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ORSAM

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## FEIRAHİ: “ARAB SPRING LED TO A NEW CONFRONTATION WITHIN THE AHL-E SUNNAT!”

Davood Feirahi



Davood Feirahi is a professor of political science in the Faculty of Law and Political Science at Tehran University. Besides his academic education, he completed education on Shi'ite theology and Fiqh in seminaries of Zanjan and Qom. Professor Feirahi, who is well known with his command on the field on political thought in Islam, has authored various articles books such as Power, Knowledge and Legitimacy in Islam (Ghodrat, Dânesht, va Mashro'yyat dar Eslâm), Political System and State in Islam (Nezâm-e Siyâsi va Dowlat dar Eslâm), The History of Developments of State in Islam (Târikh-e Tahavvole Dowlat dar Eslâm).

**ORSAM:** We would like to have your ideas about sectarianism that is on the rise in the Middle East region. As it is known, there occurred great changes in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. You are a professor of political science and a Shii religious scholar at the same time. How do you see the view of the Middle East when you look from Tehran?

**Davood Feirahi:** To my view, Middle East is a 'hegemon' region. That means, not only the region itself is unstable but also the instability of the region could penetrate the whole world. Many places of the world are not like that indeed. The issues in other regions may not be the issues that concern the whole world. The issues of the Middle East region could become global issues, pretty quickly. The reason for this is the location of the region. For instance, the region is like a heartland from geographical point of view. This heartland is located between the big powers. Look at the big powers located in the north, south, east and west: The Middle East is in the middle of them. On the one side there is China, on another side there is Russia, the Europeans are on the west. This is named as strategic heartland. One dimension

of the issue is this issue of location. The other dimension is energy, which is the oil in the Middle East. One other dimension is Islam that is itself a major issue. That is to say, the fact that being a Muslim region is very important. I would like to try to explain this issue more in detail. I am not interested in the political and military issues that are emphasized by the strategists who mention the heartland of this geography. On the contrary, I would like to discuss the religious situation of the Middle East. This is because the issues such as oil have been very much discussed regarding the Middle East, but the religious dimension has not been clarified enough. To be precise, I will explain the religious dimension of the issue.

If we would like to look from an international point of view, we see that one of the main characteristics of the region is immigration which is caused by underdevelopment. A significant portion of the Muslim generation immigrated for instance to the USA, Europe and to various places. This migration has many effects. One of the most important effects is that family of every immigrant that goes to Europe or to the USA continues to stay in the Middle East. In other word, their relatives, families, parents or sib-

lings are here. This being the case, the events in the Middle East cause sensitivity among the immigrants in Europe and in the USA. Therefore, these immigrants drag the events and issues of the Middle East to the countries that they migrated and settled, and the events in the Middle East affect the Europeans and the Americans. For instance, the 9/11 event is crucially important from this perspective. Those who engage in conflict with the Americans in the region drag this conflict to those far lands. Do you know what happened? When the Americans captured Iraq, an interesting tv programme was broadcasted by the CNN. In the programme, an American soldier was asked why he came to the Middle East. The soldier replied, "I came here in order not to be obliged to fight with the radicals in the USA." In return, al-Qaeda also made the statement: "We also want to do the same with you!" This statement was meaning that 'you want to open a front on this side; and so we want to move the front to your lands.' Upon this, they developed a project called 'threatening the West at their home'. As you see, one of the characteristics of the migration is this. Any change or development here resonates in the West.

One other characteristic

of the migration is this: According to a common view, people who are far away from their families and circles are more prone to radicalization. This is an interesting phenomenon. They almost begin to form a colony. This colony starts to oppose to the high culture. Russians have a saying: "When a rich person pays attention to a poor person, the poor one thinks that some part of the wealth that God gives to the rich goes from him." Because of this, the poor feels rage towards the rich. When we look at the Westerners, this saying of Russians becomes true: immigrants think that the Westerners deprive themselves of. It is this that makes the Middle Eastern issues global and drags the issues to everywhere. The events in the Middle East affect everywhere and this is a usual affect. An event that happens in the Middle East leads to two kinds of fears. One is the influence of the event on energy system; the other is the idea that the security lines could change place. In the Cold War period it was said that the security line crosses the Middle East. Some part of the Middle East inclined to Europe and the USA, other part inclined to Russia and China. The line of division between the West and Russia and China took shape in this region. I myself remember, at the time of

*The events in the Middle East affect everywhere and this is a usual affect.*

the USSR, the Russians were asked "Why are you in Syria?" Russians replied "In order not to be obliged to meet the Westerners in the Central Asia."

**ORSAM: Do you mean that the Middle Eastern issues do not only belong to this region and are not confined only with this region?**

Yes. When the Islamic Revolution (1979) happened, it was a very big event that was called as a "miracle" in Iran. Regarding the issue of intervention to Iran, the Americans were preventing the Russians and the Russians were preventing the Americans. I remember there is something like this in the Nojeh coup attempt (9 July 1980). Similar situations came out also in other operations. In a word, the two big

powers were preventing each other in the operations against Islamic Revolution. As a result of this, after the revolution, the aforementioned line of division disappeared. The line became blurred, not clear if it would be drawn again, led to a thought if a new independent space appeared. Currently Iraq and Syria is like this. Everyone tried not to pull back their security lines. These lines were very important lines. In the past, this situation was the same under the name of "twin pillars"; the Westerners wanted to control the Saudi Arabia and Iran. All these point out that the issues of the Middle East are global in their content. Foreign interventions totally eliminate the possibility of solution of the conflicts inside the region since the region is not independent.

Thus, themes of migra-



tion and security lines that remained from the old Cold War tradition were explained. Both phenomena make the problems complicated. You should add this politics and economics; the markets and oil.

From the other side, there are two crises in the Middle East: One is tribalism and nationalism, the other is religious controversies. I will try to explain these religious controversies. So to say, the controversies in question do not have a common dress. For instance, Arab nationalism is against Shiism. Likewise, Salafism is against nationalism. What I want to say is that national and sectarian identities are not overlapping. For instance, it is not like that in Japan and China. Japan distinguishes itself from its surrounding with its language and religion –Shintoism. In contrast to this, it is not the same in the Middle East. One has a national difference; the other has a sectarian divide which is not coherent at all. Because of this sectarian controversies either control national controversies or deepen them. National controversies do the same over the sectarian controversies.

**ORSAM: Sectarian controversies are really very important. Especially in Iraq and Syria, this dis-**

**tegration has become severe. Why recently these controversies increased that much?**

In addition to present international factors, there came out many other factors. One is these is the democratization process in the region. As you know, democratization is a mentality. There occurred democratic awareness in the society. This democracy mentality has come to the Middle East. If we want to use as a metaphor, spirit of democratization travels in the Middle East. This democracy mentality activates sectarian identities. Every sectarian current wants to have a share from power. It was not like this in the past. In the past, Shiites of Arabia were demanding freedom just to build a mosque; but now they demand a share from power. Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites were not like this. Before, they only demanded not to be objected to force by repressive government; but today they want to have a share from politics; a huge share. The story of Iraq is an important story. We have to take lessons from this story. Both ahl-e Sunnat and Shi'ites wanted to take share from power. However, the relationship of democracy with nationality, which means how much share each group would take from the power, has not certain yet. This uncertainty fuels more political

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controversies between sectarian movements. The reverse is also the case; that the political controversies sharpen the sectarian controversies. I would like to give an example: When Iraq waged war over Iran; Iran developed a narrative of defense based on religion because of the fact that the revolution was religious. What was interesting was that a party like Baath had to religionize its discourses. Likewise, they added the wording 'Allahu akbar' to Iraqi flag. What is also attracting attention was that when America attacked Iraq because of Kuwaiti issue, Baath party started to come closer to the Sunni fraction. When it came closer with the Sunni fraction, in the coming years the Iraqi army, most of which was composed of Baath and Sunnis, reached to an extremist point regarding the sect. Afterwards, the Sunni soldiers of Iraqi army today joined ISIS. When we analyze ISIS army today, we see that a foreign group is on the ISIS front and majority of these forces composed of Sunnis who could not take share from power at the time of Nouri al-Maliki government and other majority is composed of Baath army, a small part is composed of Naqshbandi Sufis under the leadership of Izzat al-Douri, and a part is composed of those who participated to 'Sunni Awakening' (Sahwa) current.

**ORSAM: You mentioned the impact of democratization process on the intensification of sectarian controversies in the region. What may be the relationship between the ISIS and democratization process?**

Their presence is a reaction against democracy. You can see the affects of this. For instance, they authored a book named in Arabic "*Edilletün Celiyye fi Küfri men İtikade fi'd-Demokrasiyye*", meaning "Clear Evidences about Excommunication of Those Who Mention Democracy." It is also quite interesting that Iraqi ahl-e Sunnat believes that right to govern historically belongs to Sunnis. ISIS excommunicates these three groups: 1. Shi'ite; they call Shi'ites as polytheist. 2. Those who cooperates with the West. Everyone who cooperates with the West is infidel. For instance, they call also the Saudi Arabia as hypocrite. In other words, they are Muslims in appearance, but actually they are hand in hand with the West. As an example, they don't want (the US Foreign Minister) Kerry to meet with King Salman. 3. They call those who accept democracy as ahl-e 'bid'ah'. Bid'ah refers to things which are not in the essence of religion, but added afterwards. According to this, AK Party is totally infidel ac-

ording to them, because AK Party talks about democracy. This reflects their minds very clearly. So it means that democratization process is not ineffective for them. Albeit reactionary way, democracy shaped ISIS in one way or another.

**ORSAM: Then do we have to give up democracy in order to solve sectarian controversies in the region? Is it possible to solve this problem within democratization process?**

I would like to explain this: All that we mention until now was implication of what happened in Iraq. Many people could not gain a clear understanding of Iranian presence in Iraq. One of the reasons for this is Iran's own interest. But the real important reason is the fear that generations will be slaughtered. There appeared a possibility that the same massacre of Ezidi's will be done especially in the Shi'ite regions. This causes reaction in Shi'ite world.

Apart from these, there is another quite wide problem. In fact, Arab Spring did not cause a conflict between Sunnis and Shi'ites; it led to a new confrontation among the Ahl-e Sunnat. This confrontation is a contradiction of Sunni with Sunni. 'Ikhwan enigma' prepared this. Ikhwanis were

directed to democracy. When Ikhwan relies on democracy, the distance between itself and all other non-democratic Arab governments was widened. Ikhwan was dangerous for Arabia, because they were explaining democracy with a religious definition. This is very important. They were saying that good Islam or true Islam was democratic. Could it be possible that all the sultanate regimes of the Middle East would accept Islam's being against sultanate? Hence, Ikhwanis started to shake the thrones of Riyadh, United Arab Emirates, monarchies. In a sense, Arab Spring is not a danger only for secular dictators but also for sultans. If the Arab Spring movement had continued, then the entire Middle East region could have been connected. This movement actually could connect for instance Turkey and Egypt. But there occurred controversy among Sunnis themselves. For instance, look at the controversies between Egypt and Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. These controversies were a split prepared by the Arab Spring; a problem caused by Ikhwan. Today, in reality, all the repression on Ikhwan is a warning to Turkey. Although they themselves want to abolish Ikhwan, this strategy was jammed in Egypt. There were two kinds of contradiction: One is the contradiction between Shi'ite

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and Sunni, the other contradiction is between Sunni and Sunni. The contradiction between Sunni and Sunni has three dimensions: 1. Ikhwan view, 2. Wahhabi view, and 3. the contradiction of the ISIS view. What happened at the end of this contradiction? Sunni forces could not control ISIS. Although the tanks were ready at the border, Turkey could not move in Kobani, because they did not know with whom to fight. If they fight with ISIS, Assad will come; if they fight with Assad, ISIS will come. Saudi Arabia is also in the same situation. It cannot know whether it will fight with ISIS or Assad. On the contrary, although temporary, the only force that could establish a common front against ISIS is Shi'ite arc, meaning Lebanon, Syria and Iran. This is the natural result of the events, because actually,

the aforementioned contradictions, which could be but cannot be solved by the Sunni world and the big Sunni countries, pull from their hands the opportunity of forming a big power that could take place of other powers. For instance, (conflict among Ikhwan and Saudi Arabia?) story of Ikhwan and Saudi Arabia has to be solved. If Sisi would lessen the pressure over Ikhwan, Ikhwan will come again; if Ikhwan would totally be inactivated then there are countries such as Turkey, Qatar, and Tunisia who have relations with Ikhwan. A country who mentions democracy in the region cannot be together with Saudi Arabia. These countries' presence will make Saudi Arabia uncomfortable, because Arabia's presence is against them. Because of this reason, these countries that pay money to the radicals do not have the

total control of the groups they help. I would precisely like to say that this issue is a mentality issue. If I will explain, when does a human being take a step? Or when he/she is taking a step, does he/she think if he/she will put his/her right foot first or the left foot? This is the situation of Arabia. The only thing that King Salman can do is to have peace with some countries or to come to terms with Egypt or to convince them. If King Salman can convince Egypt to lessen the pressures over Ikhwan, then it will come closer with Turkey. As a result of this, they can together form a front against ISIS and they can also determine their strategies against Shi'a. However, it has still not been done. All these led to formation of microstructures that states cannot control. For instance, the situation of Kurds in Kobani. Both issue of nationalism and sectarianism causes formation of this kind of microstates. Also unofficial people, especially some influential tribes, can become actors. In the words of Foucault, irregular micro forces have appeared. I have a view as a researcher who works in these issues and thinks about these issues. If the views of regional countries, especially the Sunni countries, do not reach a solution on the relationship between religion and politics, then ISIS will continue to exist. This is because

one side is trying to control, but the other side is trying to destroy. Now for instance, according to what I see – that I'm not a politician; I am saying as a researcher- both Saudi Arabia and Turkey have not give consent to the operation carried on in Tikrit; but it is not known what will happen if this operation is not being carried out. Assume ISIS developed in one region – now it already has six million people under its authority – and then it wanted to expand to other regions. Then who could take control of them? Since the Americans understood this situation, they accept Iran's presence in the region. Despite the present controversy between the foundations of the two countries, they could see that this is their common interest. Because of their internal contention, neither the Westerners nor the Sunni states could establish this control. In other words, Sunni states could not reach to a common decision. In a sense, the enigma of mind expands to the area. Arabs cannot decide. If they decide to be more democratic, then Saudi Arabia will be demolished; if they decide to be against democracy, then they will be at the same front with ISIS. As you see, this is a mental enigma.

**ORSAM: Can we say that one of the reasons of con-**

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**troversies between Sunnis and Shi'ites is the mutual otherization of these two sectarian groups? What are the theoretical and historical background of controversies between Sunnis and Shi'ites?**

At first, there were not conflicts between Sunni and Shi'ite. Of course this does not mean that there was not any; but Shi'ites did not have a problem with the four *madh-hab* of Sunnism. The problem started with the formation of Wahhabism. Wahhabis took the road for leaving Istanbul because they were calling the Ottoman state as non-Arab. Afterwards, they started to radicalize Salafism sect. Therefore, Puritanism had shaped in Arabia took a stand against Shi'a and started to clash with Shi'ites. The actual philosophy

of formation of Wahhabism was to marginalize the Ottoman; but this Puritanism started to confront Shi'ism after several phases. It is actually the same now; there is problem between Shi'ism and Wahhabism, not with alh-e sunnat. In fact, Shi'ites do not have problem even with the Salafis; since because Salafis actually had enlightened ideas at the beginning. However, in time, Wahhabis started to attack sacred places, shrines, and graves. Afterwards, they went to Iraq and began to attack Shi'ites. Afterwards, Wahhabis started to transform the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia. Nominately, their interests started to be involved. Radicalism generates radicalism; when Wahhabis radicalized; Shi'ites also started to radicalize. It was not possible to obviate this. Radicalism is always



bad. We can also say other things but what happened is happened and now fire is everywhere. Hereafter we have to look for a solution.

**ORSAM: Many people think that Iran's assertive policy in the region, which is based on Shi'ite geopolitics, intensifies sectarian controversies.**

This is true. At first, Shi'ites were there as a reaction to Wahhabis. But afterwards, there gradually appeared some radical currents in Iran's foreign policy. We cannot say that Iran's foreign policy is not influential. I told the reason; one is ongoing pressure of Wahhabism on Shiism, and the other is the content of revolution. When the revolutions began to take shape; their ideologies became sharpened. This is a fact. On the contrary now, after 30 years, Iranian society confirms that passing the limit of something is harmful. It will be harmful; if either the limit of Shi'ism or nationalism was passed. It is like saying here is mine, there is mine. Yes, there were things like that. I think the main reason of this stems from the desire to protect the revolution in the region. However, there are other important issues now. These are to solve internal crises of Islamic world – such as controlling ISIS – and to find a way to have religion and democracy at the same time. If

we look at the whole, there are radical currents in our country as there are in any country. However, the essential route of Iran and routes of Turkey and Ikhwan are strategically closer to each other, because they include Islam and democracy in themselves albeit to some extent. Of course there are issues between them such as Syria; but these are resolvable issues. When I look at the region wholistically, the ideas of Islamic Republic do not support the radicals but support un-radicals. For instance, they have a harmony with Ikhwan because of being against sultanate. Of course this is my argument. If these countries come closer, they may draw radicalism away; but if they do not do this and they continue to jostle each other, radicalism can began to rise. For instance, If President Rouhani cannot solve the Middle east issue, his alternative will be worse than former president Ahmadinejad. Of course we know our country.

**ORSAM: Well then what are your suggestions for the solution of controversies in the region?**

I think that three points are important. Firstly, the states, and politicians should be more farsighted. They have to think future without being attached to present. The second is reciprocal conversation of

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academicians and experts of both sides. These kinds of people do not listen to voice of right or left, they just tell what is there as it is. Thirdly, the primary and secondary issues should be determined in the region. Even though we cannot form a common stance on the primary issues, we can at least meet on a common ground. For instance despite the controversies

between themselves, Turkey, Qatar and Iran are against ISIS and they can act together. In other words, despite our controversies we can be allies in some issues. Then ISIS will not have a space to breath.

**Thank you for your allocating time to us and for sharing your views frankly.**

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