

COMMENTARY

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“SUSHI” Unwrapped: The Sunni-Shia Rivalry Intensifies

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Social media is ever so creative these days, and it is increasingly important for messaging during conflicts in the Middle East. As we witness the grotesquely extreme terrorist organization called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) sweep across significant parts of Syria and Iraq, its territorial spoils and fiercely anti-Shia ideology have triggered sectarian side-taking as well as calls for sectarian unity on Twitter and Facebook. In one photo posted on Twitter, a husband holds a sign saying, “I am Shia,” his wife wearing a headscarf holds a sign saying, “I am Sunni,” and their daughter, sitting between them on the sofa holds a sign that says, “I am SUSHI.” The caption says, “Have you ever tried Iraqi SUSHI? The national cuisine that unites us all.” This is followed with the note: “Say no to ISIS,” but in Twitter-speak it includes the now viral hashtag: #no2ISIS. At the other end of the spectrum are growing numbers of global Sunni supporters for ISIS, who are expressing themselves on social media just as emphatically and fervently. They do not hesitate to express their deep hatred of Shias, and vocally cheer on ISIS’s advances. They post prayers and pleas to *Allah* for ISIS’s success in its endeavours.

In addition, ISIS itself is reported to have launched a rather sophisticated online propaganda campaign, complete with its own Twitter accounts and Facebook page set up by ISIS fans. The latter venue, Facebook, is coming under tremendous pressure to block the page on the basis of its participants’ hate speech primarily against Shias. According to a 19 June 2014 *BBC News* report, ISIS “has launched a social media campaign and is posting (mainly on Twitter) photos and statements to highlight its military strength and territorial advances in Iraq. On 15 June, it posted images of what appears to be dozens of captured Iraqi security personnel along with threats and messages to surrounding towns warning residents of the group's approach. The photos included the apparent capture, transport, and ultimate killing of the soldiers. The material went viral on the Internet and was widely shared by ISIS supporters.”[1] ISIS has also

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disseminated propaganda videos in order to gain support for their cause, which is to set up a hard-line Salafist Sharia enforcing Caliphate throughout the Middle East. ISIS's ideology and tactics have turned off even Al Qaeda, which has denounced the grossly violent and merciless organization.

The *Washington Post's* David Ignatius wrote a piece on 13 June 2014 describing the Al Qaeda-ISIS rift as a new front of competition between two prominent terrorist organizations vying for global prestige. According to Ignatius, "A senior [U.S.] administration official sums up the toxic rivalry this way: 'Who can make the biggest attack? Who signs up for Team Zawahiri? Who signs up for Team ISIS?' The competition, ultimately, is about who will succeed Osama bin Laden as the world's leading terrorist." [2] This competition is taking place simultaneously in the virtual and real worlds, and it looks like ISIS is making strong gains in all domains. However, Al Qaeda is catching up, and its Syrian affiliate, Al Nusra Front, is making significant gains on the ground, in the media, and also in virtual messaging.

The media in general are yet again presenting the latest developments involving ISIS in simplistic Sunni-Shia rivalry terms, without bothering to peel that analytic onion. Those taking the pro-/anti-Sunni and Shia sides online in social media are equally dismissive of the complexities involved in the events on the ground in both Syria and Iraq. The current dynamics that are direct outcomes of the Syrian civil war and now spilling deeper into Iraq have a long trail leading back to an explosive conflict in the Middle East that allowed the sectarian divides and fault lines to erupt into a fifteen-year long civil war. It can be argued that this conflict was the first in modern history that manifested deep-seated sectarian hatred that has percolated for centuries. Of course, that would be the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). However, the reality is that the Lebanese civil war involved Sunni-Shia killing as much as *intra*-sectarian fighting as well. Shia militias in particular pitted themselves against each other, resulting in the prominence of Hezbollah today.

The scenarios in Syria's civil war and the impending one in Iraq embody an equally perplexing matrix of inter- and intra-sectarian actors, alliances, rivalries, loyalties, and shifting alliances. Therefore, it is not entirely accurate to say that the Syrian civil war and current conflict in Iraq are based purely on sectarian lines. However, the proxy ideological and material support for respective Saudi-Sunni and Iranian-Shia actors in both Syria and Iraq are undeniable. What happens on the chessboard of the battlegrounds tends to get blurry, especially when proxy supporters both inside and outside the theatres of war shift their alliances even within the same identity group. There is little truth to Napoleon's quote that, "A soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of coloured ribbon." In Middle Eastern wars there is no greater driver for the current volunteer fighters, defectors, armies, and recruits than ideology and identity. Plus, nationalism falls somewhere in that equation as well, although the likes of al-Nusra Front and ISIS and their comrades would like to chip away at post-colonial nationalisms and Western-carved borders

following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The secret British-French colonial plan called the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 is to blame. In fact, these militant groups have vocally proclaimed their opposition to nationalism and consider it anti-Islamic. ISIS has specifically announced its plan to undo Sykes-Picot, and the idea has its attraction. Many in the Middle East and North Africa blame colonialism for all the major regional problems, conflicts, wars, authoritarianism, corruption, and development deficiencies that afflict them today. ISIS and Al Qaeda effectively exploit such sentiments, especially in social media. However, in the process, though a contextually different issue, the inherent Sunni-Shia rivalry and hatred have not been overlooked.

Let's connect the conflict dots that have allowed the sectarian hatred genie out of the bottle in the modern era. The Lebanese Civil War has already been mentioned as the pivotal conflict in which sectarian bloodshed in the Middle East ruptured the seams of, until then, relatively repressed Sunni-Shia hatred and ideological competition. Although Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution intensified the competition throughout the region, and especially rendered the sectarian rivalries inside Lebanon more pronounced, the causes of the Lebanese Civil War are numerous. One causal factor, however, has long been a simmering sensitive issue, thanks to French colonialism, and that is demographics. How the demography of the country affected politics, and the negative effects of Lebanese politics on the quality of life of particularly the poorer Shia population, but also on what many viewed as political under-representation of groups in society (e.g., the Druze, Sunnis, Shias, Maronites), all had an impact on the outbreak of conflict. Plus, the addition of Palestinian refugees and the insertion of the PLO into the Lebanese scene, ousted from their base in Jordan, further complicated the situation in Lebanon. But, the core issue in Lebanon is sectarian demographics, and, one can argue that all subsequent conflicts in the Middle East have been based on the same but with varying configurations depending on the country or countries involved.

Presumably, not much analysis is needed regarding the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), as this was the epitome of sectarian competition in the region. However, there were anomalies even in this war. Syria, with a majority Sunni population led by an Alawite regime, opted to support Shia Iran. Iraqi Shias embraced nationalism over Shia solidarity, much to the chagrin and miscalculations of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini. Sectarian demographics in this case ended up showing skewed loyalties.

Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait and the 1991 Gulf War do not outwardly look like sectarian based conflicts. However, the entire configuration of the principal countries involved, Iraq and Kuwait, and then followed by coalition forces led by the U.S. based in Saudi Arabia, had sectarian demographics respectively affecting – as well as affected by – what went on during this war. The large Iraqi Shia rebellion that Saddam Hussein viciously crushed after the 1991 Gulf War illustrates the underpinnings of the sectarian demographics dynamics.

Often, inter- and intra-sectarian rivalries emerge as blatant popularity contests, as we have seen with Al Qaeda and ISIS. When Hezbollah declared victory in its conflict with Israel in 2006, Hassan Nasrullah's photos plastered walls throughout the region, even in Sunni communities. Hamas aspired to utilize the "Hezbollah model," despite the latter's Shia ideology and beliefs. Eventually, Hamas also became Iran's patron, as if it did not want to be left out of the feeding. But, this is also a testament to the Iranian regime's strategic outreach. Hamas's hard-line Sunni / Salafi ideology has not hindered the Shia theocracy, Iran, to support it, under the banner of supporting the Palestinian cause. With this we can see that even the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not immune to sectarian actors and roles.

Where is the United States in all of this? U.S. national interests relative to the Syrian civil war and the civil conflict in Iraq are primarily focused on denying safe havens to terrorist organizations, especially ISIS. The fear is that once ISIS and its cohorts establish huge swaths of territory as safe havens, they will turn their attention to attacking the U.S. and its regional allies. Interestingly, and alarmingly, many Americans are voicing in social media and other venues the opinion that Sunnis and Shias in the Middle East should be left alone to kill each other while the U.S. should remain completely uninvolved. However, what is not considered or even understood in that scenario are the nuances of the outcomes of such a fight. The glaring caveat in the scenario, whether the U.S. gets involved or not, is that even within Sunnism and within Shi'ism there exists a diversity of ideologies, degrees of orthodoxy, and unpredictable loyalties. That is what Middle Eastern modern history has taught us, and these nuances need to be heeded. But, in the frenzy and sheer volume of split-second sound bites and Twitter posts with character limits, such dire lessons are completely lost to the noise. The only thing intensifying in all domains is the language and tone of hatred, with the voices of peace, tolerance, and unity struggling to squeeze in their messages.

In the end, after all the blood in the streets floods the drains and the dust finally falls in Iraq, the sectarian and ethnic groups will likely have to embrace a communal political system similar to the Lebanese model. This will still be an immensely complex task. Also, this is assuming that Iraq does not end up completely partitioned, as some are speculating, into Kurdistan, and a Sunni and Shia autonomous territory respectively. No one has bothered to ask what will happen to Iraqi Christians.

In my classrooms, recently students from the Gulf Arab states have openly expressed that the Shias "are not real Muslims." In the past, such utterances in public were unheard of, but now it is clear that some Sunni Muslims have a difficult time resisting expressions of their disdain, distrust, and *takfirism* (labelling someone a non-believer, or an "apostate") pertaining to the Shias. No doubt, there are Shia counterparts who engage in the same verbal condemnations of Sunnis. We can also see this reflected in ISIS and Nusra Front's select terminology in social media when making reference to Alawites and Shias. Historically, the derogatory term that

Sunnis used for Alawites is “*Nusayri*,” and the term “*Rafidi*” with the plural “*Rawafid*” (rejecter; rejectionist; those who refuse) is used referring to Shias. The Shias use the derogatory term “*Nasibi*” with the plural “*Nawasib*” (those who have hatred) in reference to the Sunnis.

The silver lining in this gloomy picture is the photograph of “SUSHI” posted in Twitter, conveying a message of sectarian unity. SUSHI must be taken with a huge helping of hope that the message of sectarian unity and tolerance prevails over the violent hate mongers on all sides of the sectarian divide, as well as within all sects.

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Notes:

1. Faisal Irshaid, “How ISIS is Spreading its Message Online,” *BBC News*, 19 June 2014: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27912569>.
2. David Ignatius, “Why the Rivalry between ISIS and al-Qaeda May Lead to Attacks on America,” *The Washington Post*, 13 June 2014: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2014/06/13/why-the-rivalry-between-isis-and-al-qaeda-may-lead-to-attacks-on-america/>.

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