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Sunni-Shia Conflict Between Iran and Saudi Arabia: Causes and Way Forward

Uroosa Ishfaq [*]   Kashif Ashfaq[†]   Muneeba Shahid [‡]

Abstract

The Sunni-Shia conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia has emerged as a significant source of tension in the Middle East. This article examines the root causes of this religious and geo-political rivalry, emphasizing historical, ideological, and geopolitical factors. It also explores potential avenues for resolution, including diplomatic engagement, dialogue, and international mediation. As the conflict's continuation poses serious threats to regional stability and security, understanding its underlying causes and promoting peaceful coexistence is imperative for a more stable and prosperous Middle East.

Heading

- Introduction
- Causes of Sunni-Shia Conflict in Iran and Saudi Arabia
- Succession
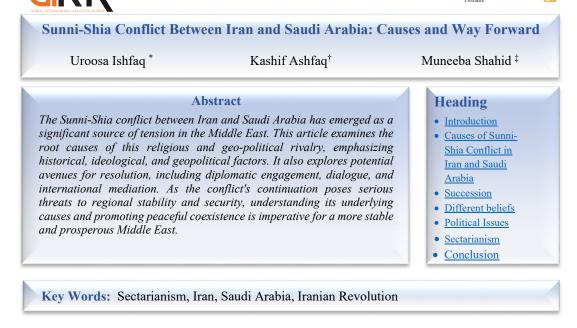- Different beliefs
- Political Issues
- Sectarianism
- Conclusion

Introduction

Aside from some shared traditions, beliefs, and philosophies, Sunni and Shia are two different Islamic sects. Knowledgeable religious leaders are primarily responsible for interpreting Islamic law. There are no set laws in either Sunni or Shiite Islam. Instead, both Shiites and Sunnis rely on the same sources for the interpretation of the law. (Blanchard, 2015).

The strained relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran are founded on opposing philosophies, including differences in religion and economics. There is an immediate antagonism between the two countries since Shia Muslims predominate in Iran while Sunni Muslims rule Saudi Arabia. There is a fundamental distinction between them, even though they are both Islamic religions, which forms the basis for the continued antagonism between the two countries. Shiites make up ten to fifteen percent of Muslims globally, although Iran has the biggest concentration of Shiites in the Middle East. Because they make up the majority, Sunnis in Saudi Arabia have the most power (Cardinali, 2013).

Before the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were based on a mutual awareness of each nation's importance to US foreign policy in the area. In 1929, Saudi Arabia and Iran formalized their friendship agreement and their relations. Relationships between the two countries were not favorable during this period because both countries were concentrating on building their national infrastructure. After the Islamic Republic of Iran was created and the Shah was overthrown in 1979, the relationship changed. The new Republic replaced Saudi Arabia's Sunni Wahhabi ideology with a Shiite Islamic system of government. It is important to keep in mind that Iran is a Shiite-majority country with a

[*] Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Women University Swabi, KP, Pakistan.
Email: uroosa.ishfaq@gmail.com
[†] MPhil Scholor, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern Languages Islamabad, Pakistan.
[‡] Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Women University Swabi, KP, Pakistan.

Persian ethnic majority. Saudi Arabia is a Sunni-majority Arab country (n.d, Joint Crises; Iran - Saudi Arabia Conflict, 2020).

The Iranian Shah was overthrown in 1979 following a victorious revolution, starting a time of great upheaval. The fact that Iran's Islamic message was being widely heard in the region concerned the Saudi authorities and exposed a gap in their diplomatic relations with Iran. The apparent success of the Iranian revolution alarmed Saudi Arabia, and Iran's aspirations to spread its revolutionary ideology throughout the region dissatisfied it. 400 people were killed in skirmishes between Iranian explorers and Saudi security forces, which further heightened tensions. Each of the two states made a charge against the other. The relationship along these lines intensified in 1988, to the point where the ambassadors of both nations were contacted by the other (Malik, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Middle East - A Dilemma, 2017).

Since Wahhabi and Shiite leaders stoked this rivalry, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been tight and strained for a long time. In contrast to Mohammad Bin Abdula Wahhab, who believes that Shiites are apostates of true Islam, Abdula Wahhab was the architect behind the attack on the revered Al Hussain shrine in Iran. Ever since then, the tension has remained high and is expected to persist due to the current circumstances and the rivalry between the leaders of Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Iranian government has continuously criticized Saudi Arabia since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. (Alghunaim, 2014).

About the impact on politics, religion, and the economy in these areas, Saudi Arabia and Iran's complex security challenges and strategic environment mostly help to maintain a power balance. However, each actor is fighting for a prestigious position or position of power to influence others. They have long been embroiled in the conflict between regional powers, and their raging grudges have grown against the powerful foundations. The propagation of ideologies and covert proxies is most importantly shown by the struggle for power. (Gul, Iran and Saudi Arabia strategic rivalry and the Middle Eastern security; An assessment, 2021).

Saudi Arabia and Iran are presently in competition with one another as a result of their respective economic wealth. Due to their status as OPEC members as oil producers and reserves, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran are undoubtedly expanding their economies. Iran enjoyed a competitive edge over other energy-producing countries during the post-nuclear reconciliation era, which is why the product became well-liked in the Middle Eastern oil market. Their strategic competition then intensified as a result of economic worries. The Middle East's geopolitical location, ideologies, spiritual repercussions, and theological implications, on the other hand, contributed to a decline in complexity due to the methods of the power struggle and the sources of material competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The main source of conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran is security-related issues. When questions of state sovereignty come up, the security problem has its relevance, but this is also the reason why the security problem becomes an insecurity problem. Both parties are acting cunningly to guide an effective regime. Security within the internal regimes governments utilize when external dangers are recognized owing to internal worries. Due to their strategic rivalry, both organizations exploit international problems to draw attention to internal security, regimes, and a high degree of global insecurity to calm domestic political dissatisfaction towards their sponsors and foreign relations. To ensure that unstable regimes inside the state modify security, there needs to be a shared understanding of the security conundrum. This is crucial because Iran and Saudi Arabia's engagement in regional crises has enormous opportunities and worldwide ramifications (Gul, Iran, and Saudi Arabia strategic rivalry and the Middle Eastern security; An assessment, 2021).

The reasons for this ongoing conflict are the Arab Spring, the US-Iraq War, and the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. The 1979 Islamic Revolution, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, started the wave by infusing a sectarian element into Iran's aspirations for international prominence. For him, religion was political, and as a result, many Shia people in Iraq rebelled against Saddam Hussein's Sunni Baathist government.

His aggressive foreign policy put the Saudi monarchy and Saudi Arabia's regional dominance in great peril. There is a security issue since each country is operating in a way that will increase its security at the expense of the other because the scenario portrays Saudi Arabia as the status quo and Iran as the revolutionary (Morse, 2015).

Causes of Sunni-Shia Conflict in Iran and Saudi Arabia

The history of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran portrays two Muslim-majority nations with assertive nationalist policies. Religion is another factor that separates them. This split in doctrine results from the two main Islamic sects, Sunnism and Shiism, to which the majority of Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively, adhere. Both kingdoms have consolidated their positions as the heads of their respective Islamic sects in recent history, working to keep the Shia or Sunni faith safe from outsiders. The unrestrained relationship we still see today is a result of these self-invented stances (Dupont, n.d).

The following are the main causes of conflict in Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Succession

The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia can be traced back to historical and religious factors. The main difference between the Sunni and Shia branches lies in their belief about succession after the demise of the prophet Mohammad. Sunnis follow the system of electing leaders, known as caliphs, through voting. On the other hand, Shias believe that the leadership should be passed down through direct descendants of Prophet Muhammad, known as Imams. This difference in beliefs regarding succession has been a significant factor contributing to the divergent practices and perspectives of Sunni and Shia Muslims.

Different beliefs

Sunnis and Shias have the most fundamental differences regarding Khilafah or iqamah issues (caliphate leadership). For Shia Muslims, imamah is a basic and significant subject because it is a part of aqeedah. According to Sunni belief, there is no explicit declaration of a successor by

the prophet Muhammad. On the other hand, Shia Muslims believe that the prophet publicly designated his cousin and son-in-law, Hazrat Ali, as the first in the line of hereditary Imams from the prophet's family to lead the community after him. This difference in beliefs regarding succession has been a significant factor in shaping the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam.

The beliefs of the Shia's aqeedah are tawheed, nubuwah, the divinity of Allah, and imamah. The topic of imamah is not wholly rejected by Sunni Muslims. However, that is more of a political and social issue than a fundamental Islamic principle (Manan, 2020).

Political Issues

Politics and religion both play significant roles in the Sunni-Shia conflict. The conflict is primarily a political phenomenon that has intensified to build a polarizing division that affects not only the Middle East but the entire world, notwithstanding the importance of such objectives. Since the first caliph, Shi'as and Sunnis have conflicted politics in the Muslim world. This blatant difference between the two faiths is an illustration of sectarianism, a set of societal norms that are frequently linked to broader and more general types of loyalty and connection. Any increase in sectarian tensions is mostly due to the struggle for hegemony through socioeconomic and political power as well as the debate over which interpretation of Islam should have the greatest influence on societies and future leaders (Gul, 2021).

Sectarianism

The concept of sectarianism originates from the internal political dynamics of both governments and permeates international ties, as evidenced by the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. A good example of this is the conflict that has arisen over who is entitled to the holiest sites in Islam, in which Saudi Arabia certainly prevails (Mirza, Structural Sources of Saudi-Iran Rivalry and Competition for the Sphere of Influence, 2021). The two are under the jurisdiction of Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom enjoys unparalleled importance and respect in the Islamic world due to its proximity to the two holiest sites in Islam,

Medina, and Mecca, as well as a shared commitment to safeguarding them. Iran opposes this notion because it wants to safeguard its holy sites for the Shi'a community around the world and provide a haven for them (by taking zakat donations, for instance), none of them can compare to the spiritual holiness of Mecca and Medina. The idea of a religious struggle over holy places is crucial, but having an advantage over others is more important. States can be used to achieve political goals in areas where the political climate is constantly uncertain (Bardaji, 2016).

Iranian Revolution

An important turning point in the growth of Sunni-Shi'a relations occurred in the 1970s with the occurrence of the Siege of Mecca and the Iranian Revolution. At the beginning of the year, Saudi Arabia's first oil trade high came to an end, allowing the country to benefit from such sales. The Kingdom was affluent and self-assured, and it had gained a new prestige level in the Middle East. Just a few weeks into the New Year, Iran, on the other hand, found itself in a quite different situation. At the time, Iran possessed one of the Middle East's more stable administrations, but it was also highly shielded from outside influence (Faheem, 2021). The insurrection, which occurred in February, was primarily political and had nothing to do with religious beliefs. Its objective was to overthrow the current administration and replace it with an Islamic, spiritual one. It has proven difficult for some political scientists to explain why the Iranian Revolution, in contrast to others in the region, succeeded in establishing the Islamic Republic after a wide range of people rose and toppled a more rigid political order. Whatever was used as a foundation for gaining local support, the Iranian Revolution was characterized by a blatant political ambition to topple a ruler and change the structure of a government. The Iranian Revolution and its repercussions had a huge impact on Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran due to the abrupt and dramatic ascension to power of a Shi'a religious leader in a neighboring state and the competition that would subsequently arise between the main Islamic countries (Alghunaim, 2014).

Saudi Arabia feels threatened by the Iran revolution

Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries in the region began to feel threatened by the Iranian revolution in the early 1990s and worried that its effects would lead to uprisings in other states bordering the Arabian Gulf. The surrounding country of Saudi Arabia was promoting its domestic social agenda, which was more conservative and religious. Because Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, which are neighbors of Iran, have substantial Shi'a populations and may be impacted by Iranian influence from its rebellion, the situation in Iran is particularly concerning. Some claim that Saudi Arabia upholds the status quo locally and that, although their fear-based competition with Iran predates the creation of both countries, it has evolved after 1979. In contrast, Iran routinely tries to radicalize the rest of the Arab World and the Arabian Gulf, with varying degrees of success (Kalim, 2016).

Political pressure as the root cause of conflict

Despite the countries' growing mistrust of one another's influence, the continued interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia that take place outside of their respective borders serve as a vivid reminder of the political dynamics at play in this protracted battle. Given the political rather than religious nature of both situations, what does the future hold for Saudi Arabia and Iran? Due to the exploitation of religion's core elements to hide political objectives, both states are currently involved in a minimal game. Religious schisms in this region obscure political domination and the growth of Saudi or Iranian power, which leaves behind what is left and what will remain in the years to come while religion is widely practiced there. Saudi Arabia is currently attempting to contain its problems with neighboring Qatar and regional adversary Turkey, in addition to the proxy wars ongoing in Syria and Yemen, while Iran continues to defy US sanctions. It's possible that sectarian politics has become deeply rooted and may take time to eradicate. Leaders of the Shi'a and Sunni groups are eager to take advantage of local issues to stay

in power and achieve their political objectives because they recognize the political benefits of doing so. The history recounted above shows that leaders are not sincerely attempting to bridge the divide, mend the hurts, and offer a common vision of an inclusive future. In this situation, it can be stated that the outcome of the war determines the ultimate winner. (Dupont, n.d).

Conclusion

Terms like Sunni and Shia are widely used when referring to the Muslim world. Given the importance of religion in Muslim nations, understanding Sunni and Shia beliefs is crucial to comprehending the contemporary Muslim world. In Islamic history, there has never been a more significant and enduring split between Sunnis and Shi'a. To understand the political legacy of the Prophet Muhammad, some previous knowledge is helpful. When the Prophet died at the beginning of the seventh century, he left behind the Islamic faith and an Islamic State in the Arabian Peninsula with roughly 100,000 Muslims. The argument stemmed from the question of who would rule the nascent Islamic state after the Prophet. The Prophet's close friend Abu Bakr was finally selected as the caliph (head of the Muslims) by the greater faction of Muslims. Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, was favored to be the caliph by fewer individuals. Supporters of Abu Bakr as caliph are known as Sunnis. Those who still believe Ali should have become the next monarch are known as Shia Muslims. Since Muhammad is considered the last prophet by both Sunni and Shia, the term "successor" should not be used to imply that anyone who succeeded him was also a prophet. At first, the sole difference between Sunnis and Shias was who should be the leader. However, the Shia valued the Hadith literature as well as the leadership of the Prophet's relatives. The interpretation of Hadith (the Prophet's sayings and acts) is important for both Shia and Sunnis. The Shia prefer the Hadith that was passed down by Ali, Fatima, and their close associates. Sunnis recognize the validity of the Hadiths recounted by any of the 12,000 companions. In the end, this led to a shift in how people view Islam. Sunni Muslims often adhere to the theories of scholars Hanbali, Hanafi, Maliki, and Shafii, who lived in

the seventh and eighth centuries. The Shia think that imitation should only come from true experts. Saudi Arabia and Iran are fighting a bloody battle across the Arab world to defend and enlarge their respective zones of influence. The repeated historical events have resulted in a basic institutionalization of antagonism between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This hostility now affects their institutional and governmental structures, as well as regional and occasionally extra-regional affairs and their various spheres of influence.

Their competition for control of the Muslim world, different interpretations of regional security, Saudi concerns over Iran's nuclear program, Saudi support for regional partners, issues with oil prices and the ownership and management of natural resources, diverse and antagonistic state and governance structures, systemic relationships with rival and occasionally aggressive major powers, the presence of cultural and sectarian splits within societies, and others all contribute to the region's instability. History has mounded the origins of the dispute between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Through the historical study of the relationships, information is offered regarding interaction patterns such as "how and in what manner they act and respond". For a very long time, both Iran and Saudi Arabia considered themselves to be the authentic Islamic states. They have fought for dominance both locally and globally within the Muslim world.

Way Forward

Peace and harmony

Islam encourages us to live in a peaceful and tolerant way and condemns the use of force to spread its message. The teachings of Islam promote peace, love, and harmony with others. Armed individuals are not true Muslims, and they ought to face harsh punishment.

Non Violent Methods

Since sectarian conflict is more of a political than a religious issue, politicians must solve it without resorting to violence. If killing people were a viable solution, the recent increase in sectarian killings should have facilitated resolution, but it

hasn't. Instead, it has intensified the conflict, which is detrimental to everyone. We must oppose extremism and, at the very least, coexist and behave like normal people.

Justice

The judiciary, the police, and the institutions that uphold the rule of law all need urgent overhauls. Furthermore, the administration must hold its intelligence services accountable. Many people think that these groups should have their behavior closely regulated because they are thought to be the primary cause of sectarian violence.

Role of Media

A key factor in lowering sectarianism is the media. They must avoid "yellow journalism" and limit their reporting to the facts. People can be advised and educated by the media because the majority of people have access to it, especially electronic media. To this day, the media plays a significant role in people's lives. Muslim intellectuals and leaders use the media, which has a big impact on our culture, to inform the people. One of the best methods to lessen sectarian hostility is through this.

Effective Education System

The educational systems around the world need to be changed. It ought to impart virtues like tolerance, the ability to live in peace with all living things, and respect for other people's rights.

Role of Religious Parties

Religious parties have a responsibility to promote religious harmony and dissolve their hostile organizations because the majority of sectarian organizations are founded on religion. Religious parties play a very important role in this context since they have access to and roots in the broader population. They can educate and awaken people. Religion shouldn't be utilized for political ends because doing so can be very seductive and be a very effective tool for mass mobilization. Some of the worst crimes against mankind have been committed with such deception. Islamists commit acts of religious

violence because of their rage over what they see as global injustice. Everywhere in the world, there is an urgent need for fair and quick answers to problems involving Muslims.

Social Reform

The country needs social changes that would guarantee free education for everyone, at least through elementary school, and provide incentives for deprived students.

Harmony among Religious Sects

It is important to promote religious unity among different sects and to show respect for one another's holy days. The arms race needs to be halted because it increases the likelihood of violent conflict between opposing parties. It is commonly established that violent and criminal behavior in movies often precedes such behavior in real life. Young people's reactions to these films are still not fully known; therefore, this needs to be carefully considered.

Curriculum of Madrassas

To keep them in line with other Madrassas and prevent the escalation of enmity towards other sects, religions, and societies, the curriculum of Madrassas needs to be changed. One of the most important elements in settling the sectarian strife is the concord among Muslims respecting their faith. Muslims need to understand that Islam is the sole true religion and that all other religions are irrelevant to it. If Muslims unite and accept the existence of Allah, everything will be resolved.

Positive Role of Religious Leaders

Religious authorities also play a significant role in addressing the issue of multiple sects and other religious issues among Muslims. If religious leaders unite and focus on resolving the issues connected to Islam, it is also seen as a significant step in ending sectarian bloodshed.

Role of OIC

A great platform for settling disputes affecting Islam and the Muslim Ummah is the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), an

alliance of Muslim countries. The Muslim leaders would band together, host conferences on the subject, and raise awareness of the challenges the Muslim world faced in upholding the fundamental tenets of Islam. The function of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation is to improve cooperation amongst Muslim countries by resolving their internal disputes, maintaining world peace, and assuring collective security, the OIC is critically required in today's world. Governments are prone to internal unrest, unfavorable external conditions, and anti-government sentiment.

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