



Sectarianism Begets Diversity; A Study on the Sectoral Divides in Islam in the Middle East

Haseena Sultan¹, Tajwar Ali², Tahira Ali³

¹ Ph.D. Scholar, School of History, Zhengzhou University, Henan Province PR China.

Email: hasina_sultan@yahoo.com

² Associate Professor/ Ph.D., School of Liberal Arts, Qilu Institute of Technology/ School of History, Zhengzhou University, Henan Province PR China. Email: tajooformanite@yahoo.com

³ Lecture/Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Business Administration, Karakorum International University Gilgit Baltistan/ University of Zainal Abidin Terengganu Malaysia. Email: tahira@kiu.edu.pk

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ABSTRACT

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Middle East is the native land of world's well-known creeds and different faiths ruled the Arabian Peninsula in the ancient and modern history. Islam was born in the Middle East in the 6th century and soon it became the religious conviction of majority in the region. This study investigates the complex dynamics of sectarianism within Islam in the Middle East, analysing how these differences contribute to the cultural and intellectual diversity within the Muslim world. This study conducts a thorough examination of historical circumstances, socio-political influences, and religious beliefs to explore the beginnings and development of sectarian differences. It specifically examines how these divisions have affected regional stability, the construction of identity, and geopolitical interactions. The research explores the intricate nature of Sunni-Shia disputes and the rise of other sects, revealing the interplay between religious diversity and socioeconomic dynamics in the area. Ultimately, it asserts that comprehending these sectarian divisions is essential for cultivating mutual understanding and advancing peace within the diverse fabric of Islamic culture. There are more than 15 different sub sects in the Middle East and each camp plays a vital role in the politics of Middle East. Sectarian politics is an indispensable phenomenon in the Middle East.

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Corresponding Author's Email: tajooformanite@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

Islam originated in the 6th century inside the Arabian Peninsula, under the leadership of the esteemed Prophet Hazrat Muhammad. The Prophet hailed from the prominent Hashemite Clan, who had significant influence in the city of Makkah. During the historical period including the life of Hazrat Muhammad, it is noteworthy that Islam did not exhibit any internal splits. Instead, those belonging to this religious community took great pride in identifying themselves as Muslims, so demonstrating their affiliation with the overarching ideology of Islam. Following the passing of the Holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad, many groups emerged within the Muslim community, characterised by distinct variances in their ideology. Muslims have engaged in migration to many regions around the globe, disseminating the teachings of Islam in the process. Consequently, Muslims can now be found in diverse locations worldwide. Within the global Muslim community, it is observed that around 85% identify as Sunni Muslims, while the remaining 15% adhere to the Shia branch of Islam (PRC, 2011, Jan 27). While the historical roots of sectarianism in Islam may be traced back to ancient times, the emergence of contemporary sectarianism in the Middle East can be mostly attributed to the events after the 1979 revolution in Iran. Various sects emerged in various Middle Eastern nations due to a sense of discontentment with their own administrations, which were seen to have disregarded Islamic principles. The Iranian populace successfully overthrew the secular regime led by the

Shah of Iran. The advent of this revolution engendered a fresh antagonism in the Middle East, pitting Saudi Arabia against Iran, since the latter was viewed as a formidable challenge to the dominant position of Saudi Arabia in the region (Heather M. Robinson, 2018). The two most significant branches of Islam, namely the Sunni School of thinking and the Shia School, exhibit deeper subdivisions within their own frameworks. Based on the prophetic predictions of Hazrat Muhammad, it is anticipated that Islam would include a total of 73 distinct sects. The Middle East, being the geographical origin of Islam, also serves as the birthplace for the major sects within the Islamic faith. The separation between Sunni and Shia sects, along with several subdivisions within the broader branches of Islam, emerged in the Middle Eastern region. Certain sects of Islam, such as Brailvi and Deobandi, originated on the Indian subcontinent. The difference between Shia and Sunni sects has consistently played a significant role in the political landscape of the Middle East throughout history. This division continues to have considerable importance in contemporary times and is expected to retain its significance in the future. There exists a notable antagonism between radical Sunni factions, such as the Wahhabi Sunni movement, and hardline Shia groups in Iran. This animosity has been particularly pronounced since the Iranian revolution in 1979. The prevalence of religious sectarianism has reached a significant level, shown by the willingness of the Wahhabi sect in Saudi Arabia to engage in deals with Israel. However, they have not shown a similar inclination to reconcile their hatred with the Shia sect in Iran.

Nearly every religious denomination in the Middle East has its own militant faction or maintains affiliation with an insurgent force. Al-Qaida and ISIS have a tight association with the Wahhabi and Salafi ideologies. Hezbollah is a paramilitary organisation composed of Shia combatants, whereas the Houthis are adherents of the Zaidi Shia sect. Hamas, on the other hand, is mostly comprised of Sunni members. These organisations exhibit strong affiliations with their respective camps and function as the enlisted members of their respective factions. Iran is actively fulfilling its duty by providing assistance to Syrian Shias and the Alawite community, while the Hardliner Shias of Iran provide their support to other Shia minority factions around the Middle Eastern region. The Shia community in Iran extends their support to the Zaidis in Yemen in their conflict with Saudi Arabia. The Iraqi Shia community endeavoured to overthrow Saddam Hussein's secular Ba'athist rule, drawing inspiration from the Iranian Revolution (Gritten, 2006). As compared to Sunni Muslims Shias are more united under the Slogan of Nara- e- Haidari (A slogan of the bravery of Hazrat Ali). Almost all the sub branches of Shia Islam believe the Imamate of Ali and this Imamate of Ali Unites all the Shia branches of Islam. Sunni Islam has the distinction of being the largest branch within the Islamic faith, both globally and particularly within the Middle Eastern region. The level of unity among the many branches of Sunni Islam is somewhat less in comparison to the unity seen among the branches of Shia Islam. Wahhabi hardliners and Salafi Sunni Muslims espouse puritanical perspectives, exhibiting greater adherence to stringent practises and seeing certain actions of their fellow Sunni Muslims as manifestations of apostasy. The Wahhabi sect abstains from offering payments to shrines, but some other Sunni branches of Islam have great reverence for the holy shrines of Muslims. Wahhabi Muslims have significant influence on the political landscape of the Middle East, given that Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar are nations associated with Wahhabism. Saudia, as the Head of the Organisation of Eastern Cooperation (OEC), has a significant position as a key ally of the United States within the area, second only to Israel. Since 1979, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been engaged in a protracted period of tension sometimes referred to as a Cold War in the area. This ongoing conflict may be attributed to the fact that Saudi Arabia is mostly inhabited by adherents of the Sunni sect, known for their hardline beliefs, while Iran is predominantly populated by followers of the Shia sect, also known for their hardline beliefs.

1.1. Sects in Islam

Abu Hurairah a Muslim authority of Hadith and Islamic traditions during the city-state of Medina relates that Hazrat Muhammad the Holy Prophet said: "The Jews were divided into 71 or 72 sects as were the Christians. My Ummah will be divided into 73 sects" (Dawood, 4579). According to the Predictions of the Holy Prophet of Islam, Hazrat Muhammad, There will be 73 sects in Islam until the day of judgement. Right now, there are more than 30 Sects of Islam, which are known in the world but still some sects are unknown, or in the formative Phase. Middle East is the region where Islam was born, then it grew there, and today, there are many sects of Islam in the Middle East. In the Middle East, Sectarianism is among the competing identities in the region. It is a two pronged phenomenon; internal and external. Internal

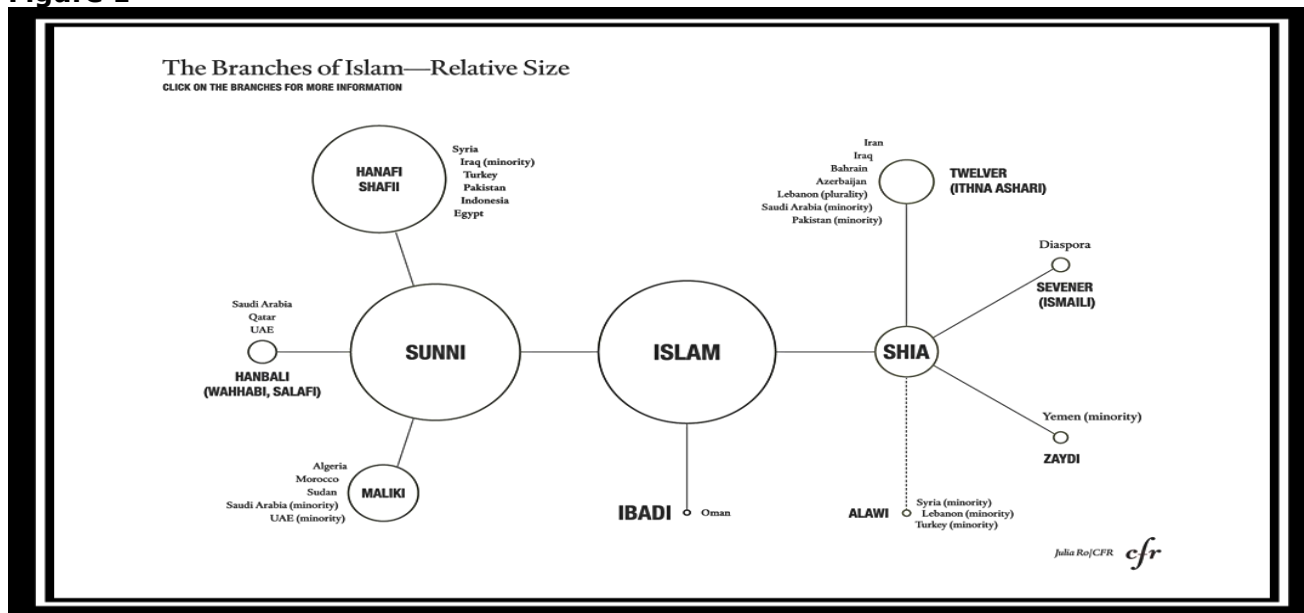
sectarianism takes place in the states like different religious ideologies within one state while external sectarianism is different sects in a region like Middle East (Heather M. Robinson, 2018). According to a US senator Ted Cruz, Sunnis and Shiites are engaged in a sectarian war since 932AD and it is a 1500 years old Conflict (Cruz, 2014, Sep 10). Mitch McConnell a leader of US stated about what is taking place in the Arab world that it is a religious feud that has been going on for a millennium and half (Borowitz, 2014, Jun 18).

Thomas Friedman the famous columnist of New York Times said that the main issue in the Middle East is the 7th century struggle among Sunnis and Shias over who is the true heir of the Holy prophet Hazrat Muhammad (Friedman, 2015).

2. Major Islamic Offshoots in the Middle East

Islam is comprised of two prominent branches, namely the Sunni and Shia sects. The emergence of two prominent sects within Islam may be attributed to their divergent perspectives on crucial ideas such as the institution of Imamate and the understanding of Spiritual Being and Material Being. Shia Islam encompasses many major subsects, including Shia Ithna Ashari, Zaidi, Alawi, Ismaili, Bohras, and Druze, among others. Sunni Islam encompasses many subsects, including Hanafi, Maliki, Hanbali, Shafi'i, Wahhabi, and Salafi. The fundamental distinction between Sunnis and Shias is in their divergent perspectives about the lineage of Imam Ali as a direct blood descendant of the Holy Prophet, and the recognition of Hazrat Ali as the first imam. While Shias uphold the belief in Imam Ali's direct blood lineage and regard him as the first imam, Sunni Islam does not acknowledge Hazrat Ali as the initial Imam subsequent to Hazrat Muhammad. Sunni Islam regards Hazrat Abu Bakar as the first caliph (Khalifa) and recognises him as a judicious leader within the Islamic faith. He is held in high esteem by Sunni adherents, being considered the most revered figure after the Holy Prophet. Sunni Islam does not adhere to the concept of Imamate as an ongoing succession within the lineage of Ahl-e-Bait (The Sacred Family). Conversely, Shia Islam maintains the belief in the perpetuation of Imamate within the lineage of Hazrat Ali until the day of judgement (qiyamat) (Shahrastani, 2014). There are so many sub branches of both Sunni and Shia Sects in The Middle East but some prominent sects, which influence the politics of Middle East, are explained in the following heads.

Figure 1



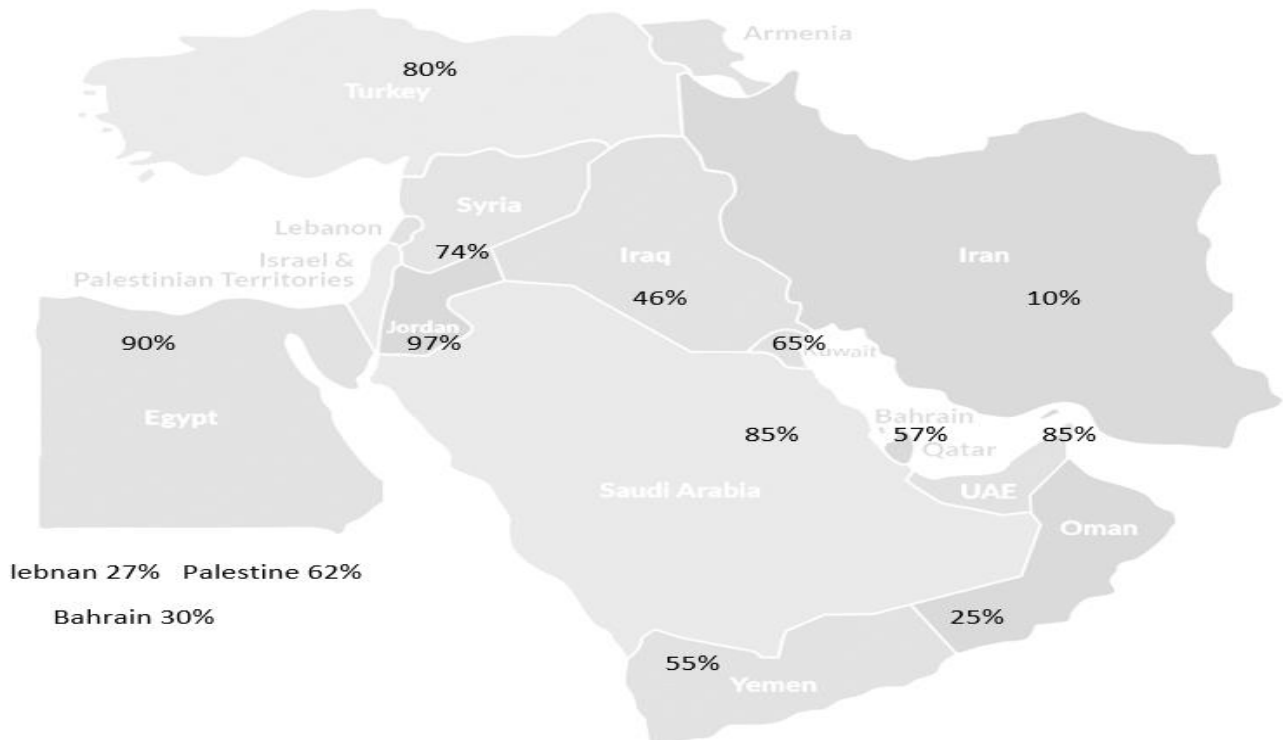
<https://www.cfr.org/interactives/sunni-shia->

2.1. Sunni Muslims

Sunni Muslims make up approximately 85 percent of the world's Muslim population, constituting the largest branch of Islam. There are so many sub branches of Sunni Islam and some branches of Sunni Islam are related to Shia branch of Islam. The Sunni branch of Islam recognises Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddique as Holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad's descendant and the current caliph. Shia Islam accepts imamate after the death of the sacred Prophet, whereas

Sunni Islam accepts Khilafat. In Tunisia, Morocco, Turkey, Algeria, Pakistan, Indonesia, Yemen, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan, Sunnis constitute the majority of the population. Despite the fact that Sunni Islam is the foundation of every Muslim, he is either Shia, Sunni, or Ibaadi. In the world, there are numerous sub-branches of Sunni Islam, but the most prominent are Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi, Hanbaly, Salafi, Wahhabi, Brailvi, Ahl e Hadees, and Ahl Sunnat.

Figure 2: Sunni Population Percentage in Middle East



2.2. Hanafi Sunnis

Hanafis adhere to one of the four main Sunni Islamic schools of thought, namely the Hanafi school of philosophy. It was founded in 767 on the teachings of the prominent Muslim jurist Imam Abu Hanifa. Abu Yusuf and Alshaybani, two of his disciples, compiled his teachings and legal works, which were formally adopted by the Abbasid dynasty. Analogical reasoning (Qiyas) is highly valued by the Hanafi school of thought. In the 16th century, Ottoman Turks formally adopted this code, which remains the most influential institution in the Islamic world. There are Hanafi adherents in the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan (Warren, 2013). Being the oldest Sunni school of thought, Hanafi Sunnis believe in the unity of Muslims and they have good relations with other schools of thought within Sunni Islam and out of Sunni Islam. History further reveals that Imam Abu Hanifa was the pupil of the Imam of Shia Islam like Imam Jafar Sadiq so Hanafis are near to Shia Muslims (Esposito, 1999).

2.3. Maliki

Maliki school of thought is one of the four Sunni schools of thoughts, which was founded by Imam Malik Ibn Anas in the 8th century. They stress Practice as the lens through which to understand the legal implications of the Quran and Hadith and other Islamic traditions. They were also open to analogical reasoning and juristic discretion. The Maliki School currently prevails in western Africa and in the Persian Gulf states (Britannica). Maliki is also a preferred school in Kuwait Bahrain, Dubai and other Gulf states (Nasir, 1990).

2.4. Shafi

Shafi School was founded by Muhammad Ibn e idrees Al Shafi in 818 AD. It is prevalent in Malaysia, Indonesia, Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Egypt (Armanios, 2004). Imam Shafi collected all hadith and tried to make their categories into Authentic weak and strong ones. The categorization process of hadith made up the foundation of this school. The other two schools of thought criticize them for disregarding hadith and sayings of the sahaba (Tschannen, 2017, October 4).

2.5. Hanbaly

Iman Ahmad bin Hanbal founded the school Hanbaly and he was a well-known authority for Hadith Knowledge and Islamic traditions. His school of thought was founded on both weak, strong and authentic hadith (Tschannen, 2017, October 4). Imam Ahmad Bin Hanbal lived from 164H to 241H in Bagdad, the famous city of Iraq. He gained popularity in Najd in Arabian Peninsula due to the ideas of Muhammad ibn Abdl Wahab (Al-Qarawee, 2004). The followers of this school of thought found in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar where it is official fiqh. Some minorities of Hanbaly followers also found in Bahrain Oman, Syria (Champion, 2003).

2.6. Salafi

This school of thought is considered the most modern movement, which based on authentic hadith. The Majority of the followers do not follow weak hadith (Tschannen, 2017, October 4). Salafism is further divided into three main groups like Quietist, Political Salafism and Jihadi Salafism. The aficionados of quietist Salafism distillate on "Cleansing" and shun political activism and teach Islamic way in all its "purity". Political Salafism stresses on the political obligation as an essential part of Islam through parliamentary participation and argumentative debates and making political parties. The followers of Jihadi Salafism try to takeover supposedly apostate regimes in the Islamic world through aggressive Jihad. Adherents of Salafism are found in Syria, Iraq, Egypt and many other countries of the Middle East (Wagemakers, 2016).

2.7. Wahhabi Sunnis

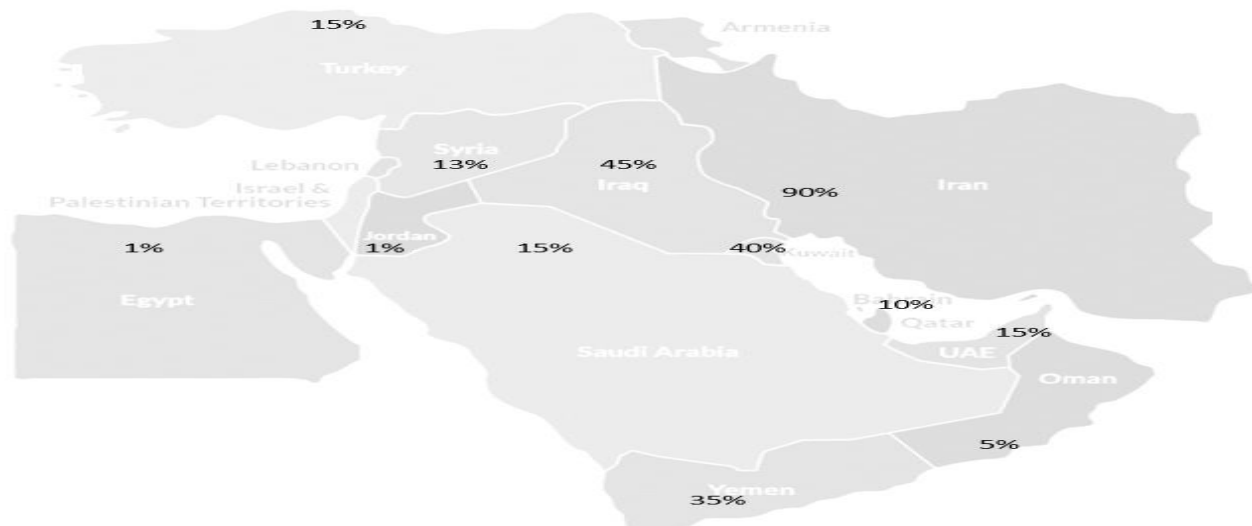
The Muslim reform movement founded by Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahab in the 18th century is called as Wahhabism. Saud family of Saudi Arab adopted Wahhabism in 1744 in central Arabia; it is prevalent in Saudia until then. They believe in absolute oneness of God and call them as Muwahhidun as Unitarians. Some acts of other Muslims like visiting Toms, and venerating saints are acts of polytheism for Wahhabis. They are considered as strict followers of the basic sources of Islam like the teachings of the Holy Quran and Hadith and the traditions from the life of the Holy Prophet PBUH. The teachings of Ibn Tamiya and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal are considered authentic (EncyclopediaBritanica, 2020). It is also considered as the alliance between the political Power of Saud family and the doctrine of Abdul Wahab (Al-Dakhil, 1998). In the Middle East, extremist groups and Wahhabis consider themselves a form of Salafis. Wahhabism and extremist groups like ISIS share many similarities. ISIS encourages killing of Sufis, Sunnis and other Shia groups. They consider all such groups as polytheists. Wahhabis and ISIS rejects secularization, they destroy historical monuments, tombs and century old Islamic Architecture. Wahhabis when captured the holy cities of Muslims like Mecca and Medina, destroyed sacred tombs domes, shrines considering them as the act of idolatry (Algar, 2002). They both have a similar way of enforcing strict regulations by banning smoking, singing, music and all other forms of recreation {Arabia, 2016, July 13 #37}. It grew as a religiously funnelled political reaction to the abating social and political conditions of the 18th century (Al-Dakhil, 1998). A cherished individual belonging to the house of Saud affirmed that Christians are more respectable than non-Wahhabi Muslims since at least they practice their faith. He thinks that non-Wahhabi Muslims are seemingly guilt-ridden of polytheism, and do not follow Islam in the true manner (Algar, 2002). Wahhabis are different from other four Schools of thought because they do not believe in any school of thought. Wahhabis regard the holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad as a best human being but other Sunnis consider Hazrat Muhammad More than a best human being(Jilani).

2.8. Shia Islam

Followers of the Imamate of Hazrat Ali, the paternal cousin of Hazrat Muhammad, are known as shite or Shia. The majority of Muslims believe that Hazrat Muhammad appointed Hazrat Ali as his successor just prior to his death. The following hadith is accepted by all Shias and the vast majority of Sunnis worldwide. Hazrat Muhamad said following his final Hajj Hujat ul Widaa, "Ali will be the Mola of all Muslims who accepted me as Mola."(al-Termezi, 9th century CE). The acceptance of this hadith and the recognition of Imam Ali as a direct blood descendant of Hazrat Muhammad is widely embraced by Shia adherents. Conversely, Sunnis interpret this hadith differently, defining the term "Mola" as "friend" and not subscribing to the notion of Imamate within the lineage of Imam Ali. The primary distinction between Sunni and Shia Islam lies in the notion of continuing Imamate within the Hashmi clan, particularly within the lineages of Muhammad and Ali. One of the primary distinctions between Sunnis and Shias

is to the perceived position and significance of the Holy Prophet. The majority of Shia adherents hold the belief that the Holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad is regarded as a spiritual being rather than a corporeal one. Certain adherents of Sunni Islam see Hazrat Muhammad as an exemplary individual in terms of his physical attributes and human qualities, but without attributing to him a spiritual essence. Sunni Islam serves as the foundational pillar of the Islamic faith, whereas Shia Islam has emerged as a distinct branch that has developed from this foundation. The Shia sect, also known as Shia Islam, is a branch of Islam that represents a Shia Muslims universally embrace the fundamental tenets of Sunni Islam, including the belief in the ultimacy of prophethood, the sanctity of the Holy Quran, and adherence to the pillars of Islam. Shia Islam encompasses several branches, among which the most notable and significant ones are Shia Isthnashary, Zaidi, Alawites, Ismaili, and Bohra. Minority populations of this particular group may be found in almost all nations, whereas in Iran, they constitute a majority.

Figure 2: Shia Population Percentage in Middle East

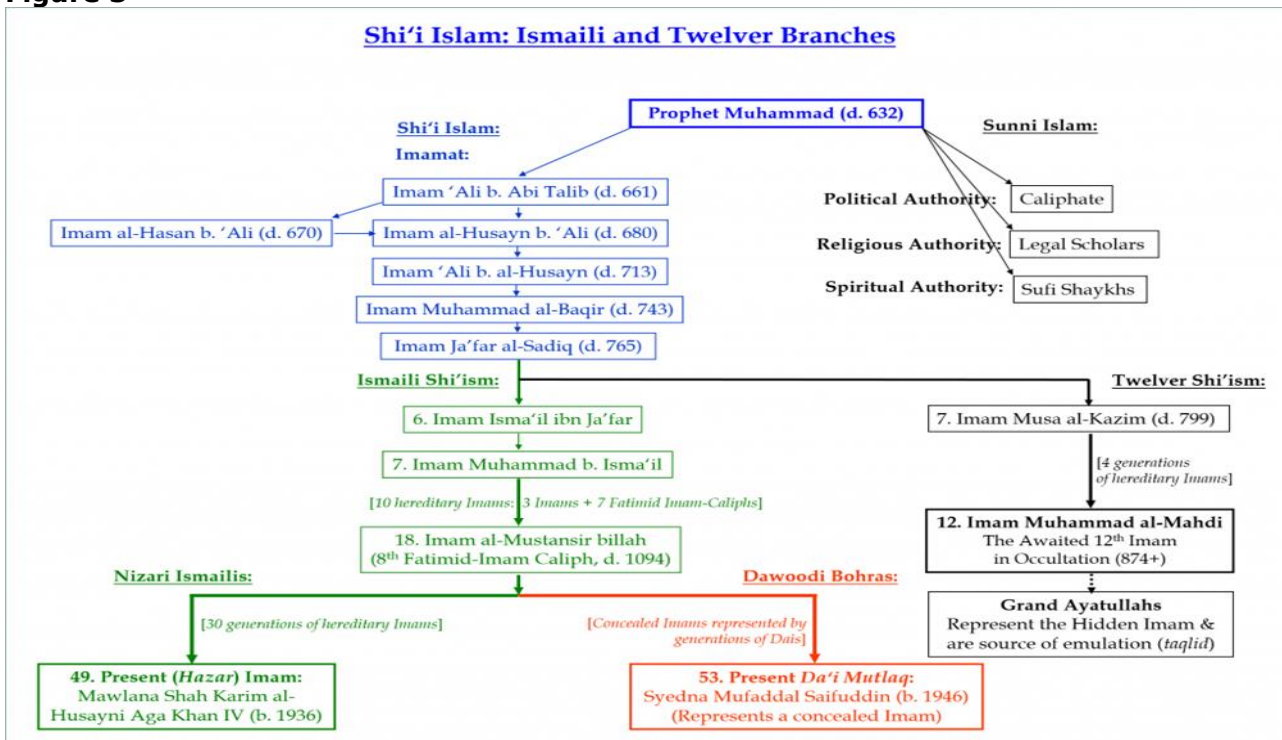


*Lebanon 28% * Bahrain 75%

2.9. Ithna Ashari Shia

The branch of Shia Islam known as Shia Twelvers or Ithna Ashari has the distinction of being the largest among the Shia community. This particular sect of Shia Islam adheres to the belief in the succession of twelve Imams after Hazrat Muhammad. The twelfth Imam, known as Mehdi, is believed to have gone into occultation, and the followers of this sect hold the belief in the temporary concealment and eventual reappearance of the Imams. The manner in which they vary from the Ismaili and Bohra branches of Shia Islam are distinct. Following the death of Imam Jafar Sadiq, a particular sect within Shia Islam began to adhere to the leadership of Imam Musa Kazim, who was the son of Imam Jafar Sadiq. Concurrently, another group known as the Ismailis emerged, who recognised Imam Ismail as their spiritual leader and subsequently adopted the name "Ismailis" in his honour. With the exception of the Zaidis, all branches of Shia Islam maintain the belief in the presence of an imam in the world, which is considered an essential component of their faith. The existence of the imam has significant significance for adherents, as they see the imam as a guiding figure for their followers. The Shia branch of Ithna Ashari Islam is prevalent in several Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and other nations within the region. The political significance of this religious group in the Middle East stems from the predominance of Shia Ithna Ashari Muslims among the people of Iran. Iran is assuming a pivotal position in the political landscape of the Middle East (Momen, 2017). Despite their distinctions with other branches of Shia Islam, Shia twelvers can readily converge with all branches because Hazrat Ali's institution of Imamatus unifies all Shia branches into one. Compared to Shia Islam, there are vast differences between the numerous sects of Sunni Islam. In Sunni Islam, numerous Sunni sects share characteristics with Shia branches. In India, Pakistan, and Central Asia, Sunni Islam, such as the Brailvi Sunnis, coexists with Shia branches of Islam. However, in the Middle East, Sunni branches distinguish themselves from all Shia branches (al-Qasim, 2017).

Figure 3



<https://www.theislamicmonthly.com/brief-history-ismaili-muslims/#>

2.9.1. Zaidi Shia

Zaidis are also called as fivers, which emerged in the eighth century out of a Shia branch of Islam. Zaidis are named after Hussain Ibn Ali the grandson of Imam Hussain. More than 50 % Muslims in Yemen belong to Zaidi branch of Shia Islam (Day, 2012). Zaidis are the oldest branch of Shia Islam and it is the second largest group after Shia twelvers. They are different from other Shias because they do not believe in the infallibility of Imams. This sect emerged after the unsuccessful revolution of Zaid against Hisham ibne Abd al Malik in 724 AD. Zaidis find it hard to remain unreceptive in an unfair world or in the words of modern Zaidi leaders like Hussain Badreddin al Houthi (Lux, 2009). Houthis are fighting against Saudi Arabia since 2016 and Saudi Arabia is spending huge money on her defense expenditure to crush the Houthis of Yemen. Iran supports Houthis against Saudi Arabia because they both have commonality in the Imamate of Hazrat Ali after Hazrat Muhammad.

2.9.2. Alawites

Alawites are a branch of Shia Islam, which was founded by Al-Husayn ibn Hamdan al-Khasibi in the 8th century. The beliefs of Alawites are described as Secretive in nature and they tend to conceal them (Friedman, 2015). Alawites population makes 17percent of the population of Syria and overall in the Middle East, their population is not high but their political role in Syria has made them prominent in the Middle East. Iran supports both Alawites of Syria and Zaidis of Yemen because they have ideological proximity (Barfi, 2016). The perception that Alawites regard Hazrat Ali as God provokes abhorrence from other sects of Sunni Islam (BBC, 2012, May 17).

2.9.3. Ismaili and Bohra

Ismaili Muslims are considered as the most moderate sect of Islam, which purely focuses on philanthropic works. It is a branch of Shia Islam who follows the Imamate in the lineage of Hazrat Ali and Hazrat Muhammad. Prince Karim Agha Khan is 49th direct blood decedent of Hazrat Muhammad and the Imam of Ismaili Shia Muslims. Ismaili Muslims had established empires in the name of Fatimid Caliphs in Egypt in 900ad but currently they are found few in number in different countries of Middle East like in Syria, UAE, and Yemen. They have no political role in the Middle East and they are not part of any militant organization all over the world (Andani, 2017, July 6). Dawoodi Bohra Muslims are near to Ismaili Muslims and they are further a sub branch of Ismaili Muslims. They are very noble and gentle in nature. They are few in number scattered all over the world and especially in the Middle East. Syedna

Aali Qadr Mufaddal Saifuddin is the fifty-third and current Dai al Mutlaq of Dawoodi Bohras who was the son of Burhan U din Rabbani the 52th supreme leader of this sect. They share same beliefs and Imams with Ismaili Muslims but they parted their way in Fatimid Khilafat and become a different sect. Like Ismailis, they are focussing in the philanthropic works and they have no active role in the politics of Middle East (IndiaTV, 2020, Aprile 3).

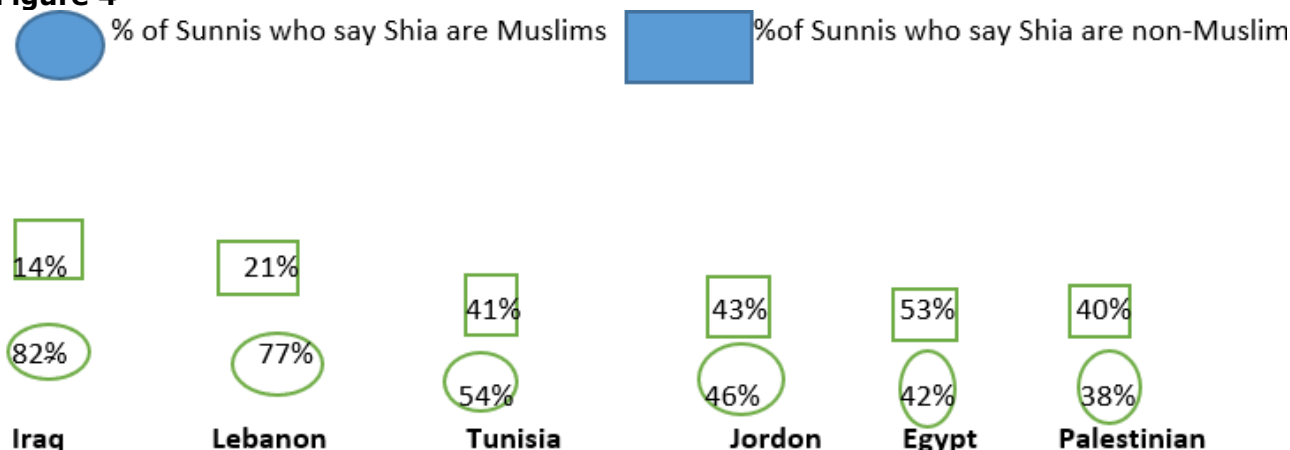
2.3.4. Ibaadi Muslims

Ibaadi Muslims are third and a lesser –known branch of Islam with deep historic roots. Ibaadis are less than three million in the world and they are in majority in Oman. They have a paradoxical background and are a branch of Khawarij; they were the famous earliest hardliners in Islam. Ibaadis are not as hardliners as Khawarij were in many grounds. Ibaadis are relatively obliging towards Muslims of other persuasions and indeed towards Jews and Christians. Oman has 75% Ibaadi population and their policies are different from other gulf nations. Sultan Qaboos is an anglophile leader who has always resisted pressures from Saudi Arab to fight against Shia Iran. Ibaadis were also accused as being no superior to the radical Khawarij from whose lines they arose in 14 centuries ago. That is unfair if anybody depicts the fanatical spirit of the Khawarij. All this reminds that intra-Muslim clashes of the 7th century can still fuel skirmishes today, and that there is no specific logic that defines which modern faction recognises with which olden one (Economist, 2018, Dec 18). The difference between Sunni schools of thoughts does not lie in the fundamental beliefs but they have some difference in jurisprudence and judgements. The Imams of these four Sunni schools of thought have presented their own independent reasoning that is why there is difference between them. There is a delicate difference in the methods of offering prayers among all the four Sunni Schools but these differences are not severe. A follower of one school of thought can pray behind an Imam of another school without any confusion (Tschannen, 2017, October 4).

3. Unity and Acceptance Among different Sects of Islam

There are distinct ideological differences between the various Islamic factions. In addition to the Sunni-Shia divide, a third factor further divides the two primary factions within the existent ones as the most significant distinction between Muslims. This primary point is the Imamate and status of Hazrat Ali, Hazrat Muhammad's cousin. Many Sunni Muslims around the world hold Hazrat Ali's prominence and Imamate in high regard, but they are still classified as Sunni Muslims. Sunnis who unwaveringly revere Imam Ali have a tender spot for Shia communities worldwide. The majority of Sunnis recognise Hazrat Ali as their fourth Caliph, but they disagree with his Imamate and do not consider him a direct descendant of Hazrat Muhammad (Hodgson, 1975). All branches of Shia Islam like Alawaites, Ismailis, Zaidis, Bohras and all other Shia factions believe in the Imamate and Love of Ali (Hub e Ali) and this love combines and unites them. Another Major concept is Spiritual being and physical existence. According to the concept of spiritualism, the Holy prophet Hazrat Muhammad is a spiritual being, this concept divides two major groups in Islam. Some Sunni sects like Brailvi Sunni believe in the spirituality of the Holy Prophet. Many Sunni sects like Wahhabi and Ahl-e- Hadith consider Hazrat Muhammad as a best human being but do not consider him as a spiritual being. The Imamate of Ali and the concept of Spiritualism divide Muslims ideologically (Abdul-Rahman, 2003).

Figure 4



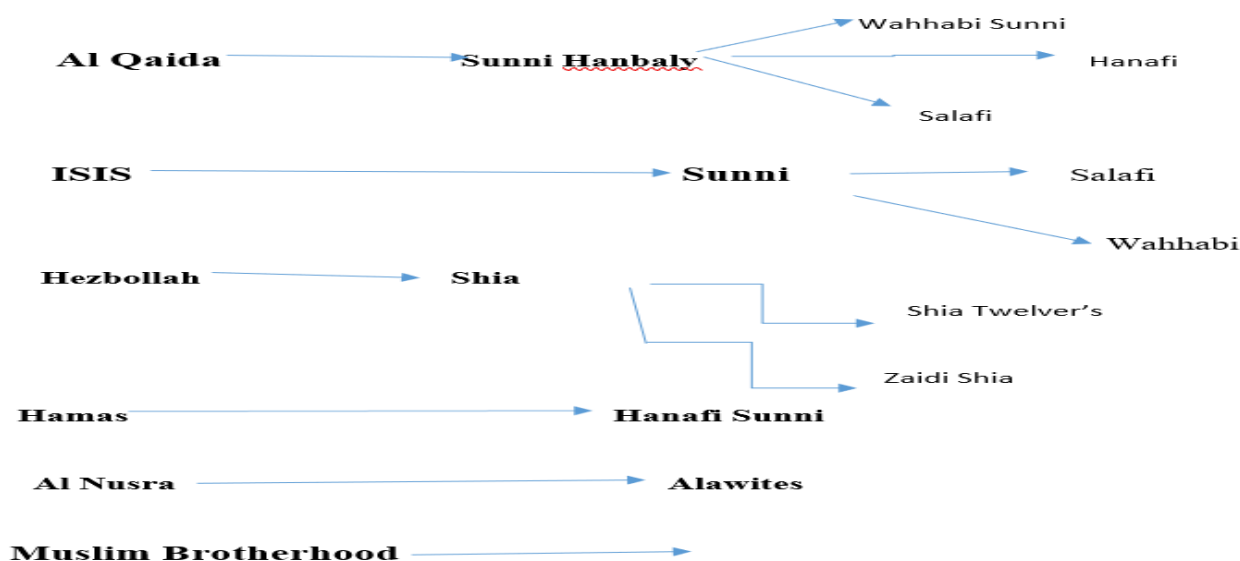
Source Pew Research, The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity, 2012

Muslims in the Middle East are well aware of the differences between the two major branches of Islam, Sunnis and Shias. In most countries, at least 40 percent Sunni Muslims do not consider Shia Muslims as Muslims. In Lebanon and Iraq where Sunnis and Shias are living side by side, there majority Sunni accept Shias as their fellow Muslims (P. Center, 2012).

4. Role of Islamic offshoots in the Polity of Middle East

The struggle for power in Middle East is fundamentally a Shia versus Sunni contest. Sectarian framework is most common one in the Middle East which enables one to understand the dynamics new Middle East Cold War (Gause, 11, July 2014). Religious sect has played its due role in the history but modern sectarianism after the revolution of 1979 of Iran has drawn sharp lines between Sunnis and Shias in the Middle East. Regime in the Middle East always possessed a sectarian bias while the tried to conceal it from others (Al-Qarawee, 2004). In the Middle East, both Sunnis and Shias support their respective sub-branches. Iran favours Alawites and supports the Syrian government of Assad. Syria's civil war is sectarian, with Shia states such as Iran and Hezbollah supporting the regime and Sunni states such as Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS supporting the opposition (Al-Qarawee, 2004). The Shrine of Sayida Zainab in Damascus, which a most sacred place of Shia Muslims was a battleground for Shia and Sunni. Shia fighters were in quest of martyrdom in defence of this sacred shrine while Salafist Jihadist reflected it as a manifestation of Shia polytheism (Al-Qarawee, 2004). In the Middle East, the most virulent animosity exists between two fundamentalist branches of Islam: Sunni and Shia. Wahhabi Salafists are the fundamentalist Sunni Muslims who dominate Saudi Arabia, while Shia Ithna Ashari is a sub-branch of Shia Islam that accounts for 90% of Iran's population. Both are attempting to create a balance with their adversary by forming alliances with sub-sects in the area. Current Middle Eastern politics are based on sectarianism, which is a result of the intense animosity between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iran and Saudi Arabia have reached a point where Saudi Arabia is willing to recognise a Zionist nation in order to defeat Iran, and Iran is prepared to attack Saudi Arabia at any time (ABNA, 2019, Oct 1). Ka'ba is the Sacred Place for all Muslims worldwide, and it historically belonged to the Hashmi Clan in Arabia. Today, millions of Muslims from all over the globe conduct Hajj in Saudi Arabia. Each year million Muslims visit Saudia to visit Ka'ba and give a stimulus to the economy of Saudi Arabia. The Shias of Iran frequently query who owns the Ka'ba, which the Sunnis of Saudi Arabia dislike. Even Shias who are Shia Muslims are prohibited from visiting some religiously significant sites and sanctuaries in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's Shia Ithna Ashari and Wahhabis are the most violent by temperament. Even though both Shia Ithna Ashari and Wahhabi are willing to embrace Jews, they are not willing to accept each other(Shabar). The Iranian Theocratic regime managed to make a powerful network with Shia movements in Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon. This multinational Shiism has been contained by a Transnational Saudi led Sunnism generating proxy wars in Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and Iraq (Al-Qarawee, 2004).

5. Different Militant organizations and their Affiliation to different Sects of Islam



6. Conclusion

The Middle East serves as the birthplace of three major Abrahamic faiths, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Throughout history, the Middle Eastern region has seen a shift in religious demographics. Initially, Jews and Christians had a dominant presence in the area. However, with the emergence of Islam, Muslims gradually became the predominant population in the region. After the year 630 AD, Islam emerged as the predominant religion in the Arabian Peninsula. Following the passing of Hazrat Muhammad in 610 AD, two important factions emerged within Islam, each espousing distinct interpretations of the faith. The historical period after the death of Hazrat Muhammad in the Middle East is characterised by a series of sectarian conflicts among Muslim factions. Religious sects have had significant influence throughout the history of the Middle East, and continue to play a prominent part in the region's contemporary political landscape. Moreover, it is anticipated that religious sects will continue to be a central feature of Middle Eastern politics in the foreseeable future. Sunni Islam, being the most populous branch of Islam, has significant political influence within the Middle East region. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are prominent nations in the Middle East with a significant Sunni majority population. These countries have considerable influence on the political landscape of the region (P. R. Center, 2009). Militant organisations such as Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and ISIS (Daesh) mostly adhere to Sunni Islam and draw inspiration from Salafi and Wahhabi doctrines. The Middle East is home to several sub-branches within the Sunni Islamic tradition. Saudi Arabia serves as the central core for Sunni Islam, including several religious places significant to the Islamic faith. The sub-branches of Sunni Islam, such as Hanafi, Shafi, and Maliki, are generally considered to have a more moderate approach in comparison to the Salafi and Wahhabi sects within Sunni Islam. The Wahhabi sect of Sunni Islam in the Middle East is renowned for its puritanical ideology and commitment to austerity. The Wahhabi sect has a prominent position in Middle Eastern politics due to its affiliation with a significant number of hard-line militant organisations, surpassing other sub-branches of Islam in terms of influence.

The second prominent branch of Islam pertains to the Imamatus of Hazrat Ali and the perpetuation of Imamatus as an institutional aspect within the Islamic faith. Shia Muslims constitute around 15% of the global Muslim population and are present as minority communities in several Middle Eastern nations. However, in some states, they possess a significant demographic presence. Iran is primarily inhabited by a significant Shia population, which serves as a refuge for other substantial Shia communities in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria. In contrast to the level of unity seen among various sects within Sunni Islam, Shia sects exhibit a higher degree of cohesion in the Middle East and other global regions (BBC, 2009, August 19). The unification of Shia sub-sects is attributed to the Imamatus of Hazrat Ali after the death of the Holy Prophet, since all Shia adherents share the belief that Islam is inherently incomplete without the presence of Hazrat Ali. Iran extends assistance to Houthi rebels in Yemen, as well as the Shia communities in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, based on religious and ideological grounds. Hezbollah is a militant organisation that is prepared to engage in resistance against oppressive forces targeting Shia Muslims. Ibaadi Muslims are recognised as a distinct sect within Islam, constituting a third branch that diverges from both Sunni and Shia traditions. They constitute 50% of the population of Oman. Despite being a significant majority in Oman, the Omani population does not exert much influence on the political landscape of the Middle East. In addition to the two predominant branches of Islam, namely Sunni and Shia, there are additional distinct Muslim communities in the Middle East, such as the Ahmadi and Druze. These communities exhibit unique beliefs and practises that set them apart from the aforementioned mainstream branches of Islam (Vallely, 2014).

While economic growth is often prioritised by states in both internal and international politics, it is important to acknowledge that other variables, such as religion and ideology, also have significant influence for many countries. The Middle East is widely recognised as the geographical origin of the Abrahamic faiths, including significant historical and cultural significance in the area. Religion has consistently had a prominent position over the course of its history. During the ancient era, the region in question saw the prominence of Jewish and Christian communities. Subsequently, in the 6th century, the emergence of Islam took place in this region, leading to its eventual dominance over the whole area. Islam is the predominant religion in the Middle East, exerting significant influence across the area via several sub-branches of the faith. Iran assumes a prominent role as the central authority for Shia Muslims within the Middle Eastern area, while Saudi Arabia assumes a leadership position within the

Sunni bloc. The Shia population in the Middle East has a notable affinity for Shia Islam, whereas the Sunni population in the area tends to have a natural predilection towards Saudi Arabia. The internal variations among various sects of Islam are inherently precarious. The Sunni population in Saudi Arabia is more inclined towards recognising the state of Israel as a strategic measure to offset the growing influence of Shia Iran in the area. Both Jordan and Egypt are mostly Sunni governments that have established diplomatic relations with Israel and maintain positive bilateral relations. However, it is worth noting that both countries have a stronger aversion towards Iran due to its status as a Shia state. Hence, it can be said with confidence that the internal dissimilarities among Muslims are much more detrimental than their exterior disparities.

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