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The Looming Sunni-Shia Crisis

Sectarian tension roils four Mideast countries

By Kelley Vlahos
November 9, 2012

No one — not Washington, nor the establishment press — seems ready to confront the Sunni-Shia conflagration that threatens to rock whatever narrow foreign policy hold the U.S. has in the region, promising a bleak landscape of war for years to come.

Foreign policy had been largely sidelined in American political discourse over the last year, but now that President Obama has secured a second term, and the roiling conditions in the Middle East before November 6 haven't subsided — they will become harder to ignore.

“No one is paying attention to this,” says [Adil Shamoo](#), an Iraqi-American author and professor at the University of Maryland. Shamoo was born and raised in Iraq and is a Chaldean Christian who is horrified at the sectarian strife that [has divided his native country since the American invasion of Iraq nearly 10 years ago](#). He sees the American presence there as unleashing the simmering tensions between the Sunni and long-repressed Shia majority, leading to institutional discrimination and a backlash against other religious minorities, particularly the [now-dwindling Iraqi Christian population](#). Worse, he sees the conflict playing out throughout the region today.

“I think it's the most dangerous development in the Middle East, in the Muslim world,” he told *TAC* in a recent interview, “because you're talking about hundreds of millions of people potentially fighting each other and it has become real now.”

The American presidential debates completely ignored the issue of sectarian violence erupting in places like Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, and Pakistan — even though U.S. foreign policy directly concerns each country. Washington placed the new Shia-dominated government in Iraq into power. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has since [handed down four death sentences](#) against Sunni Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, who is in exile. The U.S. still supports the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain, despite widespread reports of human rights abuses and the torture of political prisoners. The government there has actually started [revoking the citizenship of dissenters](#).

Violence in Syria is already spilling over into Lebanon, which has implications for Israel, neighboring Jordan, and even Washington's tenuous negotiations with Iran, a stalwart ally of Syria.

American policies affect many of these powerful dramas unfolding today — Washington being both an extra and a principal player. It is key that the world's "superpower" does not rush to its usual inclination, to steal the show, warns Shamoo. "There is a reservoir of good will towards Americans, but there is a bigger reservoir of anti-Americanism," he said. The next several weeks and months will tell how the president grapples with each explosive flash point.

Syria

The uprising in Syria, launched by the majority Sunni, some 74 percent of the country, is struggling to topple the authoritarian rule of President Bashar Al Assad, who represents the [minority Alawites](#), a sect of Shiism which broke off from the main branch of Shia a thousand years ago.

"We want just what they got in Tunis and Egypt," Mahmoud Razak, a shop-keeper in the outer suburbs, [told *The Guardian* recently](#). "Freedom and the chance to progress in life. But we thought it would take 19 days like it took [in Egypt]. It's now 19 months. We didn't know it would be this difficult."

In the meantime, Syria has become the epicenter in the long-anticipated Sunni-Shia confrontation, with besieged President Assad reportedly drawing support from Iran and Lebanon via [Hezbollah](#), as well as Shia fighters from Iraq, and the minority Kurds, who (with possibly their own long-term sights on independence) [fighting the rebels in the north](#), enjoined by Kurdish compatriots from over the Turkish border. Noted the [New York Times](#):

Some Iraqi Shiites are traveling to Tehran first, where the Iranian government, Syria's chief regional ally, is flying them to Damascus, Syria's capital. Others take tour buses from the Shiite holy city of Najaf, Iraq, on the pretext of making a pilgrimage to an important Shiite shrine in Damascus that for months has been protected by armed Iraqis. While the buses do carry pilgrims, Iraqi Shiite leaders say, they are also ferrying weapons, supplies and fighters to aid the Syrian government.

"Dozens of Iraqis are joining us, and our brigade is growing day by day," Ahmad al-Hassani, a 25-year-old Iraqi fighter, said by telephone from Damascus. He said that he arrived there two

months ago, taking a flight from Tehran. The Iraqi Shiites are joining forces with Shiite fighters from Lebanon and Iran, driving Syria ever closer to becoming a regional sectarian battlefield.

Meanwhile, arms and financial assistance are flowing to the rebels from the Gulf States and Turkey, all predominantly Sunni. Jihadi fighters have streamed in seeking the same ideological struggle playing out in Muslim power vacuums from Afghanistan to North Africa, according to recent reports. The majority of these religious jihadis among the opposition in Syria are Syrians, according to the *Guardian*, however:

... it has become clear that extremist Salafi or jihadi groups, some linked to al-Qaida, are now a significant element of the armed opposition. Alongside fighters from al-Qaida in Iraq or Fatah al-Islam from Lebanon is the mysterious Jabhat al-Nusra, which has claimed responsibility for suicide bombings in Damascus and Aleppo. It is sympathetic to al-Qaida. Others hail from Jordan, Libya and Algeria.

In October, the *Washington Post* reported that at least 150 Islamists from Jordan were fighting in Syria with Jabhat al-Nusra, and a number of “ultraconservative Islamists” or salafists, [who have been arrested in Jordan](#), ostensibly preparing for jihad in Syria. Jordan, ruled by the Sunni monarchy of King Abdullah II, has its own [fervent democracy movement](#) to contend with, as well as refugees from Syria who continue to pour into the country. Abdullah has maintained official ties with Assad, but like other states in the region, Jordan has encouraged Assad to step down.

The Syrian opposition is feeling the burden of a religious war building on their efforts at democracy, too, according to writer Martin Chulov:

For the most part, the opposition movement is staying true to the ethos that led many of the country’s towns and citizens to mount a challenge to President Bashar al-Assad’s absolute state control over their lives. But around the fringes, there are signs that the revolution’s original values are starting to fray. The narrative of a defiant street versus a draconian state, so simple in March 2011, is now far more complicated.

Mary Wakefield, reporting for *The Spectator*, [recently toured the shaky corridor along the Bakaa Valley](#), between Lebanon and Syria. It is a paranoid and scarred place. “Everyone in the region is either for or against Bashir al-Assad’s regime, it’s a bipolar world: Christians and Shia mostly for, Sunnis mostly against.”

For these and many other reasons, the Obama administration has refrained from getting involved in the conflict with anything other than “non-lethal support.” Becoming a lead player on this stage could have serious repercussions beyond the soft lines of the Syrian territorial map.

Lebanon

In October, a 70-kilogram bomb targeted and killed the Sunni head of the Lebanese Internal Security Forces-Informational Branch, Gen. Wissam al-Hassan, in a predominantly Christian quarter of Beirut.

According to reports, Hassan was an ally of the U.S. and Israel in monitoring the activities of Hezbollah and pro-Syrian forces within Lebanon. Both Syria and Hezbollah have been accused of plotting Hassan's murder, instigating a massive wave of anti-Shia/Syrian violence in the city. Some have even called for a toppling of the Lebanese government, of which Hezbollah is a ruling faction. According to the *Wall Street Journal*:

Because of Gen. Hassan's ties to the West, Arab and Western officials said they believed last Friday's car bombing in central Beirut ...was a warning from Syria and Iran. Its aim, these people say, was to warn anti-Syrian politicians in Lebanon and the West not to work for the overthrow of Mr. Assad's regime in Damascus.

Both Syria and Hezbollah officials have denied involvement. As the *Washington Post* explains:

At the same time, Hezbollah's political rivals in Lebanon are out for blood, led by a Sunni-led bloc still inflamed by painful memories of the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri in a car bomb attack in 2005. The group has vowed to topple the government led by Prime Minister Najib Mikati, which could significantly weaken Hezbollah's political power

"We are targeting Najib Mikati, but we mean Hezbollah," said Nouhad Mashnouk, a member of parliament with the bloc opposed to the Syrian government. Both Hariri and Hassan were key leaders of the Sunni Muslim community, and their violent deaths have deepened the sectarian divide between Shiite and Sunni Muslims in Lebanon.

Bahrain

Not all Shia-Sunni tensions are connected to Syria, at least not yet.

Just last month, the Bahraini ruling Sunni monarchy [banned all street protests nationwide](#). The decree came 21 months after the Shia, which represent 70 percent of Bahrain's population, took to the streets in their own version of the Arab Spring, demanding democracy and an end to the institutional discrimination keeping their people largely unemployed and living in quasi-apartheid conditions.

The strife has caused some 50 deaths, mostly activists, in the last two years, amid major police crackdowns that left Shia protesters filled with birdshot or tortured in government prisons, according to human rights observers. The interior minister nonetheless blamed the campaigners for abusing the privilege and shut all the rallies down, promising legal repercussions if they took to the streets from this point forward.

This has put the American government in a bind, since Bahrain and its biggest ally, Saudi Arabia (which has been accused of covertly fueling sectarian tensions throughout the Middle East), are its own best friends in the region. [The Bahraini monarchy also has a cozy relationship with western media and especially, Washington lobbyists, insulating it from the kind of scrutiny that say, Egypt faced during its revolution.](#) The White House has been criticized not being more vocal about the violence against protesters and the obvious stifling of dissent.

Pakistan

According to a [recent report](#) by Michael Georgy for Reuters, more than 300 Shia have been killed by Sunni extremists in Pakistan in the last year. The group Lashkar-e-Jhagvi or LeJ, has “grown more robust and appears to be operating across a much wider area in Pakistan than just a few years ago.” They’ve been linked to both the Taliban and al Qaeda and are responsible for some of the most violent terror attacks in recent times, targeting the Shia, which account for about 20 percent of Pakistan’s population.

Revenge comes in the form of Shia extremist attacks, sometimes backed by Iran, Georgy writes: “Sunni and Shi’ites, who have lived together for decades, now cope with sectarian no-go zones.”

Dealing with a Sunni-Shia showdown on a grand scale has been a “no-go zone” for most Washington lawmakers and even the foreign policy establishment, which seems to prefer addressing one conflict area at a time. The spillover from the Syrian conflict could wreak havoc on places already made fragile by years of war, poverty, and corruption.