Supreme Leader Khamenei delivering Friday sermon. Photo: Khamenei.ir

Iran, the Shia, and the Arab Upheaval: The Ideological Response

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The deepening rift in the Middle East between the Sunni majority and the Shii minority has harmed Iran's efforts to consolidate its status as the leader of the Islamic world. To mitigate the rift, Iran has worked on several ideological levels: the first is the effort to prove that the rift has no deep ideological or historical roots, and that all Muslims, Sunnis and Shiis, must unite against the real enemies of Islam—the United States and Israel. As part of this endeavor, Iran has sought to abolish various Shii practices that arouse Sunni anger, particularly the curses against the first three caliphs, who are admired by all Sunnis. The second effort was to create a united front of the Shia and the moderate mainstream Sunni Islam against both the Saudi Wahhabis and the Salafi-jihadi camp, by presenting these two groups as deviants that have completely distorted the essence of "correct" Islam, and in fact operate in the service of the United States and Israel. This article analyzes Iran's ideological activity and the difficulties it faces.

Keywords: Iran, Shia, Islam, Sunni, Wahhabi, Salafi-jihadi, Israel, United States

Introduction

The upheaval that engulfed the Arab world starting in late December 2010 and erroneously labeled the Arab Spring put an end to a decade of political and strategic achievements for Iran and Shii organizations in the Middle East, and presented some of the Shii communities in the region with challenges that for a while were perceived as existential threats. The wave of protest, deriving from the social, economic, and cultural crisis that plagued and still plagues some Arab states, was originally directed against failing Arab regimes. However, a number of concurrent processes lent the upheaval the nature of a violent sectarian clash between the Sunni majority and the Shii minority. The cruel suppression of the civil protest in Syria changed the nature of the uprising to a violent struggle led by Salafi-jihadi Sunni organizations, who placed the Shiis at the head of their list of enemies to be destroyed. The policy of exclusion of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki toward the Sunni minority pushed them into the arms of the local branch of al-Qaeda, which later assumed the name the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and which adopted an extreme anti-Shii line. Hostilities in Syria threatened to spill over into Lebanon and undermine the fragile political balance there, which benefited Hezbollah, arousing fear of an outbreak of violence between it and Sunni organizations, mainly in Tripoli. The protests in Bahrain were presented by the rulers of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia as part of the Shii struggle against the Sunnis and not as the protest of an oppressed majority against an oppressive minority regime—a depiction that helped to maintain United States support for the Sunni government. Added to these were the growing hostilities in Yemen between the Houthis (who are part of the Zaydi Shii stream) and the government, as well as the terror activities by Sunni extremists against the Shii minority in Pakistan, which have taken the lives of thousands since the start of the current century.

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Among the most prominent schisms was the strategic enmity between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is beyond the scope of this article, but one of its basic elements is the doctrinal hostility between Saudi Wahhabi Islam and Shii Islam. Consequently, framing the various conflicts as a Sunni-Shii struggle severely damaged Iran's efforts to establish itself as the leader of the Islamic world with the consent of the Sunni majority. It was clear to Iran and its Shii allies that the demographic reality of a Sunni majority and Shii minority in the region cannot be changed, and thus a military solution to sectarian hostilities was not realistic. The Shiis, with Iran at their helm, therefore adopted two complementary courses of action, intended to weaken or blur the sectarian nature of the conflicts and build bridges to the Sunni mainstream. The first move raised the banner of Islamic unity—Sunni and Shiis—against the external and internal enemies of Islam. According to the Iranian regime, this list is headed by the United States and Israel, who are to blame for the intra-Islamic strife. The second course of action was to present the Wahhabis and the Salafi-jihadi organizations as responsible for the bloodshed within Islam, and as the common enemy of correct Islam, practiced by moderate Sunnis and Shiis alike, acting in the service of the external enemies. The Salafi-jihadi groups were presented as deviants that distorted Islam, and were declared heretics against whom jihad must be waged. These two moves preceded the outbreak of the Arab Spring, but were accelerated by the regional upheaval and its aftermath.

Bringing Sunnis and Shiis together

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei led both moves. In numerous speeches he argued that the divisions in the

Muslim world are not natural, and were, rather, imposed and fostered by imperialism led by the United States and Israel. These enemies knew that if the Islamic *umma* were united, "it would have conquered the world" (Office of the Supreme Leader, 2015a). Therefore they founded al-Qaeda and ISIS and fomented civil wars in Islamic countries, in order to deflect the Islamic *umma's* attention from the real threat it faces, that is, Zionism. Khamenei criticized the Western media for describing the violence in Iraq as a conflict between Sunna and Shia, whereas it actually was a struggle between "humanity and barbarity" ("Khamenei: No Sword between Sunna and Shia," 2014).

Iran presented itself as driven by faith in Islamic solidarity and revolutionary commitment "to support the oppressed" wherever they may be, and counter the efforts of the United States, which in Iranian eyes sows discord between Muslims. Thus Khamenei took pride in the fact that in its support for the oppressed, Iran does "not look at [their] religious denomination and we have offered the same support that we provided to our Shii brethren in Lebanon to our Sunni brethren in Gaza" (Office of the Supreme Leader, 2015b).

As part of this policy, each year since the Arab upheaval, Iran has hosted Islamic conferences to bring together the various streams in Islam. The conferences are attended by hundreds of clerics, mostly Sunni, from forty different countries. The three principal messages that have emerged from these conferences and from the hundreds of official publications in Iran insist that the gaps in beliefs and religious conduct between the Salafi-jihadi movement and the Sunni mainstream are far wider than the gaps between the main Sunni and Shii streams; the Salafi-jihadi movement is a threat to all Muslims, and not only the Shiis; and the United States and Israel are behind this movement, and they are the beneficiaries of its murderous activities.

The Iranian spokesmen have thus tried to present the theological differences between the Sunnis and the Shiis as historical issues that are now less important, particularly in light of the broad common ground between the two groups on a wide range of issues. This effort demands a re-evaluation of a number of basic Shii principles, as well as action to abolish some popular religious practices that have aroused the anger of Sunnis for hundreds of years. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani declared at the Islamic Unity Conference in 2016 that Sunnis and Shiis lived side by side and respected each other for many centuries. The Shii did not harm core elements sacred to the Sunnis, and all Muslims respected the companions of the Prophet (*aṣ-ṣaḥābah*) and the Prophet's family. Like Khamenei, he rejected the sectarian nature of the conflict and defined it as a struggle between "American Islam" (that is, Saudi and Salafi Islam) and "pure Muhammadan Islam" (Rouhani, 2016).

Former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani went further in seeking to minimize the heavy legacy of early Islamic history on modern political reality. At the Sunni-Shii unity conference in January 2014 he asked, with a certain degree of despair, "Until when will we continue killing each other over the question of who should have been the first caliph?" (the successor of the Prophet Muhammad), and added that "the questions of how they wash their hands and feet before prayer and how they pray cannot be a logical cause of conflict." Rafsanjani recognized the historical quarrel between the Sunnis and Shiis and their respective development with different religious texts, traditions, and doctrines. However, he was ready to challenge the symbolic and emotional weight of these differences and to focus instead on the present and future, by emphasizing that quarrels over the past should not be allowed to become a source of violent rifts in the present (Savion et al., 2014).

Considering the historic centrality of these disputes to the Sunni-Shii division, it appears that Rafsanjani sought to change the nature of the relationship between the two sects—from a sectarian dispute based on animosity and

mutual exclusion, to a situation resembling the various denominations in contemporary Western Christianity, a situation of peaceful co-existence between groups that share major tenets of belief and tolerate their differences. However, his words aroused strong criticism from conservative clerics, who argued that yielding on the question of the Prophet's successor would undermine the basic principle of the Shii world view and the doctrine of the Guardianship of the Jurist, which is the foundation of legitimacy for the current Iranian regime ("Critique of Mr. Rafsanjani's Answer to One Claim," 2014; "Isn't it Better for Us Shiis not to Judge," n.d.).

Efforts to Appease the Sunnis

As part of the aim of easing sectarian hostility, Khamenei renewed the effort that he had begun years earlier— to ban and revoke the practice of disassociation and cursing of the first three caliphs, whom Shiis see as the usurpers who had deprived Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin, of his rightful succession. Various spokesmen for the regime argue that the real "renunciation" should be directed against the West or the Salafi-jihadi organizations, who are the true enemy, and not the simple Sunni believers ("Ninth of Rabi Awwal is the Day," 2015.)

On January 21, 2013, during Islamic Unity Week, the official Iranian news agency IRNA published a collection of religious rulings from leading Iranian clerics who strongly criticized the "curses and expressions of scorn for the sacred values of other religions and ethnic groups," increasing tensions and divisions between Muslims ("View of the Sources of Emulation regarding Deviationist Activities," 2013). That these rulings were reissued in 2015 and 2016 apparently indicates that they did not achieve a broad popular response. Some of the rulings stressed that it is forbidden to curse the Sunni caliphs in public, implying that it is permitted to curse them in the heart. In other words, the reservation reflected the political

nature of these religious rulings, rather than a significant ideological change.

Another popular custom that the Iranian authorities wished to abolish was the celebration on the 9th of the month of Rabīʿ al-Awwal, marking the date of the assassination in 634 of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who is particularly detested by the Shiis. The assassin was the Persian slave Piruz Abu-Lulu Nahavandi, who according to Iranian tradition fled to the town of Kashan where he became a popular hero, and his purported grave has become a pilgrimage site. After the 1979 revolution the Iranian government banned the celebrations, but the ban was not enforced. In 2007, responding to pressure by Sunni clerics, the Iranian authorities promised to close the site but did not keep their promise. However, in view of the growing Sunni-Shii hostility since 2012, the authorities decided to increase their publicity campaign against the festivities and the pilgrimages to the grave.

A plethora of statements and publications from clerics of all levels, reflecting the deeply ingrained sense of Shii vulnerability and victimhood vis-à-vis the Sunnis, criticized the celebrations for the harm they have caused to Shiis in the whole region. They contend that the celebrations provoked unnecessary sedition (*fitna*) between Sunnis and Shiis, leading to the killings of thousands of Shiis in Indonesia, Pakistan, Iraq, and Lebanon by Salafi organizations ("View of the Sources of Emulation regarding the Deviation," 2013). Hujjat al-Islam Ali Yunesi, former Minister of Intelligence and now an advisor to President Rouhani on minorities, even declared that any person who takes part in such ceremonies against the Sunnis should know that they are accomplices to the bloodshed of Shiis in Pakistan and Iraq and are thus assisting the Salafi criminals ("ʿAlī Yūnesī," 2013). Rafsanjani, who was more brazen in his willingness to undermine religious conventions, lamented that activities such as the celebrations of Umar's murder and the cursing of the Sunni caliphs contributed to the

emergence of organizations such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban ("Rafsanjānī," 2014).

While the celebrations reflected animosity toward Sunni Islam, various clerics tried to change their meaning, arguing that the 9th of the month should actually highlight the unity of all Islamic factions against their common enemies, Zionism and the West ("Ninth of Rabi` Awwal: the Holiday," 2013; "Ayatollah's Bahjat's View," 2014). In September 2013, as the date for the celebrations approached, the Ministry of Intelligence ordered the police in several towns to forcibly prevent any celebrations. The directive was part of a broader campaign by the Iranian internal security forces against religious groups and media bodies that were accused of fomenting hatred of the Sunnis, against the background of ISIS gains at that time ("Iran's Intelligence Ministry Bans anti-Sunni Celebrations," 2014). As in other cases, the rulings and bans did not put an end to the custom—illustrating not only the gap between popular Islam and official Islam, but also the depth of anti-Sunni feelings rooted in broad sections of the Shii public.

An important feature of the attempt to reconcile the Sunni mainstream incorporated an effort to unite against the shared external enemy—the West and Zionism.

The repeated rhetoric on the need for Islamic unity and the efforts to abolish anti-Sunni practices did not did not mean, however, that the Iranian clerical establishment intended to revise the doctrines that distinguish it from the Sunna, or their basic attitude toward the early Muslims who, in the Shii view, betrayed Ali. Khamenei's office sought to allay Shii fears and, possibly, also to discourage Sunnī hopes by making it clear that the ideal of Islamic unity did not mean that Shiis or Sunnis had to endorse the beliefs of the other. The various Shii spokesmen stressed that every group should maintain its identity, and that any Sunni wishing to join the Shia should do so only after study and talking with scholars. Moreover, both parties should avoid the whispers (a hint at Satan's whispers that are mentioned in the Qur'an) of the enemies of Islam who are working to stir up enmity between Muslims, and cooperate against their common enemies ("Unity in the View of the Great Leader of the Revolution," 2014; "View of Clerics and Great Sources," 2015). In other words, an important feature of the attempt to reconcile the Sunni mainstream incorporated an effort to unite against the shared external enemy—the West and Zionism.

The Propaganda War against Wahhabism and Salafi-Jihadism

On a purely religious level, the Shia and Wahhabism, the official religious doctrine in Saudi Arabia, are at opposite ends of the Islamic ideological spectrum. The Wahhabis regard the Shiis as apostates deserving death, because in their view various Shii practices detract from the unity of God and are tantamount to polytheism. Therefore, the Wahhabis resorted to extreme violence against them in the early 19th century. The 1979 Iranian Revolution provided a boost to the Shii communities in the Middle East, and positioned Iran and Saudi Arabia as the main rivals for leadership of the Islamic world. At the same time, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan jolted the Salafi-jihadi organizations into action. They adopted the anti-Shii approach of the important Hanbali jurist Taqi ad-Din Ibn Taymiyya (died 1328), who described the Shiis as apostates deserving of death. For the Shiis, the fanatic Wahhabi worldview is the source and foundation of the murderous ideology of the Salafi-jihadi movements, and they therefore link these two phenomena.

Since the fall of the Baath regime in Iraq, the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda has waged a cruel war of terror on the Shiis, costing the lives of thousands of civilians . The (short-lived) achievements of ISIS, which peaked with the capture of Mosul in 2014 and the announcement of the Islamic caliphate, increased Shii fears.

The ISIS threat to settle historical accounts with the Shiis in "Karbala, the filth-ridden city, and in Najaf, the city of polytheism," was interpreted as the intention to desecrate the two holiest Shii sites and to massacre the Shii population in these two holy cities ("Baghdad Launches Air Strikes on Insurgents in Mosul," 2014). The Iranian government apparently also feared the potential appeal of Salafi-jihadi ideology to local Sunnis in Iran, many of whom lived in the country's poorest regions of Baluchistan and Kurdistan, and harbor a deep sense of deprivation.

In addition to military measures against ISIS, primarily the establishment of the Shii Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq and active support for the Assad regime in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen, Iran launched a massive campaign of polemics and propaganda against the Saudi Wahhabis and the Salafi-jihadi organizations, primarily to drive a wedge between them and the Sunni mainstream. The propaganda war against the Wahhabis was not a new phenomenon in Shii history, but in recent years there has been a significant change. In the past, Shii polemical literature bore a defensive character, intended to prove that Shii religious beliefs and practices did not deviate from the laws or spirit of Islam, and there was therefore no basis for Wahhabi denunciation of them as apostates. As Shii self-confidence increased since the start of the current century, and in particular since the Arab upheaval, Shii polemics began to attack Wahhabism itself as a distortion from normative Islam.

The central Shii argument, which to a large extent targeted mainstream Sunnīs, attacked Wahhabi and Salafi-jihadi extremism, according to which any Muslim who did not accept their distorted perceptions was an apostate to be killed. The Shiis claimed that this approach contradicted the Qur'an and the consensus accepted by all Sunni scholars. In the face of this fanaticism, the Shiis presented themselves as the standard-bearers for pluralism in Islam and stressed the precepts that apply to all Muslims,

particularly around the principle that real Islamic rule derives only from God. They claimed that there were always different interpretations of Islam, and therefore denouncing another Muslim as an apostate is contrary to Islamic tradition. Therefore not only were the Wahhabi and Salafi concepts without foundation in Islam; they also dragged Muslims into a vicious cycle of violence ("What are the Similarities and Differences between the Thought of ISIS and Wahhabism?" 2014). Significantly, the Shii propaganda did not use the word Salafi to refer to Sunni jihadist organizations, since this term also has positive significance for mainstream Sunnis, who revere the "righteous forefathers" (*al-salaf al-salih*) of the first generations. Instead, they used the term Wahhabis to link them to Saudi Arabia, and particularly used the derogatory term *takfiri*, meaning someone who declares other Muslims as apostates. The description of the Wahhabis and Salafi-jihadi streams as deviating from the Islamic path automatically made the Shiis integral members, if not the main representatives, of "true" Islam.

Thus Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, then-head of the Iranian judiciary authority at the time, argued that Wahhabism was the driving force behind the *takfiri* groups, since true Islam could not create "garbage (*zebalahha*) like ISIS." According to the official website of the Qom seminary, it was enough to look at their attitude to Muslims in general and at their crimes to see that ISIS is a Wahhabi terrorist group "Impossible that True Islam could Produce such Rubbish like ISIS," 2015; "ISIS is Wahhabism's Other Face," n.d.).

The most striking resemblance between the two streams, according to Shii spokesmen, is their intolerance and the rejection of the beliefs of most Muslims, but mainly the Shiis. The emphasis on this theme was aimed particularly at the strong aversion among mainstream Sunnis to the condemnation of ordinary Muslims as apostates, even if they have violated Islamic laws. The Salafi-jihadis consider themselves superior to all other Muslims, and

they are determined to impose their views with the "sword of *takfir*" (Mustafa & Mustafa, 2016).

The 2014 International Conference on Radical and *Takfiri* Movements compared the conduct of the Salafi-jihadis to the behavior of the Khawarij sect, which has been reviled since the early days of Islam and is hated by mainstream Sunni because they focus on their Muslim enemies instead of external enemies. Two senior clerics, Naser Makarem Shirazi and Ja`far Sobhani, claimed that the modern *takfiris* were worse than the Khawarij, since the latter were acting out of ignorance and mistaken beliefs, while the modern *takfiris* are the product of plotting by the enemies of Islam. Moreover, their crimes such as the mass killings of non-combatants, selling of women as sex slaves, and the destruction of holy sites, are far worse than the crimes of the Khawarij. Other speakers compared the *takfiris* to the Mongols—the symbol of cruelty in Muslim history " Look at the Various Dimensions," 2014).

Another striking rhetorical motif presented

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the Wahhabis and the Salafi-jihadis as ignorant people guided by obscurantist thinking, in complete contrast to the logic and rationalism that guide Islam in general and Shiism in particular. Wahhabism sprouted in the Najd region in Eastern Arabia, which was "devoid of civilization and lacking culture," and had never known the wealth and depth of Islamic culture (Qazvini, 2013, p. 76). It is not surprising that the founder of the sect, Muhammad ibn-Abd al-Wahhab (died 1792) lacked any knowledge of theology, philosophy, or the principles of Muslim law (Rajayi Borujni, 2016). The simplistic world view of Wahhabism led its followers to reject scientific discoveries and improvements that Islam had always welcomed, and exposed them

to many internal contradictions. Therefore, Wahhabi propaganda is unable to persuade anyone through rational arguments, and it only succeeds among the ignorant, who are intellectually inferior and attracted to money ("Stagnation in Wahhabism's Thought," 2013).

Internal contradictions are also widespread among the Salafi-jihadis. Although they claim to be returning to original Islam, their teaching is actually a reprehensible innovation (*bid`a*) and deviation from the path of the Prophet, for whom no Muslim who had uttered the declaration of faith (*shahada*) could never be declared an apostate ("Scholarly Charter," 2012). The meaning is clear: not only have the Salafi-jihadis invented new practices that have no precedent in normative Islam; they are also liars and hypocrites who pretend to be following the early Muslims. Contrary to Salafi-jihadi fanaticism, the Shii spokesmen present their movement as the flag bearers of tolerance and pluralism in Islam.

A blatant expression of Salafi-jihadi ignorance and distortion of Islamic law is, according to the Shii writers , their encouragement and practice of "sexual jihād" (*jihādal-nikāḥ*) in other words the ISIS propaganda encouraging Muslim women to travel to Syria in order to marry ISIS members fighting the Assad regime and grant them sexual favors before they leave for battle ("How was Wahhabism Formed," 2014). According to the Shii spokesmen, not just this custom, but ISIS criminal treatment of women in its entirety is contrary to the Qur'an and the spirit of Islam, and proves that their main motivation is not Islam but pure egoism (Mustafa & Mustafa, 2016; "Scholarly Charter," 2012).

One of the worst Salafi-jihadi sins, according to the Shii narrative, is deflecting the popular uprising in Arab countries, which was essentially an Islamic and anti-American uprising, to violent hostility between Sunnis and Shiis, at a time when the Islamic *umma* faced extremely serious threats from the external enemy. Ayatollah Sobhani even accused the jihadists of causing

rifts in Muslim countries in order to pave the way for a (Western) crusader and Zionist attack on Muslims (Sobhani, 2009, pp. 8-9, 111-113). For Khamenei, the unforgivable crime of the *takfiri* movement was shifting the frontline of the Islamic struggle from the borders of occupied Palestine to the streets of Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, and Libya. Other spokesmen criticized the Salafi-jihadis for avoiding attacks on Israel while fighting the Shiis. ("*Takfiris* are the Objective Symbol of Sufyani's Deviation," 2014; Supreme Leader's full speech, 2014). Senior clerics complained that the *takfiris* created a distorted image of Islam as violent in nature, while Islam is "known for its mercy, wisdom and logic." Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi accused them of tarnishing the image of Islam all over the world, and of thereby aiding the Zionists, while Ayatollah Husayni Bushari accused them of deliberately encouraging Islamophobia worldwide ("Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi," 2016).

The Enemies of Shiism: The Jews and the West

One of the most effective rhetorical tools in intra-Islamic polemics has always been to identify the internal opponent with an external enemy, principally the Jews, and in modern times, also the West. According to Steven Wasserstrom, it is hard to find any deviating Muslim sect that has not been accused at one time or another of having Jewish origins (Wasserstrom, 2014, p. 154). The attribution of a Jewish source to non-orthodox sects absolves the "true" Muslims from responsibility for the internal disputes in Islam. At the same time it shames the "deviants" by linking them with a despised external "other" — it Judaizes them and vilifies the Jews as the enemies of Islam. The Shiis have themselves been the victims of such charges by the Sunnis (Wasserstrom, 2014, p. 158), and now level similar accusations against the Wahhabi and Salafi-jihadi opponents. This attitude also feeds into the widespread attraction of conspiracy theories in the Arab and Iranian political culture,

to explain a complex and hard-to-accept reality by attributing it to powerful hidden forces.

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According to the Shii narrative, the British implanted the Wahhabi "cancerous tumor" in the region as part of their broader imperialist design against Islam. A central element of the British plan to take control of the Persian Gulf was to break Islamic unity by encouraging revolts in the Ottoman Empire and undermining the harmonious coexistence between Sunna and Shia, and their agents found in Muhammad ibn-Abd al-Wahhab a partner and tool to realize their plot ("Wahhabism in the Service of the Enemies of Islam," n.d.; "English Goals in Creating the Wahhabi sect," n.d.). The British-Wahhabi cooperation peaked during the period of the founder of the modern Saudi kingdom, Abd el-Aziz ibn Saud (died 1954), and his consent to hand over Palestine to the Zionists in 1948, while in return the British helped him to conquer the entire Arabian Peninsula ("Sa'ud Family Strategy regarding the Zionist Regime," 2015;" "Sa'ud Family Betrayal of Palestine and the Muslims," n.d.). Even worse, the Shii spokesmen discovered that the origin of Muhammad ibn-Abd al-Wahhab and the Saudi dynasty was in fact Jewish. In one version, the Saud family is descended from a Jewish tribe, Banu Qaynuqa, that fought the Prophet Muhammad in Medina, and according to another version, their ancestors were among the residents of the Khaybar oasis who were defeated by Ali, father of the Shia, in 628 ("The Sa`ud Family are Jews," n.d.; "Fars: The Ancestors of the Sa`ud Family are the Jews of Khaybar," 2015). The Jewish connection was also expressed in the popular call "O the Saud

family, O the family of Jews," that was heard at many anti-Wahhabi conferences, and also in the moniker *Sahyun* that links the name Saud with Zion (Qasemi, 2016). Conflating the historical enemies Wahhabis and Jews aims to highlight their evil nature and explain their hatred for the Shiis as a kind of late revenge for past defeats suffered by the Jews. It also heightens the belief that the fate of Zionism will be like the fate of those Jews from the days of the Prophet.

Presenting the *takfiri* organizations as the product of a Western plot was a common motif in Khamenei's speeches. He argued that although the *takfiri* approach was not new and had a long history, nevertheless "criminal organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS were created" by the imperialist enemies—America, Great Britain, and the Zionist regime—in order to divide the peoples. The *takfiri* movements have an Islamic facade, but in fact these organizations and the regimes that support them (that is, the Saudis) are working in the service of the Americans, the European imperialists, and the Zionists. Spokesmen for the regime explain that the purpose behind the West's establishment of the *takfiri* groups was "to destroy the real image of Islam," to weaken the Islamic *umma*, and to fight the "Islamic awakening." ISIS was used to distract the world's attention from the crimes of the Americans and the Zionists against Muslims (Masalkhazada, 2014; "What is the Reason for ISIS Attack on Iraq?" 2014). These accusations enabled Khamenei to present Iran and the Shia as the positive polar opposite of the *takfiri* stream, and this also explained the *takfiri* hostility toward them.

While Khamenei accused the United States of being behind ISIS, several clerics charged Israel with similar crimes, and called ISIS a "Zionist project." Other spokesmen pointed to the "American-Zionist nature" of the *takfiri* groups, which aligns with the Zionist approach of damaging Iran's efforts to promote Muslim unity. The cruelty of ISIS toward Muslims, which has no basis in the tradition of Islam, Christianity, or any other religion, derives from the Jewish Torah and Talmud. ISIS is implementing ideas that the Zionists dictated but have not yet been able to carry out, they concluded ("Is ISIS the Black-Clothed Flagbearer?" 2014; "What were the Goals of the Zionist Project?" 2017). The Mashreq News Agency, which is affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards, adopted the claim that ISIS leader Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi was in fact an officer in the Israeli Mossad named Shimon Eilot ("Veterans Today," 2014). On the basis of this story, the ISNA News Agency, using a play on words in Arabic, gave new meaning to the ISIS acronym: "The Israeli State of Iraq and Syria" ("ISIS are the Guardians of Israel," 2014).

Invoking the Salafi, Zionist, and Western triangle exposed conflicting views among the various Shii spokesmen regarding the identity of the biggest threat to Islam. The official questions and answers website on Islamic practices, Islamquest, admitted that the Jews were Islam's worst enemies in its early days, but now the Wahhabis are a greater danger ("Who is the Greatest Ideological Enemy of Islam?" 2014). Meanwhile, the final statement from the conference against extremists ranked the *takfiris* together with external enemies, namely the United States and the Zionists ("Scholarly Charter," 2012). Khamenei for his part placed the *takfiri* stream in the broader context of historical threats that Islam faces. He therefore reached a different conclusion, claiming that although the *takfiris* and the Wahhabis are both fighting Iran and the Shia and have committed serious crimes, they are not Islam's "main enemy." This enemy is the one who conceived, sustained, and incite them and who created the rift between these "ignorant and uninformed groups and the oppressed Iranian nation," and this enemy is above all the West, led by the United States ("Warning of the Supreme Leader," 2014). The logic guiding Khamenei was clear. The Wahhabis and the Salafi-jihadis are killing Shiis, but they cannot defeat the Shiis or Iran, and their ideas do not appeal to young people in Iran. On the other hand, although Khamenei believed that

the historical defeat of the West in the long run was inevitable, he was far more worried by the allure of Western culture among young people and its inherent danger to the very existence of the Islamic idea and regime.

Excluding the *Takfiris* from Islam

The presentation of the *takfiris* as the handiwork of the West and the Zionists served to justify a more serious judgment removing them entirely from the boundaries of Islam. Makarem Shirazi, for example, contrasted true genuine Islam based on "prayer and submission to Allah the Merciful" and the *takfiri* religion based on bloodshed, destruction, and terror. This religion, he determined, is not Islam. During the conference against religious fanaticism in 2016 he declared that the *takfiris* were neither Sunnis nor Shiis, but a political movement with no connection to either of the important schools in Islam. In this context he added that all Islamic clerics must stand together and confirm that Wahhabis are not Muslims and have nothing in common with Islam ("Appropriate Instruments," 2016).

Khamenei made use of another rhetorical tool to exclude the *takfiris* when he adopted the term "the new *jahiliyyah*," which was introduced by the Sunni-Pakistani thinker Abu A'la Moududi and popularized by the Egyptian Salafi thinker Sayyid Qutb, and applied it to the conduct of the *takfiris*. Originally this term referred to Muslim societies that no longer lived according to the laws of Islam and had therefore returned to the period of barbarism and ignorance that preceded Islam. Khamenei highlighted the original meaning of the term *jahiliyyah* (barbarism) when he spoke of the spread of "cruelty" and "brutality" and "unbridled killing" by the *takfiris*. He presented the modern *jahiliyyah* as worse than the historical phenomenon, not only because of the use of modern weapons for mass murder but also because the Salafi-jihadi organizations lacked any moral inhibitions, when even "the idolaters of Mecca" respected the life of the Prophet. For

example, the "idolaters of Mecca " refrained from warfare in the holy month of Ramadan, while their modern heirs even breached this fundamental principle ("Modern Barbarity," 2015).

The comparison between the Salafi-jihadi stream and the pagan Arabs and the claim that their conduct removed them from boundaries of Islam were the equivalent of defining them as heretics, which justifies declaring holy war (jihad) against them. The newspaper *Jomhuriye Eslami,* which is associated with the religious seminaries in Qom, even urged clerics from various Islamic streams to issue a joint *fatwa* defining the *takfiri* stream as heretical and specifying the penalty for those who "turn to the *takfiri* weapon" (Savion et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, senior clerics refrained from issuing such a *fatwa*, apparently due to past experience. Shii clerics have historically avoided declaring Sunnis to be apostates, since they understood it would be a mistake for a minority to arouse the anger of the majority by such a confrontationist way. Instead they presented the Sunnis as Muslims who have erred and should be drawn back into the Shii fold through propagation . Apparently they were also apprehensive that a declaration of heresy based on conduct could be used as a weapon against Shiism itself, as indeed happened with the Wahhabis.

Since the Salafi jihadis did not deny the Qur'an or the principal tenets of Islamic belief, senior Sunni clerics, led by al-Azhar University in Egypt, refused to declare them apostates, although they criticized their actions (Gabra, 2016). Shii clerics acted in the same way, apparently fearing that such a declaration would harm their efforts to form an alliance with the central Sunni stream against these organizations, leaving them alone in their fight. They preferred to use the less binding term "non-Muslims," that is, people who were never Muslims and are placed outside the boundaries of Islam—an approach that enabled the Shiis to call for jihad against them. They took a similar

line against Saddam Hussein after Iraq invaded Iran in 1981, when they defined him as *taghut*, an idolatrous tyrant, thus sidestepping the Islamic ban on declaring jihad against other Muslims (Gieling, 1999, pp. 44, 76).

> The growing strength of the Shii-Iranian axis of resistance was a serious factor in the decision by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in the summer of 2020 to normalize relations with Israel, as a way of improving the regional balance of power, particularly in the Persian Gulf.

Ayatollah Kazem Ha'iri was the first to issue a *fatwa*, when on November 18, 2013 he defined the war of the Lebanese Hezbollah against the Sunni rebels in Syria as a conflict between the defense of Islam and heresy, or in other words, as a religious commandment ("Ruling of Ayatollah Kazem Ha'iri," 2013). In June 2014, after ISIS conquered Mosul, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of the leading Shii scholars in Iraq, issued a *fatwa* calling on all fit men to enlist in the struggle against the ISIS "terrorists" in order to defend the soil of Iraq, the Islamic *umma*, and the religious sanctities. His *fatwa* stated that in accordance with the laws of jihad, anyone killed fighting ISIS will be deemed a martyr (*shahid*). Muqtada al-Sadr, an Iraqi Shii leader whose religious status was far below that of al-Sistani, followed him and issued a similar *fatwa* a few months later ("Ayatollah Sistani Issued a Ruling of Jihad," 2014; "Muqtada Sadr's Jihad Ruling," 2014). While Khamenei did not publish an official *fatwa* declaring a jihad against the Salafi-jihadis, he continued to call for an all-out struggle against them. Khamenei defined ISIS as "a cancerous tumor" created by the enemies—a metaphor he used against Israel, indicating not only the resemblance between the two enemies of Shiism, but also, taking into account the only effective treatment of cancerous tumors, the proper end of both of them ("Bringing the U.S. to its Knees," 2017). These declarations, which deviated from the traditional Shii line

due to the sense of the threat posed by ISIS, to a great extent marked the closing of a historical circle, when the Shii religious discourse that was originally driven by Shii fear of exclusion from Islam ended with their declaration of their Wahhabi-Salafi opponents as an anti-Islamic enemy to be fought and destroyed.

Conclusion

The increasing importance of the Sunni-Shii conflict within the Arab Spring has severely undermined Iran's ambitions to establish itself, with the consent of the Sunni majority, as the leader of the Muslim world. The need to contain the harm of the Sunni-Shii rift has obligated the Shii leadership, with Iran at the helm, to sharpen their ideological and political responses. Some of the responses, mainly the revoking of anti-Sunni practices, required efforts against deeply rooted popular customs, and were not entirely successful. They also revealed the gap between the doctrine and policy of the regime and popular undercurrents of Islam in Iran.

The other type of response, namely the attack on the doctrines and conduct of the Wahhabi and Salafi-jihadi groups, reflect on the one hand the sense of dread in view of the physical threat posed by these movements to the Shiis in Iraq, Lebanon, and Pakistan. On the other hand, the nature of the attack also reflects confidence, particularly among the Iranians, replacing the defensive Shii line of the past. A central motif of this line of action places the responsibility for sectarian hostility in Islam on external enemies, led by the United States and Zionism, and attempts to create a united Muslim front against them. The second motif stresses the proximity between mainstream Sunna and Shiism, while the Wahhabi and Salafi-jihadi movements are characterized as deviants and the enemies of all Muslims. This approach also positions the Shiis as the ultimate representative of "pure Islam." Here too there is a major effort to identify the internal enemy with external enemies, to present it as their handiwork and

as serving their interests. In this context there is a notable attempt to attribute a Jewish origin to the internal enemy of Islam. The pinnacle of this effort is the presentation of these enemies as apostates, which justifies the declaration of jihad to defeat and eliminate them. In this way the Shiis close a historical circle, evolving from a minority defending themselves against charges of heresy to presenting themselves as the upholders of pure Islam, and leaders of the military and ideological effort to fight Islam's internal enemies.

The growing strength of the Shii-Iranian axis of resistance was a serious factor in the decision by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in the summer of 2020 to normalize relations with Israel, as a way of improving the regional balance of power, particularly in the Persian Gulf. They were careful not to present the move in public as directed against Iran and the Shiis, but their intention was clear to Iran, which therefore responded strongly, although it was careful not to refer to the Sunni-Shii enmity but to present itself as defending the interests of the Palestinians and Muslims in general. In a September 2020 speech, Khamenei criticized the decision as "treason against the Islamic world" and expressed his certainty that it would not survive long (al-Monitor, 2020). The Iranian Foreign Ministry was more scathing and criticized the accords with Israel as "strategic stupidity" that would only strengthen opposition to Israel. A Foreign Office spokesman even predicted that "the unjust shedding of Palestinian blood over the past seven decades of Israeli occupation [i.e., since 1948] will sooner or later catch up with those who betrayed the Palestinians" ("Israel Agreement," 2020). The head of the Armed Forces HQ General Muhammad Bakri exposed some of the Iranian fears when he warned the UAE that Iran would not tolerate even the slightest damage to its security as a result of this move and that it would hold the UAE fully responsible ("Chief of General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces" 2020). However,

the various Iranian spokesmen did not specify what Iran intended to do in order to thwart normalization, in line with Khamenei's cautious approach to foreign policy.

Ultimately, Iran's open support for the Syrian regime's cruel suppression of its mainly Sunni population, and its support for both the Shii militias in Iraq, who have dealt harshly with Iraqis, and for the Houthis in Yemen who fire rockets at Saudi Arabia, will have a greater impact on the religious rift between Sunnis and Shii in the Arab world for the foreseeable future than Iran's self-righteous proclamations of Islamic unity.

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