Syria and the Regional Quagmire of the Middle East

Sunnis, Shiites: The Second Major *Fitna*

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Nowadays the Middle East is witnessing major tensions between Sunnis and Shiites. The confrontation underway has led to a globalization of the conflict between the two main branches of Islam on the regional scale. For its magnitude, it even seems to surpass the "Great Fitna" pitting Muslims against one another at the dawn of Islam. Literally "rebellion" or "protest," *fitna* designates any sedition against a legitimate ruler. Generalized *fitna* is also traditionally considered a sign announcing the Last Judgement Day.

How Might the Current Conflict between Sunnis and Shiites Degenerate into a Regional or even Worldwide Conflict?

One often hears that the source of conflict between Sunnis and Shiites lies in the very origins of Islam. The first *fitnas* pitted the supporters of Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, against the followers of the Umayyads. The first *fitna* usually refers to the war between Muslims following the assassination of the Caliph Uthman in 656, and the Battle of the Camel where Ali vanquished the clan of the Quraysh of Mecca. The aim of the fighting was to establish who would wield power after Muhammad's death. It was not purely a matter of form, for beyond individuals and clans, it was the very conception of power in Islam that was at stake. The Sunnis took the side of the Caliphs and in turn, of the Umayyad and Abbasid Dynasties, while the Shiites, committed to a legitimist approach to power, denied the legitimacy of the succeeding caliphs, over whom they preferred a line of twelve infallible Imams, descendants of the Prophet.

The Twelver Shiites comprise the vast majority of Shiites in the Muslim world. The Zaydi of Yemen and the Alawi of Syria, however, are not Twelvers, although they adhere to Shiism. Relations with the Twelvers were nearly non-existent for the Zaydi and late for the Alawi, since the Shiite Ulemas of southern Lebanon only began to take an interest in the latter in the early 20th century. The aim was to bring these Shiite "lost sheep" into the Twelver fold.

But can the denominational wars causing bloodshed in today's Arab world and, beyond it, in Pakistan, be attributed to this opposition that is over a millennium old? In the Arab world, and in particular Iraq and the Gulf States, a majority of Shiites are actually former Sunnis converted to Shiism. This conversion movement accelerated in modern times, the last great conversions dating to the start of the 20th century.

Why did Sunnis opt for Shiism? This is the origin of the current divides. The religious dogmas cement identities largely consisting of social differences emerging in the modern era.

The Social Hierarchy of the Bedouin Arab World Behind the Denominational Schism

The Arab world was the last major area to receive nomad invasions. The last major migration dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, when the tribal confederation of the Shammar, conquered by the Saudis, had to migrate north: Iraq, Syria, Jordan. These invasions were particularly violent in Iraq, Bahrain and the Gulf: towards the end of the 18th century, the Al Khalifa ruling Sunni family took control over the sedentary population of Bahrain; in Iraq, the Ikhwan Wahhabi continued to attack the

sedentary farmers of the Euphrates valley and the holy Shiite cities located at the edge of the desert until the 1920s. These regions, more than any others, illustrate the opposition between the nomads – powerful warriors – and the sedentary or semi-sedentary communities that were at the mercy of the former. The farmers and fishers of lower Mesopotamia had to pay a tribute for "protection" to the "lords" of the desert (the *khuwa*), which by no means spared them from constant raids.

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The majority of Iraqi Shiites are likewise converted Sunni who were members of the formerly nomad Arab tribes from the Arabian Peninsula. When they settled in Mesopotamia, their environment changed radically (abundance of water and pasture), and their ways of life were profoundly modified: they became sedentary farmers or fishers, settling in the fertile plains where nomadism was no longer necessary. In any case, in the Bedouin code of values, sedentism represented an irreparable disenfranchisement, because the sedentary became vassals of the tribes that had remained nomadic. The latter supremely despised working the land or, even worse, fishing, and could not conceive of living by any means other than the use of arms.

Socially and Politically Dominated Shiite Communities

The Iraqi Shiites thus massively occupied the lowest social echelons. The denominational nature of the Ottoman regime, standard-bearer of Sunni Islam in the face of Shiite Persia, could not but aggravate the Shiite condition. The conversion of Persia to Shiism in the 16th century allowed the

Safavid Dynasty to create a strong denominational identity in a state that was a rival of the Ottoman Empire. Although overwhelmingly Arabic, the Iraqi Shiites were readily presented as an Iranian fifth column in Ottoman territory. The Arabic and Kurdish elite, who were the local representatives of Ottoman power, were all Sunni. The Shiites were completely excluded from political power and very few could pursue a military career, which was reserved for the Sunnis. Over the course of the 19th century, the Ottoman State began a process of land privatization to the benefit of a class of landlords who led the countryside on the path towards feudalism in the European sense. Traditionally the collective property of the tribe, millions of farmers were thus robbed of their land, becoming landless peasants. Such servitude ultimately convinced numerous tribes to convert to Shiism. In fact, Shiism met the profound aspirations of these people, belonging to tribes reduced to the State of serfs. Its rejection of injustice and the religious duty it made of revolting against iniquity perfectly suited the sentiment of humiliation and disenfranchisement of the vast majority of these peasants

In the 19th century, conversion to Shiism was facilitated by the emergence of a Shiite religious authority increasingly intervening in the political arena: struggling against the despotism of Muslim sovereigns, rejecting European domination, Shiite Islam became a true weapon of combat, breaking with the millennial passivity of its own authorities. "The tribes," they said at the beginning of the 20th century, "are the army of the *mujtahid* (Shiite religious leaders authorized to practice *ijtihâd*, the interpretation of the sacred texts through the use of reason)." This was confirmed between 1914 and 1925. In 1914, the great ayatollahs were, paradoxically, those who responded to the Sultan-Caliph of Istanbul's call to jihad against the British invasion. And in 1920, when the vast majority of the Sunni Arab elite expressed their acceptance of the British occupation and the new Iraqi State under British mandate, the Shiites' holy city of Karbala became the capital of the most significant armed movement in the Middle East against European domination. Defeated by British weapons, the Shiite religious leaders retreated to the holy cities and entered a wilderness period that lasted several decades. The new Iraqi State took over from the Ottoman power to impose on the Shiite majority a

government with a Sunni sectarian tint that remained the hallmark of the Iraqi State until its fall in 2003 after American intervention. Meanwhile, the emergence of a true Iraqi-style feudalism, with the recurrent tyranny of sheiks, who had become major landlords, caused a rural exodus that literally emptied the Iraqi countryside. Fleeing misery and the cruelty of the main sheiks, millions of Shiite farmers came crowding into large cities where they created immense slums. The symbolic neighbourhood of Sadr City in Baghdad is the most shocking example. With over a million inhabitants, a quarter of the population of the Iraqi capital, it concentrates the greatest poverty to date. A destitute working class, Shiite in its vast majority, then became the target population of new political parties. Among them, the communist party succeeded in achieving genuine harmony with this mass of disadvantaged peoples, to the point that one could say communism is a modern version of Shiism. The Shiites were just as active in the Baath party, whose Iraqi branch was founded by them. Nonetheless, the first Baathist coup in 1963 against General Qasim's regime conjured up enmities thought to have been laid to rest. The communist party, which had supported Qasim, was the Baaths' main adversary. After the assaults against districts of Baghdad by communist fighters, Baathist militias did not hide their sectarian hatred: "*Min al-yawm, la shî'î wa la shyû'î wa la Sharâgwa"* (As of today, there will be no more Shiites, no more communists nor Easterners, i.e. the Shiites from the Tigris provinces) was the slogan of these militias. The result was immediate: the Shiite representation in the Baath party crumbled in just a few weeks and Baath was identified as a Sunni party. Insofar as the communist party, its hour of glory had passed: subject to repression, it now also had to face a new actor in the Shiite arena, a young, militant Shiite clergy who, as of the late 1950s, had undertaken to win back its community from the hold of communist ideas.

The Shiites of the Arab world share the fate of having been socially and politically dominated communities for centuries. This was the case during the centuries of Ottoman domination, then under the British (Iraq) and French (Lebanon, Syria) mandate regimes. In Lebanon, the *Metwalli* – a name designating the Shiites of southern Lebanon that became pejorative – lived under the rule of the major landholding families. Excluded from the entente between Maronites, Druze and Sunnis presiding over the foundation of Lebanon in 1920, they were the last of the Lebanese communities to embark on an emancipation movement that was at once external and internal. After being forgotten by History, they began to protest in the 1970s through Musa al-Sadr's Movement of the Dispossessed, the precursor to Amal and then Hezbollah. The Syrian Alawi, contemptuously called *Nusayri* by the Sunnis, also met with an unenviable fate: isolated in their mountains and marginalized, their members traditionally worked as servants for the Sunni and Christian bourgeoisie in the big cities – Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama.

In Bahrain, the ruling Sunni dynasty always excluded the Shiites, who were a majority in the emirate. The mass of the most underprivileged Shiites were first attracted by secular nationalist and left-wing parties before returning to the fold of the religious movement beginning in the 1980s. As of 2011, activist Shiite clergy have played a significant role in the citizen mobilization for democratic reform as part of the Bahraini Spring.

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There is an exception, however, to this pessimistic panorama of Arab Shiite communities: the Yemeni Zaydi have governed the high plateaus of Yemen for over a thousand years. The dynasty of the Zaydi Imams also dominated the lowlands of Yemen until 1962, when civil war put an end to this centuries-old rule.

And finally, it must also be kept in mind that the Shiites have managed to create a real bourgeoisie, major merchants often associated with transnational clergy networks. Excluded from political power and military careers, the Iraqi Shiites, like the Jews, got involved in business. It would be safe to say that,

though the vast majority of the destitute were Shiite, the wealthiest were also Shiite.

The Emancipation Movement of Shiite Communities

Beginning in the late 1950s, there was a vast political and social emancipation movement encompassing all the Arab Twelver Shiite communities. The main actor was a new Shiite clergy, young and open to the world, determined to meet the challenge of progressive ideas in a Shiite milieu. Najaf was the cradle of this Islamic renaissance. The young Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (1935, executed in 1980 by the Saddam Hussein regime) undertook to refute communist ideas one by one using arguments from the Muslim *fiqh*. A movement inverse to that of the 1930s quickly appeared, with the return to the religious fold of many who had left Shiism for secular (communist or Baath) parties. After four decades in the wilderness, the religious Shiite movement in Iraq, galvanized by the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979), made a comeback leading to a situation of low-intensity civil war between the young militant Shiite clergy and the Baathist regime. This Iraqi civil war was drowned in endless regionalization: war with the young Islamic Republic of Iran, the Kuwait War (1991), then the Iraq War of 2003. The American occupation dealt the death-blow to a Sunni Iraqi State that had reached the end of its journey after having given rise to 83 years of wars and internal repression. Called upon to reconstruct a state institution in all urgency, the Americans had no choice but to make those excluded in the former system (Shiites and Kurds) the main beneficiaries of a Lebanese-style system that has the flaw of always generating excluded groups. In this case, the latter were those who had always held power in Baghdad: the Sunni Arabs, within the framework of the institutions recognized by the international community, could expect nothing more than the fate of a marginalized community, without power or wealth. In 2006, the destruction of the mausoleum of the Shiite Imam al-Askari in Samarra was the signal for a merciless sectarian war. This conflict caused over 800,000 casualties from 2005 to 2008 and convinced many Shiites and Sunnis that they could no longer live together. For the first

time in the history of Iraq, populations undertook massive migrations to regroup in denominationally homogenous areas. Baghdad, which had always been a multi-denominational city where Shiites and Sunnis were on a par, with many mixed central neighbourhoods, became an 80% Shiite city, the Sunnis having been chased out by Shiite militia of all persuasions. The final blow was dealt by the repression of what could be called the Iraqi Arab Spring, even if it has operated according to community divisions. Sunni Arabs participated for the first time in elections (2010), trying their hand at a hypothetical integration into the political system. Beginning in 2012, a movement grew by imitation of the Arab Springs. The response of Nouri al-Maliki's government, Shiite in majority, was final: heavy artillery and shelling against peaceful protests and sit-ins caused despair among the Sunni Arabs who still believed in change. The door was wide open for the Islamic State, which occupied Mosul on 14 June 2014 without firing a single shot.

The Arab Middle East is dealing with an unprecedented *fitna*. The scale of the phenomenon surpasses all discord in the early days of Islam

The failure of the reconstruction of an Iraqi State under American patronage has brought the same results as the Arab Spring in Syria: extreme denominational polarization. This constant demonstrates that the issue, beyond regimes, is the governments in place. These states have not been the seat of a succession of authoritarian regimes by coincidence. They have proven incapable of offering shared citizenship to their populations in all their diversity, or of accommodating grassroots Shiite emancipation. The Islamic State prospers where states collapse.

An Unprecedented *Fitna*

The Arab Middle East is dealing with an unprecedented *fitna*. The scale of the phenomenon surpasses all discord in the early days of Islam. First of

all, through the conflict's regionalization: it now encompasses Shiite communities (even Yemen's Zaydi, who do not share a common history with the Twelvers) and heterodox communities (Syria's Alawi) who have no choice but the Shiite camp. Then, through the involvement of neighbouring states, who fight each other as interposed Arab communities: Iran on the one hand, assisted by the Lebanese Hezbollah; Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey on the other. And finally, there is now an international dimension, with With Russia's intervention in support of the Shiites; a Russian policy that seems suicidal for it suggests an Orthodox crusade against Sunni Islam (approximately 15% of Russia's population is Sunni…). The Islamic State and the al-Nusra Front in Syria have already declared jihad on Russia. Insofar as the anti-Daesh coalition led by the United States, in which France is participating, it is limited to air raids which, alone, can only lead to greater radicalization. Both Shiite and Sunni religious authorities seem embroiled in the turmoil: Ayatollah Sistani declared jihad on the Islamic State in June 2014 and what remains of a Sunni religious authority in full crisis is apparently completely incapable of reconnecting with their brothers in Islam, as the Shiites are considered by the Sunnis. Regarding the self-proclaimed Islamic State's Caliph, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, he sees the Shiites as renegades (*râfi-da*) destined to die. The attempts at rapprochement of the 1950s between the two religious authorities seem a long way off…

The *fitna* underway between Sunnis and Shiites could well usher in a new Middle East with a new state order and new borders

The Arab Spring movements everywhere have illustrated an irreversible process: with the emergence of civil society, the era of authoritarian regimes and their deadly face-offs with Islamist movements seems over. But another consequence of the Arab Spring movements has been to reveal fractures within Arab societies and, more generally, in the Middle East. By undermining the sovereignty of states, often seized by communities, the Arab Spring movements have at the same time exposed their nature as illegitimate in the eyes of at least part of the population. Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon… the list of failed Arab States seems to grow longer every day. In the chain collapse of these states, the denominational factor is central. The *fitna* underway between Sunnis and Shiites could well usher in a new Middle East with a new state order and new borders.

Terrorism in Europe

The French Veterans of Globalized Jihad

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Today there is surely not a single United Nations member state without nationals enrolled in Daesh, the very poorly-named "Islamic State." In a field where it is illusory to expect reliable data, evaluation of US intelligence can provide a guideline for analysing a trend rather than being taken at face value. In any case, American intelligence sources estimated that in 2015, Daesh had 30,000 foreign fighters from over one hundred countries, in contrast to half that number a year earlier.

Beyond the figures, this estimate reveals a jihadi recruitment dynamic on a world-wide scale that has experienced exponential growth. This dynamic is fundamentally fuelled by the flaws of anti-Daesh mobilizations, which often do nothing more than accentuate the threat instead of combating it effectively. Thus in August 2013, America's backing down after Obama committed to strike Assad allowed jihadi propaganda to hammer home the message that the chemical bombardments of Damascus were the fruit of a vast conspiracy associating Moscow, Washington DC and Europe.

The result was an acceleration of those travelling to Syria to "take up jihad," since the country was easily accessible from Turkey. For the first time in the history of jihad, images of the victims of Assad's gas shelling served as an argument for "humanitarian" recruitment in the name of solidarity with the Syrian people, who had been abandoned by all. The reality on the ground was entirely different, of course, with tension between Daesh and the revolutionary forces escalating to the point of open confrontation in January 2014, when the jihadists were expelled from the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib in the northwest of the country.

The second rupture in the recruitment curve occurred in the summer of 2014: the proclamation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's "caliphate" based in Mosul, Iraq's second city, effectively left the United States indifferent, until the ordeal of an American hostage led the White House to mobilize a "coalition" against Daesh. The strictly aerial campaign undertaken in Iraq, then Syria, proved counter-productive in the long run: only military action on the ground can inflict a substantial defeat on Daesh, while the losses arising from air raids are largely compensated by soaring international recruitment (we saw how foreign "volunteers" went from 15 to 30,000 in the first year of the air raid campaign).

And finally, Russia's massive offensive in Syria as of September 2015 has led to an unprecedented rise in the number of those "taking up jihad." This bombardment campaign, which has taken a heavy toll on the civilian population, only marginally aims at Daesh targets, so focussed is it on defending the Assad regime and thus on destroying revolutionary positions. The anti-Assad groups are the only ones also resolutely committed to the struggle against Daesh, which Assad and his regime have constantly handled with kid gloves, going as far as handing over the oasis of Palmyra to them in May 2015. To make matters worse, the crusade rhetoric in vogue in Moscow, with the Orthodox Church blessing Russian bomber aircraft, cannot but encourage jihadi propaganda.

In Daesh's globalized recruitment process, the errors of states and "coalitions" intended to fight the organization play a decisive role. Jihadi propaganda has moreover attained an impressive degree of sophistication, with personalized messages sent to potential recruits unearthed on social networks before they are approached more physically. The dissemination of communiqués, brochures and videos in various languages, with or without subtitles, is