

THE SUNNI-SHI'I RIVALRY OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is central to many of the conflicts that haunt the Middle East today. This is often described as a centuries-old strife between the two main branches of Islam, the majority Sunni Islam with Saudi Arabia as its champion, and the minority Shi'i branch dominated by Iran. But is this a correct description? What role does religion actually play in this rivalry?

Seen from Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh, it does indeed look like they are being encircled by a Shi'i resurgence. Going westwards from Iran, they see Iraq with a sectarian Shi'i government; Syria under a Shi'i dictator; Lebanon where the Shi'i Hizballah party has strong influence, and now Yemen is rocked by a Shi'i rebellion, not to mention the restless Shi'i majority in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's own Shi'i minority on the east coast completing the circle. Everywhere they turn, they see Shi'is.

There is no doubt that Iran has its fingers in many of these pies. But to answer whether this is because of religion or power politics, we have to look briefly at what it means to be "Shi'i". Some of these regimes, like the Syrian Ba'thists, are staunchly secular and pay little attention to religion, while others like Hizballah are strongly religious, like the Iranian regime itself. However, for a religious Shi'i, many of these regimes are not really Shi'i at all.

For an outside observer, the actual religious differences between Sunnism and Shi'ism seem minor. They share the same holy Qur'an and venerate the Prophet, much of their theology is shared and in issues of religious law, the Shi'is

most often take a middle position in between those of the different Sunni currents. There are some evident distinctions in prayer and other rituals, but Sunnis and Shi'is perform the hajj pilgrimage at Mecca together, if politics does not get in the way. However, there is one major difference of faith that clearly divides Shi'is from Sunnis, and that is the nature of the imam. Shi'is believe that when the Prophet Muhammad died, his descendants from his grandsons on were destined to lead the Muslim society, and that the Sunnis usurped the rightful authority of the Prophet's family. Instead of the historical caliphs, the Shi'is only recognize the "true" leader from the Prophet's family, whom they call "the imam" (not to be confused with the Arabic word for "prayer leader" in a mosque). They consider this imam to be divinely inspired, and give him a religious and legal authority that the Sunnis will only allow for the Prophet himself.

Now, the twelfth and last Shi'i imam withdrew from this world in the tenth century, so there has not been an actual imam apparent for over a thousand years. The twelfth imam did not die, he goes about hidden amongst us, but no-one can know who he is and he will only reappear at the Day of Judgement. Nevertheless, the concept of



the hidden imam is central to Shi'i theology and law, it is for example required to act in such a way that the hidden imam does not disapprove. Almost all theological differences between Sunnism and Shi'ism can be traced back to the issue of the imam.

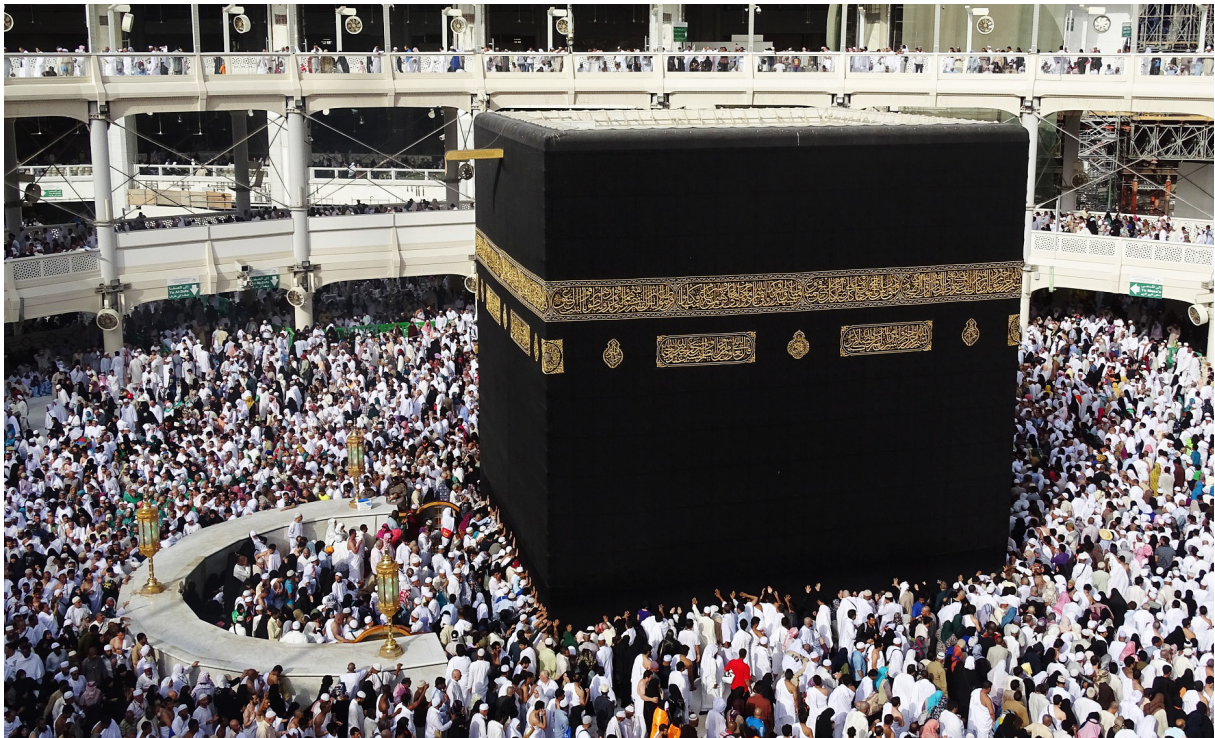
The problem here is that many of these other "Shi'i" allies of Iran do not have this idea of the hidden imam at all. The Iranian, or "twelver", branch dominates in Iraq and Lebanon, so these share Iranian theology. But the Yemenis do not, they are Zaydi Shi'is, not twelvers. Their imam never went into hiding and is not at all divinely inspired, he was simply the best and most just leader among the descendants of Muhammad. The Zaydi imams ruled Yemen until the republic was declared in 1962. Indeed, reformist Zaydis tried to establish themselves as a branch within Sunnism. They failed, but Zaydi Shi'ism is probably as close to Sunni thought as it is to the twelver Shi'ism of Iran.

Even worse are the Alawis of Syria, which Assad and his cronies belong to. They may not even be considered Muslims at all, let alone Shi'i. Over the centuries, this sect moved away from mainstream Islam and took in notions that are anathema to any scholarly Muslim, for example that the prophet's son-in-law Ali is divine and part of a trinity of "emanations of God", in contrast to Islam's strict monotheism. They celebrate Christmas and Mass, and believe in the reincarnation of the souls. When the Assad family took power in Syria, they made sure that a local Shi'i authority under their influence papered over this embarrassing past and recognized them as "Shi'is". The Assads did not care. But the ayatollahs in Iran actually do care about such things. For political reasons, they will accept even the Alawis as fellow Shi'is, but consider both the zaydis and the alawis are far off the track of true faith. There are almost no "regular", twelver, Shi'is in either Syria or Yemen.

Like those of Iraq, the Shi'is in Bahrain and eastern Arabia are twelvers, and thus share the theology of Iranian Shi'is. However, they tend

to emphasize that they look to Iraq, not Iran (where they speak Persian, a different language), for religious authority. While Iran is certainly the dominant country of Shi'ism, many of the religious and intellectual centres lie in Iraq, particularly the cities Najaf and Kerbala. As it happens, the religious Shi'i authorities there have not followed their Iranian colleagues on the path to political Islam. The dominant ayatollah in Iraq, Ali Sistani, has rejected the Iranian model and stayed almost completely silent on political matters over the years, even though Shi'i politicians, many having lived in Iran during the Saddam period, have come to dominate politics. So by pointing to Iraq rather than Iran, the Bahraini Shi'i leaders have indicated that their grievances are local and not part of any Iranian master plan, as the Saudi rulers claim. Of course, the Saudis do not believe them.

It should also be noted that the alliance around the Assad regime is certainly not exclusively Alawi (Shi'i), although those at the top generally come from this group. It includes other religious minorities in Syria, such as Christians or secularists who fear the rise of Sunni Islamism among the rebels. Also, while the Houthi rising in Yemen is certainly a revolt made by Zaydi Shi'is, it is not a "Shi'i revolt", because they rose against an established power that was also Zaydi Shi'i. Although they make up less than half the population of Yemen, the Zaydi tribes of the north Yemen highlands have for centuries dominated Yemeni politics, and the former president Ali Salih had the same background. He fell because he came into conflict with the two largest, and equally Zaydi, tribal confederations in the north. However, since the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, the president has always come from the north, and the vice president from the south. So when Salih was forced out, the presidency fell to the vice president, the southerner Mansur Hadi, and Yemen had for the first time a Sunni president - but still with northern tribal (and thus Zaydi Shi'i) backing. It was in this chaos that a third minor northern tribe, known as the Houthis, used the occasion to press their own demands and surprisingly



The Kaaba. (Credit: CC0 Public Domain)

take all of the north, with the underhand support of their old enemy Salih. So, in Yemen, there are Shi'is (Zaydis, that is), on all sides of the conflict, it is not a "Shi'i against Sunni" conflict.

Theology thus probably does not matter much. That does not mean that religion does not matter, though. What all these variant Shi'i groups have in common is that they are not Sunni. The division of Sunni / not-Sunni can then become a powerful marker of identity, whether or not this identity is founded in an actually shared religious belief. It can still provide an "us" to oppose "them". This can clearly be seen in the development of the Syrian civil war. At the outset in 2011, it was a purely political protest against a stagnant authoritarian rule and for democratic reforms. But since the leadership of the regime came from the Alawi groups, which was an ethnic as well as religious minority in the northwest, the slogans began after a few months to become anti-Alawi. The regime forces turned to those they trusted most, which increasingly was those from their own region, which again strengthened the ethnification of the conflict,

with both sides manning road blocks checking passers-by not for their political affiliation, but their ethnic and religious background, harassing or killing those from the "wrong side". Whether these were actual believers or not played little role, the rebel slogans were "send the Shi'i heretics back where they came from", that is to Iran, where of course they never had been and probably would be persecuted if it came to that.

This identitarian impulse has fanned over the Middle East, we saw its effects in Iraq after the US invasion in the late 2000s. Even countries without any Shi'is presence at all, such as Egypt, has made laws against the danger of Shi'i influence and seen attacks on the couple of thousand huddled Shi'is that live there. The power of these religious concepts has lead many to talk of a deep-rooted, millennial hatred between the two branches of Islam. In fact, this is not true. There were periods of social conflict between Sunnis and Shi'is in the Middle Ages, and the two great rivalling powers, the Sunni Ottomans and Shi'i Iran, used religious rhetoric in their intermittent wars against each other. Shi'is belatedly joined

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Sunnis, Christians and other sectarian militias in the Lebanese civil war.

But mostly, Sunnis and Shi'is have through the centuries lived peacefully together where there were both present. Shi'is were often kept out of political power, but there was nothing one can call simmering hatred like we see today. We can probably date the start of the sectarian conflict precisely to the 1990s and Afghanistan, when the Taliban began targeting the Shi'i Hazara minority. This spilled over into Pakistan, with sectarian reciprocal mosque bombings, and then the local Qa'ida leader in Iraq lit the fuse there in 2005. So, rather than millennial, this is a conflict that we have had for about twenty to thirty years.

That does not mean that it is not real, and can be deeply felt. We have seen similar explosions of identity conflicts that even the locals hardly imagined in the Balkans in the 1990s, but once you define your neighbours as "them", it can be hard to overcome even if calm historical analysis says these are constructed divisions. The origin of the current conflict may be regional rivalry between the powerful, but isolated Iran and the rich and better connected Saudis, together with cynical manipulation by Islamist terrorists, but it may be harder to put the genie back into the bottle than it was for Aladdin and the other heroes of old Baghdad.

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