian onslaught emanating from Riyadh, at least in discursive terms. Despite US President Barack Obama's assertion that there are "*ancient sectarian* differences" in this part of the world, the preference of the Islamic Republic is not, and has never been, to exclusively focus on alliances with its Shia constituencies. A simple look at the demography of the Muslim world – of which Shias form only 10-20 percent – in the context of Iran's grander ambitions explains the logic behind this posture.

With the empowerment of Islamist forces and rise of new opportunities for non-sectarian Islamist partnerships, efforts to contain Iran's influence by other regional actors have been renewed. Political elites in the Gulf states have led a largely successful campaign to push movements, such as the Brotherhood, away from Iran. In sum, for Iran, by and large, the only available alliances are and have been with marginalised constituencies that happen to overwhelmingly be fellow Shias who are themselves victims of domestic power dynamics (to some extent reinforced by the foreign alliances of ruling elites).

## Avoiding the sectarian trap

In the past, pan-Arabism was used to exclude Iran from inter-Arab politics. But with the demise of pan-Arabism, and the empowerment of previously marginalised Shia communities in places like Lebanon and Iraq, status quo powers have had to adopt a new approach to protect their positions. Over the last three decades, Arab rulers have deployed a consistently anti-Shia discourse to underpin their policies towards Iran. Similar to Saddam Hussein's characterisation of Iraqi Shias as "Iranians", former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak openly questioned the loyalty of Arab Shias to the Arab world, while Saudi religious scholars (*ulama*) have issued fatwas forbidding support for Hezbollah.[82] In parallel, King Abdullah of Jordan coined the term "Shia Crescent" in response to the political empowerment of Shias in Iraq post-2003.

At its heart, from the Iranian perspective, the sectarianism pushed by status quo states is essentially geared towards excluding "new" Arab players, many of them previously marginalised by ruling (Sunni Arab) elites, from the arena of inter-Arab politics. The most obvious examples of these "new" players are nascent state actors, such as the Iraqi government, and on a non-state level, groups such as Hezbollah and al-Wefaq. Again, these "new" players have chosen to partner with Iran – and vice versa – not because of their overwhelmingly Shia identity, but because of the almost total lack of alternative alliance options and perceptions of insecurity and threats. From Iran's point of view, the logic behind the Western backing of the status quo powers' "sectarian" strategy is ultimately about excluding it from playing a meaningful role in regional politics.[83] Keeping this in mind, and going back to the fundamental questions this essay seeks to answer, it becomes clear how sectarianism in the region is playing out in Iranian political perceptions and why Iran has not responded in kind.

## Perceptions of security and the sectarian axis

However, Iran has not been wholly immune to the adoption of sectarianism in its discourse. Hard-line Iranian figures have indeed made controversial remarks in response to the rising tide of sectarian violence in the region. In July, Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, a member of the Assembly of Experts (the clerical body tasked with appointing and overseeing the supreme leader) thundered in a Friday prayer sermon that "[Wahhabism] is created by Britain and they are doing crimes against humanity in Syria as they did in many other places. We expect all of the Muslim leaders to publicly denounce the Wahhabis and say that Wahhabism is not an Islamic branch."[84]

Moreover, partly in response to the issuance of fatwas backing traveling to Syria "for the purpose of participating in jihad against the [Assad] regime" by several Sunni clergymen, hard-line cleric Ayatollah Kazem Haeri has issued an edict "that implicitly authorises and legitimises travel to Syria to take part in jihad against Salafi groups."[85] Perhaps partly because of the lack of official backing of his edict, there is no substantiated evidence of Haeri's fatwa being followed. Overall, Iranian political and religious elites have by and large displayed no interest in fuelling the flames of sectarianism, despite Iran's considerable financial and military support for the Assad regime. Indeed, no major cleric in Qom has issued any fatwa authorising travel to Syria for jihad; while Iran is seeking to preserve a critical strategic alliance, it has not opted to provoke a sectarian agenda to that end. So while hard-line voices have made headlines, those in charge of policy towards Syria have displayed noticeable restraint.

Furthermore, the political leadership of the Islamic Republic has refrained from painting the situation as a Sunni-Shia conflict. Rather, Iranian officials have adopted discourse focusing on *takfiri* groups, or Muslims who denounce other Muslims as apostates, portraying them as a threat to both Sunnis and Shias. This discourse has not been confined to hard-line officials. Reformist Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has even adopted this language, warning that "extremists and Takfiris are a threat to the whole region.[86] Indeed, the Islamic Republic has even

**82** See Seymour Hersh, "The Redirection", *The New Yorker*, 5 March 2007, available at http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/03/05/070305fa_fact_hersh; David Goldman (alias Spengler), "Civil Wars or Proxy Wars?", *Asia Times Online*, 5 December 2006, available at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HL05Ak04.html; Noah Feldman, "Nuclear holocaust: A risk too big even for martyrs?", *New York Times*, 27 October 2006, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/27/world/africa/27iht-bombforweb.3310676.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0; Ehsan Ahrari, "Rice Hopes to Exploit Iran-Arab Divide", *Asia Times Online*, 5 October 2006, available at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HJ05Ak01.html.

**83** Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the U.S.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 160.

**84** "Iran's Voice Against the Takfiris, The Muslim Brotherhood And Explains Morsi's Fall, *Iran's View*, 5 July 2013, available at http://www.iransview.com/irans-voice-against-the-takfiris-the-muslim-brotherhood-and-explains-morsis-fall/1320/.

**85** Ali Mamouri, "Shiite Seminaries Divided On Fatwas for Syrian Jihad", *Al-Monitor*, 29 July 2013, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/syria--jihad-fatwas-shiite-clergy-iran-iraq.html#ixzz2dgvJSSm4.

**86** "Takfiri groups in possession of chemical arms threatening region: Zarif", Press TV, 18 October 2013, available at http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/09/09/322891/takfiri-groups-threat-to-region-iran-fm/.

warned status quo powers of the dangers of the blowback caused by support for Salafi extremists. In reference to the situation in Syria, Ayatollah Khamenei lamented that "unfortunately, a Takfiri group has been formed with the support of certain regional states which is in conflict with all Muslim groups", while warning that "supporters of this stream should know that this fire will burn them too."[87]

## Syria: a sectarian battleground?

Again, the lack of Iranian sectarianism in response to broader sectarianism in the region is due to Tehran's focus on strategic priorities. Nowhere is the manner in which strategic rather than "ideological" priorities dominate Iranian thinking more evident than in the Syrian arena. Alawism, a distant offshoot of Shia Islam, is a question mark to most Iranians. If there is any sense of affinity between Iranians and Syrians, it is due to the imprint of the historic memory of the war with Iraq on Iranian politics, during which Syria was Iran's only Arab ally – not Shia-Alawi sympathy.

There is no one definitive outcome that Tehran would prefer in Syria, but what is unquestionably clear is what it does not want, and most of that ground is paradoxically shared with the United States: the emergence of (Salafi) militant safe havens that might destabilise neighbours and the prevention of the rise of a hard-line Sunni-led government. For the time being, the preservation of a longstanding ally seems to be Tehran's safest means to those ends. Some Iranian hard-line clerics, such as Mehdi Taeb, have forcefully argued that "Syria is the 35th province [of Iran], and strategic for us. If the enemy attacks us and wants to annex either Syria or Khuzestan [a south-western Iranian province], the priority is that we keep Syria."[88] What the rhetoric of figures like Taeb reveals is that the Syrian government, although a secular Baathist regime, has strong, shared strategic interests with Iran. This aspect of Iranian thinking, which displays the relationship between "ideological" and strategic interests, is also reflected in Iran's support for Armenia in its conflict with Muslim, Shia-majority Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

There is a similar dynamic in Bahrain, where Iran has largely avoided sectarian rhetoric and limited its involvement to moral support for the popular, Shia-led protests. This "moral support" has largely been in the form of media coverage of the unrest, which has largely been ignored by regional state-controlled media outlets that have increasingly adopted sectarian postures in their coverage. The so-called Bassiouni Commission, set up on the order of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, investigated the potential role of Iran in the unrest that Bahrain has been facing and found no tangible evidence of any Iranian involvement.

As noted Iraq scholar Fanar Haddad argues, in the Iraqi context, sectarianism should not be seen as a pole rivalling nationalism, but a vehicle for the promulgation of rival nationalisms. Hence, the violence in Iraq can and should by and large be attributed to the battle for the meaning of the idea of Iraq. The Islamic Republic's main strategic concern about Iraq is not the sectarian features of its rulers, but the nature of Iraqi state identity and its repercussions. Indeed, Iraqi Shias, who made up the bulk of the rank and file of Saddam's secular army in the 1980s, had no objection to fighting Iranian Shias. Thus, Iranian policy towards Iraq is calibrated to promote the strengthening of the Islamic component of Iraqi identity, thereby providing more fertile ground for overcoming decades of diametrically opposed "Arabist" and "Persianist" policies. Fragmentation of Iraq anew would mean the loss of a key regional ally (much as Syria does today).

A key aim of Iranian policy towards countries like Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon, then, is to break the Sunni Arab monopoly on inter-Arab politics as a step to the larger objective of initiating a new regional order, where the Islamic Republic – along with its partners – will have a reasonable place and say. Thus, from the Iranian perspective, fanning the flames of sectarianism will only play into the status quo powers' strategy of excluding "new" players from their turf. In sum, political sectarianism in Iran has not taken hold due to the Iranian understanding of the nature of the sectarianism in the region, and Tehran's preoccupation with strategic rather than "ideological" priorities.

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87 Jon Hemming, "Iran's Khamenei blames outsiders for Middle East woes", *The Star*, 26 August 2013, available at http://www.thestar.com.my/News/World/2013/08/26/Irans-Khamenei-blames-outsiders-for-Middle-Easts-woes.aspx.

88 "Director of Ammar Camp: Keeping Syria more important than keeping Khozestan", BBC Persian (trans.), 14 February 2013, available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/02/130214_nm_tayeb_ syria_basij.shtml.

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