

V. Op-Ed

A Primer to the Sunni-Shia Conflict

by Philipp Holtmann

Which dispute is so resilient that it continues nearly 1,400 years after the original quarrel? It is the Sunni-Shiite dispute over the question who should succeed the Prophet Mohammed. The original struggle turns around the question if religio-political leadership should be passed on by bloodline (the Shiite *imamate*) or election (the Sunni *caliphate*). Today, this has become among some factions a fight over the monopoly to sacrifice and martyrdom, and it takes the form of a competition for political predominance in the Middle East between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

How did it all begin? In 657 AD the Ummayyad governor *Mu'awiyya* contested the reign of the fourth caliph Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, starting the first civil war among Muslims (*fitna*) that lasted until 661. Ever since, the Muslim community has been split into two major factions: Sunnis [1], who believe that there should have been an egalitarian right of any capable Muslim to head the caliphate, provided he has been chosen by consensus (*ijma'*). In reality, however, *Mu'awiyya* confined the inheritance of leadership strictly to members of his own family after he had usurped power, as did Abbaside caliphs and Ottoman sultans in later centuries. Shiites [2], on the other hand, consider it the exclusive right of male members of the family of Muhammad (*ahl al-bayt*) to head the *imamate*. The strongest and most influential of Shiite groups are the Twelver Shiites, named after their belief in the twelfth Imam, who allegedly went into hiding in 873; since 1979 this group rules in Iran.

The quarrel over succession continues today between many Shiites and Sunnis - the latter comprising around 85-90% of the world's Muslim population (which is estimated to be roughly 1,6 billion [3]). Both Sunni and Shia religious leaders, influenced by hardships endured by their communities over the course of history, have developed eschatologies full of apocalyptic doomsday visions and are obsessed with the hereafter. And yet, worldly matters are just as important, with leaders arguing that it is a divine obligation to install an Islamic political, economic and social system on Earth.

To understand the complex dynamics of the contemporary Sunni-Shiite conflict, one needs to understand both the historical and doctrinal context. This can shed some light on the kaleidoscopic nature of intra-Muslim conflict which plagues the Middle East today: A prominent current within Sunni Islam is Salafism, which is a puritan, purifying, fractionated and almost uncontrollable current that bases its doctrine on a literalist interpretation of the Quran and the life of the first three generations of Muslims (*al-salaf al-salih*). There are intra-Salafi conflicts as well as severe conflicts between Salafis and modern 'cultural' Muslims. Moreover, there is a particularly severe quarrel between Salafis and Shiites. On the other hand, there are currently no serious conflicts among Shiites. Their split into three major doctrinaire groups—the Zaidis (Hasan's and Hussein's line accepted leaders), Imamites (Hussein's line accepted leaders) and Ghulat ("exaggerators" who venerate some imams as quasi-gods)—does not stand in the way of coalition building among them - as exemplified in Iranian support for Yemenite Huthi-Rebels.

The historic Sunni-Shiite split originally led to the emergence of *three factions*. The *Khawarij* ("those who leave") regarded the faction of *Mu'awiyya* as infidel, because it had dared to challenge the authority of Caliph Ali. Moreover, they excommunicated Caliph Ali, son in law of Muhammad, for consenting to arbitration with the insurgents instead of battling them. Ali and his followers would later become known as the Shiites, while *Mu'awiyya* and the Ummayyad Caliphate would become the first representatives of the Sunni majority faction. The *Khawarij* would follow neither of them and even denounce the *sahaba* (the followers

of Muhammad), declaring them infidels and combating them by means of assassinations and guerrilla-type warfare. This introduced the doctrine of *takfir* into Islam (pronouncing someone as *kafir* [unbeliever] and excommunicating him), for which, according to competing legal interpretations, either the accused or the accuser is punishable by death.[4]. Today the doctrine is commonly used by Sunnis against opponents. *Khawarij* are often compared to today's Jihadi *Takfiris*, who form a sub-group of the militant Salafi-Jihad trend, who in turn are a sub-group of Salafi fundamentalists. For modern *Takfiris* (who declare other Muslims 'unbelievers' by judging their allegedly infidel actions as *kufir akbar* – "greater unbelief") it is only a small step from the concept of spiritual purification of society to its physical cleansing. The *takfir* doctrine has become a type of ideological virus that threatens to tear apart Sunni Islam. Sunni-Muslim state clergy and quietist-evolutionary Salafis put the *Khawarij*-label frequently on political-oppositional Salafis and on Salafi-Jihadis. The latter throw the accusation back at them, claiming that the former are betraying all true Muslims. [5] Among Sunnis it is common practice to declare Shiites as infidels per definition—most do not even bother with the *takfir* accusation. For Salafis, like the internationally influential Bahraini sheikh Abu Sufyan as-Sulami, the ruling Alawites in Syria (who belong to the Shiite-Nusayriyya sect) are even "more infidel than the Jews and the Christians."

Yet by isolating Shiites and labeling them infidels, Sunnis have actually helped their rivals to develop an identity on their own in the course of Islamic history. Ever since the fourth caliph Ali was assassinated and his son Hussein was murdered, Shiites have spiritually connected to the plight of these victims of sectarian strife and integrated the re-experience of their martyrdom into their belief practice (especially during the annual *Ashura* festival on the tenth day of the Islamic month of *Muharram*, which commemorates the murder of Hussein in 680 AD in Kerbala, located in today's Iraq). As a persecuted minority, Shiites in many countries have had to revert to practices of secrecy and became accustomed to suffering and discrimination when living in Sunni majority environments. [While Shiite communities can be found worldwide, most Shiites live in just four countries: Iran, Pakistan, India and Iraq.] At the same time, this adversity has helped Shiites to consolidate a common sense of identity and to find relative doctrinal and social cohesion.

In contrast, certain religious and political doctrines put forth by Sunni extremists since the 1960s have caused divisions and mayhem in their own ranks. The Sunni quest for identity started in the early 20th century with the abolishment of the caliphate by Turkey in 1924. It was intensified by Western colonialism, by failed experiments with state formation in parts of the Arab world and by five humiliating Arab military defeats against Israel. As a consequence of a long series of setbacks on several levels, Salafist fundamentalism has become a strong ideological alternative for many Sunni Muslims since the 1970s. In the course of the radicalisation and popularisation of Salafist concepts—which include a new sense of isolation, victimisation and martyrdom—some Sunnis are fostering doctrines which are similar to those of Shiites: they believe in hiding their true doctrine (*taqiya*) in order to protect themselves; they apply independent Islamic legal reasoning (*ijtihad*), although this leads to a jurisprudential anarchy (*fauda fiqhiyya*); they cherish martyrdom (*istishhad*); and they believe in miracles (*karamat*), especially with regard to slain martyrs. Paradoxically, the widespread use of suicide attacks today, and the saint-like veneration of martyrs by Sunni extremists were initially introduced into the Middle East by the Shiite Hezbollah in 1981.

Thus, while the 20th century witnessed the disintegration of Ottoman Sunni power and the emergence of new, disunited Sunni ideological currents, it also saw the strengthening and consolidation of Shiite power. Particular milestones in this process were (i) the establishment of a modern theological Shiite state (the Islamic Republic of Iran, founded in 1979), (ii) the creation of a formidable military sub-state force (Hezbollah), which by the mid-1990s controlled most of Lebanon and in 2006 slapped the allegedly invincible Israeli Defence Forces right in the face, (iii) a strong Shiite segregation movement in northern Yemen, (iv) Shiites in top political and military positions in Pakistan, and (v) a Shiite parliamentary majority

government in Iraq since 2005. With their centralised and more effective leadership styles in military, religious and political affairs, modern Shiites are well-positioned to become the winners in the region's Sunni-Shiite conflict unless Sunnis find a common religious agenda and political platform. Even if they do, Western and local military junta interventions in past Sunni attempts to build Islamist governments (see Algeria, Gaza and Egypt, among others) have proven that there are many obstacles on the way. On a tactical level, Shiite powers may lose some battles in the ongoing conflicts in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Northern Yemen. Yet Sunnis seem incapable of re-establishing anything that resembles the lost caliphate. All that remains are hot pockets of resistance and insurgency, where the highest chains of command are those of Sheikhs who also battle each other about differences in doctrine and strategy. These battles produce ever more Sunni dissenters, who, out of frustration, often declare those surrounding them 'infidels', whether they are Sunnis or Shiites.

This *takfir* problem is especially severe among Sunni-Salafis, whose different branches maintain large transnational propaganda networks. The messages emanating from these networks often contain dangerous simplifications and lead to further radicalisation of doctrines. The Salafi cleric Hassan Dabbagh, who preaches via Pal Talk as well as in a mosque in Leipzig (Germany), complained recently that many Muslim youngsters in the European diaspora only believe in "*takfir* and Kalashnikov" – an interpretation that is fostered by the Internet-propaganda of Salafi clerics like Muhammad Mahmud, an extremist Austrian preacher of Egyptian origin. For Shiites, intra-Sunni disunity and hate campaigns are not a problem as long as these help to foster their own cohesion. For Sunnis, however, these internal splits are anathema to a common united front.

Sunni rebel groups are busy battling each other in northern Syria, in some instances with financial support and weapons from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Meanwhile, Shiite powers are demonstrating united military and diplomatic fronts in Syria and Lebanon, and are gathering behind Iranian president Hassan Rouhani's diplomatic initiative for a rapprochement with the West. Part of Rouhani's initiative is to focus on stronger inter-Shiite relations, in order to present a unified base of support. Iran might even drop its long-term Sunni ally Hamas, whose leader was recently prohibited from visiting Tehran. It is not even inconceivable that Iran might prefer closer ties with the United States over maintaining its longstanding alliance with the Assad dynasty. [6] Peace in Syria and a new government that shares central strategic interests, such as the containment of the Sunni-Jihadi threat, are on top of the Shiite agenda. Shiites, it would appear, are making good progress on their very own political highway.

About the Author: Dr. Philipp Holtmann is an analyst specializing in the Middle East, where he has lived and worked in several countries. He conducts in-depth research on jihadist media as well as on Muslim conflicts and reconciliation issues and is a Research Associate with the Terrorism Research Initiative. His publications include 'Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's Jihad Concept' (2009), 'Virtual Leadership: How Jihadis Guide Each Other in Cyberspace' (2012), 'The Symbols of Online Jihad' (2013), 'The Use and Genre of Huda' (encouraging battle songs) versus Anashid (praiseful hymns) in Jihadi Propaganda' (2013), and 'Countering Al-Qaeda's Single Narrative' (2013).

Notes

[1] Lit. Ahl al-Sunnahwa-l-Jama'a = "People who follow the tradition of Muhammad and the consensus of the Muslim community?"

[2] Lit. shi'at 'Ali = "The Party of Ali."

[3] According to the Pew Research Center, "World's Population more Widespread than you might think" (June 7, 2013) Online at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/07/worlds-muslim-population-more-widespread-than-you-might-think/>

[4] Ever since, there has been a doctrinaire battle in Islam, whether or not an infidel action is enough to excommunicate a Muslim or whether unbelief of the heart needs to be proven. The practice of the Khawarij was revived in different Islamic periods for political purposes. For example, some Sunni legal scholars in the 12th and 13th centuries used it as a label against Mongol Muslim converts, who attacked the Abbaside Caliphate at that time, and declared the Mongols infidels. The doctrine was also revived under the purist Wahhabi sect in the 18th century, which coalesced with the Sa'ud clan in their power struggle with other tribes over control of the Arabian peninsula.

[5] Among Sunni-Salafi sects the takfir-doctrine has been revived since the 1970s, and has been quoted as justification, for example, in the assassination of the Egyptian cleric Muhammad al-Dhahabi in 1977, the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, and the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat in 1981. In the Algerian, Iraqi and Syrian civil wars, the doctrine has played a decisive role as underpinning for the murder of tens of thousands of Muslim civilians. Also Saddam Hussein's brutal slaughter of Shiites in the Iran-Iraq war, in which the dictator mercilessly applied nerve agents, can be partly explained by it.

[6] "Nasser Hadian: Reasons Iran Wants Peace in Syria," United States Institute of Peace, February 4, 2014, accessed February 9, 2014, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2014/feb/04/nasser-hadian-reasons-iran-wants-peace-syria>.