

Muslim vs Muslim in Middle East

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The recent declaration of a fatwa (a binding religious decree) by the Sunni Egyptian cleric, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, against the Shia militant movement, Hezbollah, and Iran as enemies of Islam who are “more infidel than Jews and Christians” is a dangerous turn portending endless war among Muslims on sectarian lines.

Qaradawi’s poisonous rhetoric, which is influencing tens of millions of Sunnis globally via the Qatari television channel, Al Jazeera, is exacerbating the fratricide in Syria, where violence between Sunnis and Shiites is bringing back memories of historic battles and grudges between the two main sects of Islam.

As Hezbollah and Iran hunker down in Syria to defend the regime of president Bashar al-Assad (a secular government dominated by Alawite Shias), leading Sunni hate-mongers like Qaradawi and Sheikh Ahmad Assir of Lebanon are rallying sectarian passions to converge in Syria and overcome “pain from the Iranian domination”. The outcome of this religious bigotry by Sunni Salafists is visible in the extreme barbarities in the war in Syria, where the Sunni rebels ranged against president Assad have been brainwashed into believing that Shias are hizb ash-Shaytan (party of the devil).

Despite the religious overtones of this bitter sectarian divide, politics and the pursuit of power have been central to the Sunni-Shia rivalry since its very inception after the death of Prophet Muhammad. The two sects have not often seen eye to eye on the issue of political succession and legitimacy of rulers. Different forms of oppression and discrimination have been deployed against Sunnis and Shias by sultans and emperors of yore and by modern-day governments dominated by one sect or the other.

The current geopolitical context for the Sunni-Shia war sundering Syria and its neighbourhood lies in the long-term contest for supremacy between the orthodox Sunni monarchies of the Gulf Co-operation Council (its members deliberately call it “Arabian Gulf” as opposed to the Persian Gulf) and Iran. It is a contemporary iteration of medieval era wars between the Sunni Ottoman empire and the Shia Safavid empire for control over Arab territories. With present-day Turkey joining hands with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan to fuel the Sunni insurgency against Assad, there is a lingering symbolism of the bloody past that pitted Muslim against Muslim.

The sectarian myths circulating in the Middle East today are millennial in nature. In the world view of the hardline Sunnis — most of who belong to the Saudi-funded Wahhabi and Salafi schools of thought — it is the obligation of their sectarian brethren to unite and fight what they term as the “spreading of the Safawi project”, i.e. the erstwhile Shia empire centred in Persia. By labelling the war in Syria as an existential one, the Sunni regimes and their fiery mullahs are trying to leave no room for reconciliation and co-existence within Islam. Even so-called moderate Sunni elites like King Abdullah of Jordan are guilty of stoking phobia about the perils of a “Shia crescent” that could upset the traditional balance of power in the Middle East.

On the Shia side, too, centuries-old are being reinvented to defend Assad's regime. In Shia-majority Iraq, the bugbear of 'Sufyani'— an apocryphal tyrant who is predicted to arise in Syria and decimate the descendants of Prophet Muhammad (the most revered family branch for Shias) — is being likened to the Sunni jihadist machine that has been armed and funded by the Saudis and Qataris to topple Assad.

The cruelty and daredevilry of Sunni jihadist rebel outfits like the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria have convinced ordinary Iraqi Shias that they must rush to rescue the Assad regime or face prophesied extermination. The sight of armed Shias from outside Syria flooding in to protect haloed Shia memorials like the mosque of Sayyidah Zainab (the Prophet's granddaughter) in Damascus reveals how elevated the sectarian anxieties are in the Levant region.

Owing to emotional religious baggage, the Salafi versus Safawi war is overshadowing other fault lines which mark conflict in the Middle East. The fact that the Assad dynasty has been ruling Syria with an iron fist for far too long, and the genuine desire among Sunnis and Shias alike to seek political self-determination and democracy throughout the region, have been swept aside by the sectarian frenzy.

Even the classic Arab versus Israeli antipathy has been sidelined due to the Sunni-Shia bloodletting, which is not only laying waste to Syria but also resurging alarmingly in neighbouring Iraq. More than one thousand people have been killed in sectarian clashes in Iraq last month, the deadliest since the gory Sunni-Shia civil war there during 2006-07. The sectarian fire lit by the US invasion and occupation of Iraq has not only not subsided there, but also taken a more advanced and destructive avatar in Syria.

The masking effect of the sectarian war is a reason why little is being done to end it either in Syria, Iraq or Lebanon. As the Sunni-Shia dimension shifts the focus away from the Arab Spring and the popular push for democracy, and deviates from the Palestinian statehood topic, it helps status quo-minded elites in the Gulf nations to keep their people's aspirations for political freedom under control.

A permanent Sunni-Shia war dynamic also works to the advantage of Western powers, intent on using any means to pressurise Iran. For Iran itself, its life-or-death struggle on behalf of the Shia regime in Syria is probably a good diversion from its own internal economic and political tumult.

The only constituencies of hope amidst the escalating Sunni-Shia war are the Sufis, who are mostly Sunni by origin but whose practices have much in common with Shias. The Persian Sufi poet, Jalaluddin Rumi, preached "no division" in the spiritual realm. He was above petty politics and sectarian venom. Although Sufis are heavily persecuted by theocratic regimes in the Middle East, average Sunnis and Shias must strive for Rumi's mystical condition or at least draw inspiration from it to foster peace.

Ordinary Sunnis and Shias gel well, but rebuilding trust and avoiding traps set by rabble-rousers like Qaradawi is arduous in the middle of a polarising war. Middle Eastern masses have to yet again make history by rejecting elite-imposed bifurcations. The alternative is self-destruction of Islamic civilisation.

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