Sunni and Shi‘ite Muslims clash in Syrian civil war

by Oren Dorell and Ahmed Kwider

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The Syrian civil war is increasingly drawing in nations across the Middle East. The conflict, which sets Muslim against Muslim, threatens to pit world powers against each other.

The United Nations Human Rights Council pushed through a resolution May 29 to investigate the abuses of the Syrian regime, over the objections of the regime’s ally Russia, who insisted the West was making matters worse.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry continued his travels in the region, trying to get all parties to agree to a peace conference in Geneva. But councils representing the Syrian rebels again refused to join, demanding that representatives of Bashar al-Assad’s regime be banned.

In a war that is now clearly setting the two main branches of the Islam—Sunni and Shi‘ite—against one another, the differences between world powers is bringing about a desperate situation, according to experts.

“The longer this conflict goes on the more chances it has of spilling over,” said Vali Nasr, dean of John Hopkins University’s Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies in Washington.

Whether the battle will be contained to Syria is in doubt now that Islam’s two major strands have taken sides against one another, threatening to spark a wider war that is centuries in the making between Sunni and Shi‘ite Muslims.

“There is great fear over a massive sectarian war starting. If it does, the entire region will turn into a genocidal war, engulfing everyone,” says Samir al-Ibrahim, 55, secretary-general of the Syrian Free Religious Scholars Association and a Sunni

Muslim in Idlib, Syria.

Sunni Muslims, who include the royal families of the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms, have banded behind the rebels (Sunnis are the majority in Syria). The royal families of Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been funneling arms and cash to rebels, and Sunni Muslims who dominate al-Qaeda have dispatched fighters to the front.

Assad has appealed to the Shi‘ites, who are helping him hang on to his regime. The Shi‘ite theocracy of Iran has deployed officers and fighters from its Revolutionary Guards. Hezbollah, designated a terrorist group by the United States, which has fought two wars with Israel from its base in Lebanon, is pouring militants into Assad’s forces.

Religious leaders from Islamic branches in Sunni-dominated Egypt and Shi‘ite-heavy Iraq have denounced each other for killing Muslims. Arab capitals have expressed fears that restive members of one sect or the other will erupt in the streets as they did in Bahrain during the Arab Spring of 2011.

Already, the fighting has bled across Syria’s border with Lebanon, where Lebanese Alawites are fending off attacks from Sunni citizens of the same nation, leaving several people dead. Rockets have been fired back and forth between Turkey, Syria and Iraq.

The schism that gave birth to the Sunni and Shi‘ite divide occurred in the seventh century soon after the death of Islam’s Prophet Muhammad. Some Islamic leaders took the position that it was legitimate for Muhammad’s successor to be chosen through consultation, and they selected the father of Muhammad’s wife to be caliph, or leader of the Muslim world. Others believed Muhammad intended his cousin and son-in-law Ali, a blood relative, to be his rightful heir.

The disagreement led to war. Ali was killed as were his two sons. The two branches flourished as the Shi‘ites, translated roughly as “the followers of Ali,” and the Sunnis, “the people of the tradition of Muhammad and the consensus of the Ummah,” or the Islamic world.

The Sunnis achieved dominance in numbers, wealth and power. The Sunnis of the Ottoman Empire based in modern-day Turkey swept through the Arab world in the Middle East and controlled the caliphate for centuries until World War I. The victorious allied powers divided up the empire into nations, turning power over to

their favored tribes and leaders in newly created countries such as Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia—but they also threw together Sunni and Shi‘ite communities and largely left Sunnis in positions of power.

Today, Sunnis are the majority in most Muslim countries, except in Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain and Iran. Assad’s Alawite sect is an offshoot of Shi‘ite Islam.

One reason given by the Obama administration for refusing to arm rebels to topple a man it wants gone is concern over who will replace him. Sunni foreigners allied with al-Qaeda have been streaming into the fight and winning some battles.

Abu Said, 35, a Sunni member of the Revolution Council in Outer Damascus, a rebel group, says foreign fighters fill a void for antigovernment fighters who are outgunned and out-funded by Assad’s forces.

“As for al-Qaeda, it’s not only our problem, but yours too,” Said added, referring to the West. “You’ve allowed our country to become a feasible environment for everyone to operate, whether al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, or Iran’s and Iraq’s volunteers.”

Adnan Oumama, a hard-line Lebanese Sunni sheikh, sees the strife already bleeding into his country.

“There is no doubt that the war in Syria has turned into a sectarian conflict pitting Shi‘ites and Alawites against Sunnis,” Oumama said. “We are against a religious war with the Shi‘ites, but if someone starts killing us based on our religion, we will defend ourselves.”

Shi‘ite cleric Sheik Mohamad Ali Hajj el Ameli also sees the Syrian sectarian war spreading to Lebanon. “The Muslim street, whether Sunni or Shi‘ite, has radicalized,” Ameli said.

“Although politicians do not seem to want a war in Lebanon, it is doubtful they can maintain control of their followers, given the involvement of both communities in Syria. A religious war is thus a growing possibility, all the signs are pointing to one.” *—USA Today*