



1.21 • Conjuntura internacional

SYRIA... A MODEL OF THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICTS

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THE HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE EAST is full of conflicts, and religion is often a major driver in it. Such as sectarian conflicts that arise between different religious sects, or those that arise between the religious currents and military regimes that took power after the withdrawal of colonial powers from the region during the last century. The great ongoing conflict in Syria after what has become known as the Arab Spring revolutions is an ideal model in which we can read and understand the nature and dynamics of conflicts in the Middle East, the Arab region and the Islamic world in general.

The Sunni-Shiite Conflict

The Sunni-Shiite conflict is one of the oldest sectarian conflicts related to first period of the emergence of Islam itself. This conflict broke out during the days of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth and last Caliph in the era of The Rashidun Caliphs. Based on the events of this era, a new sect arose among Muslims, known as the Shiites (supporters) who were supporting Ali ibn Abi Talib. The new sect began to emerge because of political conflicts, which had a religious nature. The persecution of the Shiites began by the other party in the equation of Islam, which known as the Sunnah. The Shiite community then began to operate in certain geographical areas such as Iran and Iraq. It is noteworthy that during the period of the Fatimid state, Egypt was apparently Shiite state, which completely changed after Sunnah took power with the end of the Fatimid era.

Back to the Syrian case, we will find that the Syrian demographic components include many ethnics and religions: Arab, Kurd, Turkmen, Circassians, Druze and Muslims (Shiites, Sunnis), Christians and Jews. Although the Shiites in Syria represent the minority, the Alawite/Shiite community (about 12% of the total population) succeeded in seizing all the top positions in the country, such as the presidency, the army, the police and other vital institutions in the country. Which angered the Sunni community that accounts for more than 60 percent of the total population of about 18 million. This situation was the main cause in making Syria one of the arenas of conflict between Sunni forces in the region, led by Saudi Arabia, and Shiite forces, led by Iran. This has been evident in a number of previous situations. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, in which Shiite clerics came to power, Syria ended its strategic alliance with Sunni Egypt and replaced it with a strategic alliance with Shiite Iran. The new alliance was based on religious ties to counter its Sunni rivals in the Sunni regimes, led by Saudi Arabia,

Turkey and Iraq¹. In addition to the fear of regional isolation, that Syria will face after Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, which makes Syria weak in its confrontation against Israel. Also, the Iranian interest in geostrategic sites of Syria where its common borders with Israel, Turkey and Iraq, and its influence in Lebanon, which led to the establishment of Hezbollah armed militias in southern Lebanon as a result of the cooperation between Syria and Iran in 1982 to harass Israel, and the establishment of an alliance called Axis of Resistance. Beside that the Iranian cooperation with Syria provides Iran a presence on the Mediterranean Sea.

Given the eight-year Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), Syria chose to stand on the Iranian side based on sectarian motives despite the participation of the Syrian and Iraqi regimes in the same intellectual principles of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party. While Saudi Arabia supported Saddam Hussein's Sunni regime against Shi'ite Iran.

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In the conflict going since 2011, Syria has become a battleground between Sunni and Shiite currents. Iran has supported and continues to support the Assad Alawite/Shiite regime with all its power, as Syria has become a sacred arena for the Shiite jihad, which attracts Shiite elements from everywhere in Iran, Afghanistan and Lebanon to defend the Shiites there, raising sectarian slogans which reminiscent of the historical battles between Sunnis and Shiites throughout Islamic history. The most prominent of these Shiite factions are the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, Hezbollah militias and many other factions and Shiite militias. On the other side, there are many Sunni factions and militias supported by the Sunni regional regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. The most prominent of these are the Saudi-backed Army of Islam, the Qatari-backed Faylaq al-Rahman and the Turkish/Qatari-backed Free Army. In addition to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham that known previously as Al-Nusra Front which represents Al-Qaeda arm in Syria.

The Sunni-Sunni Conflict

Despite the Sunni-Shiite conflict, there was a similar situation of conflict and rivalry among members of the Sunni camp. This situation of

inter-Sunni conflict is evident in the conflict between Saudi Arabia and its allies (Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain) against both Turkey and Qatar, which is the result of a conflict of interest. Turkey, in its dealings with the Arab countries, based on the idea of the return of the Ottoman role of Turkey, which is supported by the state of nostalgia among the Islamic peoples of the idea and project of the Islamic Caliphate, depending on the Muslim Brotherhood deployed in the Arab world to implement that plan after the Arab Spring. However, this project represents direct threat to many countries, primarily Saudi Arabia, which since its establishment in its present form in 1932; it plays the role of official representative of Muslims around the world because of the important Islamic places it has. Therefore, any attempt to revive Turkey's role as an Islamic representative is a direct threat to Saudi role in the Muslim world and diminishes its influence in the international community.

For Egypt, which is considered the Muslim Brotherhood's home country, where the headquarters of the organization is located, it sees Turkey's attempts to revive the Caliphate project by using the Muslim Brotherhood as a direct threat to its national security. Both the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have adopted Saudi Arabia's position on the Turkish/Qatari Islamic project because it represents a direct threat to its existing regimes. It is noteworthy that Qatar, the small Gulf rich state, has adopted the Muslim Brotherhood and provided them with a lot of financial and political support to be able to achieve gains from the spread of the group around the world and overcome its small geographical area and weakness of its human potential.

All of the above generated a state of division within the Sunni camp that was clearly manifested within the Syrian scene. We saw different positions of the Sunni countries towards the Shiite regime of Bashar. For example, Egypt, which is the largest Sunni state in the Arab world, strongly supported the regime of Bashar al-Assad in international forums, it also supported Assad by military experts and sometimes equipment and weapons against the will of other Sunni countries, such as Saudi Arabia. The reason behind Egypt's support for Assad regime is to thwart the Turkish and the Muslim Brotherhood's plans. On the other hand, we saw Saudi-funded militias fighting in some locations with Turkish-funded militias and sometimes and other sites fighting with Qatari-funded militias.

Thus, the conflict in Syria reveals to us the dimensions of the problem between the Sunni

states and each other and clearly reveals a Sunni-Sunni conflict no less burdensome than the Sunni-Shiite conflict.

Military-Religious Currents Conflict

The conflict between the religious currents known as the currents of political Islam and the ruling regimes of the military institutions that came to power through the military coups is one of the oldest conflicts in the region that is continues so far. Syria is a model of this conflict in the region. In 1970, Hafez al-Assad assumed the presidency of Syria after a military coup, the latest in a series of military coups in Syria that began in 1963 after a group of officers adhering to the principles of the Ba'ath Party seized power. The history of political Islam in Syria dates back to the 1930s when Muslim Brotherhood seeds began to reach Syria through students who went to study in Egypt, especially those who went to study religious sciences at Al-Azhar.

In the early 1940s, the Muslim Brotherhood took many organizational steps to carry out the work of the organization and chose a public center in Aleppo. In 1945, Sheikh Mustafa Al-Sibai was elected as the first general observer of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. From this point, the Brotherhood began its journey to power, the journey that stopped by the rock of the National Socialist Baath Party, which considered the religious currents as a fierce rival who wanted to wrest power from the hands of the military and nationalists. The conflict between the two sides began to take the form of armed confrontation from the sixties of the last century, since then these confrontations were breaking out from time to time. Despite Hafez al-Assad's attempt to contain the Muslim Brotherhood, imposing a state of calm at the beginning of his rule, the tensions quickly erupted between him and the Islamists led by the Muslim Brotherhood when Assad, the father, changed the Constitution and dropped the article states that "The religion of the state is Islam". The violence erupted between the two sides led to the assassination attempt of Hafez al-Assad in 1980, which was considered a milestone in the history of the conflict between Syria's military regime and the Islamists.

As a result, the Syrian army executed a large number of Islamists who were imprisoned, and then issued a law that punishes all members of the Muslim Brotherhood to death penalty. After a number of confrontations between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood, the massacre of Hama 1982 took place in the city of Hama, located in the center of the Syrian Republic, which was a stronghold of the Islamic armed movements. These movements succeeded in killing a number of Syrian army forces, prompting the Syrian forces to launch a large and unprecedented attack on the city using all kinds of heavy weapons, which led to the destruction of the city and the killing of tens of thousands of both Islamists and civilians. The conflict between the Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood and the military regime in Syria

continued even after the death of Hafez al-Assad and the beginning of the era of Bashar al-Assad's presidency. The Brotherhood was an important factor in igniting the civil war in Syria in 2011 and formed many armed factions backed externally. The Brotherhood's struggle for power in Syria comes as part of a general case of their struggle across the region to seize power in various ways, including what happened Egypt following the January 2011 revolution. Although successful in gaining power, they fell because of the army's military coup against them in 2013 in the light of the power struggle between the military and Islamists who committed many terrorist acts.

Conclusion

The factors of conflict throughout the Arab and Islamic countries in the Middle East do not go beyond the elements mentioned above, and it may be available together or individually depending on the situation. Syria is a model in which all the factors of conflict in the region gathered in one case, it could also be the perfect model for researchers to understand the nature, the reasons and drivers of the Middle East conflicts. We have not dealt here with minorities in the context of the ongoing conflict in the region. The reason is that the ethnic or religious minorities in the Middle East, except the minorities (Shiite) is unable to be a party capable of igniting a crisis or generating a conflict, it always dealing with existing conflicts in order to maintain safety and provide a safe exit. The minorities here choose to support one of the parties of the conflict against the other, but it cannot manage a conflict separately and fully. ■

Notes

¹ Although the majority of the Iraqi people follow the Shiite sect, the Sunni minority was the only one to rule there, led by Saddam Hussein, who was the head of the Ba'ath Party. Although the Shiites in Syria are the minority, but they also ruled the Sunni majority through a rule based on the application of the principles of the National Ba'ath Party.