



A Sociological Perspective on Present *Sunni-Shi'a* Animosity

Mazin Muwaffaq Hashim describes the motivations behind mounting tension between the Shi'as and Sunnis as non-sectarian, discounting the religious distinctions between the two sects as the main source of their animosity. Rather, he attributes their acrimony to the Shi'a's political motives and their sense of being marginalized and having been unfairly treated, historically, by the Sunnis.

To explain this phenomenon, the author contrasts the historical development of Arab and Persian civilizations. *Hashim* emphatically asserts that Arab/Sunni identity and pride rest solely with Islam¹ while Persian/Shi'a dynasties often drew their power from nationalistic ideologies distinct from Islam. The author then predicts that any Iranian expansion, regardless of the religious *Shi'a* banner under which it could be promoted, will ultimately translate into a nationalistic movement. He goes on to remark that efforts to achieve regional hegemony often use sectarian religious differences, less as a belief and more as a means to achieve their ends. *Hashim* concedes that sociologically, these nationalistic tendencies are not limited to Iran, but could also be at one point in the future, the root of Turkish expansionism or an Arab quest to exert dominance over their non-Arab neighbors.

It is noteworthy that *Hashim* generally applies the “nationalistic” label to individual countries (i.e. Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran), but treats Arab countries collectively under a unified, majority Sunni banner -- Sunni Pan-Arabism.

Hashim also discusses the power derived from having a Sunni majority, considering it normal that the majority's Sunni ideology reigns while the minority's rights are neglected. He emphasizes that the *Shi'a* minority's inferiority complex has led to an unwarranted attack on the *Sunni* majority. As an example, he points to what he considers to be the *Shi'a*'s hypocritical accusation that the Sunnis remained silent instead of condemning the bombing of Shi'a mosques in Iraq; an accusation he rejects.

The author's premise, i.e., that religious identity is more important than national identity, allows him to employ a distorted logic in which the Shi'a majority in Iraq become part of the general *Shi'a* population and are thereby transformed into a minority with diminished rights.

The author then describes a litany of emotions that he believes the *Shi'a* experience and which the Sunni majority considers exaggerated or unfounded: the sense of marginalization, injustice and discrimination. It is obvious, however, that the *Shi'a*'s social situation in each of the Gulf countries – Lebanon, Iraq and Iran – is quite different. It is only through speaking in generalities about the *Shi'a* experience that the author is able to ignore this issue.

***Hashim* concludes by calling on both *Shi'a* and *Sunni* to re-unite through their common Muslim beliefs. He sees the origin of the *Shi'a-Sunni* problem as political. Only later, in his view, did it become sectarian and doctrinal. While he may have a point, his analysis suffers from the typical Islamist tendency to completely ignore nationalism in favor of a Sunni *Ummah*.**

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¹ While this seems to be the view of most Islamists, it raises the question about the interpretation of Arab identities, the various earlier non-Muslim civilizations which existed in Egypt, the Levant and Iraq or the more recent socialist Pan-Arabism as conceived in Egypt's Nasser or the Baath party in Iraq and Syria, and which at the time was a source of collective Arab pride.