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Iran and religious sectarianism in the Middle East: the role of the European Union

Nezka Figelj

Nota autore

Nezka Figelj is an expert in EU-Middle East relations and has been working as Academic Assistant at the University of Trieste and Ljubljana. She holds her MA Degree in International Studies from the University of Trieste and MA in Security and Diplomacy Studies from Tel Aviv University. Currently she is an Accredited Parliamentary Assistant at the European Parliament.

Abstract

The paper focuses on the recently emerged Sunni-Shi’a rivalry in the Middle East. The situation can escalate and result in violence and sectarian uprisings. The religious fragmentation will be analyzed from the Iranian perspective. The two main actors in the regional checkboard will be introduced: Saudi Arabia and Iran. It will discuss the Iranian Shi’a regime with its aspiration to regional hegemony. The potential threats of the Iranian nuclear program for the security of Israel will be addressed. The paper will evaluate the role of the European Union’s strategic interests in Iran after the Iranian nuclear agreement.

Keywords

Iran, Saudi Arabia, religious sectarianism, rivalry Sunna-Shi’a, Israel, European Union.
Introduction

This article will firstly discuss the Iranian theocratic regime. Iran is the only country with Shi’a as state religion. Shi’a is a minority compared to the majority of Sunni Islam and has been through the centuries marginalized by Sunni dominations such as the Caliphate and Ottoman Empire which had forced Shi’a communities to live in quietism. In the last decades Shi’a Islam, leaded by Iran, has been increasing its hegemonic role in the Middle East. The author of this article maintains that one of Iranian nuclear program functions is the spread of Shi’a supremacy in the Middle East¹.

In the second part the Sunni-Shi’a rivalry will be introduced, represented mostly by Saudi Arabia and Iran. The article argues that the emergence of Shi’a is due to the conflict in Iraq after the American invasion in 2003 as well as Arab Springs in the region. The outcomes of the competition of the two Muslim fractions, such as the emergence of ISIS, will be presented as well.

The third paragraph will focus on the relation between Iran and Israel. Although many scholars maintain that the conflict between the two countries has no historic motivation, external repercussions of the Iranian nuclear program should not be ignored². In fact, Israel perceives it as existential threat. The Jewish state has developed different solutions to defend itself against it, in particular in the military field. Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital will be addressed, as well as US withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear agreement on Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

In the last paragraph the author of the article argues that the EU-Iran relations are positive, in particular after the nuclear agreement. Opportunities between the two parts will be presented, especially in the economic field.

1. Iranian theocratic regime – Shi’a

Iran is struggling with approximately 80 million people, with a large middle class and many highly educated young people who live on less than a third of the OECD average salary. Sanctions and the falling price of oil are only part of the story. Industrial production has been shrinking many times faster than the economy as a whole over the past decade, including oil refining. Skilled labor is lacking, because skills in a global knowledge economy presume integration into the customer and supplier networks of global companies. An estimated 150.000 Iranians with college educations leave the

²Ivi, p. 88.
country every year\(^3\). Demonstrations erupted in the end of December 2017 are a result of economic difficulties in the country. Iranians are increasingly unsatisfied with the support to foreign organizations, such as Hamas in Gaza, Lebanese Hezbollah, Syrian regime and Houthi in Yemen, by a government which fails to fix domestic problems such as unemployment and poor economic growth\(^4\).

The survival of Iran has always been deeply rooted in the Iranian ontological security\(^5\). It is based on preserving the Shi’a identity of the Islamic Republic by demonstrating it in foreign relations via its ties and links with other international actors in order to appease its domestic identity’s anxiety. Iranian regime aims at securing its existence and acceptance by other regional and international actors. This trust system acts like a defense shield for Iran against psychological anxiety acerbated especially in cases of Shi’a marginalization by Sunni governments – like in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Modern literature about current Shi’a position in the Middle East discusses the emergence of “Shi’a Crescent”, a phrase which was controversially coined by the Jordanian king Abdullah in 2004 when he mentioned that a Shi’a Crescent under Iran’s leading role was appearing in the Middle Eastern region. The concept is related to Iranian foreign policy of enlarging Shi’a influence in the Middle East by strengthening contacts with Shi’a factions in countries like Iraq, Bahrain and Kuwait\(^6\).

As religious minority surrounded by mostly Sunni countries, the recent emergence of the Shi’a Crescent phenomenon is preoccupying. However, Sunni concerns about Shi’a Crescent could likely be an exaggeration. The major issue remains the survival of the Shi’a in Iran rather than the expansion in the Gulf region and in the Middle East. Even the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), according to many scholars, occurred because of the rhetorical exaggerations of Iran’s traditional threat perceptions in the Sunni Arab world. On the other hand, Iran perceived the war as synonymous of the survival of Iran, way of life, territorial integrity and Iranian identity\(^7\).

\(^6\) Figelj Nezka, *The Nuclear Program In Iranian Theocracy: Motivations And Functions In Domestic Perspective. Implications for Israel’s Security*, cit. 36-37.
\(^7\) Ivi, p. 35.
Reinforcing Shi’a presence and expanding its influence around the Middle East shouldn’t be though dismissed. Nowadays, it is undoubtedly one of Iran’s priorities in foreign politics.

2. Sunni-Shi’a rivalry and Sectarianism: Saudi Arabia and Iran

**Kingdom of Saudi Arabia vs Islamic Republic of Iran: a proxy war in the Middle East**

Source: The Maghreb and Orient Courier

The rivalry is often depicted as conflict between Shi’a and Sunna for the supremacy of the Islamic world with a geopolitical dimension.
The attempts to export the revolution in the decade 1979-1989 included Teheran creating and financing movements or militias of foreign Shi’a extraction. As an answer to the exportation of the Iranian revolution, Riyadh enacted politics of containment which materialized in the support to Saddam Hussein in Iraq and in the creation of the Gulf cooperation Council in the 1981. Iran has proposed its revolutionary model as winning, while Saudi Arabia its historical role of Islamic world guide with legitimacy coming from hosting the holy sites of Islam, Mecca and Medina.

Given their relevant geopolitical role, both countries have led proxy wars. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 which has caused the collapse of Saddam Hussein regime, has exacerbated the precarious and fragile Sunna-Shi’a balance. Sectarianism has emerged from the failures of state-building in post-2003 Iraq. In the same years the conflict had moved to Lebanon. The killing of the pro-Saudi prime minister Refiq Hariri in 2005 with Hezbollah indicted for his murder, resulted in the disengagement of Syrian troops in the country and the end of peace in Syria.

During the Arab Springs in 2011 Saudi Arabia tried to fill political gaps in Sunni countries by avoiding the penetration of Iran and the Islamists close to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Yemen, Egypt, Bahrein are only some of the countries in which Riyadh has penetrated. In Syria, the attempt to hit Iran for causing the collapse of Assad, has resulted in the support to Islamist rebel formations. After the dramatic Syrian battle against Iran, Riyadh redirected the proxy conflict to other levels with regional actors, such as Israel. Saudi Arabia appears in fact interested in pleasing Israel, which has become a tacit ally in the conflict with Iran.

By contrast, Iran has likewise fueled subversive activities across the region and carried out cyberattacks, such as a major one in 2012 against the Saudi oil company Aramco. As a result, Iran has contributed significantly to the weakening of state frameworks and the stoking of sectarian fires in the region. It has increasingly filled the void in Iraq through Shiite domination and maintained a sphere of influence in Syria, preserving the Bashar al-Assad regime. These Iranian activities have driven Sunni elements into the arms of Sunni jihadist forces in Iraq and Syria. In Lebanon, Iranian meddling is conducted through Hezbollah – a virtual state within a state –. In Yemen, it has been arming and funding the Shiite Houthi rebels, who toppled a pro-American government and conquered a strategic Red Sea port.

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The war in Syria has fomented the support to Shi’a factions by countries such as Iran and Russia which associated Assad with a potentially stable dictatorship. On the other hand, Sunni rebel groups have organized themselves in uprisings to fight the regime. This has culminated in the support by Sunni states such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The emergence of radical groups, such as ISIS, has posed problems in Sunni countries for its support to violence and brutalism. In Iraq, for instance, in Sunni areas surveys maintain that the populations were increasingly aggrieved against their own leaders, who continued to live in cities such as Erbil, Amman and other parts of the region, while the population suffered under ISIS rule\textsuperscript{11}.

Although Shi’a politicians dominated politics in Baghdad after 2003, Sunnis and Kurds were also part of the government at different times. The use of violence and discrimination based on religion, race, language, ethnicity or gender created vulnerability, which facilitated the proliferation of sect-based political movements. Sectarian identities became enshrined in the state’s institutions, such as executive, legislative, judicial branches of government and the security services. The dismantlement of state infrastructure in post-invasion Iraq left many Sunnis unemployed and increased the targeting of Shi’a militias. This anti-Sunni violence seemingly took place with either impunity or the complicity of Baghdad\textsuperscript{12}.

It is important to underline the role of the Gulf States against Iran. The link between the Western diplomacies on one side and Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates on the other, is based on mutual interest. The Sunni regimes in the Gulf represent a natural border against the Shi’a military and anti-American theocracy in Teheran. Moreover, in many occasions Arab kings and emirs have pressured the United States and other Western countries to provide tangible aid against the regime of the Ayatollah. The élites of the Gulf countries are concerned about the nuclear program in Teheran and the territorial competition between Iran and the Gulf States. Relevant is the presence of European and American military in the region such as the Fifth Fleet of the US Marine in Bahrein supporting military operations in the region. The perception and fear of an Iranian political and ideological expansion in Gulf countries is a turning point for understanding the governments rapidity in containing and repressing internal disagreements. With the exception of Bahrein represented by a Shi’a majority population and ruled by a restricted Sunni élite, there are other consistent Shi’a minorities in the Gulf area. For example, the one locat-


\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibidem.}
ed in the eastern Saudi Arabia province of al-Sharqiyya which is one of most important oil centers and for this reason, constantly controlled by the security system of Riyadh. The Gulf monarchies think that these conditions make the region particularly fecund for Iranian propaganda. Consequently, each form of disagreement is considered as potential transmission of information to Teheran for modifying or subverting the actual system of Sunni and pro-Western power.

The region has also experienced rapid demographic change that has placed serious pressure on regimes across the region. With population increases of 53% between 1991 and 2010, regimes were largely unable to provide jobs in the public sector whilst also struggling to create vibrant private sectors. Projected growth rates suggest that by 2020 it is estimated that there will be over 350 million people living in countries “vulnerable to conflict”, a number which is expected to double by 2050. Such deep structural conditions are exacerbated by the growth of an increasingly vocal middle class, making serious demands on the state. In Saudi Arabia, the state employs 37% of the workforce whilst this is 29% in Iraq. There is a low level of support for formal institutions and a widespread lack of confidence in rule of law, protection of liberties, equal treatment of all societal groups as well as economic opportunities.

The failures of state-building in post-2003 Iraq, the war in Syria and the emergence of ISIS as consequences of Arab Springs, as well as the Iranian nuclear program, resulted in religious sectarianism in the Middle East and divided many countries in the world.

A paradox of foreign policy towards the Middle East is that many of the West’s long-term allies are actually drivers of sectarian conflict, for instance Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, national interests, such as arms exports, financial flows, diplomatic or military alliances of some EU member states or of the United States, have often made it difficult to convince governments to adopt mid- to long-term strategies countering the root causes of sectarianism, and discourage state sponsors from using sectarianism as a ruling strategy or a foreign policy tool. China, with its economic interests in Saudi Arabia, and Russia, are growing players in the region by influencing the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the Yemeni government.

Sunna-Shi’a sectarianism is affecting also Israel, the Jewish state in the Middle East.

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3. Iran-Israel relations

Israel considers Iran a challenge to regional stability, a regional power that expresses its revolutionary ideology, in particular the negation of Israel’s right to exist. Israel has watched Iran arming its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon with more than 100,000 rockets. Facing such an enemy, Israel naturally sees great risks and tends to attach more weight to these risks than to potential opportunities.

Iranian military support for Hamas fuels tensions in Gaza, while Iranian leaders vow to reproduce Gaza in the West Bank by arming the Palestinian militants.

Israel also does not take lightly Iran’s frequent public calls to eliminate it. Iran’s Supreme Leader Khamenei tweeted nine ways to achieve this goal. While Israel regards these calls with added seriousness, it feels they are being shrugged off by the international community as mere rhetoric means for domestic consumption or to express unrealistic “visionary” goals.

The signature of the Iranian nuclear agreement has marked a major change in Israeli politics and military as well as in the society. Before the agreement, the political leadership and the Israeli military were united against its signature, since it doesn’t foresee the destruction but rather the freezing of the nuclear facilities.

However, Steven R. David from the Begin Sadat Center for Strategic Studies wrote: “Preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons would be welcome, but does not seem likely. After all, regional disarmament is an utopian fantasy, diplomacy shows few signs of yielding results after ten years, economic sanctions have yet to bring Iran to its knees, and a military strike promises only to leave Iran with the ability to make more nuclear weapons later, while unleashing catastrophic consequences in its wake. Coping with a nuclear Iran is hardly better. Israel is unable to bring about a favorable regime change, and defense offers limited protection against a determined nuclear attack, while preemption or an effort to disarm the Iranians are not likely to be fully successful. Israel would be left open to a horrific Iranian retaliation. In such a dire situation, what is Israel to do?”

After the signature of the agreement, the unified Israeli position has progressively fallen apart.

On the one hand, Netanyahu’s government keeps stating that Iran is the main threat for Israel and the signature of the agreement was a great historical mistake which doesn’t force Iran to quit its aggressive behavior in the Middle

East and could trigger the danger of a second Holocaust. Netanyahu is particularly sensitive to Iranian support of Palestinian terrorists and Hezbollah, as well as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s statements on the elimination of Israel from the world in the next 25 years. However, in the next 25 years Ali Khamenei will most probably leave the scenario before Israel could potentially be eliminated from world’s maps. The military option to destroy Iranian nuclear facilities remains open although it would mean a violation of international law. Netanyahu has often repeated that Israel reserves the right to defend itself in any moment. However, despite the great Israeli superiority of nuclear and conventional weapons, its capacity of attacking Iran without American support remains questionable. The current US administration after its withdrawal from the JCPOA might provide an ally to Israel.

On the other hand, after the JCPOA Implementation Day in January 2016, during the annual conference in the Institute for National Security Studies, Gadi Eizenkot, former Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces, stated that the nuclear agreement between Iran and the West is undoubtedly a historical turning point. It represents many risks but also many opportunities. “We try to renew our strategy and keep Iran high in the priority list”. With this statement – in opposition to the “historical mistake” line maintained by Netanyahu, Eizenkot had opened the debate in Israel over the position of the Israeli army on the issue of Iran’s nuclear program. This...
debate started in the summer of 2015 when Eizenkot published for the first time in the history of Israel a public defense strategy with no reference to the Iranian nuclear threat, which has been postponed to a near future. The current challenges for Israel, according to Eizenkot, are Iranian hegemonic ambitions in the Middle Eastern region, support to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, to Hamas in Gaza and to the Houthis in Yemen, and its dominant position in Baghdad18.

Netanyahu’s position is challenged by Western countries which have supported the nuclear agreement for the stability in the Middle Eastern region. By contrast, it is supported by Trump’s administration, and according to the narrative “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”, unofficially by Sunni coalition including Saudi Arabia, as proved by Israeli Prime Minister consideration to visit the kingdom. After four years from the signature of the agreement, opinions of the experts who defend Israel, the nation for which the Iranian nuclear ambitions represent the greatest consequences, should not be ignored in future debates19. Moreover, the violation of human rights remains a relevant issue: Iran is the country were women are stoned and homosexuals executed. This situation has nothing to do with Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East.

The situation has a new development also with Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. His pronouncement has caused the eruption of protests and potential explosion of violence, and divided Muslim leaders. It became a reason for bickering between the Middle East’s Sunni and Shiite powerhouses, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Although condemning the decision as “unjustified and irresponsible” Trump’s move puts the Sunni nation, in a bind. The kingdom enjoys a close relation with the US President that it needs and cannot afford to compromise20. While the Saudis can at least on the surface pressure Trump, they will almost certainly continue to cooperate on intelligence sharing regarding Iran. For its part, Iran seized upon Trump’s move to show itself as defender of Muslims and condemn Saudi Arabia as encouraging terrorism, extremism, sectarianism and incitement against neighbors21.

The situation in the Middle East has a direct impact on Europe which faces the fallouts of regional conflicts much stronger than other regions in the world, for instance the United States. The large influx of migrants coming from countries where Sunni-Shia conflict is salient, has a relevant impact on European states. Europe must properly address these issues.

18 Figelj Nezka, Israel: before and after the Iran Deal, Mediterranean Affairs, September 7, 2016.  
19 Ibidem.  
20 Karam Zeina, Muslim Leaders Are Divided Over Responses to Donald Trump’s Pronouncement on Jerusalem, December 7, 2017.  
21 Ibidem.
4. The role of the European Union in Iran

It is in the Europe Union’s general interest that the Middle East is stable. Iran, a relatively stable state in the region, with a vibrant society that includes elements of democratic rule, is a potential partner in creating a more stable and peaceful Middle East.

After the nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions, the European Union has developed a Strategy for relations with Iran. A significant and practical step in this direction would be to create a EU wide Investment and Protection Agreement that would provide a more robust legal protective framework for trade with Iran. This would instill greater confidence in European business that are interested in trading with, and investing in Iran. Similarly, the EU should continue its support for Iran’s accession to the WTO as part of the effort to integrate Iran into the world economy. Lifting sanctions will produce a stronger increase in trade and present opportunities to the business communities of both sides. Iran needs to be seen as a partner on multiple levels and a key player on the international energy market, as a source of economic and technological innovation and a potential partner for co-investments in the entire region. Iran is offering projects opportunities in the energy sector to international investors. If EU companies take advantage of these possibilities, they will create value in the Iranian economy which can be a backbone for greater regional development. One fact that should facilitate the process of greater economic interaction is the sheer diversity of economic activity in Iran. Indeed, Iran has the most diverse GDP composition in the entire region as well as natural and human resources to expand sectors such as agriculture, mining, industry and petroleum. EU companies and EU governments should consider this diverse economic base and the availability of resources as a huge potential for enhanced economic and investment relations.

The EU has also consistently brought up human rights concerns. Iran has the highest per-capita rate of executions in the world. This should not be ignored but properly addressed by the country, in order to enhance a constructive cooperation with the European Union.

5. Conclusion

It could be argued that for the survival of Iranian theocratic regime Shi’a, as state religion, is essential. In this regard, the development of the nuclear program, with all the related long-term negotiations for the agreement reached

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on July 2015, plays a relevant role in the facilitation of spreading Shi’a Crescent among the Middle East. The ontological security is therefore assured.

With the post 2003 in Iraq and Arab Springs, the balance in the Middle Eastern region has dramatically changed. Dictatorships have collapsed and religious fragmentations emerged. Countries such as Syria and Iraq have experienced a dramatic conflict between Sunni and Shi’a fractions causing political instability, wars and poverty. Both leading actors, Saudi Arabia and Iran, seek to impose supremacy in the region by advocating their key role as voice of Islam. Religious sectarianism, which has violently erupted, will probably further provoke fragmentations as well as political, ethnic and social changes in the Middle Eastern region. Iran will likely keep a prominent role in being politically a relatively stable country with highly educated population. It is too early to make statements, but it could be argued that recent social protests in Iran will bring about changes in the economic and social field.

It is highly unlikely that Israeli-Iranian relations will stabilize in the near future. On the one hand, Netanyahu government’s opposition to JCPOA has resulted in increased isolation among Western democracies, with the exception of the USA, and seeking alliances with the coalition of Sunni counties. US President Donald Trump withdrawal from the nuclear deal and his recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital are strong signs of cooperation between the USA and Israel. However, the announcement has undermined America’s reputation that it is a fair player and caused reactions across Muslim countries. On the other hand, Israeli military establishment has noted that the nuclear agreement offers at least ten years of ceasefire and new opportunities for Israel, such as the possibility to build new defensive weapons. Moreover, humanitarian issues should not be ignored. Iran is a great violator of human rights while Israel the only democracy in the Middle East.

The European Union has invested diplomatic effort in reaching the nuclear agreement in July 2015. The EU should therefore maintain its role of mediator with Iran based on dialogue and critical approach. Specifically, Iran’s violation of human rights should always be a priority in every diplomatic negotiation, in particular in the further steps of the nuclear agreement.

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La Rivista semestrale *Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società* intende la *Sicurezza* come una condizione che risulta dallo stabilizzarsi e dal mantenersi di misure proattive capaci di promuovere il benessere e la qualità della vita dei cittadini e la vitalità democratica delle istituzioni; affronta il fenomeno del *Terrorismo* come un processo complesso, di lungo periodo, che affonda le sue radici nelle dimensioni culturale, religiosa, politica ed economica che caratterizzano i sistemi sociali; propone alla *Società* – quella degli studiosi e degli operatori e quella ampia di cittadini e istituzioni – strumenti di comprensione, analisi e scenari di tali fenomeni e indirizzi di gestione delle crisi.

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