

COMMENTARY

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The Sectarian Genie

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The Islamic Oral Law (*Hadith*) quotes the Prophet Muhammad who stated: "My nation will be split into seventy two factions, and only one of them will escape Hell". Since Muhammad closed his eyes for eternity in the year 632 CE, the Muslims—regarding this tradition—have been absorbed by two questions, one theoretical and one practical. The theoretical one is: which is the correct and righteous faction which is destined to inherit Paradise, and which are all of the other factions to whom the gates of Hell are open wide to receive them. The practical question, which stems from the theoretical, is how each faction verifies that it—the correct and the righteous—is the one that will live in an earthly paradise, and how can it make concrete life hell for the other factions.

Shias

These questions were first dealt with immediately after Muhammad's funeral, when the Muslim elders met to decide who would be the Caliph—who will succeed Muhammad. Ali bin Abi Talib, Muhammad's cousin, who was also his son-in-law, claimed that the caliphate belonged to him, but his claim was not accepted and three others were named as caliphs before him. He waited 24 long years until he was named as the fourth Caliph. During this time, he consolidated around him a support group, who were even willing to engage in violent battle in order to take over the status of sovereignty. They were the first Shi'as. The meaning of the word Shi'a in Arabic is "faction", meaning the faction of Ali.

After Ali was murdered in 661, his son, Hussein, continued to claim that the leadership belongs to him, because he was of the clan of Hashem, the family of the Prophet, and not the Caliphs of

the Umayyad clan, a branch of the Quraysh tribe, which seized control. Because of this claim, he was seen as a rebel and in the year 680, he was caught by the army of the regime near the city of Karbala in Southern Iraq, and slaughtered together with most of his family and supporters. This event was the seminal event of the Shi'as until today, and the Shi'as mark the *Ashura*—the *yahrzeit*—of Hussein with memorial rites, some of them beating and wounding themselves until they bleed.

Over the years, Shi'a developed its own theology and religious laws so different from that of Sunni, which is mainstream Islam, that there are those who claim that the Sunni and the Shi'a are two different religions. Many Sunnis see Shi'as as heretics of a sort, and more than a few Shi'as see Sunnis in the same way. Many Shi'as see Sunni as *najas*, or unclean. The Shi'as say that their claim to leadership is based on two chapters in the Qur'an, while the Sunnis claim that these two chapters are a Shi'a forgery. For all of history the Shi'as have been considered as a group, which is rebelling against the regime, and therefore the judgment for a Shi'a is death. In areas where the Shi'as have ruled, this was the fate of the Sunnis.

The struggle between the Sunni and the Shi'a continues in full strength until today, with Iran leading the Shi'a side while Saudi Arabia is in the forefront of Sunni Islam. In Saudi Arabia, the Hanbali school leads, with its extreme Wahhabi version of Islam, according to which the Shi'as are heretics. Therefore, the Shi'as who live in Eastern Saudi Arabia are ground into dust: they are forbidden to sound the call to prayer on loudspeakers because their call includes a Shi'a addendum. They are forbidden to mark the *Ashura* publicly and they are forbidden to demonstrate. The Saudi regime relates to them with fierce determination and zero sensitivity.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), which cost a million people their lives on both sides, was part of the struggle between the Shi'a and the Sunni, because Saddam Hussein was Sunni. In Lebanon, the Shi'a Hezbollah fights the Sunnis and their friends over hegemony in the Land of the Cedars, and in Bahrain, the Farsi-speaking Shi'a majority has been trying for years to free itself from the Sunni minority, which rules over it with an iron fist and an outstretched arm. This past year, when the spirit of the Arab Spring brought the Shi'a majority into the streets, Saudi Arabia occupied Bahrain and forced the sectarian genie back into its bottle.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah calls itself the "group of Allah" to send the message that the Shi'as are the faction that belongs to Allah, while the Sunnis, Christians, Druze, Zionists and all others are *hazav al-Saytin*, the "group of Satan". Hezbollah's struggle is primarily a sectarian struggle before it is nationalistic or political.

The civil war in Syria is likewise another example of the Shi'a struggle against the Sunni: the Alawites who rule Syria represent themselves as a Shi'a sect, because they see Ali bin Abi Talib, the founder of Shi'a, as the incarnation of G-d in a human body. That is why a Shi'a coalition that includes Iran and Hezbollah stands with the Alawites, and opposing them is a Sunni

coalition—Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. The stakes of the war is the whole "kitty": sovereignty, physical survival and the question of who is the true Islamic faction, which will be spared from Hell: the Shi'as or the Sunnis. And meanwhile both of them are making hell for each other.

Salafis—Sunnis

Many today are concerned about the revival of Islam in the wake of the Arab Spring, which began with high hopes that democracy would sweep the Middle East but instead, the Islamist parties rose to power in Egypt and Tunisia, and the Islamist parties gained strength in Morocco and Kuwait. The many jihadi militias that are active in the Syrian theatre against the socialistic and secular Ba'ath regime increase the concerns about militant Islam, the concern mainly centering around the fear that the militias will succeed in getting their hands on the many weapons of mass destruction that exist in Syria.

The Salafis emerged from this whole mishmash onto the political stage. These organizations aspire to return Islamic societies to the life-style of *al-Salaf al-salah*—the righteous forefathers—who lived in the seventh century CE, which is how their name is derived. Some of them do this by using *dawa*, social activism, but some of them are pushing the end and use militant jihad to achieve their goals. In Egypt, the Salafi movements, which entered into politics last year, won a quarter of the seats of parliament, and in Syria, many anti-regime militias bear Salafi jihadi symbols.

Violent Salafi groups regularly desecrate monuments of groups that they perceive as heretical: the Taliban in Afghanistan destroyed the Buddha statues in March of 2001; about two months ago groups of Salafis destroyed gravestones and buildings belonging to Sufis (a mystical Islamic sect) in Timbuktu, Mali, and on Saturday August 25, a group of Salafis destroyed a mosque and dome belonging to Sufis in Tripoli, the capital of Libya, in broad daylight and no one dared trying to prevent them from doing it. The weapons carried by the destroyers convinced others to remain at a safe distance.

In Tunisia of post Arab Spring several Salafi groups are active, and recently a clip has been circulating that shows one of these groups performing a ritual in which its members slaughtered a young man who had the temerity to convert to Christianity. Some of the violent groups who have been active in Iraq since 2003, and presently in the Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, Algeria and Morocco, Chechnya, Iranian Baluchistan, Kurdistan (of Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran), Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Nigeria, Kenya, Somalia, and many other states present themselves as jihadi Salafis. Over all of these groups hover the immortal apparition of Osama bin Laden and the successful Al-Qaeda model.

It is important to note that the Salafis are Sunnis, and the struggle that they are conducting is against Sunnis, Shi'as, Christians, Jews and heretics to the same degree, because as they see it

anyone who is not a Salafi jihadi is destined for hell, in this world as well as the next. The Salafi jihadis appoint themselves to dictate the height of the flames upon which all those who do not join in their path will be roasted.

The Common Enemy

For both sides of the factional struggle, the Sunnis as well as the Shi'as, there is a common enemy, which is the West in general, which represents an ideological and cultural enemy, while the United States and Israel fulfill the role of a concrete, military and political enemy. However, the fact that there is a common enemy does not usually lead the two sides of the factional struggle to join forces. Moreover, sometimes one side—usually the Sunni—enlists the support of the West in order to cope more successfully with the Shi'a side. This is how the long-standing alliance between the US and Saudi Arabia is explained, which are so very far from each other culturally.

It could be that also the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, which was signed in March 1979, was to a certain extent a reaction to the revolution of the Ayatollahs in Iran that occurred months previously.

The Clash

The clash between the Salafi jihadi Sunni and the Shi'a has lasted almost 1400 years, and did not halt in the last generation either. In recent years, there are several arenas in the Arab world in which a bloody clash exists between Shi'as and Salafis:

1. In Iraq, since 2003 a fierce struggle is being conducted in which on one side are Shi'a militias funded, armed and trained by Iran, headed by the "Mahdi Army" of Muqtada al-Sadr, as well as public organizations and political parties that do the bidding of Iran. On the other side are Sunni militias, headed by al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, which is funded with money from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates.
2. During the past year, Syria has been a fierce arena of battle between the regime, which is funded and supported by Iran, and Sunni Salafi militias that operate with money and weapons from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, all of which countries are Sunni. These states are doing everything in their power to cut off the Syrian tentacle of the Iranian octopus, in order to decrease the Iranian threat upon the Sunni world in general and on the states of the Gulf in particular.
3. Lebanon, since the beginning of the eighties, is a boxing arena between Hezbollah, supported by Shi'a Iran, and the rest of the factions under Sunni leaders such as Rafik Hariri. He indeed was not Salafi, but the Saudi regime who supported him was Salafi by its own definition. Not for nothing has Hezbollah been helping the Syrian regime to stand against the Sunnis who have been rebelling against it during the last year and a half.

4. The clash between the sides is exacerbated by the passing of religious laws by both sides, which serve each side as a means to undermine the legitimacy of the other side. Thus, religion becomes a tool in the conflict whose basis is a family-tribal disagreement between two houses of the Quraysh tribe, over the succession of Muhammad.

5. There are cases where lines are crossed: Shi'a Iran and its satellites Syria and Hezbollah supported Sunni Palestinian organizations Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but after the violence in Syria broke out, the Hamas people had to leave Damascus and cut off connections with Iran, because they could not accept the slaughter of Sunnis under the Syrian regime.

6. Even mutual visits between the leaders of the two sides cannot bridge 1400 years of mutual hatred and slaughter. Ahmadinejad visited Saudi Arabia; Mursi and Haniyye visited Iran, but these visits do not fundamentally change the hostility between the two sides. Embassies that each side opens in the other side serve mainly as a basis for spying and subversion.

7. A rivalry exists between the two sides about which of them will conduct a more successful jihad against the common enemy—the West, the US and Israel. The rivalry stems from the belief that successful acts of terror enhance the popularity and legitimacy of the group. Whenever one side is successful in carrying out an action against the West, it increases the motivation of the other side to carry out a more successful act. The success of Shi'a Hezbollah in removing Israel from Southern Lebanon in May 2000 pushed the Sunni Palestinians to open a second intifada at the end of September 2000, and for al-Qaeda to attack the US one year afterward, in September 2001.

Conclusions

1. The Islamization that many observers note these days in the Middle East is an existing phenomenon, and the increasing influence of the Islamist parties on political life is palpable and real. Moreover, a more important and stronger phenomenon is the escape of the factional genie from the bottle in which it was confined while dictators controlled the region. Mubarak in Egypt, Qaddafi in Libya, bin Ali in Tunisia, Salah in Yemen and Assad in Syria, all knew and recognized the "factional genie" well, whether in the Shi'a version or the Sunni version, and took every means at their disposal, principally torture chambers, in order to deal with the factional jihadism which has no boundaries of law or ethics. Today, dictators are taken down one by one, and jihadism is flourishing.

2. When an Islamist movement comes to power, even if it behaves in an acceptable way, it is liable to carry within its womb a jihadi group that will turn the life of the mother group into hell. Islamic rule such as that in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Gaza or Iran, tends to ignore radical groups, because it sees them as a sort of good folk, better and more faithful to original Islam than itself. Only when these groups harm the regime does it wake up to take action against them, but this action will always be limited by the lack of willingness to behave like the overthrown dictators.

The regime prefers to come to an agreement with the jihadi groups but these agreements are short-range, because of the dynamic character of the groups, and their tendency to reject any regime.

3. Countries in which there are Islamic immigrants must be on guard and supervise well what is done among the separatist immigrant groups who jealously guard their traditional character, because there is a significant chance that these groups will develop jihadi characteristics. Their jihadi activities will target the host state, but also the mother faction, for not being active enough and not faithful enough to Islam according the jihadi approach. These jihadi immigrant groups, who are composed usually of the people of a single state, are very difficult to infiltrate for intelligence gathering, because they are closed and based on personal acquaintance and absolute loyalty to the group. The smaller and more homogeneous the group, the more dangerous it is likely to be.

4. Iran maintains connections with jihadi groups, mainly Shi'a, all over the world, which serve as "sleeper cells" waiting for a command. The diplomatic mail sacks of Iran serve as a means for transferring arms to these cells, because the diplomatic sacks are not subjected to a security check in the host country. Iranian embassies the world over serve as storage places for weapons, ammunition and devices of sabotage just as they serve as a basis for intelligence and the activation of agents and collaborators. One must assume that some of the Saudi embassies act in a similar manner regarding local Sunnis. Tracking these embassies and the activities of their people can give the security apparatuses of the host countries much information about subversive and jihadi activities in these countries.

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