

## Impact of Shia-Sunni Annoyances on the Contemporary Geopolitics in the Middle East: A Critical Appraisal

Vol. I, No. I (2016) | Pages: 314 – 323

p- ISSN: 2616-955X

e-ISSN: 2663-7030

L-ISSN: 2616-955X

DOI: 10.31703/grr.2016(I-I).24

Inayat Kalim \* Muhammad Mubeen † Sohail Ahmad ‡

### Abstract

*The modern-day Shiite-Sunni split between the Sunnite Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia and Shia theocracy Islamic Republic of Iran is predominantly portrayed as a sectarian conflict. Instead, their rivalry constituted geopolitical, economic, military, and religious supremacy and legitimacy in the region of the Middle East. Riyadh and Tehran are convoluted in a complex rivalry over a volatile region where both want their dominance and become a Muslim world leader. Religious dissimilarities are of secondary worth for the political elite of both the states, despite the doctrinal variance of Wahhabism and Shiism in their socio-religious setup; the competition of geostrategic influence in the Middle East makes the primary concern instead. Both countries have directly and indirectly supported sectarian violence and militancy in the region, which has caused immense harm to Muslim unity. Muslims are embroiled in several problems and conflicts throughout the world in the name of religious sectarianism, which has weakened their position at the international level.*

**Key Words:** Shia-Sunni, Sectarianism, Political Rivalry, Theological Divide, Islamophobia, Muslim Unity, Middle East

### Introduction

For centuries, the Middle East has displayed its unique geopolitical culture with two powers, i.e., Saudi Arabia and Iran, competing over the political and economic influence in the region, which still is a major theatre of the area even after the demise of Saddam Hussein in the US-led war on Iraq in 2003 (Coll, 2004). It changed the dynamics of regional politics and policies. The Saudi-Iran competition has created a security dilemma that has involved all the Muslim countries. Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Muslims face many problems whose primary reasons are

---

\* Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan.

† Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan.

‡ Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: [sohail.ahmad@comsats.edu.pk](mailto:sohail.ahmad@comsats.edu.pk)

sectarian hatred, prejudice, West Islamophobia, and lust for political, economic, and regional hegemonic designs are the core examples of the conflict.

Due to the Shia Sunni divide, Muslims are deprived of honor, dignity, pride, and power. The lack of unity among Muslim countries shows that the burning issues of Kashmir and Palestine are still not resolved. Solidarity among Shia and Sunni communities is necessary to take actions against such elements supporting terrorism and extremism in Muslim countries. Muslims are deprived of their fundamental rights and divided along with the sectarian lien of Shia and Sunni. Riyadh and Tehran have always pursued their policy goals only to protect their national interests and have harmed the Muslim community. Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi-Arabia are involved in an unending geopolitical, regional, economic, and theological rivalry in the region to lead the Muslim world from their perspective. Ancient religious divide among Muslims is fueling political, economic, and geographical conflict between them. Islam is a Prism through which seeds of these conflicts can be seen. Competition among Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia for the leadership of Islam and Muslim ummah is further escalating the sectarian divide. Sectarian divide among Muslims had changed the political balance of power between Sunni and Shia and the future of the Middle East region. Despite the efforts of Clerics to reduce Shia Sunni conflict and adopt counter-violence measures are not materialized. Shia and Sunni divisions among Iraq and Saudi Arabia harmed the cause of Muslim Unity worldwide.

This research intends to highlight the cause of the divide between Saudi Arabia and Iran along the sectarian lines while focusing on their bilateral relationships. The research aims to analyze the Shia-Sunni conflict as a reason for the divide and plight of Muslims. The main focus of this research is on Iran and Saudi Arabia, who constitute the majority of Shia and Sunni populations respectively in the Middle East region. The research is based on qualitative data analysis, which comprises secondary data collected from news articles, journals, books, and online. The research design of this paper is based on qualitative analysis. The research has further been divided into four parts. The first part consists of an ancient divide between the two which originates after the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The ancient Shi-Sunni divide was mainly based on religion—the second part of the research deals with the same conflict but its amalgamation in modern times. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no longer the Shia-Sunni divide exists as the states' national interests are based on economic, political, and regional aspirations. Further, the seed of conflict between Shia majority Iran and Sunni majority Saudi Arabia is being discussed as a root cause of sectarian divide and harm to the Muslim unity.

## **Historical Background of the Conflict**

Although all Muslims consider the Quran divine in their practices, they are divided on Hadith. After Prophet (SAW) death Muslims were divided into two fractions

over the debate of succession; one fraction argued that leadership should be given to qualified individuals while others contended that it is the inherent right of Prophet (SAW.) Bloodline. The dispute intensified further after the Karbala Pata in which Hussain Ibne Ali and his family were killed by ruling Caliph Yazid I. Sectarian divide among Muslims dates back to the 63AD over the ownership of the Caliphate. The two opposing camps succession debate has generated the two main sects of Islam: Shia Islam and Sunni Islam. The word Shia stems from Shi'atu Ali, which is an Arabic word meaning "partisans of Ali" whereas Sunnis- meaning is "followers of the Sunna" or "way". (Gupta, 2015). Sunni and Shia Islam have different interpretations for Hadith. Sunni Shia is the primary denomination of Islam, but demographically, they constitute 87 to 90% of Muslims worldwide, having 1.57 billion of Sunni population and 10 -13% are Shias. The majority of the Shia population live in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and India (Council of Foreign Relations, 2012).

Being the Muslim states, both have similarities in their belief systems, though the doctrinal difference, the major bone of contention, determines their variant socio-religious organization in ritualistic patterns and theological inclinations of the people. Both sects' religious leadership, aligned with their respective state agendas, remain at loggerheads on politico-religious grounds. The sectarian divide has to tear apart the Muslim community across Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, and Yemen. Who are Sunnis? The word Sunni is derivative of "Ali-al-Sunnah," meaning people of the tradition (Council on Foreign Relations, 2012). Here tradition means whatever The Prophet (PBUH) said, did agree, or condemned to do. Sunnis regard themselves as an orthodox of Islam. An estimated 90% of Sunnis live in the Middle East, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia (Hazleton, 2009). Who are Shias? Shias are guided by The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) dependent Hazrat Ali. The Shia population is about 154 to 200 million globally. The literal meaning of Shia is "Shiat Ali" or "party of Ali" because they claim Hazrat Ali as the suitable successor of The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Council on Foreign Relations, 2012). The battle of Karbala gave rise to the Shia concepts of martyrdom and their grieving rituals.

### **The Shiite-Sunni Split in Modern Times**

Persia's Safavid Empire (1501-1736) declared Shiism as the state religion (Encyclopedia Iranica by Hamid Algar). This phenomenon resulted in the rise of annoyances between the Persian empire and the contemporary Sunni Ottoman Empire (1299-1922), resulting in armed conflicts between the two. Although those empires faded with time, their political and religious legacy still exists in different Shia and Sunni sects. Shia comprises Iraq, Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Lebanon, while Sunni majority countries are more than forty, ranging from Morocco to Indonesia. The Iranian revolution of 1979 allowed Shia cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah

Khomeini to rule under “guardianship of the jurists” (Velayat-e-Faqih), which Sunnis oppose (Council on Foreign Relations, 2012).

From 1950-1960 Arab Nationalism was at its peak in the Middle Region (Gupta, 2015). In the 1980s, during the Iran-Iraq war, ethnicity, sectarianism, and religious divide became prominent (Gupta, 2015). Middle Eastern and Gulf countries are engaged in sectarian violence. The Shia Sunni divide is so vast that it engulfed Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Thousands of Syrian and Iraqi people being killed, and millions have taken refuge (News, 2016). Shia population living in a Sunni-dominated country always consider themselves a victim of oppression and discrimination as conservative Sunni regimes considered the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a launch of radical Shia Islamist agenda (News, 2016). Particularly in the Gulf region, the Shia-Sunni sectarian divide has become stronger over time.

Religion and political supremacy can be seen through Arab Spring 2011. According to NPR Podcast Through line, three significant events have further deepened the Shia-Sunni divide by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Council on Foreign Relations, 2012). Firstly, in the 16th century Safavid dynasty transformed Sunni Iran into Shia Iran. Then in the 20th-century division of the Ottoman Empire after WWI has further divided the region across community lines. Finally, the 1979 Iranian revolution branding radical Shia Islam, which collide with the conservative Sunni Saudi Arabia.

The politicization of Islam and the rise of fundamentalists have increased the sectarian divide in the 21st century. The Chaos caused by Persian Gulf War was followed by the US war in Iraq in 2003 with the demise of Sunni leader Saddam Hussain and the massive uprising in the region known as Arab Spring 2011 (Coll, 2004). The Shia-Sunni divide has fuelled war in Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, and Yemen. A common thread of an ongoing conflict between Shia-Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia is influencing the oil-rich Middle East region and regional superiority. The cold war moved into the Middle East, where regional geopolitical stances led to rivalry by using sectarianism as a tool. In 1979, the Shah of Iran was toppled by its people and replaced by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to establish Iran as a regional power. It shocked the Sunni Muslim countries, especially the traditionalist Saudi Arabia who always considered himself a leader of the Muslim world. So contemporary Saudi Arabia considered himself a leader of all the Muslims, whereas Iran’s view of the Muslim world is quite different.

## **Main Factors for Conflict Between Iran and Saudi Arabia**

Historically, sectarian violence is sporadic to see, but the political leadership of Iran and Saudi Arabia has sparked regional and sectarian violence. Extremist groups and sectarian militants are sponsored and supported by these states. Saudi-Iran political rivalry is tearing apart the Middle East region and causing harm to the Muslim unity. They displayed considerable resources to proxy battles. Saudi

Arabia has deployed forces in restlessness in oil-rich provinces, which are a dominantly Shia minority. Saudi Arabia is supporting the suppression of the Shia rising in Bahrain. At the same time, the Sunni dominant coalition of countries to combat rebels in Yemen has further intensified the situation. The regional situation has been further built up after forming a Saudi-led coalition army of the ten Sunni majority countries to counter Houthi rebels in Yemen. Furthermore, the chain of proxy tussles is amplified in Syria through the backing of both the states to their respective fighting sects; Saudi Arabia is providing financial support to Sunni rebels in Syria, and Iran is providing billions of dollars in aid and loan to Syria's Alawi-led government under Assad and trained Shia militants.

Saudi Arabia and Iran rejected settling conflicts through dialogues. Both countries want regional political hegemony. In January 2016, Riyadh executed a Shiite cleric for being involved in anti-state activities. The event has caused a diplomatic crisis between the two, which generated ferocious demonstrations all over the Middle East region. As in Syria, Hezbollah – a Shiite militant group, has assistance from Tehran to fight along with Al-Assad's government to tackle the Sunni rebels. On the other hand, Islamic State (IS), backed by Riyadh, targets the Shia population in Syria and Iraq.

Shia and Sunnis lived together for centuries. Their sectarian divide is not mainly of religious supremacy; their struggle is for wealth and power in the region. The modern-day enmity between Riyadh and Tehran is based on their hegemonic intentions in the region. In the post-Saddam era, both countries are engaged in more fierce tensions over power and influence. This is evident from the rise of sectarianism, nationalism, and non-consensus on Hajj. These developments have forced Saudi Arabia to keep stationing the US military presence in the Gulf region. Both countries have taken a non-reconcilable position on the core matter of power-sharing in the region. The post-political environment after the Arab Spring 2011 has changed the regional alliances of both countries, which has further intensified their bilateral tensions.

Iran is quasi successful in fulfilling the vacuum created by the failing or failed states by political and military means in Iraq and Syria. Constructive engagement between Riyadh and Iran over power politics is driven by sectarianism. During Cold War, Riyadh and Tehran were the two most essential pillars of US foreign policy in the Middle East region. However, after the 1979 Iranian revolution, the regional dynamics have been completely changed, making Iran an orthodox theological state pursuing an independent foreign policy of the US and from Saudi Arabia. The Western states further complicate Saudi-Iran rivalry support to Saudi Arabia and economic sanctions on Iran due to its nuclear program and Russia's support to Iran. The Cold War, which is ended on the global scene, is still quite visible in the Middle East, with the same backings and dynamics.

## **Saudi-Iran Political & Theological Contention Causing Harm to Muslim Unity**

The sectarian hatred between Shia and Sunni is far beyond the myth of 1400 years of ancient religious hatred. There are 1.6 billion Muslims globally, consisting of 85% Sunni and 15% Shia communities (Fisher, 2016). There is a sizeable Shia minority in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia itself is a Sunni theocracy following Wahhabism, an offshoot of the Hanabi School. For centuries, the ancient sectarian hatred simmering between the countries explained it as a Shia-Sunni conflict in Syria and Iraq, arousing continuous tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. 7th-century succession disputes have indeed created religious animosity between Shia and Sunni, but it is also a fact that it is ancient history. Today's divide between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia is not based on religion and is not ancient as it is far more recently and driven by power politics, not theology.

Shia Sunni divide is very much modern and political rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran as it tearing apart Muslim Unity, causing significant harm to the Muslim Brotherhood all over the world. Saudi Arabia and Iran or using Shia-Sunni lines to achieve the political and strategic interest in the region. It has worsened the situation and divided the Muslims into sectarian lines in and across the Middle East region, due to which sectarian violence has increased over time. In 2015 IS attacks on Beirut, Kuwait, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia has created a black lash against Muslims, threats to immigrants, and European Union ended its open border policy (Fisher, 2016). Syrian war displaced millions of people, manifesting the biggest humanitarian crisis. Four million Sunnis have taken refugees in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Therefore, it can be deduced that all the Muslim militant organizations of the contemporary age with their posture of sectarian violence, Al Qaeda, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Hezbollah, and Hamas, are in one way or the other are having their roots in these two regional powers, i.e., Iran and Saudi Arabia, from where they are sponsored and backed for their ventures (Fisher, 2016).

Iran and Saudi Arabia are playing regional cold war on the sectarian fronts of Shia-Sunni. Shia-Sunni divide or conflict has become a defining issue of the Middle East in the contemporary world. As it is a manipulation of Middle East leaders, it is not the case that middle easterners waked up one day and often realized that they hated each other over seventeen-century succession disputes. Because till 1950 to 1960, the leading regional movement was Arab Nationalism, as the Shia-Sunni divide was irrelevant.

The 2003 US War on Iraq toppled the Saddam Hussein regime and has shuffled the balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both countries tried to fill up the vacuum, which indeed created more rift between them. Later in 2011, the Arab Spring again created stark differences by ending governments in the Middle East, increasing violence. In the other Muslim States, both countries are

trying to support their religious claims against each other for their own strategic and political cause, which harms the Muslim Unity.

The hegemonic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is based on their political and ideational factors. The role of sectarianism in Saudi-Iran bilateral rivalry is not in nature as it continues some political enmity. Such interpretation is a part of the divide and rule policy in the region. This policy especially flourished in 2003 after the U.S.-led regime change campaign in Iraq. In the post-revolutionary, Iran sensed civilizational superiority, which is viewed with Saudi Arabia very well. Iran considered Saudi Arabia as an external entity created by colonial powers to achieve their Zionist objectives.

There irreconcilable political aspirations of Iran and Saudi Arabia to become a leader of the Islamic world has escalated not only further tensions but also causing immense harm to the Muslim Unity throughout the world. Since 1980, Iran has claimed itself as a nucleus “Umm al-Qura,” which means the mother of all cities of the Islamic world (Nasr, 2016). Since 1986 Saudi Arabian King has been granted the title of “custodian of the Two Holy Mosques” (Nasr, 2016). This has generated competition on the religious front and regional political alignments, devastating harmony among Muslims. Both countries have used their media to prepare their perspective agendas in the region. Both countries are funding for proxies and political movements outside of their borders to have regional hegemony due to which number of Muslims fled their state and take refuge in other states.

Saudi Arabia and Iran struggle for power in the Middle East region and the Muslim world. The political disputes and religious differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia continue to expand rather than acknowledging the harsh rhetoric statements between Iran and Saudi Arabia, making it easy to consider them as archenemies and geopolitical rivals. While analyzing the bilateral relationship of Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is pretty evident that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, both countries are involved in the power politics within the Middle East region. It has ultimately taken the Shia-Sunni divide into another level of sectarian violence and militancy in the region. Before the 2003 US war in Iraq, three regional military powers were Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Iraq was playing the balance of power in the region, and it was not very friendly to both Iran and Saudi Arabia. The US toppled the balance of power in the Middle East region and opened a vacuum for the power politics that both Iran and Saudi Arabia want to fill, escalating conflicts. The rise of Hezbollah, Hamas, ISIS, and other militant groups is causing multitudinous harm to Muslims as the rise of Islamophobia is a significant threat that Muslims are facing. In the West, Muslims are facing discriminatory treatment.

## **Conclusion**

Neither Sunnis nor Shias are representative of the whole Muslim community. Both

Saudi Arabia and Iran are manipulating regional scenarios for their own national and political interests. Without resolving some of the long-smouldering issues for power and resources within the Middle East region and between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the bloodlust will affect the Muslim community's security, prospects, and tranquility. The need of the hour is that both the countries should come together on one front to resolve their bilateral conflicts. OIC platform can be a marvelous opportunity where all the Muslim countries can sit together and work for the devolvement of the sectarian clashes. The socio-economic uplift of the Middle East is largely dependent on the nature of bilateral ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Middle East's security and well-being depend on both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Their future course of action will determine the prospects of the whole region and resolve long-standing disputes. Their bilateral cooperation and collaboration can only extinguish bitterness and hatred pursuit in and around the region and will pave the way for peaceful coexistence with all neighboring countries. Riyadh and Tehran's friendly and peaceful relations can only bring peace, prosperity, and even security in the Middle East and surrounding regions.

## References

- Aarts, P., & van Duijne, J. (2009). Saudi Arabia after U.S.-Iranian Détente: Left in the Lurch? *Middle East Policy*, 16(3), 64–78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2009.00404.x>
- Amiri, R. S. K., & Fereidouni, H. (2011). Iran's Economic Considerations after the War and its Role in Renewing of Iran-Saudi Diplomatic Relations. *Cross-Cultural Communication* 6(3), 45-54.
- Bahrain king offers reform talks in July. (2011, June 1). Kuwait Times.
- Coll. S. (2004). *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. Penguin Books, London pp. 712. <https://www.amazon.com/Ghost-Wars-Afghanistan-Invasion-September/dp/0143034669>
- UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. (2012). *The Sunni-Shia Divide*. <https://www.cfr.org/Sunni-Shia-Divide/#!/Sunni-Shia-Divide>.
- Fisher, M. (2016, January 5). *the real roots of Sunni-Shia conflicts beyond the myth of ancient religious hatreds*. VOX. <https://www.vox.com/2016/1/5/10718456/sunni-shia>
- Gupta, S. K. (2015, May 31). *The Long, violent history of the Shia-Sunni conflict*. The Pioneer. <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2015/sunday-edition/the-long-violent-history-of-shia-sunni-conflict.html>
- Hazleton, L. (2009) *After the Prophet: The Epic Story of the Shia-Sunni Split in Islam*, Doubleday Books Publisher, pp 239. <https://www.amazon.com/After-Prophet-Story-Shia-Sunni-Split/dp/0385523947>
- "Iran: Safavid Period," Encyclopedia Iranica by Hamid Algar. Excerpt: "The Safavids originated as a hereditary lineage of Sufi shaikhs centred on Ardabil, Shafi'ite in school and probably Kurdish in origin."

Nasr, S. V. (2016). *The Shia Revival: how conflicts within Islam will shape the future*. <https://www.amazon.com/Shia-Revival-Conflicts-within-Future/dp/0393329682>

BBC News. (2015, January 25). *India and the US seal the nuclear deal as Modi hosts Obama*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-30930581>

Wehrey, F. et al. (2009). *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for US Policy*. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG840.html>

Williams, T., & Adnan, D. (2010, October 17). *Sunnis in Iraq Allied with the US Quitting to Rejoin Rebels*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/world/middleeast/17awakening.html>

Yapp, M. E. (1996). *The Near East since the First World War: A History to 1995*. <https://www.routledge.com/The-Near-East-since-the-First-World-War-A-History-to-1995/Yapp/p/book/9780582256514>

Yemen Leader's Role Presents Thorny Issues for US (2010, January 5). New York Times.