Chapter 13

The Amplification of the Sunni–Shia Divide through Contemporary Communications Technology: Fear and Loathing in the Modern Middle East

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ABSTRACT

The Sunni-Shia divide has once more returned to the global popular lexicon. However, this contemporary form of the allegedly age-old schism within Islam in fact differs significantly from historical cases. It has primarily come to the fore again as various actors have invoked it, and the fear it brings, in order to frame the conflicts they currently wage both overtly and covertly in more favourable terms. The purpose of this chapter is to examine this phenomenon, with particular focus on the Syrian Civil War, and the wider regional struggles for hegemony. It will further look at how modern communication technologies have permitted actors to spread their narratives much more effectively than ever before, and how the international community might arrest the exacerbation of this divide, and slow the sectarian violence currently plaguing the region.

INTRODUCTION

Fouad Ajami noted in his 2012 book on the Syrian Conflict when it was still in the early stages that the “pandora’s box had been opened”. He was referring explicitly to the invocation and utilization of the Sunni-Shia divide as a tool of fear and mobilization by both sides of the conflict. Although they differ in their interpretation of Islamic law, and in certain rituals, both Sunnis and Shiites share their faith in the Quran, the Prophet Muhammad’s teachings, and many of their prayers. Indeed, over the past many
centuries, it had been common for members of the two groups to intermarry, and even pray at the same mosques, making the recent return of the discourse of division all the more troubling (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). This chapter seeks to lay out the case for the recent return of the specter of the sectarian divide between followers of the Sunni and Shia interpretations of Islam. This chapter will first look at the historical origins and relevant factors to the contemporary conflicts, then it will lay out the theoretical underpinnings of its primary argument, that the Sunni-Shia divide has been weaponized and used as a tool by certain individual and state-level actors present throughout the region, referred to and explored in this chapter as political entrepreneurs, while looking specifically at the local level Syrian conflict, and the regional Iran-Saudi Arabia struggle for hegemony. It will further examine the role that communications technology plays in facilitating the spread of these narratives, and how they have helped political entrepreneurs achieve their goals, and how the international community might stop them or at least attempt to mitigate their effectiveness.

BACKGROUND

Sunni-Shia Divide

Globally, Sunni Islam is the dominant sect of Islam, with around 85 percent of the 1.6 billion Muslims following its tenets, while the roughly 15 percent remaining follow Shia Islam and its various subgroupings, such as Ismailis or Alawis (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). The origins of the divide are found almost at the same time as Islam itself. Following Muhammad’s death in 632 AD, divisions over succession questions as to the future leader of the faithful created a schism among his followers. These took the form of two groups, one arguing for a more meritocratic manner of choosing the leader of the Islamic community, the Caliph, while others argued that legitimacy could only flow from Muhammad’s bloodline (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). The split became reinforced with the election of one of Muhammad’s companions, Abu Bakr, as the first Caliph, over the protestations of those who supported Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib. This gave the two sects their names, with the majority Sunnis taking their name as followers of *sunna* or “the way” in Arabic, while the Shias were so named due to their support of Ali, giving them the name *shi’atu Ali* or “partisans of Ali” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). Ali would become Caliph in 656, but would be assassinated five years later, beginning the trend of fraternal violence that would characterize the divide. Subsequently the caliphate would pass on to various dynasties throughout the Middle East. The Shia for their part, refused to recognize the legitimacy of the selected rulers and continued to maintain the primacy of Muhammad’s bloodline. This culminated in the figure of al-Husayn, son of Ali, and (in the Shiite telling of events) later martyr and courageous soldier who struggled against a tyrant and sacrificed himself “for the principles of justice and virtue” (Hazran, 2010, pp. 528). The massacre of Husayn and his companions in Karbala in 680 would be instrumental in cementing the schism, and in helping to formulate what some have described as the Shiite persecution identity (Hazran, 2010). Throughout history, tensions between the groups have ebbed and flowed depending on leaders and the fortunes of various empires or dynasties. However, there are recurring instances of the Sunni majority excluding the Shiite communities from governmental affairs in core Sunni territories, and even harshly persecuting the minority sect as being heretical (Hazran, 2010, pp. 524).