Introduction

Author's Premise: As war, democracy, and globalization force the Middle East to open itself up to a number of long-
resisted forms of change—conflicts such as the Shia-Sunni rift will become both more frequent and more intense.
Before the Middle East can arrive at democracy and prosperity, it will have to settle these conflicts—those between
ethnic groups such as Kurds, Turks, Arabs, and Persians, and, more importantly, the broader one between Shias and
Sunnis. Just as the settlement of religious conflicts marked Europe’s passage to modernity, so the Middle East will
have to achieve sectarian peace before it can begin living up to its potential.

Author’s Aim: Is to explain why there is a Shia-Sunni conflict, why it has become more salient of late, and what it will
mean for both the future of the Middle East and the Muslim world’s relations with the West.

1 The Other Islam: Who Are the Shia?

The overwhelming majority of the world’s 1.3 billion Muslims are Sunnis. Shias number from 130 million to 195
million people, or 10 to 15 percent of the total. In the Islamic heartland, from Lebanon to Pakistan, however, there are
roughly as many Shias as there are Sunnis, and around the economically and geo-strategically sensitive rim of the
Persian Gulf, Shias constitute 80 percent of the population.

The divide between Shiism and Sunnism is the most important in Islam. The two sects parted ways early in Muslim
history, and each views itself as the original orthodoxy.

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<th>Sunni</th>
<th>Shia</th>
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<td>Political</td>
<td>The Prophet's successor was succeeding only to his role as leader of the Islamic community, and his election was by community consensus.</td>
<td>When the Prophet said “whoever recognizes me as his master will recognize Ali as his master” he was setting up a hereditary line of succession.</td>
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<td>Theology</td>
<td>All believers are capable of understanding religious truth in a way and to a degree that renders special intermediaries between man and God unnecessary.</td>
<td>People need the help of exceptionally holy and divinely favored people in order to live in accord with the inner truths of religion.</td>
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<td>Anthropological</td>
<td>Humans are capable of self-government.</td>
<td>Humans are fallible and need to be guided by holy men.</td>
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<td>Protestant Analog</td>
<td>Low church.</td>
<td>High church.</td>
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- Sunni caliphs worried about the Shia less as a theological deviation than as a political threat. The notion of the Prophet’s blood kin asserting their right to rule and standing up against monarchs always had the potential to capture the popular imagination.
- In 680 C.E., soldiers of the second Umayyad caliph, Yazid I, massacred Ali’s son Husayn along with 72 of his companions and family members (that number has since symbolized martyrdom).
- As soon as Saddam Hussein’s regime was crushed in the spring of 2003, tens of thousands of Iranians walked
  across the Iran-Iraq border, traversed minefields, and made their way through the desolate landscape of southern Iraq to visit the shrine of Imam Husayn in Karbala, which Saddam had for years barred to Iranian pilgrims.
- In 2004, when the firebrand Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr symbolically moved from Baghdad to Kufa to deliver
  his sermons dressed in a white funeral shroud, he was signaling his resolve to sponsor an armed challenge to U.S., coalition, and Iraqi government authority. (Did our military understand this?)
- In many parts of the Muslim world today, the battle between Sufism on the one hand and Wahhabi or Salafist
puritanism on the other vastly overshadows any struggle between Islamic traditionalism and modernism.

- Muslim Brotherhood is an advocate of puritanical Sunni fundamentalism.

2 The Making of Shia Politics

Shiism did not come to predominate in Iran until the sixteenth century, when the Safavids took over the country. The Safavids were not content to rule over a domain that would remain Sunni. They had a genuine zeal for Shiism and wanted to bring the faith to Iran. They also were intense rivals of the Sunni Ottoman Turks to the west and the Sunni Mughal Empire and Turkoman tribes to the east. That competition took sectarian overtones as the Safavids became a Shia empire and the Ottoman emperors—who ruled over Arab lands and officially laid claim to the caliphate and made Istanbul its seat in 1517—became the spokesmen of Sunnism.

The Ottomans and the Safavids fought many wars. For a brief time the Safavids controlled Iraq (in effect, the eastern flank of the Arab world). But soon enough the line between the two rival empires came to follow very much the same path as today’s border between Iran on the east and Iraq and Turkey to its west. While the Safavids used their power to make Shiism the religion of Iran, as much by coercion as by persuasion, the Ottomans put the Shia to the sword in Anatolia. Only the Alawi offshoot of Shiism survives in what is today southern Turkey. In this climate of antagonism, Shiism gave Iran its distinct identity, so that Iranians are distinguished from most Arabs and Turks not only by language and culture but also by religious belief and practice. The boundary between Shiism and Sunnism thus came to coincide with the boundary between empires, with what is today southern Iraq extending as a kind of Shia salient into Sunnism’s flank.

- In 1722 the Safavid empire fell to Sunni armies from Afghanistan, who were then followed in power by the great Iranian king Nader Shah. Nader restored Iranian power as an eminence between the Ottomans to his west and the Mughals to his east. Yet he was a Sunni. Although neither the Afghans nor Nader were able to make Sunnism the religion of Iran, their triumph ended the Shia political challenge to Sunni regional domination. Yet the identification of Iran and Shiism endured, with highly provocative consequences for the Middle East in the twentieth century.

- Ayatollahs are very much like Catholic cardinals, though Shiism has no pope. (It is hardly surprising that when Saddam fell, the Shia clerics who had endured his brutality alongside their followers emerged as the new Iraq’s main power brokers.)

3 The Fading Promise of Nationalism

The Shia have long embraced Arab Nationalism in the hopes of achieving equality with the Sunnis who have persecuted them for centuries. Since WW I there have been numerous occasions for common cause between Sunnis and Shia against the threats of colonialism, modernity, and secularism. Despite the obvious logic of Arab Nationalism it has not been able to overcome the old hatreds.

The result has been a series of Sunni dominated secular dictatorships in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, etc.

Next chapters the rise of religious fundamentalism.