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A chance for mainstream Islam to unite against Isis

Hossein Mousavian Author alerts

A lack of central authority opens the door to a charismatic leader, writes Hossein Mousavian



There are few happy consequences of the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, which has swept across Iraq and Syria since the beginning of the year. A rare shaft of light, however, is to be found in the rapprochement between the two biggest branches of the Islamic mainstream.

Shia and Sunni Islam have been at odds for most of the past decade. But the self-declared caliphate of terror known as Isis presents them with a common challenge. And they are beginning to put aside their differences in an effort to meet it.

The grand clerics of both schools – the Shia from Tehran, Qom and Najaf, and the Sunni from Riyadh and Cairo – have called upon their followers to take up arms against Isis. Political leaders have also declared their support for an intensified campaign. When the Iranian and Saudi foreign ministers met in New York in September, both diplomats hailed the opening of a new chapter in relations between their countries.

For better or worse, western countries are also engaged in this complex, onerous mission.

It is of paramount importance that all parties clearly understand the differences between Sunni and Shia traditions with respect to the war on Isis and other terrorist groups that claim to find justification in Islamic doctrine.

Neither traditional Sunni nor Shia clerics would recognise Isis as their own, but the group more closely follows the model of Islamic governance suggested in the teachings of Salafism, an offshoot of the Sunni school.

Isis did not materialise out of thin air. Its emergence was facilitated by financial and military aid from Sunni countries that support them – supplied by individuals and governments alike, and initially intended to curb the influence of Shia Iran in Syria and Iraq.

The two Islamic factions differ in their ways of mobilising their followers in the campaign against Isis.

In Shia tradition, this is straightforward because religious leadership is centralised. For instance, Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran and Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq can issue a fatwa urging their followers to join the fight. Hundreds of thousands of their followers would take up arms without hesitation. These leaders carry with them a huge mass of support.

But under Sunni Islam there is no central authority and no hierarchy, making the issue far more complicated. That is precisely why it is possible for a charismatic, authoritarian leader to assume control of a radical movement – albeit a limited one.

This decentralisation gives the extremists latitude to develop their own reading and understanding of jihad. In the absence of central authority, preventing fundamentalist Sunni Muslims is a daunting task. So is thwarting financial or political support of extremists by this non-governmental force in the Sunni world.

Major governmental Sunni players in the region, namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey have taken contrasting approaches towards extremist groups. Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood created friction with Saudi Arabia and tensions have also appeared between Turkey and Saudi Arabia over their support for opposed currents of extremism in Syria and Egypt.

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The coalition built by America to check the advance of Isis must pay careful attention to these facts.

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Sunni players in the region should be urged to cut their support for the terrorist groups. International measures should be taken to prevent sympathisers elsewhere from providing financial or material support. A co-ordinated approach was largely successful in starving al-Qaeda of support.

Violent extremism that claims to act in the name of Islam has emerged as a monster that may come back and haunt Sunni states. But this threat has also created an opportunity. Shia and Sunni Muslims now face a common, grievous enemy. They must settle their differences and confront the danger together before events spiral even further out of control.

For the Sunni states to succeed in this mission, difficult as it may be, they should put their differences aside and unify against the dark forces that threaten their stability – and even their existence.

The west – particularly the US, as the leader of this coalition – should recognise that as things stand the only unified actors in the Islamic world are the Shia. This force cannot be ignored. It should assume its proper place as the pillar of this vital campaign.

The writer, a former Iranian diplomat, is author of 'Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace'

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