The roots of renewed sectarian violence in Iraq and Pakistan
By Michael Goldfarb, Global Post
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LONDON — In Iraq last weekend, car bombs ripped across Baghdad in a coordinated sequence killing 28 people. In Pakistan last weekend, 90 people were killed in Quetta.

The two events have this in common: the victims were Shia Muslims. The bombs are believed to be the work of Sunni extremists.

These are not isolated events. In January, another 90 Shia were killed by a suicide bomber at a snooker hall in Quetta. In Iraq, 2012 ended with 36 Shia killed in a wave of attacks across the country.

In Iraq, at least, these attacks marked a return to the kind of sectarian violence that had been in sharp decline in recent years. Experts have different views about what is behind the upsurge.

"The Syrian conflict," is the cause, says Fawaz Gerges, director of the Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics. "The Syrian conflict has exacerbated tensions across the region," Gerges adds. "You cannot isolate Iraq from its neighbors. There are linkages and connections."

Syrian President Hafez Assad's regime, he says, “portrays itself as protecting minorities: Shia, Alawites, Christians." In Iraq the reverse is true. The Sunni are the minority but the government is dominated by the majority Shia.

Salafists — Sunni extremists — fighting in Syria see the battle as being the same in both countries. "The Shia represent a fifth column against the true faith and so are more dangerous than the kuffar, or unbelievers," explains Gerges. "Killing Shia is a religious duty."

But this is not the only reason for the upsurge, the LSE professor points out. It may not even be the most important. "Salafist activism is a very limited phenomenon, but it is insidious and violent."

All politics is local, even violent sectarian politics. Local elections are due in Iraq in April and the recent bombings may be tied to that.

There is anger in Iraq's Sunni heartland of Anbar Province with the Iraqi government and its face on the streets, the security services, which they regard as Shia-dominated. In January a protest in Fallujah ended with the security forces firing on a crowd and killing 9 people.

This event led to more protests and a limited revival of al-Qaeda in Iraq and other Salafist activity.

Then there is the approaching 10th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. Anniversaries tend to be marked by radicals on both sides with violence, although on this anniversary America is not a big factor — or target.

"America's political influence in Iraq has dropped drastically since its withdrawal at the end of 2011," says Omar Sirri of London's Chatham House think tank.

"America figures somewhere near the bottom of the average Iraqi's list of daily concerns." Sirri adds. "Of greater concern is the desire for uninterrupted electricity lasting longer than 4-6 hours per day, and to earn a decent working wage — desires similar to most people in the world."

Most analysts from the region emphasize the unique nature of Sunni-Shia conflict. Gerges sees it as less religious conflict and more about real world politics.

Iraq's Sunni and Shia communities aren't fighting about the succession to the Prophet Mohammed 1,400 years ago — the origin of Islam's religious schism. Salafists excepted, the conflict isn't about trying to establish a new Caliphate to unite the Muslim world. The rival groups are fighting to get their share of the new Iraq's political and economic pie.

It is a rapidly growing pie. According to The Economist, the southern oil fields in the Shia heartland of the country are exporting 2.8 million barrels a day, the highest total in 30 years.

Local politics is also partially behind the violence in Pakistan, described by Gerges as "a separate case," characterized by the nation's "perpetual instability." The problems are exacerbated by the ongoing attempt of the Taliban to take over the Tribal Areas.

The recent bombings in Quetta targeted the Hazara community. Quetta is on the border with Afghanistan and the Hazara, primarily Shia, are immigrants from that country. The attacks therefore have an element of nationalist violence as well as sectarian overtones.

The Salafist madrassas in the country have steadily churned out generations of young men indoctrinated to think that all who practice Islam in a different way are apostates; not just Shia, but Sunnis who educate their daughters, for example.

The upsurge in sectarian violence may dissipate but it will not go away. It will simmer until the divide can be exploited by political leaders.

"Geo-strategic rivalry in the Middle East has taken on sectarian form," claims Professor Gerges. "The main rivals are Saudi Arabia and Iran. They are competing for influence in Syria, Iraq and throughout the Gulf region."

There are many ways to look at the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. They are oil producing countries of a certain size and located in close geographic proximity.

Their rivalry could be played out on ethnic terms: Arab vs. Persian. It could be played out in post-colonial political terms: Saudi Arabia remains the feudal monarchy set up by the British, Iran is a revolutionary Islamic republic founded on the overthrow of a western-backed monarch.

Instead they play out their rivalry in sectarian terms with Saudi Arabia backing Sunni forces, and Iran backing the Shia.

A rapprochement is unlikely any time soon. Recently Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad traveled to Cairo. He visited the al-Azhar Mosque, regarded as the intellectual center of Sunni Islam. The mosque in recent years has come under radical Saudi influence.

The Sheikh of al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayeb, publicly upbraided the Iranian president, accusing Iran of trying to spread Shiism into Sunni nations.

It was as if the pope denounced the president of the United States to his face for advocating religious pluralism in the Christian world. This was a major diplomatic incident which is still causing ructions in the Middle East.

So long as the Sunni-Shia divide is a convenient tool for politicians to maintain their power, it's likely that deadly flare-ups between the two groups will continue to mar the life of ordinary Muslims around the Middle East and South Asia.