



Middle East: Opportunities for a Sunni-Shia rapprochement

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In the current issue of the “Pulaski Policy Papers” Senior Fellow at the Casimir Pulaski Foundation Tomasz Otlowski analyses a recent Sunni-Shia rapprochement. “On March 8, 2014, the world was shocked upon learning (from the Lebanese media quoting diplomatic sources in Beirut) that the government of Saudi Arabia had officially sent an invitation to Rouhani to visit Riyadh. According to reports from the region, Iran's president apparently accepted this invitation, and the visit will take place in the near future. A few months ago an event of this magnitude would have been impossible, today it may become a political reality in the region.”

We encourage you to read the new issue of the “Pulaski Policy Papers”!

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The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is an independent, non-partisan think tank with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out such activities as conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders in Poland and abroad. The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is one of only two Polish institutions that have a partnership status with the Council of Europe and is a member of the Group Abroad – an umbrella organization of top 40 Polish NGOs working outside of Poland.

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Three years after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, events in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are continuing to surprise us with their scale and dynamism. One of these intriguing developments has been the increasing evidence of a thaw between Iran and the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf. The signs of a potential warming of relations between the two countries are all the more astonishing considering that they are appearing at a time when Sunni-Shia confrontation has been at its most severe for decades. On the territory of war-torn Syria, this confrontation has taken on explicitly militant character. Ever sensitive to fluctuations and changes in the global international environment, the situation in the Middle East has been accelerating for three years now, and yet the direction in which it is heading is still hard to ascertain. Factors both internal (resulting from the processes taking place in the region) and external are currently having a great influence in shaping the state of affairs and events in the area of the Middle East. The former include: the growing rivalry between Sunni and Shia (most evident in the war in Syria and in Iraq), the issue of Iran's nuclear program, and an increase in the impact and importance of radical Islam in the region. In turn, the most important external element is the deteriorating atmosphere of relations between the West (the U.S. and EU) and Russia. This factor may in the next few months appear to be the most important in contributing to the evolution of major geopolitical paradigms in the MENA region.

Inter-Islamic religious war in Syria

The war in Syria plays a crucial role in shaping the current strategic reality in the Middle East. Lasting for four years now, this conflict brings together the majority of the region's problems, while at the same time absorbing the commitment (and competition) of world powers. The war in Syria, at first a classic internal conflict, taking place in the wake of the Arab Spring, has turned into a war between the Shia and Sunni communities inhabiting the region. The logic of the ethnic, religious and strategic situation in the Levant has become the determinant of such an unexpected turn of events. Initially, everything pointed rather to the fact that the Syrian war may “only” be, like the earlier conflicts and crises in Iraq, Bahrain or Yemen, an “indirect clash” between Iran and Saudi Arabia, i.e. regional powers competing for influence and primacy in the Middle East. However, matters have progressed much further, and the strategic rivalry has evolved into an open conflict also involving a religious dimension, a catastrophic clash between Sunni and Shia harking back to the centuries-old history and rich mythology of the dispute.

This situation has introduced a new quality in the regional dynamics of international relations. It also carries certain repercussions and consequences not only for the situation in Syria and the ongoing war there, but it also affects many other problems of the region, ranging from the Iran-Saudi rivalry in the Persian Gulf, through the events in Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon, and finally the Iranian nuclear program. When considered alongside the rapidly deteriorating atmosphere of relations and cooperation between the world powers after the events in Ukraine, one is left with a not particularly optimistic picture of the new international situation in the MENA region.

Paradoxically, such a turn of events, where the religious factor has become the dominant axis of disputes and conflicts in the region, is not in the interest of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The authorities in Tehran are aware that if they are able to effectively, and successfully, control the game with the Sunni Arabs at a strategic level, the elevation of the conflict to a religious and theological level might bring about Iran's failure. The reason for this is simple: there are many fewer Shiites than Sunnis; Shiites are internally diverse and scattered

throughout the Middle East. Additionally, in the majority of countries (except Iraq and Iran), they are discriminated against (usually as a minority) and pushed to the margins of social and political life. Sustaining the religious dimension to this confrontation is also not in Iran's interests, since Sunni religious fervour would undoubtedly increase should such a conflict continue: what today is the domain of mainly Islamic extremists under the banner of Al-Qaeda (active in Syria and Iraq), fighting against Shia "heretics", could spread to the entire region as an anti-Shiite "crusade". For Iran such a scenario would mean both the final disintegration of the "Shiite crescent", painstakingly built up over decades, as well as cancelling out Iran's chance to continue to play the role of a regional power with something to offer to Sunnis.

Iran's stance is also influenced by the experience of Syria. The operational and strategic conditions of the ongoing war have revealed the limitations faced by Syria's Alawite authorities and the Shiite forces from the region who support them. Despite unprecedented support from Iran, the long-term commitment of elite units of the Lebanese Hezbollah, and the effort of thousands of Shia volunteers from Iraq, Iran, Yemen and even Pakistan, Syria is not able to suppress the Sunni insurgency which long ago evolved into an Islamic "holy war against heretics and infidels."

A new opening?

This stalemate in Syria (and more widely across the region) is clearly felt by the other side in the dispute, as well. Saudi Arabia and its allies from the Gulf are also discovering the limits to their actions against the problems of the region and the effective projection of their own interests. Syrian opposition groups supported by Saudis have either joined the Islamic extremists, mostly linked to Al-Qaeda, or have been marginalized and reduced, which practically precludes them from playing any further role in the future of Syria. The Syrian struggle, and the consequent turn of events in the region, have clearly veered off the course designed earlier in Riyadh and are now out of its control. Other factors that further complicate the strategic situation of Saudi Arabia include the noticeable lack of clear and determined U.S. policy towards the Middle East and the weakness of their current political leadership (visible even during the crisis over Syria's chemical weapons in 2013). This dooms the Saudis and their allies to acting independently.

In addition, the unity and strategy compliance within the Arab states of the Persian Gulf (grouped in the Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC), unshakable until recently, has begun to crack. Oman, traditionally the most independent member of the club (perhaps due to the fact that it is inhabited mostly by Ibadis, separate from the Sunnis and Shiites), has again started its own independent game with Iran.

Paradoxically, this situation raises the chances of a new opening (or rather brings it by force) in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The recent series of diplomatic events, speeches and gestures from both sides is unprecedented. In December 2013, the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Jawad Zarif, made an official visit to Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. In turn in mid-March 2014, Hassan Rouhani, the new president of the Islamic Republic of Iran himself, visited Oman; he is the hope of the West and of the Iranian reformers for introducing a new quality to Iranian foreign policy and socio-political reality.

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Challenges and obstacles

Time will tell whether the warming of bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is merely tactical (another manifestation of the classical Muslim idea of “deceiving one's enemies” – the infamous taqqiya and Kitman), or perhaps an expression of the genuine will for a change. The possibility cannot be ruled out that both sides see the warming of relations not as a “reset” of the current strategy, but rather as a temporary tactical truce, allowing a necessary breath to be taken, so that they can gather and re-organise their own ranks before the next rounds of the game. However, regardless of these concerns, it is already known that the conciliatory gestures of both parties are met with the resistance of the opponents of such a policy. In Iran, the words of dissatisfaction are loud on the part of the most conservative elements of the ruling establishment (including those in the circles of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). There are also increasing media attacks on Saudi Arabia, highlighting its role in the Syrian war. In Riyadh, in turn, the “family quarrel” has been increasing between those who support at least tactical agreement with Iran and the sworn opponents of such an option (the latter apparently has Prince Bandar, the head of Saudi intelligence as their informal leader).

Another equally important challenge for the Shiite-Saudi thaw may be the dynamic events in the region. The recent escalation of tensions between Damascus and Ankara, connected with armed incidents on the Syrian-Turkish border, may undermine the Iranian-Saudi attempt to slow down the escalation of the Syrian conflict. What remains unknown is the response and actions of Israel, for whom the escalation of the Shiite-Sunni conflict is not at all favourable. The Kurds are also pursuing their own policy. For them the chaos in Syria and the progressive disintegration of Iraq present a chance to achieve their own dream of statehood.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The dynamics of geopolitical processes taking place in the Middle East have reached the point at which the main regional players – Saudi Arabia and Iran – are forced to take a strategic dialogue which is also in a broader sense a new opening between Sunnis and Shiites. Without even an attempt to partially reset bilateral relations, the two countries will not be able to implement their own respective strategies towards the region. On the other hand, this is a Shiite-Sunni rapprochement in the Middle East which seems at present to be the only chance to rectify the problems of the region such as the war in Syria or Iran's nuclear program.

2. The dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia, however, may be difficult or even torpedoed by serious obstacles and adversities. Their sources are both the political processes taking place in Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as the activities of other regional actors (Turkey, Israel, the Kurdish community). A major challenge for the future of Shiite-Sunni dialogue in the MENA area might also be the change of Russian policy towards the region. The success of the process of warming between Iran and Saudi Arabia could be called into question if Russia decides to take confrontational steps towards the West in the Middle East (e.g. openly taking the side of President Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian conflict, opting out from the international pressure against Iran and its nuclear program or attempting to recover the former influence in the Arab world).

3. Maintaining opportunities for a breakthrough in the Middle East should now become an important task of the international community, especially the EU and the United States. The Ukrainian conflict and the crisis in relations between the West and Russia cannot obscure other strategic goals.

4. Western countries should now encourage both Iran and Saudi Arabia to continue the policy of détente in mutual relations, regardless of emerging obstacles. An important element of such a strategy should be the exerting of influence by the EU and the U.S. on these regional partners of the West, who - like Turkey or Israel - feel seriously concerned about the prospects of Shiite-Sunni strategic dialogue. Tel Aviv and Ankara need to obtain an assurance that an easing of relations between Riyadh and Tehran will not jeopardize either the strategic interests of Israel and Turkey, or their security in the region.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation

is an independent think tank which specializes in foreign policy, with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out activities both in Poland and abroad, among others in Central and Eastern Europe and in North America.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation was founded due to political changes that took place in Poland after 1989. The principal values of Casimir Pulaski (freedom, justice and democracy) are an inspiration for every initiative undertaken by the Foundation. A few of the Foundations activities include: conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders (www.instytutprzywodztwa.pl).

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