

The Regional Geo-sectarian Contest over the Gulf

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ABSTRACT *Sectarianism in the Middle East has intensified since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the outbreak of the Arab Spring, and has transformed into local sectarian and regional geopolitical confrontations among some Gulf States and Iran. The nature of this conflict is disputed. Is it a geopolitical regional rivalry or a purely sectarian conflict? This paper argues that it is a geo-sectarian contest over the Gulf. Therefore, firstly it argues that the nature of the conflict is fundamentally geopolitical. Secondly, it traces and analyzes the factors that led to the rise of sectarianism. Finally, it discusses the legitimacy of the emergence of a Sunni camp against the Shia camp.*

Introduction

Over the last decade, sectarianism has increased in the Middle East and influenced regional politics. The debate over a potential rift between Sunni and Shia Muslims began with the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Iran's proclaimed intention of exporting this revolution to neighboring countries alarmed the latter's political regimes, particularly in the Gulf States in immediate proximity to Iran, where the state systems are monarchies, and the majority of the people are Sunni. The reality of sectarian strife has become clear since the United States-led invasion

of Iraq in 2003, which was followed by Iran's increasing influence in the country and the Iraqi Shia parties' control of the government. The strife erupted into a sectarian civil war during 2006-2008, when some armed Sunni groups intensified their attacks in response to the U.S.-led coalition and the government's policies, while the Salafi-Jihadists escalated the conflict. With the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, some of its revolutions such as in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen have evolved into sectarian and geopolitical confrontations among regional states, particularly Gulf States and Iran. Operation "Decisive Storm" in Yemen, in effect since 2015, clearly exemplifies

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Saudi Arabia seeks to preserve the current GCC system, which helps maintain its significant regional role and prevent Iran from exerting any influence on the Arab Gulf States

this geo-sectarian struggle. Finally, the execution of Saudi Shia dissident cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr in January 2016 led to an open confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran after Shia angry demonstrators set fire to the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Saudi Arabia responded by cutting off its diplomatic relations with Iran.

The nature of this multifaceted conflict is disputed. Is it a geopolitical rivalry over the regional influence that uses sectarianism as a means to mobilize popular support? Or is it a sectarian conflict fed by Sunni-Shia antagonistic discourse and respective grievances, while states and sectarian substate actors add fuel to the fire?

This paper argues that the regional conflict over the Gulf region is geo-sectarian. This means that it is a geopolitical contest which has recently been engulfed by a sectarian dimension. Geopolitically, the traditional power struggle among Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia over the Gulf has been obvious since the early 1970s, and continues to be perpetuated mainly by Saudi Arabia and Iran. The recent sectarian clashes

in Iraq, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen, which have evolved into sectarian conflicts, have significantly exacerbated that struggle. With that said, this assertion raises a question over the legitimacy of the emergence of a Sunni camp against the Shia camp, and to what extent this may affect the security and stability of the region at large, particularly the Gulf. Therefore, the paper first argues that the nature of the conflict in the region is fundamentally geopolitical. Second, it traces and analyzes the factors that led to the rise of sectarianism. Finally, it attempts to answer the above-mentioned question regarding the Sunni vs. Shia camps.

The Geopolitical Contest over the Gulf

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is informed less by sectarianism and more by other factors.¹ Geopolitically, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran have contested for regional influence since the decision by Britain in the late 1960s to withdraw its military forces from the Gulf. The United States and the Soviet Union, the two superpowers at that time, sought to fill this strategic gap and to protect the region from each other's influence. Saudi Arabia and Iran were allies with the United States according to the "Twin Pillars" policy. Baathist Iraq, which was supported by the Soviets, was the main adversary. Even under the Islamic Revolution regime in Iran since 1979, the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) was mainly a struggle for regional influence rather than a



sectarian war. During this war, Shias fought alongside Sunnis in Iraq, which was led by a secular regime, while the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) supported Iraq to maintain its survival and protect the Gulf from a potential Iranian hegemony. The fall of Saddam Hussain's regime in 2003 led Saudi Arabia to become the main regional country to counter Iran's growing influence.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have different visions for the structure of the regional system in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia seeks to preserve the current GCC system, which helps maintain its significant regional role and prevent Iran from exerting any influence on the Arab Gulf States, particularly Bahrain. In contrast, Iran is looking for a new regional system that includes all eight Gulf States, and in which it provides a strong role in

Gulf security. Through this prospective system, Iran looks to reduce the ability of Saudi Arabia to maneuver in the Gulf.

The question of United States' power in the region is also at the heart of the struggle: Iran sees a Gulf free from the U.S. military influence, whereas Saudi Arabia has long relied on the U.S. as some sort of external balancer to serve as a check against Iran and Iraq. The two sides have also contested for the patronage of the Palestinian cause: Saudi Arabia sees Iran's involvement in this issue as tremendously threatening to its regional status.² The two states embody different models of government –each laying claim to Islamic legitimacy. Since the Iranian Revolution, they have represented two opposite poles of Islamic politics –a revolutionary republic versus a conservative monarchy, each

During a demonstration outside the Saudi embassy in Tehran, Iranians hold portraits of Shia Muslim cleric Nimr al-Nimr and protest his execution by Saudi Arabia on January 3, 2016.

ATTA KENARE / AFP / Getty Images

claiming that it speaks most legitimately for “Islam” in the political sphere.³

The Gulf States themselves have some protracted sectarian problems. However, these problems are limited almost exclusively to Bahrain and the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia. These problems fuel the sectarian conflict with Iran. But the small presence of Shia populations in other Gulf States neither raises local sectarian problems nor regional conflict. There are an estimated two million Shias within the six states of the GCC. In Bahrain, Shia citizens outnumber the Sunni citizens; Kuwait has a sizeable 25-30 percent of Shias. The four remaining GCC states also have minority Shia populations of roughly around 10-20 percent. The numbers for the Gulf in total are much greater when one includes the Shia populations of Iran and Iraq.⁴ As the paper will show in the next section, sectarian strife throughout the Middle East is fueling the geopolitical contest for the Gulf, while sectarian conflict within the Gulf Arab states is limited to few cases.

The Rise of Sectarianism

Sectarianism may be broadly defined as the process through which forms of ethnic and/or religious identity are politicized.⁵ Literally, it means an excessive devotion to a particular sect, especially in religion.⁶ The rise of the Sunni-Shia tensions and their potential impact on domestic and foreign politics in the Middle East is visible.

However, acknowledging religious differences does not necessarily lead to divisiveness and conflict. Indeed, the differences are the markers of a pluralistic society, and the building blocks of any democracy. While sectarianism has long been associated with religious discrimination and violence, the concept can be rehabilitated to embody appreciation and respect for diversity within politically inclusive societies.⁷

Recently, many factors have exacerbated sectarian conflict in the Middle East. Some argue that sectarian political mobilization in the region can be generally dated to the start of the Lebanese civil war in 1975.⁸ From the 1980s onward, with the advent of the Iranian Revolution, Iran formulated a foreign policy in which Shia sectarian identity was used as a tool of influence. The radicalization of some of the Shia Islamic movements also functioned to exacerbate the securitization of the Shia question in the region.⁹

The 2003 regime change in Iraq, which permitted Shia Islamic movements to take power in Baghdad, while reinforcing Iranian networks of influence in the Arab states, further aggravated this phenomenon.¹⁰ The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq not only reversed the domestic balance of power between Sunnis and Shias in Iraq; it also unleashed insurgencies that have deepened the sectarian divide across the region. Al-Qaeda and ISIS have capitalized on and contributed to this division.¹¹ According to Fanar Haddad, a socio-political

expert in Iraq, Sunni Arab Iraqis in 2003 found themselves singularly ill-equipped to compete in the new Iraq. He argues that prior to 2003 the language of ethno-sectarian victimhood and ethno-sectarian demographic percentages was alien to most Sunni Arab Iraqis. Consequently, the post-2003 culture of communal identity and communal victimhood came, intentionally or not, at the expense of Sunni Arabs specifically because the latter did not have a myth of unique communal victimhood in a political environment that, to a significant extent, defined victims along ethno-sectarian lines. Since 2003, the political relevance of sectarian identity, the policies of Iraqi and occupation authorities and the continued instability –not least the civil war of 2006-2008– have nurtured a sense of encirclement amongst Sunni Arab Iraqis that in turn has seen Sunni identity in Iraq being articulated and asserted in an unprecedented way. This placed Sunnis at a distinct disadvantage in the sectarian competition that has flourished since 2003.¹²

In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings since 2011 and especially the Syrian war, sectarianism appears to have become entrenched in Middle East regional politics. Rivalries and alliances are increasingly framed in sectarian terms, and the main conflicts of the region can all be said to involve a sectarian dimension.¹³ Since 2011, the region has become the theater for a Saudi-Iranian geopolitical confrontation fought not through classical realist state-to-state military battles, but rather through proxy domestic and

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transnational actors and the domestic politics of a number of Arab states, such as Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen.¹⁴

To take one example, demonstrations in Bahrain began in 2011 for political and economic demands. Later, they took on a sectarian form because the opposition forces who led the demonstrations were mainly Shia. The King of Bahrain, Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa, sought to co-opt the opposition through a political reform project cemented in the National Action Charter. His son, Crown Prince Salman, extended this reform effort into the economy through new initiatives to train and employ more Bahraini workers and to promote greater diversification through international investment. This economic project attracted the support of the Shia working and professional classes due to their greater dependence on private sector employment, as well as development-minded Sunnis, particularly modernizing youth who were attracted by the crown prince's global vision and international scholarships.¹⁵ Despite these factors, the demonstrations turned into confron-



Houthi militants take part in a demonstration against the air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition, on April 27, 2015 in Sanaa, the capital of Yemen.

MOHAMMED HUWAIIS / AFP / Getty Images

tations with security forces. Therefore, the reforms did not see progress and the political negotiations with the opposition failed. The two sides blamed each other. The government accused the main opposition party (al-Wefaq) of creating “a new generation that carries the spirit of hatred,” having links with “sectarian and extremist political parties that adopt terrorism,” and “following foreign religious ideologies and political entities.”¹⁶ This charge was a reference to Iran. For their part, the protesters accused the government of resorting to force so as to not implement political reforms. The GCC Peninsula Shield Forces marched to Bahrain to suppress demonstrations in March 2011 and to restore security.

The Kuwaiti case, by contrast, shows how a state formation process based on the progressive assemblage of segments of populations of various

ethno-religious backgrounds has had the effect of avoiding any type of polarization between the rulers and the various Shia communities. The contingent history of the formation of the opposition to dynastic rulers, where the Sunni founding families of Kuwait who embraced Arab nationalist tenets played a central role, is also key in understanding the old alliance between the al-Sabah ruling family and the Shias.¹⁷ This long-standing connection helped to protect Kuwaiti society from sectarian strife.

It should be noted that the other Gulf States, namely the UAE, Qatar and Oman, did not witness any sectarian tensions. In these states, the number of Shias is few, and the Shia population is fully integrated into their societies. Over the past decades, no significant cases of discrimination against Shias have been reported. Oman is a special case, where the dominant school

of Islam is Ibadi. Ibadism does not have historical grievances or severe tensions with the Sunnis, Shias and Zaydis. For this reason, among others, Oman's foreign policy often remains neutral in the face of tensions in the region, especially those related to sectarianism. Hence, its relations with Iran have never been affected by the other GCC states' policies.

In Yemen, some analysts argue that the violence is not sectarian. That's partially true, if one looks only within Yemen: the Houthi forces there are a Zaydi-Shia group, but they fought alongside Sunnis –the forces of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh– against the legitimate government of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Locally, this is partly a political contest for power. But if we look at the broader picture to see how regional powers are aligning and intervening, it is hard to miss the sectarian divide. Saudi Arabia backs President Hadi, who is Sunni, whereas Shia governments, such as those of Iran and Iraq, as well as non-state groups, like Hezbollah, support the Houthis. Yemen's battle was part of the larger political contest in the Middle East –but now the central cleavage has switched from a dispute over a regime type to a question of sectarian identity.¹⁸ The Saudi decision to launch “Operation Decisive Storm” in March 2015 was rooted in very real security concerns about the Houthi's military buildup on the border.¹⁹ Tehran's involvement in the Yemeni conflict is driven by its grand confrontation with Riyadh over geopolitical influence. After all, meddling in Saudi Arabia's security

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backyard is in keeping with the rules of geopolitical engagement.²⁰

These regional geo-sectarian tensions have finally led to the direct confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In January 2016, Saudi Arabia put dissident Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr to death. The charges against al-Nimr included “inciting sectarian strife.” The execution sparked protests in Bahrain, Iraq, and Iran, where demonstrators overran Saudi Arabia's consulate in Mashhad and set fire to its embassy in Tehran. These attacks prompted a formal severing of diplomatic ties between the two regional rivals.²¹

It seems that Saudi Arabia is responding to the perceived threat to its own national security and regional interests. At least two reasons have led the country to escalate with Iran. Firstly, Iran's nuclear deal. Saudi Arabia's escalation was driven by its fear of the potential success of the U.S. deal with Iran over its nuclear program. Saudi Arabia viewed Iran's reintegration into the international order and its evolving relationship with Washington during Barack Obama's Administration as a profound threat to its own regional position.²² It considers a “nu-

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clear” Iran a significant threat, particularly if a future nuclear capability deters the United States from coming to Saudi assistance in a conventional conflict or a crisis situation.²³

Secondly, Iran’s influence has advanced at the expense of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, particularly after the fall of Sanaa in the hands of the Houthis in 2014. The Syrian government again strengthened its position in 2015-2016, while Hezbollah became dominant in Lebanese politics. Because of this, the Tehran city representative in the Iranian parliament, Ali Reza Zakani, who is close to Khamenei, said: “Three Arab capitals have today ended up in the hands of Iran and belong to the Islamic Iranian Revolution.” He noted that Sanaa has now become the fourth Arab capital that is on its way to joining the Iranian “Revolution,”²⁴ after Baghdad, Beirut and Damascus. This statement was accompanied by Gulf States’ concerns over extending Iranian influence from the Gulf to the Mediterranean, and expanding to the entrances of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.

This geo-sectarian contest is not limited to Iran and Gulf States. Turkey has also expressed its concern over Iran’s increasing influence in the region, particularly in neighboring Syria. Ankara condemned Iran’s sectarian discourse and its alliance with Shia substate actors to achieve its geopolitical goals. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu has called on Tehran to revise its regional policies and “abandon sectarian politics” in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.²⁵ However, Turkish relations with Iran are well developed, and the sectarian factor is not the main determinant of their strategic relations, as shown in the next section.

Sunni vs. Shia Camps

Recently, the debate on the so-called “Sunni camp” has increased, with Saudi Arabia attempting to bring Sunni Arab and Muslim countries into alliances to counter Iranian influence as well as ISIS. On the one hand, Iran has succeeded geopolitically in the region by relying on a Shia alliance. It became the most influential regional player in Iraqi politics by sponsoring a number of Shia movements. Iranian support has also been essential to the preservation of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime, and Hezbollah remains the dominant force in Lebanese politics. The success of the Houthis in controlling Yemen further contributes to the regional sense that Iran is on the march.²⁶ Iran also has been trying to support Shia’s demands in Bahrain and the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia.



At Saudi Arabia's request, Foreign Ministers of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE met with Secretary-General of the Arab League in Cairo on November 19, 2017 to discuss the alleged 'violations' committed by Iran. KHALED DESOUKI / AFP / Getty Images

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States are trying to contain this Iranian Shia influence, in part by working on a rapprochement with Turkey, which shares some of their concerns. Although the early years of the Arab Spring witnessed Saudi-Turkish disagreements over the Muslim Brotherhood and the revolutions of Egypt and Libya, King Salman's accession to power in Saudi Arabia in 2015 reintroduced the momentum of strategic partnership. The two countries have agreed to form a High-level Strategic Cooperation Council to coordinate and develop their relations in terms of economic, political, defense, and security issues.²⁷

The Turkish-Gulf agreement in Yemen has raised hopes that a Sunni Arab-Turkish camp could form a counterweight to Iran. The vision of the "Sunni camp" stems from the per-

ceived Iranian threat, which took on a sectarian dimension by supporting the Shia movements in the region. Saudi Arabia views Turkey as the most important country in the region for any broad alliance because it is a regional power, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and it has a considerable Sunni population that can be a valuable counterweight to Iran. Turkey has stood on the side of Saudi Arabia in many cases even against Iran. Erdoğan even launched an unprecedented attack on Iran because of its position on the execution of Nimr al-Nimr, describing the decision as "an internal Saudi affair."²⁸ He had previously accused Iran of seeking to dominate the region, declaring his support for the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen.²⁹

To counter Iran and Shia influence, Saudi Arabia has worked to use or

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create alliances composed of Sunni Arab and Muslim states. It used the GCC's Peninsula Shield Forces to prevent Iran's influence in Bahrain. It created the Arab Coalition of nine Arab countries, which launched "Operation Decisive Storm" in Yemen. It also established the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, which includes 41 Muslim countries, excluding Iran, Iraq and Syria. In addition, when Donald Trump became the president of the United States, Saudi Arabia exerted its efforts to hold an Arab Islamic-American summit in Riyadh, which 52 Muslim countries attended. One of the most important results of this summit was to call for the international isolation of Iran, while Trump himself accused Iran of fueling "sectarian conflict and terror."³⁰ Through these alliances, Saudi Arabia has tried to emphasize its regional role in the Gulf and the Middle East, and to demonstrate its leadership of Sunni Arab and Muslim countries. Above all, it has attempted to show its ability to contain Iran.

Nevertheless, these alliances have fallen short of forming a so-called Sunni camp. This is an unrealistic option for at least four reasons: First,

Gulf States are divided over perceiving Iran as a threat. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain consider Iran as an essential threat, while the United Arab Emirates view Iran as an occupation state of its three islands, Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb. Qatar, as well as Turkey, perceive Iran as a neighboring country. Qatar looks for the strengthening of mutual understanding and interests with Iran, but it opposes Iran over its sectarian policies and influence in the region, particularly in Syria and Yemen. Oman does not recognize Iran as a threat, and enjoys significant bilateral relations.

Second, there are fractions among Sunni actors; the Gulf States deem Sunni Salafism-jihadist organizations such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda in Yemen, and ISIS as terrorists. Although such organizations are anti-Shia and anti-Iran, they target Sunni Gulf States and consider its regimes as 'Kafer' (infidel). In addition, there is a rift between Salafism in Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest organization of political Islam across the Arab world. The latter is deemed the main socio-political rival in most Arab states. The policies of the Gulf States differ over the Muslim Brotherhood. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE classify it as a terrorist organization, it is engaged in political life in Kuwait and Bahrain and enjoys good relations with Qatar.

Third, the recent Gulf crisis highlights a political division among the Gulf States. Saudi Arabia, the UAE

and Bahrain cut their full diplomatic relations with Qatar in June 2017, accusing it of supporting terrorism and having good relations with Iran. In addition, those countries have been in a geopolitical contest with Qatar as well as Turkey over Egypt and Libya since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011.

Finally, Turkey does not want to engage in sectarian strife because it is a key partner of both Iran and the Gulf States. Turkey has been involved with Iran in a number of issues affecting their national security, including the position on the Kurds and political talks on Syria. Both countries signed a joint political declaration, establishing a High-Level Cooperation Council, and signed agreements regarding economic relations, politics, culture, transportation and security. Therefore, Turkish President Erdoğan emphasized Turkey's friendship with Iran after his meeting with his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani, in Tehran. He said, "From now on, Turkey and Iran should take steps based on solidarity... Let's become negotiators to prevent the shedding of blood in the region... Turkey does not care about the religion or sect of people who are going through a crisis in the region."³¹

In short, while Saudi Arabia has sought to counter Iran and Shia influence, it has had severe tensions with some Sunni states and organizations. Thus, the Sunni camp is neither a unified camp nor does it have a blanket policy or agenda to balance Shia influence.

In conclusion, the conflict over the Gulf is a geo-sectarian contest; that is, it is a calculus of both the geopolitical rivalry of regional powers and sectarian conflict in some Middle Eastern societies. The sectarianism in these societies may remain latent and unseen for a long time, but it arises in times of crisis. When sectarianism arises, it is often fueled by the conflicts of the major regional powers. ■

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