Why Sunnis Fear Shiites

The true nature of the Syrian conflict—and the Middle East's

By Hillel Fradkin & Lewis Libby

THE RECENT Arab revolts in the Middle East and the concomitant "Islamic Awakening" have not merely shaken up the order of an already violent and unstable region. They have reanimated the bloodiest and longest-running dispute in Muslim politics: which branch of Islam, Sunni or Shia, is to rule the Muslim polity. This rivalry dates back some 1,300 years to the death of Muhammad, and while it has occasionally been set aside for reasons of expedience, it has never been resolved. The continuing conflagrations following the mislabeled Arab Spring, increasingly shaped by this ancient Sunni–Shia tension, are set to rage on indefinitely. Affairs in the Middle East are accelerating back to the old normal: a state of hot holy war.

The seemingly internal conflict in Syria has become the war's central front. Sunni and Shia alike have been drawn into the conflict as the Syrian tragedy has unfolded. Inspired by the revolts in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, in March 2011 Syrians—a predominantly Sunni population—mounted initially peaceful protests against the rule of the Shia-offshoot Alawite regime headed by Bashar al-Assad. Secure in his support from the extremist Iranian regime, Assad responded with great brutality. His opponents responded in kind, fueled by money and arms from their Sunni patrons in the Gulf Arab states and by Sunni Islamists from both the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda. They fear what they have taken to calling, with alarm, the "Shia crescent." The term connotes a swath of Iranian Shiite influence across the Arab world and, via Syria, to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Syria functions as Iran's direct operational link to its terrorist arm Hezbollah and to the Shiite plurality in Lebanon. It borders Iraq, whose Shiite majority may be radicalized, and Turkey, whose Sunni leadership can be monitored and checked.

As the Syrian revolt proceeded, sectarian elements came to the fore. The momentum frequently shifted back and forth between the Iranian-backed Assad and the Sunni rebels. But this past spring, when Assad's fortunes waned, Iran doubled down. It arranged for Shiite Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite "volunteers" to join the fray directly and massively, tipping the battle for Syria into Shiite hands. Iran is now winning what one Iranian officer has described as "an epic battle for Shiite Islam."

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American influence in the region has fanned both Iranian ambitions and Sunni fears. The Middle East is well versed in the posturings and weaknesses of foreign sovereigns. In Shiite and Sunni eyes alike, President Barack Obama's proposed deals relating to Syrian chemical weapons and Iran's nuclear program translate into large gains for radical Shiism.

It is tempting, naturally, for Americans to stay out of a fight between two holy armies who oppose the United States and its allies. To put it very mildly, neither radical Shiite nor radical Sunni groups share our values or serve our interests. Still, as a practical matter, this does not mean that one of our enemies is not a more potent threat than the other. Of all the distasteful regimes in the region, only Iran's has defined itself from its foundation as our mortal enemy and acted accordingly ever since. Moreover, Iran's capacity to pursue hostile action toward America is currently growing. Thus, Iran presents the more serious threat to our well-being. If it emerges the victor in the fight for the future of political Islam and regional dominance, American interests will probably be endangered to an extent not seen since the Cold War. This is especially true if an Iranian victory is coupled with the regime's attainment of a nuclear weapon. Not only will America's ally Israel be under constant threat of annihilation, but American influence in the Middle East will be made hostage to credible Iranian policy blackmail. And yet, given the current status of the Sunni–Shia conflict, this is where we're headed. "Iran grows more powerful day by day," Iranian President Hassan Rouhani recently gloated. It's hard to disagree.

There are several reasons for thinking that radical Shiism, as manifested in the Iranian regime, might continue to dominate and ultimately win this holy war. First, the Shiite camp enjoys the advantage of the more-or-less unitary leadership of Iran. Perhaps in time internal Iranian opposition could challenge the regime in Tehran, but for now the ayatollahs seem to have stifled any such efforts. Outside Iran, some Shiite clerics in Iraq reject the Khomeinist doctrine of the "Rule of the Jurisprudent," but this "quietist" school of Shiism is not interested in governing its Persian neighbors and, in any case, is frequently undermined by other clerics working in Iraq on Iran's behalf. So the concentrated center of Shiite power remains in Iran and is, moreover, strengthened by the support of outside non-Muslim powers—principally Russia and China.

By contrast, the Sunni camp is profoundly divided, and therefore weak. This weakness is manifest in the split among the Sunni Islamist forces fighting Assad in Syria. The result is increasingly frequent military fights between sides, to say nothing of the ongoing fights with more secular Sunni militias.

Beyond Syria, things are scarcely more cohesive for Sunnis. The Sunni nations of Arabia and the Gulf lack the size and reach of Iran. They have provided money and arms to the Sunni rebels fighting Assad, but as they themselves support different Islamist groups inside Syria, they've also contributed to the infighting. What's more, the broader conflicts among these countries have derailed joint efforts.

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The unsettled condition of Sunni-majority Egypt, the world's largest Arab country, has had a demoralizing and divisive effect as well. While ousted Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi had suggested that Egypt might provide greater support for the Syrian opposition, that proposal proved so unpopular it might very well have been a contributing factor in his removal by the Egyptian military. The new regime has made clear that it wants no part of the Syrian civil war.

Perhaps the most surprising of the Sunnis' weak links is Turkey. The country shares a long border with Syria and is therefore on the frontline of the struggle. In recent years, its prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had put forward claims to not only Sunni leadership but regional leadership as well. After Turkey declared its enmity for Assad, it was reasonable to expect it to take a significant, even decisive, role in the struggle. After all, Turkey is equal in size to Iran and in possession of a large modern army. And under Erdogan's rule, underwritten by three successive electoral victories, Turkey had enjoyed unprecedented economic prosperity and political stability. As a result of this and Erdogan's Islamist roots and leanings, Turkey appeared to enjoy great prestige within Arab countries, especially those where Islamist forces were coming to the fore. The Brotherhood movements held Turkey in high regard.

Yet over the two years since Erdogan declared that Assad must step down, he's done little to make that happen. Additionally, he's begun to face his own domestic legitimacy crisis; there have now been several large protests against Erdogan's mode of rule. Among the many objections fueling the protests was Erdogan's

Syria policy, which was deemed by some to be *too aggressive* and risky for Turkey. Meanwhile, Erdogan's weakness has been further exposed by his failure to garner any regional leader's support in his continuing campaign against the ouster of Egypt's Morsi. Erdogan went out on a limb, and no one followed. Within the constellation of Sunni countries—Arab and non-Arab—no one has a claim on leadership, least of all Turkey, the most powerful among them.

Yet another contribution to Sunni disarray is the lack of a credible, external non-Muslim patron—namely, the United States. In the past, America had de facto supported Sunni interests, but Obama is not following that path. After making pronouncements about the necessary departure of Assad, he gave very little material support to the opposition. And then, after more such pronouncements, he conveyed the expectation that Assad will survive with diminished control over Syrian territory. Last came Obama's big Syrian debacle: The administration announced plans for a small attack aimed only at Syria's chemical-weapons capabilities—before embracing a Russian proposal that would allow Assad to avoid even that.

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The American retreat from a Syria strike follows on the heels of Obama's abandoning a U.S. military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, which would have weighed on Iranian calculations. In all this, Washington has ensured a powerful impression of weakness. If America is so reluctant to act in the face of Assad's clear provocation, so ready to abandon its positions, both Sunnis and Shiites are likely to conclude that the United States does not have the stomach for the contests to come with Iran, including the matter of the supposedly ambiguous Iranian nuclear program. Tellingly, a top adviser to Erdogan (whom Obama had assiduously courted) recently described the American president as a "half leader." Russian President Vladimir Putin, Erdogan's aide proclaimed, is a "whole leader." And this was *before* Putin's diplomacy rescued Obama from action in Syria.

THOUGH THERE are few prospects for true Sunni success in Syria (or the larger sectarian war), there are possible scenarios in which Sunnis can regain some ground lost to Shiites. But even these eventualities offer limited hope of doing serious damage to Iran. For example, the civil war might allow the Syrian rebels to carve out a mini-state in what was once greater Syria. Such an area would probably be governed by the Jihadist groups most hostile to the Shiites. One of those groups, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, would undoubtedly try to combine Sunni areas of Iraq with a Sunni-controlled Syrian area. This mini-state would be a frontline base for continuing the fight against Shiites. But Iran has demonstrated a fierce devotion to its aims, and its willingness to expend treasure and blood will not lapse even if its ally has lost partial control of his dominion.

In any event, Iranian nuclear weapons are likely to push Sunni powers toward greater and greater accommodation to Iran's will (to be, so to speak, "Finlandized"). Consider just one important Sunni country, and American ally, Saudi Arabia. In recent years, Iran has tried to raise the price of oil by getting the Saudis to limit its production. So far, the Saudis have shot down these requests, but they may not feel free to do so if Iran possesses a nuclear bomb (and especially if Russia—which has its own interest in high prices—joins Iran in applying pressure). Even if Saudi Arabia were to obtain its own nuclear deterrent, Iran's more ideologically radical foreign policy would render any Saudi attempt at brinkmanship a very bad option.

CURRENT Sunni–Shiite polemics often invoke an earlier period of large scale Sunni–Shiite warfare: the rivalry between the Sunni Ottoman Caliphate and the Shiite Safavid Persian empire, which ran its course in the 16th and 17th centuries. In that struggle the powerful resources of the Ottoman state kept Safavid power in check relatively easily. As a result Sunnis may be heartened by its recollection.

But there was another time when the Muslim world was in a predicament perhaps still more similar to the one it faces today. In the 10th and 11th centuries, the radical Shiite regime known as the Fatimids, based in Egypt and acting in sometime alliance with a Shiite dynasty ruling in Baghdad, dominated the Middle East and the Sunnis. The Shia were able to attain power in large part because the Sunnis were divided. Ultimately the Sunnis did reemerge as the dominant force, but that required a new Sunni element from outside the region—the Seljuk Turks.

There is no such Sunni equivalent to the Seljuk Turks today, but non-Islamic external powers could still play a countervailing role. Thus far, the Obama

administration has declined to do so, arguing implicitly that developments in Syria have made decisive American action a risky prospect. This is no doubt true, even if present costs and risks are the result of previous American inaction.

Are we then obliged to see Iran emerge victorious and proceed onward in its regional designs? There is another option. The most obvious possibility is to shift our focus to areas where Iran is more vulnerable to American might: its nuclear program and its disaffected heartland. But here, too, there is little reason for hope. The record of American pronouncements against an Iranian bomb is becoming murkier as it gets longer. The same can be said of American calls for Iranian democracy. As matters now stand, the United States is still pursuing a negotiated settlement with Tehran on the nuclear issue—a process that has, in truth, been pursued for 10 years with nothing to show for it. Iran's new president, Rouhani, has taken to speaking in the soft and vague diplomatic terms that hopeful Westerners describe as moderate. Obama-administration diplomats seem to be fully on board with this reading of matters. But as a senior adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has noted of Rouhani: "The language is and should be different; but the goal remains the same." Indeed, Rouhani's pre-presidential career is an anthology of the kind of anti-American apocalyptic oratory that no hopeful American diplomat should mistake for moderation.

The most effective option for stopping Iran's march to regional dominance would be the judicious application of military force. Nobody but President Obama can know for sure if the United States will exercise that option, but the recent record of American retrenchment and accommodation makes it ever more doubtful.

But if the United States determines that striking Iran is, like striking Syria, not worth the risk, there is one last possibility: Israel. The Jewish state, which faces an existential threat from Iran, may take military action to halt the mullahs' nuclear program. The Israelis are an improbable stand-in for the Seljuk Turks, yet as Mark Twain famously said, "History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme." It is a rhyme, moreover, that seems plausible enough to a number of Sunni Gulf-Arab leaders who have privately confided their support for an Israeli strike on Iran. If such a strike were to occur and be successful, it might initiate a positive change in the trajectory of the Sunni–Shiite war by reversing the fortunes of today's Fatimids.