The Shia/Sunni Cold War: A US Strategy and Saudi Illusion

Back in February, Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadi nejad, claimed that the United States and Israel were deliberately stirring sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni in order to exploit all Muslims. If his analysis is correct, then it appears US policy has evolved significantly following its first hand encounter with Islamic sectarianism in Iraq. His comments came as Secretary of State Rice outlined “a new strategic alignment in the Middle East”; a policy which Seymour Hersh derisively surmised as, “Supporting the Sunnis anywhere we can against the Shia.” Martin Indyk, an architect of Clinton’s ‘dual containment’ policy, warned of a strategy that could lead the Middle East into a “Serious Sunni-Shiite Cold War.”

One of the legacies of the Iranian Islamic Revolution was the creation of a distinct Western attitude to militant political Shi’ism. The initial vehemence of its anti-Americanism, energetic desire to export its revolutionary doctrines, and penchant for hostage taking and terrorism made Sunni activism appear less threatening in comparison. This attitude prevailed throughout the 1980’s, only to be rudely awakened in the mid 1990’s following the militant Sunni backlash to the 1st Gulf War. The US, in recognition of unease amongst its Sunni Allies, has now come back full circle. In a bid to restore a favourable equilibrium to the Shia-Sunni balance of power, the US is increasing military aid to Sunni regional powers and enlisting the assistance of Sunni militants. This may, in the short term, reduce US deaths in Iraq and reassure its Saudi, Jordanian and Egyptian allies. In the longer term, the US is in danger of creating a new generation of strongmen in Lebanon and Iraq that, as Afghanistan stands testament, are likely to turn against each other and, ultimately, America.

The wider regional impact of establishing the first Shia ruled Arab state was only seriously addressed by specialists following the transfer of power to the Iraqi Interim Government. In the summer of 2004, The Washington Quarterly published an article by Vali Nasr entitled, “Regional Implications of Shi’a Revival in Iraq”. Influential in Washington, the piece argued that the sectarian implications of US intervention in Iraq would be more significant than “any potential example of a moderate and progressive government in Baghdad.” Nasr predicted a Sunni extremist backlash phrased in sectarian, rather than strategic terms. The regional Sunni powers had, Nasr noted, responded in a similar manner when confronted with militant Shia republicanism in 1979.

Mr Ahmadinejad, for once, can claim a very modest portion of the higher ground. Of all the regional powers, Iran has contributed least, rhetorically, to the perception of a fitna (or sectarian schism) between Shia and Sunni. The Saudis are particularly guilty of masking state-strategic tensions, and repression of its own Shia community, under a cloak of religious sectarianism. By whipping up fear of Iran on the back of an energised Shia revival, the Saudis justify their tacit support for more controversial policies. In any other circumstances, their strong objection to a US withdrawal in Iraq, and their isolation of the former champions of Arab-Israeli resistance, Hezbollah, would be extremely problematic for the guardians of Mecca and Medina. The rising strategic threat of Iranian influence in Iraq and in Lebanon is thus characterised as the “Safavid dream of Shia expansion.”

Joining the US (and Israel) in confronting the Iranians, and Hezbollah, is a big risk for the House of Saud. The success of this strategy depends, ironically, on the support of the same clerics that call for jihad against America or suicide bombings in Israel. It relies on the fact that tensions between Shia and Sunni are much older and doctrinally intransigent than the forces of anti-Americanism in the Middle East. Saddam’s grotesquely mishandled execution on the first day of Eid al-Adha played into the Saudi hands, providing a sectarian distraction to Saudi strategic vulnerabilities. The botched, and obviously sectarian, killing of Saddam presented a perfect opportunity to demonise the Shia. Nasser al-Omar, one the best known Saudi Wahhabi firebrands, commented on his website, “The timing shows how much Shias hate Sunnis in Iraq and all the Islamic world.” Al-Omar included reference to the Shias being “Safavids” - the name of a 15th-century dynasty who established Shia Islam as Iran's state religion. The rabble-rouser reminded his devotees that the Shia were, “The sons of Ibn Alqami”, referring to a Shia minister who, according to some Sunnis, connived with the Mongols to attack Baghdad in 1258. A columnist in one Saudi daily asserted, falsely, that Shias routinely have to perform ablutions if they happen to touch an “unclean” Sunni. Sunni
clerics also allege that Iranian agents are converting Sunni Arabs and spreading Shia texts. This is a potent mix of doctrinal, political and historical tensions, and one that the US would be best to steer clear off.

The political consolidation of Shia rule in Iraq, escalation of violence against Sunnis following the bombing of the Samarra Mosque, and Israel's disastrous war against Hezbollah have all led to an escalation of sectarian rhetoric. The Saudis rolled out their state employed, bigoted and militantly anti-Shia clerics to characterise the conflict as a *fitna*. Iran was apparently, and deliberately, failing to prevent the ethnic cleansing of the Shia from Baghdad. Thirty eight senior Saudi clerics issued a call to arms in defence of Iraq against the “Crusader-Safavid-Rejectionist plot that seeks to uproot Sunni Islam.” On the back of this, the Saudis were able to publicly state that, in the event of a US withdrawal, they would be forced to provide aid to radical Sunni groups there; an unbelievable statement, but one that the US didn’t express outrage at. The increased sectarian phrasing of the shift in the balance of power in the Persian Gulf had the dual effect of supporting the Saudi government’s ongoing persecution of their own Shia minority in the Eastern provinces of Qatif and Al Ahsa. The Saudis, in turn, criticise the treatment of the oppressed Sunni minorities in Iran. Given that most Iranian Sunnis are Kurds, Balochis, or Turkmen, groups who the Saudi have shown little previous interest in, it seems that their plight has been politicised without any real sympathy for their predicament.

Whatever they say, the Saudi government care much more about Iranian influence in the Iraqi government than they do about the sectarian murders of Sunni Muslims. Equally, they feared Hezbollah and Iran’s hijacking of the Palestinian cause and political control of Lebanon, much more than cared about the destruction of Beirut. There is some evidence that Saudi policy is working. Hezbollah are increasingly seen as little more than an instrument of Iranian ambitions. In Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, officials all identify Iran as the chief destabilising factor in the conflicts in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine. Even Hamas, a Sunni Palestinian group, find their strong association with Iran a weight around their neck. Jibes of ‘Shia’ ‘Shia’ are now the common insult directed by their Fatah rivals. This is thus a coordinated effort amongst all of the American allied Sunni states. Editorials in the Egyptian state owned *al-Ahram*, blame Iran for violence in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon using the same ‘safadist’ conspiracy theories of Shia expansionism. It was also King Abdullah of Jordan who, over two years ago, warned of a rising Shia “crescent”. After Saddam’s execution, the Jordanian government allowed, if not encouraged, demonstrations in Amman. Many added “Death to Iran” to the obligatory “Death to America”.

The risks for the US tilt towards the Sunnis are equally grave. Whilst extending an olive branch to Sunni militants in Iraq has helped, amongst other factors, limit attacks on US troops, the backing of Sunni militants in Iraq and Lebanon echoes of Cold War strategy in Afghanistan. Back then, America was not fussy when enlisting proxy forces to resist Soviet expansion. Even Iran, at the height of the hostage crisis, was approached with very limited success. US allies are equally disparate now. A new breed of Sunni militants, such as former Islamic Army warlord, Abu Abed, receives US arms and treasure in Iraq. In Palestine, the US broke a 15 month aid embargo to bolster Mahmoud Abbas’ battles against Hamas. Now it has been reported that the Siniora government has allowed some US aid to end up in the hands of Sunni radical groups in northern Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley, and around Palestinian refugee camps in the south. This strategy follows another agreement between Vice President Dick Cheney, Deputy National Security Advisor Elliot Abrams, and Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi national security adviser, whereby the Saudis would covertly fund the Sunni Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon.

As Karim Makdisi pointed out, America is cultivating longer term alliances with the Lebanese army in the hope that it could eventually confront Hezbollah. Yet, confrontation via their own, or proxy, power is an unlikely strategy for success. Former Israeli Defence Minister, Ehud Barak, admitted: “When we entered Lebanon... there was no Hezbollah...It was our presence that created Hezbollah.” Iraq stands as testament to the ability of militant Shia groups to become entwined in the social fabric of the Shia community in a climate of sectarian strife and impotent state control. Not only that, but the only thing that brought the two warring Shia factions, Anfal and Hezbollah, together was Israeli invasions. What seems to undermine
Hezbollah’s support in Lebanon is not sectarian conflict or direct confrontation, but Hezbollah provocation of Israel and an atmosphere devoid of sectarian conflict.

The sectarian bent to US strategy is fundamentally conflicted. In Iraq, the US is pursuing reconciliation with Sunni militants who express no desire to reconcile themselves with the Maliki government. At the same time, US support for the Maliki government inhibits genuine rapprochement with the Sunni groups. On such insurgent summed this up in the Washington Post: “The problem is that the Americans have a relationship with the slaves: Dawa, Badr Organization, the Mahdi Army are slaves to Iran.” The logical conclusion of this marriage of convenience, and alienation of the Shia ruling majority, looks more and more to be the separation of Iraq along ethnic lines.

What’s more, US policy is based on a wildly exaggerated premise; that Iran somehow pulls the strings of any and all Shia parties, governments or militant groups. Despite significant efforts, no definitive link can be made between Iran and the Khobar Towers bombing attributed to Saudi Hezbollah. The premise that Lebanese Hezbollah exists as an instrument of Iran’s regional interests is another assumed and, as asserted on a recent Libertas contribution, routinely un-qualified allegation. Also overlooked, are the important differences within Shia groups. Iraqi Shi‘ites are almost universally Arabs and in many ways closer, in cultural terms, to Iraqi Sunnis than to Persian Shi‘ites.

Yes, the demise of Saddam has gifted the Iranians some strategic benefits; notably the destruction of what was once an invading army. Yet, the appearance of an aggressive Iranian Shia ‘crescent’ has been grossly manipulated to suit the needs of the US and its regional Allies. It now appears that the needs of the US are now being reassessed. The overall propriety of meddling in sectarian tensions is more recently challenged by the reorientation of US policy in Iran. If such a dangerous policy is justified by the need inhibit external Iranian leverage on the nuclear issue; then surely a re-adjustment of the Iranian nuclear threat makes this gamble less appealing?