

Summer Situation in the MENA Region

Jozef Hudec¹

Abstract

By 2030 more than 26 % of global population will be Muslim. Sunni Muslims are expected to continue to make up a majority of about 87 %, the remaining approximately 13 % are Shias. More than a third of the Shia Muslims live in Iran.

The contribution focuses on the relations of Sunni and Shia Muslims and their impact on the regional geopolitical dynamics in the wider MENA (non-Arab powers – Iran, Israel Turkey; and Arab powers – Saudi Arabia/GCC, Egypt/Maghreb, Iraq/Levant; external powers – U.S.A., Russian Federation). It aims to briefly summarise internal development in Arab countries, political changes in North Africa (Tunisia, Egypt and Libya), followed by protracted struggles on the Arab Peninsula and Levant (Bahrain, Yemen and Syria), as well as tendencies in other Arab League members. GCC monarchies are afraid of which will be the first victim of a revolution with some correlation to Iran.

The Shia Muslims would not become a leading power of the Islamic world. Despite that, there are several possibilities of escalations between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Also the Islamic democracy might have same negative tendencies. Therefore the EU should strengthen the economic co-operation and investment only in the MENA countries without hesitation to make necessary reforms in economy and education. For Slovakia would be important to reflect the differences between the societies in the MENA and the Central Europe.

Keywords: Sunni, Shia Muslims, geopolitical balance, Islamic democracy, tendencies

Introduction

Largely unexpected events of the so-called Arab Spring have started important processes in the Arabic core of the Islamic world. Developments in the Arabic and Islamic countries, especially assertive political Islam and tensions between Sunnis and Shias, might have serious impact not only on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, but also on other parts of the world. By 2030 more than one quarter of global population will be Muslim. The number of Muslims is set to double, reaching up to 2.2 billion in 2030 (www.pewforum.org).

It should be noted that behind demonstrative religious principles and tendencies of the new establishments, some primarily geopolitical and economic pushers might also have their say. We may recognise these new movers and shakers also in the tension between Sunnis and Shias. Sunni Muslims make up a majority of Islamic population, about 87 %; the remaining about 13 % are Shias. More than a third of the Shia Muslims live in Iran (www.pewforum.org).

The relations of Sunni and Shia Muslims

Historical-religious: The origins of the differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims had in fact not much to do with ideological, rather with organising and political developments. According to the Sunni understanding of the faith, the Islamic Umma (the society of

¹ The text of this contribution strictly reflects personal opinion of the author only.

believers) should be led by the most capable and pious Muslim. The Shias believe that the leader of Umma should be of prophet Mohamed's (died 632 A.D) and of his son-in-law Ali's descent (www.britannica.com). The most recent leader of believers – *Caliph* – was the Ottoman Sunni sultan Abdülmecid abolished and exiled on March 3, 1924 (*Finkel, C., 2006, p. 546*). Thus, the chair is vacant for almost 90 years and both Islamic denominations could discuss the *Caliph's* position in theory. However, the international Muslim Brotherhood, which has appeared in Egypt several years after the last Caliph's "abolishment," could strive for renewing the Caliphate (www.ikhwanweb.com; *El-Ghazali, A.H., 2001*).

With golden Fatimid' times long over, the Shias were the suppressed minority during the bulk of almost 1400 years of Islam's history. The persecutions developed into ideology of martyrdom. Vis-a-vis the Sunni Ottomans in the west, the Safavids spread Shia mainly through Persia from the 16th century A.D (*Drozdíková, J., 2005, p. 186f*). There are several branches in the framework of the Shia denomination, differentiated by the number of the hidden imams. The largest branch is the *Itnashariya* one believing in twelve imams (*Drozdíková, J., 2005, p. 208*).

Even though some moderate Sunni Muslim scholars consider Shia to be equal to the four Sunni jurisprudence schools, the radical Sunnis consider Shias to be *Rafidayeen*, i.e. rejecters and view their practices as heretical, which has very serious consequences in Islam.

In turn the Shias label the radicals as *Wahhabees*, according to the most rigid Saudi Sunni movement, who destroyed even some monuments from the Islam's beginnings (e.g. tombs of prophet Mohamed's companions), to prevent popular religious practices being held there (*Drozdíková, J., 2005, p. 228; Jackson, R., 2006, p. 159-164*).

Political: The majority of Shia population lives in Bahrain, Iran, and Iraq. The specific Ibadiya sect has a majority in Oman. Minority groups could be found in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, and other countries.

In Iran, the largest country of Shia Islam, the strength of the denomination is a legacy of the Shia Safavid monarchs who ruled there for several centuries. The Iranian drive for dominance in the region is to be interpreted as a result of a combination of several factors: geopolitical situation, revolutionary zeal, and attempt to overcome the complex of persecuted minority, oil wealth and last but not least, ancient Persian tradition.

In Iraq the majority Shias have only got political power in the beginning of the 21st century, after the regime change brought about by a coalition led by the U.S.A. The rather secular Baathist Sunni regime in Iraq was a regional counterbalance to Iran after the local Islamic revolution in 1979. By defeating Iraq the U.S.A. paradoxically upset the regional balance as the contemporary Shia political forces in Iraq are considered rather Iranian allies.

In Bahrain the Shias continue in their struggle for a share in political rule. They revolted against Sunni monarchy; however, the king has been protected by other GCC monarchs, especially by the Saudi one. The leaders of the upheavals are being prosecuted despite some reservations of the Western world. Bahraini leaders suspect the local Shia majority of Iranian connection. Iran historically considered Bahrain as its fourteenth province.

The situation of minority Shia groups in some of the above-mentioned countries is rather complex. Usually these countries have Sunni majority, except for Lebanon, where an

elaborate political system was created after World War I aimed to stabilise a delicate Christian-Sunni-Shia balance.

In Yemen the Shia imams were the rulers of the country till the revolution in the 60th (*Haykel, B., 2003*). Several years ago the residual Zaydiya Shia sect revolted and the al-Houthis in the northern province of Saada are involved in the fight against the authorities in Sana'a as well as against some local Sunni tribes and the Salafists.

In Saudi Eastern Province a large group of local Shias use to complain that they are second class citizens (*Al-Rasheed, M., 2005, p.190*). Demonstrations against antidemocratic governmental practices and absolutistic monarchy were registered in the province in recent years.

In Syria the Shia Alawite sect members took over power in the Baath party and the military. Currently the Alawites face a civil war in which several Arab Sunni states support the rebels, who declared a desire for majority Sunni regime.

Impact on the regional geopolitical dynamics in the wider MENA

The tragic civil war in Syria might be interpreted as another evidence of the conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims. However, the rebellion against Assad's regime would not be possible without involvement of external powers. Thus, the war has much wider background and consequences. It is a part of the shaping of a new regional geopolitical balance and as such it is a proxy war against Iran.

Presently there are three regional powers in the MENA; all of them are non-Arabic countries, i.e. Iran, Israel and Turkey. Turkey and Iran were the main pillars of the US regional policy already in the 1950s and 1960s. Israel switched its orientation from France towards the U.S.A. after the 1956 crisis. Since the oil crisis in 1973 Saudi Arabia emerged as another US ally (*Dreyfuss, R., 2005*). The Iranian revolution in 1979 left the U.S.A. with two strategic allies, Israel and Turkey. Since the Justice and Development Party became the leading Turkish power, the trust between Israel and Turkey started to diminish; the development escalated by the Mavi Marmara operation in 2010.

With the changes brought by U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and last but not least introduced by the "Arab Spring" movements, the local Arab and non-Arab powers as well as "the superpowers" (P5) are trying to influence and shape a new regional balance. It seems that Iran will pay the bill for the new arrangement and its influence might decrease.

Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey position themselves as Sunni powers interested to diminish regional influence and economic power of Shia Iran. These countries also compete with each other for influence in the Sunni world. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey also support the uprising in Syria.

The conflict in Syria has exposed tensions between Turkey and Iran. Turkey has decided to support Sunni rebels to extend its influence and to curb that of Iran in the Levant. However, Turkish influence on energy resources of the Caspian area as well as their transport routes westwards might also have a role. As revenge Iran and Syria are trying to pit against Turkey the Kurds in Iraq, Syria and south-eastern and eastern Anatolia. Thus, Turkey is concerned about the situation in the Syrian northeast, which might fuel Syrian Kurdish aspirations for autonomy. Turkey invested a lot of effort in curtailing Iraqi Kurdish ambitions for

independence by political and economic engagement. A strategic partnership with the Iraqi Kurds undercut also the PKK. On the other side the government in Baghdad is not pleased by direct Turkish relations with Iraqi Kurds because it might side-line the central authority. Beside the usual Iraqi triangle Shias-Sunnis-Kurds, also Iranian interests in Turkey might have an influence on the situation.

Some analysts attribute the divergence between Israel and Turkey to Israeli support for decomposition of Iraq, including Kurdish independence. On the other side, both powers share a common interest in curbing Iranian influence, which is also exploited by the U.S.A. to bring the former strategic partners together. Israel had, however, a strong dilemma with regard to regime change in Syria, influenced by a stable situation on the ceasefire line with the Syrian enemy over thirty years. Broader regional calculations, together with the immediate spill over effect of the "Arab Spring" to other neighbouring countries and the Iranian rhetoric have broken the Israeli silence against the Assad regime.

Qatar's regional influence is frequently considered disproportional to the country's size. According to some interpretations Qatar is preparing itself for the situation when its natural gas revenues run out. However, the current position of Al-Jazeera among the Arab media in conjunction with a clever usage of financial possibilities allow Qatar to be an important regional player against Iran, despite its lack of popularity in some traditionally influential Arab countries, for which Qatar's interests and goals lack transparency.

Egypt has for a considerable time kept silent about the situation in Syria. But now with the new leadership from the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood it is trying to practice its new found strength in foreign policy, also by stressing the necessity of the Assad regime to step down. After the domestic political changes, Egypt would like to convince the region that despite its economic and financial turbulences and a new Islamic regime it is the same powerful state, the Arabic leader, as before January 2011. This is one of the reasons behind Egypt's invitation to a regional conference on Syria with Iranian presence. However, a normalisation of the Egyptian diplomatic relations with Iran is still put on hold. The new Egyptian impulses are generally seen as positive; despite that, it seems that the chance for an Egyptian solution of the Syrian crisis is similar to the attempts of the new Egyptian leadership to balance the situation in Yemen.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Iran compete for regional dominance since the fall of the Baathist regime in Iraq. The growth of Iranian influence, especially in Levant, rang Saudi alarm bells. It is important for Saudi Arabia to disrupt the Iranian access to the Mediterranean via Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Unravelling of the events in Syria would leave Iran's position vulnerable not only in Lebanon, but also in Iraq. The KSA apparently uses all available tools to gain this strategic goal; some Saudi elements even support Sunni jihadist groups. On the other side the KSA accuses Iran of anti-Saudi incitement of Shias in its Eastern Province and Bahrain. However, Syria is not an isolated desert country like Libya; quite the opposite - it represents large continental crossroads. In worst-case scenario Syria might develop into another Afghanistan or Iraq (or Libya?) with serious impact on Europe. Iran is now looking for ways to join discussions about a transition in Syria. Recently it participated in the meeting of the OIC in Mecca, where the Syrian's OIC membership has been challenged.

After the proxy solution of the regime change in Libya, the U.S.A. is developing a strategic partnership with Turkey to manage the region, according to Stratfor opinion (www.stratfor.com). Turkey was seen by the U.S.A. as an example for (Islamic)

democratisation in the wider Middle East.² The U.S. vision of the liberal democratisation failed some years ago, thus, the U.S.A. adapted to its strategy the fact, that:

1. The new democracy in the MENA may not necessarily be the liberal and secular one; it might be also Islamic democracy. As expected in the NIC prognosis,³ popular support may frequently bring Islamist parties to power. For the purposes of the democratisation, it might be suitable that such parties be moderate. This could explain the change in relations of the U.S.A. towards Muslim Brotherhood.
2. The democratisation may not necessarily be a result of evolution of the ancient (dictatorial and authoritarian) regimes. Apparently, the idea of creative chaos and abrupt revolutions might have their roles in these calculations, as could be seen in Libya and Syria. The question remains what could happen after the control of situation would be completely lost.
3. After the experience in Afpak and Iraq, the U.S.A. applies a strategy of indirect influence and presence on the ground in the MENA changes.

The Russian Federation, which has increased its presence in the MENA region in recent years, might be taken by surprise by the changes in the U.S. regional strategy, as indicated in Libya. Therefore Russia, together with China is considerably resistant to repeating the Libyan scenario in other MENA countries. Eventual disengagement of the U.S.A. from problematic relations in the MENA region via proxies also does contravene Russian interests (especially according to Stratfor). Russia might be interested in the U.S. engagement in the troubled MENA countries, because otherwise the U.S.A. would be more focused on the bilateral relations and the situation in the Russian Federation and its spheres of influence. Last but not least, Russia has its own economic and strategic interests in the wider MENA, which shall be adapted to the new situation.

Internal development in Arab countries

Further regional development and potential escalation in the relations between Sunnis and Shias might be also influenced by the internal situation of key players, especially the Arab ones. Due to “Arab Spring” the Muslim Brotherhood could have a large impact on internal situation in several Arab countries. Presently the tendencies of development seem as follows:

1. **Regime changes** are either in their hot phase (**Syria**), or (temporary?) in their calming-down phase (**Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya**). Former regimes in the mentioned countries, despite having formally republican constitutions, had “*gumlakiya*”⁴ perspectives, i.e. dynastic succession of the head of the state.

The degree of changes varies from country to country, from Yemen to Libya. In Yemen there were minimal changes in the regime establishment, also due to sensitive intertribal relations which could cause a disintegration of the state. Yemeni version of the MB (*al-Islah*) is one of the key political players. In southern and south-eastern provinces the militant *al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula* and its off-shoot, *Ansar al-Shariah*, pose the major security risks. In the north the central government used the Salafists and local tribes to fight against the al-Houthi rebels, who seek autonomy and even authority over the Red Sea port of Midi. On the other hand, Libya might develop

² The expectation sounds interesting vis-a-vis relations between the EU and Turkey.

³ The NIC prognosis “Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World.”

⁴ Combination of Arabic words *gumhuriya* – republic and *mamlaka* – kingdom.

into a failed state if the completely new Islamist leadership is not able to control the security situation.

Generally, all the mentioned countries have either unconsolidated state budgets (Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen), or a tradition of sub-standard state authorities (Libya). Financial constraints, security situation and substantial reforms of economy and education would be the largest challenges for the new regimes. Local variations of the Muslim Brotherhood might proclaim their main political mantra “*Islam is the solution*”; however, whether it would succeed in addressing the above-mentioned challenges remains highly disputable. Future tensions might overcome the “*post-revolutionary*” public sympathies for the “*martyrian*” Muslim Brotherhood. Further deterioration of the economic and security situation cannot be ruled out as well as return to authoritarian rule.

2. **Transformation pressure** for the constitutional monarchy in **Jordan** is gathering strength. Political pressure has been ventilated in some degree by reforms in **Morocco**. Both kingdoms have economic problems and are grappling with state budget and popular temper. The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan is boycotting elections to bring constitutional changes to challenge the king’s authority. On the other side, Moroccan rights groups, the February 20 Movement and trade unions are organising demonstrations against corruption, rising prices and arrests of activists. If the control over the economic and security situation would be lost, the change of constitution from monarchy to republican (controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood) might be quite real.
3. **Resistance** to political changes of the Arab Spring is most visible in the GCC (**KSA, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman**). Regional monarchies are afraid of republican and anti-autocratic revolutions and therefore are ready to defend the status quo even by force, if necessary. Both, regional geopolitical changes and efforts to protect monarchies have some correlations to Iran. The KSA is using the momentum for a larger GCC integration, i.e. increase of the Saudi influence in the region (see Bahrain) under the aegis of a fight against Shia heretics supported by Iran (which might not be to the liking of the ruling Ibadiyas in Oman (*Destination Oman, 2006-2006, p. 15*)). It is possible to expect increase in internal political tensions, both between Sunnis and Shias and between absolutism and calls for democratic freedoms/constitutional monarchies (see Kuwait). By now the GCC regimes are successful in controlling potential anti-monarchic movement by generous financial policy. If the situation would change and mass mayhem would start, collapse of economy would be eminent, as the GCC economies are usually dependent on foreign employees. Under such a problematic environment the employees might tend to leave the host countries.

The GCC states are also worried over the rising influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. They suspect the *Ikhwan* of plotting to take over the GCC wealth. The GCC Islamists are allegedly sympathetic to the *Ikhwan*, which also contributes to tensions with Egypt. However, each of the GCC states, with the exception of the UAE, has found a way to approach the local *Ikhwan*’s sympathisers. Bahrain even relies on the local Muslim Brothers and Salafists to counter Shia opposition. Kuwait has even integrated the local *Ikhwan* into the parliamentary mainstream. However, the UAE recently denounced local Islamist *al-Islah* for plotting against state and national

heritage. The UAE population suffers from stark differences in the distribution of wealth and therefore the regime is more vulnerable to even minor challenges.

4. **The post-conflict states**, such as **Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan** are potential sources of further religious (*sushi – i.e. Sunnis versus Shias*) upheavals, depending on policies of regional players (especially in Iraq and Lebanon). There is considerable potential of (further) influence of political Islam on constitutional arrangement especially in Sudan, Algeria. By 2030 Iraq, with its Shia majority, is expected to have the second-largest Muslim population in the MENA region, after Egypt (www.pewforum.org).
5. **Mauretania, Somalia, and Palestinian Autonomy (PA)** could be described as **unstable, failed or limited sovereignty states** respectively, with a perspective that is difficult to predict. It is improbable to expect popular democratisation movements anytime soon, despite some recent signals (e.g. demonstrations against the Prime Minister in the PA and elections in Somalia, both in September 2012). Mauretania was swept by several coups in recent decades (similar to Comoros Islands). The leadership of the occupied Palestinian territories might be lacking in legitimacy due to internal divisions (*Gunning, J., 2009, p. VI*) overdue elections and troubles with budget. Presidential elections in the divided and unstable Somalia facing Shehab militias might only be a beginning of very long process.

Conclusions

The Shia Muslims apparently do not have the strength to become a leading power of the Islamic world, despite Iranian attempts. Nevertheless, high probability exists that Iran will further use issues appealing to the Muslim street, like the Palestinian question, anti-Israeli and anti-U.S.A. sentiments, to mobilise support in a continuous attempts to cross and/or conceal the denominational differences and to link the character of changes in the Arab and Muslim world to Iranian model of Islamic revolution.

There are, however, also several possibilities of escalations between Shia and some elements of Sunni society, especially Wahhabees and Salafists. The relations between the contemporary “mainstream” Islamists, i.e. Muslim Brothers and Shias would depend on several moments, first and foremost on the economic development in the Sunni world (*Noble, P., 2010, p. 71f*). If the murky economic and social perspectives prevail, the regimes might look to blame the others; beside Western world and its conspiracy also the Shia Muslims could be cast as the culprits.

Beside internal Muslim factors, the interests of superregional powers and their tactical and strategic tools are of importance. A strategic chaos might be an effective strategy, however, if it is not applicable in your direct neighbourhood. On other side it should be taken into consideration that the Islamic democracy might have the same or even stronger tendency towards authoritative rule as the previous secular “directive” democracy.

The EU is naturally extremely interested and involved in the developments in the Arab and Islamic world which would have direct impact on the European security situation. The changes in the southern and eastern Mediterranean could also present wider opportunities for bilateral economic cooperation and know-how transfers. Overall these moments are attractive; however, precaution should be the preferred approach before an overly enthusiastic

involvement. The economic co-operation and investment would be reasonable only in those MENA countries courageous enough to make all necessary reforms in economy and education. Otherwise, European money would fall into a bottomless black hole. Sure, it is impossible to make a reasonable investment in an economic environment that is deformed by heavy subsidies. This could lead to several paradoxes; just a brief example: it is more profitable to fodder domestic animals by subsidized bread than to buy unsubsidized grain...

On the other side, for Slovakia with its know-how exchange program, it would be important to reflect the differences between the starting points of transforming societies in the MENA and the Central Europe and local social realities before offering the know-how experiences.

Sources

Al-Rasheed, Madawi: A History of Saudi Arabia. Cambridge 2005.

Destination Oman. 2005 – 2006. An essential tourism and business guide. Muscat 2005.

Dreyfuss, Robert: Devil's Game. How the United States helped unleash fundamentalist Islam. New York, 2005.

Drozdíková, Jarmila: Lexikón islámu. Bratislava 2005.

El-Ghazali, Abdel Hamid Hasan: The way to the revival of the Muslim Ummah. Cairo, 2001.

Finkel, Caroline: Osman's Dream. The Story of Ottoman Empire 1300 – 1923. London, 2006.

Gunning, Jeroen: Hamas in Politics. Democracy, Religion, Violence. London 2009.

Haykel, Bernard: Revival and Reform in Islam. The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkání. Cambridge 2003.

Jackson, Roy: Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab. In: Fifty Key Figures in Islam. Routledge, 2006.

Noble, Paul: From Arab System to Middle Eastern System? p. 67 – 165 In: Korany, B. – Dessouki, A.E.H. (edit): The Foreign Policy of Arab States. The Challenge of Globalisation. Cairo, 2010.

<http://www.pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx>

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/574006/Sunnite>

<http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=813>

<http://www.stratfor.com/>