

Let Two Flowers Bloom in the Middle East

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... [It] illustrates the old maxim that religious freedom is the product of two equally pernicious fanaticisms, each canceling the other out. — Fareed Zakaria

The Muslim Middle East is split into two parts, facing challenges from one another as well as from the West. This is roughly a portrait of the present heartland of the world. The periphery as usual lumbers in the limbo.

The three central belligerents are engaged in a game of power over wealth and over people. It's a war, borderless, seamless, fought both inside and outside. Enemies are often invisible; weapons malleable. Unprecedented, it's a three-corner fight without sharp corners. The game has little prospect of having a stable equilibrium any time soon. Yet conceivably the cloud seems to have a silver lining.

1. *The Rise of a Triangle:* The 34-day firefights between Israel and Lebanon ended in a draw. In the eyes of the 'Arab street', however, a putative icon has appeared in the person of Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the chieftain of Hizbullah, whose reputation has apparently put the image of Osama Bin Laden in eclipse, at least momentarily.

An arc of 'Shia Crescent' of political power emanating from Iran and Iraq, spreading from the Persian Gulf states to Syria and Lebanon, looms on the horizon, as apprehended by sunni leader, King Abdullah II of Jordan. Shia Muslims, 150 million of them, are the second largest sect, although numerically far behind the sunni Muslims of over one billion worldwide.

Just five years ago, Iran was still surrounded by a wall of hostile sunni regimes: Iraq and Saudi Arabia to the west, Pakistan and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan to the east. Iranians have welcomed the collapse of the sunni wall, and they see the rise of shia in the region as a safeguard against the aggressive sunni-based nationalism. They are particularly relieved by Saddam's demise, because Iraq had been a preoccupation of Iranian foreign policy for much of the five decades since the Iraqi monarchy fell to Arab nationalism in 1958. Baathist Iraq worried the shah and threatened the Islamic republic. The Iran-Iraq War dominated the first decade of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolution, ravaged Iran's economy, and scarred Iranian society. Now the resurgence of Iran's regional ambitions is in the making, fueled this time not so much by ideology as by nationalism. Tehran has begun to see itself as a regional power and the hub of a Persian and shia zone of influence stretching from Mesopotamia to Central Asia. Freed from the menace of Taliban in Afghanistan and of Saddam in Iraq, Iran is riding the crest of a wave of shia revival, pursuing nuclear energy and demanding international recognition of its interests.

The canonical shrine for all sunni Muslims is, of course, Saudi Arabia, home to the two holiest cities, Makka and Madina. Hajj pilgrimage to Makka at least once in the lifetime of a faithful is one of the five pillars of his piety. In its spiritual salience, Saudi Arabia is unparalleled.

For long, the desert kingdom had been left alone by the marauding imperialists from the West as a barren, sleepy backwater. Then, just before the Second World War, it was discovered to be the most promising oil province of the world. On the way back from the Yalta summit with Stalin and Churchill, President Franklin Roosevelt met with King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia, aboard the ship USS Quincy anchored near the Suez Canal. In return for guaranteed access to Saudi Arabia's vast treasure of oil, Roosevelt promised the tribal chieftain America's full military protection. Since then, the vow has proved to be one of the fixed pints of global politics.

In the wake of the 1979 shia revolution in Iran, the mantle of a prospective global sunni revolution was donned by Saudi Arabia. Over the past three decades, the Saudis, mostly through private trusts, have funded theological schools (madrassa) and centres that spread Wahhabism, a rigid desert-variant of Islam that has been used as an ingredient of template for most Islamist fundamentalists around the world. The exported fundamentalism has infected not just Arab societies but countries outside Arabia. It often carries with it a ostensibly parochial Arab political programme. Of all countries, most spectacularly hit was the United States on the infamous 9/11: as many as 16 of the 19 pilots who emptied their deadly cargo on the American soil were scions of Saudi Arabian aristocracy. Since then, the Saudi-US terms have gotten ambivalent if not frayed. Meanwhile, if the shias have their Hassan Nasrallah, the sunnis have got Osama bin Laden.

The Iran-Saudi-US triangle has become too tangled to stabilize in a hurry. If oil is a trump card for Saudi Arabia, so it is also for Iran, being the fifth largest holder of proven oil reserve. What is more, Iraq is second in the league. In oil, Iran plus Iraq comes pretty close to Saudi Arabia. The shia and the sunni lands both are equally attractive to the US, desperate as it is for oil import. Evidently, they in turn require the US presence to keep balance in the Middle East.

2. *Power Politics*: 'Power may be defined as the production of intended effects,' says Bertrand Russell. 'The fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics. Like energy, power has many forms' (*Power : A New Social Analysis*, pp 4 and 23).

We distinguish power by the field of its origin, namely, social, and economic. Now, glory is the personification of social power, and wealth that of economic power. Every person craves power of both forms more or less. The richest in economic power are the capitalists and landlords; in social power, priest, preachers and apostles. The shia and sunni blocs would surely pursue glory and wealth with equal zeal.

To the faithful, the Koran and the sharia are the two most sacred scriptures. The Koran is putatively accepted though interpretations vary. Sharia generally refers to a body of Islamic law, even though this meaning is considered restrictive. Sharia, which etymologically means 'way' or 'path', is the legal framework within which the public aspects and some private aspects of life are ruled. Legal theory is generally considered the domain of the traditional legal schools of thought. Sunni Muslims follow Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki or Shafii, while shia Muslims follow Jaafari.

There is no such thing as pan-shiaism, or even a unified leadership of shia Muslims; but they show a common religious view. They have developed a distinct conception of Islamic law and practices. Basic difference in piety between shia and sunni is substantial. While sunni Islamist movements are calling for a restoration of the caliphate to rule the

whole world, the 1979 shia revolution in Iran did not deal with the issue of global caliphate.

Islam is the fastest growing faith across the world. France has Islam as the second largest religion by the number of believers. Western Europe and North America are poised in the same direction. In the space of theology, Riyadh and Tehran are placed far apart from one another at the radical end of the spectrum. For enlisting believers competition between the two state religions is acute all over the world. Evangelical Protestantism has joined the race in right earnest. Rivalry among preachers, Adam Smith speculated in 1776, is capable of bringing forth 'the pure and rational' kernel of a religion. 'The teachers of each sect, seeing themselves surrounded on all sides with more adversaries than friends,' he wrote, 'would be obliged to learn candour and moderation.' Finding themselves almost alone, they would be obliged to respect those of almost every other sect, and concessions which they could mutually find it both convenient and agreeable to make to one another, in time probably reduce the doctrine to the pure and rational religion (*The Wealth of Nations*, p 793).

Islam does not have a clergy, nor a religious hierarchy as do Catholicism and some Protestant sects. The mosque is simply a place to pray — not like the church, a theological institution. With no central religious authority, the supremacy of state over church — which arose in Europe as a result of religious wars — has always existed in the lands of Islam. The caliph was first and foremost a prince; he was not a pope, and he did not have to contend with one. He could build mosques and patronize scholars, but he was not a religious authority.

Actually this very fact—that Muslims never had a pope to rebel against —is the very source of the quandary. Since temporal authority was almost always dominant over spiritual authority, the issue of separating the two never came up. This meant that rulers and those who opposed them could manipulate the faith in order to serve their own ends. Rulers could always find some priest to legitimate them, and rebels could find inspiration in the words of others. The Saudi king has his clerics; bin Laden has his. And, even without himself being a cleric, bin Laden issued fatwa —religious edict. (Hinduism has a similar ambiance where 'anything goes'; and the same quandary.)

There is only one exception to this rule, and it is Iran. The shia tradition does have a clerical establishment; expanded after Khomeini's revolution, it has now an elaborate hierarchy and a pope-like figure at the top. This structure has the potential of leading to an Iranian reformation, comparable to Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation.

Khomeini during his rule seems to have introduced a kind of 'Christianization' of Iran's theocratic institutions, with himself as an infallible pope, and with the functional equivalent of a hierarchy of archbishops, bishops and priests. It may be, Western scholars surmise, that Muslims having contacted a Christian illness, will consider a Christian remedy, that is to say, the separation of religion and state. 'Paradoxically, Iran's theocracy might provide a path toward greater reform. It is not unthinkable that the country that led the Middle East into Islamic fundamentalism might eventually lead it out' of that (Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom*, p 148).

3. *Physics of Faith*: The world is a construct of our sensations, perceptions, and memories. It exists objectively on its own. But it certainly does not become manifest by its mere existence. Its becoming manifest is conditional on very special goings-on in very special parts of this very world, namely, certain events

that happen in a brain. Those events in a brain are known as cognition and judgment.

Mind is invisible, intangible; it is not a 'thing'. Mind remains without sensual confirmation and remains without it for ever. Mind goes around in our spatial world more ghostly than a ghost. The material world has only been constructed at the price of taking the self, that is, mind, out of it, removing it; mind is not part of it. Obviously, therefore, it can neither act on it nor be acted on by any of its parts. In the words of Erwin Schrodinger : 'Mind has erected the objective outside world of the natural philosopher out of its own stuff. Mind could not cope with its gigantic task otherwise than by the simplifying device of excluding itself— withdrawing from its conceptual creation. Hence the latter does not contain its creator' (*What Is Life? Mind and Matter*, pp 119 and 121). 'The localization of the personality, of the conscious mind, inside the body is only symbolic, just an aid for practical use.'

Darwin's theory of evolution too offers no room for human behaviour to play any role, on account of apparent passivity of the organism in the process of Darwinian 'natural selection of the fittest'. Mutations occur spontaneously in the genome—the hereditary substance; they are mainly due to pure chance. The individual has not the slightest influence on the hereditary treasure it receives from its parents, nor on the one that it bequeaths to its offspring. Its activity during its lifetime is biologically irrelevant. For nothing of it has an influence on the offspring: acquired properties are not inherited. Any skill or training attained is lost; it leaves no trace, it dies with the individual, it is not transmitted.

Julian Huxley has extended Darwin's theory by recognizing that a change of behaviour itself does not get fixed genetically intruding into the chromosome structure; but it affects the process of natural selection. Behaviour changes parallel those of the physique, first as a consequence of a chance in the latter, but very soon directing the further selection mechanism into definite channels, because, according as behaviour has availed itself of the first rudimentary benefits, only further mutations in the same directions have any selective value. As a new organ develops, behaviour becomes more and more bound up with its mere possession. Selection will be powerless in producing a new organ if selection were not aided all along by the organism's use of it. You simply cannot possess clever hands without using them for obtaining your aims: you hunt first with stone, then with bow-and-arrow, then plough land to raise paddy, finally you learn using computer and join a call centre. A good mutation has the tendency to induce the selection of its complementary ones.

Reason is a faculty of mind that performs cognition and judgment. It requires, to begin with, the notion of certain categories such as time and space which cannot be acquired by an individual through personal experience. On the other hand, one cannot think of anything without reference to time and space. There can be no experience without a prior notion of those. Often religion supplies such categories of this kind to our mind.

Take the case of time. There are different views about its nature. To Hinduism, time is cyclical: four epochs (yuga)—satya, treta, dwapor, kali—go one for ever in that order, without any promise of progress or decline. In Islam, time is regressive in that people's religiosity is said to diminish with the passage of time; it is the sole responsibility of reason to keep it steady. In Catholicism, time is progressive as the Holy Spirit guides

human beings toward ever greater glory of the Lord. The behaviour of these communities is likely to be influenced by their conception of time.

As the shia, sunni and evangelicals strive to win the heart and mind of millions across the world, they will lay out their creeds in the open. A faith will shape the notion of categories in an individual's mind, and thereby affect his behaviour, and the subsequent evolution. The data of consequences would be reflected in historical records. Now faiths can be tested and compared with facts in history.

4. *Concluding Remarks* : In the Middle East, for the first time in more than a thousand years, the two sects of Islam, shia and sunni, are placed at the same level of economic, social and political considerations. Competition between them can possibly open the door for religious freedom, if history is any guide.

The Islamic civilization in the medieval period has been the custodian of the trove of human heritage. There is no reason why it cannot reclaim its rightful place in the modern period. 

