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Contemporary aspects of Sunni-Shiite conflict

The Sunni-Shi'a conflict is centuries old and is deeply imbedded into the ideology and theology of the two main branches of Islam as well as in various aspects of relations between them. Both groups claim to be the rightful successors to Prophet Muhammad and thus represent the properly constituted assemblage of adherence. Their claims and demands for the recognition of their assertions present an insurmountable problem. Throughout the centuries the claims of Sunnis and Shi'a to the origins and property of the Prophet's succession have been a source of open conflicts and skirmishes as well as intense communal animosities.

Tensions between these two communities have recently escalated and acquired new dimensions – each of the two main traditions of Islam is now associated with a powerful state – Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Iran on the other. They also represent groupings of countries linked through their version of Islam with two important clusters in the system of international relations. Oil-rich Saudi Arabia which is also the home of two of Islam's holy sanctuaries: Mecca the Blessed and Medina the Radiant, presents itself as the protector of Sunni communities. Iran with its imperial history and determination to join the world's exclusive nuclear club sees itself as a guardian of the Shiite groups wherever they are to be found. The expanse of this conflict extends through Africa, the Middle and Far East to Asia – from Nigeria to Malaysia. Saudi Arabia's fundamentalist Wahhabi doctrine¹ contains a "virulent hatred" for Shiites, which is semi-publicly and privately often expressed with great hostility.

This confrontation is founded on the belief that each of these two factions sees themselves as the true representative of Islam, and the other contemptuously is considered

¹ Wahhabism, also known as Salafism, is an ultra-conservative fundamentalist school of Islam based on the teachings of Abdul Wahab (1703-1792). It began as a movement to cleanse Islamic societies of cultural practices and interpretations that were considered un-Islamic, such as for example the Shi'a practice of visiting shrines of dead Imams, praying at saints' tombs and at graves, using votive and sacrificial offerings, prayer ritual in which the suppliant appeals to a third party for intercession with God. The Wahhabis believe in the Quran in its literal sense and stress the necessity of deducing one's duty from it.

as heresy. The confrontations often turn violent, even during the pilgrimage in Mecca and Medina, where riots by Shi'ite pilgrims, whom the Saudi suspect are acting with Iranian encouragement, have caused hundreds of casualties².

Conservative Sunni clerics in Saudi Arabia routinely denounced Shi'a as heretics. For a great many Shi'a are simply an inferior community and have been regarded as such for a very long time. The Arab revolts that began in 2011 clearly exacerbated the Sunni-Shi'a fault-lines.

Although it is difficult to find accurate data on the Sunni and Shi'a populations throughout the world, it is estimated that in the years 2009-2010, among the 1.6 billion Muslims (23.4 per cent of the population of the world), Sunnis comprise 87-90 per cent and Shi'a 10-13 per cent³.

Between 12-15 per cent of the Muslim population in the Asia Pacific region is Shi'a, as is 11-14 per cent of the Muslim population in the Middle East and North Africa. Most Shi'ites (from 68 to 80 per cent) live in four countries: Iran, Pakistan, India and Iraq. Iran has 66-70 million Shiites, or 37-40 per cent of the global population of this faction. Iraq, India and Pakistan are home to at least 16 million of the faithful of the sect. The following table gives the appropriate number of Shi'ites in the countries where they count more than one hundred thousand.

The arrival on 14 March 2011 in Bahrain of some 1,500 soldiers from the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, led by Saudi Arabia, under the umbrella of the Peninsula Shield Force⁴, is the latest manifestation of the on-going Sunni-Shi'ite conflict that has

² There is a long history of clashes between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi police in Mecca and Medina. The most notorious took place during the pilgrimage in July 1987, when Iranian pilgrims' demonstrations against the "enemies of Islam" (including the U.S. and Israel), turned into a battle between the protesters and the Saudi security forces. The police opened fire on demonstrators which led to panic among the pilgrims. In this skirmish 402 people died (275 Iranians, 85 Saudis including many police officers, and 42 pilgrims from other countries), and 649 people were wounded (303 Iranians, 145 Saudis and 201 citizens of other countries). Much smaller riots took place in subsequent years. In early 2009, the Shiite pilgrims were attacked in Medina after performing rituals that are prohibited by Wahhabi Islam. As a result, the interior minister of Saudi Arabia, Prince Nayef Ibn Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, said that Shiites should not show publicly their faith with respect to the majority Sunni. According to Human Rights Watch a pilgrimage of Saudi Shi'a to Medina in February 2009 to observe the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad's death led to clashes between the pilgrims and Saudi security forces who objected to what they consider the idolatrous innovations of Shia rituals of commemorating special holidays and making visits to graves. The immediate cause of the Medina clashes was the filming on 20 February of Shi'a women pilgrims by a man believed to belong to the Saudi religious police. The clashes continued over a period of five days in the area of the Baqi' cemetery in Medina, which is believed to contain the graves of several of the Prophet's wives, many of his companions, and four of his successors whom the Shi'a recognize as rightful leaders of the Muslim community. They resulted in the arrest of 49 Shias.

³ The Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, *Mapping the Global Muslim population. A report on the size and distribution of the world's Muslim population*, Washington DC 2009.

⁴ The Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), officially created in 1982 at the third summit of the GCC's Supreme Council, comprised of the rulers of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait and Qatar. It took part in the liberation of Kuwait during the First Gulf War in the early 1990s, and was again sent to Kuwait in 2003 ahead of the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. Initially the PSF was based in north-eastern Saudi Arabia, in the city of Hafr al Batin, close to both the Kuwaiti and Iraqi borders. The size of the force was estimated

endured at many levels in the Islamic world. Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran appear to be engaged in the struggle for supremacy among the Muslim faithful.

Table 1.

	Estimated population of Shi'a – 2009	Estimated percentage of the Shi'a Muslim population
Iran	66-70 million	90-95%
Pakistan	17-26 million	10-15
India	16-24 million	1-15
Iraq	19-22 million	65-70
Turkey	7-11 million	10-15
Yemen	8-10 million	35-40
Azerbaijan	5-7 million	65-75
Afghanistan	3-4 million	10-15
Syria	3-4 million	15-20
Saudi Arabia	2-4 million	10-15
Nigeria	<4 million	<5
Lebanon	1-2 million	45-55
Tanzania	<2 million	<10
Kuwait	500,000-700,000	20-25
Germany	400,000-600,000	10-15
Bahrain	400,000-500,000	65-75
Tajikistan	~400,000	~7
United Arab Emirates	300,000-400,000	~10
United States	200,000-400,000	10-15
Oman	100,000-300,000	5-10
United Kingdom	100,000-300,000	10-15
Bulgaria	~100,000	10-15
Qatar	~100,000	~10
Total in the world	154-200 million	10-13

Source: The Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, *Mapping the Global Muslim population. A report on the size and distribution of the world's Muslim population*, Washington DC 2009, p. 8.

at a modest 5,000 soldiers at its inception, but according *The National* (March 16, 2011) it has since grown six-fold. At the 21st GCC summit in Manama on 31 December, 2000 the member states signed a mutual defence pact which also created a joint GCC defence council and a high military committee and codified what is now the pillar of the GCC's military doctrine: that the security of all the members of the council is an "indivisible whole". According to the communiqué issued at that time "any aggression on a member state is aggression against the other states, and facing aggression is considered a joint responsibility whose burden is on all the member states... Interference from any entity in the internal affairs of one of the member states is interference in the internal affairs of all the nations of the council". The communiqué thus made attacks by a foreign force, foreign interference and destabilisation of a GCC state all contingencies that demand unified action by the council. A proposal by Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, adopted in 2006 by the Gulf Supreme Council, transformed the PSF. It was agreed that soldiers would be stationed in their home countries but come under joint command.

In addition to Saudi forces UAE sent some 500 police officers to Bahrain. Subsequently, on 21 March 2011 a Kuwait navy vessel with a number of ground forces on board docked off the Bahraini coast, as part of the Peninsula Shield Force troops deployed by the GCC in the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia has decided to intervene in Bahrain after a month of social unrest that has left the tiny Gulf nation sharply divided between the minority Sunni Muslims backing the ruling system and the Shi'a majority demanding sweeping changes. The ruler of the kingdom, King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, is a Sunni Muslim like the entire ruling elite of Bahrain. Although, technically Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy, the country's parliamentary prerogatives are limited in favour of the king, who is the real power broker.

By the middle of March Bahrain's Sunni ruling elite had discovered that the country's security forces were unable to cope with the on-going protests by the majority Shiites, who constitute around 70 per cent of the population of 1,214,705⁵. Ostensibly a parliamentary group asked King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa for a three-month declaration of martial law and claimed that "extremist movements" were trying to disrupt the country and push it towards sectarian conflict⁶. The king declared state of emergency and invited the GCC to help to establish "security and domestic stability". The deployment of the Peninsula Shield Force has been explained as a show of solidarity among the Gulf Council states – "safeguarding security and stability in one country is a collective responsibility"⁷.

Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani, the Qatari prime minister and foreign minister, stated: "There are common responsibilities and obligations within the GCC countries... The arrival of Saudi and UAE troops in Bahrain is in line with a GCC defence agreement that calls for all members to oblige when needed and to fully co-operate"⁸.

Quite clearly Bahrain's leadership found itself under intense pressure from other Gulf neighbours, particularly powerful Saudi Arabia, not to give ground to the demands of the protesting majority of the country's population.

Iran has been accused of being behind the demonstrations in Bahrain. King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa went as far as to blame a foreign plot for the nation's unrest, using veiled language to accuse Iran of fomenting an uprising by the Shi'a majority⁹. However, it should be remembered that the revolt in Bahrain has also an economic underpinning. The Shi'a in Bahrain are the poorest and least educated group of people in the country. They complain of discrimination on religious grounds in search of jobs and public services and that they are regularly pushed to lower levels even in comparison to naturalized Sunni immigrants from other countries, such as, for example, from the Asian subcontinent. Their position is becoming increasingly difficult since the government of Bahrain regularly naturalizes tens of thousands of Sunnis, whose presence in the security forces is one of the main factors of the harsh police response to the protests. The allocation of housing, health

⁵ The figure includes 235, 108 non-nationals (July 2011 est.) CIA World Factbook: Bahrain, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ba.html

⁶ The 40-seat chamber was left with only pro-government politicians after 18 opposition members resigned in protest against the use of violence against demonstrators.

⁷ GCC secretary general, Abdulrahman al Attiya, quoted by Frank Kane and Jonathan Lessware, "UAE and Saudi Arabia send forces to Bahrain", *The National*, March 15, 2011.

⁸ Al Jazeera, "Saudi soldiers sent into Bahrain", www.english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/03/2011314124928850647.html

⁹ "Associated Press", 21 March 2011.

care and other benefits to Sunnis from outside Bahrain also causes resentment among the Shiites who increasingly feel second-class citizens in their own country. Despite the wealth of the country, they claim that they have never received a fair share of the economic benefits. As a result, the Bahrain Shiites took to the streets expecting a true democracy, pointing out the example of the Shiites in Iraq, who took control of the government after the first free elections in Iraq in January 2005.

This however is a nightmare scenario for Saudi Arabia and other Sunni oil principalities in the Persian Gulf – the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait – whose troops are involved in the Peninsula Shield Force. Each of these countries struggles with their own restless Shi'a minority. Moreover, each of these states is also an object of Iranian ambitions. Their concern is that Shi'a control of Bahrain will be the final result in the implementation of age-old Iranian desire to take over this strategically located island.

Bahrain is just off the east coast of Saudi Arabia and the two countries are connected by 25 km long causeway¹⁰. The world's longest causeway links Bahrain with Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province – the largest province of the country, comprising 31.28 per cent of the kingdom's total size. This province is not only inhabited by large number of Shi'ite population, but it is an area that contains all the most important sources of natural gas, crude oil and refineries on which not only the United States but also the majority of western countries rely. Saudi Arabia is overwhelmingly dependent on oil exports. As much as 75% of the state budget comes from export. Crude oil accounts for 45% of GDP.

There are no accurate figures on the number of Shi'a in the Eastern Province. The 1992 Library of Congress study estimates that "in the Eastern Province... they constituted perhaps 33 per cent of the population, being concentrated in the oases of Qatif and Al Ahsa"¹¹. The 2005 International Crisis Group report states that: "Saudi Arabia's roughly two million Shiites represent between 10 and 15 per cent of the total population. Most live and work in the Eastern Province, which they dominate demographically... While a small number reside in Dammam, the Eastern Province's capital and largest city, the overwhelming majority live in the towns and villages of the two large oases, Qatif and Al Ahsa. Small Shiite communities also exist in Mecca and Medina"¹².

Their demands for greater freedom of worship to take account of their religious traditions and freedom from Sunni practices based on the Wahhabi school of Islam dominant in Saudi Arabia, are interpreted as an affront to Sunni Wahhabism which are the basis of the kingdom's legal system. The Shi'ites are prohibited to gather in community

¹⁰ The King Fahd Causeway was opened in 1986. The idea of building the causeway is based on an idea of improving relations and ties between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The project cost a total of \$ 1.2 billion. One of the main contractors of the project, Ballast Nedam, was based in the Netherlands. This four-lane road is 25 km long and about 23 m wide and was built on 350,000 m² of concrete and 47,000 tons of reinforced steel. It is estimated that the number of vehicles using this road is around 45,000 on weekdays and 60,000 at the weekends.

¹¹ *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, H. C. Metz (ed.), Washington 1992. The same study suggests that in the whole of the kingdom "Shi'a... probably constitute about 5 percent of the total population, their number being estimated from a low of 200,000 to as many as 400,000", in a population of 12.3 million in 1992.

¹² International Crisis Group, *The Shi'ite Question in Saudi Arabia*, Middle East Report N 45 – 19 September 2005.

centres, they do not receive funding from the state budget for the construction of their mosques, and do not have access to certain jobs, such as the teaching of history. Deep tensions exist from 1913, when King Abdul-Aziz, who later created the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, secured control of this region. In recent decades, inner-religious, sectarian issues have become even more accentuated as a result of momentous developments in the region, such as the Iranian revolution, unrest in neighbouring Bahrain, and Shiite-Sunni tensions in Iraq following the American invasion in 2003, which has completely changed the power dynamics of the area. The latter in particular "strengthened Shiite aspirations and Sunni suspicions and generally deepened confessional divisions throughout the region"¹³. For the Saudi Shi'a the failure of their engagement with the Saudi ruling circles dating back to the early 1990s and the successes of their co-religionists in Iraq suggested that they must demand political reforms in the kingdom.

The most serious problems occurred in late November 1979 and were associated with the revolution in Iran. Shiites in Qatif region organized an Ashura procession without the permission of local authorities. This led to bloody street violence between state security forces and thousands of frustrated Shiites that lasted seven days, and rocked the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia¹⁴. Women as well as men marched in anger. Several buildings were destroyed, including the offices of the Saudi National Airline and the British bank in the town. Protesters seized weapons from soldiers, destroyed state-owned vehicles and even occupied the old city in downtown Qatif, from which they held off the Saudi military for days. The security forces, which included 20,000 Saudi National Guard, cordoned off the major roadways, particularly those in Qatif, Sayhat, and Safwa to localize the protest. The National Guard relied on the heavy firepower of helicopter gun ships for crowd control, turning the area into a deadly conflict zone characterized by terror, hostility, and fear. The protest were eventually crushed by the National Guard. About 20 people were killed and unknown number wounded¹⁵. Similar clashes took place in Qatif in February 1980. During the spring of 2011 several demonstrations in the Eastern Province took place with the protesters demanding the release of prisoners¹⁶. There were protests

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The protests coincided with the seizure on 20 November 1979 of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a group of some 200 Sunni extremists. The heavily armed group of fundamentalists, men and women enrolled in Islamic studies at the Islamic University of Medina, took over and besieged the Grand Mosque in Mecca. The seizure was led by Juhaiman ibn Muhammad ibn Saif al Utaibi who belonged to a powerful Sunni family of Najd. He justified the action claiming that the ruling Al Saud dynasty had lost its legitimacy, because it was corrupt, ostentatious and had destroyed Saudi culture by an aggressive policy of Westernization. The events in the Eastern Province added to already worrying and insecure situation faced by the Saudi authorities.

¹⁵ See J. C. Toby, *Rebellion on the Saudi periphery: Modernity, marginalization and the Shi'a uprising of 1979*, "International Journal of Middle East Studies", 2006, no. 38, p. 213-233.

¹⁶ On 16 February 2011 Shiites stage a small protest in the town of al-Awamiyah. On 25 February 2011 residents of al-'Awamiyah held a silent vigil the same day calling for the release of the so-called "Forgotten Prisoners", nine Shi'a Saudis detained without charge or trial for over 12 years. On 3 March 2011 about 100 people, mostly men and one group of women, staged small protests in two towns of Eastern Province. On 4 March 2011 more than 100 protesters march through the city of al-Hofuf to demanding the release of Shiite cleric Tawfiq al-

again in October 2011 when according to the BBC, quoting Saudi state media, fourteen people were injured in clashes.

It should be stressed that the Shi'ites in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and their coreligionist neighbours in Bahrain are among the oldest Muslim communities and are linked by blood ties. The mutual relationship between these two communities is extremely important to the constantly changing links and relationships between the various actors in the Persian Gulf and for the future stability of the region. The rise of Shi'a militancy clearly represents a potential threat to the oil fields of Saudi Arabia and also indirectly the interests of the United States and other Western countries.

Saudis believe the Iranians are playing a long-planned game to use Bahrain as a springboard to destabilize this very sensitive area. Already at the beginning of the riots in March 2011, following the revolutions in Egypt, Saudi activists proclaimed Day of Rage in the Eastern Province during which, hundreds of Shiites demonstrated against the Saudi authorities. Just as in Bahrain, there is deep dissatisfaction among more than two million Shiites in Saudi Arabia, who are on the margins of economic and socio-political. Their demands and expectations are of course open to exploitation. Saudi Arabia is deeply afraid of possible "fragmentation" – the parcelling of its territory and also its oil and gas wealth without which the kingdom loses its significance.

Iranian politicians had openly expressed their desire to conquer Bahrain. Several times in recent years they have called Bahrain the 14th province of Iran. In July 2007, the semi-official Kayhan newspaper ran an editorial that asserted an Iranian claim to Bahrain. It called Bahrain, "a province of Iran", ready for reunification with the "native land".

This claim was repeated publicly in February 2009 by Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, a close advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei Hosseini. Iran bases its claim on the period in the nineteenth century when in 1830, Sheikh Abdul Al Khalifeh declared his submission to the Shah Fath Ali Shah. Over the next 30 years Iran controlled the island. And although the government of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran, renounced these claims in 1970. It would appear that today the mullahs in Iran are clearly nostalgic for the demands of the nineteenth century.

Iran supports its claims to Bahrain through actions. In the 1970s Tehran bolstered the establishment of a radical Shi'ite Islamist organization – the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB). It is alleged that the IFLB was involved in a coup attempt in December 1981. According to Bahraini sources, "An Iranian-trained team of Shi'ite Bahrainis were to simultaneously attack telecommunications services and Bahrain's airport and assassinate key members of the Al Khalifa regime. In the ensuing chaos, Iran would

-Amir. On 9 March 2011 at least three people are injured after police fired in the air to disperse protesters in Qatif. Around 600-800 protesters, all Shi'a and including women, took to the streets of the city to demand the release of nine Shi'a prisoners. On March 11 2011 some 500 protesters demonstrated in the cities of al- Hofuf, al-Ahsa and al-Awamiyah. Hundreds of protesters rallied on 17 March 2011 to show solidarity with their fellow Shiites in Bahrain. On 8 April 2011 hundreds of Saudi Shiites protested in the city of Qatif demanding the withdrawal of Saudi troops from neighbouring Bahrain and political rights and freedoms at home.

send in its military and establish a new theocratic regime similar to its own"¹⁷. Indeed, in 1981 the government of Bahrain announced the discovery of a conspiracy led by the IFLB, which aimed at the overthrow of the government in Manama and the establishment of "Islamic Republic". A group of Shi'a from Bahrain and other parts of the Gulf, reportedly trained in Iran, was supported during the overthrow attempt by an Iranian hovercraft¹⁸. A number of persons were arrested in 1987 in another plot linked to Iran. In June 1996, fifty one Bahrainis were arrested and charged with plotting against the government. They were accused of being members of "Hizballah" trained and armed in an Iranian-backed plot¹⁹. The importance of the "Hizballah plot" as an attempt to overthrow the Bahraini regime has been largely dismissed by Shi'ite observers and Sunni liberals. Apparently the number and type of weapons found by the security forces was "hopelessly inadequate to start a revolution or even to stand up to Bahrain security forces"²⁰. In December 2008, fourteen people were arrested on suspicion of planning a series of terror attacks against commercial centres, diplomatic missions and nightclubs in Bahrain.

Again in 2010 Bahraini authorities arrested hundreds of Shiites, some local and some foreign, and accused them of taking part in a conspiracy of preparing attacks in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The purpose of this conspiracy was the "planning and execution of a campaign of violence, intimidation and subversion". In February 2011 Bahrain put on trial 23 people accused of belonging to a "terror network" aimed at overthrowing the government. Iran was accused of participating in preparing the actions of this network.

With the Saudi and Gulf troops moving into Bahrain, the two major players in the Sunni-Shi'a conflict became engulfed in the process of undermining their rival's allies, Saudi-Arabia backing the Sunni rebels in Syria and Iran embracing the Shi'a opposition against the Al Khalifa family in Bahrain. Open conflict along the lines of the Sunni-Shi'a divide was now evident across the region; in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and Lebanon, where pro-Assad militias allied to Hezbollah were fighting Sunni forces backing the Syrian rebels in the north²¹.

While it appears that Saudi Arabia, at least for now, won the battle for Bahrain, its success in other areas of the proxy war with Iran are much smaller. Iranian-backed Hezbollah, in the past three years, became a political force in Lebanon, having the role of power broker in the country. The Lebanese government, supported by Saudi Arabia, has been paralyzed for many months. Long Saudi Arabian mediation attempts failed

¹⁷ See <http://manamapress.net/?p=4148>

¹⁸ IFLB infrastructure was badly damaged during the government's crackdown in 1981 and 1982. Several of its members were imprisoned. The groups influence on political developments in Bahrain has diminished substantially over time. At present the IFLB has little support among the senior Bahraini clergy and only some measure of street support. Its leadership remains based in Iran.

¹⁹ The Bahraini Hizballah were established in 1985 with the help of Iranian cleric Hojjat ol-Eslam Hadi al-Madrasi and are reputed to have operated in coordination with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force.

²⁰ F. E. Graham and F. R. Rend, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*, New York 1999, p. 135.

²¹ See <http://www.popularsocialscience.com/2012/11/21/>

and in January 2011, Hezbollah withdrew its participation in the government forcing its resignation. The collapse of the government in Beirut, not only emphasized the importance of Hezbollah and its Iranian sponsors, but also undermined the importance of efforts and the efforts of Saudi Arabia in the region.

There is a general assumption amongst scholars that of all the Islamic countries in the world Pakistan has the most diverse collection of Muslim sects, sub-sects and political parties, in which sectarianism is directly or indirectly a part of political discourse²². Currently Iranian-Saudi confrontation is probably most intense in Pakistan, which is the cradle of modern Shi'a – Sunni sectarian fighting. Relations between the two main branches of Islam deteriorated significantly after the Iranian revolution of 1979, which helped to boost the confidence of the Shiite minority. The result was the creation of a political organization called Tehrik-Fiqhi Nifazi Jafari (Front Defense of Jafari Law) [TNFJ], which eventually forced the military government in Pakistan to grant exemptions for Shi'a from Sunni laws. As a consequence of these events Sunni groups in Pakistan have started to complain of the growing influence of Shi'a in this country and particularly in Punjab. In the early 1980s, some radical groups sponsored by Pakistani intelligence began systematic attacks on Shiite symbols and mosques in Pakistan. In September 1985 in Jhang, (Punjab) the Sepah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, (Companions of the Prophet Corps) [SSP] was established. It belongs to a conservative Muslim North Indian Deobandi school, sharing very similar views with the Taliban when it comes to treatment of women, Shiites and non-Muslims. One of the main objectives of the Companions of the Prophet Corps is opposing the Shiite community, which they consider to be non-Muslims and therefore infidels, as well as Iranian interests in Pakistan.

The Sepah-e-Sahaba Pakistan is financed mainly by Saudi Arabia which also sponsors other Sunni socio-political initiatives. One of the common devices used by the Saudis is funding Sunni fundamentalist madrassas in Pakistan, especially in the provinces bordering Afghanistan and Iran²³. It should be added that the influence of Iran is not the only reason for the growth of anti-Shiite sentiments. Another important factor is the perception of groups of Sunni peasants that they are being exploited by Shi'a is property and large farm owners. The SSP is the main promoter of a Sunni state in which all other sects would be considered as non-Muslim minorities. They demand that the Pakistani government publically declares the Shiites as non-Muslims and to prohibit the observance of the

²² K. Saleem, *Accommodation, Competition and Conflicts: Sectarian Identity in Pakistan*, in: *Can Faiths Make Peace?: Holy Wars and the Resolution of Religious Conflicts*, P. Broadhead and D. Keown (eds), London 2007, p. 63.

²³ There is a body of evidence that financial resources coming from Saudi Arabia find their way to various terrorist groups and organizations. General issues related to the financing of terrorism by associations, foundations and individuals in the Kingdom are raised in a secret memo from the U.S. ambassador to Riyadh, James B. Smith, to the State Department in Washington, DC, on 12 February 2010, and published a year later by WikiLeaks. In this telegram James Smith writes that "... funds from Saudi Arabia that reach the terrorists, remain a serious problem... secret available information reflect the fact that the Kingdom [of Saudi Arabia] is an important place to raise funds, especially during the Haji and Ramadan, for the Taliban and other terrorist groups based in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (www.213.251.145.96/cable/2010/02/10RIYADH182.html).

Mourning of Muharram commemorating the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali. Anti-Shiite action of the SSP involved a number of attacks on mosques processions and assemblies, as well as on assaults on Iranian diplomats and the country's interests in Pakistan²⁴. The organization was banned in January 2002 for alleged terrorist attacks.

SSP has a considerable presence and influence in all four provinces of Pakistan and is considered the most influential group of extremists in the country. According to reports, it has a particularly strong presence in south and central Punjab, especially in the districts of Jhang, Mianwali, Bhakkar, Dera Ghazi Khan, Bahawalpur, and Bahawalnagar²⁵. It also managed to create a "bank" of voters in Punjab and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) [North-West Frontier Province]. It is estimated that the SSP has some 500 offices and branches in all 34 districts of Punjab. According to available information the Prophet Corps has about 100,000 registered workers in Pakistan and 17 branches in other countries, including in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Canada, and the United Kingdom²⁶.

In 1996 there was a split in the Sepah-e-Sahaba Pakistan and from among its members emerged the militant terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) [(Army of Jhangvi)²⁷, which aims to transform Pakistan into Sunni state, through the use of violence. Since its foundation the LeJ has grown to become one of the most feared sectarian terrorist groups in Pakistan.

Most of the cadre comes from the many Sunni madrassas in Pakistan. It is divided into small cells consisting of about 5 to 8 persons in each, who act independently of the cells. It has very close relations with the Taliban, which it helps in various ways, both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. According to reliable reports, the LeJ receives financial support from contacts in Saudi Arabia. Evidence of private funding from Arab countries were revealed with the arrest of several members of the organization responsible for terrorist attacks in the late 1990's. Much of this funding also comes from a group of wealthy benefactors in Karachi in Pakistan²⁸.

LeJ operates mainly in Pakistan, where it assumed the responsibility for numerous massacres of Shias and target killings of Shiite religious leaders and members of religious and social groups. The victims of the terror have been politicians, businessmen, teachers, civil servants, police officers and ordinary people living in neighborhoods or streets with a population loyal to Shiites or Shiites praying in mosques.

The Sunni-Shi'a struggle in Pakistan has provoked reactions in Iran and resulted in providing secret support for Shi'a co-religionists. Pakistani Shiites, who make up 10-15 percent of the 172 million population of the country in retaliation, formed their own

²⁴ Details of the incidents related to the SSP can be found at: www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/SSP_tl.htm

²⁵ Abdul Nasir Khan, *Punjab government bans 22 renamed militant organisations*, CentralAsiaOnline, 6 VII 2010.

²⁶ See www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/Ssp.htm

²⁷ Named after its slain founder, Maulana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, who was murdered by Shiite terrorists.

²⁸ See www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/lej.htm

militant organizations supported by Iran. For reasons of security the details and the names of these organizations are kept secret. In Kurram valley in the north-western region of Pakistan, near the border with Afghanistan, where Shiites are a majority²⁹, two militant organizations are active. They focus primarily on the defense of the Shiite community and do not attack the Pakistani state. The militants of Hezbollah Kurram³⁰ are ideologically close to Iran³¹. The second organization, the Mehdi Militia, consisting mainly of Turi tribesmen, is ideologically close to the Iraqi Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Although it is reported that its fighters come from all over the region of Kurram, the group is concentrated in the upper Kurram area of Parchinar and Ziayran³². This is a very conservative, ideologically rigid and staunchly militant group³³.

The sectarian confrontation in Pakistan has a very devastating impact on the socio-economic and religious structure of the country. The South Asia Terrorism Portal³⁴ has documented incidents of sectarian confrontation in the years 1989 to 2011 in which 3,561 people were killed and 7,594 were injured. The highest intensity of the confrontation was reported during the years of 2006-2011, during which in brutal sectarian fighting 1,733 persons were killed and 3,243 wounded. The US-based, Human Rights Watch recorded in 2012 as the bloodiest year for the Pakistani Shi'a community with over 400 targeted deaths, some 120 of these were in Balochistan³⁵.

Conclusions

The deepening sectarian conflict in Pakistan is a reflection of the growing Saudi-Iranian conflict. The conflict has intensified quite considerably over the past four-five years and its outcomes are extremely difficult to predict. The ongoing conflict in Syria adds very significantly to the complexities and dynamics of Saudi-Iranian and Sunni-Shi'a confrontations.

This of course comes on top of the March 2011 military intervention by Saudi and Gulf troops in Bahrain. Led by Saudi Arabia, the intervention in Bahrain was clearly a warning message to Iran. Saudi Arabia retains a deeply negative assessment of Iran, which is

²⁹ Upper Kurram is inhabited largely by the Turi tribe – the only Pashtun tribe which is wholly Shi'a – while central and lower Kurram are inhabited by Sunnis, mostly Bangash. There are longstanding disputes over ownership of forests, hills, land and water resources between Sunni and Shia tribes in Kurram, and sporadic incidents of communal violence have taken place since the 1930s. Kurram became strategically important since 2001 because it shares a border with key Afghan provinces (www.thefridaytimes.com/beta2/tft/article.php?issue=20120302&page=3).

³⁰ Unrelated to the militant group of the same name in Lebanon.

³¹ Mansur Khan Mahsud, *The battle for Pakistan: Militancy and Conflict in Kurram*, Washington DC 2010, p. 6.

³² See www.thefridaytimes.com/beta2/tft/article.php?issue=20120302&page=3

³³ Mansur Khan Mahsud, *The battle for Pakistan: Militancy and Conflict in Kurram*, op. cit.

³⁴ See www.satp.org/

³⁵ Mohammad Ali Jinnah, *2012 bloodiest year for Shias in Pakistan*, "The Times of India", 17 I 2013.

reflected in the King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud private utterances reported in a secret telegram sent by the U.S. Ambassador in Riyadh in March 2009, to Washington³⁶. This message quotes the king describing Iran not as "a neighbor one wants to see," but as "a neighbor one wants to avoid". "Iran's goal is to cause problems", – he continued. "There is no doubt something unstable about them". The king referred to Iran as "adventurous in the negative sense", declared "May God prevent us from falling victim to their evil"³⁷.

The Saudi authorities are firmly committed to the forestalling of any movements for change in Bahrain that would undermine the rule of the Al-Khalifa family in Manama, seeing it as the only obstacle that prevents the Shiite majority in that country from becoming the dominant group. This commitment prevents the Shiites of Bahrain from overtly providing support to the Shiite population in Saudi Arabia. Shi'a rebellion in Bahrain may fade for a while, but it's hard to imagine that it would completely extinguished. To the Shi'a in Bahrain opposition to the rule of the Al-Khalifa family is their daily reality, a part of the historical memory and constant struggles.

Sectarian antagonisms and struggles, of which Pakistan is a particularly perceptible example, have the tendency to generate stimulating energy to those who are involved in them. Sectarian frictions also acquire their own mechanisms and methods that are adapted to the needs of new situations. The challenging aspects of the contemporary dimension of the Sunni-Shi'a conflict lie in the propensity of this conflict to embrace new dimensions – a dynamic that would contribute to its expanse in terms of spatiality and time-scale. At present it looks though that the Sunni-Shi'a conflict is likely to enter into a new and unpredictable phase.

³⁶ Details of this stormy discussion are given in a secret telegram from U.S. Ambassador in Riyadh, Ford Fraker to the State Department in Washington, DC, dated 22 March 2009 and published by WikiLeaks on December 5, 2010 (www.213.251.145.96/cable/2009/03/09RIYADH447.html, and www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/198178).

³⁷ See www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/198178