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The Sunni-Shi'a Divide: Origins, Theology, and Geopolitics in the Past and Present

by

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January 2007

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines the origins, theology, and geopolitics of the Sunni-Shi'a divide. The study begins by recounting the historical origins of the divide, the dispute over the proper successor to the prophet Muhammad as the leader of the community of Muslim faithful. It then examines the theological ramifications of that split. The study pays primary attention to the so-called Twelver school of Shi'ism, easily the largest Shi'i sect. Next, it surveys how the Sunni-Shi'a divide has manifested itself in history from the period of early Islam until the modern day. Finally, it looks at the geopolitical impact of the divide in contemporary Middle Eastern politics. The geographic focus of the study is restricted to the lands of the Middle East from Iran in the east to Egypt in the west.

The conclusions of the study can be summarized as the following: The Sunni-Shi'a divide is deep and multi-dimensional. The two main branches of Islam possess starkly different notions about the nature of God, religious authority, religious knowledge, and the meaning of history, and the rupture between them occurred early enough in Islamic history to have produced contrasting aesthetics, approaches to jurisprudence, and bodies of law, among other things. The differences between Shi'i and Sunni Islam are so great that they are virtually two distinct religions. Although overlap and common ground between Sunni and Shi'i beliefs and practices can be found, the divide that separates them is effectively unbridgeable, as a failed effort at reconciliation in the twentieth century demonstrated. One implication of these findings is that the greater the influence of theology on the behavior and outlook of Sunni and Shi'a actors, the lesser the chances for fruitful cooperation between the two.

At various times in history geopolitics and ethnicity have transformed the Sunni-Shi'a divide from a primarily theological-ideational one to one of imminent political importance. This can be seen most clearly in the Fatimid-Abbasid and Ottoman-Safavid rivalries when sectarian identities corresponded to political ones. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 marked a similar moment, reviving a revolutionary Shi'i challenge to the Sunni Arab states in general and especially to the staunchly Sunni monarchy of Saudi Arabia.

Factors of class and ethnicity often exacerbate the theological-ideational differences. Four hundred years of Ottoman Sunni domination of the Arab lands created a legacy of official, theologically inspired marginalization of the Shi'a. The post-Ottoman Arab states of the twentieth century – particularly Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Iraq – perpetuated this discrimination. The result has been to create feelings of resentment among the Shi'a and to strengthen feelings of contempt and disdain among the Sunni. The rise to power of a Shi'i sub-sect in Syria in 1970 did not dissipate these sentiments but merely reversed the general pattern of discrimination against the Sunni.

The fact that a non-Arab country, Iran, is home to the largest and most powerful Shi'a community has also deepened sectarian divisions in the past and present. In the eyes of significant numbers of Sunni Arabs this Persian connection further taints Shi'ism as something less than wholly Islamic and contributes to the stigma of being Shi'a. Today, Sunni activists and

Arab nationalists alike regard the emergence of the Shi'a in Iraq with dismay, seeing the Shi'a as both infidels and stalking horses of Persian geopolitical influence.

Iran's Shi'i identity distinctly impacts contemporary geopolitics in the Middle East. The emergence of a powerful independent Shi'a community in Iraq and of Hizbullah in Lebanon is both a product and cause of the growth of the power of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In addition to posing a conventional geopolitical challenge as the largest state in the Persian Gulf region, Iran's ascent in the Middle East and the rise of the Shi'a creates a specific dilemma for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The legitimacy of the Saudi regime rests on its ability to uphold and defend Wahhabi Islam. Its inability to do so in the eyes of its religious critics has, since at least 1979, already severely compromised its security. Wahhabi Islam is virulently anti-Shi'a, and the rise of Shi'a communities is necessarily seen as a rebuff to Saudi pretensions to defend Islam. This places a serious constraint on Riyadh's ability to acquiesce to the emergence of Shi'a, including Iranian, power outside Saudi Arabia and to placate the demands of the Shi'a minority within Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia, for purposes of internal security as much as external, has a deep interest in seeing Shi'a power checked and diminished. Its ability to do so may be limited but is not non-existent. One option already broached in public is to revive the same strategy used to counter the Islamic Republic of Iran's initial bid for pre-eminence in the Middle East. That strategy involved the backing of Wahhabi groups, including violent ones, throughout the Muslim world. Given that these groups include enemies of the Saudi monarchy, replaying this strategy is equivalent to playing with fire. Yet given the Saudi regime's need to uphold its already compromised legitimacy, it may well decide that it has no choice.

The relevance of the Sunni-Shi'a divide for Syrian politics is not as clear. Historically, Muslim Brotherhood members in Egypt and Palestine have, most unlike their Wahhabi counterparts in the Gulf countries, espoused Pan-Islamic accommodation with the Shi'a. The Shi'a in this part of the world are insignificant, whereas the Western powers have posed imminent threats to Egypt and Palestine. Syria's cooperation with Iran and Hizbullah and its resistance to Israel and the US logically should win it favor among Muslim Brotherhood activists. Yet the fact that Syria is ruled by a Shi'i sub-sect that thoroughly crushed Sunni opposition groups and continues to subjugate them is bitterly resented by Syria's Muslim Brothers. The possibility that Saudi Arabia in its efforts to curb Iranian and Shi'i influence in Lebanon and elsewhere might seek to pressure Damascus by backing its Sunni opposition should not be excluded.

The intersection of the Sunni-Shi'a divide with Iranian foreign policy creates a unique dynamic. To the extent that Iran wishes to extend its influence throughout the region, it must emphasize its Pan-Islamic credentials and minimize its Shi'i and Persian identity. The most effective way for Iran to do this is to seek confrontation with the US and Israel. The same dynamic holds for Hizbullah as well. Thus, the efforts by Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states and organizations to underscore Iran's sectarian identity and weaken Iranian influence paradoxically may prod Iran to pursue more confrontation. Iran and Hizbullah's strategies of provocation are inherently risky, but so far they have yielded significant gains at little cost.

THE ORIGINS OF THE SUNNI-SHI'A SPLIT

The origins of the Sunni-Shi'a split lie in the question of who should have succeeded Muhammad as the spiritual and political leader of the community of the Muslim faithful. The genesis of the community of Muslims, or *umma*, as a distinct entity dates to 622. In that year, Muhammad led his followers from the city of Mecca, where they had endured increasing opposition and repression, to Medina. This act of flight, known as the *hijra* or migration, marks the beginning of the formation of the *umma*, the community of Muslims. Accordingly it also serves as the first year of the Muslim calendar.

Over the course of the Muslims' eight year residence in Medina, Muhammad evolved from a messenger of God, a speaker of spiritual truths, to a political leader who both issued laws (often in the form of divine pronouncements) and oversaw their implementation and the resolution of all questions concerning the community as whole, including the organization and execution of battle. In other words, in addition to supreme spiritual authority Muhammad combined in his person both legislative and executive powers. The *umma* evolved from a loose grouping of spiritual seekers to a political entity tightly bound to Muhammad and his teachings.

The question of who should succeed Muhammad upon his death in 632 was therefore of overwhelming importance for the *umma*. Yet there was no mechanism or even clear criteria for selecting a successor. Muhammad's lack of a living male heir meant that one option, choosing a direct male descendant, was not existent.

There were two leading candidates. One was Ali, Muhammad's cousin and the husband of Muhammad's daughter Fatima. Ali additionally was one of Muhammad's first converts and widely respected for his piety. As a relative of Muhammad, Ali was a member of the Banu Hashim, the Prophet's own clan. Ali's father, Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib, was head of the clan and had protected Muhammad even when other members of the Quraysh tribe pressured him to muzzle Muhammad. Thus while Muhammad was alive, the Banu Hashim acquired an elevated status, and this status was then formally sanctioned by the teachings of Islam.

The other candidate was Muhammad's closest companion, Abu Bakr. Abu Bakr, too, enjoyed a reputation for piety. His supporters also claimed that he was Muhammad's very first male convert. Although not from the Banu Hashim, he was from the same tribe as Muhammad, the prestigious Kuraish tribe.

Before any sustained deliberation about who should succeed Muhammad could take place, however, Abu Bakr's supporters acted first. Not waiting even to bury Muhammad, they declared Abu Bakr Caliph. Ali, not wishing to plunge the faithful into a fratricidal conflict, acquiesced and allowed Abu Bakr to assume the post of Caliph, or successor to Muhammad. Tensions nonetheless remained. Under Abu Bakr's rule, the Kuraish acquired a special status while the Banu Hashim lost their former privileges. The Banu Hashim protested against this turn of events by refusing to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr for six months.

When Abu Bakr died in 634, one of his supporters, Umar, replaced him as Caliph. Umar continued the policy of denying the family of Muhammad privileges. In 644, Umar fell at the hands of an assassin, a Persian Christian slave who had taken offense at Umar for unknown reasons. Again, Ali was overlooked. Uthman, a member of the high-status Banu Umayya clan of the Quraish tribe, was chosen to succeed Umar. Most unusually for a member of the Meccan elite, Uthman had joined Muhammad early on and therefore enjoyed prestige. He had also married two of Muhammad's daughters.

The split between what was known as the Shi'a Ali, the "faction" or "party of Ali," however, widened in the Caliphate of Uthman. Despite the fact that Abu Bakr and Umar had twice denied to him what he believed to be his rightful title as head of the Prophet's family, Ali, unlike some of his followers, spoke well of the first two caliphs and their performance as heads of the Muslims. Toward Uthman, however, he was openly critical, accusing him of arbitrary innovations and poor governance. Uthman lacked Umar's authority and strong character. Moreover, his custom of favoring fellow clansmen among other things generated substantial dissatisfaction.

This general discontent burnished the claims of Ali and his followers. These asserted that the family of the Prophet held the true claim to leadership of the community so long as there existed one of them who could recite the Quran, knew the sunna and professed the true faith. Uthman was not from the Prophet's family, but Ali was. Ali's supporters openly hailed him the most excellent of Muslims after the Prophet and composed poetry in his praise. They expressed their belief that shortly before his death Muhammad had named Ali as his successor but that his will had been ignored. Ali's opponents retorted by speaking of a "religion of Ali," i.e. insinuating that Ali's followers had invented a religion separate from that of Muhammad, Islam. Tensions within the umma were mounting.

Dissatisfaction with Umar's rule gave rise to several rebellions and mutinies. These culminated in the assassination of Uthman in Mecca in 656. Members of Uthman's clan the Umayya, fled Mecca, finally granting Ali's followers the chance to make their candidate Caliph. In the eyes of his followers, Ali's ascension to the post of Caliph reversed the series of transgressions against God's will committed in the wake of Muhammad's death.

Yet the restoration of human affairs to the course that God had intended failed to be permanent. Opponents to Ali existed, and they gathered around Muhammad's widow Aishe, who belonged to the Umayya clan. Although Ali had not explicitly condoned the uprisings against Uthman, he had accused the former Caliph of having provoked them and had refused to condemn Uthman's assassins. Muawiya, the governor of Damascus, who was from the Umayya clan, demanded that Ali bring Uthman's assassins to justice. When Ali refused, Muawiya marshaled his forces and went forth to do battle with Ali. The armies of the two men clashed in 658 in what is known as the Battle of Siffin. According to the traditional accounts, when Ali's forces gained the upper hand, Muawiya ordered his men to hoist copies of the Quran on their lances and cry "Let God decide!" The cry was an appeal for arbitration to settle their differences. Ali, in the interests of preserving what harmony still existed among the Muslim community, refrained from crushing his opponents and agreed to settle the matter peacefully.

Part of Ali's army, however, regarded the Caliph's reticence to crush the rebels not as prudence but instead as a betrayal of Islam. They deserted Ali and resolved to take up arms against both him and Muawiya. This group, known as the kharijites, or "those who go out," for their opposition to both Ali and Muawiya, espoused an uncompromising observance of Quranic principles and a virulent, violent opposition to any authority of suspect morality. They were radical egalitarians who believed that any Muslim sufficiently pious should be able to become a candidate for the Caliphate, and radical democrats who believed that the Caliph could be chosen only by the uniform consent of the *umma* as a whole. They therefore opposed Muawiya's position of an exalted role for the Umayyad clan. Now they accused Ali, too, of defying God's will and declared him an enemy.¹

In 661, a Kharijite succeeded in assassinating Ali. The Kharijites' contempt for any sort of compromise led them into constant conflict with the rest of the Muslim community, while their embrace of violence to the point of massacring even women created enemies as implacable as they were. Eventually, the Kharijite community was annihilated. Only small offshoots of the sect remain today, primarily in Oman and scattered in other parts of the Middle East.

THE MARTYRDOM OF HUSSEIN AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE SHI'A

The assassination of Ali did not put an end to the movement of his followers. Shortly after Ali's death his supporters rallied behind his son, the grandson of Muhammad, Hassan. Hassan, however, had little interest in wielding power and readily ceded the post of Caliph to Muawiya. Hassan's abdication disappointed the backers of Ali, but it was not the equivalent to a renunciation of the claim to the title of Caliph and thus did not constitute a repudiation of the basic Shi'a doctrine. Instead, Ali's party bided their time. Not long thereafter, Hassan died in 669. Although the cause of his death is unknown, Mu'awiya is reputed to have encouraged one of Hassan's wives to poison her husband out of fear that one day Hassan might challenge him.

Hassan's death left his younger brother, Husayn, as the inheritor of Ali's claim to the Caliphate. The party of Ali now urged Husayn to stake his claim to the title Caliph. Husayn instead chose to honor his brother's agreement with Mu'awiya and refused to challenge the acting Caliph. When Mu'awiya passed away and was succeeded by his son Yazid, the Shi'a again implored Husayn to take his birthright by force. They begged Husayn to come to the city of Kufa and lead them. They promised him their total support.

Husayn heeded their pleas and went forth to Kufa in the expectation that the supporters of Ali would greet him and back him in his bid to overthrow Yazid. Instead, an army sent by Yazid managed to trap Husayn and his family outside of Kufa. No supporters emerged. Husayn and his family found themselves abandoned on the fields of Karbala. On 10 October 680, 10 Muharram 61 in the Muslim calendar Yazid's army closed in on Husayn and some twenty other members of the Prophet's household and slew them all.

¹ G. Levi Della Vida, "Khawarij," *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2nd ed) vol. 5 (1985), 1106-1109.

The massacre at Karbala is a momentous event in the history of Shi'ism. It injected into Shi'ism the themes of repentance and martyrdom that have become and remain permanent, defining features of Shi'i spirituality. Shi'is commemorate the event annually in a "passion play" or re-enactment that has no analog among Sunni Muslims. Young males are the primary actors, and express their grief for their collective's betrayal of the Alid line by doing every thing from beating their breasts through self-flagellation with whips to slashing their heads in more luridly bloody celebrations. Karbala is central to the Shi'a worldview, as it marks the moment when human history irrevocably turned and took a course different from the course that God had intended. Unlike the passing over of Ali for Caliph, the massacre at Karbala was an irretrievable loss, and one for which the Shi'a themselves bore guilt.

The Shi'a version of history is very different from that of the Sunnis.² The Sunnis regard the era of Muhammad and the first four Caliphs, whom they dub the al-Rashidun, or "rightly guided," as a "golden age" when Islam existed in its most perfect form. The astounding expansion of Islam in this epoch attests to the purity of Islam in the first Islamic century. Within this time Islam had developed from as a religion espoused by a lone illiterate in barren Arabia to a spiritual, political, and military force that toppled empires and established borders spanning three continents. Sunnis regard this astonishing achievement as clear evidence that Muhammad and his "rightly guided" successors enjoyed divine blessings, blessings that they received in return for faithfully fulfilling God's commandments and will. Contemporary Sunni Islamists contrast this glorious past with the weakness of the present Muslim world to make their case that the cause of that weakness is the failure of contemporary Muslims to live according to the requirements and laws of their faith.

By contrast for the Shi'a the world has never known such redemption. History, and the fate of the pious, took a bad turn following Muhammad's death and an even worse one following Husayn's martyrdom. Sometime in the tenth century, Shi'a scholars formulated the doctrine that the promise that God gave in the form of Islam was never realized. As a result, the earth remains the realm of injustice and oppression. It will know divinely ordained order only when the Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam and savior of mankind, appears and establishes a truly Islamic order.

Some scholars have suggested that the myth of Karbala and early Shi'i history produced two different political impulses, a quietist and activist. The quietist impulse derives from Karbala's demonstration that the world is irretrievably unjust. Resistance to oppression is futile, and the believer should seek only to endure and await the Messiah. Ali's acceptance of the first three caliphs, Hassan's deference to Muawiya, and the passivity of the Imams after Husayn's death all provide legitimizing examples for quietism. The activist impulse in contrast looks to the example of Husayn's heroic resistance to oppression. This impulse can be summarized in the saying, "Live like Ali, die like Husayn." The two impulses exist in tension with each other side by side. Shi'a leaders have throughout history up to the present day drawn upon the resources within the

² Bernard Lewis, "The Shi'a in Islamic History," in Lewis, *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 157-158.

tradition to justify both.³ In recent decades, Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and Musa al-Sadr in Lebanon both invoked the example of Husayn at Karbala to mobilize the Shi'a faithful to greater political activism, resulting ultimately in the Iranian Revolution and the founding of Hizbullah.⁴

BASIC DISPUTES: THE CALIPHS, MUSLIM HARMONY, FIGURE OF ALI, NATURE OF THE QURAN

Internal division and disagreement is unpleasant for any group, and especially so for Islam. Islam, the message delivered by Muhammad to mankind, claims to be God's final revelation to mankind. Earlier prophets existed, and these include all of those known to Jews and Christians as well as an unspecified number of others. Every nation or community has received some form of divine guidance. The problem is simply that most did not receive a formal message, and those that did, such as the Jews and Christians, possessed messages that were either incomplete or had been corrupted. The result was that mankind prior to Muhammad lived with imperfect knowledge of God's law and will. Although most could claim some aspect of the truth, none could claim it comprehensively, and therefore mankind remained riven by different religions. In order to rectify this situation and rescue mankind from the persistent state of jahiliyya, or ignorance, in which it lived, God entrusted a perfect revelation to Muhammad. Muhammad declared himself the seal, the last and final of all the prophets. Muslims believe that the Quran is the final revelation, constituting God's revelation in its perfect and uncorrupted form.

An important facet of Islam's presumed superiority to Judaism, Christianity, and other earlier religions and their rival sects is Islam's claim to represent clear and straightforward guidance for man on which there should be and can be no doubt. Indeed, the text of the Quran repeatedly refers to itself as a "clear text of guidance." God had entrusted his revelation to Muhammad in part to put an end to the confusion among mankind that gave rise to so many different beliefs and practices. The existence of internal disputes and sects within Islam diminishes this claim and casts doubt on the superiority Islam. Partly for this reason, *fitna*, or internal dissension, is considered a grave offense within Islam. The Quran specifically condemns the formation of sects in chapter six verse 159.

Aside from being a source of doctrinal embarrassment, *fitna* has also threatened Islam's physical existence. The *umma* took shape during the ten year years that Muhammad and his followers spent in exile from Mecca. During this period, Muhammad had succeeded in forging a new community that was defined primarily by faith and not by Arabia's traditional tribal networks and clan relations. The *umma* experienced its rapid rise to glory when it exploded across the Middle East in a stunning feat of conquest. All the more significant then, is the fact that the

³ Denis McEoin, "Aspects of Militance and Quietism in Imami Shi'ism," *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)* Vol. 1 No. 11 (1984), 18-19; Lewis, "Shi'a," 161-162.

⁴ Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, "Factors Conducive to the Politicization of the Lebanese Shi'a and the Emergence of Hizbu'llah," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 14:3 (2003), 277. See also Ajami's fascinating account of Musa al-Sadr's use of Karbala to mobilize and inspire the Shi'a of Lebanon, 123-158.

greatest challenge to this expansion came not from the outside but from the inside, when, at several instances including those mentioned above, the *umma* fell into violent squabbling and civil war. *Fitna* has posed both theoretical and physical threats to the unity and well-being of the Muslim community.

Thus there is a significant gap between the way Muslims understand what Islam represents – the perfect and clear final revelation that unites the faithful in willful harmony and does away with religious confusion and division – and what their own history demonstrates. The Sunni practice of calling the first four caliphs – Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali – the al-Rashidun, the “rightly guided” is a manifestation of the desire or need to conceive of Islamic history as a story of divinely-willed processes. The dissension and political decay that took place under the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties that followed the era of the Rashidun is too well documented to maintain that the *umma* continued to receive divine protection and blessing. Although the dissension of those later periods has its roots in the very first succession, Sunnis nonetheless regard the era of Muhammad and the Rashidun as a golden age.

The Shi’a, by contrast, cannot share this view. According to their version of events, the mere fact of Abu Bakr’s ascension to the Caliphate in the place of Ali marks the derailing of history from the course that God intended. For the Shi’a the three Rashidun aside from Ali are anything but Muhammad’s legitimate and rightly guided successors. They are usurpers.

The Sunnis’ insistence on portraying the first decades of Islamic history as a golden era notwithstanding, the history of internal violence and dissension in this period is too great and too clearly documented to ignore. Thus the Sunnis, too, albeit reluctantly, acknowledge that the fissures of the *umma* into Sunni, Shi’a, and Kharijite camps have their origins in this golden age and are not merely the products of later events.

The dissolution of the *umma* into Sunni and Shi’a communities, however, creates an obvious difficulty for Sunni chroniclers: how can one reconcile the emergence of corruption from within the body of Islam, which is presumed to be pure? From where did Shi’ism arise? The Shi’a claim that Ali espoused the same cause and the same beliefs as his nominal followers is unacceptable to Sunnis. How could Ali, one of the very best, most pure of the Muslims, one of the Rashidun, be the source of heretical ideas?

The easiest and most satisfying solution to this sort of problem is to identify an impure foreign element as the carrier of corrupting heresy. Thus the Sunni historian al-Tabari in the tenth century fingered not Ali but the figure of ‘Abd Allah bin Saba’, a Yemenite Jew, as the real founder of the Shi’a. Following Tabari, Sunni historiography portrays Ibn Saba’ as a malicious agent of outside forces that sought to weaken and destroy Islam by sowing division from within. It accuses him of inventing the doctrine that Ali was the legitimate successor to Muhammad, and of denying Ali’s death and deifying him. Although the latter assertion may have some historical foundation (some sources do attest that Ibn Saba denied the death of Ali and ascribed a divine status to him), the former has none and is almost certainly a convenient invention. Sunni print houses published tracts repeating this myth in the 1920s and 1930s in the wake of the Arab

failure to achieve unity against the Europeans, following al-Azhar's recognition of the Jafari Shi'i school of law, after the 1991 Gulf War and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵

Sunni scholars also point out that early on Shi'ism attracted a disproportionate number of Persians. Although the Persians did not adopt Shi'im en masse until after the rise of the Safavids in the sixteenth century, some Persians did play prominent roles in Shi'ism in its early centuries. In short, Sunni teaching preserves the integral purity of Islam and refutes the Shi'i account of Islamic history by simply dismissing Shi'ism as a whole as something that entered the Muslim community from the outside rather than something that emerged from within, let alone from the person of Ali.

Accounting for the Sunni-Shi'a split is slightly more complex for the Shi'a. Because they believe that history already began veering off the path that God intended for it when Abu Bakr and not Ali succeeded Muhammad as Caliph, the Shi'a have never felt the same need to idealize early Islamic history. Indeed, they experience the opposite temptation. They cannot accept the Sunni concept of the "Rightly Guided Caliphs." Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman are all, in Shi'a eyes, usurpers. In fact, far from regarding these three as honorable and exceptional Muslims, many Shi'is have disparaged them as *nawasib*, meaning those who hate the Prophet's lineage. Some Shi'a have at various times in history returned this hate to the *nawasib* in the form of ritual cursing. As part of their communal prayers Shi'a have often called upon God to punish the Rashidun, the very same figures that the Sunni revere as divinely blessed.

The practice of ritual cursing has been a source of controversy among Shi'i clerics. Today most condemn the practice. The modern Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, formally bans the practice. Being the vastly smaller party, the Shi'a cannot so freely or openly reject Sunnism as alien to Islam without running the risk of retaliation. Consequently Shi'i scholars have expressed a wide range of opinions on the legitimacy of the Sunnis and their beliefs. Thus although they may question the legitimacy of some Sunni beliefs and practices, very few dispute the fundamental claim of Sunnis to be Muslims. Nonetheless, ritual cursing remains a popular aspect of communal prayers. And because clerical authority among the Shi'i primarily flows upward from the rank and file rather than from the top down, some Shi'a clerics opt to tolerate the cursing rather than jeopardize their personal authority by condemning it.

Although the Sunni revere Ali, they cannot and do not ascribe the same authority to him as do the Shi'a. Sunnis accordingly accuse the Shi'a of attributing exaggerated importance to the person of Ali. Indeed, the charge that the Shi'a created a "religion of Ali" as opposed to Islam, the religion of Muhammad, was one of the Sunnis' earliest criticisms of the Shi'a. The charge is not entirely baseless. There have been, and are, among the Shi'is a small number who have gone so far as to assert that Ali was closer to God than Muhammad. According to them, the intended recipient of God's final revelation was not Muhammad, but Ali, and that the angel Gabriel erred by delivering the revelation to Muhammad. This notion, as well as the still more extreme idea that God became incarnate in Ali, is absolutely scandalous to the vast majority of Sunnis for

⁵ Nakash, *Reaching for Power: the Shi'a in the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 45.

whom the centrality of Muhammad as the God's last and best prophet is axiomatic. Although these beliefs have never found a place in mainstream Shi'i doctrine, Sunni polemicists have not hesitated to tar the Shi'a as a whole with the radical ideas of the sects that branched off from the Shi'a mainstream.

Shi'a conceptions of the transmission of religious knowledge and the nature of spiritual leadership constitute another field of dispute with Sunnis. These conceptions are tied to the Shi'i rejection of the Rashidun and the doctrine that the caliphate properly belongs to the Prophet's family. The Shi'a contend that Ali was Muhammad's rightful successor not merely because he was his closest male relative, but also because Muhammad had passed on to Ali esoteric knowledge. They further believed that only persons possessing certain traits passed on through inheritance could master such knowledge. After Ali's death the Shi'a maintained that his line of male successors held the first claim to the post of Imam.

This belief in the special role of the descendants of Muhammad and Ali manifested itself in the Shi'i institution of the Imamate. The word "imam," which literally means simply the one in front, acquired very different meanings in Sunni and Shi'a Islam. Whereas in Sunni Islam it typically refers simply to the one who stands in front and leads the congregation in prayer, or occasionally as an honorary title for particularly revered scholars, in Shi'a Islam it came to denote the supreme leader of the Muslim community, an analogue to the Caliph. Hence whereas the Sunni narrative of Islamic history traces the development of the Caliphate from the Rashidun through the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties until the final destruction of the Abbasid dynasty and the Caliphate in 1258 by the Mongols, the dominant Shi'a narrative runs through a series of "Imams," beginning with Ali and his sons Hassan and Husayn and ending with the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi (this school of Shi'ism is appropriately known as the "Twelvers;" the next largest group is known as the "Sevens" for they believe that there were only seven imams before the line ended).

This twelfth and final Imam did not, according to the Twelver Shi'a, die but rather disappeared and went into occultation. In 874 he disappeared from sight and communicated from a cave through deputies. This is known as the "lesser occultation." Then in 941 he disappeared entirely in what is known as the "greater occultation." As his moniker al-Mahdi, a rough translation of which is "messiah," suggests, he will come back from occultation to establish a reign of true justice. Until his return there will not be another imam. Reflecting this belief in twelve imams, the dominant group of Shi'a today is known as the "Twelvers" to distinguish them from the other, much smaller related sects. Although the Sunnis too, believe in a mahdi, they have no figure in occultation or equivalent to the Twelfth Imam.

According to the Twelver Shi'a, a candidate for the position of imam generally had to satisfy several conditions. Most of these are unremarkable: being of mature age, possessing sound mind and body, holding a sound command of theological knowledge, and being capable of rule. These qualities are not, however, enough. Keeping in conformity with the long-standing Shi'a insistence on the special role of the Prophet's direct lineage, the Twelver Shi'a contend that the imam must also be a direct descendant of Ali either through Hassan or Husayn. Only such a descendant can be both close enough to God and in possession of the esoteric knowledge

necessary to rule and “guide men to attainment of happiness and perfection.” It is not the *umma* that selects the Imam but God.⁶

The Shi’i conviction that Muhammad passed on esoteric knowledge to Ali and that possession of this knowledge is a perquisite of the Alid line provides yet another source of friction and contention between Sunni and Shi’a. Sunnis regard this interest in the esoteric as a preoccupation that has more to do with pagan superstition than with Islam. Again, a central facet of Sunni Islam’s claim to superiority is the contention that the Quran constitutes a clear and straightforward book of guidance and that Islam rests upon a wholly rational understanding of the oneness of God (as contrasted in particular with the Christian mystery of the Holy Trinity).

For many Sunnis, the suggestion that esoteric knowledge is necessary both contradicts what the Quran itself claims and undermines its authority by suggesting that there are other sources of authoritative knowledge outside the Quran. Hence a common slur wielded by Sunnis against Shi’is is *batini*, a word that connotes the inner or hidden aspect of things. The word entered common discourse in reference to a particular sub-sect of Shi’a that placed an exceptional emphasis on esoteric knowledge. Sunni polemicists have since adopted *batini* as a general term of abuse for the Shi’a, accusing them of superstition and un-Islamic obfuscation and obscurantism.

THE QURAN

Another subject of dispute concerns the Quran. For Sunnis, the Quran is the literal word of God. This belief in the Quran’s nature as a flawless and direct expression of God is central to Islam’s understanding of itself as the final revelation of God, a revelation that surpassed all that came before and that cannot itself be surpassed. Unlike the Torah or the Christian Bible, which however much divine inspiration they may contain are corrupted and unreliable guides to God’s will, the Quran is perfect. Indeed, its perfection is in itself a miraculous proof of Muhammad’s message.

Yet the fact is that whatever the character of the Quran’s content may be, it did not take its final form until the reign of Uthman. Prior to Uthman’s reign, Muhammad’s followers did not record or maintain systematically the revelation that Muhammad had brought to man. Instead those with ability had committed the revelation in whole or in part to memory or, perhaps, to scraps of paper or bone fragments in scattered places. Foreseeing, or perhaps even experiencing, the problems inherent in relying upon oral transmission, Uthman ordered that the verses of the Quran be committed in full to paper and compiled in order to ensure fidelity to the revelation originally uttered by Muhammad. The result was a Quran consisting of 114 suras organized according to descending length.

This is the Quran that virtually all Muslims today recognize as their holy book.

⁶ Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabata’i, *Shi’ite Islam* Trans. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Karachi: Islamic Educational Society, n.d.), 184, 189-190.

It is difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to overstate the reverence Sunni Muslims feel for the Quran. It is the core of their faith, and they hold it to be the flawless word of God and regard it as a miracle in itself.

There has circulated among Shi'a circles, however, the claim that the Quran is incomplete and significantly shorter than it should be. Because it was compiled at Uthman's behest, some Shi'a have expressed distrust about its authenticity. In particular, according to this belief, Uthman's Quran left out critical aspects of Muhammad's revelation relating to Ali and the Household of the Prophet. Far from being the perfect and miraculous final revelation of God, these Shi'a regard Uthman's Quran to be deficient and unreliable. Given the Shi'a view of Uthman himself as an usurper, it is hardly surprising that among the Shi'a there should have arisen skepticism about the Quran he compiled. Although almost all Shi'is today recognize and accept Uthman's Quran as the literal word of God just as Sunnis do, for those Sunnis inclined to be hostile toward the Shi'a, the fact that some Shi'i groups in the past have expressed doubts about the Quran constitutes yet another reason for antagonism.

THE HISTORY OF SUNNI-SHI'A CONFLICT

The consolidation of the Shi'a as a distinct community within Islam took place following the martyrdom of Husayn at the battle of Karbala. From that point onwards, the Shi'a rejected the Sunni Caliphs and looked to their Imams instead as the authentic authorities in Islam. Inevitably, the Shi'a began to invent and cultivate distinct traditions, rites, and doctrines, including a separate branch of jurisprudence. In the beginning, however, the Shi'a lacked state institutions and thus, as a minority holding controversial and even heterodox ideas, were subjected to repression by the Sunni authorities. With no avenues out of this situation, the Shi'a adopted a doctrine of dissimulation, *taqiyya*, according to which it is permissible for a Shi'a believer to deceive outsiders and deny his beliefs for the sake of self-preservation. This doctrine has since been disowned by many Shi'a scholars but has nonetheless further strengthened among the Sunni images of the Shi'a as the mysterious, malevolent, and immoral internal enemy.⁷

The victory of Yazid over Husayn at Karbala also marked the rise of the Umayyad dynasty, named after the clan to which Muawiyah and Uthman belonged, the Umayya. It is thus no surprise that the Umayyads persecuted the Shi'a consistently. When the Umayyad grip on the caliphate began to weaken, its two main rivals, the Shi'a and the Abbasids, met along with representatives of the Banu Hashim tribe to choose a new candidate for caliph. They settled upon a Muslim named Abu al-Abbas Abdullah ibn Muhammad al-Saffah, who won backing from the Shi'a by emphasizing his blood ties to the Prophet's household through his uncle and by letting the Shi'a believe that he would vest authority in the Shi'i Imam. Al-Saffah toppled the Umayyads in 750.⁸

Shi'a hopes for this new dynasty, the Abbasid, were sorely disappointed. The alliance fell apart as soon as the Abbasids secured a victory over the Umayyads. Not only did the Shi'a come to blows with the Abbasids, but they themselves disintegrated into quarrelling sects. The result was that the Sunni Abbasids gained control of the Caliphate. Al-Saffah thereupon perpetuated the Umayyad practice of succession. Successive Abbasid Caliphs waged campaigns of repression against the Shi'a. The Abbasids' transgressions allegedly include the murder of Shi'as through mass beheadings and live burials, the assassination of the sixth Shi'i Imam, and the destruction of the tomb of Husayn at Karbala.

GEOPOLITICAL AND SPIRITUAL RIVALRY: FATIMIDS VS. ABBASIDS

It was during the Abbasid period that the Shi'a managed for the first time to pose an institutional and geopolitical challenge to the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate. In 909 a North African Muslim

⁷ R. Strothman, "Taqiyya," *Encyclopedia of Islam* vol. 11 (1934), 659-61.

⁸ Tabata'i, 59-63.

claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima and Ali established a new dynasty, which became known as the Fatimid Dynasty (909-1171). They espoused a form of Shi'ism known as Ismailism. After extending their control over much of North Africa, the Fatimids seized Egypt from a local Sunni dynasty in 972. With a firm base in Egypt, the Fatimids were able to project their power and extend their control into the Levant and present-day Syria, thereby directly challenging the Abbasid Caliphate, which was based in Baghdad, in the heartland of the Islamic world.

During roughly two centuries of control, the Fatimids managed to leave their stamp upon Egypt. They gave the city of Cairo its name and they founded perhaps the Muslim world's most famous institute of higher learning, the university of al-Azhar. Ironically, after Egypt fell again under Sunni control, al-Azhar would go on to acquire the reputation of the guardian of Sunni orthodoxy. The Fatimid Shi'i influence is reflected in the fact that even today Sunni Egyptians are known for their heightened reverence of the family of the Prophet.

The Fatimid challenge to the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad was more than a mere geopolitical one. As descendants of Ali and as Shi'is, the Fatimids directly and deliberately challenged the Sunni Abbasids' legitimacy as rulers of the Islamic world. Significantly, the Fatimid threat came at a time when the Abbasid Caliphate was especially vulnerable and faced threats from within and without. The Islamic world's unity had already fractured and rendered the Caliphal claim to rule the lands of Islam a nominal one. The Caliphate had been in decline and its power diminishing for some time. In the tenth century, a Shi'i dynasty known as the Buwayhids from northern Iran asserted control over Baghdad, and with it the Caliphate. They accepted the titular authority of the Caliph, but exercised real power. From the perspective of later Sunni historiography, the worst of these challenges to the Caliphate came in the form of the Christian Crusaders. In the twelfth century the Crusaders from Europe were pushing in to the Middle East and reversing conquests made long ago by Muslims.

The fortuitous arrival from Central Asia of the Seljuk Turks provided the boost that rescued the Sunni world. The Seljuks, who had converted to Sunni Islam while still in Central Asia, supplied fresh manpower and energy to what had been a flagging faith. They destroyed the Buwayhids and once again placed the Caliphate under Sunni guardianship. Not least important, the Seljuks extended state support to education and providing for the construction of madrasas and other institutions of learning. This support rejuvenated Sunni scholarship and enabled Sunni scholars to meet and refute the Shi'a challenge in the realm of doctrine and ideas.

To many Sunni historians, the overlapping Shi'a and Crusader threats to the Sunni Caliphate were not unrelated or coincidental. Instead, they perceived a shared aversion and hostility to true Islam joining the Shi'a and Crusaders together. It took a great Sunni warrior, Saladdin, to defeat these threats. After first overthrowing the Fatimids in Cairo and securing his rear, Saladdin was able to rally the forces of Islam and begin the expulsion of the Crusaders.

Yet even Saladdin's efforts did not suffice to stamp out Shi'a perfidy. A radical group of Shi'a known most famously as the "Assassins," waged an extended campaign of terror against the Sunni Abbasids and Seljuks. Secure in high mountain redoubts from Abbasid-Seljuk armies, the

Assassins dispatched trained killers to murder Sunni officials. The Assassins will be discussed below.

In 1258 the Sunni world experienced a catastrophe. In that year invading Mongols under Hulagu Khan captured Baghdad. Along with the city the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustasim and his household came into Hulagu's control. Fearing prophecies that predicted divine retribution should he spill the caliph's blood, Hulagu ordered the last Caliph to be rolled up in a carpet before he was trampled to death by horses

The Mongol destruction of the caliphate was an unprecedented disaster for Sunni Muslims. After all, the temporal success of the Muslims, the conquests, had served as divine proof of Islam's truth. Now the premier institution of Sunni Islam no longer existed, not even as a symbol. Although later a Muslim claiming to be a surviving member of al-Mustasim's household would emerge in Cairo and be proclaimed Caliph by the Mameluk Sultan, his authority was restricted to matters of ceremony and purely religious matters. For that reason Muslim historians referred to this dubious Mameluk institution as the "Shadow Caliphate." Moreover, large numbers of Muslims were now subjected to the rule of the Mongols. Whereas the Shi'a found accommodation with the Mongols, Sunni Muslims could only despair at the disaster wrought upon them.

IBN TAYMIYA

During these dark days of Mongol rule one of the most influential Sunni jurists and theologians emerged, Ibn Taymiya (d. 1328). The problem of Islam's loss of power and the spread of non-orthodox ideas and practices among Muslims pre-occupied Ibn Taymiya. The answer he found was that Muslims had failed to practice their faith with the necessary rigor. In order to restore the realm of Islam to its rightful glory Muslims must return to the vigorous, austere, and, above all, uncompromising Islam that, Ibn Taymiya argued, existed solely in the Quran and *hadith*, or stories of the life of the Prophet. Ibn Taymiya maintained that there was no need for either the reason of philosophers or for the esotericism of the mystics and embraced an exceedingly literalist interpretation of the Quran. His critics, for example, charged him with anthropomorphism, taking the Quran's mention of the ear or hand of God as proof of God's possession of such appendages.

More ominously, Ibn Taymiya argued that the Mongols, recent converts to Islam, were in fact apostates because they did not practice Islam to the full and proper extent. As apostates, they were fair targets for assassination and killing. It is not a coincidence that Ibn Taymiya's thought and writings are today especially authoritative among Sunni Muslim radicals trying to make sense of Islam's fall from glory and restore its strength. Ibn Taymiya's literalism, rejection of authority and sources beyond the Quran and *hadith*, and his readiness to declare Muslims apostates all mark Sunni radical groups today.

Ibn Taymiya reserved a special contempt and hatred for the Shi'a.⁹ These Shi'a were the enemy from within, heretics who posed as Muslims but who sought to sap and destroy Islam from the inside. In a charge that would be repeated centuries later by Sunnis such as Saddam Hussein and Abu Musab Zarqawi alike as they fulminated against the lack of Shi'a resistance to US forces outside Baghdad in 2003, Ibn Taymiya accused the Shi'i Grand Vizier of the last Caliph, Ibn al-Alqami, of having secretly betrayed the Caliph and assisted Hulagu Han sack Baghdad.

It is important to note that Ibn Taymiya's enmity for the Shi'a did not stem simply from a need to find a convenient scapegoat to explain the predicament of Islam. His animosity to the Shi'a was consistent with his beliefs about the nature of revelation, authority, and the history of early Islam. Where the Shi'a posited an Islam with hidden or esoteric sides that demanded divinely designated individuals to ascend to leading positions from which they could use their abilities to safely guide the Muslim community, Taymiya argued for a literalist, puritanical Islam based solely on the Quran and the Sunna. Thus Taymiya dismissed the Shi'i institution of Imam as wholly improper. Neither the Quran nor the Sunna made any mention of it and thus it lacked any sort of proper pedigree. Moreover, there was no need in Islam for an Imam or anyone else possessing a unique ability to achieve esoteric knowledge because there was no such knowledge. The Quran and Sunna were clear and direct guides to all Muslims.

Ibn Taymiya dismissed the Shi'a view of Ali as wildly exaggerated. If Ali had in fact been so special and close to God he could never have failed three times in a bid to become Caliph. He regarded the Shi'a belief in the occultation of the Twelfth Imam as absurd. Echoing the general Sunni concept of the good leader as one who wields authority to provide order first and foremost, Ibn Taymiya argued that the proof of a ruler's worth lies in his ability to take power and wield it. Someone who could not even be present, like the occulted Twelfth Imam, was useless to a community and could not be a leader by definition. Similarly, the Shi'i pathos of the repeated failures of "rightful" leaders to take their places was nonsensical. The fact that these would-be leaders could not claim and hold power demonstrates that they were unfit even to be leaders.

Ibn Taymiya's hostility to the Shi'a is not rooted only in contingent or coincidental history, but is a logical extension of his construction of Islam. His Islam is clear, literal, outwardly directed, and puritanical. When Muslims practice it correctly, they have God's blessing and will know success in this world, as the record of the Prophet and Rashidun demonstrates. Their failure to practice it correctly brought about their weakness and the loss of the caliphate. To overcome this weakness they must return to the Islam of the Golden Age and fearlessly take up arms against Islam's enemies. It is, therefore, no surprise that Wahhabi and other militant Sunni groups that draw on Ibn Taymiya espouse a similarly virulent antagonism toward the Shi'a.

At the same time it should be noted that Ibn Taymiya could condone tactical alliances with the more mainstream of the Shi'a, the Twelvers. This is consistent with Ibn Taymiyah's emphasis

⁹ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: Norton, 2006), 94-96; Nakash, 30. On Taymiya's views on Shi'a sects like the Alawi and Nusayri, see Yaron Friedman, "Ibn Taymiyya's Fatawa against the Nusayri-'Alawi Sect," *Der Islam* vol. 82 no. 2 (2005), 349-363.

on the need for the political defense of Islam. Because Islam embraces both the affairs of this world as well as that of God, the preservation of secular power was also a priority. The Shi'a could never be accepted as Muslims and were not trustworthy, but if necessary tactical alliances with them were permissible.

THE ASSASSINS

The image that Sunni polemicists created of the Shi'a as an unstable and dangerous group of heretics predisposed to fanaticism was not wholly without some empirical support. In 1090 an Ismaili Shi'i from Yemen named Hassan-i Sabah set up a stronghold in the mountain of Alamut just south of the Caspian, not far from Qazvin, Iran. Following the death of the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir in 1094, Hassan-i Sabah and his followers refused to recognize the new caliph and split from the Fatimids. Sabah remained deeply hostile to the Sunni Abbasids and remained dedicated to achieving the destruction of the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate. To accomplish this goal he raised a cadre of religiously inspired killers who would track down and individually eliminate high-ranking Abbasid officials, including the Caliph himself if possible. Although they did not take their own lives, their preferred style of attack – carried out individually, up close, and in public in order to ensure the greatest amount of terror and intimidation – virtually guaranteed that they would be caught and killed.¹⁰

Hassan-i Sabah therefore recruited his hit men carefully and subjected them to intense religious indoctrination. The idea of martyrdom, the Muslim belief that a Muslim who dies while in the process of fighting jihad for the sake of God would upon death instantly achieve his reward in the paradise of Heaven, was a central component of this indoctrination. The preparation and instruction allegedly included the use of drugs, notably hashish. Thus, according to some, this group became known as the *hashishiyin* and contributed to the English language the word “assassin.” Although scholars debate the likelihood of drug-use and propose alternative theories about the precise etymology of the word assassin, they all agree that the word originated with this Shi'a sect and its practice of targeted and deliberate murder.

The Assassins succeeded in building up a network of fortresses in Iran and Syria from where they waged a campaign of terror for nearly a century and a half. They murdered a number of high-ranking Abbasids, including the famous Abbasid Vizier and Turk, Nizam al-Mulk, who as vizier had among other accomplishments laid the foundation for state-supported Sunni madrasahs. The Abbasids, Seljuks, and Mameluks all failed to suppress the Assassins. It took the might of the Mongols to crush and stamp the sect out of physical existence. The Ismaili sect exists today in numerous corners of the world. The Nizari sub-sect from Alamut, however, was apparently extinguished in toto by the Mongols.

Although the Assassins are alleged to also have carried out a number of attacks against the Christian Crusaders (who brought the word “assassin” back with them to Europe), Sunni sources

¹⁰ The history of the Assassins is covered in Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

remember them not as defenders of the faith against outsiders but as a heretical movement dedicated to the destruction of Islam. Moreover, many Sunni commentators understood the Assassins not so much as an extremist sect within Shi'ism but rather as the embodiment of the mystical extremism that is the nature of Shi'ism. Sunni commentators referred to the Assassins as Batini, i.e. those who search for the inner or hidden meaning of religion. To this day Sunni polemicists invoke the Batini and the example of the Assassins to discredit the Shi'a in general as a quasi-occult and heretical movement holding nothing in common with Islam beyond nomenclature, a fact that only underscores their cunning and malicious nature.

THE SAFAVID SHI'I SUPERSTATE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

The next momentous event in the history of Sunni-Shi'a relations was the rise of the Shi'i Safavid dynasty in Iran (1501-1736). The dynasty takes its name from the Safaviyeh Sufi order, which was based in Ardabil and had a following among the Turkic tribesmen of the region. Sometime around the beginning of the 15th century the Safaviyeh, for unknown reasons, switched its orientation from Sunni to Shi'i. In 1501 the head of the order, a young boy named Ismail I, captured the city of Tabriz. Within another ten years he succeeded in conquering most of Iran as well as the provinces of Baghdad and Mosul.

Iran's population at this time was solidly Sunni, and scholars debate the extent of even the Safaviyeh's commitment to Shi'ism. Some scholars propose that one reason why Ismail I became such an enthusiastic proponent of Shi'ism was because its reverence for Ali and the Shi'i imams verged on deification. Shi'ism permitted Ismail I to present himself as the reincarnation of Ali and a manifestation of God and thereby win greater popular support and influence. The Shah functioned as both a temporal king and a divine representative.¹¹

In any event, Ismail I upon coming to power demonstrated himself to be a fervent Shi'i. He declared Shi'ism the official religion of his state, encouraged conversion among the population, and invited leading Shi'i scholars to Iran where they could establish madrasas and develop Shi'i doctrine and thought. The result was momentous. Shi'ism took root in Iran, both binding Iran's disparate tribal and ethnic elements together and binding itself to the Persian national consciousness. To be a Shi'i became an essential part of Persian identity. And, not least important, the Shi'i religion acquired a powerful state with a large population and extensive geographic reach. Shi'ism had again become a geopolitical force in the Islamic world.

The other rising power in the Middle East, the Ottoman Empire, could not ignore the Safavid state. Not only did the Safavids loom as military rivals, but as champions of Shi'ism they posed a direct ideological challenge to the staunchly Sunni Ottomans. The Ottoman Sultan Selim I

¹¹ Hans R. Roemer, "The Safavid Period," in P. Jackson ed. *The Cambridge History of Iran* vol. 6 (1986), 189-190, 198, 298; Hans R. Roemer, "The Qizilbash Turcomans: Founders and Victims of the Safavid Theocracy," *Intellectual Studies on Islam: Essays Written in Honor of Martin Dickson* ed. Michel M. Mazzaoui and Vera B. Moreen (Utah, 1990), 30.

judged the threat significant enough to turn the Ottomans from the west, where they had heretofore focused their conquests, to the east. He led his army through eastern Anatolia toward Iran. Along the way he dealt harshly with the Shi'i Anatolian tribes he encountered. Their religious affiliation marked them as potential allies of the Safavids, and so Selim allegedly put some forty thousand to the sword. In 1514 he brought his army against Ismail's in the battle of Chaldiran and defeated the Shi'i Safavids.

The Shi'i Safavids retained control of Baghdad, the seat of the Abbasids, and this was an embarrassment to the Sunni world. Two decades later Selim's son, Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent, rectified the situation. He wrested Baghdad from the Safavids and completed the conquest of Iraq. From then on Baghdad remained under Ottoman control, except for a brief Safavid reoccupation that lasted from 1623 until 1638. Istanbul integrated Iraq, composed of the three provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra, into its empire and ensured Iraq's westward orientation. In order to maintain control of Iraq, the Ottomans cultivated a local Sunni elite to assist their civil servants and military officials in the region. The Ottomans thereby established the pattern of Sunni-domination of Iraq that lasted up until the recent overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

Although the border between Persia and the Ottoman state remained relatively stable following the Ottoman conquest of Mesopotamia, coinciding roughly with today's border between Turkey and Iran, wars between the Ottomans and Safavids were frequent. The Safavid presence to the east remained a constant geopolitical threat and ideological bugbear to the Ottomans. The fact that eastern Anatolia was relatively remote from Istanbul and populated by effectively independent tribal confederations heightened Ottoman concerns about the Shi'i threat. If Shi'ism spread there, and the natural resentment of the tribesmen toward central control heightened the potential appeal of Shi'ism, it would knock out the Ottoman sultan's best claim to legitimacy, that he represented Sunni Islam and was thereby the rightful leader of all Sunnis.

Ensuring the religious orthodoxy of their subjects along the Persian border thus was a constant concern of the Ottomans. Sultan Selim I's harsh treatment of Shi'i tribesmen was only the first attempt to punish Shi'is for their beliefs. The word *Qizilbash*, a reference to the red headgear that Shi'i Anatolian tribesmen wore, became a term of abuse, a synonym for traitor and heretic.¹²

The Ottomans regarded all of Iraq as a potential area of dissent, and maintained surveillance of the population as a whole, not just Shi'i religious shrines. The Beylerbeyi, or governor, of the Baghdad province complained that there was "no end to the heretics and believers." The authorities outlawed the Shi'i celebration of Ashura, confiscated heretical books from Persia, and gave their subjects the rather extraordinary power to summarily imprison other subjects on the charge of heresy. Convicted Shi'a ran a real risk of incurring the death penalty.¹³

¹² C.H. Imber, "The Persecution of the Ottoman Shi'ites according to the *mühimme defterleri*, 1565-1585," *Der Islam* vol. 56 (1979), 248.

¹³ Imber, 271.

To underscore their own Sunni orientation, the Ottomans decorated their mosques with plaques bearing not just the names “Allah” and “Muhammad,” but also the names of all four of the Rashidun. Under Ottoman rule a common charge levied against Shi’i suspects, and one that in itself could incur the death penalty, was “cursing and reviling” the Rashidun. The refusal to name sons Abu Bakr, Umar, or Uthman was also considered an offense. At this time the Sunni authorities began to disseminate allegations that the Shi’i Alevi Turks were sexually depraved: “they assemble at night, bringing wives and daughters to their assemblies, where they have disposal of one another.” The Sunni belief that Alevis practice sexual perversion stems in part from the Alevi practice of permitting men and women to perform communal worship together. Sunni Turks still circulate this kind of calumny about their fellow Alevi citizens to this day.

Although the conversion of Iran from Sunni Islam to Shi’ism was a gradual process, the Safavids also actively sought to cultivate “proper” religious beliefs and practices. Thus Shah Tahmasp I made ritual cursing mandatory at the Friday communal prayer. Those castigated as enemies of Ali went beyond the first three caliphs to include two of Muhammad’s wives, Aisha and Hafsa, and the *ashab* or “companions” of the Prophet, whom the Sunnis regard with great respect. Christians and Jews inside Iran were also, at times, subjected to state pressure to convert to Shi’i Islam.¹⁴

Over time, the Shi’i *ulema* in the Safavid empire grew in size and gradually began to play a dominant role in civil affairs as judges, court functionaries, and administrators. They strove to inculcate among the people of Iran an emotional and intellectual attachment to Shi’ism, encouraging the observance of the *taziyyah* passion play of Ashura, visits to the shrines of Shi’i prominent figures, and the assimilation of the reasoned and “mainstream” doctrines of Twelver Shi’ism. Thus although the Safavid dynasty fell into a period of decline after the death of Shah ‘Abbas I in 1629 and came to an end in 1732, it had succeeded in welding Shi’ism to the Iranian identity. The Safavids’ successors, the Qajars, initially made their realm welcome to Sunnis in a deliberate bid to weaken popular enthusiasm for Shi’ism, which retained a close association with the old regime. Yet Shi’ism retained its grip upon the population, and Sunni Islam remained limited in Persia primarily to ethnic minorities such as the Kurds.

Sunni Arabs did not let the union of Iranian identity with Shi’ism escape unnoticed. For them the Persians’ attraction to Shi’ism only underscored Shi’ism’s foreign, un-Islamic origins. Sunni Arabs retained this prejudice throughout the twentieth century. The rise of Arab nationalism in the wake of the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of independent Arab states failed to erase the distinction. Although Arab nationalists proclaimed a more or less secular orientation – and for that reason initially included among their number Christian and Shi’i Arabs who sought to downplay sectarian identities in favor of an inclusive Arab identity --

¹⁴ Rosemary Stanfield Johnson, “Sunni Survival in Safavid Iran: Anti-Sunni Activities during the Reign of Tahmasp I,” *Journal of Iranian Studies* vol. 27 nos. 1-14 (1994), 123, 129. This persecution varied, often according to the state of the Safavids’ relations with outside powers. Ezra Spicehandler, “The Persecution of the Jews of Isfahan under Shah Abbas II (1642-1666) *Hebrew Union College Annual* (Cincinnati, 1975): 331, 341.

they privileged Sunni Islam as the authentically “Arab” religion and an essential part of Arab identity. This was especially true of Pan-Arabism.¹⁵

That Pan-Arabism would become “a wrapping for Sunni political culture and sensibilities” was inevitable for two reasons. One was the simple reality that the great majority of Arabs were Sunni, and any mass ideology or identity had to reflect that. The second is that the Sunni narrative of history provided excellent material for modern nationalists. With little effort modern nationalists could point to Muhammad and his companions as heroes of the Arab nation and describe the Caliphate as the glory of the Arab nation, that glory to which the Arab peoples were destined to return in the future. The Shi’i narrative, by contrast, provided little useful material. The Shi’a narrative was one of thwarted glory and ambition. It was fit for soothing oppressed minorities perhaps, but would hardly suffice to inspire a great nation to accomplish great deeds as a proper national myth should.¹⁶

Thus the Shi’a minority of Iraq was slighted and persecuted by a modernizing Arab nationalist regime, while the Shi’a in Lebanon remained marginal in the region’s Arab politics.¹⁷ The geopolitical reality of Iran only exacerbated suspicion of the Shi’a. Non-Arab Iran threatened the Pan-Arab cause through first its alliance with Britain and the United States in the 1950s and after. Then, after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran threatened secular and religious Arab regimes alike through its ideology of Islamic revolution. Thus for these young, and hence innately insecure, Arab states, the Shi’a were, as they were for the Ottoman Turks, more than misguided Muslims or even heretics. They represented a real and potential fifth column of a foreign state.¹⁸ The fears of a self-consciously progressive nationalist Arab vanguard melded with the ancient suspicions held by the Sunni *ulema*, or traditional religious scholars.

¹⁵ Nakash, 82-83.

¹⁶ Some Shi’a in Lebanon did attempt to meld Arab nationalism with Shi’ism, casting the collective Arab nation in the role of Huseyn, but the narrative was too abstract to excite Shi’a, let alone Sunnis. Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al-Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 145.

¹⁷ Reeva Simon, “The Imposition of Nationalism on a Non-Nation State: The Case of Iraq During the Interwar Period, 1921-1941,” in I. Gershoni and J. Jankowski eds. *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 103-104; Ajami, 61.

¹⁸ Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak revived this charge against the Shi’a of being a fifth column in April 2006. “Beyond the Vacuum,” *Al-Ahram* (13-19 April 2006).

THE EXCEPTIONS: SYRIA AND SAUDI ARABIA

The rise of Arab nationalism in principle held out the possibility to the Arab Shi'a of integrating into modern society as the equals of the Sunni. The formal assignment of emphasis upon ethnic, Arab, identity over religious identity did, nonetheless, seemingly offer Shi'a in the twentieth century the chance to integrate into society. In most Muslim countries in the 1950s and 1960s the Shi'a in disproportionate numbers tended to throw their support to left-wing parties and movements that were indifferent or hostile to religion.¹⁹ The quasi-Shi'i Alevis of Turkey acted similarly. The widespread clashes between "leftists" and "rightists" in Turkey in the 1970s were driven by sectarian dynamics as much as by political ideological ones.

One twist on this general story of the continued repression of the Shi'a in the twentieth century is provided by Syria, where since 1966 the minority Alawi sect has held power. Alawi beliefs and practices differentiate them sharply from both Sunnis and Shi'a, but due to their special reverence for Ali they are considered to be closer to the Shi'a. Nonetheless, even the Twelver Shi'a regard the Alawis as, at best, verging on heresy. The dominance of Pan-Arab nationalist ideology in the 1960s facilitated the Alawis' seizure and maintenance of power in Syria by allowing them to downplay their religious identity in favor of an emphasis upon Arab identity.

Sectarian tensions, however, always remained under the surface. In 1973, with the Alawite Hafiz al-Assad as president, the government released a draft of a new constitution that neglected to affirm that Islam was the state religion. This slight was sufficient to provoke an outpouring of popular protest. Sunnis, the numerically dominant element in Syria, took to the streets en masse to express their displeasure with an Alawite clique that dared to diminish Islam. In the short term Assad suppressed the demonstrators with a show of force. In the longer term he attempted to allay Sunni suspicions about the Muslim identity of the Alawis by integrating them with the Twelver Shi'a. He attempted to arrange for prominent Twelver clergy in Iran to recognize the Alawi as Muslims and for Alawi students to study Twelver law in Qom. Neither the Twelver clergy nor the Alawis community, however, has been enthusiastic about the initiative.²⁰

In any event, it is doubtful that such recognition would do much to allay Sunni suspicion of and dissatisfaction with Assad's regime. In 1976 the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood initiated a campaign of terror against the government. Government reprisals followed. Finally, Sunni resentment exploded in early 1982 when the Muslim Brotherhood seized the predominantly Sunni city of Hama (which in 1964 had rebelled against what city residents even then had

¹⁹ Ajami, 72-73; Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: the Forgotten Muslims* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 204. The attraction to left-wing politics stimulated a response from more religiously oriented Shi'a, who sought to counter the left-wing turn. Thus the Iraqi Shi'i Dawa party also has its roots in this period. Nasr, *Shia Revival*, 86-87, 116.

²⁰ For more on this topic, see Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism," in Martin Kramer, ed. *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987).

regarded as an apostate regime) and declared an uprising against Assad and his Alawi regime. Assad responded by crushing the rebels in Hama mercilessly, killing an estimated 20,000. Seemingly having learned its lesson (or perhaps being simply incapable of doing anything else), the Muslim Brotherhood has renounced violence and has since refrained from openly challenging Assad. But Sunni resentment with the Alawi regime remains, and the Muslim Brotherhood still seeks the overthrow of the regime of Hafiz al-Assad's son, Bashar.²¹

The experience of Saudi Arabia stands in sharp contrast to that of the rest of the Middle East. Unlike the other Arab countries, Saudi Arabia was never occupied by non-Muslim powers. Whereas the experience of failed military resistance and occupation convinced the elite in the rest of the Middle East that resisting the European powers required the adoption of the secularizing and modernizing modes of Europe, the Saudis could, and did, draw the opposite conclusion: that the key to preserving political independence and cultural integrity resides in preserving Islam as the central determinant of social, political, and cultural order.

In Arabia, unlike elsewhere in the Middle East, an indigenous religious movement met not defeat but success in the twentieth century. It allied itself with the family of Saud to establish a state, Saudi Arabia, in which its religion would dominate. This movement, the Ikhwan or "Brothers," (not to be confused with the Muslim Brothers), was composed of tribesmen who espoused the ideas of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a seventeenth century theologian who advocated a radical return to the Islam professed by Muhammad and his companions. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab imagined this original Islam to be pristine, puritanical, literalist and virulently anti-Shi'a. His vision of Islam was, in fact, heavily inspired by Ibn Taymiya, who today remains a revered authority among Wahhabis. It is worth noting that, much like the earlier Ibn Taymiya, ibn Abd al-Wahhab was greatly disturbed by the political weakness of Islam vis-à-vis non-Muslim powers. He, too, was convinced that the root of this weakness lay in the failure of Muslims to remain true to the original faith. The regeneration of Islamic power demanded a return to the unadulterated Islam practiced by Muhammad.²²

Accordingly, ibn Abd al-Wahhab and then his followers revolted against their nominal overlords, the Ottomans. They declared the Ottomans apostates and Ottoman Islam a debased perversion of the faith. Although the Ottomans succeeded in putting down the Wahhabi revolt, they failed to extinguish the movement. The Wahhabis therefore regarded their success in establishing the Saudi state in the wake of the Ottoman collapse as an auspicious triumph, evidence that God was indeed on their side.

²¹ Gary C. Gambill, "The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood" *Mideast Monitor* (April/May 2006); Mahan Abedin, "The Battle within Syria: An Interview with Muslim Brotherhood Leader Ali Bayanouni," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* Vol. 3. No. 16 (11 August, 2005).

²² For a brief critical exposition of Wahhabi thought from a Sunni perspective, see Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay* (Oneonta, NY: Islamic Publications International, 2002). For a more polemical critique, see Vincenzo Olivetti, *Terror's Source: The Ideology of Wahhabi-Salafism and Its Consequences* (Birmingham, UK: Amadeus Books, 2001).

The Wahhabis early on had made the Shi'a targets. In 1802 Wahhabi tribesmen sallied out of the Arabian Desert and sacked the city of Karbala. This intense enmity toward the Shi'a has stayed with the Wahhabi movement. In 1913, before they had even succeeded in establishing dominion over the Arabian peninsula, they invaded the heavily Shi'a eastern province of Hasa and attempted to impose their beliefs.²³

After establishing the Saudi state, they wasted no time in suppressing the state's Shi'a community. In 1925 they forced the Shi'a of Medina to destroy with their own hands the tombs of the second, fourth, fifth, and sixth Shi'a Imams in Medina. In 1926, the Ikhwan, frustrated with the reticence of King Ibn Saud to mete out death to those Shi'a who refused to convert, undertook the mass execution of Shi'a on their own. Ibn Saud put an end to the killing by ordering the expulsion of those Shi'a who refused to convert., relenting only several years later after Shi'i intellectual and cultural life had been devastated. Up until the 1950s, Shi'i subjects in the Kingdom were subjected to taxes levied solely on non-Muslims. Wahhabi *ulema* denigrated Shi'i beliefs as contaminated by Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Sasanid Persian elements and depicted the Shi'a as a "virus" and "fifth column" within Islam.²⁴

Although Wahhabi theology provides explicit and ample grounds for anti-Shi'a sentiment, Saudi fear and loathing of the Shi'a is motivated by more than mere theology. The Shi'a represent not only a figurative fifth column within Islam, but a genuine potential fifth column within the Saudi state. The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia are concentrated in the eastern provinces of Hasa and Qatif, the very same provinces that contain the majority of Saudi Kingdom's oil reserves. Right across these provinces, on the other side of the Persian (Arabian) Gulf lies Shi'i Iran with more than twice Saudi Arabia's population. Next door is Bahrain. Although also ruled by a vigorous Wahhabi dynasty, the al-Khalifa, Bahrain possesses a predominantly Shi'a population that chafes under Wahhabi rule. Historically, the Saudi Shi'a of Hasa were closely tied to their co-religionists in Bahrain. The possibility of Bahrain's Shi'a achieving greater power is a specter that haunts the Saudi, despite Bahrain's small size. The symbolism of a Shi'a-led Bahrain would be significant and impossible to ignore.²⁵

In brief, the Shi'a of the Persian Gulf represent both the most acute theological and geopolitical threats to Sunni Islam. The Sunnis of the Gulf have always tended to embrace an Islam that is more literalist, puritanical, and anti-Shi'a. With Iran nearby and significant Shi'i populations in Iraq, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the Gulf they have far more to fear from the reality of Shi'a power than do the Egyptians or Jordanians for example.

²³ Jacob Goldberg, "The Shi'i Minority in Saudi Arabia," in Juan Cole and Nikkie Keddie, *Shi'ism and Social Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 230-233; Guido Steinberg, "The Shi'ites in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, 1913-1953," in Rainier Brunner and Werner Ende eds, *The Twelver Shi'a in Modern Times* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2001), 236.

²⁴ Nakash, 44-47; Nasr, *Shi'a Revival*, 97-98.

²⁵ Fuller, 196.

TAQRIB

The accelerating military, economic, and cultural onslaught of the European colonial powers against Muslim lands in the nineteenth century galvanized a number of Muslim leaders and thinkers, ranging from the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II to the itinerant activist Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, to propagate the idea of Muslim unity in the modern era in the form of Pan-Islam. It is perhaps worth noting that al-Afghani, one of the most famous advocates of Muslim unity, is believed to have been not an Afghan but a Shi'i Iranian. In the interests of appealing to the Sunni majority of the Muslim world, however, he adopted the name "al-Afghani." The Tajiks of Afghanistan were, like him, Persian speakers, but they were Sunnis, not Shi'is. Advocates of Pan-Islam, and particularly al-Afghani, identified the threat of European imperialism as the greatest threat facing the Muslim world. Only if Sunni and Shi'a quit squabbling and united in the name of Islam could they hope to avoid domination by the unbelievers.

The end of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 meant not only the end of the Ottoman dynasty but also the end of the ideal of a unified Sunni Muslim polity. Even if its own claims to leadership had often been half-hearted and disputed at times by its own subjects, such as the Wahhabis of Arabia who considered the Islam of the Sultan to be at best a degenerate form of Islam, the Ottoman state had nonetheless made a rhetorical claim to leadership of the Sunni world. The Sultan held the title of Caliph, taken from the Mameluks following Sultan Selim I's conquest of Egypt. Even if the Mameluke claim was itself tenuous, the fact remained that the Ottomans upheld the ideal of Muslim unity.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire destroyed even any pretense to this ideal of unity. What had remained of the empire had been divided into several sovereign successor states, thus sundering the political unity the heart of the Islamic world had known since the early sixteenth centuries. Still worse from the standpoint of Muslim thinkers was Mustafa Kemal's abolition of the caliphate in 1924, an event that even Bin Ladin has publicly lamented. Kemal's action had shattered the very ideal of Muslim unity. The physical and symbolic rendering of the Muslim world left Muslims confused and disoriented. One response was to redouble efforts to achieve unity.

Although it started among political activists and leaders such as al-Afghani, the call for unity between Sunni and Shi'a eventually attracted the interest and support of theologians and jurists in the post-Ottoman era. The hostility or indifference of their own new nationalist regimes at home also spurred a belief in the urgency of overcoming sectarian differences in the interests of Muslim unity and defense of the faith. Known as *taqrib*, "reconciliation," this impulse managed to win adherents among Shi'a and Sunni alike. Hence a number of Shi'i *ulema* lent their support to an effort to revive the Sunni caliphate and participated in a conference in Jerusalem in 1931 dedicated to this goal. Such behavior would have been virtually unthinkable for their predecessors. Similarly, al-Azhar university in Cairo, known as the most prestigious institution of Sunni learning authorized the teaching of Shi'i law in its curriculum, while the rector declared in a fatwa in 1959 that Twelver Shi'a law should be considered a legitimate school of law alongside the four established Sunni schools.²⁶ Sunni and Shi'a scholars established a center at

²⁶ The text of the fatwa can be found at <http://www.islamfortoday.com/shia.htm>.

all-Azhar called “Dar al-Taqrīb al-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyyah,” the “Center for Reconciliation of the Islamic Schools of Law.”

Nonetheless, despite the desperate straits of Muslims in the twentieth century and the boldness of these gestures, little practical reconciliation has been achieved. The theological, juridical, and other differences between Sunni and Shi’a are too deep. Although Shi’a Twelver law is not completely foreign to the Sunni schools, among other differences it draws on sources, such as different collections of *hadith*, and styles of reasoning that are outside of the Sunni experience. Recognizing it as legitimate would require not an act of good will accompanied by some doctrinal modifications. Instead, it would demand a radical rethinking and reconstruction of fundamental parts of the Sunni tradition. The *taqrīb* movement owed its initial success to the enthusiasm of both sides for apologetics, not to a mutual willingness to reconsider and significantly reform their own traditions. Thus the *taqrīb* movement foundered in the 1960s and disintegrated in the 1970s.²⁷

The potential benefits for the Shi’a of Sunni recognition of Shi’a law would seem to be clear and unambiguous enough to merit support. After all, such recognition would not only lift the stigma of heresy from the minority Shi’a but would even put them on an equal footing with the dominant majority Sunni without requiring a “conversion” to Sunni Islam. Yet opposition did emerge. Unlike the Sunni schools of law, which were founded and developed by ordinary mortals, Shi’i law was a product in part of the infallible Shi’i Imams. Hence to equate the Shi’a school with a Sunni school would be to demote the imams to the level of ordinary scholars. No matter how politically and socially expedient it might be, mutual recognition of the schools of law could not be consistent with the Shi’i understanding of the unique nature of their imams.

Thus despite the propitious conditions of the twentieth century for Sunni-Shi’a rapprochement and the efforts made by leaders on both sides, the *taqrīb* effort generated only one fatwa. It has failed not because of any outside or incidental circumstances surrounding it, but because the internal differences and contradictions between the two traditions are simply too great to overcome absent a revolution in interpretation that would result in the effective abolition of one or both. Representatives of the two sects continue efforts to promote tolerance and even cooperation, but such efforts remain at the level of tactics and accommodation. Even so, they remain dogged by internal opponents and critics on both sides.

²⁷ The *taqrīb* movement is covered in detail in Rainer Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century: the Azhar and Shiism between Rapprochement and Restrain* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS OF A SHI'A IRAQ FOR SAUDI ARABIA AND SYRIA

The current struggle in Iraq combines the theological challenge of Shi'ism with the geopolitical threat of a rising Iran. It therefore will continue to reverberate throughout the region. The likelihood of the emergence of a Shi'a dominated state in Iraq, be it the Iraqi state or a fraction thereof, poses an explicit challenge to the current Sunni-dominated order in the Arab Middle East. It will inevitably continue to impact the domestic politics of two of Iraq's neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Syria, albeit it in very different ways.

A new Arab Shi'i state will unsettle Saudi Arabia for three reasons. One is that it will, at least from Riyadh's perspective, represent a net increase in Persian power. Iran is close to Saudi Arabia, lying just across the Persian Gulf. It already was the biggest and the strongest state in the Gulf. The removal of Saddam Hussein not only removed a check on Iran, it has turned out to be a net gain for Iranian power. Through the Shi'a majority in Iraq Iran, for now and the foreseeable future, exercises considerable direct influence on Mesopotamia.

Geopolitical rivalry between Arabia and Persia is nothing new. In the Sassanid era, the Persians controlled the opposite, Arabian side of the Persian Gulf as well as their own. The Sassanid Empire was the first great victim of the Arab conquests. Today, the Saudi Gulf coast again looks vulnerable. Saudi Arabia's Shi'a population is concentrated in its eastern provinces; these provinces also happen to contain Saudi Arabia's main oilfields. Keeping this region secure and the oil flowing is a Saudi priority. Moreover, the neighboring Gulf island kingdom of Bahrain is predominantly Shi'a. Like Saudi Arabia, it too is ruled by a Wahhabi dynasty, the Al-Khalifas, who conquered Bahrain in 1782 and ethnically cleansed the Shi'a from the island's eastern coast.²⁸ Unlike Saudi Arabia, however, the Al-Khalifas Sunni minority that espouses the same Wahhabi Islam that the Saudis do. The geographic distribution of Arabian Shi'a communities necessarily is a cause of concern for the Saudis. A Shi'a-led state in Iraq will effectively put Iran on the Saudi border.

Second, a Shi'a-led Iraq or Arab state will embolden the Shi'i minorities within Saudi Arabia and the majority in Bahrain. In fact, it already has. In the wake of the US invasion of Iraq Saudi Shi'a have grown more restive. Those in Bahrain are challenging the dominant Sunni minority more boldly. Historically, these communities have enjoyed close ties to Najaf, Iraq; less so to Qum, Iran. The emergence of an Arab Shi'i power and the reemergence of Najaf as a center of Shi'i scholarship is having an impact on Shi'i communities in the rest of the Gulf. Although it is impossible to say precisely what kind of impact the opening up of Najaf will continue to enliven

²⁸ Fuller, 121.

the Shi'a communities of Arabia and strengthen Shi'i identity there in a way that the Iranian Revolution could not.²⁹

The third way in which the emergence of a Shi'a-led Arab state will threaten the Saudis relates to Saudi legitimacy. The Saudi royal family legitimizes its rule through its support for and sponsorship of Wahhabi Islam. Wahhabism is a severe and relatively inflexible interpretation of Islam. Significantly, it is one that sooner explains difficulties not as challenges to be overcome through reflection, modification, or compromise but as signals of impure belief and practice. Inevitably, fierce critics of the Saudi regime's impurity have emerged. These critics accuse the regime of hypocrisy and weak faith on a number of accounts. Given the regime's dependence on Wahhabi approval for legitimacy, it is necessarily sensitive to such charges.³⁰

Wahhabis cultivate an intense animosity for the Shi'a and consider them more vile than Jews or Christians. For some, the struggle against the Shi'a should take precedence over the struggle against Israel. This past summer, one senior Saudi religious authority issued a fatwa declaring "Hizbullah," ("Party of God") in reality to be "Hizbulshaytan," ("Party of Satan").³¹ In December 2006 thirty-eight Saudi religious figures calling upon "Muslims" worldwide to "be made aware of the danger of the Shi'ites" and to support "our Sunni brothers" in Iraq against the Iranian-backed Shi'a who are murdering them.³² The rise of a Shi'a state in Iraq and Shi'a possession of Baghdad will therefore add grist to the mill of the monarchy's Wahhabi critics. They will cite the inability, or even unwillingness, of the Saudi establishment to fulfill their claim and obligation to defend Islam. They will highlight the fact that the apostate Shi'a came to power in Iraq while the Saudi Royal family did nothing. Meanwhile, the Shi'i minority – a distinctly unhappy one – has grown more assertive and demanding. The pressures from Wahhabi critics and the Shi'a minority are colliding in Saudi domestic politics. The need to bear the standard of Wahhabi orthodoxy restricts Riyadh's ability to respond positively to the demands of its restive Shi'a population. Any compromises it makes with its Shi'a population will fuel the fire of its religious critics.

Thus the likely response of the Saudi authorities to the emergence of a Shi'a Arab state would be to ramp up support, both ideologically and materially, for militant Sunnism.³³ This is not a

²⁹ Vali Nasr, "When the Shi'ites Rise," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2006); "Regional Implications of Shi'a Revival in Iraq," *The Washington Quarterly* vol. 27 no. 3 (2004): 7-24.

³⁰ For an analysis of Saudi Arabia's internal fissures and the problem of legitimacy see Michael Scott Doran, "The Saudi Paradox," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2004).

³¹ "Senior Saudi Sheikh: Hizbullah –Party of Satan," Associated Press, 5 August 2006.

³² "Saudi Clerics Call for Help for Sunnis in Iraq," Reuters, 11 December 2006.

³³ After threatening precisely such a policy in the pages of the *Washington Post*, Saudi security consultant Nawaf Obaid was promptly fired as an adviser by the Saudi Ambassador to the U.S. Prince Turki al-Faisal. See Nawaf Obaid, "Stepping into Iraq," *Washington Post*, 29 November 2006. Less than two weeks later Prince Turki al-Faisal

difficult task for the Saudis; they vigorously pursued such a policy following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and enjoyed success in containing Iran's revolutionary appeal by transforming perception of Iran from a being a Pan-Islamic revolutionary state to a sectarian Shi'i one. Not only would contributing to the fight against Shi'ism in Iraq serve the goal of containing potential Iranian influence, but it would also serve to defuse charges that the Saudi royal family is not doing enough to defend Islam. The fact that some members of the royal family share tribal ties to Sunnis in Iraq will probably both facilitate such an effort and make it that much more likely.³⁴

Such a policy will be equivalent to playing with fire in the same way that Saudi support for Sunni militants in the 1980s did. But it is likely that the Saudis will decide – if they have not already decided – that they have no real choice but to back Sunni militants in Iraq even as they seek to contain radicals at home. Iraq is simply too close and important for the security of Saudi Arabia for the regime to ignore it. Finally, the personal convictions of Saudi decision-makers about the apostate nature of Shi'is should not be dismissed. Fighting the Shi' is normatively good, aside even from considerations of Saudi security.

SYRIA

Predicting or analyzing the likely impact of a Shi'a Arab state in Iraq on Syria is difficult, but necessary. Syria and Iraq historically have not had good relations. The Syrian and Iraqi Baath parties split from each other in 1966. Hafiz al-Assad and Saddam Hussein were bitter rivals from the 1970s until Saddam's fall. Syria, exceptionally for an Arab country, supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq war and also opposed Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War. Damascus continues to maintain close relations with Tehran and works with the Shi'i Hezbollah in Lebanon. One might therefore expect that Syria would welcome the rise of a Shi'i Arab state.

Things may not be so simple for the Syrian regime. Syria's Alawis rule Syria not as Alawis but ostensibly as Arab nationalists. The final discrediting of Arab nationalism and the emergence of sectarian tensions in neighboring Iraq can only further undermine the Alawis' claim to rule. As mentioned earlier in this paper, theologians such as Ibn Taymiyya and Wahhabis cultivate a special rancor toward the Alawites, and the Muslim Brotherhood waged a war of terror and subversion from 1976 until Hafiz al-Assad crushed it in 1982.

Since then the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has remained quiescent. The views of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood are not well known. What is known is that they remain committed to the

shortly thereafter abruptly resigned from his post as ambassador. It may be worth mentioning that al-Faisal, as head of Saudi intelligence for twenty-four years, had overseen the backing of Sunni organizations in the 1980s and 1990s. Whether or not Iraq policy had anything to do with al-Faisal's resignation is unclear, but, given the potential repercussions for al-Faisal personally and Saudi-US relations and Saudi security more generally it cannot be excluded. See "Princes at Odds," *The Economist* 19 December 2006.

³⁴ Salah Nasrawi, "Saudis Reportedly Funding Iraqi Sunnis," Associated Press, 7 December 2006.

overthrow of Bashar al-Assad and the Alawi regime. In a recent interview the nominal head of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Ali Bayanouni attempted to downplay the importance of sectarian tensions by stating that the Brotherhood accepts Alawi claims to be Muslim. Yet at the same time that he disavowed the Brotherhood's use of violence in the past or future, he described the violence of the 1970s as stemming from the Syrian people's defense of Islam in the face of Baathist aggression. He acknowledged that the conflict has a sectarian character, and cited Alawi dominance of the government as the cause.³⁵

As argued in part two of this paper, the Egyptian and Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood organizations traditionally have possessed more positive views of the Shi'a than the Wahhabis. This is the case largely for the simple reason that the Shi'a are few in their neighborhood whereas the Western and Israeli threats loom large. This is not to say, however, that Muslim Brotherhood activists are comfortable with Shi'is. The Muslim Brotherhood found in the example of the Iranian Revolution much that was inspirational. But in their writings the Brothers always sought to remain silent about or downplay the Shi'i aspects of the revolution.³⁶ For Syrian Sunnis, as Ali Bayanouni confessed, sectarianism is only too real in the form of the Alawis. The fact that a Shi'i state, Iran, and a Shi'i organization, Hizbullah, are currently benefiting from close ties to Syria's Alawi regime likely further poison the attitudes of Syria Sunnis against the Shi'a and their sects.

Damascus thus might find itself forced to choose in an Iraqi civil war. If it chooses to cooperate with the Sunnis, it may alienate Iran. If it works with Iran to back the Shi'a, it may find itself not only at odds with its own predominantly Sunni population, but also with the Saudis, Bahrainis, Jordanians, and Egyptians – all of whom can be expected to back the Sunnis. It is certainly conceivable that Saudi Arabia might seek to leverage support for Syria's religious opposition to compel Assad to moderate his ties with Iran and/or support for Hizbullah. ³⁷ In the event of the emergence of a powerful Shi'i bloc or state in Iraq, it may be that the Saudis or others will seek to overthrow Bashar al-Assad and install an expressly Sunni regime. That would both counter Iranian power and provide a Sunni victory to balance Sunni losses and thereby burnish Saudi legitimacy. Such a regime change would likely be quite bloody as Sunnis seek to uproot Alawi dominance and exact revenge for past misdeeds, perceived as well as real. The foregoing is speculation. It is, however, difficult to see how minority sectarian rule in Syria could easily survive the explosion of sectarian rivalry in Iraq.

³⁵ Mahan Abedin, "The Battle within Syria: An Interview with Muslim Brotherhood Leader Ali Bayanouni," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* Vol. 3. No. 16 (11 August, 2005).

³⁶ Rudi Mathee "The Egyptian Opposition on the Iranian Revolution" in Cole and Keddie, *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, 259.

³⁷ The Lebanese political analyst Michael Young has suggested that the tensions between Sunni Lebanese and Hizbullah be exported to Syria in order to compel a change in Syrian behavior. Michael Young, "Giving to Bashar, and Taking Away," *Daily Star*, 21 December 2006.

IRAN

The greatest beneficiary of the rise of the Shi'a has been Iran. Its success in building up Hezbollah in Lebanon, keeping Syria tethered, and exerting influence in Iraq has given it much greater clout in the region. Were Iran interested primarily in acting as the guardian of the Shi'a, U.S. policy makers could look to Iran as a positive force for stability in the short term and perhaps even a partner in the longer term. Iran as a state has definitely displayed greater vitality and adaptability than Saudi Arabia and the more secular large Arab states in the latter part of the twentieth. Some scholars suggest that the more dynamic Shi'i style of juridical thinking is helping to create a genuine accommodation between Shi'a Islam and the demands of modernity.³⁸

Yet the fact is that, in the short term, Iran has been seeking not to consolidate its gains but instead to expand its regional influence. This requires Iran to play the Pan-Islamic card and emphasize its anti-Western and especially anti-Israeli credentials. By seeking confrontation with Israel and America in particular Iran deflects attention away from its sectarian character and to its Islamic character. This has led, and will continue to lead, Iran to pursue policies that would not, strictly speaking, be considered in the Iranian "national" interest. Similarly, Hezbollah has been striving to transcend its sectarian identity by similarly emphasizing its Pan-Islamic and even Arab identity. Fighting Israel and thwarting the U.S. are among the most effective means it has to do this. Tehran's sponsorship of a conference questioning the Holocaust is one example of a relatively low risk way to do this. Funding and supporting Hamas is another.

This strategy of Iran and Hezbollah is inherently aggressive and hence risky, yet so far it has yielded substantial gains in popular support for Iran, gains substantial enough to worry Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt. Therefore one very possible consequence of attempts by Saudi Arabia and other Sunni powers to undercut Iran's appeal by underscoring Iran's Shi'i identity may be to goad Iran still further in its willingness to provoke and antagonize the US and Israel. Sunni efforts to dampen the appeal of Iran to Sunni Muslims may only boost Iranian aggressiveness against the US and Israel. Finally, the personal religious views of Iranian President Muhammad Ahmadinejad and Hezbollah chief Sayyid Hassan Nasrullah are beyond the scope of this paper, but they cannot be ignored when analyzing the behavior and policies of Iran and Hezbollah.

³⁸ Yitzhak Nakash argues that the Shi'a are leading a reformation. He does not clearly articulate why and how this is taking place, however, and his argument rests too much on the personality of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Husayni Sistani. Vali Nasr also expresses a relatively optimistic view of the future of Iran and the Shi'a, albeit one that is more grounded in empirical evidence. Nasr is a Shi'a of Iranian descent and the son of the well-known scholar of Islam Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

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