

A Summary of the Study

„Rivalitäten und Konflikt zwischen Sunniten und Schiiten in Nahost“

Rivalries and Conflicts between Sunnis and Shi'is in the Near East

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The Situation

After the fall of Saddam Hussain's regime in Iraq in 2003, the political situation was turned on its head. The Sunni minority lost political power to the Shi'ite majority. As early as December 2004 the King of Jordan expressed his worries about the growing Shi'ite influence in the Near East. This concern increased after Mahmud Ahmadinejad was elected Iranian president in 2005 since Iran, a Shi'ite country, began to pursue a considerably more aggressive foreign policy in the Near East. The governments of Near East countries fear that Iran is instrumentalizing the Shi'ite populations in the region in order to expand its influence. Iran's nuclear ambitions are intensifying the Gulf States' fixation with Iran as a "threat" to the stability of the region. In this risk scenario the confessional difference between the (Sunni) heads of state and the representatives of Sunni Islam and, in particular, the Saudi Wahhabi religious sector, are increased.

The anti-Iranian, anti-Shiite rhetoric is being spread by Sunni preachers with a classical theological training who are exerting trans-national influence via appearances in satellite television and the Internet. Anti-Shi'i positions are also being revived by self-appointed interpreters of the religion and religious norms that have no theological training, such as those produced by Islamist armed groups. All of them take up historical experiences of rivalry and animosity between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims that go as far back as the early years of Islam.

The confessional element (Sunnism vs. Shi'ism) has not only played a major role in Iraq since the Iraq War in 2003 but in all of the Near Eastern states and has influenced the confessions' perceptions of each other. Even in the Maghreb states, where there is no Shi'ite community worth mentioning, the "Shi'ite awakening" has been registered with some concern. The confessionalization of political, power political, economic, and social issues and the increased emphasis on the religious characteristics of specific groups harbour the risk of conflict, which is why Shi'is are seen as a threat to national and regional stability.

Therefore this research project attempts to answer to two key questions:

- Is the confessionalization of problem areas and conflicts between Sunnis and Shi'is being incited deliberately and is an escalation of the conflicts simply being accepted?
- Are any attempts being made to counter the confessionalization of the relations between the population groups, to diffuse the religious animosities and to promote a cross-national and cross-group identity?

The case studies focus on Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Lebanon. In each of these states there are larger communities of (Twelver or Imami) Shi'is whose political demands have propelled them into their respective national limelight because their specific religious identities have confessionalized their domestic political disputes. The Shi'ite communities in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Lebanon differ in their size or their share of the whole Muslim population, and it is this that determines their status as a minority (Saudi Arabia), majority (Bahrain) or relatively equally weighted confessional community (Lebanon). The religious, ethnic and cultural environment is relatively homogeneous in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, whereas it is heterogeneous in Lebanon. Each country is also distinguished by different dominant interpretations of Sunni Islam; the Saudi Wahhabi Islam stands for rigidity; in Bahrain and, in particular, in multi-religion Lebanon, no such coherent rigid interpretation has been able to assert itself; a group specific multiplicity of interpretations from rigid (Salafis) to liberal is evident.

The contributions covering specific countries deal in detail with the situation of the Shi'is and their relationship with the Sunnis; they investigate the main actors involved in the Sunni-Shi'ite controversies, their mutual perceptions and the part that religion and, more especially, Iran play in these controversies.

The four thematic contributions concentrate on (1) the emergence of Shi'ism and the development of centuries old stereotypical prejudices between Sunnis and Shi'is; (2) on the changing importance of religion in Iranian foreign policy, (3) on the differences in the perceptions of Iran to be found among the heads of states and political and social groups in North Africa and the Near East and (4) on the role of the Lebanese Shi'ite TV broadcaster al-Manar in the Sunni-Shi'ite controversy. These contributions help to provide an understanding of the resurgence of the religious controversies at the beginning of the 21st century. They point to the importance of traditional stereotypes and the willingness of politicians to exploit religious differences to serve their own interests. Religion in the Near East and North Africa is the area in which, aside from the official state religious institutions and their representatives or scholars, unofficial religious interpreters with extreme views and a tendency towards violence appear publicly. Religion in the Near East and North Africa is always political and politics very often has a religious component.

The Studies' Findings

The current conflict between the Sunnis and the Shi'is in the Near East has several interlinking dimensions: a national political, a national religious, a cross-border religious and a foreign policy dimension. The foreign policy dimension is all tied to Iran's efforts (1) to gain influence and find political partners in the Near East, (2) to become a nuclear power, (3) to strengthen the (worldwide) position of the Shi'is, who support Iran's position and help to secure Iran's religious influence.

The instrumentalization of religious feelings and religious differences has clearly been boosted by the increase in power held by the Iraqi Shi'is and the aggressive foreign and nuclear policies pursued by Iranian president Ahmadinejad. As the sense of threat grew among the Near East's leaders so did the anti-Iran and anti-Shi'ite (Iran's "fifth column") polemic.

Within the current Sunni-Shi'ite conflict two distinct levels can be distinguished: the foreign and domestic policy levels. The conflict between the Arab Sunni state leaderships and organizations and Iran primarily has its origins in foreign and security policies.

The intensified support given by the Iranian leadership to Shi'ite organizations since 2005 – in combination with messianic Iranian rhetoric and the politicization of Shi'ite communities in the Near East – has increased awareness of the

importance of religious differences for the forming and consolidation of the respective concepts of the enemy. Religious arguments in the Near East and North Africa were also effective for gathering and mobilizing the masses in the past. The foreign and domestic policies of the Iranian and Near Eastern leaderships are continuing this tradition of instrumentalizing religion.

Nevertheless, the difference between Sunnis and Shi'is is not only an instrument that is being used to assert political interests or to gain support. For some states, organizations and individuals with fundamentalist religious convictions the split between the Sunnis and the Shi'is has an important religious dimension: their conviction to possess "true Islam" and hence the monopoly for interpretation excludes any form of tolerant interaction with deviant interpretations and rites; an example for this is the Wahhabi's attitudes towards the Shi'ite minority in Saudi Arabia and to Shi'ism, in general.

The claims to religious monopoly held by religious authorities who defend their sovereignty over interpretation and reject religious plurality have resulted in a fundamental enmity to Shi'ism. Religious discrimination against others is the result; as a rule discrimination is not restricted to religion but includes economic and political discrimination.

There is no evidence that there has been any serious, systematic Sunni government backed efforts within the religious sectors of the various countries to develop new ways of dealing with religious differences in those countries and to reduce prejudices, however; there has been no appropriate modification of the states' religious policies. In other words, on the religious-theological and societal-cultural levels Sunni and Shi'ite commonalities are not being encouraged but rather differences and whatever polarizes is being emphasized.

Conflict Potential and Development Tendencies

Three scenarios are conceivable:

Scenario 1: The differences between the Sunnis and the Shi'is decline. There is a rapprochement between the confessions and the Shi'ite communities are granted legal equality.

Scenario 2: The differences between the Sunnis and the Shi'is continue on the same level as now. The confessionalization of conflicts solidifies. There is no rapprochement between the confessions and no fundamental equality but the

national leadership grants some of the socio-economic and political demands of the Shi'is in order to prevent unrest and any radicalization.

Scenario 3: The differences between the Sunnis and the Shi'is intensify after none of the Shi'is' religious, political and socio-economic demands are met. There is then a radicalization of some groups and the state reacts with repression. The alienation between the confessions and the conflicts in which religion is instrumentalized increase. The willingness to use violence to have demands fulfilled increases.

The contributions in the study provide evidence that *scenario 1* is unlikely, because no fundamental national attempts exist to substantially and decisively defuse the various dimensions of the conflict (religious, political and economic) by means of appropriate measures.

The likelihood that *scenario 2* determines relations between the Sunnis and the Shi'is in the Near Eastern states in the next few years is great because no measures designed to reduce antagonisms and stereotypical (religious) prejudices have been instituted and the tendency to confessionalize the conflicts in which Sunnis and Shi'is oppose one another have steadily increased since 2004/05. The national leaderships have resorted to several measures to grant the Shi'is some of their demands and in doing so preserve social harmony; the measures implemented are still a long way from meeting the Shi'is' demands.

For that reason *scenario 3* cannot be discounted altogether. A deterioration in the relations between the Sunnis and the Shi'is in the Near Eastern states and a radicalization of Shi'ite Muslim organizations is to be expected if (legitimate) demands designed to change the religious, political and socio-political status quo continue to be met only very rudimentarily.

The Sunni national leaderships are hesitating to deal pragmatically with the legitimate demands made by the Shi'ite communities and to make a new effort to overcome the religious rivalries and the historical mutual rejection; the longer they hesitate, the greater the dissatisfaction and the impatience within the Shi'ite communities and the risk that some will see violence as a tool for carrying out conflicts and pursuing their interests and thus as the only remaining way of changing their situation. The Sunni-Shi'ite conflict will for that reason not lose any of its explosiveness and escalation potential in the near future if the national leaders' attitude to the Shi'ite communities does not change and lead to a

reduction in discrimination. If the discrimination continues, this will make it easier for Iran to offer itself as the backer of Shi'ite groups in their struggle for their rights in the Near East. This foreign policy dimension of the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict would become "irrelevant", however, if two pre-conditions were fulfilled. If the national leaderships in the Near East were to act to concede their Shi'ite communities some of their requests for equality or if the Iranian leadership were to change its foreign policies with respect to the Near Eastern states and improve its relations with the governments in the region. This would require Iran to issue a clear and credible pledge not to interfere in the internal affairs of the Near Eastern states and to convincingly prove that it is not striving to use nuclear energy for military purposes. Since Shi'is in the Near Eastern states have not been accorded any greater equality yet and there has been no change in Iran's Near Eastern foreign policy, the potential for conflict in foreign policy will continue and the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict in domestic politics will escalate.