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What is really behind the Saudi-Iranian cold war?

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Abstract:

The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is routinely explained away as a sectarian rift, but this paper argues that the rise in sectarian tensions is a consequence, rather than the cause, of the rivalry between the two regional powers. The Kingdom has resorted to playing the sectarian card in response to the ideological challenge posed by Iran, which tries to woo Sunni Muslims to its side by advocating a political system that combines Islam and a democracy of sorts. For its part, the Islamic Republic prefers to downplay the Sunni-Shiite split and emphasises the need for Islamic unity against foreign enemies, notably Israel and the US. In addition, both Riyadh and Tehran are concerned about regime survival, which is a major factor in their foreign policy and how it is framed.

Keywords:

Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Israel, Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic State/Daesh, al-Qaeda, Wahhabism, Islamism, Islamic Awakening, Axis of Resistance.

***NOTA:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Documents are the responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

Western journalists, analysts and politicians often attribute the ongoing volatility in the Islamic world to one main cause: the sectarian split between Sunni and Shiite Muslims.¹ That would be the reason behind the enmity between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two regional powers vying for leadership of the Islamic world, and of the wars in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. According to this narrative, such state of affairs is inevitable; after all, Sunnis and Shiites have been fighting each other ever since prophet Muhammad died and his followers fell out over his succession. The current conflicts, which have been dubbed a new Middle Eastern “cold war,”² would just be the most recent manifestation of a centuries-old antagonism. However, that explanation fails to take into account the factors that normally influence state policies and perpetuates the stereotype of the Islamic world as somewhat exceptional and impervious to the usual political categories.

We shouldn't be too critical of Western commentators for their reductionism. Some of the actors involved in those conflicts have chosen to frame them in sectarian terms in order to undermine their enemies and mobilise their co-religionaries against the “eternal foe.” And unfortunately, once invoked, sectarianism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the dehumanisation of the other exacerbates the scale and viciousness of the hostilities. Nevertheless, a full understanding of the situation requires revisiting the historical and geopolitical context which has led to an increase in sectarian strife over the last decade or so. Such an exercise reveals that sectarian narratives often conceal more prosaic motivations, and that the current cold war in the Middle East has more to do with ideological competition, regime survival and the regional balance of power than with the Saqifa gathering or the Battle of Karbala.³

¹ For example, in his final State of the Union address, Barack Obama referred to the Middle East as “going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia.” See “Transcript of Obama's 2016 State of the Union Address,” *The New York Times*, 12 January 2016. In: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/13/us/politics/obama-2016-sotu-transcript.html?_r=1

² The previous Middle Eastern “cold war” opposed two Sunni Arab states, Saudi Arabia and Nasserist Egypt, each aligned with one of the superpowers engaged in the wider Cold War. The expression “Arab cold war” was famously coined by Malcolm H. Kerr in a book of that title first published in 1965.

³ During the Saqifa gathering, which took place shortly after Muhammad's death, Abu Bakr was appointed as the prophet's successor (caliph) instead of Ali, who was not present. In the Battle of Karbala, Ali's son Hussein was killed by the army of Yazid, the son of Ali's nemesis, Muawiya. Both are seminal events in the Sunni-Shiite dispute.

From cooperation to antagonism

Up until the late 1970s, relations between Iran and its Gulf neighbours were relatively cordial, if not warm. There were several long-running border disputes, and the Arabs criticised Iran for recognising the state of Israel, but their common alliance with the United States kept disagreements in check. Iran and Saudi Arabia were the “twin pillars” of American policy in the region, as guarantors of Western oil supplies and bulwarks against the Leftist ideologies which prevailed at the time. In spite of his modernising secularism at home, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi supported King Faysal’s initiatives in favour of Muslim unity, such as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (now Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) and the Muslim World League. In fact, a member of the Saudi royal family remembers that the Shah urged the King to modernise and “let women wear miniskirts” if he wanted to keep his throne; in response, his fellow monarch advised him not to forget that he was the Shah of Iran, not of France.⁴

The huge increase in revenues which resulted from the post-1973 oil crisis allowed the oil-rich Arab monarchies to finance a vast expansion in the power of the state, invest in ambitious development projects and raise their international profile. At home, they fostered religious conservatism and offered generous benefits to their citizens to ensure quiescence. Abroad, they promoted their reactionary brand of Islam and financed Islamist organisations perceived as ideological allies, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. With their blend of Islam and modern political thought,⁵ the latter found fertile ground in an Arab world still in shock after the 1967 Six-Day War, which was interpreted by many as the defeat of Arab socialism and as God’s punishment of societies which had distanced themselves from their faith. Islamists gradually became the main focus of opposition to authoritarian and, often, Western-backed regimes, as in Egypt, Jordan and Iraq.

⁴ The anecdote was related by Saudi prince Bandar bin Sultan in an interview in 2001, when he was ambassador to Washington. Subsequent events would reassure the Saudi royal family in their belief that they had taken the right path. Quoted in Elaine Sciolino, “A Nation Challenged: Ally’s future; US Pondering Saudis’ Vulnerability,” *The New York Times*, 4 November 2001. In: www.nytimes.com/2001/11/04/world/a-nation-challenged-ally-s-future-us-pondering-saudis-vulnerability.html

⁵ Islamism emerged in the 1930s with Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and was strongly influenced by Fascism, both organisationally and ideologically. Later authors, like Muslim Brother Sayyid Qutb and Iranian activist Ali Shariati, were influenced by Marxism, e.g. Qutb’s Leninist concept of a revolutionary vanguard. See Ana B. Soage, “Hasan al-Banna or the politicisation of Islam,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 9:1 (March 2008), pp. 21-42; and “Islamism and Modernity: The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10/2 (June 2009), pp. 189-203.

The Islamist contagion also reached Shiite Iran, where the Shah was considered both a brutal tyrant and a puppet of the West. Many of his opponents read Sunni Islamist authors like Sayyid Qutb and Abul-Ala Maududi alongside their homegrown Ali Shariati.⁶ They came out in force for Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini when he returned from exile in February 1979, and were instrumental in his conquest of power. Khomeini had developed a political theory he called *wilayat al-faqih*, or “guardianship of the Islamic jurist,” which meant a radical departure from classical Shiite thought. He argued that until the return of the Hidden Imam⁷, government should be in the hands of a high-ranking cleric, the person most capable of ruling according to the tenets of Islam. However, Islamists claim to be responsive to the will of the people, whom they believe would freely submit to God’s law if given the chance. Therefore, the Islamic Republic of Iran combines theocracy and democracy – although the latter is limited to choosing among carefully-vetted candidates. Despite its distinctly Shiite character, the proclamation of the Islamic Republic galvanised Islamists across the sectarian divide. Khomeini did not hide his intention to export the revolution throughout the Islamic world and was fiercely critical of monarchic rule, which he deemed contrary to Islam. Unsurprisingly, that was perceived as a serious ideological challenge by Iran’s Arab neighbours, especially those with significant Shiite populations: Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia. All four saw major Shiite disturbances, and that was the key factor behind Saddam Hussein’s decision to attack Iran in 1980 and the Gulf monarchies’ support for Iraq during the ensuing eight-year war. For its part, Saudi Arabia witnessed unprecedented unrest in late 1979 in the governorates of Qatif and al-Ahsa, which are home to most of the Kingdom’s Shiites – maybe 20% of the total.

Around the same time, Riyadh was dealing with the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by several hundred zealots led by a Juhayman al-Otaibi. They had acted out of frustration that the Kingdom was moving away from the Wahhabi creed they had been indoctrinated into by Saudi schools, mosques and media. After a two-week-long siege

⁶ Pakistani-born Islamist intellectual Zafar Bangash claims that Iran’s current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, translated Qutb’s works into Farsi himself. See his article “Sayyid Qutb on the jahili system,” *Crescent International*, 1 August 2013. In: <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/articles/sayyid-qutb-on-the-jahili-system>.

⁷ According to Shiite Muslims, the Hidden Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, went into occultation in the X century. Since then, Shiites pray for his return, which they believe will restore the purity of the faith and bring about justice. Muhammad al-Mahdi was the twelfth imam for mainstream Shiites, which is why they are known as Twelvers.

and a military operation which left hundreds dead, including many hostages, Juhayman and his surviving followers were summarily tried and publicly beheaded up and down the country. Nevertheless, they gained a posthumous triumph: the authorities became more attentive to criticism from Wahhabi clerics that modernisation had gone too far and proceeded to roll it back. Images of women were banned from the media and gender segregation was strictly enforced. Music shops and cinemas were closed, and the religious police became more assertive. In addition, the need to shore up the regime's Islamic credentials contributed to its decision to back Arab Jihadis in Afghanistan.

The shifting role of the United States

Regional dynamics changed again in 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and threatened its Gulf neighbours. Saudi Arabia welcomed the protection of the US, much to the chagrin of many of its citizens – among them, Osama bin Laden, who pleaded with King Fahd to let his Mujahedeen defend the Kingdom.⁸ The most vocal opponents of the US deployment belonged to the Sahwa (“awakening”) movement, which blended Wahhabism with the political activism of the Muslim Brotherhood, and that strained relations between the regime and the organization.⁹ The authorities tried to manage a tricky balancing act, cooperating with the US just enough to avoid annoying Washington but not as much as to alienate the Saudi people. Over the next two decades, the US gradually increased its presence in the Persian Gulf regardless of what party was in power. Bill Clinton implemented a Dual Containment policy towards Iraq and Iran which after 9/11 metamorphosed into George W. Bush's War on Terror, with both countries included in the Axis of Evil (North Korea was thrown in so it didn't look anti-Muslim). On the Saudi-Iranian front, the decade ended with Mohammad Khatami paying an official visit to Riyadh, the first by a president of the Islamic Republic.

⁸ The presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, which is home to the two holiest sites of Islam, was resented across the Islamic world. It led to a series of terrorist attacks against Western targets, such as the Khobar Towers in 1996, the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in 2001. The Khobar Towers bombing was originally blamed on Hezbollah, but is now believed to be the work of al-Qaeda, like the other attacks. The US finally moved the forward headquarters of its Middle East central command to Qatar in 2003.

⁹ Members of the reformist Sahwa movement were influenced by the Muslim Brothers who had fled countries like Egypt, Syria and Iraq in the 1950s and 1960s and found refuge in Saudi Arabia. Many were highly-skilled professionals and were put in positions of responsibility in the Kingdom, notably in the field of education. With the emergence of the Sahwa movement and consequent estrangement of the Saudi regime from the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar became the organisation's main sponsor.

Anti-Americanism among Arabs and Muslims reached fever pitch in the 2000s with the second Palestinian Intifada and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, heart-rendering images of which were brought into people's living rooms via the new satellite TV channels. Many admired Hezbollah for ending the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, and that admiration grew during the 2006 Lebanon War; the pan-Arab news channel Al-Jazeera gleefully reported that the Arab street was behind the Iran-backed Shiite militia.¹⁰ Arab governments were rather less enthusiastic, although none was as outspoken as Saudi Arabia's, which issued a statement blaming the war on certain "elements" within Lebanon.¹¹ For his part, Bush placed the hostilities in the context of the War on Terror and discreetly expedited a shipment of precision-guided bombs to Israel. But despite regional instability and Iran's more belligerent rhetoric under president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Gulf monarchies felt reassured by the ever-growing US involvement. In 2007 Ahmadinejad visited Saudi Arabia and, later that year, he was the first Iranian president to attend a Gulf Cooperation Council meeting, during which he proposed a security pact and a free trade agreement.

That feeling of reassurance vanished after Barack Obama became US president. His administration adopted a rather hands-off approach to the Middle East which contrasted sharply with Bush's interventionism. This change in policy coincided with the Arab Spring uprisings, which Tehran celebrated as a continuation of its own "Islamic Awakening." Washington's traditional Arab allies looked on in dismay while Obama tossed aside Hosni Mubarak and showed willingness to work with his democratically-elected successor, Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. Furthermore, the American president offered only half-hearted support to the rebels who took up arms against Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Worse, he turned a blind eye to Tehran's involvement in that and other regional conflicts and negotiated a deal which would allow Iran to return to the community of nations. In these circumstances, the exchange of visits between Morsi and Ahmadinejad in 2012-13, a first since the Islamic Revolution, was felt as an insult and a betrayal in Riyadh.

¹⁰ Doha Al Zohairy, "Arab street rallies behind Hezbollah," *Al-Jazeera*, 1 August 2006. In: <http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2006/08/200849142219501402.html>

¹¹ Robert Tait & Faisal al Yafai, "Anger from Tehran but silence in Damascus," *The Guardian*, 14 June 2006. In: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jul/14/syria.israel2>

A more assertive Saudi Arabia

The US was no longer considered as reliable an ally as it had been in the past, and Saudi Arabia reacted by vastly increasing its weapons imports and by embarking on a more aggressive foreign policy to deal with the fallout from the Arab Spring. It sent troops across the bridge to Bahrain to bolster the Sunni Al Khalifa monarchy against the democratic demands of its overwhelmingly Shiite population. It brokered a transition plan in Yemen to make sure that nothing changed, and president Ali Abdullah Saleh was replaced by his vice-president, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. It continued to assist Jihadi groups in Syria – including Daesh, at least initially.¹² And it moved against the Muslim Brotherhood, openly backing the coup against Morsi in July 2013 and adding the organisation to its list of terrorist groups in March 2014, alongside al-Nusra Front and Daesh. That same month, the Kingdom recalled its ambassador from Qatar over its support for the Muslim Brotherhood; the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain followed suit. The ambassadors would only return eight months later, after Doha took some (largely cosmetic) measures to distance itself from the Brotherhood.¹³

This hawkish tendency intensified after King Abdullah's death in January 2015 and the ascension to the throne of his brother Salman – although the man most credited, or blamed, for that is his son, crown prince Muhammad bin Salman, who is also defence minister. Within two months Saudi Arabia had pressed eight of its Sunni Arab allies into taking part in a military operation in Yemen against the Houthis, a Shiite politico-religious movement which claims to represent the Zaydi minority (just under 40% of the population) and favours an Iranian-style government. The Houthis had fought Saleh when he was president, but after he was deposed they joined forces with him and, together, they gained control of Sanaa and much of the west of the country. Hadi was compelled to flee to Riyadh, where he urged his hosts to intervene. Then in January 2016 the Saudi

¹² This was happening with the full knowledge of the US, as revealed by Hillary Clinton's leaked electronic correspondence. See Patrick Cockburn, "We finally know what Hillary Clinton knew all along – US allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar are funding Isis," *The Independent*, 14 October 2016. In: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/hillary-clinton-wikileaks-email-isis-saudi-arabia-qatar-us-allies-funding-barack-obama-knew-all-a7362071.html>

¹³ Ian Black, "Qatar-Gulf deal forces expulsion of Muslim Brotherhood leaders," *The Guardian*, 16 September 2014. In: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/16/qatar-orders-expulsion-exiled-egyptian-muslim-brotherhood-leaders>. Saudi Arabia has long resented its small neighbour's determination to follow an independent foreign policy since the late 1990s, chiefly by establishing and funding Al-Jazeera (which is often critical of the Saudis), by supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and, more recently, by backing competing Islamist groups in Syria. Riyadh already withdrew its ambassador from Doha in 2002 and only reinstated him in 2008.

authorities executed 47 prisoners convicted of terrorism, including prominent Shiite cleric and activist Nimr Baqer al-Nimr, triggering protests in Shiite regions of the Kingdom and abroad. In Tehran, angry crowd set the Saudi embassy on fire, prompting Riyadh to cut diplomatic relations.

In addition, Saudi Arabia has been working to isolate Iran. It is forming an Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism which to date has attracted 41 members, but the Islamic Republic has not been invited. And it is trying to give the “Arab NATO” initially proposed by Egyptian president Abdelfattah al-Sisi a decisively anti-Iran bias, with keen support from US president Donald Trump and from Israel, which already cooperates closely in security matters with two of the members of the embryonic alliance, Egypt and Jordan.¹⁴ Conversely, the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb al-Islah, is collaborating with the Saudi-led coalition, and there have been signs that the Saudi regime felt the organisation had been sufficiently chastised and it might be time to bring it back in from the cold.¹⁵ However, the relationship with Qatar has taken a turn for the worse. Earlier this month, Saudi Arabia broke ties with its Gulf neighbour, purportedly to protect national security.¹⁶ The UAE, Bahrain, Egypt and the Saudi-backed government of Yemen took similar steps.

Assessing the sectarian argument

According to Saudi propaganda, Iran has a nefarious expansionist project motivated by sectarianism, and all other countries should line up behind the Kingdom to tackle that threat. Shortly after Riyadh severed diplomatic ties with Tehran, renowned Saudi

¹⁴ Ahmed Fouad, “Is an ‘Arab NATO’ in the works?”, *Al-Monitor*, 8 March 2017. In: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2017/03/egypt-united-states-joint-arab-alliance.html>

¹⁵ “Saudi to remove Muslim Brotherhood from terrorist lists,” *Middle East Monitor*, 8 December 2016. In: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20161208-saudi-to-remove-muslim-brotherhood-from-terrorist-lists/> That is far less likely after the recent Saudi-Egyptian reconciliation. See Ana B. Soage, “Saudi Arabia: Riyadh mends fences with Sisi’s Egypt, but the potential for rivalry remains,” *Gulf States News*, 26 April 2017. In: <https://archive.crossborderinformation.com/Article/Saudi+Arabia+Riyadh+mends+fences+with+Sisi%e2%80%99s+Egypt%2c+but+the+potential+for+rivalry+remains.aspx?date=20170426&docNo=6&qid=4&from=Search.aspx#>

¹⁶ The move came two weeks after Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani allegedly hailed Iran as an “Islamic power” and criticised Trump’s policy towards Tehran. Doha claims that the website of its official news agency was hacked and that the Emir never made such statements but, in any case, that was probably the last straw. Commentators have speculated that Trump’s recent visit to Riyadh may have emboldened the Saudis to act against Qatar.

journalist and political commentator Jamal Khashoggi published a much-circulated piece entitled “You are either with us or against us” which provides a good summary of the Saudi position.¹⁷ Khashoggi talks of a “major existential crisis” facing his country and compares the current situation in the Middle East to Europe in 1939, with the Iranian regime playing the role of Nazi Germany and Saudi Arabia standing up for freedom and democracy in the face of Iranian aggression. He insists that Iran’s alliances in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon constitute irrefutable proof that the Islamic Republic is solely moved by sectarian bigotry and, tellingly, expresses hope for the return of a “nationalist Iran” that could become a partner for the Kingdom.

Leaving aside the absurdity of portraying Saudi Arabia as a champion of freedom and democracy, the argument sounds hollow. If we look at the conflicts which are described as proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is conspicuous that Saudi propaganda has systematically reduced them to their sectarian component, whatever their real character, and that Riyadh has consistently backed Sunni extremists.¹⁸ To be sure, Iran is not innocent of kindling sectarian fervour in order to mobilise its constituency, e.g. to recruit fighters for Syria as far afield as Pakistan.¹⁹ Nonetheless, its own propaganda does not attack all Sunnis, but singles out those who practise takfir, i.e. the excommunication of other Muslims, and emphasises the need to protect Shiite religious sites, which have been the target of Jihadi terrorists.²⁰ As a Shiite country in an overwhelmingly Sunni-

¹⁷ The piece first appeared in Saudi-owned, pan-Arab newspaper *Al-Hayat*. See “Imma an takunu ma'na wa-imma dhiddina,” *Al-Hayat*, 9 January 2016. In: <http://www.alhayat.com/Opinion/Jamal-Khashoggi/13312982/>. An English version was later published in other media, such as the website of Saudi-owned satellite news channel *Al-Arabiya*. See “You are either with us or against us”, *Al Arabiya English*, 12 January 2016. In: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2016/01/12/You-are-either-with-us-or-against-us.html>

¹⁸ We discussed above Saudi Arabia’s support for Jihadis in Syria (see note 13). On Iraq, see Helene Cooper, “Saudis’ Role in Iraq Frustrates U.S. Officials,” *The New York Times*, 27 July 2007. In: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/27/world/middleeast/27saudi.html>), for the period of the post-invasion Sunni insurgency, and Patrick Cockburn, “Iraq crisis: How Saudi Arabia helped Isis take over the north of the country,” *The Independent*, 12 July 2014. In: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/iraq-crisis-how-saudi-arabia-helped-isis-take-over-the-north-of-the-country-9602312.html>), for the last few years. On Yemen, see Giorgio Cafiero & Daniel Wagner, “Saudi Arabia and al-Qaeda Unite in Yemen,” *Foreign Policy Journal*, 23 September 2015. In: <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2015/09/23/saudi-arabia-and-al-qaeda-unite-in-yemen/>

¹⁹ Babak Dehghanpisheh, “Iran recruits Pakistani Shi’ites for combat in Syria,” *Reuters*, 10 December 2015. In: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-pakistan-iran-idUSKBN0TT22S20151210>

²⁰ In Syria, the emphasis is on protecting the Sayyida Zaynab mosque in Damascus, which Shiites believe contains her remains. One of the foreign militias fighting in Syria is called Liwa’ Zaynabiyyun, or the Followers of Zaynab Brigade; its members come from the Shiite minority in Pakistan. Zaynab was Ali’s daughter and prophet Muhammad’s granddaughter, and she was taken prisoner at the Battle of Karbala and taken to Damascus, then the capital of the Islamic Empire.

The most notorious case of Shiite shrines being targeted was the attack against the al-Askari mosque in

majority Islamic world, it is not in Iran's interest to focus on sectarian differences; instead, it promotes Islamic unity to confront "evil Zionists and arrogant powers" – i.e. Israel and the US – supposedly bent on fomenting discord between Sunnis and Shiites.²¹

In contrast, the official Saudi ideology, Wahhabism, deems Shiism a hateful heresy and has a long and inglorious history of targeting Shiites. Among the "feats" of the First Saudi State (1744-1818) was the sack of the two holiest cities of Shiite Islam, Karbala and Najaf, in modern-day Iraq, where the Wahhabi warriors destroyed the shrines and massacred the population. Wahhabi clerics routinely refer to the Shiites using epithets such as *Rawafedh*, i.e. those who have rejected (the truth of Islam); *Safawiyyin*, in reference to the XVI-century Safavid Empire, implying their allegiance to Iran; and *Majous*, or "Zoroastrians," followers of the faith of pre-Islamic Persia, refusing to consider them Muslims. Moreover, the Salafism Riyadh has done so much to disseminate in the Islamic world and beyond has ignited sectarian strife, especially in countries with sizeable religious minorities like Syria, Pakistan, and Egypt (where the main victims of Salafi violence are the Copts).

The (non-sectarian) Iran-Syria alliance

An analysis of Iran's foreign policy suggests that it is driven by factors other than sectarian considerations. Maybe the best example is that of Syria, which has also contributed the most to exacerbating sectarianism. The alliance between Alawi-ruled Syria and Twelver Iran goes back to the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s and has little to do with a shared religious identity. Alawism – which includes among its beliefs reincarnation and a holy trinity²² – has traditionally been seen as heretical by Sunnis and Shiites alike. In reality, Syria

Samarra, northern Iraq, which houses the tombs of the tenth and eleventh Shiite imams. It was destroyed in February 2006, provoking an escalation in sectarian strife – as was undoubtedly intended by the perpetrators of the attack. See Robert F. Worth, "Blast Destroys Shrine in Iraq, Setting Off Sectarian Fury," *The New York Times*, 22 February 2006. In: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/22/international/middleeast/blast-destroys-shrine-in-iraq-setting-off-sectarian.html>

²¹ "The Leader's View of Unity Between the Shia and the Sunni," 21 August 2008. In: <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/868/The-Leader-s-View-of-Unity-Between-the-Shia-and-the-Sunni>

²² The Alawi holy trinity is composed of Muhammad, Ali and Salman the Persian. Ali was the prophet's cousin and married his daughter Fatima, and the belief that their descendants are the legitimate leaders of the Muslim community is central to all branches of Shiism. Salman the Persian is a minor and obscure figure in the history of early Islam, known mainly for suggesting the digging of a trench to protect Medina from a Meccan attack.

supported the Islamic Republic against Iraq mainly due to the rivalry between Hafez al-Assad and fellow Baathist leader Saddam Hussein. In addition, the Syrian president was facing Islamist opposition (which he brutally suppressed, notably in Hama in 1982) and was vulnerable to sectarian slurs, therefore he was eager to gain acceptance into the fold of Islam. He turned to Khomeini and to Lebanese Imam Musa al-Sadr for fatwas that declared Alawis to be Shiite Muslims (Alawism is an offshoot of Shiism) and both obliged, for equally pragmatic reasons.

As it happens, Hafez al-Assad went great lengths to dilute Alawism as a religious identity in Syria. At school, Muslim children were all taught the same Islam: the Sunnism of the majority. Specifically Alawi religious festivities, activities and organisations were banned. Sunni-style mosques were erected in Alawi villages (Alawis do not build mosques).²³ On the other hand, al-Assad courted the Sunni commercial bourgeoisie of Damascus and Aleppo, which saw it in its interest to collaborate with the regime and went on to become one of its pillars. His son and successor, Bashar, is married to a Sunni Muslim who was born and brought up in the UK and briefly worked as a broker in Wall Street. Commentators never fail to point out that many high positions in the Syrian army and secret police are occupied by Alawis, but that is due to concerns about loyalty and trust and to plain nepotism, rather than to religious solidarity. Saddam Hussein did much the same in Iraq, favouring his own Tikriti tribe.

Tehran is invested in its alliance with Damascus because it is its only longstanding Arab ally, which is useful to dispel the notion of a historic Arab-Persian rift. Besides, Syria shares the Islamic Republic's antipathy towards Israel and provides access to the Levant, the main arena of the Arab-Israeli struggle, serving as a major channel for assistance to Hezbollah, including weapons.²⁴ As mentioned above, hostility to Israel is a cornerstone of Iranian foreign policy, both in principle and as part of the regime's strategy to gain acceptance in the Islamic world. Ironically, Iran's backing of Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war has been very costly in terms of reputation. Salafi and Wahhabi sheikhs have

²³ Journalist and former hostage Peter Theo Curtis suggests that Alawism has not disappeared from Syria, but it has been transformed into a personality cult of the leader. See "Peter Theo Curtis's Writing on The Twisted, Terrifying Last Days of Assad's Syria," *New Republic*, 4 October 2011. In: <https://newrepublic.com/article/95722/syria-damascus-bashar-basil-al-assad-sunni-alawi>

²⁴ See Yossi Melman & Sof Hashavua, "In depth: How Iranian weapons reach Hezbollah," *The Jerusalem Post*, 25 May 2013. In: <http://www.jpost.com/Defense/In-Depth-How-Iranian-weapons-go-through-Syria-to-Hezbollah-314313>

succeeded in presenting the conflict as sectarian and in drawing to their side mainstream Sunni Islamists, who had been friendly to Hezbollah and to its Iranian sponsor. Influential Qatar-based cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who has long been regarded as the Muslim Brotherhood's foremost contemporary ideologue, has contritely "admitted" that the Shiites had deceived him and that the Saudi ulemas had been right all along about Hezbollah.²⁵ The war in Syria has also put much strain on Iran's relationship with Hamas.²⁶

In fact, there was great uneasiness in Iran about supporting Bashar al-Assad when he stifled the Syrian prodemocracy demonstrations in 2011. After all, the Islamic Republic had celebrated the Arab Spring when it threatened conservative regimes allied to the West, and it portrayed the uprisings as the second wave of the Islamic Awakening which started with its own revolution. Iranian public opinion opposed involvement, and even hawkish president Ahmadinejad criticised the violence of the Syrian government and urged al-Assad to be accountable to his people's demands.²⁷ However, misgivings were pushed aside as Sunni states like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey started backing Syrian armed groups, including takfiris, and Sunni clerics referred to the conflict in increasingly sectarian terms. The Iranian leadership opted to frame it in the Axis of Resistance narrative – itself a response to Bush's Axis of Evil categorisation –, and Syria was labelled "the golden link in the chain of resistance" which stretches from Iran to Hezbollah and Hamas.²⁸ Needless to say, the emergence of Daesh only reinforced that narrative.²⁹

²⁵ "Al-Qaradawi: Al-Shi'a khada'uni and Hizbullah kidhba kabira" (Al-Qaradawi: The Shiites deceived me and Hezbollah is a big lie). *Al-Arabiya*, 2 June 2013. In: <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/syria/2013/06/02/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%AE%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%83%D8%B0%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D9%83%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-.html>

²⁶ Karim El-Bar, "After Aleppo's fall, Hamas finds itself resisting Tehran as well as Tel Aviv," *Middle East Eye*, 27 December 2016. In: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/after-aleppo-s-fall-hamas-finds-itself-resisting-tehran-well-tel-aviv-1017030317>

²⁷ It is rather incongruous that Ahmadinejad, who most likely rigged the 2009 presidential elections to obtain a second term and repressed the subsequent protests, should be giving lessons on democratic accountability. Nevertheless, the president was a populist with his finger on the pulse of the Iranian street, and there is little doubt that his statements reflected popular feeling. See "Syria crisis: Iran's Ahmadinejad criticises killings," *BBC News*, 22 October 2011. In: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15416410>

²⁸ See, for instance, Arash Karami, "Khamenei Advisor: Syria 'Golden Link in the Chain of Resistance'," *Al-Monitor*, 4 April 2013. In: <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/04/1713/khamenei-advisor-syria-golden-link-in-the-chain-of-resistance/>

²⁹ Bozorgmehr Sharafedin & Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Abandoning discretion, Iranians proclaim their role in Syrian war," *Reuters*, 21 September 2016. In: <http://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-iran-syria-idINKCN11R2EA>

Conclusion: Sectarianism as a smokescreen

Sectarianism is not a satisfactory explanation for the cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is propelled by more conventional motivations. The first is ideological competition: Saudi Arabia is playing the sectarian card because it feels threatened by the Islamist ideology promoted by the Islamic Republic, which appeals to many religious-minded Muslims. Cunningly, Iran encourages an “Islamic Awakening” which would not necessarily be based on the Khomeinist principle of *wilayat al-faqih*, but would adapt to the particular conditions in the different Muslim countries.³⁰ In addition, its Axis of Resistance rhetoric against Israel and the US resonates with the Arab and Muslim streets and delegitimises Riyadh, a long-term ally of the US and, apparently, increasingly willing to go public with its hitherto covert relationship with Israel.³¹ The World Assembly for the Islamic Awakening, set up shortly after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, holds regular high-profile conferences to advocate a unified Islamic *Umma* (community), support the Palestinian cause, and counter both Zionism and Takfirism. The first, held in September 2011, was reportedly attended by over 700 delegates from 84 countries.³²

The Saudi regime continues to rule by royal decree and seems unwilling to contemplate the possibility of responding to the ideological challenge posed by Islamism with serious political reform which would give its citizens a greater say in the decisions that affect them. The item is conspicuously absent from its ambitious “2030 Vision,” which focuses on reducing the country’s reliance on oil and developing a productivity-driven economy. The programme does include some relaxing of the stringent mores in the Kingdom, and a General Entertainment Authority has been established to bring fun to its citizens – within the bounds deemed acceptable by the Wahhabi clerics. The GEA organises arts shows and (male-only) concerts, is developing the theme parks industry, and there is talk of cinemas reopening. But even if 2030 Vision is successful – and many doubt it³³ –, it

³⁰ Ali Khamenei, “Speech at the International Conference of the Islamic Awakening,” 17 September 2011. Quoted in Payam Mohseni, “The Islamic Awakening: Iran’s Grand Narrative of the Arab Uprisings,” *Middle East Brief* 71, April 2013, p. 3.

³¹ See, for instance, Linda Gradstein, “Israel develops new ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states,” *PRI*, 19 April 2017. In: <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-04-19/israel-develops-new-ties-saudi-arabia-and-other-gulf-states>

³² Zafar Bangash, “Tehran conference puts people’s uprisings in proper Islamic context,” 1 October 2011, *Crescent International*. In: <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/articles/tehran-conference-puts-people-s-uprisings-in-proper-islamic-context>

³³ Nick Butler, “Saudi Arabia – the dangers of a fanciful vision,” *Financial Times*, 2 May 2016. In: <http://blogs.ft.com/nick-butler/2016/05/02/saudi-arabia-the-dangers-of-a-fanciful-vision/>

remains to be seen whether “bread and circus” will be enough to satisfy the aspirations of a very young and increasingly educated and well-travelled population.

Another source of concern for Riyadh is Iran’s ability to project its influence in the region through proxy forces: fellow Twelvers in Lebanon and Iraq, Alawis in Syria, Zaydis in Yemen. Tehran justifies this in terms of the Islamic Awakening and the Axis of Resistance, not sectarian loyalties. Iranian officials emphasise their country’s support for Sunni Muslims, especially in Palestine,³⁴ and denounce takfiri groups such as Daesh as part of a Western-Zionist ploy to stain the reputation of Islam and divert attention from the fight against Israel.³⁵ But Iran is also opportunistic, taking advantage of the Obama administration’s reticence to intervene in the Middle East to reassert itself in what it sees as its legitimate sphere of influence. That is undoubtedly the case in Yemen, which is not a “link in the chain of resistance” but offered a chance to annoy the Saudis in their own backyard. Trump’s bellicosity might prompt a more cautious approach... or an escalation. Hard-line elements within the regime, notably the Revolutionary Guard, are not averse to exploiting external crises to consolidate their internal position.

Indeed, Iranian foreign policy must also be considered from the perspective of domestic events. The recent victory by a landslide of reformist president Hassan Rouhani over the conservative candidate backed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei should be seen in the context of a socio-political pro-reform movement which began in the 1990s, leading to Khatami’s victory in 1997 and, again, in 2001.³⁶ In 2005 conservative forces were able to mobilise support for populist firebrand Ahmadinejad, who won a second mandate in 2009 in an election marked by irregularities. The subsequent mass protests, which were harshly repressed and depicted as a Western-sponsored coup attempt, gave rise to the Green Movement which would bring Rouhani to power in 2013. Conservatives reacted

³⁴ See, for instance, “We are with every group that is steadfast on the path of Resistance: Ayatollah Khamenei’s address to the Sixth International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada,” 21 February 2017. In: <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4644/We-are-with-every-group-that-is-steadfast-on-the-path-of-Resistance>

³⁵ The official website of Iran’s Supreme Leader contains numerous articles with this theme, e.g. “ISIS treatment of minorities, US’s tool to demonize Islam,” 11 December 2016. In: <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/3621/ISIS-treatment-of-minorities-US-s-tool-to-demonize-Islam>; “ISIS was created to divert the Resistance from fighting Zionism: analyst,” 14 May 2017. In: <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4805/ISIS-was-created-to-divert-the-Resistance-from-fighting-Zionism>; “Takfiris are Israel’s tool to distract attention from Palestinian cause: Sheikh Naim Qassem,” 25 May 2017. In: <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4861/Takfiris-are-Israel-s-tool-to-distract-attention-from-Palestinian>

³⁶ For an analysis of the recent Iranian presidential elections, see Ana B. Soage, “Iran’s reformist president wins a second term by a landslide,” *CAPESIC*, 23 May 2017. In: <http://www.capesic.cat/en/2017/05/23/irans-reformist-president-wins-a-second-term-by-a-landslide/>

by launching a so-called “soft war” against the “soft” threat posed by those Khamenei referred to as a “Satanic current.”³⁷ For their part, Iranian reformists hailed the Arab Spring as a continuation of their own mobilisations in 2009-10, rejecting the efforts to connect it to an Islamic Awakening they do not believe in. Just like the Saudi royals, the Iranian regime is anxious about its own survival.

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³⁷ See Mohseni, “The Islamic Awakening,” op. cit., pp. 4-5.