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Political Sectarianism in Contemporary Islamic Thought: The Impact of the Sunni-Shia Divide on the Formation of Regional Alliances after the Arab Spring

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Abstract

This research aims to examine the extent to which the Sunni-Shia divide has contributed to consolidating political sectarianism within contemporary Islamic thought and how this has impacted regional alliances after the Arab Spring. The research addresses how this sectarian schism has reinforced political sectarianism and reshaped the geopolitical map of alliances in the region post-Arab Spring. Given the complexity of the subject, encompassing both ideological and political dimensions, this study utilizes an analytical-synthetic approach combined with descriptive and historical methods. Key findings indicate that post-Arab Spring regional transformations (Sunni and Shia) placed regional states in direct confrontation with Iran's expansionist ambitions, marking one of the most intense phases of conflict characterized by significant political and economic shifts. Each party strives to capitalize on these changes in alignment with their strategic interests, often neglecting popular aspirations. The study recommends that religious and intellectual institutions in the Islamic world revive a discourse of Islamic unity grounded in common ethical and doctrinal principles, rejecting exclusionary tendencies fueling political sectarianism through educational platforms, media, and advocacy.

Keywords

political sectarianism, Islamic thought, Sunni, Shia, regional alliances, Arab Spring

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Introduction

Political sectarianism refers to the use of religious or sectarian affiliations as tools to achieve political objectives. In the contemporary Islamic context, these affiliations are frequently employed to mobilize the public and shape political alliances, often at the expense of national unity. It is notable that political sectarianism does not always stem purely from religious differences; rather, it is often exploited to serve political, economic, and geopolitical interests.

The roots of political sectarianism trace back to historical periods characterized by power struggles, where sectarian affiliations were utilized to justify or enhance specific political stances. In modern times, this phenomenon has intensified due to foreign interventions and regional conflicts, further deepening sectarian divisions.

Although political sectarianism emerges from objective historical causes, it is neither inevitable nor intrinsic. We must acknowledge the role played by external colonial interventions in fueling sectarianism. Foreign interference has historically exacerbated sectarian and ethnic conflicts globally—and particularly within the Arab world—dating back to the weakening of the Ottoman Empire. A vivid contemporary example of such interference is the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq, which institutionalized sectarian power relations as the natural order, embedding the Sunni-Shia dichotomy deeply within political consciousness and state institutions. This division further intensified after the events of the Arab Spring in 2011.

1. Introduction

The literature surrounding political sectarianism in contemporary Islamic thought, particularly in the context of the Sunni-Shia divide and its impact on regional alliances post-Arab Spring, reveals a complex interplay of socio-political dynamics and identity politics. The early analyses, such as Martin's (Martin, 2014) examination of political transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, underscore the significant role of a disenfranchised youth population in shaping political landscapes. This demographic's aspirations and frustrations have been pivotal in driving both revolutionary movements and subsequent political developments in the region.

Patterson (Patterson, 2015) expands on this theme by exploring the ramifications of the Arab Spring for the Shia communities in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Her work highlights how the uprisings have instilled both fear and hope among these communities, as they navigate an environment marked by governmental repression and sectarian discrimination. The potential for sectarian violence and the international community's growing awareness of human rights abuses further complicate the political landscape, suggesting that the Arab Spring has not only challenged existing power structures but has also intensified sectarian identities.

Antosh (R. Antosh, 2016) contributes to this discourse by analyzing the drivers of sectarian violence in Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey. She argues that a deeper understanding of the region's religious and ethnic identities is essential for effective governance and conflict resolution. The emphasis on the role of leadership in exacerbating or mitigating sectarian tensions offers a critical lens through which to view the actions of political elites post-Arab Spring, suggesting that the manipulation of sectarian identities has been a strategic tool for maintaining power.

Barakeh (Ghassan Barakeh, 2016) further delves into the narratives surrounding sectarianism, particularly among non-violent Islamist groups utilizing social media as a platform for political expression. This exploration reveals the intricate ways in which sectarian identities are constructed and contested within the broader socio-political context, highlighting the fears and grievances of Sunni communities in relation to Shia groups, particularly in the aftermath of significant political events.

Chen (Chen, 2017) and Alam (Alam, 2017) both address the historical context of Saudi-Iranian rivalry, emphasizing how sectarianism has been weaponized in the quest for regional hegemony. Chen critiques the oversimplification of sectarian conflicts as merely Sunni versus Shia, arguing instead for a nuanced understanding of the diverse political identities and historical narratives that shape contemporary alliances and conflicts. Alam's analysis of the geopolitical implications of this rivalry further illustrates how sectarianism complicates international relations and regional stability.

Valbjorn and Hinnebusch (Valbjorn & Hinnebusch, 2019) examine the sectarianization of the Middle East in the context of the Syrian Civil War, noting how interventions by Shia militias have intensified sectarian polarization. Their work suggests that the strategic use of sectarian identities by political actors can significantly influence the dynamics of conflict and power relations in the region.

Løland (Løland, 2019) critiques the historical framing of sectarianism and its association with irrationality and tribalism, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of sectarian identities as complex constructs shaped by political, social, and cultural factors. This critical perspective challenges essentialist views of sectarianism, suggesting that it is not merely a product of religious differences but is deeply intertwined with the region's political landscape.

Mabon (Mabon, 2019) calls for a reevaluation of sectarian narratives, proposing mechanisms for desectarianization in a region often characterized by sect-based violence. His argument underscores the potential for political actors to transcend sectarian divides through inclusive governance and cooperative strategies.

Finally, Dodge (Dodge, 2020) emphasizes the role of political elites in fostering sectarian identities as a means of maintaining power in post-2011 Middle East. He posits that the manipulation of sectarianism is a strategic response to declining legitimacy, thus reinforcing the notion that identity politics is intricately linked to broader political struggles.

This literature review highlights the multifaceted nature of political sectarianism in contemporary Islamic thought, illustrating how the Sunni-Shia divide continues to shape regional alliances and conflicts in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Each article contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding sectarian identities and their implications for political dynamics in the Middle East.

This study aims to shed light on political sectarianism in contemporary Islamic thought, focusing specifically on how the Sunni-Shia divide influenced the formation of regional alliances following the Arab Spring.

Problem Statement

After the Arab Spring, the Arab world underwent profound political and social transformations accompanied by the growing prominence of political sectarianism as a defining factor in regional conflicts and alliances. The Sunni-Shia division has reshaped the geopolitical landscape, with sectarian affiliations increasingly being used to justify regional interventions and guide alliances among states and groups. This phenomenon raises fundamental questions regarding whether political sectarianism is inherently linked to religious doctrinal roots or if it serves primarily as a tool for advancing regional and international political projects. It also poses intellectual challenges to contemporary Islamic discourse, which finds itself caught between upholding the ideals of Islamic unity and confronting a fragmented political reality structured along sectarian lines. Thus, the primary problem addressed in this research is:

"To what extent has the Sunni-Shia divide contributed to entrenching political sectarianism within contemporary Islamic thought, and how has this impacted regional alliances following the Arab Spring?"

Significance of Study

The significance of this research arises from both theoretical and practical perspectives:

Theoretical Significance

This study critically engages with one of the most controversial concepts in contemporary Islamic political thought—political sectarianism. By analyzing the relationship between sectarian identity and political orientation in the Islamic world, this research enriches the intellectual and political literature concerning the role of religion and sectarianism in shaping the political space of Muslim states and societies. It also clarifies the sectarian dimensions of regional alliances and conflicts post-Arab Spring, enabling a deeper understanding of how the Sunni-Shia divide has been politically instrumentalized within Islamic political discourse, thereby providing a theoretical basis for future comparative studies.

Practical Significance

From a practical standpoint, this research offers an analytical framework for understanding recent shifts in the map of regional alliances in the Arab and Islamic worlds. It illustrates how sectarianism has evolved from a mere social mobilization tool to an active element in foreign policy and regional power alliances, notably between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This analysis aids policymakers, political scientists, and international relations experts in dissecting current political developments and distinguishing between authentic sectarian motives and those cloaked behind political agendas. Furthermore, the research supports intellectual efforts aimed at mitigating sectarianism and fostering inclusive Islamic discourse capable of transcending the sectarian polarizations generated by the Arab Spring.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the main question:

- **To what extent has the Sunni-Shia divide contributed to entrenching political sectarianism within contemporary Islamic thought, and how has this influenced the regional alliances formed after the Arab Spring?**

From this central question, several sub-questions emerge:

1. What is meant by political sectarianism?
2. What are the historical roots of political sectarianism?
3. What are the forms of sectarian conflict, and what are their political and military impacts?
4. What is the Sunni-Shia regional transformations after the Arab Spring?

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to understand the extent to which the Sunni-Shia divide has entrenched political sectarianism in contemporary Islamic thought and how this phenomenon has reshaped the map of regional alliances following the Arab Spring.

Additionally, the research aims to achieve the following secondary objectives:

- Clarify the meaning of political sectarianism.
- Identify the historical roots of political sectarianism.
- Explore forms of sectarian conflict and their political and military consequences.
- Analyze the regional transformations (Sunni and Shia) after the Arab Spring.

Research Methodology

Given the complex nature of this topic, involving both ideological and political dimensions, this research employs multiple methodological approaches:

Descriptive Methodology

The descriptive method is used to characterize the phenomenon of political sectarianism within contemporary Islamic thought. This involves analyzing the concept, defining its characteristics, and examining its manifestations within contemporary political and intellectual discourse, especially following the events of the Arab Spring.

Analytical-Synthetic Methodology

The analytical-synthetic method facilitates examining the components of political sectarianism and linking them with political, sectarian, and social factors. It particularly emphasizes the relationship between the Sunni-Shia divide and the formation of regional alliances, critically analyzing political discourse and regional political alignments.

Historical Methodology

The historical method tracks the origins of political sectarianism and the historical formation of the Sunni-Shia division. It reviews historical developments in relationships between Islamic sects through the ages, highlighting key political events that transformed sectarian diversity into political conflicts.

2. Literature review

In "Political Transition in a Post-Arab Spring Middle East: A Comparative Analysis of Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen," (Martin, 2014) provides a nuanced examination of the political transformations occurring in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, focusing on three distinct case studies. The article underscores the interplay between socio-economic factors, particularly the youth demographic, and political instability in shaping the region's future.

The author highlights the significance of a large, unemployed, and disenfranchised youth population as a critical factor influencing political transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen. This demographic's discontent is portrayed as a

catalyst for the uprisings that characterized the Arab Spring, suggesting that the youth's aspirations for political representation and economic opportunity are central to understanding the broader implications of these movements. The author argues that the failure of political systems to address these grievances has perpetuated instability, which is further complicated by the historical Sunni-Shia divide that influences regional alliances and conflicts.

The article's comparative approach allows for a thorough analysis of how each country's unique political landscape has been shaped by both internal dynamics and external influences. The author concludes with a reflection on the implications of these findings for the Persian Gulf monarchies, positing that the lessons learned from Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen could inform the strategies of these states as they navigate their own challenges related to sectarianism and governance.

While the author effectively articulates the role of youth discontent in the political transitions post-Arab Spring, a critical evaluation reveals a need for deeper exploration of the sectarian dimensions that complicate these transitions. The Sunni-Shia divide, while acknowledged, could be more thoroughly integrated into the analysis of how regional alliances are formed and fractured in response to these uprisings. The article would benefit from a more explicit connection between the socio-economic factors discussed and the sectarian tensions that often exacerbate political instability in the region.

The article, "The Shi'a Spring: Shi'a Resistance and the Arab Spring Movement in the GCC States" provides a nuanced examination of the implications of the Arab Spring on the Shia communities within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The article highlights the dual nature of the Arab Spring for GCC Shi'a populations, encapsulating both the fears instigated by potential political activism and the hope for greater representation and reform.

The author articulates that the Arab Spring has catalyzed a significant response from Shia populations, who have historically faced discrimination and marginalization in predominantly Sunni states. The author posits that GCC autocrats perceive the rise of Shi'a activism as a direct threat to their power, which has led to an increase in sectarian rhetoric aimed at scapegoating Shia communities for broader societal grievances. This tactic, while historically common, poses severe risks of inflaming sectarian violence across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The article effectively contextualizes this dynamic within the broader historical patterns of discrimination against religious minorities, emphasizing that such a strategy of blame-shifting could lead to catastrophic consequences for the already vulnerable Shia populations.

Moreover, the author notes the role of the international community in this context. The growing awareness of political corruption and human rights abuses within GCC states has garnered sympathy for peaceful protestors, including the Shia activists. The author emphasizes that non-violent methods employed by these protestors have the potential to draw attention and support from global audiences, thus enhancing their political voice and agency. This aspect of the article underscores the importance of international solidarity in local struggles for rights and representation, suggesting that external support can bolster the efforts of marginalized groups.

However, while the article presents a hopeful perspective on the potential for Shia populations to gain a greater political voice, it also acknowledges the significant challenges they face. The entrenched power of GCC autocrats, coupled with the pervasive atmosphere of fear and repression, creates a complex landscape for political activism. The analysis indicates that the path toward reform and greater representation for Shia communities is fraught with obstacles, particularly in the face of escalating sectarian tensions.

Catherine R. Antosh's article presents a nuanced examination of the complexities surrounding sectarian violence in the Middle East, particularly in the context of the Sunni-Shia divide. Antosh argues for a deeper understanding of the unique characteristics of Middle Eastern sectarianism, distinguishing it from sectarian conflicts observed in other regions. This distinction is critical, as it highlights the need for tailored approaches in addressing sectarian issues, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

The article emphasizes the importance of recognizing the intricate interplay of religious and ethnic identities that shape political landscapes in the region. Antosh suggests that a comprehensive understanding of these identities could prevent future missteps by external powers, particularly the United States, which has historically struggled to navigate the region's sectarian dynamics. This assertion is particularly relevant in light of the consequences of U.S. interventions, such as in Iraq, where sectarian tensions were exacerbated by foreign involvement.

Moreover, Antosh raises pertinent questions regarding the role of religion in politics and the challenges of secularizing governance while allowing for religious practice. This duality is vital for fostering a harmonious society where no sect is privileged over another. The author posits that further research is necessary to explore effective secularization methods that respect religious identities, which is crucial in a post-Arab Spring context where many nations are grappling with governance issues and sectarian strife.

Another significant point made by Antosh is the influence of leadership on sectarian dynamics. The article draws attention to historical figures like Saddam Hussein and Atatürk, whose leadership styles and narratives significantly impacted sectarian relations within their respective countries. This aspect invites further exploration into how charismatic leadership can either mitigate or exacerbate sectarian tensions, offering valuable insights for contemporary political contexts.

Antosh concludes that sectarian violence is driven by broader processes beyond mere religious and ethnic differences. The competition for power and survival emerges as fundamental motivators for groups engaging in violent conflict. This perspective underscores the necessity for developing peaceful avenues for expressing grievances and seeking representation, which is particularly urgent in the current geopolitical climate of the Middle East.

The article provides a nuanced exploration of the dynamics between Sunni and Shia communities in the context of contemporary Islamic thought, particularly following the Arab Spring. Central to the analysis is Abdo's study, which investigates how non-violent Islamist groups leverage social media to articulate their perspectives and garner public support amidst rising sectarian tensions.

The article highlights that the aftermath of the Arab uprisings has catalyzed a significant shift in Islamist beliefs, particularly among Salafist factions. These groups perceive Hezbollah and the broader Iranian influence as existential threats to Sunni identity and political autonomy. The article effectively illustrates how the Tripoli Islamist community embodies this fear, expressing concerns over potential oppression and marginalization by the Shia-aligned entities. The reference to the "anger reservoir" among Tripoli Sunnis underscores the deep-seated frustrations that have emerged in response to perceived injustices and inequities in the political landscape, particularly regarding the Lebanese army's treatment of Islamist factions relative to Hezbollah's actions.

Furthermore, the review critiques the role of stereotyping in exacerbating sectarian divides. The article posits that such narratives not only fuel animosity but also reinforce a collective identity among Sunni groups that positions them in opposition to Shia communities. This is particularly evident in the framing of Shiite presence as analogous to that of Israel, a comparison that signifies a profound level of distrust and hostility. The assertion that Salafi leaders advocate for a form of pluralism that does not lead to Sunni marginalization reveals the paradox within Islamist discourse, where calls for coexistence are often contingent upon the preservation of Sunni dominance.

The article also touches upon the strategic use of social media by Islamist groups to mobilize support and disseminate their views, indicating a shift in the methods of political engagement in the digital age. This aspect is particularly relevant in understanding how contemporary political sectarianism is not merely a product of historical grievances but is actively shaped and perpetuated through modern communication channels.

In her article, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: Sectarianism, a Quest for Regional Hegemony, and International Alignments," explores the complex interplay of sectarianism and regional politics in the Middle East, particularly focusing on the Sunni-Shia divide. The author argues that the narrative of an inevitable sectarian conflict has been amplified by Western powers to maintain political control and the status quo in the region. This perspective is critical as it challenges the prevailing notion that sectarian identity is the primary driver of conflict in contemporary Islamic thought, particularly after the Arab Spring.

The author highlights that the roots of sectarian strife are often misrepresented, suggesting that both Muslims and non-Muslims have exaggerated differences between Sunnis and Shias to mobilize specific groups and create disunity among Muslim communities. This assertion is significant, as it underscores a historical political strategy where disunity is utilized to mitigate perceived threats from cohesive groups. The article emphasizes that there have been instances of cooperation among Middle Eastern countries, which contradicts the dominant narrative of sectarianism as a divisive force. For example, prior to the Syrian Civil War, Syria was characterized by a diverse population, including Sunnis, Alawites, Druze, and Christians, all coexisting within a relatively stable social framework. Similarly, Lebanon's power-sharing governmental structure illustrates a successful attempt at inclusivity, further challenging the idea that sectarian identities are the sole determinants of political relationships in the region.

Moreover, the author discusses historical instances where Arab unity transcended sectarian lines, such as during the Arab-Israeli conflicts. This historical context is crucial as it demonstrates that leaders have previously emphasized a shared Arab identity in defense of common goals, rather than allowing sectarian differences to dictate political alliances. The article also provides statistical insight, noting that while Sunni populations outnumber Shia globally, Shias constitute a significant majority in the Persian Gulf region. This demographic detail is pertinent in understanding the regional dynamics and alliances that have emerged in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

In the article, provides a comprehensive analysis of the historical and contemporary dynamics between Saudi Arabia and Iran, two pivotal players in the Middle East whose sectarian identities significantly influence their political interactions and regional alliances. The article meticulously outlines the evolution of these two states, emphasizing the emergence of Saudi Arabia as a dominant force in the region following World War II, juxtaposed against Iran's longstanding influence.

The author argues that the sectarian divide, primarily characterized by the Sunni-Shia dichotomy, has been a fundamental aspect of the rivalry that shapes regional politics. The author highlights how the differing political systems—Saudi Arabia's monarchy and Iran's Islamic republic—exacerbate these sectarian tensions, which are further fueled by significant events such as Iran's nuclear ambitions and the execution of a Shia cleric by Saudi authorities. These incidents not only intensify the rivalry but also complicate the geopolitical landscape of West Asia, leading to increased instability and conflict.

One of the critical evaluations of the work is the assertion that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has far-reaching implications beyond their bilateral relations. The author effectively illustrates how this enmity has influenced the formation of regional alliances, impacting various conflicts across the Middle East, such as those in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The sectarian undertones of these conflicts often reflect the broader Sunni-Shia divide, suggesting that the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is not merely a nationalistic struggle but a profound ideological battle that resonates throughout the region.

Moreover, the discussion on the consequences of this rivalry on international politics is particularly insightful. The author posits that the West's involvement in the region, particularly in the context of the Arab Spring, has been shaped by the Sunni-Shia divide, leading to a complex interplay of alliances that often prioritize sectarian affiliations over national interests. This perspective encourages a deeper understanding of how external powers navigate their relationships with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, often complicating the already intricate regional dynamics.

The article provides a comprehensive examination of the intricate dynamics of sectarianism in the Middle East, particularly in the context of the Sunni-Shia divide following the Arab Spring. The authors argue that the regional power struggle, predominantly between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran, has significantly influenced interventions in various countries, exacerbating sectarian polarization in the long term.

The authors highlight that the interventions driven by these two powers are not merely military or political maneuvers but are deeply rooted in a broader sectarian framework that complicates the socio-political landscape of the region. They assert that the ongoing sectarian strife is a product of historical grievances and contemporary political calculations, suggesting that the sectarian narrative has been strategically employed by regimes to legitimize their authority. This is particularly evident in countries like Syria, where the Ba'thist regime has resorted to sectarian rhetoric to consolidate power in the face of popular uprisings.

The authors delve into the concept of sectarianism, framing it as an "essentially contested concept," which reflects its complex and multifaceted nature. They draw parallels between contemporary sectarianism in the Middle East and historical divisions within European Christianity, indicating that the roots of sectarianism extend beyond mere religious differences. This perspective is crucial for understanding how sectarian identities are constructed and mobilized in the political arena, especially in a post-Arab Spring context where traditional state structures have been challenged.

Furthermore, the authors discuss the implications of these sectarian dynamics on regional alliances, suggesting that the polarization between Sunni and Shia factions has led to the formation of new alliances that are often fragile and driven by immediate political interests rather than long-term stability. The authors argue that such alliances are characterized by a populist social contract, where regimes seek to align themselves with specific sectarian identities to maintain legitimacy and control over their populations.

In her article, provides a nuanced exploration of the concept of sectarianism, particularly within the context of the Syrian conflict. The examination of the term *al-ta'ifiyya* reveals its transformation over the 20th century from a neutral descriptor of sectarian affiliation to a term laden with negative connotations, largely influenced by Western colonial interests and Arab nationalist discourses. This shift in perception reflects a broader unease with sectarian identities, which are often seen as antithetical to the ideals of a secular and unified nation-state.

The author identifies a critical debate within the literature regarding the nature of sectarian identities. The discourse ranges from primordialist perspectives, which attribute sectarianism to inherent human predispositions towards violence, to ethno-nationalist views that emphasize the roles of religion and culture in fostering sectarian conflict. While these models provide valuable insights, they are criticized for their essentialist tendencies, as they overlook the complexity of individual agency and the multifaceted nature of conflict. In contrast, the instrumentalist model offers a broader framework that considers the interplay of various factors over time, although it may overstate the influence of political systems in inciting sectarian violence.

The article also emphasizes the significance of religious identity in shaping political allegiances within Syria. The author argues that understanding the Syrian conflict necessitates an appreciation of how individuals and groups prioritize their sectarian identities, which have historically been pivotal in determining their political affiliations. This assertion aligns with the analysis, which underscores the importance of recognizing the diverse explanatory models that can elucidate the dynamics of sectarianism and conflict.

In "Desectarianization: Looking Beyond the Sectarianization of Middle Eastern Politics," critically examines the prevailing narratives surrounding the Sunni-Shia divide in the context of contemporary Middle Eastern politics. The article addresses the tendency to oversimplify the complexities of political fragmentation by attributing it solely to "ancient hatreds." builds on the foundational arguments of Hashemi and Postel, who contend that sectarianization has become a defining characteristic of Middle Eastern politics, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

The analysis is particularly valuable as it challenges the deterministic view of sectarianism as an immutable aspect of identity. The author argues that the politicization of sectarian differences is often a strategic maneuver employed by various actors to consolidate power and control amidst a backdrop of contested sovereignty. This perspective is crucial for understanding the dynamics of regional alliances formed in the wake of the Arab Spring, as it shifts the focus from inherent sectarian animosities to the political contexts that exploit these identities for geopolitical gains.

The article highlights that sectarian identities are not merely static or primordial but are actively constructed and manipulated in response to political circumstances. This nuanced understanding suggests that efforts towards desectarianization, or reducing sectarian tensions, can be viable if political actors are willing to engage in strategies that transcend sectarian divides. The author posits that recognizing the instrumental use of sectarianism can lead to more effective conflict resolution and alliance-building in the region.

Moreover, the author emphasizes the importance of situating sectarianism within broader geopolitical struggles, thereby acknowledging that external factors often exacerbate internal divisions. This insight is particularly relevant in analyzing the formation of regional alliances post-Arab Spring, where sectarian identities have been mobilized to serve the interests of both state and non-state actors.

In "Beyond structure and agency: rethinking political identities in Iraq after 2003," provides a nuanced examination of the dynamics of political identities in the context of Iraq post-2003, particularly in relation to sectarianism. The article critically engages with constructivist theories, emphasizing the interplay between structure and agency in the formation of identities. The author argues that the intellectual plurality within constructivist approaches has shifted the discourse away from deterministic views of national identity towards a more fluid understanding of how identities can be shaped and reshaped through individual agency and social processes.

The author highlights the tension between macro-culturalist and micro-rationalist perspectives, noting that while the former tends to emphasize the overarching cultural narratives that define sectarian identities, the latter focuses on the rational choices made by individuals when identifying with specific ethnic or sectarian groups. This critical distinction is essential for understanding the complexities of sectarianism in the Middle East, especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The article underscores the significance of the 'sectarianisation thesis,' which posits that ruling elites exploit sectarian identities to maintain their power. The author provides empirical evidence supporting this thesis, illustrating how political leaders have manipulated sectarian sentiments to galvanize support and suppress dissent.

However, the article also raises important caveats regarding the application of the sectarianisation thesis. The author cautions against the deterministic view that sectarian mobilization is solely a product of elite manipulation, suggesting that such an interpretation overlooks the agency of individuals and the potential for identities to evolve independently of elite influence. This critique is significant, as it calls for a more balanced understanding of sectarian dynamics that incorporates both structural and individual factors.

3. Conclusion

The literature surrounding political sectarianism in contemporary Islamic thought, particularly regarding the Sunni-Shia divide and its implications for regional alliances post-Arab Spring, reveals a multifaceted landscape shaped by socio-political dynamics, identity politics, and historical grievances. The reviewed articles collectively illustrate how the Arab Spring has not only challenged existing power structures but has also intensified sectarian identities and conflicts across the Middle East.

([Martin, 2014](#)) emphasizes the role of disenfranchised youth in shaping political transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, arguing that their aspirations significantly influenced the uprisings and subsequent political developments. This demographic's discontent is pivotal in understanding the complexities of political instability in the region, particularly as it intersects with sectarian tensions. ([Patterson, 2015](#)) expands on this by examining the Shia communities within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, highlighting the dual nature of the Arab Spring for these populations—instilling both fear and hope amidst governmental repression and sectarian discrimination. ([R. Antosh, 2016](#)) contributes further by analyzing sectarian violence in Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey, stressing the importance of understanding the region's religious and ethnic identities for effective governance and conflict resolution.

The narratives surrounding sectarianism are further explored by ([Ghassan Barakeh, 2016](#)) who discusses the role of non-violent Islamist groups using social media to express their political grievances, particularly in relation to Shia communities. This highlights the complexities of identity construction and contestation within the socio-political context. ([Chen, 2017](#)) and ([Alam, 2017](#)) address the historical context of Saudi-Iranian rivalry, critiquing the oversimplification of sectarian conflicts and emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of political identities that shape contemporary alliances and conflicts.

([Valbjorn & Hinnebusch, 2019](#)) examine the sectarianization of the Middle East in the context of the Syrian Civil War, noting how interventions by Shia militias have exacerbated sectarian polarization and altered power dynamics. ([Løland, 2019](#)) critiques essentialist views of sectarianism, advocating for a more nuanced understanding that recognizes the political, social, and cultural factors at play. ([Dodge, 2020](#)) calls for mechanisms of desectarianization, suggesting that inclusive governance and cooperative strategies could transcend sectarian divides.

([Dodge, 2020](#)) emphasizes the role of political elites in manipulating sectarian identities to maintain power in the post-2011 Middle East, reinforcing the idea that identity politics are deeply intertwined with broader political struggles. The collective findings from these articles underscore the multifaceted nature of political sectarianism, illustrating how the Sunni-Shia divide continues to shape regional alliances and conflicts in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

In conclusion, the reviewed literature reveals that political sectarianism in the contemporary Islamic context is not merely a product of historical grievances but is actively shaped by socio-political dynamics and the strategic actions of political actors. Understanding the complexities of sectarian identities and their implications for regional alliances is crucial for addressing the ongoing challenges in the Middle East. The interplay of youth discontent, sectarian narratives, and geopolitical rivalries underscores the necessity for inclusive governance and cooperative strategies to mitigate sectarian tensions and foster stability in the region.

Political Sectarianism in Contemporary Islamic Thought:

The Impact of the Sunni-Shia Divide on the Formation of Regional Alliances after the Arab Spring

1. The Nature of Political Sectarianism

Political sectarianism in contemporary Islamic thought is a tool employed to pursue political and geopolitical interests, particularly after the Arab Spring. To explore this, this section is divided into two subsections: defining political sectarianism and examining its historical roots.

1.1 Definition of Political Sectarianism

The term political sectarianism combines two words—sectarianism and politics—making it essential first to define "sectarianism" itself. Defining sectarianism is challenging due to its inherent ambiguity, multiple references, diverse origins, and evolving meanings. Historically, sectarianism's interpretation varies significantly—from traditional categorizations of beliefs into sects and denominations, through modern contexts following the rise of the modern Arab state, to Western conceptualizations influenced by nationalism and modernist schools of thought.

Linguistically, the Arabic term *ṭā'ifiyya* derives from the root *ṭāfa*, indicating motion or rotation, metaphorically extended to denote small groups. In classical Arabic lexicons, such as "Lisān al-ʿArab," a *ṭā'ifa* (sect or group) refers to a small number, typically fewer than a thousand individuals (Ibn Manzūr, 1997). It can specifically denote a group unified by religious doctrine, ethnicity, or professional affiliation.

Political sectarianism is a relatively modern concept, highlighting the shift of sectarian identities from societal groups to political representation, thus politicizing sectarian affiliations. The core danger of political sectarianism is its transition from the societal level—natural sectarian diversity—to political institutions aimed at monopolizing power for specific sectarian interests at the expense of national unity.

Definitions vary, yet they agree on political sectarianism as the instrumentalization of religious or sectarian affiliations for political gain. For instance, Badareen (2014) defined political sectarianism as "utilizing religion from a sectarian perspective for worldly political objectives, not necessarily serving the interests of the sect itself" (p. 131). Similarly, Bashara (2018) described political sectarianism as "a pattern of political bias with sectarian or religious camouflage, employed by politicians—often driven by personal interests rather than religious convictions—to manipulate people's sectarian sentiments for political advantage" (p. 52).

From these definitions, it is clear that distinguishing between societal and political sectarianism is crucial. The former is historically and socially inherent, while the latter politically exploits sectarian identity, compelling sect members to submit to political agendas justified through religious commonality.

1.2 Historical Roots of Political Sectarianism

Sectarianism historically emerged in Europe during the Middle Ages, manifesting in severe conflicts between Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians, resulting in thousands of casualties. A modern example includes the prolonged sectarian conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

Historically, India experienced violent sectarian clashes between Hindus and Muslims leading to partition in 1947, creating secular India and Islamic Pakistan (later splitting into Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1971). Additionally, religious conflicts have marked other regions, such as East Timor's separation from predominantly Muslim Indonesia due to religious differences, and the long-standing dispute over Muslim-majority Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

In the Arab world, political sectarianism notably surged after the Arab Spring, exacerbating internal divisions, threatening social peace, and opening avenues for foreign interventions. Sectarian violence emerged starkly in Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, each experiencing devastating internal conflicts rooted in sectarianism and external manipulations.

According to some researchers, the Islamic roots of sectarianism date back to the Saqīfa of Banī Sā'ida in Medina, immediately following Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ death, where disagreements regarding succession (Caliphate) initiated sectarian divides. These early political disagreements later developed into distinct sectarian identities and rivalries.

The Umayyad period exacerbated sectarian divisions due to the rulers' political necessity for legal and ideological frameworks opposing rival groups, fostering independent sectarian identities. Moreover, ideological and political factions historically built doctrinal and political legitimacy separate from state authority, exacerbating deep-seated divisions due to persecution, oppression, and forced migrations.

Thus, the historical roots of political sectarianism in Islam closely align with political struggles for power, particularly after Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ death. However, the explicit transition from doctrinal disagreements to political sectarianism occurred much later when ruling elites strategically mobilized sectarian identities to legitimize their

authority. This phenomenon intensified in modern times due to weakened national identities and increased sub-national allegiances, exploited by regional and international actors to destabilize states and societies.

2. The Impact of the Sunni-Shia Divide After the Arab Spring

The Sunni-Shia divisions have significantly intensified following the Arab Spring, reshaping regional alliances and exacerbating regional tensions. Understanding these dynamics requires examining historical and political factors that contributed to the formation of new alliances and sectarian conflicts.

This section is structured into two subsections: forms of sectarian conflict and their political-military implications, and the regional transformations post-Arab Spring.

2.1 Forms of Sectarian Conflict and Their Political-Military Implications

The Sunni dimension in regional conflicts often manifests through popular support rather than explicit state representation, with significant backing from Saudi Arabia due to its religious symbolism. Saudi Arabia has notably supported Lebanon's Future Movement led by Saad Hariri, anti-Iranian opposition groups, and various Sunni factions in Iraq. In response to Iranian regional expansion, Saudi Arabia initiated the Arab Coalition for Supporting Legitimacy in Yemen in 2015, a military alliance primarily comprising Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This coalition aims to restore Yemeni legitimacy and counter the Houthi insurgency supported by Iran. Similarly, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) deployed Peninsula Shield forces in 2011 to Bahrain, effectively suppressing widespread demonstrations.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia has strategically engaged Shia figures opposed to Iranian influence, exemplified by its hosting of the Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in 2017. However, al-Sadr's stance seemed altered after his 2019 visit to Iran, where he met Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani. Saudi Arabia also sought to integrate Lebanese Shia cleric Muhammad al-Husseini, Secretary-General of the Arab Islamic Council in Lebanon, granting him Saudi citizenship in 2021. Conversely, Iran cultivated figures such as Saudi-born Ma'an al-Jarba, founder of the "Karama Movement" in Lebanon, whose Sunni Shafi'i-Ash'ari heritage resonated strategically with Iranian interests due to his ideological alignment with the so-called resistance axis.

Iran's declared policy of exporting its Islamic revolution has resulted in considerable support for armed groups across the Arab region. The Syrian regime, Iran's longstanding ally since the Iranian Revolution, has facilitated Iranian military training and militia formation beyond conventional military cooperation, significantly influencing Syrian politics and economy. Syria also serves as a vital conduit supporting Hezbollah, Iran's primary proxy in Lebanon. Similarly, Iran leverages sectarian dynamics within Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to pressure monarchies, capitalizing on Shia communities' social unrest. Yemen, viewed strategically by Iran as a frontline against Saudi Arabia, exemplifies Tehran's geopolitical maneuvering in the region (Makawi, 2017).

Beyond military interventions, Iran has expanded its influence culturally and diplomatically. Iranian embassies and cultural centers are notably active, deploying soft-power initiatives through cultural diplomacy, educational missions, media outreach, religious institutions, scholarships, Arabic-language broadcasts, and cultural institutions abroad such as the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution and Imam Khomeini Relief Committee. These instruments project Iranian influence regionally, serving Tehran's long-term strategic ambitions (Hussein, 2018).

Therefore, this sectarian conflict is not limited to political elites but permeates societal and educational spheres, including media, school curricula, universities, and religious institutions, particularly in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. A significant concern arises from educational curricula infused with sectarian rhetoric, threatening the social fabric and the unity of future generations.

2.2 Sunni-Shia Regional Transformations After the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring significantly widened Sunni-Shia divisions, with Iran expanding its influence among regional Shia populations, expecting sectarian loyalty, and actively pursuing conversions among Sunni communities, particularly in Syria and among Syrian migrant workers in Lebanon. Concurrently, intensified proselytization by Sunni Salafi groups counterbalanced Iranian activities.

Iran's regional influence encompassed broader support networks, including backing for Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and unequivocal support for the Syrian regime against popular protests. Its intervention against the 2014 Yemeni

revolution exemplifies Tehran's anti-democratic, counter-revolutionary posture despite initial rhetorical support for Arab uprisings, reflecting Iranian efforts to align regional movements with its strategic revolutionary objectives.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei initially framed Arab protests as "Islamic Awakening," associating them with Iran's Islamic revolution. However, as protests escalated in Syria, Iranian rhetoric quickly shifted from supporting revolutions to bolstering Assad's regime militarily, politically, and economically. Additionally, Iran supported Yemen's Houthis, undermining democratic aspirations and national dialogue outcomes, explicitly manipulating the Arab Spring for its regional interests (Abo Aisha, 2018).

Conversely, Saudi Arabia publicly supported the Syrian revolution, contrasting its stance against Arab Spring uprisings elsewhere, notably in Bahrain, where Saudi intervention stabilized the government amidst widespread demonstrations. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia spearheaded the Arab coalition in Yemen, counteracting Iran's proxy strategy.

The Arab Spring intensified direct confrontations between regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran. This period is notably marked by unprecedented political-economic volatility, each side exploiting evolving dynamics to advance strategic interests, frequently disregarding popular aspirations.

3. Conclusion

This study addressed a critically important subject: **Political Sectarianism in Contemporary Islamic Thought: The Impact of the Sunni-Shia Divide on the Formation of Regional Alliances after the Arab Spring**. The research was structured into an introduction and two main sections, concluding with a set of findings and corresponding recommendations.

3.1 Key Findings

1. **Sectarianism vs. Political Sectarianism:** Sectarianism is a socio-religious historical phenomenon. In contrast, political sectarianism is a political construct that imposes sectarian frameworks on individuals under the pretense of shared religious identity.
2. **Historical Roots:** The roots of political sectarianism in the Islamic world are deeply intertwined with political power struggles, particularly following the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ death. However, the transition from doctrinal dispute to institutionalized political sectarianism emerged prominently in later periods when ruling elites began exploiting sectarian affiliations to serve political legitimacy and interest.
3. **Educational and Social Entrenchment:** Sectarian conflict has been institutionalized through public discourse, media, religious sermons, and educational curricula, especially in conflict zones such as Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. Worryingly, children's education has become saturated with sectarian rhetoric, potentially compromising future societal cohesion.
4. **Post-Arab Spring Dynamics:** The Arab Spring catalyzed direct confrontation between regional powers—primarily Saudi Arabia and Iran. This period marked one of the most intense phases of geopolitical conflict, with actors weaponizing economic and political transitions for strategic advantage, often at the expense of grassroots democratic aspirations.

3.2 Recommendations

1. **Reviving Islamic Unity Discourse:** Religious and intellectual institutions in the Islamic world must revitalize a discourse centered on shared theological and ethical principles, actively rejecting exclusionary ideologies that foster political sectarianism. Educational, media, and religious platforms must be used to advance this message.
2. **Curricular Reform:** It is essential to revise religious education curricula in Muslim-majority countries to remove content that incites sectarian hatred or reinforces negative stereotypes. Educational reforms should promote dialogue, coexistence, and tolerance.
3. **Research and Monitoring Centers:** Establish independent research centers dedicated to analyzing and monitoring sectarian discourse in media, politics, and religious institutions. These centers should provide evidence-based policy recommendations to decision-makers.

4. **Inter-Sectarian Dialogue Initiatives:** Governments should facilitate official reconciliation initiatives and open religious-political dialogue channels—especially between key regional actors like Saudi Arabia and Iran—to foster cooperation and reduce sectarian tensions.
5. **Empowering Civil Society:** Civil society organizations must be supported in their efforts to promote national belonging, social cohesion, and awareness of the dangers of political sectarianism.
6. **Comparative Case Studies:** Scholars and policymakers should examine successful models of inter-sectarian coexistence—such as in Oman or Malaysia—to extract transferable strategies adaptable to other national contexts.

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