



THE SUNNI-SHIA CONFLICT AND ITS STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

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With the invasion of Iraq by a US-led coalition, the West found itself operating in an environment they little understood. Military forces, coming from countries where religious differences did not matter politically, were forced, in planning and executing even the smallest of tactical operations, to take into account the religious specificity of each area, modeled by Islam and by the rift between the two main branches of Islam – Sunni and Shia – rift that can go down to family level.

The same thing is true at strategic level, where the Sunni-Shia conflict, if not correctly understood and assessed, has the potential of making irrelevant or pushing into failure even the most detailed Western plans.

Keywords: Islam; Sunni people; Shia people; oil; Saudi Arabia; Iran.

For the unsuspecting observer from the West, where different churches, moreover, different religions exist side by side in such a harmony that the Thirty-Year-War has disappeared from memory and seems to have never happened, the existence of two different Muslim *churches* seems a normal fact, resulting in benign diversity and plurality of views. Yet the Western lenses could not deform reality more. Provoked by events that occurred in 632 and materialized for the first time in open conflict in 680, the Sunni-Shia rivalry equals a long line of confrontations, even wars, all extremely bloody, that stretches to the present days and shows no sign of calming down in the near future. Moreover, nowadays societal trends in the Muslim world seem to harbingers its intensification.

This article sets out to achieve two objectives.

Firstly, it will present the relevant historical data needed to understand the current state of the conflict between the two parties.

Secondly, it will proceed to assess the way, or ways, in which this conflict might affect Western policies in the region. This enterprise, even though focused on a phenomenon almost fourteen century-old, is deemed opportune now, when the Arab Spring, far from bringing more democracy in the Middle East, has in fact brought but more sectarianism¹.

Religious differences

In 632, Prophet Muhammad dies and leaves the young Muslim community a problematic inheritance. On the one hand, the Muslims were on the heels of a series of military successes, won by a redoubtable fighting force which, in a matter of years, would conquer the entire Arab Peninsula, and over the next decades would push the boundaries of the Muslim world from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, in the West, to the steppes of Central Asia and into the Indian Subcontinent, in the East.

On the other hand, the Prophet was leaving behind a religion without scriptures, based solely on the oral transmission of the revelation. Moreover, Muhammad had not been successful in clearly establishing either a successor to lead the Ummah, or a procedure based on which a successor might be chosen.

In order to solve the succession crisis, the most important Muslim leaders decided to choose, along pre-Islamic Arab line, that man among them who, besides piety in religion, was able to ensure the young community its unity and its strength. Thus, according to this procedure, the first to become Caliph, was chosen Muhammad's father-in-law, the elderly but respected Abu Bakr². This way of reasoning about choosing the leader found the most supporters, and it would evolve into what we today know as Sunnism, vision of Islam that represents a majority of 80-85% of Muslims.

There was also a parallel view which maintained that Allah would not have revealed Islam to a regular mortal, but to one that was exceptional. Thus, the Muslim leaders should not have been

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chosen based on political qualities, but should have been chosen from among the Prophet's blood relatives, starting with his nephew, and son-in-law, Ali, followed by the two sons the latter had with the Prophet's daughter, Fatima. This competing view would develop into Shiism, currently remaining in minority in the Muslim world to this day.

After the imposition, for the moment, of the pre-Islamic successionist approach, Abu-Bakr, the first Caliph turned out to be a strategic genius. Immediately after the death of the Prophet, many of the tribes who had sworn allegiance to him declared that the bond died with Muhammad and they owed nothing to the Muslim state or its new leaders. Abu-Bakr declared them apostates and immediately launched against them the campaigns known as the *Wars of the Apostates (Harub al-Ridda)*. The outcome was a series of victories which, after two years brought inside the Caliphate the entirety of the Arab Peninsula, pushing the Muslim law in territories today known as Iraq and Syria, at the moment mere provinces of the Sassanid (Persian) and Roman Empires.

In 634, Abu Bakr died, leaving behind a state vaster and stronger than, probably, Muhammad had dreamt of. Moreover, the Caliphate was neighboring on the Persian and Roman Empires, at that moment nothing more than decadent political entities. In 634, the man who became Caliph was another one of Muhammad's former companions, the terrible Umar ibn al-Khattab, named *al-Farouk (The one who separates the good and the bad)*. On the one hand, Umar continued the campaigns started by his predecessor and before his death, in 644, the Caliphate had swallowed the entire Maghreb, Egypt, the Levant, a good part of Anatolia and almost the entire Persian Empire. On the other hand, Umar started the building of an administration, necessary to control the enormous territory and, along with the administration, he started the draconic imposition of the Muslim law. His own son, surprised imbued received a punishment of eighty lashes, after the application of which he died.

In 644, Umar was killed by a Persian slave and the reign was passed on to the third Caliph, Uthman ibn Affan. Uthman consolidated control over the territories he had inherited and continued the campaigns, the Muslim armies arriving in Sindh, the current Pakistan. In parallel, Uthman

proceeded to a light decentralization, allowing the consolidation of power of local leaders like Muawyah, the governor of Syria. Another great success of his tenure was the codification, in writing, of the Islamic revelation, known as Quran. In 656, Uthman was killed by a group of Muslim soldiers, during a revolt, and his blood was spilled on the pages of the Quran he was reading, fact which shocked the believers³. As a Caliph was supposedly chosen for his express quality of ensuring unity, the mandate of the Caliphs seemed to weaken. The supreme power was passed on to yet another companion of the Prophet's, his nephew, Ali ibn Abu-Talib.

Ali's Caliphate, from a military standpoint, did not bring great surprises, his tenure being affected by civil wars and other political problems, his power being strongly contested by Muawyah, cousin to the defunct Uthman. The Syrian governor had publicly requested Ali to punish the killing of the third Caliph, fact that had only deepened the social problems. Completely disappointed with the situations, members of the Islamic sect of the Assassins (*Khariji*) planned attacks against the two competitors. Ali was killed, while praying in a mosque in Kufa, the current Iraq. Muawyah survived the attack and became Caliph, position from which he founded the Umayya dynasty, located in Damask.

By that moment, 661, it had become a custom that the Caliph be only a political leader, able to ensure the unity of the *Ummah*⁴ and to defend its interests. The Caliph, according to that conception, was elected by the community, or by its representatives, upon the vacancy of the position, and he would rule for as long as he was able to meet the stated criteria. His authority was only political. Muhammad's aura had not been passed to anyone, the religious authority being a purely formal one, exercised by a priesthood called *Ulama*⁵, constituted like a functionary body. However, the rule, instituted with the election of the first four, was that the Caliphs come from Muhammad's tribe, Quraysh, and as much as possible be a former companion of the Prophet's.

With the ascend to power of the Umayya dynasty, the rule changed and the Caliphs were no longer elected, the power being passed from one generation to another, inside this bloodline. The power of the Caliphs would not be threatened as



long as they were able to guarantee unity, stability and protection of the Muslims' interests. The Umayyads, however, members of the Quraysh tribe, stemmed from the lower clan of Banu Abu Shams, feeling inferior to the members of the upper clan of Banu Hashim, from which stemmed the Prophet, Ali and his offspring. Thus, the first Umayya Caliphs dedicated themselves to annihilating Ali's bloodline, in order to eliminate the possibility of a legitimacy crisis. And the Umayyad were right to fear.

Having passed through the trauma of seeing three of the first four Caliphs killed, many Muslims had started to believe that the way the Ummah was founded was maybe not the right one and that maybe the truth was riding with those maintaining the legitimacy of succession among Muhammad and Ali's line. This leadership would not have been only political and military. Because this line had inherited Muhammad's aura and with it, the capacity of understanding the truth hidden in the Islamic revelation, these would have been religious leaders, as well, their mandate being a richer one.

The conflict between the two parties reached a climax in 680, in the desert outside Karbala, where Yazid, the Umayyad military commander, attacked the caravan of Hussain, Ali's second son and Muhammad's favorite nephew. During the attack, Hussain was killed and his severed head paraded in the streets of Kufa, Ali's former capital, so as to discourage future rebellions.

Four years later, at Karbala, a commemoration was organized, for the first time, for Hussain's death. This was the birth of Shiism.

Starting with the 680 incident at Karbala, the history of the two communities would be one marked by violence, most often than not started by Sunnis who saw in their co-religionists nothing but heretics bound to deviate Ummah from the right path. Along the way, the religious differences between the two would take political forms as well.

Political and economic differences

The rift between the two parties was further exacerbated by the colonial policy of manipulating religious differences, when the power was passed from the colonial power down to the minorities. Thus, in an Iraq with a Shia majority, the power was passed to the Sunni minority. This minority always

acted like a majority, by emphasizing its Arab identity, being a known fact that the Arabs are by a great majority Sunni. Along this line of reasoning, the Shia were always excluded from power, any of their revolts being drenched in blood.

The same trend was found in the entire Muslim world, the suppression of the Shia becoming the norm. The adversity between the two communities continues to this day, illustrated for instance by the famous behavior of the Afghan Sunni mujahidin who, in 1979-1989, would take breaks from fighting the Soviet invaders only to massacre Afghan Shias and Iranian officials⁶.

The Sunnis' age-old suspicions seemed to have been proven right with the advent of the Persian Safavid Empire. Even though Persia used to be inhabited in its vast majority by Sunnis, the arrival of the Turkic Safavid dynasty to the throne changed this forever. Being Shia and having the wherewithal, the Safavids started a campaign aimed at converting to Shiism the entire population under their reign, benevolently or under threat, campaign that stopped only on the natural borders, where the Persian impetus was counterbalanced by the Ottoman Turks, who were Sunni. The fact that this territory was inhabited by Persians, ethnically different from the Arabs, helped building a different political-religious identity.

The rise of the Persian-speaking Shia power on the border of the regions inhabited by Arabs contributed to exacerbating the conflicts, any Shia claim being deciphered by the Sunni Arabs as an attempt by the Persians at subjugating the peoples of the Peninsula, Saudi Arabia being thus cast as the champion of oppressing the Shias. On the other side, Iran, as the main Shia powerhouse, was always forced to offer protection, at least diplomatically, to its coreligionists.

With the entrance of the US on the Middle East scene, Iran grew more worried. The power from across the Atlantic had signed a security-for-oil accord with the Saudi Kingdom, and Iraq was strongly supported by America during the Iran-Iraq war, with the Americans even wrongly targeting and downing an Iranian civilian airliner⁷.

In such a threatening situation, Iran normally would seek to improve its own position while weakening that of its adversaries.

This became possible with the galloping growth of global economy based on hydrocarbons.



Overlaying the map of the regions where the Shias constitute a majority on that of the main oil and natural gas fields in the Middle East has the potential to shock. Even though the common commentator would say that *the Middle Eastern oil belongs to the Arabs*, the analyst who has done the above-described exercise discovers that *the Middle Eastern oil and Gas belongs to the Shia*, in that all major fields are located in areas where Shia constitute the majority (Figure 1).

in the world, the Islamic Republic could exert a power beyond its normal boundaries, simply by manipulating the religious feeling⁹. So, based only on geographical and religious proximity, Iran could influence decisions made in neighboring Azerbaijan, another major producer of oil and natural gas.

After the US-led invasion of Iraq, the country did not become a democracy along the lines dreamt of by the Americans, but fell close to becoming a

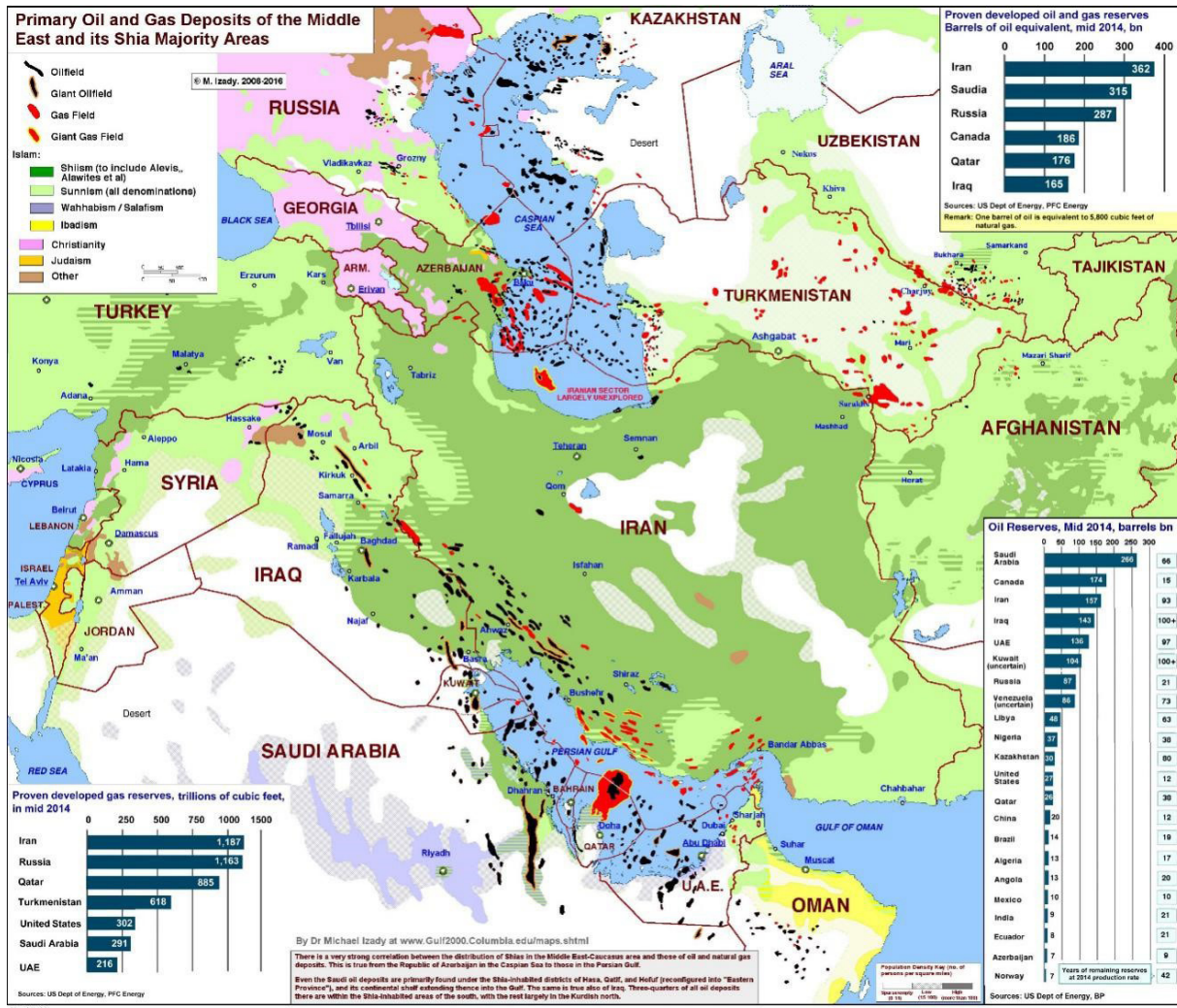


Figure 1 The layout of the Shia communities and of the oil and natural gas deposits in the Middle East⁸

In this context, the centuries-old conflict develops a new strategic dimension. With the world economy strictly dependent on the oil production, who controls the oil flows can exert a power beyond belief. Thus, Iran becomes an interesting case study.

Even though, based on the data contained in Figure 1, Iran is only the third oil producer

theocracy, with the real *power-brokers* being the grand ayatollahs Ali Sistani and Baqir al-Hakim, and the young firebrand preacher Muqtada al-Sadr¹⁰. All these have taken, willingly or unwillingly, Iraq in a very pro-Iran direction, at least partially out of a desire to distance their country from the policies of a US which was offering unconditional support to Saudi Arabia. Thus, indirectly, the US ensured

that Iraq would gravitate towards Iran's sphere of influence, Tehran winning, besides political clout, at least an indirect say in the oil and natural gas production in the Shia-dominated south Iraq.

And the situation of Iraq tends to spread on the Western shores of the Persian Gulf. Bahrain is another country where a vast Shia majority is ruled with an iron fist by a Sunni minority. Moreover, from here, the oppression feeling gives free reign to anti-West and pro-Iran passions, well known in this respect being the demonstrations caused by published caricatures of the Iranian leader, demonstrations where the Bahraini youth chanted "We follow you, Khamenei!"¹¹ And the oil-rich Kuwait follows suit¹².

So, along with this *Shia revival*¹³, besides a strengthening of the religious feeling in the repressed Shia populations, there is a great chance that this community re-align itself politically with Iran, opening the Islamic Republic possibilities of action that would jeopardize the oil production in countries led by Sunni oligarchies. Affecting the oil production here would be the logical option for Iran. On the one hand, it would decrease the power of the adversarial Sunni regimes and, on the other hand, this would strike a blow at the economies of Western countries allied with Shia Iran's old enemies.

Conclusion

At this point we are able to develop a clearer view of the Muslim world and of the way different interests intersperse and inter-relate. The countries ruled by Sunni regimes will naturally look for an external ally, who can provide protection against the revolutionary impulses coming from the Shia Iran. These alliances, on the flip side, will make Iran feel threatened and, at this point, the instrument simplest to use is striking its adversaries' oil interests, this course being greatly advanced by the disposition of the Shia communities as majorities in regions with the most important deposits of oil and natural gas in the Middle East and the world.

Following from this idea, threats, direct or indirect, against Iran, besides the mass-media noise meant for Western consumption, will achieve nothing but jeopardize the global fluxes of oil and natural gas. And here, the Western countries showing a bellicose attitude towards Tehran are divided in two major groups. On the one hand, we

have the US which still has sizable oil deposits on the floor of the Gulf of Mexico, deposits that can be tapped into in case of emergency.

On the other hand, we have the European countries which are overwhelmingly dependent on the mineral resources coming from the Middle East. Thus, in the event of an escalation of the conflict with Iran, escalation which the US seems sometimes highly inclined towards, especially under Saudi influence, the European states will be the ones who will suffer the most in the Western camp, even risking economic collapse.

In conclusion, even though the European countries might share some of the US-desired end-states in the Middle Eastern politics, their approach should be a more moderate one, because they are likely to be the first economic victims when Iran, through its leaders, feels its national survival is endangered. And the Iranian-preferred course of action should surprise no one, especially after the drone attack on the ARAMCO facilities at Abqaiq, in Saudi Arabia¹⁴.

NOTES:

1 Geneive Abdo, *The new sectarianism: the Arab uprisings and the rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni divide*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 2017.

2 Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival. How conflicts within Islam will shape the future*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, USA, 2007, p. 35.

3 *Ibidem*

4 "Ummah", Arabic word originally meaning "community", has come to designate the worldwide Muslim community.

5 Vali Nasr, *The Shia revival*, p. 36: "Ulama" is an Arabic word designating the community of the Islamic scholars, commonly deemed the guardians, the transmitters and the interpreters of the Islamic teachings. For a description of Ulama's functions in the original Muslim state.

6 Michael Scheuer, *Marching toward Hell. America and Islam after Iraq*, Free Press, New York, USA, 2008, p. 132.

7 Robert Fisk, *The great war for civilisation. The conquest of the Middle East*, Vintage Books, New York, USA, 2005.

8 <https://civilianmilitaryintelligencegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Shia-and-Oil-lg.jpg>, accessed at 12.02.2020.

9 As a matter of fact, at this moment, the manipulation by Iran of the Arab Shi'a communities' religious feeling is well documented. Geneive Abdo, *The new sectarianism*, p. 148.

10 Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 190.

11 *Ibidem*, p. 235.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 139.

13 Vali Nasr, *op.cit.*



14 Ben Hubbard, Palko Karasz, Stanley Reed, *Two major Saudi oil installations hit by drone strike, and US blames Iran*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html>, accessed at 11.02.2020.

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