The Battle of the Camel II

The Clash of Sects: How will Sunnis and Shia conflict shape Syria?

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Tensions between Sunnis and Shia have increased after the Islamic Revolution in Iran and recently these tensions reached a high level of confrontation especially after the American invasion to Iran in 2003. In the last decade, the battle between Sunnis and Shia has taken place in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Many signs support this assumption including the sectarian civil war in Iraq, the two attempts to destroy Hezbollah in 2006 and in 2008, the current Syrian civil war, and other incidents including the clashes between Saudi forces and Hothis (2009–2010) in Yemen, as well as the Saudi military intervention in Bahrain in March 2011 to back its Sunni rulers.

In the Middle East, it is impossible to separate politics from religion. The current conflict in Syria is another episode of the long religious conflict and animosity within the Muslim World between Sunnis and Shia (Crittenden, 2012). The sectarian conflict became more obvious in the last decade and more intense specifically after the U.S. invasion to Iraq in 2003.

The rivalry between Muslim sects and principally between Sunnis and Shia determines the nature of the conflict in Syria and in the Middle East. This sectarian war had started right after the American Invasion to Iraq and later reached the Syrian territories in what can be called the second “Battle of Camel.” Iraq has been governed by Sunnis under Saddam

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1 The title refers to the Battle of the Camel in the year 656 between supporters of Ali (the Fourth caliph) and supporters of Aisha the Prophet’s wife.


3 http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/14/saudi-arabian-troops-enter-bahrain
Hussein. However, after the US invasion, Iraq fell under the rule of a Shia-dominated and Pro-Iranian government of Nouri al-Malki. Shia’s control of Iraq is considered by Sunni regimes as a destabilising issue to the balance of power in the Middle East. Iraq is the first Arabic country that fell under Shia control (Naser, 2006). The Gulf Countries, especially Saudi Arabia, are worried about the Iranian danger; for them, this danger is more serious than Israel (Al-Nafis, 2007).

Meanwhile, Syria had its first sectarian conflict in the 1980s, which had been terminated after the Massacre of Hama in 1982. The Syrian regime has survived thanks to the repression and its sectarian nature (van Dam, 1996), and it did not fall in the current uprising because of the domination of Alawites in the army and security forces.

The Iranian nuclear program represents a threat for Western powers and their interests in the region, but for the Gulf state this program is a danger for their existence (Karamon, 2007). Many Saudi officials warn that if Iran acquires nukes, the Saudis will also acquire such arms. Furthermore, Wikileaks revealed that in 2008, Saudi Arabia proposed to lead an Arabic coalition under the naval and air force support of NATO and the U.S. to invade Lebanon and to smash out Hezbollah.

In Lebanon too, we notice a radicalization in the Sunni community especially in the Northern city Tripoli. This emergence financed by Golf countries and Wahabism is a response to contain the power of Hezbollah. Several confrontations between Sunnis and Alawites in

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Tripoli happened in the last two years. Alawites, who identify themselves as a Shia sect, are a minority in northern Lebanon; meanwhile, they have represented the ruling elite in Syria since 1963.

In the current Syrian crises, the Syrian regime depends mainly on its Iranian ally, whereas Sunni rebels are receiving army, money and political support from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. Similar to Iraq, Syria became a battlefield for indirect war between Iran and the Gulf countries.

This paper will focus on the sectarian conflict in Syria between the Syrian regime, which is dominated by the Alawite minority, versus the Sunni rebels and to link this conflict with the rivalry between Sunni Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states versus the Shiite Iran.

The aim of this paper is to show that the religious hatred between Muslims themselves and especially between Sunnis and Shia are not only determining the action in the current conflict in the Middle East in general and in Syria in particular, but it is also used as a tool to counter the Iranian influence by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikhdoms. To do so, the paper will talk about the background of Syria and the Syrian regime, the genesis of sectarianism in modern Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syrian and their rule in the current Syrian uprising, Iran’s rising power, then the paper will discuss if the Syrian uprising can be fit as a ‘revolution’, the endless hostility between Shia and Sunnis, Iran’s challenge in Syria, Hezbollah: From a subordinate to a key player; in addition the paper will analyse the Syrian regime's miscalculations, and it will conclude by assessing the geopolitical conflict and the possible scenarios in Syria.

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7 Le conflit syrien menace de contaminer le Liban, Publié 14 /05/2012. http://www.francetvinfo.fr/le-conflit-syrien-menace-de-contaminer-le-liban_95001.html#xtor=RSS-9-[1]
Background of Syria and the Regime

Syria is a country of around 23 million people. Ninety percent of the Syrian people are considered Arab, and about 10% are Kurds, Armenians, Circassians, Turkmen and other ethnicities. The breakdown of religion in the country is as follows: 74% of Syrians including Kurds are Sunni Muslims, 16% are other Muslim sects including Alawites, Druzes and Ismailites, and 10% are Christians. The country, which has borders with Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and Iraq, did not sign a peace treaty yet with its long-time enemy Israel. The former president Hafez al-Assad seized power in Syria after a military coup in November 16, 1970. After his death, he left the country to his son Bashar who was not Hafez’s first choice. Bashar al-Assad’s rise to power was seen by many optimistic critics as an opportunity and a chance for change in the Syrian politics. His accession to power raised expectations that the dictatorship and the repression in Syria might come to an end soon (Perthes, 2004). However, since his succession in 2000, the new president of Syria has adopted the Chinese model of reform. This model claims that doing economic reforms do not imply doing political changes or reforming the economy while keeping the status quo of one party rule (Zisser, 2006). The new president inherited a very weak economy and internal and external problems that are going to make his mission to reform even much harder to achieve. In this paper, I will focus on Syrian domestic politics and the challenges that are facing the new president, such as the high unemployment rate, corruption, minority ruling system and economic reforms. The recent uprisings in the Middle East, which has reached Syria, shows how vulnerable and destabilizing a minority sectarian authoritarian regime can be, even with extreme suppression.

Al-Assad created a regime that is based on three loyal elements: the al-Asad family, his tribe al-Kalbya tribe of the Alawite sect, and his Alawite community, which is a minority in Syria. 

8 The CIA, the World Factbook (Syria) https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html
These three elements constitute the backbone of the security apparatus and the army of the Syrian regime. Hence, the Syrian regime can be characterized as sectarian, because it depends on the backing of the Alawi community for its survival for more than four decades (Zisser, 2006). The Syrian regime’s sectarianism has brought the regime into a bloody conflict with the main political rival, the Muslim Brotherhood, between 1976 and 1982. This conflict resulted in many massacres, the most famous of which was in Hama city in 1982 (estimated 30,000 civilian dead) and Tadmur prison (around 500 prisoners were executed by Rifaat al-Asad special forces) (Levrette, 2005). Although the Syrian regime is sectarian, it succeeded in creating a coalition with some Sunni urban elites and other minorities such as Christians, Druze and Ismailis (Zisser, 2006). The systems of governing depend on three pillars: the centralised government administration, the Ba’ath party and the security forces (mukhabarat) (Perthes, 2004).

The regime that al-Asad senior built can be characterized as one expert put it: “Orwellian State,” where everything in the country is controlled by the security apparatus. Moreover, the regime became quite personalised, in the sense that Syria became Syria al-Assad as it can be read in pictures and many banners in the street (Perthes, 2004).

After Hafez al-Assad’s death, the National Assembly amended the constitution, and changed the age of aspirants to become president of Syria from forty to thirty-four to be fit with Bashar’s age (Leverett, 2005; Rubin, 2007). Perthes describes Bashar’s succession as a “quasi monarchal” (Perthes, 2004:7). A referendum took place later and Bashar was affirmed president of Syria by 97.29% of the votes, which represents a slight fall of his father’s 99.98% last presidential referendum (Rubin, 2007). As Barry Rubin puts it, “the 2.6 percent reduction in unanimity would represent the degree of democratic opening the new era brought about” (Rubin, 2007:135).
When Bashar became president, Syrians hoped that he would bring change to the country. However, soon this hope disappeared and Bashar’s approach toward introducing political openness seems to be a complete failure. Damascus spring ended the hope of revitalizing civil society, and his attempt to reform the economy without effecting the status quo situation did not bring the necessary economic change (Zisser, 2006). The goal from introducing economic reforms was viewed by critics to ensure that the maximum resources are in the hands of the elite and Bashar’s inner circle, not to ensure higher living standards for Syrian people. It is impossible to achieve any true economic reform while maintaining the same political structure. Meanwhile, Bashar cannot touch this structure because it may affect his power and the interest of his most inner circle, as well as the interest of his Alawite community. In his interview with the Wall Street Journal, on January 31, 2011, Bashar al-Assad claimed that his country is not Egypt or Tunisia and that he is unlike Moubark or Ben Ali, supported by the people. However, the current uprising in Syria proved that the Syrian model of repression and authoritarian rule seems to be outdated. The Chinese model of introducing economic reforms without touching the political status quo seems to not work well in Syria as it might have worked in China. Change in Syria seems to be inevitable but the question will be on how to implement real reforms and how to apply them. The current sectarian settings and the one party rule did not help to upgrade the system. Bashar inherited a very weak economy with a high level of corruption involving his family and members from the regime’s old guard. Moreover, the Alawite nature of the regime made it vulnerable sooner or later to deal with unresolved sectarian problems.

The genesis of Sectarianism: Alawites Emergence as a Ruling Minority

The French mandate gave the two regionally concentrated minorities of Syria, the Druzes in the south and the Alawites in the coastal areas, autonomy. The French used a sectarian policy

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.html
in order to control Syria by giving Sunni domination in politics and high ranks of the army, all the while making minorities overrepresented in the army’s soldiers. In addition, the French supported the regional and communal loyalty and prevented the creation of any loyalty to the Syrian new created nation-state (Fildis, 2012).

Historically, Alawites were the most backward and poorest people in Syria before being transformed into the ruling elite of the country (Pipes, 1989). Minorities and especially Alawites became overrepresented in the army thanks to the discriminatory French policy during the mandate, and because the army was the best way to deal with poverty (Drysdale, 1981).

Alawites lived in the mountainous region in north west Syria known as the Mountain of Nusyria since the 13th century (Talhamy, 2009). Furthermore, Alawites were originally known as Nusyris, a name derived from Muhammad ibn Nusyr, who found the sect in the 9th century and claimed that Ali, the cousin of the prophet, is divine. After 1920, the French-imposed Alawites as a new name for this group. The name Nusyarys denotes a more radical difference between this group and mainstream Islam, whereas Alawites (followers of Ali) suggests a link to Shiism (Pipes, 1989).

Similar, to Christians, Alawites believe in the trinity concept A.M.S (Ali, Muhammad, Salman) and they believe in reincarnation of souls (Talhamy, 2009). These practices are considered heretics by mainstream Muslims, which make Alawites other minorities like Druses. Ismailites resort to dissimulation (taqiyah) to hide their beliefs.

The French granted for Alawites their own state known as the State of Alawite (1920–1936). According to Talhamy (2009), Alawites during the French mandate were divided into two groups. The first one is the separatists, who want a separate Alawi state; this trend included Ali Suleiman al-Assad, the grandfather of the current president Bashar al-Assad. The
separatists emphasised religious differences and insisted on linking Alawites with Shia Islam. The second group are nationalists who sought to integrate Alawites into Syria by making efforts to be recognised as Muslims; for instance, in 1933, a group of Alawi Sheikhs gathered and issued a declaration linking Alawites with Islam, and asking authorities to call them Alawi Muslim. The Palestinian Mufti Haj Amin Husseini, who was a supporter of a greater Syria, issued a fatwa in July 1936 recognising Alawi as Muslims (Talhamy, 2009).

The reason for Alawi domination to the Syrian army can be traced to the French mandate. The French mainly recruited Alawites and other minorities in the Troupes Spéciales du Levant a military unit formed in 1921, which will later become the Syrian and Lebanese armies. Consequently, minorities from rural backgrounds became overrepresented in the Syrian Army, especially Alawites, Druses, Kurds and Circassians. Furthermore, the French preferred recruiting these minorities because they were not influenced by the dominating Arab nationalism ideology of the Syrian urban areas; the Troupes Spéciales was formed to oppress local rebellions and by the end of the French mandate, several battalions were almost entirely composed by Alawites but none were completely composed by Sunnis (Fildis, 2012).

In 1955, the Chief of Intelligence Bureau, Col. Abdel Hamid al-Sarraj, found out that approximately 65% of non-commissioned officers are Alawites (Fildis, 2012). Hence, their domination to the army gave them the chance to seize power in Syria in March 1963, and they consolidated it in February 1966 after eliminating the Druses group of Salim Hatoum. In November 1970, Hafez al-Assad made another coup against his fellow Alawite Salah Jedid to become the first Alawi president in 1971 (Batatu, 1981; Talhamy, 2009). Fildis argues that since the coup of March 8, 1963, the Alawites became more dominating in the army, including about 90% of the newly graduated officers (Fildis, 2012).
Repeatedly, some argue that some of the regime and the army pillars in Syria are Sunni. This might be true but in reality these figures, even if they hold high posts, they do not have any real powers because almost their entire subordinate are Alawites. According to Batatu, these Sunni figures have no powers on their own and they draw their authority from the president, who points out, "Of course, many Sunnis are still in the officer corps but, if they are important, they are important not as a group but as individuals and more in the professional than in the political sense" (Batatu, 1981: 343).

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood

Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) members were recruited in the beginning by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood while they were studying in al-Azhar. One of first members to join the Brotherhood was Mustafa al-Siba‘i, from Homs, who will later become the leader of Ikhwan in Syria, and his classmate in al-Azhar Muhammad al-Hamid from Hama, the city that will become the base of the movement in Syria (Teitelbaum, 2009).

There is no precise date for the birth of the Syrian Muslim Brethren but they were organizing their activity from the mid-1930s to the year 1945–1946 when a group of jamayats (Islamic organisations) joined under the name of Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Mustafa Siba‘i became the first murraqib al-amm (controller general), a title of less rank than al-Murshid al-amm (general guide), which was given to Hasan al-Banna and his successors in Egypt (Teitelbaum, 2009). This clearly shows that the Muslim Brothers outside Egypt subordinate to their Egyptian Brothers and consider their leadership as the ultimate leadership for the brotherhood.

At the early stages of the establishment of Muslim Brothers in Syria, although there is no proof of financial support from the Egyptian Muslim Brothers to Syria, Teitlebaum (2009) argues that since there is a report from the CIA mentioning fund transfer from Egyptian
Muslim Brothers to their Trans-Jordanian fellows, it is logical that they did the same with their Syrian branch.

The Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed by the Ba'ath regime in 1964 and its general controller, Isam al-Atar, was exiled. Later in the same year the city of Hama witnessed the first uprising led by Muslim Brothers and other opposition groups, including Naserites against the rule of Alawites. This uprising quickly put an end after a bloody bombing of an al-Sultan mosque in the city (Talhamy, 2009).

The Muslim Brothers avoided sectarian rhetoric at their early stages in Syria; however, after the second Baathist coup in 1966 and the rise of Alawites into power, the Syrian Muslim Brothers focused more on anti-Alawi domination rhetoric and focused on the domination of Alawites and the suffering caused by the ruling minority against the Sunni majority; consequently, this shift of Ikhwan's policy will cause bloody violence in the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, including the massacre of the Alawite military cadets in Aleppo in 1979 made by a Muslim Brotherhood; moreover, in April 1980 MB rebelled in Aleppo but the regime using armed vehicles, rockets and paramilitary baathist armed groups seized the city and killing between 1000 and 2000, and arresting about 8000 (Talhamy, 2009), and the Tadmur prison (Palmyra) in 1980, and Hama massacres in February 1982 made by the Syrian regime that ended their revolt (Teitelbaum, 2009; Talhamy, 2009).

Hafez al-Assad tried to make many gestures to reconcile with the Sunni majority and MB by praying in the mosque, especially in the religious event and getting recognition from Shia religious leaders such as Musa al-Sader who issued a fatawa declaring Alawites as Shia Muslims (Nasr, 2006); however, Muslim Brothers regarded him as non-Muslim and not fit to rule a Sunni majority country (Nasr, 2006; Talhamy, 2009).
**Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian Uprising**

MB in Syria has not only based its opposition to Ba'ath party on an ideological basis but most notably on sectarian ones because of the domination of the Alawite minority (Talhamy, 2012). Prior to the current uprising, MB were communicating with the Asad regime secretly to get permission to return to Syria while in the meantime they were publically working against it; meanwhile, Shaqfa and other prominent leaders of the Syrian MB claimed that they were not behind the creation of the demonstration in Syrian (Talhamy, 2012); however, this fact might not be true, because the original Facebook page titles (Syrian Revolution الثورة السورية د بشار الأسد) was managed by MB activist based in Sweden prior to any demonstration of movement in Syria and even prior to Dar'a's children incident, which is claimed by the opposition as the trigger of the 'Syrian Revolution.' It is true that Ikhwan or Muslim Brotherhood are not the only players on the ground in the forces fighting the Syrian regime; however, they played a major rule since the beginning of the crisis in creating the uprising and financing the anti-regime activities in Syria, as well as creating the Free Syrian Army.

In the last decade, two studies were published in Arabic: the first in 2004, probably by Muslim Brothers and the second in 2009 by the Movement for Justice and Development in Syria (a small party linked to MB based in London). Both studies alert people from the danger of Shia activity and the threat of the Iranian effort to convert Sunnis and even Alawites in Syria into Twelver Shiism.

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Is it a ‘revolution’?

Alexis de Tocqueville elaborates on the reasons behind the French Revolution and why this revolution used the destruction and radical change as a method rather than reforming.

For Tocqueville, the strength of the state and its relations with the people is what shapes the change and its type. He argued that the domination of the state during royal France and its absolute control of the society did not leave a room for any possible reform. Unlike the American Revolution, the weakness and flexibility of the state made the change easier and resulted in lesser violence (De Tocqueville, 2003; 2010). The religious-style uprisings in the Arab states including Syria are similar to the French Revolution in their demand for a radical change although they do not seem to have any vision about the next step, whether it is a democratic, an Islamic or even a Caliphate.

It is widely agreed that in the early stages, the uprising in Syria was driven by the desire to change, especially by the Sunni majority. However, this hope quickly faded because the uprising was militarized and used by external actors that want to exploit this opportunity. The anti-Assad coalition also includes Hariri and his allies in Lebanon and the post-Qaddafi regime in Libya; these two actors provided arms, money and fighters to help rebels (Hinnebusch, 2011). Hence, what is happening in Syria can be considered more as a decisive stage in the Sunni/Shia conflict than a ‘revolution’ against an authoritarian regime to establish a ‘democracy’. In fact, Saudi King Abdullah who supports the Syrian ‘revolution’ sent his troops and tanks to Bahrain to smash the Shia protesters and to support the Sunni rulers of this country (Crittenden, 2012). Moreover, the al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahri, called jihadists to go to Syria to fight the infidel Nusayri (Alawites) regime of Bashar al-Assad.  

14 Time magazine published a report highlighting that Qatars and Saudis have established an operations’ room in Istanbul that aims to control the distribution of the arms

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provided by the Gulf countries with the help of the Turkish secret services. The room screens and chooses which groups receive arms and which do not, and it works separately from the Free Syrian Army (hereafter FSA), which became a cover for all armed militias in Syria.

Time announced that Lebanese deputy Okab Saker from the Future Movement of Ex-Prime Minister Saad Hariri is the coordinator between the room and the rebels. Moreover, Time learned that Saker was in fact in Southern Turkey to ensure the distribution of 50,000 AK47 bullets for four armed groups located in the province of Idleb.\(^\text{15}\) It’s clear that neither Qatar nor al-Qaeda, nor the Saudi king, are known for their support to promote democracy and liberty.

The West sought to make Turkey, under the AKP, a model for moderate Islam and an example for the ‘happy’ marriage between Islam and democracy. Many critics called Turkish prime minister Erdogan as the ‘new Ottoman Sultan’ to show the new influential role that Turkey is playing in the Middle East.\(^\text{16}\) Indeed, Turkey is a very important player in the current conflict. The Ottoman nostalgia is not hidden in the political discourse of the AKP leaders. In the meantime, Turkey shares with Saudi Arabia the fear from the rising power of Iran. In 2011, Turkey agreed to site NATO missiles shield radar in its south-east region in order to eliminate the Iranian missiles’ danger.\(^\text{17}\) Hence, it is better to assess the current conflict in Syria as a sectarian civil war which is used by regional and international powers rather than a ‘revolution’.


Iran’s Rising Power

The rise of Iranian power in the last decades was seen as a challenge to the status quo of the Middle East by regional and international powers (Bröning, 2008). Tensions against the Iranian domination have risen in recent years. The fact that Iraq is no longer in Sunni political calculation and in the balance of power in the area has alerted the Sunni regimes in the Gulf and the Middle East — especially after the arrival of the Iraqi government controlled by Shia. Some Saudi princes pointed out that the Shia danger of Iran is more serious than that of Israel (Al-Nafis, 2007). For the West, the Iranian nuclear program represents a threat for their interest in the region; whereas for their Gulf allies, it represents a threat for their existence. For instance, the former Saudi ambassador to Washington, Prince Turkey al-Faisal, affirmed that if Iran would go nuclear, Saudi Arabia would follow suit.18 Moreover, Abdul Rahman al-Rashed, a Saudi journalist close to the Royal Family, said that Iran’s aim to build a nuclear arsenal is to target the Gulf States; for him, it’s nonsense Iran can dare to use these weapons against Israel who owns a sophisticated anti-missiles system, unbeatable fire capacity and many nuclear heads that can destroy every single Iranian city (Karamon, 2007).

Endless hostility between Shia and Sunnis

Hostility and rivalry between Shia and Sunnis give an explanation into how events happen in a certain way in the Middle East. This rivalry started since the first Islamic century and more specifically right after the death of the prophet Mohammad, following the problems of his succession. However, anti-Shiisim invented by the founder of the Wahabi movement, Mohammad bin Abdel-Wahab, became more fanatic and hostile (Al-Nafis, 2007). We should note here that Wahabism was exploited by British Intelligence to destabilize the Ottoman Empire (Al-Nafis, 2007). Wahabism considers that other Muslims including Shia and Suffis

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as infidels (Thual, 2007). Meanwhile, the political Sunni Islam considers any Shia entity as an existential threat that should be eliminated as soon as possible; this idea has been registered in the Sunni collective memory since the establishment of the Fatimid Shia State 800 years ago; hence, this explains why Gulf and Sunni states supported Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran in 1980s; in other words, the conflict between Iran and its Arabic rivals comes from this existential threat that Iran represents political Sunnism and the Gulf states (Al-Nafis, 2007). For Wahhabis, not only are Shia Twelvers labelled as rafida (rejectors) and kafirs (heretics), the class of rafida also include Alawites and Druses (Hasson, 2006).

There is a refusal from Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia for the existence of the Shia state in Iraq and usually Sunni Arabs accuse Iraqi Shia Arabs of being Safavides (Iranians). In an interview on April 8th, 2006, the former Egyptian president said "most of the Shias are loyal to Iran, and not to the countries they are living in" (quoted in Bröning, 2008:62). In the meantime, Gulf states support al-Qaeda operations in Iraq in order to put an end to the Shiite nightmare in this country (Al-Nafis, 2007). In the meantime, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the system of Wilayet al-Faqih has increased the tensions between Sunnis and Shia. The Khomeini’s ideology is as theological as revolutionary; and insists that an Islamic government must be installed to pave the way for the return of the hidden Imam (al-Mahdi). Moreover, this ideology considers monarchies and other forms of government as non-Islamic (Helfont, 2009). Bröning (2008) argues that the term Shiite Crescent that was invented is turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy. The conflict between Shia and Sunni, whether it is driven by regional geopolitical rivalries or by superpowers’ manipulation, has become a political reality in Syria and elsewhere in the Muslim world.

Louër (2009) argues that it is not accurate to see Iran as the leader of the Shia in the world or examining Shiites as a homogenous bloc; however, this explanation neglects the Shia transnational networks in the Islamic world that follow Iran's Willayet al-Faqih's system from
Pakistan to Lebanon. Furthermore, Louër’s argument does not explain how Afghani\(^{19}\) and Iraqi\(^{20}\) Shia fighters joined al-Assad's regime in his fights against Sunni rebels in Syria.

Wikileaks cables have revealed that the Gulf rulers, March 14th Forces’ politicians in Lebanon, have asked Israel, via the U.S., to invade Lebanon and even to extend the war in order to crush Hezbollah forces; moreover, according to Wikileaks, in 2008, Saudi Arabia proposed for Americans to create Arab forces under the naval and air support of the US and NATO to intervene in Lebanon and destroy Hezbollah.\(^{21}\) Besides, some politicians of the March 14 alliance gave the Americans strategic information regarding Hezbollah’s communication network.\(^{22}\)

In the last years, there are many signs of the radicalization of the Sunni community in Lebanon; for instance, there has been the emergence of Salafi and Wahabi influence, especially in Tripoli, a city in the north that has a Sunni majority. Since the beginning of the Sunni uprising in Syria, many confrontations between Sunnis of Bab al-Tabaneh and Alawites of Jabel Mohsen have taken place in Tripoli.\(^{23}\)

Besides, if we examine another part of the region, we realise that a similar confrontation has been taking place. For instance, Saudi Arabia tried without success to crush Houthites, a Shia group allied to the Islamic Republic in Yemen.\(^{24}\)

\(^{19}\) http://observers.france24.com/content/20140604-afghan-migrants-offered-500-iran-fight-pro-assad-mercenaries
\(^{23}\) Le conflit syrien menace de contaminer le Liban, Publié 14 /05/2012. http://www.francetvinfo.fr/le-conflit-syrien-menace-de-contaminer-le-liban_95001.html#xtor=RSS-9-[1]
Iran’s Challenge in Syria

Whenever Syria tried to confront one of the regional powers, Tehran comes closer to Damascus; but when Damascus has tried to improve its relations with its neighbours, Iran has become alerted and worried that Damascus might abandon their alliance (Lawson, 2007). Whether it is driven by sectarian or geopolitical factors, the alliance between Iran and Syria is the most important reason for the bloody and ongoing civil war in Syria. The ethnic and ideological differences between the B'athist regime in Syria and the Islamic regime in Iran, as well as the long period this alliance remains solid, increases suspicions of the role of Shiism in consolidating this alliance.

The relation between the Syrian regime and the Islamic regime in Iran goes back to the 1970s when Syria offered protection to some Iranian figures and even offered to receive Khomeini after being expelled from Iraq in 1978.

At the beginning of his revolution, Khomeini called for Islamic revolutions in all Islamic states. MB supported his revolution thinking that a similar revolution in Syria might help them to topple Assad's sectarian and oppressive regime; however, the Islamic republic of Iran disappointed the Muslim Brotherhood and kept close relations with the Assad regime despite its secular and Pan-Arabic nature (Talhamy, 2009). Roy argues that the Islamic revolution in Iran was not only unable to overcome the Sunni-Shia divide and transfer itself into a universal Islamic Revolution rather than Shiite one, but it widened the gap and increased hostility between the two sects (Roy, 2010). Nasr pointed out "Khomeini’s refusal to support the Muslim Brotherhood during the Hama uprising earned him the Brotherhood's lasting contempt and showed that despite his eagerness to pose as a pan-Islamic leader, relations between Shia and Sunni fundamentalists were breaking down along familiar sectarian lines.
When it came to choosing between a nominal Shia ally such as Asad and the militantly Sunni Brotherhood, Khomeini had not hesitated to stick with the former." (Nasr, 2006:154)

Alawites who consider themselves as part of Shiism allied themselves with Iran after the Islamic revolution. This alliance was rejected by the Muslim Brothers in Syria who considered it not as an alliance and not based on mutual interests, but as an Iranian attempt to control and dominate Sunni states (Talhamy, 2009).

After the Islamic revolution, Iran became the centre of Shia Islam in the world and used its religious power to destabilize neighbouring Arab countries such as Kuwait, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and backed an attempt to overthrow the Sunni ruler of Bahrain, which is dominantly a Shia country. Iran supported terrorist attacks in gulf countries, which led the MB in Kuwait to respond by bombing Iranian offices in Kuwait; in addition, MB in Kuwait labelled Shia as cursed heretics who are trying to take over Sunni and Gulf states (Talhamy, 2009).

Saudi Arabia felt the danger of the Khoumeini regime, which tries to export the Islamic Revolution to the Islamic World (Hasson, 2006), especially knowing that the majority of Saudi oil comes from two oilfields, Al Qatif and Al Ghawar, located in Shia minority areas (Bröning, 2008). Moreover, the Islamic type of Iranian regime made Saudis who claim their legitimacy from Islam to feel worried from Iran. Hence the attempt of Khomeini to export his revolution to Iran's neighbours provoked not only Saudi Arabia but all the Gulf states as well as Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq (Hasson, 2006).

Since the Gulf war between Iran and Iraq (1980–1988), Saudi Arabia tried in vain to bring Syria to the Arab camp in order to weaken Iran's position in the war (Goodarzi, 2006). Syria was the only Arab country to support Khomeini in his war against Iran (1980–1988), and in return, Iran supported Syria economically and rejected MB violence, accusing them of plotting against Syria for the benefit of Israel and the U.S.; consequently, MB in Syria and
in Iran began to see Iran as a sectarian Shia regime and began receiving financial support from Saddam Hussein. In the 1980s, the tension rose and Saiid Hawa, an ideologue of the Syrian MB, declared that Sunnis are the only real Muslims; moreover, Because of Iran’s continuous attempts to challenge Arabic regimes and to support political and even military groups in Arab states, the Muslim Brothers in Syria regard Iran as a more dangerous threat than Zionists or Americans. For them Israel and America are clear but Iran has a hidden agenda and is using Islam as a cover to take over Arabic states and revive the Safavid Empire. This view was expressed by Said Hawa (Talhamy, 2009).

Iran is clearly and openly involved by supporting the Syrian regime and training its units. The Syrian opposition repeatedly accuses Iran of sending officers and arms to back Bashar al-Assad. For instance, opposition militias kidnapped 48 Iranians near Damascus, some of which were members in the Revolutionary Guards. These kidnapped Iranians were released and exchanged later in January 2013, with 2,100 opposition’s prisoners.25

In the meantime, the Syrian opposition, backed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, is clearly pro-Western and anti-Russia and anti-Iran. Bruhan Ghalion, the first president of the Syrian National Council, declared that a post-Assad government will end the alliance with Iran (Hinnebusch, 2011).

Iran expressed its support for the Arab uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya by calling these political developments as an Islamic awakening; however, when the uprising reached Syria, Iran rejected it and continued to support its long-time ally in Damascus militarily and financially against the will of the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia (Parchami, 2012). Similarly, Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia did not support the Bahraini uprising and called it an Iranian

conspiracy, and even Saudi Arabia deployed its forces to support the fragile Sunni ruling family. Syria is very important strategically to Iran. According to Parchami (2012), Iran puts its strategic interests over any religious consideration. This is true but Iran also uses religious affiliation and its patriarchal influence over Shia in the regions in order to increase its power or destabilize its rivals. For Iran, the 'Arab Spring' was a revolt against pro-American regimes in the region and an Islamic awakening; whereas the uprising in Syria was an attempt from Western powers to destabilize the resistant axis that inspired the Arabs to revolt (Parchami, 2012). Recently, a senior Iranian army commander declared that Assad would have been toppled if Iran did not support him.26

Hezbollah: From a subordinate to a key player

Iran created Hezbollah during the Lebanese civil war; however, the new Shia player confronted many times the Syrian army that committed a massacre against Hezbollah fighters and another incident that resulted in the killing of 23 Hezbollah men in the southern suburb of Beirut. Iran warned the Syrian regime that any further attack against Hezbollah will be considered an attack against Tehran (Talhamy, 2009).

Prior to Bashar’s rise to power, Syria used to have direct control over Hezbollah; however, the relation between the Syrian regime and Hezbollah has witnessed radical change after the death of Hafez al-Assad. His son Bashar allowed Hezbollah and its leadership more equal relations with the Syrian regime whereas his father preferred to have the upper hand over Hezbollah (Perthes, 2006). Several clashes occurred between the Syrian army and Hezbollah, most notably the al-Basta incident in which the Syrian regime used extreme force to punish Hezbollah and to show it domination; even this would anger the Iranian ally (Goodarzi,

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26 Senior Iranian commander: Assad would have been toppled without Iran's support

2006). The Syrian withdrawal from Iran also helped Hezbollah to dominate the Lebanese scene more effectively because after the Syrian withdrawal Hezbollah is only depending on Syria as a supply source, but Syria can no longer impose its will by force on the ground (Pethes, 2006). Hezbollah played a very important role in supporting the regime especially in seizing Qusair\(^\text{27}\) (June 2013) and Yabroud\(^\text{28}\) (March 2014) strategic towns.

**Syrian Regime's Miscalculations**

Not only did an alliance with Iran bring this critical situation to the Syrian regime, but many other factors played a rule in the isolation of the regime including miscalculations and political mistakes, which were committed by the regime since Bashar al-Assad presidency’s as well as his underestimating the international and Lebanese reaction for his stubborn decision in Lebanon to extend the mandate of Lebanese president Emile Lahoud (Perthes, 2006); moreover, following Israel’s war against Hezbollah in 2006, Bashar made a huge mistake by calling Arab leaders, including King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, ‘half-men.’\(^\text{29}\)

The assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri, in 2005 resulted in the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the loss of a very important card from the hands of the Syrian regime. The Sectarian conflict in Iraq after the American invasion has threatened the Syrian stability because of its majority Sunni were alerted after the rise of Shia in Iraq over their fellow Sunnites; in addition, some Syrian Sunnites began to feel worried about the rising Iranian influence and visibility of Shia activities in their country and the influx of Iranian capitals to Syria (Perthes, 2006).

\(^\text{27}\) [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/05/syria-army-seizes-qusair](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/05/syria-army-seizes-qusair)


The growing influence of Iran in the region after the falling of Iran under the pro-Iranian Shia government of Nuri al-Malki provoked Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia. These states wanted to convince or to force Syria at any cost to break her alliance with Iran in order to break what these Sunni states consider as Shia crescent in the Middle East, which includes Iran and Shia in Iraq, the Alawite regime in Syria, and Lebanon, which is dominated by the Shiite Hezbollah (Perthes, 2006)

Turkey is also important in this conflict. AKP wanted to revive Turkey's Ottoman legacy and use it in the Middle East as a soft power (Aras, 2012). This soft power would include financial investments, Turkey’s Ottoman legacy and the Erdogan’s personality as an Islamic hero. Prior to the crisis in Syria, the relation between Turkey and Syria witnessed a great improvement. Turkish goods invaded the Syrian market and have a bad impact on the industrial sector in Syria. Meanwhile, the leaders Turkey, Syria and Qatar were holding a friendly meeting occasionally and no one would expect until 2010 that Qatar and Turkey will turn against Syria and eventually became the main supporters for the Syrian opposition and armed rebels. Al-Jazeera Qatari’s channel was promoting Erdogan in the last decade as a hero and an example for the Islamic leader. This was part of Turkey’s increasing influence in the Arab masses.

Since the early stages of the Syrian crisis, Turkey showed its support to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and some reports showed that the Turkish Foreign minister proposed to the Syrian president that Ankara would support his regime if he accepted to give the Muslim Brothers four major ministries.30 Although Turkish officials denied this, they cannot deny their support to the rebels and provided them with basis in the Turkish lands, allowing arms to enter their areas, as well as facilitating the influx of foreign fighters to get into Syria by

Turkey. After the so-called Arab spring, all the Arab countries that witnessed change fell under the control of Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Nahda party in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt). Everything was working well for Turkey and Qatar last year when the Muslim Brotherhood President Ahmad Mursi was toppled by a military coup following popular manifestations. Thus, the Turkish neo-Ottomans’ dream faded when General Abdel Fatah Sisi in Egypt toppled the MB rule in Egypt. Turkey's reaction against the military regime and the Egyptian response showed Erdogan’s huge disappointment of this blow, which was openly supported by Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, which both regard the Muslim Brotherhood as a real danger for their rules.

**Conclusion: Geopolitical Conflict or a New Order?**

Syria and Iraq are now under the pressures of three regional powers, the Sunni Arabs represented by Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Turkey and its Neo-Ottomans AKP party supported by Qatar and Muslim Brotherhood, and the Shiite Iran and its Wali al-Faqih system.

Iran is trying to maintain its control over Iraq and Syria, whereas Saudis and the Turkish want to get rid of al-Maliki and al-Assad. The three regional powers are competing with each other to balance any rising powers. For instance, Saudi Arabia and UAE sponsored a General Sissi coup against the Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt to decrease the Turkish and Muslim Brotherhood rising power in the area; furthermore, both UAE and Saudi Arabia are trying to topple the post-Qaddafí Muslim Brothers dominated by the government in Libya.

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In the meantime, although Saudis like Turkish and Qatars want to get rid of Assad's regime, they do not have a similar agenda and they support different militias.35 Qatar and Turkey favour and support the Muslim Brotherhood, whereas the Saudis established its own political as well as militia groups. For instance, a bloc led by a Christian named Michel Kilo, which includes the previous president of the Syrian Coalition Ahmad al-Jarba36 as well as the current president Hadi al-Bahra, is sponsored by Saudis.37

After four years of struggle and unwillingness of super powers to intervene directly in Syria, it seems that two scenarios are most likely to happen in Syria. The First Syria might disintegrate into several parts; a Kurdish one is the clearest new entity in the province of Hasakah north east of Syria. The PYD (Democratic Union Party) is controlling the Syrian Kurdish area and it declared autonomy in January 2014.38 Kurds in Syria as in Turkey, Iraq and Iran have a strong Kurdish identity while they usually reject the imposed national identity (Vali, 1998). There are also huge connected parts of Syria and Iraq (most of Raqqah and Deir-zour provinces in Syria, and Most of Arab Sunni areas in Iraq), which are now under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), and whether ISIS will be able to survive or not these parts are strongly linked through tribal and religious ties. And the third part of this possible division is the Alawite state in the Latakia and Tartous provinces.

The second scenario is that Assad will remain in power but the civil war will keep going for several years. Even if the Syrian regime manages to stay in power, it is hard to believe that this regime will be able to end violence or to rule a united Syria as it did before the beginning of the uprising in 2011. Thus, status quo ante is almost impossible because of the damage

35 http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/15/us-syria-crisis-qatar-idUSBREA0E1G720140115
36 http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/06/06/syria_is_now_saudi_arabias_problem
37 http://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFL6N0PK0RT20140709
38 http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/22/us-syria-kurdistan-specialreport-idUSBREA0L17320140122
already happening between Sunni and Alawites and the huge destruction and high number of casualties.

The opposition is clearly unable to topple the regime and foreign fighters of ISIS and al-Nusra and other Salafi groups have taken the role of the so-called Free Syrian Army. Even the main rival now against the regime known as the Islamic front is completely Islamic Salafi and backed by Saudi Arabia and its leaders including Zahran Alloush, which always calls the regime fighter as Nusyris and heretics, and that the battle is against the Iranian 'majus.'

The U.S. and Western powers are worried that the fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria will bring Jihadist and radical Islamists into power. President Obama pointed out in June 20, 2014, that Syrian opposition is unable to topple the regime or to fight ISIS even if the U.S. provides them with weapons. He said, “I think this notion that somehow there was this ready-made moderate Syrian force that was able to defeat [Syrian President Bashar] Assad is simply not true, and, you know, we have spent a lot of time trying to work with a moderate opposition in Syria…” He added, “When you get farmers dentists and folks who have never fought before going up against a ruthless opposition in Assad, the notion that they were in a position to suddenly overturn not only Assad but also ruthless, highly trained jihadists if we just sent a few arms is a fantasy. And I think it's very important for the American people - but maybe more importantly, Washington and the press corps - to understand that.”

Israel also shares the American view even though it shows its support for the uprising against the Syrian regime. Israel remains cautious and worried of the regime change because it might bring radicals to power on its borders knowing the Syrian regime is cautious of getting

involved in a conflict knowing that the result will be catastrophic (Byman, 2011). Conserving
the weak Syrian regime is the better option for Israel.

To sum up, the French created the sectarian problem in Syria by recruiting Alawites into the
armed forces. The sectarian nature of the regime makes him vulnerable to face the Sunni
majority at any time. The current civil war in Syria is a sectarian conflict between Sunni
rebels and Islamist fighters and the Syrian regime, which is dominated by the Alawi minority
and its Shia allies. The minorities including Christians, Druses and Ismaiilites are either
supporting the regime or neutral. While the biggest ethnic minority in Syria, the Kurds, are
also working separately from other Syrian components, the regime controls the Alawite
majority coastal areas (the province of Lattakia and Tartous) and the capital Damascus.

The Islamic feature of the uprising since the beginning helped the regime to secure the
support of the Alawites and other minorities. Moreover, the regime has benefited from the
radicalization of the Syrian opposition and the rise of dawlat al-iraq wal-sham (ISIS); hence,
the Western powers, especially the U.S., became embarrassed in supporting extremists in
Syria. Although it is important to mention that some of the radical leaders of the rebels,
including Zahran Alloush, the leader of the Brigade of Islam, were released by the Syrian
regime from prison after the beginning of the uprising.40

The current fragile nation-states in the Middle East including Syria and Iraq were created in
the beginning of the 20th century after the famous agreement between France and Britain to
divide the area following the fall of the Ottoman Empire known as Sykes-Picot (1916). The
current troubles in the area, especially in Iraq and Syria, proved that the borders created by
the colonial powers are weak, sectarian and tribal; ethnic ties are stronger than these political

lines. The Ba’athist regimes in Syria and Iraq weakened nationalism in these two states and replaced it with Arabic nationalism, while in the meantime enforcing regional and sectarian, ethnic and tribal ties rather than working on constructing a national identity that can englobe and unite all these components.

Whether we agreed that the current Shia-Sunni conflict is caused by a manipulation by regional or international powers or if we claimed that this conflict is resilient and primordial, this religious conflict is a political reality now, and sectarianism between Shia and Sunnis are playing a driving force toward the past. The sectarian problem within Islam and the conflict following the succession of the prophet that started 1400 years ago seems as if it happened yesterday. This Sunni-Shia might be calmed and even covered but it will always remain there unless it is solved; yet, this hope is way too ambitious.
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