

IDSA Monograph Series
No. 50 April 2016

Turmoil in West Asia

The Sectarian Divide Shapes
Regional Competitions



Talmiz Ahmad

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**INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE
STUDIES & ANALYSES**

रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

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Talmiz Ahmad
Dubai
April 2016

Introduction

Five years after the Arab Spring, West Asia is witnessing two major military conflicts in Syria and Yemen. Several states are deeply polarized and on the verge of breakdown, and there is a proliferation of jihadis across the region, engaged in extraordinary brutality against enemy states and “heretic” communities. Two transnational jihadi groups, Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS], are also engaged in a region-wide competition for geographical space and doctrinal influence. The violence, the fear of jihadi contagion, and the possible breakdown of state order across West Asia have pulled in international powers into the region's conflicts. The US and Russia are engaged in military assaults on “terrorist” targets; but, they also see the region as one more front in their larger global competitions in a world order that is being re-shaped by the emergence of new players seeking a role and influence denied them for many decades in a West-dominated system.

Though the ongoing conflicts and competitions are the result of recent developments in the West Asian State systems, the battle-lines have been deliberately drawn on the basis of primeval sectarian cleavages and animosities that have been resurrected and imbued with a contemporary resonance to serve modern day interests. The sectarian divide, or the division between the Sunni and Shia communities of Islam, is now the principal basis for mobilization of support against the “existential” threat perceived mainly by Sunni leaders from the “Other,” the Shias, primarily on account of what they see as an increasing Iranian influence in West Asia and its “interference” in their domestic politics by encouraging Shia aspirations and agitations.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, embedded as it was in the country's Shia traditions, marked the commencement of sectarian consciousness in contemporary regional politics. The revolution itself was part of the increasing salience of political Islam in West Asia vis-à-vis the “secular” blandishments of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, from the 1960s, and was projected by its clerical protagonists as an

“Islamic” not a sectarian assertion. In fact, many Sunnis at first viewed it as the successful mobilization of Islam against a secular regime backed by the West, while others viewed it as promoting the interests of “the poor and the oppressed.” The Tunisian Islamist intellectual and political leader, Rashid al-Ghannoushi, saw a parallel between the Khomeini revolution and the “global Islamic project” espoused by the stalwarts of political Islam, Abul Ala Mawdudi and Hassan al-Banna (founder of the Muslim Brotherhood). What they had in common, he believed, was the pursuit of a project anchored in Islam that had set up a solid support base and sought freedom for their people from the authoritarian and colonial yoke.¹

The response of the Arab Gulf monarchies was less enthusiastic. They saw a threat from revolutionary Islam to their rule. In order to ensure that their own youth were not attracted to this model, the Gulf Sheikdoms, united since 1981 in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), projected it as a uniquely Shia/Persian event. They then went on to attack the foundations of the revolution by attacking its basic doctrine—Shiism. Scholars have noted a significant increase in anti-Iran and anti-Shia critiques mainly emanating from the Gulf states or funded by them.²

This nascent sectarian cleavage soon became part of a larger political competition between the region's Islamic powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, as they sought to assert claims for leadership of the Islamic world and assiduously attempted to broaden their support bases across West Asia, North Africa and other parts of Asia. Their bilateral ties had several ups and downs. The lowest period was in the 1980s (the Iran-Iraq

¹ Brigitte Marechal and Sami Zemni, *The Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relationships: Doctrine, Transnationalism, Intellectuals and the Media*, Hurst & Company, London, 2013, p. 228.

² Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, Hurst & Company, London, 2011, pp. 12-13; Nader Hashemi, “Toward a Political Theory of Sectarianism in the Middle East: The Saliency of Authoritarianism over Theology”, October 27, 2015, at: <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/toward-political-theory-sectarianism-middle-east-saliency-authoritarianism-over-theology> (accessed January 8, 2016).

war, the Afghan jihad and the killing of several hundred Iranian pilgrims in Mecca during the Hajj in 1987), while the 1990s saw an upswing in ties during the presidencies of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammed Khatami. However, the US-led war on Iraq and the subsequent regime-change that installed Shia parties at the helm of government swung, in Saudi perceptions, the regional balance of power in Iran's favour.

Shia "empowerment" in Iraq after the US-led war and the ensuing sectarian civil conflict, with Iraq's Sunni radicals actively backed by the GCC regimes, sharpened the sectarian cleavage in Iraq, and had a spill-over effect across West Asia. Viewed from Riyadh, Iranian influence now seemed to dominate the regional firmament, with allies such as the Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad regime in Syria, and the Nouri al Maliki government in Iraq. The reference to the "Shia Crescent" by the Jordanian monarch, King Abdullah II, in 2008 had strong resonance in Riyadh.

The Saudi sense of strategic vulnerability in the face of what it saw as expanding Iranian influence significantly increased with the onset of the Arab Spring from January 2011. With the fall of Hosni Mubarak, the Kingdom lost its strategic partner who had helped to balance Iranian power in the region. The situation deteriorated as Saudi Arabia's ideological rivals in Arab politics, the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, assumed power through the ballot box in both Egypt and Tunisia. In fact, the government in Cairo reached out to Iran and sought to build what looked like a solid strategic partnership between these stalwarts of the two strands of Islam, a scenario in which the Kingdom had no place.

The last straw for the Kingdom was the uprising in Bahrain, which demanded sweeping political reforms, even holding up the possibility of a constitutional monarchy emerging from these public agitations. The Kingdom was concerned that any reform in that Shia-majority country would benefit the Shia and hold it up as the model of Shia empowerment across the Gulf. In mid-March 2011, the Kingdom reacted to stem this tide of reform by sending its armed forces into Bahrain and dispersing the agitators, after which the iconic Pearl Square, the venue of the protests, was itself knocked down. Saudi Arabia supported the Bahrain government in asserting that the agitators at

Pearl Square had been instigated and funded by Iran, allegations that have been made in similar circumstances many times earlier but for which no credible evidence has been offered.³

Saudi Arabia also opened a new front in Syria by mobilising militia seeking regime change, so that a more accommodative Sunni regime that emerged from this effort would bring Syria back into the mainstream Arab fold and thus restore to some extent the balance of power with Iran. From the Saudi point of view, regime change would yield another advantage: by choking off support to Hezbollah, Lebanon would also re-join the Sunni alliance.

Yemen has now become one more front in the ongoing regional sectarian confrontations. The background is that a domestic crisis emerged in Yemen about 20 years ago when, after the unification of the country in 1990, political, economic and doctrinal influence gradually shifted in favour of the now-majority Sunni community, mainly under Saudi initiative. The Kingdom sponsored Salafi clerics and the Brotherhood-affiliated *Islah* party to ensure its interests and keep the Zaidis, represented by the Houthi militia (based in the northern mountains of the Saada province bordering Saudi Arabia) and their supposed Iranian sponsors, at bay.

This arrangement was presided over by the president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who though himself a Zaidi, went along with the Saudis since they ensured his remaining in power. Following the handing over of power to Saleh's deputy, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi in 2012 in the wake of the Arab Spring agitations in Yemen—the arrangement being put in place under GCC auspices—the Houthis took advantage of the weak central authority to sweep into Sanaa, dislodge the new president, and, in alliance with former president Saleh, move southwards to Aden. Hadi fled to Riyadh and ignited a fierce Saudi counter-assault, since the Kingdom saw in the Houthi successes the prospect of Iran establishing its hold in a country with which Saudi Arabia shared a 1400-km border.

³ The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry in its report of November 2011 found no evidence of an Iranian role in the protests. See Frederic M. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2014, p. 91.

The Saudi-led battlefield opened in Yemen when from March 2015 Saudi and some GCC aircraft began pounding Houthi positions across the country with the avowed intention of despatching the marauding Houthis back to their mountain fastness in northern Yemen and restoring President Hadi in Sanaa. Here too the conflict has acquired a sectarian character in that the Houthis are Zaidis, a Shia group that reveres just the first five Imams of Shia doctrine instead of the 12 venerated by mainstream Shias, including those in Iran.⁴

Hence, not surprisingly, across the GCC countries, the remarks of rulers, establishment ulema and media are awash with fears of the impending “Shiisation” of West Asia.⁵ As Genieve Abdo has pointed out:

[The Sunnis] still see Iran's skilled and often mendacious hands behind every twist and turn [in regional affairs]. . . . To listen to many Sunnis in Arab states, particularly in the Persian Gulf, is to perceive all Shia as iron-clad Iranian loyalists.⁶

The sectarian factor is now the principal mobilizing force in the Syrian conflict, where Sunnis of different political persuasions see themselves waging a war to save their community from annihilation at the hands of the “Alawi” ruler and his “Shia” allies in Lebanon and Iran. The Sunni in Lebanon echo this perception as they see the Hezbollah backing al Assad against the Sunni majority who are claiming their rightful place in Syria. In Bahrain, the sectarian divide has superseded long-standing cross-sectarian demands for political reform, with the minority Sunnis rallying behind the royal family to protect their country from being taken over by a foreign invader, Iran, just as Iraq came under US occupation in 2003.

⁴ For the background to the Yemeni conflict, see Talmiz Ahmad, “Yemen in Meltdown: Domestic and Regional Competitions and the Destruction of Nationhood”, Special Feature, IDSA, New Delhi, August 12, 2015.

⁵ Genieve Abdo “The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shia-Sunni Divide”, Analysis Paper, Number 29, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, April 2013, p. 2.

⁶ Ibid, p. 4.

With regard to Yemen, while the Saudi government stated that its intervention in that country was to restore “legitimacy,” its clerics have projected the conflict only in sectarian terms. On March 26, 2015, the country’s Council of Senior Ulema sanctioned the intervention as a war to defend religion and declared that the soldiers killed would be martyrs, stating: “One of the greatest ways to draw closer to God almighty is to defend the sanctity of religion and Muslims.”⁷

The present-day centrality of the sectarian cleavage in defining political contentions in West Asia is the result of two separate developments in regional politics that have now coalesced. The first is the increasing salience of the sectarian identity in Iraq through the last few decades of the last century that culminated in the “empowerment” of the Shia in that country after the US-led war of 2003.

The second is the deliberate mobilization of domestic and regional support on a sectarian basis by Saudi Arabia and its allies to confront what the Kingdom and its allies see as the expanding influence of Iran in West Asia. Iran was perceived as benefitting, first, from the accession of the Shia to power in Iraq, and then from the developments surrounding the Arab Spring that, in the Saudi view, has placed Riyadh at a grave strategic disadvantage vis-à-vis its Shia neighbour, so as to constitute an “existential” threat to the Kingdom. This sectarian mobilization by Saudi Arabia is based on the most important and influential intellectual movement in contemporary Sunni Islam—Salafism.

Salafism is now central to the sectarian conflicts in different theatres of West Asia, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. It is also the foundational ideology of two other Sunni movements in competition—the mainstream activist Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, and its rivals for appeal and power, the jihadis represented today by Al Qaeda and the Islamic State for Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and their affiliates across the world.

⁷ Alexandra Siegel, “Sectarian Twitter Wars: Sunni-Shia Conflict and Cooperation in the Digital Age”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, December 2015, p. 11.

This monograph begins by reviewing the developments in Iraq that have led to Shia political empowerment in that country which has upset the sectarian balance of power in West Asia. It then examines the development of Salafism and the various strands of thought and action that define it today. It also discusses how the doctrinal differences between these strands are being used by state powers and non-state actors to exacerbate the sectarian divide to serve their interests. Finally, it looks at what implications these sectarian confrontations have for domestic and regional politics in West Asia.

The Sectarian Divide in Iraq

The vicious sectarian civil conflict in Iraq from 2003, in which jihadi forces have mobilized a large number of the country's Sunnis against their Shia compatriots, has its origins in Iraq's recent history. Fuller and Francke, in their pioneering book on the Arab Shia, have described Iraqi Shia identity thus:

Shiism in Iraq is not only a religious doctrine; it is also a culture and a geography, and its power derives as much from the richness of the heritage and environment as from religious belief.¹

However, the marginalization of the Shia in Iraq's political order commenced with the formation of the state just after the First World War, when the British, exercising political control over the country under the League of Nations mandate, disliked the Shias' anti-British activism and preferred the minority Sunni as lead role-players in state formation. The influence of the latter increased with the rise of Arab nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s and the expanding authority of the country's armed forces. At the same time, the Shia ulema encouraged the aloofness of their community from national politics, though secular-minded Shia found comfort in the socialist and communist parties, as also the Ba'ath party that came to power in 1968.

The Ba'ath in power systematically weeded out the Shia from political positions and, over time, curtailed Shia religious and cultural life.² In his outstanding work on sectarianism in Iraq, Fanar Haddad has noted that the roots of the present divide lie in the failure of the earlier

¹ Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shia: The Forgotten Muslims*, Palgrave, New York, 1999, p. 90.

² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

authoritarian regimes, particularly that of Saddam Hussein, to accommodate ethnic and confessional identities in a pluralistic state. Instead, the state insisted on defining national identity as a single monochromatic uniformity that ignored communal identities, seeing in sects a threat to national cohesion, while, at the same time, privileging Sunni symbols and identity at the expense of others.³

Thus, as Haddad notes, successive Iraqi regimes failed “to provide a narrative of the State that effectively encompasses Sunnis and Shias.”⁴ For instance, the regimes’ emphasis on pan-Arabism and the Arab identity did not resonate with the Iraqi Shia since it glorified the companions of the Prophet and the Arab Islamic empires, which were not a positive part of Shia history, memory or mythology. More seriously, through the twentieth century, several writers and even regimes denied the Arab identity of the Shia, highlighting their links with Iran and even suggesting an Iranian identity.⁵ The conflation of the Shia with Iran had the reciprocal effect of the Shia identifying the Iraqi state with the Sunni community, particularly as they suffered state repression and the denial of their identity, for instance through the suppression of their rituals from the 1970s.

Fuller and Francke have pointed out that Ba’ath party leaders felt a “visceral prejudice” for the Shia, mainly due to their own small town, lower middle-class origins which had denied them the experience of pluralism of the larger cities.⁶ This led them to pursue policies of widespread discrimination against the Shia, which included exclusion from domestic decision-making; denial of all public manifestations of Shia identity; degradation of Shia religious institutions, and harsh punishments for any signs of activism or dissent (though, in respect of the latter, the Ba’ath did not discriminate between Sunnis and Shia).

Repression of the Shia included the execution of Shia clerics. In 1979, 14 were executed, and another 13 in the next year. Between 1970 and

³ Haddad, p. 32-33.

⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

⁵ Fuller and Francke, p. 98.

⁶ Ibid.

1985, the regime executed about 41 clerics, including such luminaries as Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr and his sister, Bint al-Huda, in 1980, and Mohammed al-Hakim in 1988. Others executed also included members of Iraq's first Shia political organization, *Al Da'awa*, which was set up in 1958 but came into public light only in 1968. The Ba'ath government also initiated the policy of deporting Iraqi Shia to Iran on the ground that they were of Iranian descent: about 150,000 were deported between 1970 and 1981.⁷

The Iran-Iraq war marked a sea change in the Ba'ath government's policy toward the Shia. From 1983, as the war turned against the Iraqis, the government reached out to the Shia, who constituted the bulk of the soldiers in the army. Now, Saddam Hussein visited Shia shrines in Najaf and Karbala, thoroughly renovated the shrines and the towns, and even produced a family tree that showed that he was a descendant of Prophet Mohammed through Imam Hussain. The war was now projected as a rehearsal of the ancient Arab-Persian conflict, with national mobilization being done on pan-Arab and pan-Islamic basis. This effort was remarkably successful: once the war moved to Iraqi territory, the Shia soldiers of the Iraqi army were inspired by nationalist zeal and fought the Iranians with the same fervour as their Sunni brethren.

This camaraderie between the government and the Shia was just a temporary truce. The occupation of Kuwait after the war with Iran and the annihilation of Iraqi troops by the US-led coalition, led to a series of Shia uprisings in parts of southern Iraq in March 1991. Fuller and Francke have noted that these uprisings consisted "largely of politically unaffiliated Shia who fought out of anger and hatred for the regime and not for a particular ideology."⁸ But, this spontaneous, chaotic and leaderless event, in terms of its implications for subsequent Iraqi politics, constitutes "a turning point in sectarian relations and sectarian identity in Iraq."⁹ The regime deployed tanks, artillery and helicopter gunships against the Shia shrines and cities, severely damaging the shrines

⁷ Fuller and Francke, p. 101.

⁸ Ibid., p. 103.

⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

of Imams Hussein and Abbas in Karbala and that of Hazrat Ali in Najaf. Some accounts suggest that about 300,000 people were killed, though this could be an exaggeration. Even now, no firm figures of casualties are available.

However, the significance of the 1991 uprisings goes well beyond the events themselves. As Haddad notes, it was seen by the Shia as “a wave of unprecedented state violence against the Shia,”¹⁰ a collective punishment inflicted upon the community, with no distinction being made between political activists and ordinary citizens. The events got defined by several specific actions of the regime in the confrontations, though even now it is not possible to affirm their veracity. Thus, Hussain Kamil, Saddam’s son-in-law and war production minister, is said to have remarked in front of Imam Hussain’s shrine: “I am Hussain and you are Hussain, let’s see who is better [*ahsan*]”, before opening fire on the shrine. Again, it is said that the Iraqi tanks entering Karbala had the slogan: “*La Shiata ba’ad al yawm* [No Shias after today].”¹¹

The events of 1991 soon became the source of competing “myth-symbols” and perceptions between Iraq’s two sects. While the Shia saw them as a spontaneous expression of defiance against the tyrannical Ba’athist regime, the Sunnis were alarmed by their overt sectarian character, as suggested by the slogans used by the Shia— “There is no governor but Ali, we want a rule that is Ja’afari (Twelver Shia)” —as well as the public display of portraits of anti-regime Shia clerics, including those of Ayatollah Khomeini. Thus, for the Sunni, this was an Iran-inspired insurrection. This conviction led them to support the Saddam regime as the lesser of two evils and to accept the regime’s view that the uprisings represented “betrayal and treason.”¹² For the Shia, on the other hand, the 1991 events became “a chosen trauma and chosen glory,”¹³ the trauma of defeat and the glory of self-sacrifice,

¹⁰ Haddad, p. 73.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 127.

¹³ Ibid., p. 85.

both of which have been recurring features of Shia memory and mythology.

The 1990s were the period when Iraq was subject to crippling sanctions, which destroyed the economy, battered the middle-class and impoverished the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi people. To maintain its authority in these years of extraordinary domestic and external pressure, the Saddam regime turned to new sources of support: tribalism and religion. Contradicting earlier Ba'ath policies, the regime now began to attach importance to tribal identity and to favour tribal leaders who supported Saddam Hussein. In the area of religion, the regime launched in 1994 its "faith campaign" [*al-hamla al-imaniya*] in terms of which: alcohol was banned in public places; Islamic punishments were introduced; numerous mosques were constructed, and the Iraqi flag was now emblazoned with the phrase *Allahu Akbar*.

Both these initiatives further aggravated the sectarian cleavage in the country: in terms of the tribalism policy, the government favoured the Sunni tribes which were seen as loyal to the regime as opposed to most Shia tribes, which got increasingly marginalized. The focus on religion inevitably led to heightened sectarian identification. An observer quoted by Haddad said:

The [state's] "faith campaign" and public piety in general strengthened sectarian identity... Sunni or Sufi rituals were allowed and were expressed more visibly in the 1990s, whereas Shia rituals and expressions were tightly controlled.¹⁴

Another commentator affirmed this view thus:

The 1990s witnessed a feeling of betrayal in sectarian relations. The religious campaign was in the hands of the Religious Endowments Ministry, which was a Sunni organisation. The Faith Campaign hence took a character of Sunni Islam. This helped further sectarian division.¹⁵

¹⁴ Haddad, p. 112.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Thus, over the previous decades, but particularly in the years just before the US-led invasion of 2003 and the fall of the Ba'ath, the ground had already been prepared in Iraq for the collapse of cross-sectarian Iraqi nationalism and the assertion of claims to power that were sect-based. However, the latter was principally achieved due to the policies robustly pursued by the US administration in Iraq, abetted by the Iraqi exiles who now came to play a central role in the new political order. As Haddad points out:

[T]he new political order perpetuated and nourished the politicization of communal identity, which served to heighten Sunni fears of exclusion in the face of a more developed and institutionalized Shia identity. . . . [in April 2003] sectarian identity was unleashed and Shia identity became central to official narratives of State leading to the . . . identity disenfranchisement of Iraqi Sunnis.¹⁶

The Sunni saw in the fall of the Ba'ath the downfall of the political order that had defined their identity and nationhood. On the other hand, for the Shia opposition returning from exile, the priority concern was to correct the discriminations and repression of the earlier regimes and put in place an order that would accept the majority status of the Shia and ensure that they as a community would never again be victimized on account of their sectarian identity. This view was supported by the US-controlled Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), headed by the veteran US diplomat, Paul Bremmer. Thus, the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), set up to administer Iraq in July 2003, had 25 members appointed on communal lines: 13 Shia; five Sunni; five Kurd, and one each Turkoman and Christian. Again, the IGC was heavily loaded in favour of exiles: a third came from London, while, of the nine rotating presidents, eight were exiles.¹⁷

Nicolas Pelham has described this granting of primacy in Iraqi politics to communal identity as the "original sin" which elevated "sectarian

¹⁶ Haddad, p. 146.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 150 and 251.

and ethnic identity to the rank of primary organizing political principle."¹⁸ This was later enshrined in policies such as de-Ba'athification, the disbanding of the Iraqi army and the constitution-making process, all of which cumulatively contributed to the breakdown of state order in Iraq and the rise of Sunni extremist elements that went to war with the new order to reclaim what they thought was their lost patrimony.

Commencing from 2003, in this sectarian conflict, Sunni and Shia militia fought each other and compelled the cleansing of mixed neighbourhoods through hostage-taking, forced expulsions and bombings of mosques of the other sect. By the end of the decade, the sectarian divide in Iraq was firmly in place. The policies of Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki that actively discriminated against the Sunnis ensured that most of the latter distanced themselves from the new order and several joined jihadi groups against the central authority.

Having looked at the narrative relating to the deepening sectarian divide in Iraq and the recent empowerment of the Shia in that country, we will now turn our attention to the second stream in the contemporary sectarianism discourse, Salafism, which has been mobilized as a doctrinal and political tool by Saudi Arabia and its allies to challenge what they see as Iran's expanding influence in West Asia.

¹⁸ Nicolas Pelham, *A New Muslim Order: The Shia and the Middle East Sectarian Crisis*, IB Tauris, London, 2008, p. 104-05.

The Salafist Creed and Its Diverse Strands

Salafism¹ comes from the term *Al-Salaf al-Salif*, which means pious or virtuous ancestors, and refers to its central creed that Islamic belief and practice should replicate the model of Muslim life as lived in the times of the holy Prophet himself and his companions for three generations. At the heart of Salafism is *tawhid*, or monotheism, that is, the Unity of God, “the Indivisible, the Absolute, and the sole Real.”² This has three aspects: that God is the sole creator of the universe; that He is supreme and unique; and that He alone has the right to be worshipped, i.e., He cannot be associated with another deity. Any violation of this would be considered as *shirk*, the opposite of monotheism. Again, there can be no recourse to intercession in one’s worship of God, such as the worship of saints or other revered personalities, or veneration of their mausoleums, however exalted their spiritual stature might have been.³

According to the Salafis, the only sources for the knowledge of God’s will are the Koran and the Hadith, the “traditions” of the Prophet. The latter relate to the actions and utterances of the Prophet compiled on the basis of the accounts of his companions. Any belief or action

¹ “Salafism” discussed in this paper is to be distinguished from the 19th century Salafiyya movement associated with reformers Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Mohammed Abduh and Rashid Rida, who, confronted by imperialism, had sought to modernize Islam by going back to its roots and reconciling it with western ideas of faith, culture, society and politics.

² Cyril Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Stacey International, London, 1989, p. 400.

³ Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafist Movement”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 29, Washington DC, 2006, p. 209.

that is not sanctioned by these sources constitutes *bidaa* (innovation) and thus violates *tawhid*. Hence, Salafis reject the four schools of Sunni Islam and the full body of their scholarship (*taqlid*) as innovation, since they do not figure in the Koran and the Hadith. Following from this, the Salafis also reject the numerous changes in belief and practice that have come into Islam through the centuries due to the impact of local cultures, which have yielded several local customs.

The Salafis go further: they believe that Islam's two basic texts should be understood literally; they are so clear that their meanings should not be derived through human intellect and recourse to reason. Salafi scholars are thus reduced to what Quintan Wicktorowicz has called "the archaeology of divine texts" since Salafism does not provide for different interpretations or pluralism in religion.⁴ What then is the role of Salafi scholars? Their principal role is to apply the creed to contemporary issues. This sets before them two challenges: first, to identify which Hadith are authentic, and, two, which verses of the Koran and which Hadith should be used to address specific problems before the community. They do this through the approved mode of *qiyas* (analogy), which of course requires a deep knowledge of Hadith and the ability to apply reasoning by analogy in the application of Hadith sources.

The founding father of modern Salafism is the fourteenth century scholar Taqi Uddin Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), a jurist of the school of Sunni Islam founded by Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855). He wrote extensively about the need to read scripture literally, and criticized Sufism and popular practices such as visits to graves. He insisted on a personal study of the Koran and Hadith to learn about belief and practice. His deep personal convictions and his willingness to make sacrifices for his beliefs have endeared him to present-day Salafis.

Ibn Taymiyya had considerable influence on the 18th century religious reformer in Najd in central Arabia (now Saudi Arabia), Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703–87) who placed *tawhid* at the centre of

⁴ Ibid., p. 210.

Muslim life, and rejected foreign influences and superstitious practices.⁵ With regard to the application of the Koranic verses and the Hadith in specific circumstances, Wahhab emphasized the importance of historical contextualization rather than a literal interpretation.⁶ He noted that a Koranic verse or Hadith could provide more than one value or legal or theological principle; hence, there could be more than one interpretation depending on the issue being examined.

Thus, the application of Hadith sources to determine appropriate Muslim conduct in specific circumstances has provided considerable scope for variety in the conclusions drawn and positions asserted by different scholars, though they might be referring to the same sources. Over the years, this variety in interpretation has given rise to three broad positions in the Salafi movement: the first group is made up of those described by Wicktorowicz as “purists”. The purists’ principal concern is to cleanse the creed from “deviation” (caused by human temptations, human reason or idolatry) and then propagate this pure creed among Muslims (*dawaa*). They are also called “Quietists” since they reject an active role in political matters, confining themselves to advice to rulers rather than engaging in opposition publicly. Purist Salafis constitute the establishment ulema of the Saudi state, mainly the Council of Senior Ulema.

The second group consists of activist scholars, whom Wicktorowicz calls “politicos”. They go back to the setting up of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, which started as a cultural organization to teach the true tenets of Islam to Muslims who were being influenced by Western cultural norms in a secular order. Over the years, it became increasingly active in national politics though, in Egypt’s authoritarian system, its role was mainly at the grassroots level and among various professional syndicates. Towards the end of the last century, it built up a more

⁵ Natana Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, International Islamic Publishing House/Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 49.

detailed and even liberal political platform that combined Islamic principles with western democratic norms and institutions.⁷

In Saudi Arabia, the Salafi activists (as distinct from the establishment clergy) are represented by the younger generation of scholars, who, while not denying the scholarship of the earlier purists, claim they themselves have a better understanding of politics and world affairs, and thus can give better rulings on matters concerning the interests of the community. These activists were nurtured in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s and 1980s under the influence of Muslim Brotherhood exiles, initially from Egypt and later from Syria and a few other Arab countries, who helped set up the Kingdom's first major institutions for religious studies. They emerged in public in 1991 in reaction of the fatwa issued by the country's establishment ulema supporting the royal family, which was then seeking Western assistance to protect the country and undo the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. Functioning under the name of *Sahwa al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Awakening), they asserted the right to discuss politics and criticise rulers for their unIslamic conduct. Their divide from the purists was fundamental. According to Wicktorowicz:

From the politico perspective, while the purists insisted on preaching about doomsday, how to pray, the heresy of saint worship, and other elements related to *tawhid*, corrupt regimes in the Muslim world repressed the people, the Israelis continued to occupy Islamic land, the Americans launched an international campaign to control the Muslim world...The world was burning while the purists continued to advise people to pray for the very leaders who facilitated its destruction.⁸

The third group consists of Salafis who support the use of violence to achieve their ideal Islamic society. In modern times, their origins lie in

⁷ For the early history of the Muslim Brotherhood see Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1969 (Reprinted 1993); for a summary of later developments see: Talmiz Ahmad, *The Islamist Challenge in West Asia: Doctrinal and Political Competitions After the Arab Spring*, IDSA/Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2013, pp. 22-40 and 119-29.

⁸ Wicktorowicz, p. 223.

the “global jihad” organized in Afghanistan in the 1980s by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United States. This state-sponsored jihad drew thousands of young Muslims to the battlefields of Afghanistan where they were indoctrinated in Salafi Islam, given training in weapons and subversion, and then they achieved “victory” when the Soviet armed forces withdrew from the country and soon thereafter the Soviet empire itself disintegrated. This was the first major Muslim triumph against a Western power and affirmed to the jihadis the justice of their fight and the fact that Allah was once again with His people.

In the first few years after the Afghan jihad, jihadis in Saudi Arabia remained low key. They deferred to the Sahwa activists to take the lead to criticise the Saudi order through a series of petitions seeking political reform in the shape of a “conservative Islamic democracy”.⁹ The regime cracked down on the Sahwa from 1994, taking the help of the establishment ulema to discredit their political activism. This prompted the jihadis to emerge from the shadow of the Sahwa: in August 1996, Osama bin Laden, till then a supporter of the Sahwa, issued his “Declaration of Jihad against the Americans who are Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places,” thus laying the basis of a new ‘global jihad’, now to be led by Al Qaeda. In this statement, bin Laden paid due respect to the activism of the Sahwa, but saw the purist ulema as the agents of the Saudi State who were being used to destroy the “true” scholars who were “honest” and ready to make sacrifices for their beliefs.¹⁰ The role bin Laden saw for the latter was set out by him thus:

The importance of your duty is derived from the dangers of the fraudulent and deceiving operations which are being practised by the scholars of the regimes and the servants of the rulers who deal with the religion of Islam, who have hidden

⁹ Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2011, p. 198.

¹⁰ Wicktorowicz, p. 227.

the true state of the Ummah, and who have sold their religion for a cheap offer from this Life.¹¹

Two years later, in February 1998, Al Qaeda announced from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan that “killing the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can carry it out in any country where it proves possible.”¹² This was the clarion call for global jihad that culminated in the events of 9/11 and then spread its tentacles across West Asia and North Africa.

¹¹ Wicktorowicz, p. 227.

¹² Ibid., p. 199.

Sectarianism in Salafi Doctrine

Twenty years after bin Laden's declaration of global jihad, Salafism in its diverse expressions is now at the heart of most competitions and conflicts in West Asia. These include the regional proliferation and global reach of Al Qaeda and ISIS. It animates Islamist activist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, presently under siege (outside Tunisia) but preparing themselves to re-enter the political arena in future. More seriously, Salafism has provided the ideological basis for Saudi Arabia, the heartland of the Salafist belief-system, to mobilize support in its strategic competition with Iran on the basis of sectarianism, which has been at the core of Salafist ideology through the centuries. This sectarian cleavage between the Wahhabi state and the Shia republic has led to a series of proxy confrontations that have devastated Syria and Yemen and now threaten to engulf all of West Asia in a paroxysm of violence and destruction.

The divide in Islam between the Sunni and Shia sects goes back to the earliest days of the faith when its first adherents disagreed about the leadership of the community after the prophet's demise and went to war to assert their irreconcilable claims. These early conflicts went in favour of the majority Sunni faction that had sought to keep the leadership (caliphate) within the prophet's tribe rather than confine it to his immediate family. However, they left a legacy of bitterness and animosity, even though Hazrat Ali ibn Abi Talib, the prophet's nephew and son-in-law, on whose behalf the first claims to the caliphate had been asserted, became the fourth caliph. This is because after him, the caliphate and political power shifted to his enemies, with his family and followers, known collectively as *Shiat Ali* or Party of Ali, or simply as the Shia, marginalized in the Islamic domain.

The latter, though militarily defeated and politically isolated, were still able over time to separate themselves from the mainstream and build up a comprehensive doctrinal belief-system with its own scholarship, which developed alternative narratives of the faith and early history of

Islam. Over the next 200 years, it came to provide new authoritative doctrines and practices for acceptance and emulation by this nascent community. These, while adhering to the core tenets of Islam, went well beyond orthodox Sunni beliefs, thus putting in place a deep doctrinal cleavage that got solidified with later political competitions that gave rise to fresh accusations of “innovation” and “deviation” from the Sunni side and fresh narratives of persecution and victimhood from the Shia. These resonate to this day and have been commandeered to nourish modern-day geopolitical competitions. Thus, as Naser Ghobazadeh and Shahram Akbarzadeh have put it:

The current sectarian conflicts in the Middle East did not arise solely from renewed geopolitical rivalries between regional powers. They are also rooted in a solid, theological articulation proposed by classic Islamic political theology. The exclusivist approach, which is a decisive part of the political, social and religious reality of today's Middle East, benefits from a formidable theological legacy.¹

These two scholars refer to this theological legacy as “othering theology” which “dismisses all other manifestations of faith as false and illegitimate,”² and note that it has been a persistent feature of some sections of Muslim believers from the early days of the faith. Among the four schools of Sunni Islam, the Hanbalis (now mainly resident in Saudi Arabia and Qatar), were the most rigid in their approach to Islamic theology and jurisprudence, rejecting both reason and analogy in the study of the Koran and Hadith. Hanbal referred to the Shia as *rafidha* or rejectionists, for not accepting the succession of the first three caliphs as legal, a pejorative term that has come to be used widely in reviling the Shia in present times. Even at this early stage of Islam, many of the Hadith, cited by Hanbal and other Sunni scholars in regard to the caliphal succession, were questioned by the Shia, thus putting in

¹ Naser Ghobazadeh and Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Sectarianism and the prevalence of ‘othering’ in Islamic thought”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2015, p. 691.

² *Ibid.*, p. 694.

place a core doctrinal dispute between the sects and making anti-Shia discourse a central part of orthodox Sunni belief.³

The later Hanbali scholar, Ibn Taymiyya, continued in this tradition of broadly defining as *kufr* (non-belief) all beliefs and practices not sanctioned by the Koran and Hadith. This led him to maintain a deep animosity not just for the other Abrahamic faiths but also for the various sects of Islam, including the Shia. Concerned about divisions within Islam, he sought to unify the faith by insisting on a return to the *Salaf al-Salih*, the pious ancestors. He was fierce in upholding *takfir*, that is, declaring persons as apostates, with whom there could be no accommodation:

... any group of people that rebels against any single prescript of the clear and reliably transmitted prescripts of Islam has to be fought ... even if the members of this group make a public formal confession of their Faith by pronouncing the *Shahada*.⁴

Ibn Taymiyya's thinking found its most fervent expression in the 18th century reform movement in Najd, central Arabia, led by the scholar, Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhab. The beliefs and practices of the Shia, he felt, "violated monotheism to the point where [it seemed] that they had rejected Islam altogether."⁵ Wahhab's basic contention, in the Salafist tradition, was that, in terms of its doctrines, the Shia community had given greater authority to other scholars and leaders rather than to the prophet himself. Thus, in denying the right of Abu Bakr to ascend to the caliphate after the prophet's death, the Shia were rejecting the clear *ijma* (consensus) of the Muslim community, thus violating the Hadith: "...my community shall never be in agreement in error"; in fact, this Hadith had made *ijma* one of the principles of Islamic law.

³ Guido Steinberg, "Jihadi-Salafism and the Shias", in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism*, Hurst & Company, London, p. 112.

⁴ Ghobazadeh, p. 696; the "Shahada" is the fundamental belief of the Muslim in terms of which he testifies: "I perceive (and bear witness) that there is no god but Allah and I perceive (and bear witness) that Mohammed is the Messenger of God."

⁵ Delong-Bas, p. 84.

Again, according to the status of infallibility to the imams who succeeded Ali, the Shia are guilty of “association” with God.

Wahhab also questioned the authenticity of the various Hadith cited by the Shia in asserting the claims of Ali to succeed to the caliphate, pointing out that such “fabrication” constituted tampering with scripture and “the creation of false revelation.” Finally, he castigated the Shia for accusing some of the prophet’s companions of themselves fabricating Hadith, of describing the first three caliphs as usurpers and, above all, for pouring venom on the prophet’s wife, Ayesha bint Abi Bakr (reviled by the Shia for having been hostile to Ali’s succession as first caliph and later for taking up arms against him). Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhab concluded his indictment by accusing the Shia of “heresy, apostasy, corruption, and a vicious sin.”⁶

This anti-Shia posture thus became an integral part of Saudi Wahhabi thinking and state policy, and the points made by Ibn Abdul Wahhab continue to be part of the virulent anti-Shia discourse of modern-day Salafis of all three categories.⁷ Later, after the setting up of the Saudi State, while the Kingdom’s ulema backed King Abdulaziz in his fight against the zealous *Ikhwan* warriors who had been his allies in the early part of his conquests across the Arabian Peninsula, they drew the line at his accommodation of the Shia community in the country’s Eastern Province. They pointed out:

As to the Shia renegades [*al-rafidha*], we have told the imam [the king] that our religious ruling is that they must be obliged to become true Muslims, and should not be allowed to perform the rites of their misguided religion publicly. . . . [T]hey should swear to follow the religion of God and His Prophet, to cease all prayers to saintly members of the Prophet’s house

⁶ Delong-Bas, p. 88.

⁷ Though the legal approach of the Wahhabis (the followers of Ibn Abdul Wahhab) in doctrinal matters corresponds to the Hanbali school, they, in the Salafist tradition, deny any formal affiliation with this or any other school of Sunni jurisprudence.

... to cease their heretical innovations (*bidaa*) ... and they should cease to visit their so-called sacred cities Karbala and Najaf.⁸

While the new monarch did not implement the strict instructions of his ulema, the Shia were subjected to religious, social, cultural, economic and political discrimination as State policy, a situation that continues today.

The Wahhabi anti-Shia thinking found an echo among Salafists in other Arab countries such as Syria, Iraq and Egypt, with most of the scholars even questioning the Islamic identity of the Shia.⁹ This intellectual bias obtained a wider appeal after the Iranian revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war, which were seen in a sectarian light as indicating Iran's quest for regional domination and its desire to bring all Arabs into the Shia fold.

In Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood mobilized support against the regime of Hafez al Assad on the basis of its sectarian character as an "Alawi" entity, an offshoot of the Shia.¹⁰ From 1980, the Brotherhood expanded their attacks on al Assad to include all Shia, with their intellectuals giving full backing to this sectarian posture. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood ideologue, Said Hawwa (1935-1989) in his tract attacking Ayatollah Khomeini drew heavily from the writings of Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyya and went on to recall the various historical occasions when Shia figures had harmed Islam.¹¹ The Khomeini ascendancy in his view was thus just one more episode in this long narrative of

⁸ Steinberg, pp. 114-115.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 117-18.

¹⁰ The Alawis are a secretive and mystical sect that was founded in the 9th century; they constitute 12 percent of Syria's population, with small groups in neighbouring countries. In 1973, the Syrian president, Hafez al Assad persuaded the Lebanese cleric Musa al Sadr to declare the Alawis an offshoot of Twelver Shiism. Several orthodox Sunnis are suspicious of them and many do not even accept them as Muslims.

¹¹ The most frequent mention of Shia "betrayal" is that Shia personalities had first encouraged and then facilitated the Mongol attack on the Abbassid Caliphate in 1258.

betrayals when the Shia were collectively working with the “enemies of Islam” (that is, Israel) to take over all the Muslim territories in Iraq and the Gulf.¹²

Another source of anti-Shia discourse came from the heart of the Sahwa movement of Saudi Arabia in the shape of one its prominent ideologues, Mohammed Surour Zayn al-Abideen (b. 1938). Steeped in Salafist thought, he was also an activist in the tradition of the radical Egyptian Brotherhood intellectual Sayyid Qutb. In the early 1980s, he wrote his seminal anti-Shia work, *Then Came the Turn of the Fire-Worshippers*, one of the most influential books in this genre in the 1980s and the 1990s. Referring collectively to all Shiite “conspiracies” against Islam, he reserved particular venom for the Iranians, whom he described as “fire-worshippers” or *majus*, a reference to the pre-Islamic Zoroastrians of ancient Iran. He then elaborated on Khomeini’s hegemonic designs in the Gulf and West Asia.¹³

These views found a fertile soil in the Kingdom itself where the moderate reform programme of the majority Sahwa also included very virulent anti-Shia positions derived from time-honoured Wahhabi thought: in 1991, the Sahwa follower Ibn Jibrin stated that the Shia were apostates and hence needed to be put to death. In May 1993, another member, Nasir al-Omar, wrote a tract, *Situation of the Heretics in the Land of Tawhid*, in which he called for a ban on Shia practices and the exclusion of all Saudi Shia from government service.¹⁴

¹² Steinberg, pp. 119–120.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 120–21.

¹⁴ Lacroix, p. 183; these are extreme examples of sectarian prejudice from the Sahwa; in the early 1990s, the Sahwa as a group agreed on the general formulation in their petitions of seeking equality between “all members of society”, without specifically addressing the question of the status of Shia in the reformed polity. The sectarian issue acquired a new importance in the Sahwa movement when, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it split into three groups – the “neo-Sahwa”, a mildly activist but largely quietist group; another representing “Islamо-liberals.” while the third consisted of “neo-jihadis”, who upheld the core Wahhabi values relating to *tawhid* and *takfir*, and innovation, deviation and pluralism, and reached out to Al Qaeda and its local affiliate, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) [Lacroix, pp. 243–52].

These fulminations of Salafi intellectuals greatly influenced the thinking of the jihadis who, with their violent agenda, particularly their brutal attacks on the Shia, captured regional and global attention from the 1990s, a situation that continues to this day. The most virulent of these jihadi activists in Iraq after the US occupation was Abu Musab al Zarqawi (1966-2006). He saw the Shia as “the most evil of mankind” and described them as “the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy and the penetrating venom”, a sect which has been party to “treachery and betrayal throughout history.” He focused his assaults on the Shia in Iraq with the same enthusiasm with which he attacked US occupation forces, believing that:

The *rafidha* have declared a secret war against the people of Islam and they constitute the near and dangerous enemy to the Sunnis. Even though the Americans are also a major foe, the danger of the *rafidha* is greater and their damage more lethal to the *umma* than the Americans.¹⁵

The Al Qaeda ideologue, Ayman Zawahiri attempted to moderate the violence of his impetuous colleague on strategic and pragmatic (not doctrinal) basis. He questioned the need for conflict with the Shia “at this time” when all resources should be directed against the Americans and the government, as also the attacks on ordinary Shia. These attacks in his view would only reinforce their “false ideas,” when in fact it was necessary to preach to them the call of Islam and guide them to the truth. Zaraqawi rejected this advice, stating in September 2005 that he had declared “total war” on the Shia. In fact, Zaraqawi might have had some effect on the Al Qaeda leaders since from this time the anti-Shia content in their messages increased.¹⁶ Zawahiri also affirmed that there was no doctrinal difference between him and Zaraqawi on the subject: Shiism constituted a grave danger to Islam. He added:

[Twelver school of Shiism] is based on excess and falsehood whose function is to accuse the companions of Muhammad

¹⁵ Ghobazadeh, p. 693.

¹⁶ Steinberg, p. 123.

of heresy in a campaign against Islam. ... Their prior history in cooperating with the enemies of Islam is consistent with their current reality of connivance with the Crusaders.¹⁷

Two months before his death in June 2006, Zarqawi set out the next stage of jihad in which he said:

The Muslims will have no victory or superiority over the aggressive infidels such as the Jews and the Christians until there is a total annihilation of those under them such as the apostate agents headed by the *rafidha*.¹⁸

Soon after Zarqawi's death, his successor Abu Hamza al Mujahir continued Zarqawi's sectarian animosity:

You [Shias] who have taken gods in addition to Allah, and slandered the honour of the Prophet, and cursed his blessed companions, and are ardent in the service of the Crusaders ... we will continue what Abu Musab [Zarqawi] started with you, and we will fight you until the sword of monotheism is supreme and the word of your tyrants is brought low.¹⁹

¹⁷ Steinberg, p. 123.

¹⁸ Ghobazadeh, p. 693.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Sectarianism Emerges in West Asian Competitions (1979-2003)

Three developments in West Asia took place in a single year, in 1979, the commencement of the Islamic New Year, which significantly transformed the region's political landscape and generated consequences whose reverberations are resonant even today.

The first event was the Islamic Revolution in Iran in February of that year which sent into exile a pro-Western monarch and put in his place, for the first time in West Asian history, a political order that was directly under the control of the country's clerics. This arrangement was enshrined in the constitution and upheld rigorously by constitutionally prescribed institutions. Though the ruling leadership projected the revolution as "Islamic," the political authority of the clergy was based on Shia traditions. It also heralded, at least in the eyes of the Shias and the Sunni nations that surrounded it, the resurgence of the long-oppressed Shia community and the possible overturning of power equations that had for decades subordinated the Shia minorities across the region (as well as the majority Shia in Iraq and Bahrain). Thus, the Iranian revolution posed an ideological and a political challenge to the Arab monarchies in the Gulf.

The second event was more local, but nevertheless influential in terms of its regional implications: this was the brief occupation of the Haram Sharif (Holy Mosque) in Mecca in October 1979, by a group from within the country's Wahhabi establishment, led by Juhayman al Otaibi. He had earlier attracted official attention for his anti-monarchy views and, more importantly, his criticism of the establishment ulema for supporting an illegitimate regime. His writings reflected what David Commins has described as "a blend of nineteenth century Wahhabism's deep revulsion at any contact with infidels, the *Ikhwan's* zeal for jihad

and a strain of millenarianism altogether foreign to Wahhabism.”¹ The occupiers of Islam’s most sacred mosque asserted that: “The kingdom’s rulers, pawns of the infidels, were unworthy of true believers’ respect. The oath of allegiance that Saudi subjects had given to their king was no longer valid because the royal family had failed to uphold the laws of Islam.”² The occupation continued for a fortnight until the occupiers were killed or apprehended through military action.

The third event had global and regional implications: this was the entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan to support a local pro-Soviet government then facing an insurrection, which enjoyed some external assistance, mainly from the West and its regional allies.

The Saudi royal family took the critique of Haram Sharif’s occupiers as seriously as it did the revolution in Iran. These events were seen as a threat to the royal order at home and the Saudi leadership of the Islamic world, as well as a strategic challenge to its regional interests. The Kingdom in response took two initiatives. First, in Afghanistan, in tandem with its Cold War allies, the US and Pakistan, it converted the Afghan national struggle into a “global jihad,” providing from its coffers huge resources to support this international endeavour. It also encouraged several thousand of its youth to join the jihad, so that Saudis constituted the largest foreign contingent (after Pakistanis) in this war against “godless communism”.

Second, it encouraged the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, to launch a pre-emptive strike against Iran to stem the tide of its revolution that was threatening to overflow into Arab lands by giving a sense of hope and salvation to the beleaguered Shia communities across the region, particularly in the Gulf Arab Sheikdoms. (The latter, in the face of the Iranian “threat”, also set up in 1981 a collaborative entity, the GCC, to pool their resources and coordinate counter-measures against Iran.)

While the Iran-Iraq war ground to a halt eight years later when it had exhausted the resources and the will to fight on both sides, it ensured

¹ David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, IB Tauris, London, 2009, p. 164.

² Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, Allen Lane, London, 2007, p. 69.

that the Sunni-Shia division would now be the “marker of identity” across the region and could be mobilized to shape all the developments that henceforth took place in the region.³ In the early days of the Islamic revolution, there had been considerable enthusiasm for the revolution among the Shia, along with Iranian efforts to promote doctrinal, political, and even military networks in different GCC countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait.⁴ The conduct of the Shia during this period and the response of the ruling regimes provided the template that has not changed much in contemporary times.

In Bahrain, the Islamic revolution encouraged the formation of different Shia groups agitating for equal rights; some extremists even called for the overthrow of the royal family and its replacement by an Islamic republic. In its response, the government followed a carrot-and-stick approach of coming down harshly on the extremists, while seeking to boost the moderates by providing economic incentives to upgrade living standards, without however effecting real political changes. More importantly, the authorities painted all Shia agitations as Iran-inspired and the agitators as betrayers of the nation, thus creating a sectarian divide between the various sections of the country that had been seeking reform on a non-sectarian basis.

In Saudi Arabia, the Iranian revolution inspired widespread demonstrations in the Shia-dominated Eastern Province in which the government was criticised on three bases: poor living conditions, lack of freedom of expression, and the Kingdom's hostility to Iran. Many of the agitations against economic conditions were non-sectarian in character, with oil workers and students being in the majority. Here again, the regime took both coercive and accommodative measures, announcing new development projects, appointing a new governor, and even permitting public display of Shia rituals and the Shia call to prayer. The price the government paid for these conciliatory actions was to permit the Wahhabi clergy to boost its sectarian discourse,

³ Wehrey, p. 22.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 28–37.

both to enhance its religious credentials at home and pose a doctrinal challenge to Iran.⁵

The Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war taken together played a profound role in defining identities and issues in sectarian terms in the Gulf, shaping mutual prejudices and offering important lessons, which would shape future strategies on both sides. At the national level, the war exhibited to Iran the collective hostility of its Sunni Arab neighbours who had ganged up to destroy the revolution and had even brought western powers into the region to bolster their strength and tilt the regional balance of power in their favour. As Michael Axworthy notes, the war reinforced to the Iranians that they “could depend only on their own resources, and that fine words in international institutions counted for little.”⁶ But the war also imbued into the Iranians a great sense of national pride and self-confidence. Axworthy points out:

Now, for once, the country had set up its government by its own efforts, had rejected foreign meddling and foreign threats, had defended itself for eight years despite great suffering against tough odds and had come through. Iran was now a *real country*, with *real* independence.⁷

The stage was thus set for what a veteran Iranian diplomat from the Shah’s time now saw as the opportunity “to turn Iranian dreams of past glory into realistic ones for the future.”⁸

From the perspective of the GCC countries, the war affirmed the security threat posed by resurgent Iran and the attendant importance of Iraq as a buffer between the Islamic Republic and the GCC states. These considerations would continuously resonate with the GCC regimes as they responded to the subsequent regional crises—the Gulf War of 1990–91, the events of 9/11 and the US-led attack on Iraq, and regime change in 2003.

⁵ Wehrey, pp. 30–34.

⁶ Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, Allen Lane, London, 2013, p. 293.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Sectarianism Drives Conflicts in West Asia (2003-10)

The Iraq war of 2003 overthrew the Saddam regime and put in place a new political order that overtly sought to empower the majority Shia community, making sectarian identity the principal factor in the politics of the country. Traumatized by these sudden changes in national power equations, most of Iraq's Sunni Arab community initially distanced itself from the new political system that was tilted so heavily against its interests. It made no contribution to constitution-making nor did it participate in the elections of 2006. Instead, a Sunni jihadi insurgency was organized by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, which included armed raids, roadside bombings, kidnappings and above all suicide attacks. As noted above, this jihadi campaign had a distinct sectarian character in that many of its targets were Shia—government officials, security personnel, Shia militia, but mainly ordinary people.

This sectarian violence had a strong symbiotic relationship with the neighbouring GCC countries in that considerable funding and recruits came in to bolster the jihad from GCC sources. But, contradicting this trend, at first many Sunni Iraqis refused to countenance jihad and in fact turned militarily on their co-sectarianists in Iraq's own *Sahwa* [Awakening] movement in 2007-09, when Sunni tribes in Anbar province defeated the Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

However, the sectarian virus had already gone too deep into the body politic: Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, fearing a coup from a pluralist national army, quickly denuded the force of its Sunni and Kurdish officers and men, refused to accommodate the *Sahwa* fighters in this depleted army and increasingly relied for security on a variety of Shia militia. Under al Maliki's rule, Sunnis were largely excluded from the political, economic and social life of the territory where they had been rulers for several centuries. The distinguished Sunni scholar and head

of the Association of Scholars in Iraq, Muthana Hareth Al Dari, described the Shia agenda in the context of the US invasion thus:

The Shia objective in Iraq was to force the Sunnis to leave the country. . . . The dominance of the Shia in Iraq and the increasing sectarianism encouraged sectarianism in other countries.¹

This sectarian approach of the al Maliki government gave new life to the jihadi movement, which, bolstered by tribes, Sufi groups, professionals and army and security personnel from Saddam's forces, re-emerged as the ISIS and, in mid-2014, set up the Islamic State (IS) as a "caliphate" across territories captured by it in Iraq and Syria.

These developments in Iraq had profound implications for the sectarian scenario across the Gulf. In Saudi Arabia, after the crackdown on Shia activists in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, several Shia agitators had gone into exile in Iran, the UK and the USA, from where they conducted a robust campaign focused on pluralism, adopting the name "Reformist Movement". This movement, led by Hassan al Saffar, maintained links with some of the enlightened intellectuals among the Saudi Sahwa and backed their reform campaign. Separately, while confronting the demands for political reform from the Sahwa movement in the 1990s, the Saudi government also thought it useful to project a more accommodative stance toward the Shia by releasing prisoners and promising steps to end discriminatory policies.²

After the war of 2003, Shia communities in the GCC countries, fearing that their rulers would take a negative view of Shia empowerment in Iraq, hastened to affirm their loyalty to the Saudi state and to call for cross-sectarian unity in Iraq.³ Encouraged by apparent government support and that of the liberal Sahwa, they submitted a petition to the king in December 2003, seeking "greater religious freedom, equality

¹ Genieve Abdo, "Salafists and Sectarianism: Twitter and Communal Conflict in the Middle East", Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, 26 March, 2015, p. 17.

² Wehrey, pp. 223–24.

³ Ibid., p. 107.

and partnership" in the state order.⁴ In line with earlier Sahwa demands, they also asked for constitutional monarchy. Within three months, Sahwa liberals and some Shia petitioners were arrested by security forces.⁵ In spite of this setback, the Saudi Shia continued to pursue cross-sectarian dialogue with liberal Sahwa members in which they were supported by the then Crown Prince Abdullah. The latter, at the Mecca conference of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in 2005 obtained a resolution that recognized the four Sunni schools and two Shia schools (Twelver and Zaidi) as "legitimate and sacrosanct expressions of Islam."⁶

But from the Shia perspective, their situation continued to deteriorate since the anti-Shia posture of the Saudi clerical establishment did not change. Even among some sections of the Sahwa, the attitude seemed to become increasingly unfriendly. The Sahwa movement had already split into many groups, with several former members now seeking to ingratiate themselves with the government. Even the eminent Sahwa leader, Safar al Hawali, launched a fierce attack on the Shia petitions for reform, saying:

The Shia adopted a tone that seeks revenge not dialogue. They either want a Shia government that imposes Shiism on all or a secular government that allows everyone to fight for his religion under the false pretext of freedom. A civil war will then be imminent. We are concerned that Shia find the right path so that they escape misery in the afterlife. . . . We should discuss with them the true nature of monotheism, dissociation from blasphemy and recognition of our four caliphs.⁷

The Iraq situation and the subsequent developments in Lebanon in 2006, when Israel attacked the Hezbollah and bolstered their status in

⁴ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2007, p. 90.

⁵ Wehrey, p. 109.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁷ Al Rasheed, pp. 90-91.

the region, created what Wehrey has described as a “sense of siege” in the Kingdom’s royal family and the Salafi religious establishment.⁸ The royal family’s approach was largely influenced by its concern that the Shia-led regime in Iraq and attendant Shia empowerment, in general, had led to increased Iranian influence in Iraq, thus depriving the Kingdom of its strategic bulwark against its regional rival. Besides these geopolitical issues, Saudi Arabia could not ignore the steady deterioration in the status and even the security of the beleaguered Sunnis in Iraq due to the overt privileging of the Shia community.

Linked with these concerns was the possibility that the Kingdom’s own Shia minority, encouraged by Iran or by Shia successes in Iraq, would mobilize itself to assert its own rights, and, in a nightmare scenario, even seek secession of the oil-rich Eastern Province, perhaps with US support⁹ These possibly xenophobic concerns shaped the Saudi response to the regional challenges, which consisted of the following actions:

- (i) In Iraq, to counter Iran’s incursions and to dilute the power of the Shia militia, Saudi Arabia decided to extend full support to the jihadi uprising;
- (ii) it blamed the Hezbollah for instigating the assault upon itself from Israel through its provocative actions in sending bombs into Israeli townships; and
- (iii) it took a tough position against its domestic Shia agitators.

In implementing these overtly sectarian policies, the Kingdom’s leaders obtained the full backing of their establishment clergy and large sections of the Sahwa who rallied around the rulers in the face of what they saw as an “existential threat,” domestic and geopolitical, from the Shia. Saudi official, media and clerical discourse in the aftermath of the Iraq war had the following characteristics:¹⁰

⁸ Wehrey, p. 106.

⁹ Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 125-134.

- (i) It linked Shiism with US imperial interests, recalling the long-standing Sunni canard against the Shia as traitors to Islam.
- (ii) In the face of the escalating sectarian strife in Iraq, the clerics made fervent appeals to Saudi youth to rush to Iraq and assist their Sunni brethren.
- (iii) Between 2006-08, the tone of the clergy became even more emotive in their anti-Iraq and anti-Iran fatwas as they condemned the “massacres” of the Sunnis, described the Shia as “unIslamic”, and called for the repression of Shia at home.
- (iv) A fatwa banned Sunni support to the Hezbollah, calling it a blasphemous organization and the “Party of Satan”.
- (v) Sections of the Saudi clergy also took a hard line against the apparently reform-oriented posture of King Abdullah. Just days before the cross-sectarian dialogue convened by him in Mecca in May 2008, several clerics signed a statement referring to the Shia as “the most evil sect of the nation, and the most hostile and scheming against the Sunnis and Muslims collectively.”¹¹

¹¹ Wehrey, p. 132.

Sectarianism Ascendant (2011-16)

Taking advantage of popular uprisings against the Assad regime in the wake of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia entered the Syrian conflict by backing the Free Syrian Army (FSA), made up of deserters from the national army, to achieve a quick regime change, bring a major Arab country under Sunni rule and thus restore the strategic balance vis-à-vis Iran. However, the Saudi game plan has not worked: the US has not played its expected role of bombing the Assad regime out of existence, as it had done earlier in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. In fact, it desisted from an overt military role against the regime even when “evidence” was provided that the Damascus government had used chemical weapons against its people, supposed to have been a “redline” to ensure US intervention. Again, FSA backed by the Saudis did not make much headway in attracting recruits from the national army or secure territorial gains, compelling Saudi Arabia to get more directly involved in supporting the various Islamic militia.

Over the last three years, the Kingdom has become more deeply involved with complex Syrian militia politics, their temporary alliances, the movement of fighters from one group to the other, ties that several of them have with avowed jihadi groups, and the fickle loyalties and venality of many of the fighters. These factors led Saudi Arabia to set up *Jaish al Islam* (Islamic Front), formed at the end of 2013 to bring most Salafist militia into one group for better coordination and more effective use of resources.¹ However, the Kingdom has found itself increasingly relying on the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat Nusra in its fight

¹ *Jaish al Islam* announced its existence in November 2013; it is said to have between 45,000-60,000 fighters, which makes it the largest opposition fighting coalition in Syria. From the beginning, it has worked very closely with Jabhat Nusra. [“The Islamic Front and Jabhat Nusra”, Courage Services Inc., Arlington, VA, April 2014, at: www.courageservices.com.]

against the ISIS and the Assad forces and hence, in March 2015, it founded *Jaish al Fatah* (Victory Front), which includes Jabhat Nusra.

What has changed the ground situation is the entry of Russian forces into the Syrian war zone in October 2015, their close collaboration with the national army and its Hezbollah and Iranian partners, and the punishment they are now inflicting on many of the Kingdom's allies in the field. These developments have raised serious doubts about the efficacy of Saudi plans to effect regime change and bring Syria back into the Sunni mainstream. The winners in this scenario seem to be jihadis. As Charles Lister points out: "Syria currently represents the centre of the world for jihadist militancy."² Lister notes that from 2011 till September 2015, at least 30,000 non-Syrian fighters have joined the Syrian jihad, signalling in his words the considerable "Islamist ideological fervour [attached by these fighters] to a specific political-military cause."³

In Saudi Arabia, developments in Bahrain and Yemen are being framed in sectarian terms by officials and, more often, by official clerics and the media. After the entry of GCC forces into Bahrain, prominent Saudi ulema condemned the demonstrations in Manama in purely sectarian terms, saying: "This [the agitation in Bahrain] represents a forefront for a Safavid expansion that dreams of seizing the Arab Gulf and forming a Persian crescent."⁴ Even the "reformist" Saudi writer, Jamal Khashoggi, asserted somewhat dubiously that Bahrain just could not have popular agitations for a democratic order since the polity is polarized on sectarian basis: "Someone needs to convince the Bahraini opposition that they are not part of the Arab Spring. [Unlike Egypt and Libya], Bahrain is [a] society divided between Sunnis and Shias."⁵

² Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, Hurst & Company, London, 2015, p. 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Paul Aarts and Carolien Roelants, *Saudi Arabia: A Kingdom in Peril*, Hurst & Company, London, 2015, p. 112; "Safavid" refers to the dynasty that ruled Iran [Persia] between 1501–1732; its founder, Ismail I (r. 1501–24) made Twelver Shiism the state religion.

⁵ Ibid.

Besides the role of governments and the official ulema in fanning the sectarian divide, social media has now become the most potent platform for the promotion of sect based animosities, particularly on the Sunni side. Influential clerics with millions of followers actively contribute to these sectarian narratives and hate speech so that “dehumanizing anti-Shia and anti-Sunni slurs are increasingly making their way into the common discourse.”⁶ This rhetoric of mutual intolerance and animosity has increased in vehemence with the continued violence in Syria, sectarian confrontations in Iraq, and the Saudi military intervention in Yemen. On the Sunni side, most of the messages recall the sectarian divisions of early Islam and later grievances, and then place them in the context of ongoing conflicts.

One of the most influential Saudi users of Twitter is the cleric, Mohammed al Arefi. He is said to be a Salafist, but is also supportive of Brotherhood thinking and has called upon Arab youth to join the jihad in Syria.⁷ With about 9 million followers, he has been active for several years and, with his extremist remarks, is believed to have made a major contribution to fomenting sectarian differences. For instance, in 2009, during the ongoing sectarian conflicts in Iraq, he said in a sermon: “They [the Shia] would use the most severe torture methods against them [the Sunnis]. They would kidnap a child, boil him in water, skin him like a sheep, and then bring him on a platter, wrapped in a cloth” to his family. In 2011, he spoke of Shiism thus:

Shiism is a heresy. It did not exist at the time of the Prophet or Abu Bakr or Othman. They [the Shia] have an issue with making Ali greater than he is. Then they started with other heretical things like building shrines on graves, praying to others than God, claiming that Ali knows the unknown and that he brought the dead back to life.⁸

⁶ Paul Aarts and Carolien Roelants, *Saudi Arabia: A Kingdom in Peril*, p. 3.

⁷ In 2013, he was arrested for travelling to Egypt and denouncing the coup against the Morsi government. See Abdo [2015], pp. 25-26.

⁸ Abdo [2015], p. 25.

Nabil al Awadhy, a Salafist cleric from Kuwait, with 4 million followers, has been particularly hostile to the governments in Iraq and Syria. In June 2013, he tweeted: "To the men of Iraq and its heroes [the Sunni]: Maliki is sending his Safavid soldiers to Syria to kill children and violate women and destroy the country." In the same month, he again tweeted: "Iran wants to take attention away from Syria and shift it to Lebanon. The head of the snake does not know that Muslims will not give up on Iraq, or Syria, or Lebanon. And, Iran will be returned to the Muslims."⁹ At the onset of the war in Yemen, the Saudi cleric, Sheikh Nasir al Omar, tweeted: "It is the responsibility of every Muslim to take part in the Islamic world's battle to defeat the Safavis and their sins, and to prevent their corruption on earth."¹⁰

⁹ Abdo [2015], pp. 22–23.

¹⁰ Siegel, p. 11.

Sectarianism in ISIS Violence

In a little over a year, ISIS has acquired the character of a proto-state, with territory the size of the United Kingdom, a population of six-ten million, a standing army of several thousand, federal, provincial and municipal administrations with policy-makers, judges, civil servants and security officials. It also has a treasury with revenues of about half a billion dollars collected since 2011, and, for all its public barbarity, it has the ability to attract a few hundred fresh recruits every month.¹

Its dramatic achievements, its rampant violence, and the threat it poses to regional order and global security have left officials and commentators desperately seeking some understanding of its doctrinal wellsprings, the bases of its operational successes, and its continuing allure for young people in West Asia and even in western countries. In August 2015, a public official in a NATO country confessed that he was “horrified but baffled” by the “bewildering nature” of the ISIS phenomenon.² The distinguished French scholar of Islam and West Asian affairs, Olivier Roy, has said that ISIS’s membership represents a “youth radicalization movement” that is not very different from the 19th century French anarchists and the Baader Meinhof revolutionaries of the 20th century.³

¹ For the best accounts of the early history and spread of ISIS see: Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, Saqi Books, London, 2015; Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, William Collins, London, 2015, and Jason Burke, *The New Threat from Islamic Militancy*, The Bodley Head, London, 2015.

² Anonymous, “The Mystery of ISIS”, *The New York Review of Books*, August 13, 2015, at: www.nybooks.com/2015/08/13/mystery-isis/?printpage (accessed on December 20, 2015).

³ Emma-Kate Symons, “ISIL is really a revolt by young Muslims against their parents’ generation”, *Quartz*, December 3, 2015, at: <http://www.qz.com/562128/isil-is-a-revolt-by-young-disaffected-muslims-against-their-parents-generation> (accessed on December 18, 2015).

Scott Atran, an American scholar based in France, believes that ISIS is a revolutionary movement that attracts “marginal misfits” in West Asia and in the West who are “longing for something in their history, in their traditions, with their heroes and their morals.”⁴ The ISIS fulfils this need, while enabling them to fight for and for their comrades, as many warriors have done before.⁵

Graeme Wood has, however, asserted in a controversial paper: “The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic; very Islamic”. He points out that “the religion preached by its most ardent followers derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam.”⁶ According to Wood, ISIS’s Islam has a “medieval religious nature” that is quite different from the mindset and persona of Al Qaeda’s founder Osama bin Laden and many of his early followers (including those who participated in the 9/11 attacks), who reflected a modern and secular cosmopolitanism. In line with the strictest norms of Salafism, the ISIS follows *takfir* most rigidly and narrowly, and has no compunction about its large-scale killings, believing them to be sanctioned by Islamic doctrine. Hence, not surprisingly, it has found justification for slavery, crucifixion and beheadings, since they are approved in Islam’s basic texts, the Koran and the Hadith.

Karen Armstrong, the distinguished writer on religion and religious conflicts, disputes the suggestion that ISIS is anchored in medieval Islam. She sees it as “a thoroughly modern movement that has become an efficient, self-financing business with assets estimated at \$ 2 billion.”⁷ She also sees ISIS’s violence as calculated: “There is nothing random or

⁴ Scott Atran, “ISIS is a revolution”, *Aeon magazine*, 15 December, 2015, at: aeon.co/essays/why-isis-has-the-potential-to-be-a-world-altering-revolution (accessed on December 22, 2015).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants”, *The Atlantic*, March 2015, at: www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980 (accessed on February 19, 2015).

⁷ Karen Armstrong, “Wahhabism to ISIS: how Saudi Arabia exported the main source of global terrorism”, *New Statesman*, 27 November, 2014, at: www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2014/11/wahhabism-isis-how-saudi-arabia-exported-main-source-global-terrorism (accessed on December 31, 2015).

irrational about IS violence. The execution videos are carefully and strategically planned to inspire terror, deter dissent and sow chaos in the greater population.”⁸ Sohaira Siddiqui and William McCants agree with Armstrong’s assessment, noting that ISIS’s ideologues use scripture and Islamic history very selectively and, on pragmatic grounds, even move away from literalist readings of texts when it suits their purpose.⁹

Cole Bunzel places ISIS firmly in the tradition of jihadi-salafism. This school was initially shaped by the coming together of Salafi tradition and the radical activist discourse of the Brotherhood ideologue, Sayyid Qutb. However, in the last 20 years, the Salafi aspect has gained greater prominence, particularly in the later writings of the Jordanian intellectual, Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, whose “focus on the more violent aspects of Salafism gave birth to Jihadi-Salafism.”¹⁰ However, Bunzel goes on to say, while both Al Qaeda and ISIS represent the Salafi character of the jihadi movement, the ISIS is much more severe in its beliefs and practices: in contrast to Al Qaeda, ISIS “is absolutely uncompromising on doctrinal matters, prioritising the promotion of an unforgiving strain of Salafi thought.” Not surprisingly, al-Maqdisi had earlier distanced himself from Zarqawi on account of his extreme violence, particularly against the Shia, and is now a critic of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and his caliphate.¹¹

ISIS has continued the sectarian belief-system of its predecessor and mentor, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, and his immediate successor, Abu Omar al Baghdadi. On March 13, 2007, after announcing the setting up of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), al Baghdadi also issued an audio

⁸ Karen Armstrong, “Wahhabism to ISIS: how Saudi Arabia exported the main source of global terrorism”, *New Statesman*, 27 November, 2014, at: www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2014/11/wahhabism-isis-how-saudi-arabia-exported-main-source-global-terrorism (accessed on December 31, 2015).

⁹ William McCants and Sohaira Siddiqui, “How does ISIS approach Islamic scripture?”, *Markaz, Middle East Politics and Policy*, Brookings, 26 March, 2015, at: www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/03/26-how-does-isis-approach-islamic-scriptures (accessed on May 6, 2015).

¹⁰ Cole Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State”, *Analysis Paper*, No. 19, Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, March 2015, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 27 and 35.

statement setting out the “fundamentals” of the nascent “state.” These included the description of the Shia as “as a group of idolatry and apostasy”. Later, al Baghdadi, in a clear reference to Sunni criticisms of Shia beliefs, added in his list the condemnation of “unbelief and apostasy” of those who “disparage his [the Prophet’s] honoured stature, or the stature of his pure family and blameless companions among the four rightly-guided Caliphs and the remainder of the companions and [their] families.”¹²

ISIS ideologues and teachers in schools in ISIS territory have frequently supported their pronouncements with references to the Wahhabi tradition, particularly the writings of Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhab.¹³ The ISIS doctrine espouses all the firmly held Salafi tenets such as: associating only with “true” Muslims and that all Shia are apostates. ISIS, like Al Qaeda, believes in defensive jihad since it sees that Muslim lands are under attack from “apostate” rulers and their “crusader” allies; in fact, Muslim rulers are “traitors, unbelievers, sinners, liars, deceivers, and criminals”, and it is more urgent to fight them than the “occupying crusaders.”¹⁴

Fighting the Shia enjoys the highest importance in ISIS’s “offensive jihad” since they are apostates and idolators. More seriously, they are seen to be expanding their influence across West Asia, so that, in al Baghdadi’s words, “a Shiite crescent [is] extending from Tehran to Beirut”; Iran, Hezbollah and the Assad regime are part of this “crescent”, with plans to make Iraq into a Shia state as well.¹⁵ ISIS’s response has been swift and brutal. Its videos of May and June 2011, before its dramatic capture of Mosul, documented the killings of hundreds of unarmed Shia prisoners, with thousands of sectarian killings taking place off-camera as well.¹⁶ These were deliberately done to strike terror in the hearts of Iraqi soldiers, and were remarkably effective since, a month later, about 20,000 Iraqi soldiers in Mosul abandoned their uniforms, weapons and the city without fighting this barbarous enemy.

¹² Bunzel, pp. 38–39.

¹³ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 10–11.

¹⁶ Stern and Berger, p. 116.

Saudi Sectarian Politics

The wellsprings of contemporary sectarianism originated in two separate streams: first, the increasing sectarian cleavage in Iraq that culminated in the sect-based violence of al Zarqawi in Iraq and the attendant sectarian approach of the Nouri al Maliki administration in Iraq, which have shaped the mindset and doctrine of ISIS. The second is the mobilization of the sectarian divide by Saudi Arabia and its GCC associates to challenge the reform agenda thrown up by the Arab Spring while simultaneously responding to increasing Iranian influence in the region. These two streams have now coalesced into a single stream of deep-seated anti-Shia animosity. This coming together of two apparent enemies on a shared ideological platform has reminded several commentators of the belief-system they hold in common. In a sharply worded article, written just after the ISIS attacks in France in November 2015, Kamel Daoud saw no differences in the beliefs and practices of ISIS and the Saudi state. He recalled, "the kingdom also relies on an alliance with a religious clergy that produces, legitimizes, spreads, preaches and defends Wahhabism, the ultra-puritanical form of Islam that Daesh [ISIS] feeds on."¹

The contemporary mobilization of sectarianism by Gulf monarchies should therefore be seen as what Justin Gengler calls "a calculated survival strategy employed by frightened regimes under siege."² The forces unleashed by the Arab Spring questioned the regional political

¹ Kamel Daoud, "Saudi Arabia, an ISIS that has made it", *The New York Times*, November 20, 2015, at: www.nytimes.com/2015/11/21/opinion/saudi-arabia-an-isis-that-has-made-it.html (accessed on December 31, 2015).

² Justin Gengler, "Sectarian Backfire? Assessing Gulf Political Strategy Five years after the Arab Uprisings", Middle East Institute, November 18, 2015, at: www.mei.edu/content/sectarian-backfire-assessing-gulf-political-strategy-five-years-after-arab-uprisings (accessed on December 18, 2015).

status quo by bringing to the surface long-standing concerns relating to “feeble or dysfunctional participatory institutions and uneven access to political and economic capital.”³ While the Shia communities in the GCC countries have been the principal victims of these deficits in their polities, it is important to note that their agitations in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were not framed in sectarian terms; they were in fact projected as “cross-sectarian demands for peaceful reform.”⁴ Wehrey has also emphasized that since the 1990s, the Shia in the GCC countries “have pushed for their rights within the framework of their respective states,” frequently seeking to work with Sunni Islamists and liberals.⁵

Confronted by these domestic challenges, in its counter-mobilization, Saudi Arabia:⁶

- (i) Permitted vituperative anti-Shia sermons, tracts, pamphlets and tweets on social media.
- (ii) Demonized Iran for its “interference” in the domestic affairs of Arab states in order to “encircle” the Arab states, promote the secession of the Eastern Province from the Kingdom, and ultimately defeat Sunni Arab regimes, establish Shia rule across the region, and in time convert all Sunnis into Shia.
- (iii) Disallowed all attempts at cross-sectarian cooperation.
- (iv) Projected all demands for reform as the product of foreign meddling, specifically by Iran.

This sectarian mobilization was aimed at discrediting the demands for reform as being:

- (i) sectarian, in that they are restricted to the Shia;

³ Wehrey, p. xii.

⁴ Ibid., p. xiii.

⁵ Ibid., p. xiv.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 213–17.

- (ii) illegitimate in Islamic terms, since there can be no uprising against the ruler as it would lead to chaos (*fitna*) and, in any case, democratic participatory politics is forbidden in Islam; and
- (iii) destructive, as seen in the various Arab Spring countries such as Egypt, Syria, Libya and Yemen (while not conveying that much of this destruction was due to external interventions to block or overturn the reforms agenda, including those of Saudi Arabia itself).

Since mid-December 2015, Saudi Arabia has taken a series of initiatives that have escalated the sectarian divide and exacerbated tensions in the region. In response to criticisms that in Syria the Kingdom was entirely focused on regime change and exhibited little interest in combatting ISIS, on 15 December Saudi Arabia announced the setting up an “Islamic military alliance” which would bring together 34 countries to fight ISIS and other terrorist groups through military action, choking off of funds, and confronting the spread of its ideology. However, doubts have emerged about the seriousness of the proposal since some countries have either denied their membership or said they are seeking further clarifications about the proposal (for example, Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia).

Again, hardly any details have been provided about its specific role, organization, deployment and funding, and the likely targets. However, what is clear is that, given the absence of Iran and Iraq from the coalition, commentators have described it as a “Sunni coalition” that, if operationalized, would only aggravate the sectarian divide in West Asia. Others have questioned the credentials of the promoters of the proposal since they in the past had themselves backed extremist groups with ideological support, funding and recruits.⁷ However, whatever its shortcomings, the announcement of the coalition has enabled Saudi Arabia to assert that it enjoys a broad base of support among Arab and Muslim countries.

⁷ Hussein Ibish, “What to expect from Riyadh’s new Islamic Counter-terrorism Alliance”, December 17, 2015, at: www.agsiw.org/what-to-expect-from-riyadh-s-new-islamic-counterterrorism-alliance/ (accessed on December 18, 2015); Hadda Hazzam, “Managing the Alliance”, *Al Fajr*, Algiers, translation in *Mideast Mirror*, December 17, 2015; and Munir al-Khatib, *Al Safir*, Beirut, translation in *Mideast Mirror*, December 18, 2015.

The Kingdom took this idea further when, at the end of December 2015, it hosted Turkish Prime Minister Recip Tayyip Erdogan. During the visit, the two countries attempted to put behind them their differences in regard to the Brotherhood and the coup in Egypt, and move forward together on the basis of their shared interest in regime change in Syria, now complicated by the entry of Russia in the Syrian war zone. Saudi Arabia and Turkey seemed to have bridged their differences to a considerable extent by agreeing to set up a high-level strategic cooperation council to promote military, economic and investment cooperation. Turkey also confirmed it would join the Saudi-sponsored Islamic military coalition.

In this background, on January 2, Saudi Arabia carried out the executions of 47 “terrorists”, of whom 43 were from Al Qaeda and four were Shiites. The latter included the Shia cleric, Sheikh Nimr al Nimr. This was the largest number executed in Saudi Arabia in a single day since 1980, when 60 followers of Juhayman al Otaibi were put to death. The Al Qaeda terrorists executed included Faris al-Shuwal al-Zahrani, an Al Qaeda ideologue, said to be behind attacks on housing compounds, police stations and oil facilities in 2003.

Al Nimr’s execution immediately inflamed sectarian cleavages across the region: the Saudi embassy in Tehran was attacked after which Riyadh broke off diplomatic ties with Iran, followed by Bahrain and Sudan, while the UAE and Kuwait downgraded their relations. There are indications of some official complicity in the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran, though President Hassan Rouhani has severely criticised it. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the execution was a “political mistake” that the “divine hand of revenge will come back on the tyrants who took his life.” President Hassan Rouhani criticised Saudi Arabia for its “sectarian politics”. Former Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al Maliki, said that the execution “will topple the Saudi regime” just as the killing of the revered Shia cleric Mohammed Baqir Al Sadr (in April 1980) had brought down Saddam Hussein.⁸ There have been demonstrations

⁸ “Who Lost the Saudis?”, *Wall Street Journal*, January 3, 2016, at: www.wsj.com/articles/who-lost-the-saudis-1451859635 (accessed on January 5, 2016).

in Bahrain, two Sunni mosques have been bombed in Baghdad, while the Hezbollah chief has described Saudi Arabia as “criminal and terrorist”.

Saudi supporters have been equally vociferous. An unnamed official affirmed that the tough Saudi action was largely on account of the US's apparent disengagement from the region which had encouraged Iran's aggressive designs; he said: “Enough is enough... They [the Iranians] continue to sponsor terrorism and launch ballistic missiles and no one is doing anything about it.” The prominent Saudi cleric, Awadh al Qarni, who had been active in the Sahwa movement in the 1990s, said that the executions were “a message to the world and to criminals that there will be no snuffing out of our principles and no complacency in our security.”⁹ Writing in the *Al Sharq al-Awsat*, the Saudi commentator Mashari al Dhaydi called those executed “criminal murderers” from Al Qaeda and the “Iranian militia” from the Eastern Province. He said that Saudi Arabia was involved in a “domestic and foreign war” in which there was “no room for appeasement”.¹⁰

Sheikh Nimr al Nimr (1959-2016) was the product of the failure of the earlier generation of Shia leaders in Saudi Arabia to extract any meaningful reform in respect of Shia status and rights from the royal family. He came from the village of Al Awaniya near Qatif, the principal Shiite centre in the Eastern Province. After religious studies in Tehran and Damascus, he returned to Saudi Arabia in 1999. Some of his early public remarks were intemperate, including seeking Iranian help to promote the secession of the Eastern Province. Later, he denied making them and insisted on wide-ranging reforms to end discrimination. His appeal for “greater dignity” resonated powerfully with the Shia youth who favoured him over the older leaders, who increasingly came to

⁹ Angus McDowall, “Saudi Executions Driven by Fear, Signal Combative Policy”, *Reuters*, January 4, 2016, at: www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-security-execution-jihadists-idUSKBN0UHOIW20160104 (accessed on January 5, 2016).

¹⁰ Mashari al Dhayidhi, “No Room for Appeasement”, *Al Sharq al Awsat*, translation in *Mideast Mirror*, January 4, 2016.

be seen as ineffective and even agents of the royal family; Nimr on the other hand, as his name implied, was “the tiger of tigers”.¹¹ The well-known writer on Saudi Arabia, Robert Lacey, has described Nimr’s remarks in 2007, that he personally witnessed, as “positively incendiary—angry, inflammatory and notably uncompromising,” expressing contempt for the older leaders who were in dialogue with the government and calling for the overthrow of the royal family.¹² In 2009, Nimr attacked the government for its violence against Shia demonstrators in Medina and said that secession was the only option before them.¹³

In late June 2012, Nimr delivered a strong public attack on the Saudi royal family, rejoicing at the death of Interior Minister Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz, and pleading with God to take the lives of the “entire Al Saud, Al Khalifa and Assad dynasties”.¹⁴ On 8 July 2012, when he was trying to avoid arrest, Nimr was shot by the police: photographs of him lying bleeding in his car made him a “heroic icon” for young people across the province, a status he retained throughout his incarceration.¹⁵ He was sentenced to death in October 2014 for encouraging foreign interference in the affairs of the Kingdom, disobeying the Kingdom’s rulers, and taking up arms against security personnel. The death sentence was carried out in spite of pervasive questions about the fairness of the judicial process and domestic and international pressure for his release.

Saudi Arabia carried out the execution of Sheikh Nimr in the full knowledge that it would aggravate the sectarian cleavage in the region and deepen hostility with Iran. The Kingdom appears to be giving separate messages to three addressees. One message is addressed to the domestic population and has three parts. First, to the country’s Shia community, it is conveying that, in its eyes, there is no difference between

¹¹ Wehrey, pp. 118–20.

¹² Robert Lacey, “Killing the Tiger”, January 3, 2016 [Private email].

¹³ Wehrey, pp. 119–20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

Nimr and the Al Qaeda (or ISIS) terrorists. “If they have blood on their hands, they will be executed.”¹⁶ This is a warning that there will be no tolerance of extremist references to secession or seeking support from Iran. Second, it is an assurance to the majority Sunnis that their leaders will be tough at home and abroad. Saudi Arabia is confident about seeing through this hard line posture since it believes it has broken the back of the reform movement and has the establishment and Sahwa clergy on its side as well a vast body of domestic public opinion. Third, by executing several Al Qaeda members, the Kingdom has also exhibited its tough stand against extremism. In fact, it seems to suggest that it will itself lead the campaign against the Shias and Iran rather than leave this to ISIS, which will also cheer its domestic support base.¹⁷

The next message is directed at Iran: here, Saudi Arabia is affirming that, in spite of lack of outright success in Syria and Yemen, it remains steadfast in its resolve to pursue its interests in both countries, in spite of the Russian presence in Syria and demands for a settlement in Yemen from the international community. In short, there will be no dilution in its agenda of seeking total victory on both fronts. It is also conveying to Iran that it is not isolated and has the support of a large number of Arab and Muslim countries including, most recently, Turkey.

The other message is to the United States: the Kingdom has been unhappy with US policies in the region since the fall of Hosni Mubarak, when it lost its strategic bulwark against Iran and blamed the US for not backing an old ally. The US's later outreach to the Muslim Brotherhood government in Cairo, its refusal to use military force to effect regime change in Syria, and its engagement with Iran on the nuclear question— all these instances have created a deep divide between the two traditional allies. Now, the Kingdom is conveying to

¹⁶ Joseph Braude, “On the Execution of Saudi Shiite Cleric Nimr al Nimr”, January 4, 2016, at: www.fpri.org/geopoliticus/2016/01/execution-saudi-shiite-cleric-nimr-al-nimr (accessed on January 4, 2016).

¹⁷ Robert F. Worth, “Saudis Applaud a Tougher Line Against Tehran”, *New York Times*, January 6, 2016.

its old friend that it will not desist from its tough positions in defence of its interests even if they do not enjoy US support. But there seems to be a sub-text to this aggressive posture. In the event that the ongoing confrontations escalate, the Kingdom is reminding the US of its own enduring value for US interests and is compelling it to choose between its traditional ally and its new negotiating partner (Iran) amidst the rapid changes in the regional and global strategic scenarios.

In fact, the Kingdom's friends and enemies have already begun to view the regional situation in dichotomous terms. The *Wall Street Journal* in an early editorial backed Saudi concerns about being let down by the Obama administration, and concluded:

[I]n a Middle East wracked by civil wars, political upheaval and Iranian imperialism, the Saudis are the best friend we have in the Arabian Peninsula. The US should make clear to Iran and Russia that it will defend the Kingdom from Iranian attempts to destabilize or invade.¹⁸

On similar lines, West Asia scholar Patrick Clawson has called on the US administration to win back Saudi Arabia's confidence by taking a tough stand against Iran's "meddling" in the region; the Obama government should show leadership in confronting "Iran's aggressiveness," otherwise the Gulf monarchies will "go off on their own" in ways that the US will find "unhelpful".¹⁹

Other commentators see in Saudi actions not so much a sense of resolve as of fear. Richard Le Baron calls the break in diplomatic ties with Iran "another chapter in the politics of fear that have dominated Saudi military and diplomatic moves" over the last year. He notes in this regard Saudi concerns relating to the agitations of a "small segment of its Shia population", its failure to achieve its interests in Syria and

¹⁸ *Wall Street Journal*, January 3, 2016.

¹⁹ Patrick Clawson, "Riyadh's Message is to Washington as well as Tehran", January 4, 2016, at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/riyadhs-message-is-to-washington-as-well-as-tehran> (accessed on January 5, 2016).

Yemen, and, above all, the serious economic challenges that have emerged at home as a result of the fall in oil prices.²⁰

Following Iranian and other criticisms of the Nimr execution, the Saudi and other GCC media fiercely castigated Iran for its overt sectarian agenda through its “interference” in their domestic politics and by encouraging Shia uprisings to serve its hegemonic interests. Thus, the distinguished Saudi writer, Tariq Homeid, wrote:

Iran has been threatening us [the Sunnis?] in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Bahrain, even in our own country [Saudi Arabia]. It has armed militias, and it boasts of occupying four Arab capitals—Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus and Sanaa. It is Iran that declared war on us, and not us on it, ever since the inglorious Khomeini revolution.²¹

Others have echoed this position. Mansour Al Zarooni wrote in the *Khaleej Times*:

Sectarian politics is an Iranian brand, perfected by the regime to keep the Middle East on the boil. Peace has been elusive because Tehran thinks it is in a constant state of revolution... It does not respect the sovereignty of its neighbours and other Arab countries... Tehran's grand designs for regional dominance are no secret and this can be seen in Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen and Iraq... For peace to prevail in the region, [Iran] should leave behind its militant revolutionary mindset and treat the Arab world with respect.²²

The Saudi commentator, Tariq al Maeena, demanded that Tehran “stop meddling in the internal affairs of [its neighbouring countries]

²⁰ Richard Le Baron, “Politics of Fear in the Gulf”, January 4, 2016, at: www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-saudi-iran-break-politics-of-fear-in-the-gulf (accessed on January 5, 2016).

²¹ Tariq Homeid, “Dispelling the Doubter’s Doubt”, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, translation in *Mideast Mirror*, February 9, 2016.

²² Mustafa Al Zarooni, “How Iran Keeps the Sectarian Pot Boiling in Region”, *Khaleej Times*, January 9, 2016, p. 6.

and stop financing radical groups that encourage strife and terror. This is the moment of truth.”²³ Under the headline, “Iran has trouble letting go off sectarianism,” the Dubai-based writer, Mohammed Basharooun, said that “strategically, it [Iran] seems to be trying to create a discourse that will galvanize all Shia communities across the Arab world... Iran’s influence in the region depends on maintaining and supporting Shia dissidents in Lebanon, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.”²⁴

However, in spite of the stridency of these remarks, as of now it appears that the Kingdom may have overplayed its hand. First, expressions of support for its aggressive policies have been muted. Even Turkey, fresh from setting up the bilateral strategic cooperation partnership a few days earlier, has been cautious in its remarks: its deputy prime minister described the executions as “political death sentences” and added that the region “could not sustain such tension.” Reiterating Turkey’s friendship with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, he called on both to act with moderation.²⁵ Other members of the Islamic coalition have been equally low-key and balanced in their remarks.

A Gulf commentator, Ahmad Obeid Al-Mansoori, recently wrote that Saudi Arabia’s policy of conservatism at home and activism abroad has created a mindset in Riyadh of “you are either with us or against us,” propelled by militant Salafism and opportunistic alliances, on the basis of which it is asserting its leadership of the Arab and Islamic worlds.²⁶ But, Al-Mansoori noted that, while the Kingdom seemed to be pursuing short term alliances of convenience mainly to block the ambitions of rivals, it did not have a vision or strategy for long term regional stability. This shortcoming in the Saudi approach could make

²³ Tariq Al Maeena, “It’s Iran’s Moment of Truth”, *Gulf News*, January 24, 2016, p. A2.

²⁴ Mohammed Basharooun, *Khaleej Times*, Dubai, January 11, 2016, p. 13.

²⁵ “Turkey Calls for Caution from Saudi Arabia and Iran Amid Rising Tension”, *Daily Sabah*, January, 5 2016.

²⁶ Ahmad Obeid Al-Mansoori, “Saudi Arabia’s New ‘With Us or Against Us’ Attitude”, *The National Interest*, December 13, 2015, at: nationalinterest.org/feature/Saudi-arabias-new-with-us-or-against-us-attitude (accessed on December 18, 2015).

itself felt very soon. Nimr's execution, meant to project an image of toughness to cow down the domestic Shia community and its regional rival, could in fact mobilize its enemies, galvanize them into agitations and possibly violence and, in time, pose a serious threat to the Saudi domestic and regional order.

Prognosis

Sectarianism is the instrument being used by Saudi Arabia to mobilize domestic and regional support to subdue the demands for political change at home and and, through military interventions in the neighbourhood framed in sectarian terms, build a regional order that is congenial to its strategic interests. Over the last five years, this approach has been successful to the extent that the sectarian cleavage is now deeply entrenched both at home and in the region, and demands for reform, both sectarian and cross-sectarian, have been substantially discredited. However, this approach has not yet yielded the anticipated military triumphs in Syria and Yemen in spite of large-scale devastation in both states. Prospects for success are unlikely since, given its rigid sectarian framework, success is understood by the Kingdom so far only in terms of total victory rather than a negotiated compromise arrangement that would accommodate the interests of various parties in the fray.

More seriously, the regional interventions have not only led to the collapse of state order in Syria and Yemen, they have also provided space and opportunity for the proliferation of extremist groups, Al Qaeda and ISIS. Like Saudi Arabia, they derive their inspiration and ideology from the same source, Salafism, but take their understanding of its prescriptions to unprecedented levels of intolerance and brutality. They now even threaten the progenitor that nurtured them with belief, largesse and manpower in their formative stages, though today, one group, Al Qaeda, has been co-opted as the Kingdom's partner in its regional military enterprises, while ISIS has obtained its chief ideologue, Turki Al-Binali, from another beleaguered GCC country, Bahrain.¹

¹ Born in 1984, in Bahrain, Al Binali places himself in the mainstream of jihadi-salafist intellectuals, but is now a frequent and strident critic of most modern-day jihadi ideologues, including Zawahiri and al-Maqdisi, and the leaders of jihadi groups in Syria that are hostile to the Islamic State. See Cole Bunzel, "The Caliphate's Scholar-in-Arms", July 9, 2014, at: www.jihadica.com/the-caliphate-s-scholar-in-arms/ (accessed on January 5, 2016).

At the same time, in the face of the ISIS onslaught, the US and its Western allies have turned to their GCC allies to mobilize the fight against jihad, leading to the ironical situation described by Gengler as one in which “Gulf states [are] at once the cause of and solution to the problem of sectarian-based radicalization.”² With US-GCC ties being bolstered by lucrative defence contracts, Gengler has concluded that “the sectarian card is unlikely to be discarded completely [by the GCC countries] any time soon”.³ Perhaps, he is being too pessimistic and it is possible to contemplate alternative scenarios.

First, the sectarian project lacks historical depth: as Wehrey has noted, it has “historically not been one of the pillars of official governance in the GCC.”⁴ Hence, though effective in the present period of regional turmoil, it is unlikely that sectarian mobilization can be sustained over the long term given how little relevance the issues that first divided the two sects have for our times. As Graham Fuller has pointed out:

[T]he origin of the Shiites had little to do with theology and everything to do with clan, tribal and regional struggles for power and influence, although later each side sought religious and moral justification for their positions.⁵

Recently, in January 2014, former Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said: “Who the first caliph was or wasn’t is a historical matter of little use to us now, and we will not reach any settlement on it. How we do our ablutions or how we pray is not a rational reason for turning into a difference between us [the two sects], and it has no justification in the Koran and the Sunnah [Hadith].”⁶

² Justin Gengler, “Sectarian Backfire? Assessing Gulf Political Strategy Five Years after the Arab Uprisings”, Middle East Institute, November 18, 2015, at: www.mei.edu/content/map/sectarian-backfire-assessing-gulf-political-strategy-five-years-after-arab-uprisings (accessed on December, 2015).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Wehrey, p. 211.

⁵ Fuller, p. 266.

⁶ Ibid., p. 269.

This view has much support in the region. For instance, though its number and range is still limited, counter-sectarian traffic on social media is already making its presence felt, particularly in response to recent attacks on mosques in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, with sharp condemnations of the violence and fervent calls for unity among Muslims. It is significant that the Kuwait attack evoked a particularly strong response from the government and the population at large. Siegel ascribes this to the fact that, unlike in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Shias in Kuwait enjoy the rights of citizens in that they are free to practice their faith, vote and stand in elections, and use their own legal codes and traditions with regard to personal matters.⁷ This suggests that even a small degree of political reform and cross-sectarian accommodation can bridge the sectarian cleavage and unite the national community against extremists.

Second, sectarian mobilization by Saudi Arabia is a flimsy instrument to pursue regional interests as it does not take cognisance of the strategic ground realities of the region.⁸ Thus, while Saudi Arabia needs the backing of both Turkey and Egypt as part of its so-called Sunni coalition, neither of them is comfortable with a sectarian approach to regional affairs nor do they have much in common with each other. Egypt's principal concern under al Sisi is with the possible resurrection of the Brotherhood in Egyptian and regional politics and, hence, it is opposed to the Kingdom's overtures to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and to the Brotherhood-affiliated *Islah* party in Yemen, and is concerned about the Kingdom's strengthening ties with Qatar and Turkey, both patrons of the Brotherhood. At the same time, al Sisi has not backed externally sponsored regime change in Damascus and has, in fact, welcomed the Russian military intervention.⁹ Turkey, on the other hand, is a strong supporter of the Brotherhood and would welcome its return to mainstream regional politics.

⁷ Siegel, p. 16.

⁸ Raghida Dergham, "Saudi-Turkish Strategic Cooperation: Opportunities and Challenges", *Al Hayat*, January 3 2016.

⁹ "Soured Relations", www.raialyoum.com, translation in *Mideast Mirror*, October 19, 2015.

The three regional powers, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, attach considerable importance to a settlement in Syria, but there is little that unites them. The Kingdom is committed to regime change through military force, while the other two back the Geneva process, recognize the need to work with Russia and Iran, and could be persuaded to agree to retain Al-Assad in power during an unspecified transition period.

Again, not only do the principal partners in the Syrian conflict not agree on the groups to be designated as terrorists, they also do not agree with regard to the battle against Al Qaeda and ISIS. In fact, Turkey played a role in promoting ISIS in its earlier years in Syria, and is lukewarm in the battle against its former protégé. Saudi Arabia is working with Al Qaeda affiliates in both Syria and Yemen, while Egypt is hostile to both jihadi organizations for their terrorist acts in the Sinai and in other parts of Egypt.

At present, the GCC governments have made sectarianism central to contemporary regional politics and the Sunni clergy beat the drums of hate and war on the basis of ancient disputes. However, it is very likely that sectarianism's political significance could be as quickly reduced or even removed either by state action or, more likely, by the general populace realizing the futility of these divisions, particularly since they are being so destructively manipulated by extremist elements and cynical governments.

Finally, while sectarian mobilization is meant to discredit and in time nullify aspirations for political change, the fact remains that, in spite of state intervention and repression, the movement for reform remains resilient in Saudi Arabia. The Sahwa movement was suppressed by state action in the late 1990s, and split into quietist and jihadi elements, but now a third group, referred to as "Islamо-liberals", has emerged to demand constitutional monarchy and citizens' rights. In this endeavour, the first generation of Sahwa leaders have been joined by a new generation of activists who are more politically conscious and less intimidated by traditional clerics.¹⁰

¹⁰ Stephane Lacroix, "Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring", Kuwait Programme of Development, Governance and Globalisation, No 36, May 2014, p. 7.

In February 2011, the Sahwa movement submitted to the government a petition titled: "Towards a State of Rights and Institutions", which demanded a freely elected parliament and a prime minister accountable to parliament. This was signed by liberal, Islamist and Shiite scholars, and constituted the broadest cross-section of activist groups in the Kingdom.¹¹ It was later put online on a dedicated website and on Facebook and very quickly obtained 9,000 signatures. Now, though the momentum for reform has slowed due to government repression, the reform movement has not died away but continues to agitate on other matters such as release of political prisoners, an issue which has brought all sections of the country onto a common platform.

Overall, in spite of sustained government pressure, the Saudi reform movement has effected what Lacroix has described as "a sizeable transformation in Saudi political discourse." He anticipates an active role of Saudi youth in discussing political issues and seeking reform and concludes: "Though the [Saudi] royal family has undoubtedly won the first round of the game, it could . . . experience more challenges to its authority in the not-so-distant future."¹²

An important role-player in the Saudi reform movement is the scholar Mohammed Al-Ahmari, whose programme is deeply rooted in Islamic tradition but severely criticises the Salafists for disallowing a fresh look at traditional texts, and, instead, focusing on ritualism, insisting on religious and cultural homogeneity among Muslims across the world, and encouraging animosities among Muslims on sectarian basis. Al-Ahmari believes that the current "Salafi-Wahabbi wave" can just not provide the intellectual rigour and creativity to contribute to an Islamic renaissance.¹³ The counter to the Salafi domination, Al Ahmari insists, is freedom, which can only flourish in a democratic system.¹⁴ On the

¹¹ Lacroix, p. 11.

¹² Ibid., p. 28.

¹³ Madawi Al Rasheed, *Muted Modernists: The Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia*, Hurst & Company, London, 2015, p. 145.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 146.

same lines, the Saudi writer, Jamal Khashoggi, has strongly urged democratic reform in his country, saying that: "It's time to raise questions for the future. Democracy, popular participation or shura ... will inevitably be realized. It's a natural and inevitable development of history."¹⁵

¹⁵ Jamal Khashoggi, "It's democracy and not political Islam", *Al Arabiya*, 17 November, 2014, at: english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2014/11/17/it-s-democracy-and-not-political-islam.html (accessed 30 November, 2014)

Conclusion

The sectarian divide has been an abiding fault-line in Muslim polities for several centuries, but never in Muslim history has it captured the mindset of the populace and wielded the influence in West Asian politics that it does today. It has neither been a contemporary construct nor has it been a gnawing wound in Muslim states for centuries that some scholars have portrayed. It has just not been a central or crucial factor in the competitions for political and economic power in Muslim state systems for the simple reason that, outside of Iran, the Shia as a community were the permanent underclass, though occasionally individual Shias may have held high public office or enjoyed economic success. For several centuries, the Ottoman Empire exercised control over most of West Asia and, while the imperial domain was multi-denominational and multi-cultural, power was clearly with the Sunni rulers.

In West Asia, this situation continued even after the fall of the Ottomans, both in the traditional monarchies and the republics that succeeded it over the rest of the twentieth century. The Arab monarchies were invariably Sunni, with generally small Shia minorities that suffered discrimination, (with Bahrain the only one with a *majority* Shia population), but rarely felt able to mobilize as a community to ameliorate their parlous condition. Some republics, such as Iraq, Syria and Yemen, after unification, had rulers from the minority sect in the country, but their political order was not avowedly sectarian. Power in these countries was exercised not so much on a sectarian basis as on narrow family and clan support, buttressed by broader constituencies built on cross-sectarian lines by sharing economic spoils with the armed forces, tribal chiefs, ethnic and religious minorities, clergy of different denominations, business communities, professional groups, women, youth, etc.

The sole interest of rulers, monarchical and republican, has been to retain power. Hence, they have not shied away from pandering to

specific interest groups in the face of grave national crises and possible challenges to their authority. Thus, in the Iran-Iraq war, though his army had a majority Shia cadre, Saddam Hussein successfully mobilized support on nationalism basis, but later turned robustly sectarian in his fight against the Shia during their uprising in the early 1990s. He then played the Islamic card by inscribing *Allahu Akbar* on the Iraqi flag during the period of “dual containment” in the late 1990s.

Again, though Bashar al Assad’s regime in Syria was anchored in the minority Alawi community, the president enjoyed support across religious and sectarian lines, being backed by Sunni business persons and large sections of Christians and Kurds. However, he responded to the first uprisings in Syria in early 2011 by deliberately mobilizing Alawi support, thus “imposing a sectarian mould onto a conflict that was non-sectarian in nature.”¹ Since then, Assad has sought to correct this by maintaining his appeal with his broad constituencies while enjoying considerable cross-sectarian support from the officers and men of the armed forces.

The Saudi royal family has been similarly opportunistic in manipulating different domestic constituencies for dynastic advantage. In the early 1990s, while it mobilized support from western military forces to protect itself from the Iraqi threat, it took the help of the Sahwa clergy against the liberals, but soon turned against the former when they demanded wide-ranging political reform. Later, after the traumatic events of 9/11, the rulers backed the reform agenda of the liberals and Shia, but soon abandoned the reform programme when they mended their ties with the West after the US debacle in Iraq and no longer were subject to any external pressure for change.

For the Shia underclass across West Asia, the Islamic Revolution in Iran was the first indication that their political fortunes could be reversed. They commenced low-key and peaceful efforts for reform in their favour, but these attempts were generally articulated within the state

¹ Farhad Khoskhavar, *The New Arab Revolutions that Shook the World*, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder, CO, 2012, p. 130.

order, with little indication of Iranian influence or involvement. However, even the possibility of modest reform was not acceptable, so that over time moderate Shia leaders became increasingly discredited and were replaced by more aggressive and strident votaries for change.

The Shia in the Gulf were particularly enthusiastic about the prospect for reform held out by the dramatic events that informed the early days of the Arab Spring, which was a region-wide attempt to correct sectarian and other distortions and bring the Arab states in line with global trends in favour of freedom, democracy and dignity. However, entrenched vested interests not only crushed the aspirations for domestic reform, they also sought to divert nations toward two bogeys—the sectarian and security threat from Iran with its hegemonic designs, and the attendant suggestion that the domestic Shia communities owed their principal loyalties to Iran.

In the context of Iraq, Fanar Haddad observed: “Overt mobilisation of Shia identity in Iraq carries a high risk of raising fears of Iranian interference.”² As events over the last few years have shown, this has been equally true in the case of all other states in the region where the Shia have raised their voice against discrimination and have sought equal rights as citizens. As Vali Nasr has pointed out:

Little surprise then that rulers looked to sectarianism to defeat popular demands for change. Manipulating sectarian interests, [they] divided opposition movements and shattered the hope for cosmopolitan politics, separating Alawites from Sunnis in Syria, and Sunnis from Shiites in Bahrain and Iraq.³

Writing about how the sectarian card was used by the Kingdom in response to the Arab Spring, the distinguished writer, Madawi Al Rasheed said:

Sectarianism became a Saudi pre-emptive counter-revolutionary strategy that exaggerates religious difference and

² Haddad, p. 80.

³ Vali Nasr, “The War for Islam”, 24 January, 2016, at: www.foreignpolicy.com.

hatred and prevents the development of national non-sectarian politics. Through religious discourse and practices, sectarianism in the Saudi context involves not only politicising religious differences, but also creating a rift between the majority Sunnis and the Shia minority.⁴

After the Arab Spring, the sectarian card has enabled the Kingdom to neutralize most demands for domestic reforms as well as obtain the support of its majority Sunni community and some of its GCC partners for its active anti-regime role in Syria and direct military intervention in Yemen. Both these actions have been projected as efforts to stem the tide of Shia aggrandisement led by Iran. In both instances, Saudi Arabia has increasingly collaborated with Al Qaeda affiliates, Jabhat Nusra in Syria and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, thus potentially strengthening the hands of its jihadi enemy which has attacked the Kingdom and its leaders in the past, and can again be expected to do so in future.

ISIS completed the circle of sectarian intolerance by attacking three Shia mosques in Saudi Arabia and one in Kuwait in May 2015. Madawi Al Rasheed has firmly indicted Saudi Arabia for ISIS's brutal sectarian violence; writing after the ISIS attack on the Shia mosque, she said:

The great irony is that the IS attack stems from the convergence of the [Saudi] state's systematic discrimination against the Shiites, [its] unwillingness to curb the excesses of Wahhabi denunciation against them as heretics and untrustworthy fifth columnists, and the de facto support for the ideology of IS in Saudi society.⁵

⁴ Madawi Al Rasheed, quoted in Nader Hashemi, "Toward a Political Theory of Sectarianism in the Middle East: The Salience of Authoritarianism over Theology", October 27, 2015, at: <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/toward-political-theory-sectarianism-middle-east-salience-authoritarianism-over-theology>.

⁵ Madawi Al Rasheed, "Shiites reel from attack in Saudi provinces", *Al-Monitor*, May 26, 2015, at: www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/saudi-arabia-eastern-province-attacks-on-shiites.html (accessed on December 18, 2015).

In a later article, Al Rasheed described the ISIS violence in Saudi Arabia as “the return to its historical home of an indigenous trend of political violence ... the outcome of religious indoctrination and political conditions in Saudi Arabia ... So it is time to confirm that today the discourse of hate that inspires sectarian wars is a truly Saudi phenomenon.”⁶

The use of the sectarian divide by Saudi Arabia to shape its competition with Iran has its origins in the enduring deficits in governance that have bedevilled Gulf monarchies for several years. These are today reflected in the increasing loss of credibility and even legitimacy of the monarchies in the eyes of their populace, their continued resistance to popular participation in the political order and, above all, their non-transparent economic and financial systems that have led to corruption, increasing disparities in the distribution of wealth, crony capitalism, and widespread unemployment. Nader Hashemi notes that the actions of the GCC monarchs affirm “the salience of authoritarianism over theology in understanding the dynamics of Sunni-Shia relations today ... several of the [Arab regimes are relying] on a strategy of exploiting sectarianism to deflect demands for democratization.”⁷ He concludes:

[T]here is a symbiotic relationship between pressure from society down below, which demands greater inclusion, respect and representation, versus the refusal by ruling elites from above to share or relinquish power. This produces a crisis of legitimacy.... The politics of sectarianism ... is a result of this political dynamic. The core allegiance of ruling elites is not to their sectarian identity but to their political thrones.... In short, sectarianism does not explain the current turmoil in the Middle East, authoritarianism does.⁸

⁶ Madawi Al Rasheed, “Saudi Responsibility for Sectarian Terror in the Gulf”, July 21, 2015, at: www.hurstpublishers.com/saudi-responsibility-for-sectarian-terror (accessed on December 25, 2015).

⁷ Nader Hashemi, “Toward a Political Theory of Sectarianism in the Middle East: The Salience of Authoritarianism over Theology”, October 27, 2015, at <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/toward-political-theory-sectarianism-middle-east-salience-authoritarianism-over-theology>.

⁸ Ibid.

On this basis, domestic and regional support has been mobilized to pursue two proxy wars against Iran, in Syria and Yemen. These conflicts are remarkable for the significant firepower deployed, the opportunistic alliances with jihadi elements that have been set up, the visceral sectarian animosities that are being manifested, and the extraordinary devastation that has been wreaked upon the Arab people in these two states.

There is no sign yet that the two Islamic giants are looking at engagement and dialogue: they are, as Vali Nasr has noted, “stuck in a zero-sum sectarian battle ... all that is left is a winner-takes-all scramble”.⁹ In early February 2016, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE announced that they would send ground troops to Syria to fight ISIS, seen by most observers as suggesting military action by the GCC states against the Assad regime. Later, from mid-February, Saudi Arabia initiated 20-nation military exercises named “Northern Thunder.” These exercises are said to be “the largest in the region’s history”. They include diverse Arab and Islamic countries, with Pakistan, Malaysia and Egypt joining the GCC countries, Sudan, Mauritania, Mauritius. The message relating to these exercises, conveyed officially, is that the Kingdom’s “brothers and friends ... stand united to confront all challenges and maintain peace and stability in the region.”

But there is a silver lining in this bleak scenario: Saudi scholar Madawi Al Rasheed has argued that just as repression is being exercised on the basis of Islamic norms so can the agenda for political reform be shaped on the basis of a re-interpretation of traditional texts that would sanction freedom and put in place the institutions to sustain them. Asef Bayat in his important work, *Making Islam Democratic*,¹⁰ has referred to this as “post-Islamism” which is a combination of “religiousness and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty,” emphasizing rights instead

⁹ Vali Nasr.

¹⁰ Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2007.

of obligation, plurality instead of a single authoritative voice, and the future instead of the past.¹¹ Al Rasheed believes that there is now a core of intellectuals and activists in the region “who are willing to sacrifice their own personal freedom” in the pursuit of this reformist programme.¹²

¹¹ Marechal and Zemni, p. 241.

¹² Al Rasheed, *Muted Modernists*, p. 163.

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Five years after the Arab Spring, West Asia is witnessing two major military conflicts in Syria and Yemen. Several states are deeply polarised and at the edge of breakdown, and there is proliferation of jihadis across the region, engaged in extraordinary brutality against enemy states and “heretic” communities. The violence, the fear of jihadi contagion, and the possible breakdown of state order across West Asia have pulled in international powers into the region's conflicts. Though the ongoing conflicts and competitions are the result of recent developments in the West Asian state systems, the battle-lines have been deliberately shaped on the basis of primeval sectarian cleavages and animosities that have been resurrected and imbued with a contemporary resonance to serve modern-day political interests. This monograph analyses, in a historical perspective, the political and strategic factors that have led to the Saudi-Iran confrontation and how doctrinal differences are being used to shape their competition for regional power and influence. It also looks at the sectarian factor driving the violence of the Islamic State. Finally, it discusses the influence of sectarianism in coming years on the evolving political order in West Asia.



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