

## **Sunni-Shi'i Rapprochement: Internal Contradictions**

*Hamid Mavani*

### **Abstract**

Ecumenical initiatives to promote Sunni-Shi'i reconciliation and mutual respect have failed to take root because they do not tackle the incendiary issues that prompt each branch to view the other with disdain, if not as outright apostates or unbelievers. I argue that this will not change until the main fault lines in their worldviews, communal self-understanding, sacred narratives, history, theology, and philosophy are confronted head-on.

If this cannot be done, then all proclamations of Muslim unity and brotherhood/sisterhood under one ummah will remain hollow and lack substance, because each side's internal discourse would remain unchanged. Any type of mutual tolerance and coexistence prompted by expediency and power dynamics cannot be expected to be deep-rooted and long-lasting. The United States, along with such other local and foreign players as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, have instrumentalized Sunni-Shi'i sectarianism to promote their own myopic vested interests. The result is clear for all to see: an exponential increase in Sunni-Shi'i antagonism.

---

Hamid Mavani's expertise in Islamic studies stems is solidly grounded on academic training and specialized theological training at traditional seminaries in the Muslim world. His primary fields of interest include Islamic legal reform, women and Shi'i law, Islamic theology and political thought, Islam and secularism, transnational Islam in Asia, intra-Muslim discourse, and Muslims in North America. In addition to authoring *Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi'ism: From Ali to Post-Khomeini* (Routledge: 2013) and a number of articles, he also translates Arabic- and Persian-language Islamic texts into English. His current major book research project deals with the structural and foundational reform of the principles of Islamic legal theory. He is presently assistant professor of religion, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA.

## Introduction

It is no exaggeration to assert that almost all ecumenical initiatives (*taqrīb al-madhāhib*) at promoting Sunni-Shi'i rapprochement have failed to take root and sustain themselves. As a matter of fact, one can make a case that the contemporary Sunni-Shi'i rivalry and aversion is rapidly spiraling downward and has reached a fever pitch in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. I argue that this failure is a logical outcome of structural and foundational differences that have gradually become crystallized in each party's worldviews, communal self-understanding, sacred narratives, history, theology, and philosophy, all of which regard the "other" as having deviated from the normative, pristine, pure, unadulterated, and ideal Islam.

No meaningful reconciliation can take place without addressing these vital issues and accepting the other as equal, both of which mean going beyond tolerance and toleration. If this is not done, the potential for sectarian warfare, in spite of the apparent sectarian harmony, will always remain simmering just below the surface, ready to erupt due to acute tension or a perceived vulnerability. While the laudable and courageous efforts of Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut (d. 1963), the rector of al-Azhar University who issued a historic fatwa that proclaimed the validity of the legal school of Twelver Shi'ism and permitted it to be taught at al-Azhar<sup>1</sup> are noteworthy, a sustained and robust rapprochement can only come about by addressing doctrinal disagreements.

However, the recent upsurge in communal tensions and conflicts cannot be attributed solely to doctrinal matters or the misuse and abuse of Islam. The conflicts are now so complex and deep-seated that no single factor can be blamed and no single solution can be devised to resolve them. The multifaceted conflicts are partly due to economic (e.g., poverty and economic exploitation) and political (e.g., the inequitable distribution of the state's powers and resources) factors, along with foreign influence and invasions.

And then there are the ethnic, cultural, and religious elements used to accentuate, exacerbate, and justify these conflicts even further. Consequently, one must understand that these conflicts are rarely one dimensional, for all of these factors are involved and, at times, exploited and manipulated to advance the participants' own vested interests. As such, although local and foreign players do play a role in fanning and sustaining the flames of sectarian identity and then exploit and instrumentalize the generated hatred and animosity to pursue their own goals, in my estimation they are no more than secondary actors in the sense that they only magnify and exacerbate the existing sectarian antagonism. This mutual antipathy has degenerated into detonating bombs within mosques full of worshippers and pronouncing the other as an apostate

(*takfir*), a largely Wahhabi and Salafi undertaking directed against the Shi'is and Sufis.

The Prophet's death in 632 confronted the community with a major crisis of authority and leadership: Who would succeed him as ruler in both the temporal and religious domains? After an intense, protracted, and acrimonious debate, Abu Bakr, an early convert and the father of Muhammad's wife, Ayesha, was chosen to succeed him in temporal matters only. Ali's supporters, who crystallized as the Shi'is, interpreted this act as a sin, a glaring act of disobedience to the Prophet's directive on Ali's succession, and the usurpation of his right to lead. Historians from both branches of Islam have attempted to minimize the differences between the Companions and gloss over their disputes to project the image as homogenous and united; however, the fact remains that the succession acrimony was the beginning of a major rupture that has only widened over time.

It is important to note that from the Shi'i perspective, the genesis of this split was not a political dispute on who should become the caliph, but rather one of who should be arrogated with the mandate to continue to provide authentic and authoritative leadership and guidance in both the temporal and religious affairs, given that the Muslim community was still in its infancy phase and quite fragile. They argued that such a function could only devolve on a person who was graced with the divine gift of infallibility.

Shi'i polemical works view the first three caliphs, namely, Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman, as illegitimate rulers and usurpers, demagogues and political opportunists whose plans to seize power were helped along by two of the Prophet's wives: Ayesha (daughter of Abu Bakr) and Hafsa (daughter of Umar). In one case, the Qur'an explicitly reprimands Hafsa: "The Prophet told something in confidence to one of his wives [Hafsa] and she disclosed it [to Ayesha]—God made this known to him..." (Q. 66:3) and "His [i.e., Muhammad's] Lord may well replace you [Hafsa and Ayesha] with better wives if the Prophet decides to divorce any of you: wives who are devoted to God, true believers, ..." (Q. 66:5). Thus, you find very few Shi'is named Ayesha, Hafsa, Abu Bakr, Umar, or Uthman.

But some of the Twelve Imams, whom the Shi'is regard as infallible and divinely appointed through an explicit decree and as the Prophet's legitimate successors, did just that: The First Imam, Ali, named two of his sons Umar and Uthman; the Third Imam, Husayn b. Ali, named two of his sons Uthman and Abu Bakr; the Fourth Imam, Zayn al-Abidin, named one son Umar; the Seventh and the Tenth Imams, Musa al-Kadhim and Muhammad al-Jawad, respectively, each named a daughter Ayesha.<sup>2</sup>

From the Shi'i perspective, this usurpation of Ali's right to lead is the genesis of all the injustice, oppression, and corruption that befell – as will continue to befall – the Muslims until the return of the Messianic Imam: the Mahdi. This includes the Sunni caliphs' persecution of the Shi'is and killing of the infallible Imams. They argue that if Ali had been allowed to lead, the community would have avoided these crises because he was gifted with the attribute of infallibility and inerrancy. As such, even the slaughter of the Prophet's grandson Husayn b. Ali (d. 680) and his supporters on the plains of Karbala, Iraq, was the direct consequence of the deliberations at Saqifah, the assembly hall where the proceedings to select Abu Bakr were held.

It is in this context that the Shi'is petition the Mahdi to return and correct the wrongs by establishing justice and equity on Earth and avenging the indignities perpetrated by the Umayyads upon Husayn, his family, and followers. In other words, the victory and vindication of Shi'ism is linked to the reappearance of the Mahdi who will fight against the *bughāt* – defined in Shi'i literature as those who fought against any of the Twelve infallible Imams or usurped their authority – to first transform the *dār al-Islām* (Abode of Islam) to *dār al-īmān* (Abode of Conviction or True Faith), before battling against the apostates, People of the Book or the polytheists.

Moreover in the Shi'i narrative, part of which is shared by Sunni scholars such as Ibn Qutaybah,<sup>3</sup> after Abu Bakr's assumption of power Umar went to Ali's house to forcibly obtain his allegiance (*bay'ah*) to the new caliph. When he refused to respond, Umar threatened to torch the house and break down the front door. Fatima, the Prophet's daughter and Ali's wife, reprimanded him and reminded him of the Prophet's statement concerning her high status and the reverence due her. Ignoring her words, Umar stormed the front door and caused Fatima, who was standing behind it, to fall to the ground and suffer a miscarriage.

Ayatollah Hosein Fadlollah (d. 2010) of Lebanon declared this account ahistorical, questionable, and incredulous on the grounds that Ali, who was famed for his battlefield bravery and fearlessness and considered the personification of Arab *murūwwah* (chivalry), would not have remained silent and passive when confronted with such an egregious violation of his family's sanctity. This break from tradition resulted in virulent fatwas issued by Ayatollahs Wahid Khorasani, Fazil Lankarani (d. 2007), Bashir Husayn Najafi, Husayn Nuri Hamadani, Muhammad Taqi Behjat (d. 2009), Taqi Qummi, Jawad Tabrizi (d. 2006), and other leading jurists. Eminent jurists also tacitly approved the publication of several books written to refute his views and methodology by not coming to his defense.

The scene of Fatimah falling to the ground and aborting her child is etched in the memory of all and evokes strong emotions that ultimately demonize and dehumanize all Sunnis. Thus Umar is generally viewed as the arch enemy and even today many parts of the Shi'i world celebrate his death at the hand of Abu Lu'lu with great joy and fanfare, known as *Omar koshān* (It is said that the assassin's shrine, located in Kashan, Iran, was shut down in 2007 at the instruction of Ayatollah Mohamad Taskhiri, an exponent of Sunni-Shi'i rapprochement). In addition, Abu Bakr refused to give Fatima the Fadak estate as part of her inheritance on the grounds that prophets leave nothing for their posterity to inherit. She expressed her displeasure with both men, accused them of usurping her husband's rightful succession, and never spoke with them again.<sup>4</sup> It is of little significance whether these reports are historically factual or not so long as Shi'is perceive them to be accurate, factual, and in direct contravention to the Prophet's statement that "Fatima is a part of me, and he who makes her angry, makes me angry."<sup>5</sup>

These doctrinal and historical issues constitute serious impediments to any durable rapprochement even in the presence of asserted major areas of overlap and commonalities, such as the shared major tenets of faith (e.g., monotheism, the Day of Resurrection, and the finality of prophethood) and ritual practices (e.g., prayers, fasting, and pilgrimage); the same prayer direction (*qiblah*); the affirmation that the Qur'an is God's verbatim speech that has been perfectly preserved in its original; and that both branches follow the Prophet's Sunnah (i.e., his statements, practices, and tacit approval).

While legal accommodation on rituals is easier to accomplish, this is not the case with the significant interpretive divergences emanating from the doctrine of Imamate: Only the infallible Twelve Imams can interpret the Qur'an and prophetic traditions authoritatively,<sup>6</sup> and thus only they can succeed the Prophet as religio-political figures and, as such, an explicit appointment was made in Ali's favor:

Ali did not base his right to the succession on an implied appointment by Muhammad. Rather he claimed to have had the best title ... It was not a secondary thesis developed by the Shi'ah after his death but an essential part of his message during his reign.<sup>7</sup>

## The Doctrine of Imamate

Mohammed A. Amir-Moezzi, a contemporary scholar at the Sorbonne, states that: "The true axis around which [the] Imamate doctrinal tradition revolves is that of Imamology, without the knowledge of which no other great chapter,

as is the case with theology or prophetology, could be adequately studied.”<sup>8</sup> The major differences and disputes emanating from the ensuing disagreement demonstrate its importance: “The greatest dispute, indeed, in the community has been that over the imamate; for no sword has ever been drawn in Islam on a religious question as it has been drawn at all times on the question of the imamate.”<sup>9</sup> The contemporary scholar Wilferd Madelung writes: “No event in history has divided Islam more profoundly and durably than the succession of Muhammad.”<sup>10</sup>

Given this doctrine’s central and indispensable nature in Shi’ism, it should come as no surprise that the first three caliphs are viewed as usurpers who snatched away Ali’s rightful place. This issue is the most important point of contention and, as a result, the Shi’is view many of the Companions as untrustworthy, lacking in integrity, and as having deviated so far from the path of Islam that they became unbelievers. Abu Hanifah, founder of the Hanafi Sunni school of thought, stated: “The fundamental basis of the Shi’i creed is the misguidance (or going astray) of the Prophet’s Companions.”<sup>11</sup>

This view is a source of great consternation and animosity because the Sunnis hold the “rightly guided” caliphs in high esteem and believe that all of Muhammad’s Companions possess moral probity. When faced with some difficulty in this regard, they neither judge nor censure them for their conduct and behavior due to a directive reportedly issued by the Prophet: “Do not vilify a single one of my Companions.”<sup>12</sup>

Intolerant statements against the Sunnis are not the norm, as they are accorded the status of *muslim* (one who has pronounced the dual testimony of faith), but not *mu’min* (a believer with sound faith), in terms of the ladder of faith. This is how some Shi’i scholars bridge the sectarian divide for the sake of Muslim cohesion and unity in an attempt to maintain social relations with the larger community. As such, both agree that one enters Islam by confirming one’s belief in one God and the messengership of His Prophet, which legitimize intra-Muslim marriages and the consumption of meat slaughtered by each other.

## Sunni-Shi’i Strife

Recent flare-ups that have been transformed into a raging inferno of sectarian violence has led to a belated but forceful intervention by Ahmed El Tayyeb, al-Azhar University’s rector, who has categorically denounced and expressed his revulsion against anyone anathematizing the Shi’is or referring to them as *rāfiḍī* (i.e., those who reject the legitimacy of the first three caliphs). Most re-

cently, he responded to such inflammatory rhetoric on several satellite channels on the grounds that this would make it lawful for Sunnis to murder them and confiscate their properties.<sup>13</sup>

More alarming was the October 5, 2015, communique issued by several Saudi clerics calling upon believers to support ISIS, whom they called “pious fighters,” and annihilate the Assad regime along with the Russians and the Iranians: “Give all moral, material, political and military support”<sup>14</sup> to defeat Assad and its Iranian and Russian backers. This brought a stern response from the UN offices: Adama Dieng and Jennifer Welsh said, “[A]dvocacy of religious hatred to incite or justify violence is not only morally wrong, but also prohibited under international law.”<sup>15</sup>

Even more egregious and damning was a supplication offered at the end of one of the daily prayers at Makkah’s Grand Mosque by the government-appointed imam: “We petition God to endow the pious fighters (*mujāhidīn*) in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and all other places with honor, might, victory, and unity. O God, we seek your help against the *rāfiḍī* apostates (repeated twice), treasonous Jews, misled Christians, and the scheming and conspiring hypocrites.”<sup>16</sup> Abdollah al-Dosari, a Saudi TV host on Wesal TV, expressed his pleasure and delight at the death of more than 300<sup>17</sup> Iranians during the hajj stampede in October 2015: “Praise be to God who relieved Islam and the Muslim from their (Iranians) evil. We pray that God will usher them into Hell for all eternity.”<sup>18</sup>

Many edicts are issued by Saudi-trained scholars that the Shi’is and Sufis are innovators, or polytheists, unbelievers, and heretics for venerating their saints, praying at their shrines,<sup>19</sup> and seeking their intercession to help them gain salvation; for practicing precautionary dissimulation (*taqīyah*) when they feel it is in their best interest to do so, which many Sunnis view as a license for duplicity and trickery; for the Shi’i claim that the extant Qur’an has been distorted by removing verses that praised the infallible Imams; for cursing and dissociating themselves from some of the Companions; for placing their head on a tablet (*turbah*) of soil from Karbala or elsewhere when praying; adding the phrase “Ali is the friend and supporter of God” to the call to prayer or the creedal formula, which the Sunnis misinterpret as elevating Ali to Muhammad’s status; for engaging in missionary activity; and for innovation when it comes to the rites and rituals connected with commemorating Husayn’s martyrdom.

There have been instances on the Shi’i side as well. This is especially true in India and Pakistan, where the badge of “Umar” is sometimes placed on a dog and then released in a Sunni-populated area; Islamic law views



dogs as ritually impure (*najis*). The Sunnis, who revere Umar, naturally view this as an act of sacrilege. In addition, Shi'i satellite channels like Ahl El Bait TV with Sheikh Hassan Allahyari at the helm, continuously curse and dole out vulgar profanities on the Companions, among them Ayesha and Hafsa. They also celebrate Umar's death at the hand of Abu Lu'lu with joy and fanfare.<sup>20</sup>

These are some of the primary ingredients that have produced the volcanic eruption of intra-Muslim violence and bloodshed. The catastrophic and horrific four-year war in Syria, along with the recent intervention by Russia and Iran to prop up the infamous brutal and savage Assad regime, has only further aggravated the existing communal animosity and ill-will. In many ways, Syria has become the site of a proxy war being waged by Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, America, Russia, and the Kurds, all of whom want to preserve their own interests and power base. The hole card of sectarianism appeared (i.e., framing the conflict as one pitting Sunnis against Iranian-backed Shi'is) to be a powerful way to galvanize support; however, it eventually acquired a life of its own and became uncontrollable, as both Iran and Saudi Arabia are beginning to comprehend.

## Sunni and Shi'i Jurists' Response

Ayatollah Ali Khamena'i sought to defuse the crisis created in 2011 when the Kuwaiti Shi'i cleric Shaykh Yasser Habib termed Ayesha "an enemy of God"<sup>21</sup> by ruling: "We prohibit insulting the symbols of our Sunni brothers, as well as accusing the wife of the Prophet of what affects her dignity and honor. Moreover, it is forbidden to insult any of the wives of the prophets and especially [those of] their master the Great Prophet [Muhammad]."<sup>22</sup> Other Shi'i jurists like Ayatollahs Wahid Khorasani, Fadlollah, and Nasir Makarim Shirazi,<sup>23</sup> as well as Sistani's office, have given similar legal opinions. Here is a question posed to the latter in October 2013 and the response from his office:

**QUESTION:** A video clip has been seen several times on social network web sites showing a congregation during the martyrdom of al-Imam al-Jawad (a.s.). This group of people from the area known as al-A'dhamiyyah are shown shouting out insults upon Umar, A'isha, and others. Is this type of behavior condemned by the supreme religious authority, especially since it involves the insult of religious figures of our brothers of the Sunni school of thought, and it could potentially fuel unrest amongst the people of Iraq and jeopardize peace?



**RESPONSE OF SISTANI:** This type of behavior is condemned, strongly denounced, and contrary to the commands of the Imams of the Holy Household of the Prophet (s.a.w.a.) to their followers. Allah is The Guide.

The Seal

Office of Ayatullah Sayyid al-Sistani  
Holy City of Najaf<sup>24</sup>

Iran has been at the forefront of attempting to minimize sectarian animosity in its external (secondary) discourse in order to consolidate its strength with the Sunnis in its confrontation with the West. However, its internal (primary) discourse favors the intensification of sectarian identity and “otherizing” all Sunnis, both at home and abroad. For example, the country’s Sunni leaders have often complained of harassment and persecution, and the lack of religious freedom, as well as government interference in their children’s religious education and in setting up their seminary curriculum.<sup>25</sup> Tehran has several churches and synagogues but not a single Sunni mosque.

Another poignant example of the fragility of Sunni-Shi'i brotherhood claims is the following: In 1989, Iran inaugurated a week of unity (*haftah-ye wahdat*) to promote Sunni-Shi'i reconciliation. The whole week was chosen to accommodate the two different dates of Muhammad’s birthday: Sunnis believe he was born on Rabi’ al-Awwal 12, and Shi’is believe he was born on Rabi’ al-Awwal 17. However, when it was time to offer the ritual prayer during the 2015 commemoration, they could not agree on who should lead the joint prayer. Thus two congregational prayers were held in the same hall.<sup>26</sup> This forcefully and eloquently shows how difficult it is to transcend sectarian boundaries even when the invited guests are inclined to do so.

## Rapprochement or Expediency?

Despite the apparent major differences on doctrinal matters, both sides have occasionally promoted mutual tolerance and co-existence when prompted by expediency and power dynamics (i.e., political ecumenism). However, such an approach only gives a semblance of artificial unity and temporarily suppresses sectarian impulses. A recent example is Ayatollah Sistani’s call to regard the Sunnis as not only their “brethren” (*ikhwān*), but also as part and parcel of their “selves” (*anfus*).

Such a statement represents a clear break from tradition and thus, most probably, was issued out of expediency due to Iraq’s sectarian civil war,

bombs being detonated in Shi'i localities, and to block the violent "Sunni" Muslim extremist<sup>27</sup> groups from exploiting anti-Sunnism to recruit followers. It therefore lacks credibility in terms of representing a modified Shi'i worldview, which would require him to disown, contextualize or dismiss past Imami scholarship on this subject as just polemics wherein Sunnis are demonized. For instance, in the section on "Jihad," the Sunnis are included as one of the categories against whom jihad will be waged (*jihād al-bughāt*) upon the return of the Mahdi, presaging the end of times. Anything short of a radical change in Shi'i worldview, the Sunnis will dismiss categorically such superficial and shallow proclamations as examples of invoking *taqīyah* to preserve a larger good.

### **The Path toward Rapprochement**

Attaining a more durable rapprochement requires fundamental ideological and doctrinal reinterpretation, an undertaking that would be less daunting if both sides were to acknowledge that there is no such thing as a pure, constant, static, and unchanging Sunni or Shi'i Islam, something "pure" that has been untouched by human hands. Religious ideas and doctrines never develop in a vacuum, insulated from social, political, cultural, religious, economic, and all other values. Acknowledging that religious thought and ideas evolve and are mediated through human history and experience would infuse intellectual humility and destroy all exclusive truth claims for salvific efficacy based on the hadith that only one of Islam's seventy-three sects will be saved. This hadith is of dubious authenticity, even though it has been relayed through multiple channels of transmission and recorded in multiple works. A critical investigation, however, demonstrates that many of these chains are weak or contain an unknown person.

When Ali became caliph in 656, Mu'awiya rebelled and fought him in the prolonged and bloody Battle of Siffin under the pretense of avenging Uthman's murder. However, his real aim was to seize power for himself by destabilizing Ali's caliphate and preoccupying him with recruiting soldiers and waging war. During the battle, a group of his supporters disparaged, insulted, and abused Mu'awiya's followers. He promptly ordered them to cease and desist by saying: "I surely detest your vilifying and abusing them. But if you were to describe their deeds and recount their situation, that would be a more appropriate and convincing way of arguing. Instead of abusing them, you should say: 'O God, save our blood and their blood, produce reconciliation between us and them.'"<sup>28</sup>

Before appointing Malik al-Ashtar to the governorship of Egypt, Ali composed an epistle for him to use as his point of reference. In it, he advocates unconditional universal human dignity irrespective of one's faith affiliation or lack thereof. How, then, could his followers possibly justify the reviling and cursing of other Muslims out of love for Ali and his family? This is in direct contravention: "Infuse your heart with mercy, love and kindness for your subjects . . . for they are of two kinds: *either they are your brothers in religion or your equals in creation.*"<sup>29</sup> The concept of universal human dignity is also deeply anchored in the Qur'an: "We have indeed honored the descendants of Adam" (Q. 17:70).

The Fourth Imam, Zayn al-Abidin, who was present at the massacre in Karbala in 680 and witnessed the harrowing events unfolding in front of him, was subsequently chained and taken to Damascus and, along with his family members (including the women), was eventually imprisoned. And yet he composed a supplication in which he petitions God to preserve Islamdom's territorial integrity.<sup>30</sup> His spirit of magnanimity and generosity could become paradigmatic in overcoming the deep-seated animosity toward the first three caliphs and some of the Companions, among them Ayesha and Hafsa.

The bitterly opposing doctrinal positions on succession to the Prophet could be mitigated if the infallible Imam's authority were divided into (1) authority over the Muslims' strictly religious and spiritual affairs and (2) authority over their social and political aspects of life (caliphate), which is to be distinguished from succession (*wisāyah*) and inheritance (*wirāthah*). The former, which demands that the person be exemplary and infallible, can be known only through divine decree, as no one else could be privy to this information. However, in the area of socio-political guidance the public appears to enjoy agency and free will due to the tradition of paying allegiance (*bay'ah*) to the leader and the social contract bond. As a result, Shi'i scholars argue that the Imam's legitimacy and status does not depend upon whether he holds political office and enjoys public consensus or acknowledgment, for his appointment is a divine grace and can be discovered only through divine designation.

As for the Sunni world, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Malaysia have to abandon their virulent anti-Shi'i propaganda, as well as their negative stereotypes and misrepresentations of Shi'i rituals as polytheistic, both of which seek to dehumanize them. Such hostility has become very prevalent in their societies. This is especially true of Saudi Arabia, which actually exports its anti-Shi'i ideology abroad by dispatching religious

leaders (imams) trained in its seminaries and providing financial support to those centers that toe its anti-rational and dogmatic Wahhabi ideological line. Nicholas Kristof writes: “Saudi Arabia has supported Wahhabi madrasas in poor countries in Africa and Asia, exporting extremism and intolerance.”<sup>31</sup> Wealthy businesspersons from these countries are the financial lifeline for many of the satellite channels that promote sectarianism. Apparently, they have adopted this strategy of fragmentation to strengthen their position as they jockey for power against Iran.

The self-complacent and self-righteous belief of many Salafis and Wahhabis that they alone possess the pure and authentic Islam is another great liability, because it leads them to excommunicate those Muslims who do not share their worldview. Instead, a good policy would be to adopt the Qur’anic dictum that “none can judge another except God.” They also need to become introspective and engage in critical analysis to scrutinize Muslim history and provide a more accurate account of the past instead of glorifying it as the “golden era,” a nostalgia to return to the lost utopia, in keeping with the Sunni triumphalist worldview. No such historical epoch ever existed, and such a notion is both erroneous and ahistorical.

## Conclusion

The spread of puritanical, dogmatic, sectarian, and anti-rational Wahhabi and Salafi theology, as well as their venomous anti-Shi’i propaganda, thanks to Saudi petrodollars and open-ended American support for the kingdom despite its continuing gross violation of human rights, does not bode well for the promotion of inter-denominational rapprochement, especially in the context of Iran’s regional ascendancy; its pursuit of nuclear energy; its currently substantial influence in Iraq, Bahrain, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia’s Shi’a-majority Eastern Province; and the fear in the West and among the Sunnis (articulated by King Abdullah of Jordan in December 2004) of an emerging ideological Shi’i crescent or arc.<sup>32</sup> In the words of Kristof: “It’s time for a frank discussion about our ally Saudi Arabia and its role [in] legitimizing fundamentalism and intolerance in the Islamic world.”<sup>33</sup>

Charting the origin and development of Sunnism and Shi’ism, along with their mutual relations and the impact of polemics on its formulation and development is complex, for ideologies never appear and evolve in abstraction or in a vacuum; rather, they influence and are influenced by historical, social, political, cultural, and other factors. Contemporary perceptions of the past are formulated through this hazy prism. Thus sectarian identity is not static, but

rather in a state of flux, meaning that it is both dynamic and changing in response to context and socioeconomic and political conditions.

The enmity and disdain harbored in many quarters is fourteen centuries old, and the cumulative effect of the scars inflicted on both sides evoke strong emotions of contempt and hostility. This divide cannot be overcome with hollow and empty slogans combined with proclamations of brotherhood, pan-Islamic unity, and the politically correct language of discourse. The core issues must be confronted both honestly and seriously. President Erdogan's recent statement during his visit to Iran, "I don't care about Shia or Sunni, I care about the Muslim,"<sup>34</sup> will do little to bridge the divide. Instead, Fetullah Gulen's model of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue could be used as a starting point in formulating an intra-Muslim paradigm.

Unfortunately, the sectarian genie is out of the bottle. It will require serious introspection and self-interrogation of the doctrine, creed, history, and its evolution, along with an understanding of those who weaponize and fan the flames of sectarianism for ulterior motives. This will require allowing a greater scope for reason and rationality in Islamic thought (i.e., a move toward the Mu'tazili theology and ethics), along with a good dose of intellectual humility, a critical mindset that allows for religious plurality, a non-judgmental attitude on matters of salvific efficacy, and revision of the seminaries' curriculum used to train Muslim clergy. Only in this way can the existing polemics, which are based on popular religion and are ahistorical, be weeded out so that the Muslim world can begin bridging this divide and transcending the age-old mutually exclusive and polarized categories that allow both sides to be exploited by those who are only interested in pursuing their personal agendas by promoting politics of identity.

## Endnotes

1. [Al-Islam.org], "Al-Azhar Verdict on the Shi'a," <http://www.al-islam.org/shiite-encyclopedia-ahlul-bayt-dilp-team/al-azhar-verdict-on-shia>, accessed 10 October 2015.
2. Muhammad b. Muhammad Mufid, *Kitāb al-Irshād: The Book of Guidance into the Lives of the Twelve Imams*, trans. I. K. A. Howard (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1981), 268, 290, 391, 459, and 506.
3. Abdallah b. Muslim b. Qutaybah, *Al-Imāmah wa al-Siyāsah*, ed. Taha Muhammad al-Zayni (Cairo: Mu'assasat al-Halabi, 1967), 47.
4. "Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī," <http://www.sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/results.php5>, vol. 4, book 53, hadith no. 325, accessed 2 November 2015.
5. *Ibid.*, vol. 5, book 57, hadith no. 61, accessed 2 November 2015.

6. Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Speaking Qur'an and the Silent Qur'an: A Study of the Principles and Development of Imami Shi'i Tafsir," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 184-85.
7. Wilferd Madelung, "Shi'ism in the Age of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs," in *Shi'ite Heritage: Essays on Classical and Modern Traditions*, ed. Lynda Clarke (New York: Global Publications, 2001), 15.
8. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, trans. David Streight (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 23.
9. Muhammad b. Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, tr. A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984), 19.
10. Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.
11. Khatib al-Baghdadi, *Al-Kifāyah fi 'Ilm al-Riwāyah* (Hyderabad: n.p., 1938), 126.
12. Taqi al-Din b. Taymiyyah, *Al-Şārim al-Maslūl 'alā Shātim al-Rasūl* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2003).
13. [ABNA], "Grand Imam of al-Azhar Strongly Condemns Calling Shias as Infidels; Quran, Sunnah Reject Excommunicating Shia Muslims," 8 August 2015, <http://en.abna24.com/service/africa/archive/2015/08/08/704699/story.html>, accessed 5 September 2015.
14. [Reuters], Angus McDowall, "Saudi Opposition Clerics Make Sectarian Call to Jihad in Syria," 5 October 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/05/us-mideast-crisis-saudi-clerics-idUSKCN0RZ1IW20151005>, accessed 5 November 2015.
15. [UN News Centre], "Syria: UN Human Rights Officials Alarmed at Rise of Incitement to Religious Violence," 13 October 2015, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=52258#.V142F3arS00>, accessed 7 November 2015.
16. [Shi'i News and Resources], Saudi Imam Calls for Daesh Victory, Condemns Shi'a," 3 November 2015, <http://www.shii-news.imes.ed.ac.uk/shii-news-saudi-imam-calls-for-daesh-victory-condemns-shia/>, accessed 10 November 2015.
17. The actual figure is significantly higher. The Saudis provided a low and erroneous estimate of 717 from the outset and have gradually been raising it over time. Most reports put the number of deaths between 1,400 and 4,000.
18. [MEMRI TV], "Saudi TV Host Abdullah Al-Dosari Celebrates Death of Iranian Pilgrims in Hajj Stampede in Mecca," 3 October 2015, <http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/5134.htm#.VjOPlgItmE4.email>, accessed 14 November 2015; [BBC World News], "BBC Documentary: Freedom to Broadcast Hate," 19 March 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjNBsvvcAoQ>, accessed 3 November 2015.
19. In the early 1800s, the House of Saud destroyed Husayn's shrine in Karbala.
20. [The Official Site for Ahl El Bait TV], <https://eng.abtv.org/content/live-streaming>, accessed 20 November 2015.

21. "Sheikh Al-Habib's Reply to Aisha's Supporters," 22 October 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x22herRuSOW>, accessed 22 November 2015.
22. [Islam Times], "Fatwa Closes the Door in Front of any Sedition between the Sunnis and the Shiites," 9 October 2010, <http://www.islamtimes.org/vdcgnu9w.ak9yq4j5ra.html>, accessed 15 October 2014.
23. <file:///C:/Users/Hamid/Downloads/estefta-maraje-hormat-en.pdf>, accessed 30 October 2015.
24. [I.M.A.M.], "Sayid Sistani's Fatwa about the Prophet (S.A.W.A.)'s Companions," 13 October 2013, [https://secure.imam-us.org/fatwa/companions?utm\\_source=Sayyid+Sistani%27s+fatwa+about+the+Prophet%27s+%28s.a.w.a.%29+companions&utm\\_campaign=Sistani+Companion+Sahabah&utm\\_medium=email](https://secure.imam-us.org/fatwa/companions?utm_source=Sayyid+Sistani%27s+fatwa+about+the+Prophet%27s+%28s.a.w.a.%29+companions&utm_campaign=Sistani+Companion+Sahabah&utm_medium=email), accessed 5 November 2015.
25. "Iranian Authorities Close Tehran Sunni Mosque," Al Arabiya News, 9 February 2011. <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/02/09/136981.html>, accessed 2 November 2015.
26. <http://www.binanews.ir/news69201.html>.
27. This nomenclature is taken from Zakyi Ibrahim, "Violent Muslim Extremism Flagrantly Dares the World: A Critical Reflection," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 32, no.4 (fall 2025), i.
28. Ali b. Abi Talib, *Nahj al-Balāghah*, compiled by Sharif al-Radi, trans. S. A. Reza (Rome: European Islamic Cultural Centre, 1984), Sermon 205, 417-18.
29. Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 110.
30. Zayn al-'Abidin (Ali b. al-Husayn), *Sahīfa-ye Sajjādiyyah (The Psalms of Islam)*, trans. William C. Chittick (London: The Muhammadi Trust, 1987), sup-  
plication no. 27.
31. [The New York Times], Nicholas Kristof, "Sentences to be Crucified," [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/29/opinion/sentenced-to-be-crucified.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/29/opinion/sentenced-to-be-crucified.html?_r=0), October 29, 2015.
32. Lawrence G. Potter (ed.), *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.
33. Kristof, "Sentences to be Crucified."
34. [The New York Times], Tim Arango, "Turkey and Iran Put Tensions Aside, for a Day," <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/08/world/middleeast/turkey-and-iran-put-tensions-aside-for-a-day.html>, April 7, 2015.