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Religious Thought and Political Identity in Regional Crises: A Comparative Study of Sunni and Shiʿi Islamic Movements in Iraq and Syria (2011–2024)

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Abstract

This study explores the nexus between religious thought and political identity within the context of regional crises through a comparative analysis of Sunni and Shiʿi Islamic movements in Iraq and Syria from 2011 to 2024. The research is divided into two main sections. The first addresses the conceptual framework of religious thought and political identity, while the second analyzes the religious-political discourse of both Sunni and Shiʿi movements post-2011. The study employs critical analytical, comparative, and case study methodologies to develop an integrated understanding of how religious ideology shape's political identity amidst prolonged regional conflicts. Key findings reveal that both Sunni and Shiʿi discourses have undergone significant politicization, using religious narratives as tools of political and military mobilization. Religious authorities have been instrumentalized to serve nationalist or regional agendas, exacerbating sectarian tensions and deepening communal divides. The study concludes by advocating for a reformed religious discourse that promotes national unity and citizenship values across educational curricula and media platforms.

Keywords   Religious Thought; Political Identity; Regional Crises; Islamic Movements; Sectarianism; Iraq; Syria

1. Introduction

The literature surrounding the interplay of religious thought and political identity in the context of sectarian movements in Iraq and Syria reveals a complex tapestry of historical grievances, ideological shifts, and contemporary crises. The examination of Sunni and Shiʿi Islamic movements in these regions is underscored by a series of significant articles that contribute to our understanding of the evolving dynamics at play.

(Zeynep Oktav et al., 2015) provide a foundational analysis of the Syrian regime's strategic manipulation of sectarian identities, particularly how Salafi violence was redirected towards international targets rather than the Asad regime itself. Their exploration of the political representation crisis among Lebanese Sunnis during the civil war illustrates how sectarian identities can become sources of alterity, with Sunni communities feeling increasingly marginalized in the face of Shiʿi political ascendance, particularly through the lens of Hezbollah's growing influence.

Building on this theme, (Ghassan Barakeh, 2016) delves into the role of social media in shaping contemporary Islamist movements, particularly in Tripoli. By examining the fears and grievances of the Sunni community regarding Hezbollah and the perceived threats posed by Iranian influence, (Ghassan Barakeh, 2016) highlights the emotional and political ramifications of sectarian stereotyping, which has led to a heightened sense of exclusion and a call for protective measures among Sunnis.

(Imady, 2016) further contextualizes the Syrian uprising by examining the organizational aspects of Islamist movements, emphasizing the complexities of identity formation amidst a backdrop of political turmoil. This analysis is crucial in understanding how local Islamist groups navigate both internal and external pressures, particularly as they relate to the broader Sunni-Shiʿi divide.

(O'Driscoll, 2018) shifts the focus to Iraq, where the aftermath of the Islamic State's territorial claims has exacerbated intercommunal tensions. His insights into the political instability and the challenges posed by the government formation process underscore the fragility of sectarian identities in the face of displacement and competition for resources, suggesting that the future of these identities is contingent upon effective governance and decentralization efforts.

(Hyman, 2018) contributes to the discourse by interrogating the ideological underpinnings of the Islamic State, questioning the existing frameworks of Salafist jihadism. His qualitative analysis of online media reveals a distinct ideological trajectory that diverges from traditional benchmarks, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of sectarianism as both a historical and contemporary phenomenon.

(Løland, 2019) takes a more personal approach, exploring how ordinary individuals perceive sectarian narratives in the context of revolution and war. Her focus on narrative identity challenges the essentialist views of sectarianism, positing that the complexities of identity and coexistence in Syria are often overlooked in favor of a more simplistic, conflict-driven narrative.

(Mabon, 2019) broadens the discussion by examining the role of regional powers in sectarian politics, arguing that sectarian identities can be strategically employed by local elites to maintain control amidst geopolitical tensions. His analysis highlights the interplay between local contexts and broader regional dynamics, particularly in light of the ongoing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Finally, (Dodge, 2020) critically assesses the rise of ethno-sectarian rhetoric in post-2003 Iraq, arguing that this shift represents an aberration in Iraq's historical political landscape. By employing Bourdieu's theoretical framework, (Dodge, 2020) seeks to unravel the complexities of political identities shaped by sectarianism, suggesting that the dominance of such rhetoric is not merely a product of historical grievances but also a strategic response to contemporary political challenges.

Together, these contributions illuminate the multifaceted relationship between religious thought and political identity in the context of regional crises, revealing how historical legacies, ideological shifts, and contemporary conflicts shape the experiences and expressions of Sunni and Shiʿi communities in Iraq and Syria.

The root causes of these crises lie in the mismanagement of cultural and social diversity by various ruling regimes, which have historically neglected the importance of pluralism. Furthermore, the absence of systematic recognition of minority rights has led to social polarization and unprecedented civil unrest. The centralized model of state governance has deepened these divides instead of containing them.

The central issue lies in how religious thought and political identity are addressed amid regional crises. Dominant approaches often overemphasize external factors while neglecting the internal sociocultural fabric of these societies. The lack of deep, structural studies on these communities has hindered the development of sustainable solutions. This calls for a critical re-reading of history to identify lessons learned and policy reform opportunities—an essential step toward societal resilience and conflict mitigation.

Since 2011, Iraq and Syria have undergone significant political and security transformations. Sunni and Shiʿi Islamic movements have played pivotal roles in shaping the political and social landscapes. Their discourse has blurred the boundaries between religion and politics, creating a complex religious-political narrative that intertwines faith-based identity with political allegiance.

Undoubtedly, the Iraqi experience has significantly influenced the Syrian context. The interconnectedness between the two cases necessitates a detailed study of Iraq to determine whether developments have emerged organically or are the product of external and internal dynamics accelerating the crises.

This topic becomes even more crucial when considering how sectarianism intertwines with geopolitics, transforming the discourse of Islamic movements into a battleground for regional influence—particularly between Iran and Sunni Arab states. Notably, these movements' rhetoric has expanded beyond national concerns to shape international perceptions of the crises in Iraq and Syria.

2. Research Problem

The Arab Spring revolutions marked a major turning point in reshaping the political and social maps of several Arab states, especially Iraq and Syria. These revolutions ignited internal tensions and regional conflicts, which led to the emergence of **political sectarianism** as a key mechanism for producing power and asserting influence. Within this context, **Sunni and Shiʿi Islamic movements** rose as significant political-religious forces, each formulating distinct discourses on religious thought and political identity based on sectarian affiliation and interpretation of events.

These varying discourses profoundly influenced how each movement engaged with regional crises, whether through narratives of resistance, victimhood, or calls for political empowerment. Accordingly, the central research question of this study is:

How have religious thought and political identity shaped the discourse of Sunni and Shiʿi Islamic movements in Iraq and Syria between 2011 and 2024, and what are the key similarities and differences in how these discourses addressed regional crises?

3. Significance of the Study

3.1 Theoretical Significance

The theoretical value of this study lies in its engagement with three core concepts in political science and religious studies: **religious thought**, **political identity**, and **regional crises**—all examined within the highly sensitive Arab–Islamic context of Iraq and Syria. It contributes to scholarly literature on sectarianism and Islamic movement discourse by offering a comparative analysis of Sunni and Shiʿi narratives. The study enhances our understanding of how religion is mobilized to produce political visions and mass mobilization within crisis environments. Furthermore, it opens avenues for a critical re-evaluation of religious-political identity as a driving force in regional conflicts, rather than a mere reflection of traditional religious norms.

3.2 Practical Significance

On a practical level, the study provides a necessary knowledge base for understanding the **dynamics of sectarian conflict** and for distinguishing between doctrinal religious discourse and ideologically politicized religious discourse. This contributes to efforts toward **sectarian reconciliation**, **diversity management**, and the development of more effective public policies to reduce identity-based tensions and enhance national unity.

4. Research Questions

From the central problem of the study, the following main research question arises:

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To what extent has religious thought contributed to shaping the political identity of Sunni and Shiʻi Islamic movements in Iraq and Syria, and how has this discourse fueled regional crises between 2011 and 2024?

The study also seeks to answer the following sub-questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences in how Sunni and Shiʻi Islamic movements addressed political and social crises?
2. To what extent have these movements used religion as a political tool to expand their influence amid sectarian conflict?
3. How has the political instrumentalization of religion impacted state unity, societal cohesion, and the future of national identity?
4. Have these discourses intensified sectarian fragmentation, or have they produced new political sectarian projects that rival the concept of a unified nation-state?

5. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explain how **religious thought** has shaped the **political identity** of Sunni and Shiʻi Islamic movements in Iraq and Syria, and to assess the role of their discourse in escalating regional crises from 2011 to 2024.

The specific objectives include:

*   Identifying the similarities and differences in the discourse of Sunni and Shiʻi Islamic movements regarding political and social crises.
*   Analyzing the extent to which these movements have employed religion as a political instrument to bolster their authority within sectarian conflicts.
*   Evaluating the consequences of politicized religious discourse on the cohesion of state and society and the durability of national identity.
*   Investigating whether these discourses have merely deepened sectarian divisions or created alternative sectarian political projects that compete with national unity.

6. Scope and Limitations of the Study

6.1 Temporal Scope

This study covers the period from **2011 to 2024**, aligning with the aftermath of the Arab Spring and its ongoing impact on Iraq and Syria.

6.2 Geographical Scope

The geographical focus is limited to the **Republic of Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic**, as they represent two of the most prominent arenas where sectarian Islamic movements have played pivotal roles.

6.3 Thematic Scope

The thematic boundaries of the research are confined to the analysis of **religious thought and political identity** during regional crises, with a comparative focus on **Sunni and Shiʻi Islamic movements** in the specified countries.

7. Methodology

This study adopts a **multi-method approach** to examine the relationship between religious thought and political identity during regional crises. The following methodologies were applied:

7.1 Analytical–Critical Method

This method was used to analyze the religious and political discourse of Sunni and Shiʻi Islamic movements. The analysis involved deconstructing the rhetoric of key movements—such as **Hezbollah**, **Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)**, **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham**, **ISIS**, and the **Syrian Muslim Brotherhood**—and identifying core concepts such as **sect**, **ummah**, **caliphate**, **resistance**, **loyalty**, and **victimhood**.

7.2 Comparative Method

This method facilitated the comparison of the **historical and political contexts** surrounding the emergence of Sunni and Shi'i movements in Iraq and Syria. It helped clarify the differences in their discourses, reference frameworks, and functional roles in regional crises.

7.3 Case Study Method

The study focused on Iraq and Syria as **model case studies** to explore how religious thought has shaped political identity in a post-Arab Spring context. It also allowed for the assessment of how sectarian discourse interacts with regional power struggles and civil conflict dynamics.

7.4. Literature review

In "The View From Without: Syria & Its Neighbours," (Zeynep Oktav et al., 2015) provide a nuanced exploration of the political identity and religious thought of Sunni communities in the context of regional crises, particularly focusing on Lebanon and its historical relationship with Syria. The authors argue that the Sunnis, historically positioned as coreligionists of the Ottomans, perceived themselves as a majority within the broader Arab Middle East. This perception, however, has been complicated by the shifting political landscape following the civil war and the subsequent weakening of Sunni political representation.

The article critically evaluates the role of Sunni political leaders, characterized predominantly as notables who were generally not activist in nature. This detachment from active political engagement is particularly significant in understanding the dynamics of Sunni identity during periods of crisis. The authors highlight that despite their lack of direct involvement in sectarian militias during the Lebanese civil war, the Sunnis maintained a supportive stance towards the Palestinian cause, which reflects a complex interplay of religious identity and political allegiance.

A pivotal moment discussed in the article is the evacuation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon in the early 1980s, which marked the beginning of a crisis in political representation for the Sunni community. This event not only diminished their relative power compared to other sects but also altered their political landscape significantly. The authors note that Syria's subsequent support for Hizbullah, which gained control over the frontline with Israel, further marginalized Lebanese Sunnis, who found themselves without a militant cause to rally around.

The authors argue that as the Sunnis became increasingly envious of Hizbullah's political Shi'ism, they began to view it as a primary source of alterity. This shift is crucial for understanding the evolving nature of Sunni political identity in the context of regional crises, as it illustrates how sectarian dynamics can reshape political affiliations and perceptions. The article effectively underscores the importance of historical context in shaping contemporary political identities, particularly in a region fraught with sectarian tensions.

The article titled "Relative Deprivation Reinforces Exclusionary Politics" provides a nuanced examination of the dynamics between Sunni and Shi'i Islamic movements in the context of regional crises, particularly in Iraq and Syria. The article highlights how the post-Arab uprisings have led to a significant transformation in Islamist beliefs, particularly among non-violent groups utilizing social media platforms to articulate their perspectives and mobilize support.

A central theme of the analysis is the concept of relative deprivation, which serves as a catalyst for exclusionary politics among Sunni communities. The author emphasizes that the Sunni Islamist community, particularly in Tripoli, perceives itself as marginalized and threatened by the actions of Hezbollah and the broader Shiite coalition, which includes Iranian influence and American support. This perception of threat is compounded by the contrasting treatment of Sunni Islamists and Hezbollah by the Lebanese army, leading to feelings of anger and injustice within the Sunni public.

The discussion of the role of social media is particularly relevant, as it illustrates how Islamist leaders leverage these platforms to disseminate their views and garner public sympathy. The article details how key figures within the Sunni Islamist movement articulate their grievances and fears regarding Shiite dominance, framing Hezbollah as a significant adversary. This framing not only reinforces sectarian divisions but also calls for protective measures for the Sunni Umma, reflecting a deep-seated anxiety about their political and social standing in a rapidly changing regional landscape.

The comparative analysis between Hezbollah and Sunni Islamists is critical, as it underscores the varying narratives each group constructs regarding threats and alliances. While Shiites view Israel as the principal threat, Sunnis parallel this by perceiving Shiite presence as similarly menacing. This duality of threat perception contributes to the entrenchment of sectarian identities and exacerbates communal tensions, particularly in areas like Tripoli, where the Sunni population feels increasingly vulnerable.

In "Organisationally Secular: Damascene Islamist Movements and the Syrian Uprising," (Imady, 2016) provides a nuanced exploration of the interplay between Islamic movements and secular political dynamics in Syria, particularly in the context of the Syrian uprising. The article investigates the organizational structures of Islamist movements in Damascus, emphasizing their responses to modernity and the challenges posed by ongoing political crises.

The analysis begins with a historical overview of the Naqshbandi Sufi order's influence in Syria, tracing its evolution through the 19th and 20th centuries. The author highlights how these movements have adapted to changing socio-political landscapes while maintaining a unique identity rooted in Islamic law. This historical context is crucial for understanding contemporary Islamist organizations and their strategies for navigating the complexities of modern governance and societal expectations.

The article also addresses the implications of the Iraq War on Syrian Islamist movements, suggesting that the conflict served as a catalyst for reexamining their political roles and affiliations. The upheaval in Iraq has had a significant impact on the ideological and operational frameworks of these groups, pushing them to reassess their positions within a broader regional context. This perspective offers valuable insights into how external crises can shape internal dynamics within religious movements.

Moreover, the article discusses the concept of "masculinization" of Syrian nationalism, linking it to the broader socio-political discourse and the role of gender within these movements. This focus on gender dynamics adds an important layer to the understanding of political identity in the context of religious thought, particularly in how these movements engage with and challenge traditional narratives of nationalism.

The article "Emerging Trends of Conflict and Instability in Iraq" by (O'Driscoll, 2018) provides a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted challenges facing Iraq in the post-Islamic State (IS) era, particularly in the context of intercommunal relations and political dynamics. The examination is particularly relevant to understanding the interplay between religious thought and political identity among Sunni and Shiʿi communities in Iraq, especially as the country navigates a complex landscape of displacement, migration, and political instability.

One of the key insights from the article is the interconnectedness of displacement and migration, which is likely to exacerbate tensions between communities competing for limited resources such as land and livelihoods. The situation in disputed territories like Kirkuk is particularly precarious, as the absence of security creates a fertile ground for escalating intercommunal tensions over ownership and control. This is critical in the context of Sunni and Shiʿi movements, as historical grievances and current socio-political realities intertwine to shape community identities and responses to conflict.

The role of militias in the current landscape, noting that their presence not only provides a means of security for some communities but also poses a threat of renewed conflict. The dynamics between different militia groups, particularly those aligned with former Prime Minister Maliki and the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), illustrate the complexities of political identity in Iraq. The potential for conflict, especially if Maliki's bloc gains power and continues to implement divisive policies, underscores the fragility of the political environment and the challenges of achieving a cohesive national identity.

Furthermore, the ongoing government formation process, which is fraught with challenges as it struggles to meet the demands of protestors. The failure of the Iraqi government to decentralize governance has been a persistent issue, contributing to the sense of disenfranchisement among various communities. This lack of effective governance and representation can lead to increased tensions and conflict, particularly as different groups vie for power and influence in a post-IS Iraq.

The article "Ideology of the Islamic State: A Qualitative Analysis of Online Media" by (Hyman, 2018) provides a comprehensive examination of the ideological underpinnings of the Islamic State (IS) and its implications for sectarian dynamics in Iraq and Syria. Hyman traces the historical context of sectarian social organization and governance from the fall of the Ottoman Empire, highlighting how these historical trajectories have shaped contemporary political identities and conflicts.

One of the key insights from Hyman's analysis is the increasingly anti-Iranian and anti-Shia rhetoric propagated by the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. This historical animosity has laid the groundwork for the sectarian divisions that are evident in the region today. Hyman argues that the ideological differences represented by the Islamic State necessitate a reevaluation of Salafist jihadism, particularly in light of the evolving landscape of extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The shift in al-Qaeda's ideology, especially after the death of Osama bin Laden, reflects a response to the challenges posed by the Islamic State, and is critical for understanding the broader implications of sectarianism and political identity in the region.

Hyman's examination of Tahrir al-Sham, which has distanced itself from al-Qaeda while maintaining a different ideological stance than the Islamic State, further illustrates the complexities of sectarian identities and their political ramifications. The article emphasizes that the ideological landscape of Salafi jihadism is far from static; the predictions based on the historical trajectory of al-Qaeda are increasingly rendered obsolete in light of the Islamic State's rise and the subsequent realignments among jihadist groups.

In "Between Utopia and Dystopia: Sectarianization through Revolution and War in Syrian Refugee Narratives," (Løland, 2019) provides a nuanced exploration of the concept of sectarianism, particularly in the context of the Syrian conflict. The article critiques prevailing academic narratives that often reduce complex social dynamics to simplistic sectarian dichotomies, primarily focusing on the Sunni-Shi'i divide. Løland argues that many studies inadequately consider how individuals navigate their identities amidst the chaos of revolution and war, thus overlooking the personal and subjective dimensions of sectarianism.

One of the key insights from Løland's work is the necessity for a critical examination of sectarianism as a discursive category. She highlights that while the term is frequently associated with negative connotations—such as hatred and violence—this perspective can be overly reductive. Løland suggests that such a one-dimensional view fails to account for the historical instances of coexistence and interaction between sectarian identities in the region. This assertion challenges the conventional narrative that presents sectarian identities as inherently antagonistic, proposing instead that these identities have coexisted and intermingled for centuries, which she refers to as "missing narratives."

Løland's examination of personal narratives from Syrian refugees provides a valuable lens through which to understand the complexities of sectarian identity. By emphasizing individual experiences and the varied ways people interpret their sectarian affiliations, she underscores the importance of recognizing the agency of individuals in shaping their identities. This approach not only enriches the discourse on sectarianism but also prompts a reevaluation of the broader implications of sectarian framing in the context of political identity and conflict.

The article also points to a significant gap in the current scholarship regarding the definitions and applications of sectarianism. Løland's call for a more nuanced understanding of the term is particularly relevant in light of the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria, where sectarian narratives continue to influence political identities and social relations. By advocating for a more comprehensive and critical approach to sectarianism, Løland contributes to a deeper understanding of how these identities are constructed, contested, and experienced in times of crisis.

In "Desectarianization: Looking Beyond the Sectarianization of Middle Eastern Politics," (Mabon, 2019) offers a nuanced examination of the interplay between sectarian identities and political dynamics in the context of the Middle East, particularly focusing on Iraq and Syria. The article posits that the entrenchment of sectarian identities within political structures has profound implications for regional stability and local governance, especially during crises.

Mabon argues that sectarian identities are often manipulated by local groups to align with the interests of external actors, such as regional powers seeking to exert influence through funding and support. This manipulation is particularly evident in conflict zones where sectarian divisions have been politicized, creating a landscape where these identities become all-encompassing. The author highlights how elites utilize sect-based identities to maintain control and legitimacy amid increasing domestic and regional contestation, suggesting that such identities provide a form of security in precarious environments.

The article critically evaluates the concept of sectarianization, illustrating how it is not merely a reflection of societal divisions but a strategic tool employed by regimes and actors to navigate crises. Mabon draws on historical events, such as the Iran-Iraq war, the 2003 Iraq war, and the Arab Uprisings, to demonstrate how geopolitical tensions have historically exacerbated sect-based violence and deepened societal fractures. He emphasizes that the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran serves as a backdrop for the emergence of sectarian narratives, which are increasingly utilized to consolidate power and justify political actions.

Furthermore, Mabon's analysis extends to the implications of these sectarian narratives on regional politics, suggesting that regimes have the opportunity to reshape political landscapes during crises by invoking sectarian identities. This perspective aligns with Michael Barnett's assertion that crises can serve as catalysts for political reconfiguration, allowing regimes to assert their influence and align with broader geopolitical trends.

In "Beyond structure and agency: rethinking political identities in Iraq after 2003," (Dodge, 2020) provides a nuanced exploration of the ethno-sectarian dynamics that have shaped political identities in Iraq following the 2003 invasion. The article critically examines how political mobilization in Iraq has increasingly relied on sectarian rhetoric, which has emerged as a dominant force in political discourse, overshadowing the previously prevalent secular nationalist ideologies that characterized the nation's political landscape since its formation in 1920.

Dodge argues that the rise of ethno-sectarian rhetoric as the "primary marker of modern political identity" has significant implications for internal coherence among groups and the delineation of boundaries between them. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the national elections held in 2005, 2010, and 2014, where sectarian identity played a crucial role in mobilizing voters and justifying the descent into civil conflict. The author posits that this shift represents a puzzling historical aberration, as it contrasts sharply with Iraq's earlier political dynamics, which were marked by ideological contestation rather than sectarian division.

The article employs a constructivist framework to analyze the emergence of sectarian identities, while also critiquing the limitations of existing theoretical approaches—including primordial, culturalist, and rationalist perspectives. Dodge integrates Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of political field and symbolic violence to elucidate how ethno-sectarian mobilization has been able to dominate the political landscape, suggesting that the interplay of structural and agency-based explanations can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the situation.

However, while Dodge's analysis offers valuable insights into the mechanisms of sectarian mobilization, it may benefit from a more detailed exploration of the socio-economic factors that also contribute to political identities in Iraq. The focus on ethno-sectarian rhetoric, while critical, risks oversimplifying the complex interplay of various identities and interests that shape political behavior. Additionally, the implications of this sectarian mobilization for regional stability and inter-group relations warrant further investigation, as they are essential for understanding the broader context of political identity in Iraq and its neighboring regions.

7.5 Conclusion

The literature on the interplay of religious thought and political identity in the context of sectarian movements in Iraq and Syria reveals a multifaceted landscape shaped by historical grievances, ideological shifts, and contemporary crises. The articles reviewed provide critical insights into how Sunni and Shiʿi Islamic movements navigate their identities amid regional turmoil, illustrating the complex dynamics at play.

The foundational work by (Zeynep Oktav et al., 2015) highlights the Syrian regime's strategic manipulation of sectarian identities, particularly how Sunni communities perceive marginalization in the face of Shiʿi political ascendance through groups like Hezbollah. This marginalization is further explored by (Ghassan Barakeh, 2016), who examines the role of social media in shaping Sunni grievances and the emotional ramifications of sectarian stereotyping. The sense of exclusion felt by these communities underscores the political and social tensions exacerbated by sectarian narratives.

In the context of the Syrian uprising, (Imady, 2016) emphasizes the organizational aspects of Islamist movements, revealing how they adapt to both internal and external pressures. This adaptability is crucial for understanding the complexities of identity formation within the Sunni-Shiʿi divide.

The situation in Iraq is equally precarious, as discussed by (O'Driscoll, 2018), who analyzes the aftermath of the Islamic State's territorial claims and the resulting intercommunal tensions. The fragility of sectarian identities amid political instability highlights the necessity for effective governance and decentralization efforts.

Additionally, (Hyman, 2018) interrogates the ideological underpinnings of the Islamic State, suggesting a need for a nuanced understanding of sectarianism that considers both historical context and contemporary realities. This is complemented by (Løland, 2019), who challenges essentialist views of sectarianism, arguing for recognition of the complexities of identity and coexistence in Syria.

Regional dynamics are further explored by (Mabon, 2019), who posits that local elites strategically employ sectarian identities to maintain control amidst geopolitical tensions. This manipulation is echoed in (Dodge, 2020), who

assesses the rise of ethno-sectarian rhetoric in post-2003 Iraq, indicating that such rhetoric is not merely a product of historical grievances but a strategic response to contemporary challenges.

Collectively, these contributions illuminate the intricate relationship between religious thought and political identity in Iraq and Syria, revealing that historical legacies, ideological shifts, and current conflicts significantly shape the experiences and expressions of Sunni and Shi'i communities. The ongoing crises in these regions underscore the importance of understanding sectarian identities as dynamic constructs influenced by both local and regional factors.

8. Chapter One: Religious Thought and Political Identity

This chapter examines the theoretical foundations of religious thought and political identity and how they interact in shaping Islamic movements' ideologies. The analysis is divided into two key sections.

8.1 Religious Thought

The term "philosophy of religion" first emerged in Western intellectual circles during the **late 18th century** as a near-synonym for **religious thought**, replacing what was previously known as "natural theology." Initially, it was associated with a branch of theology concerned primarily with proving the **rational and demonstrable basis of Christian teachings**. Over time, it evolved into a discipline concerned with intellectual inquiry into the nature of religion and religious phenomena.

Religious thought can be broadly defined as a set of beliefs, ideas, and interpretations derived from religion that shape one's understanding of the world. It addresses central existential questions such as **creation**, **purpose**, **morality**, and the **ultimate fate of humankind**. Religious thought is tied to deeply held convictions that define personal and collective identity and guide social conduct. Its expressions vary depending on the religious tradition, sect, or denomination.

At its core, religious thought represents a **rational and reflective interpretation** of religious tenets, seeking to clarify the relationship between humans and the divine, as well as between individuals and society. It provides moral guidance for daily life, emphasizing faith in the unseen—such as belief in God, the afterlife, and divine destiny—which are not always empirically or logically demonstrable.

Some scholars define religious thought as "a body of conceptual and doctrinal frameworks rooted in religion that aims to interpret and guide both individual and collective life in accordance with specific theological teachings." It seeks to answer fundamental questions like "Who are we?", "Why are we here?", and "What happens after death?" and to articulate ethical and legal principles governing human behavior.

Others see religious thought as a foundational element for constructing entire intellectual and cultural systems, shaped by the unique scriptures and traditions of each religion. For instance, Islamic religious thought is grounded in the Qur'an and Sunnah; Jewish thought in the Torah; and Christian thought in the Bible. These texts serve as primary reference points that shape a community's spiritual and sociopolitical worldview.

Historically, religious thought has undergone vast transformations—from the mythologies of ancient civilizations like the Egyptians and Sumerians to the monotheistic systems of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each of these traditions has produced distinctive theological and ethical views on life, death, and the destiny of humanity.

In Islam, religious thought emerged from the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), offering guidance on all aspects of life. In Christianity, it centered around the doctrines of salvation and redemption through Jesus Christ. In Judaism, it emphasized covenantal ethics and strict adherence to divine law as revealed in the Torah.

In many cultures and civilizations, religion has profoundly shaped political thought. For instance, in **Islamic societies**, religious and political thought are often deeply intertwined, manifesting in concepts like **Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh)** and **political theology**. The political dimensions of religious doctrine influence how authority, law, and governance are conceptualized.

A striking example of this is the divergence between **Sunni and Shi'i religious thought**, particularly in how each conceptualizes religious authority and political legitimacy. In **Iran**, for example, Shi'i political theology strongly influences governance, with the **Supreme Leader** playing a central political and spiritual role grounded in religious doctrine.

In the modern era, religious thought faced numerous challenges from **globalization** and **scientific advancement** to **cultural pluralism**. While some religious movements cling to traditional interpretations, others strive to **modernize religious discourse** by aligning it with values like **human rights**, **gender equality**, and **democracy**. Examples include reformist Islamic movements that advocate for **Islamic democracy** rooted in shura (consultation) and pluralism.

The researcher asserts that regional political crises—especially those triggered by the Arab Spring—have revealed how profoundly religious thought can shape political identity. It serves as both an inspiration for popular movements and a framework for legitimizing political demands.

8.2 Political Identity

Political identity is one of the most foundational and dynamic concepts in political thought. It has undergone profound transformations throughout history, beginning with political philosophy in ancient **Greek and Roman civilizations**, progressing through the **Renaissance** and **Enlightenment**, and evolving into the complex frameworks of **modern liberalism**.

Political identity is closely linked to the rise of the **industrial society** and **Protestant ethical values**, which emphasized **individualism**, **capitalism**, and **social integration**. These developments fostered new types of relationships based on economic and social interactions. In this context, **Ernest Gellner** argues that modern political identity is largely determined by global patterns of wealth distribution. He claims that the **absence of equitable distribution** leads to a gradual erosion of national sentiment (Gellner, 1983, p. 34).

This view intersects **Samir Amin's** economic critique of global capitalism. According to Amin, the current world system reproduces **structural inequalities** through imbalanced political and economic power on a global scale. He describes a divide between **central identities**—represented by powerful nations such as the United States, Europe, and Russia—and **peripheral identities** in the Global South, particularly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These peripheral identities are characterized by **economic and political dependency**, **marginalization**, and **underdevelopment** (Amin, 1988, p. 77).

Political identity in the Global North tends to evolve into higher levels of **abstraction and civic consciousness**, whereas in the Global South, it often remains **fragmented or underdeveloped** due to weak infrastructure in culture, education, economy, and governance. Political identities do not emerge in a vacuum; they are rooted in **structured, literate, and politically active societies**, where education plays a crucial role in forming shared linguistic and cultural space. In this sense, the **state** becomes central to promoting a cohesive educational and cultural system that fosters a politically aware and capable citizenry.

Political identity is best understood through its relationship with two core concepts: **state** and **nation**. At its heart, nationalism is a political doctrine calling for the alignment of **national boundaries with political sovereignty**—that is, for a state to reflect the national identity of its citizens. Within this framework, political identity is defined as a **collective sense of belonging**, rooted in shared notions of citizenship and expressed through emotions and behaviors such as **anger, loyalty, pride, and resistance**.

Some scholars interpret political identity through the lens of the "**center–periphery**" binary, particularly when analyzing the historical power imbalance between the **North and South** under global capitalism. European nations, for example, succeeded in transitioning from **agrarian to industrial societies**, shaping political identities around events like the **Industrial Revolution**, **technological progress**, and **civilizational clashes**. This evolution was underpinned by **religious and ethical values**, especially those found in **Protestant ethics**, which emphasized work, discipline, and economic productivity.

From this analysis, the researcher concludes that political identity is a **multidimensional concept** intersecting with the themes of state, nation, and ethnic belonging. It can be defined as:

"A collective sense of belonging to a unified political entity based on national ties and shared emotional experiences such as loyalty, anger, affiliation, and defense of beliefs."

Historically, political identity developed most significantly in the **modern Western world**, where it was shaped by **industrialization**, **technological advancement**, and **Protestant morality**—as noted in the theories of **Ernest Gellner** and **Max Weber**. On the other hand, **Samir Amin's** center–periphery model highlights how robust political

identity tends to develop in **industrialized states** with strong institutions and advanced educational systems, while it remains fragile in the Global South due to the lack of foundational socio-cultural infrastructure.

Thus, the political identity is not static. It emerges through **historical, cultural, and economic processes**, both within states and in response to global power hierarchies.

9. Chapter Two: The Discourse of Sunni and Shiʻi Movements in Iraq and Syria Post-2011

Since 2011, both Iraq and Syria have undergone **radical transformations** in their political and social structures. Amid these changes, **Sunni and Shiʻi Islamic movements** emerged as powerful actors, reshaping religious and political identity in ways that further complicated the regional crises. This chapter presents a **comparative analysis** of their discourse and explores how religious thought influenced their political behavior.

The discussion is divided into two main sections:

- 9.1 Sunni Religious Thought and Political Identity
- 9.2 Shiʻi Religious Thought and Political Identity

9.1 Sunni Religious Thought and Political Identity

This section explores how Sunni religious ideology contributed to the formation of political identity through two focal points:

9.1.1 Origins of Sunni Religious Thought and Political Identity

Sunni religious thought is a **cornerstone of Islamic civilization** and has historically played a central role in legitimizing political authority. During times of unrest, it redefines concepts such as **obedience**, **statehood**, and **loyalty** from a theological standpoint. This function became especially critical during the post-2011 crises in Iraq and Syria, where Sunni ideology intersected with both political and militant activity.

The historical roots of Sunni political-religious thought lie in concepts such as **caliphate** and **allegiance (bayʻah)**, wherein the Islamic ummah is seen as a **unified religious-political entity**. Sunni orthodoxy developed after the **Great Fitna** (civil strife following the assassination of Caliph ʻUthmān ibn ʻAffān), drawing upon traditional jurisprudence and theological doctrines. Key principles include:

- **Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah**: Advocating non-rebellion against Muslim rulers, even if unjust, to preserve unity, as seen in the teachings of **Imam Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal** and **Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʻarī**.
- **Political jurisprudence (fiqh al-sulṭāniyyah)**: Theorizing about the relationship between rulers and the ummah.
- **Bayʻah and obedience**: Seen as religiously valid mechanisms for legitimizing governance, institutionalized during the **Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates**.

These foundations evolved over time, influenced by contemporary movements like the **Muslim Brotherhood**, which sought to revive traditional Sunni frameworks within modern state structures.

9.1.2 Discourse of Sunni Movements in Iraq and Syria

Following the 2011 uprisings, **Sunni religious discourse** emerged as a major tool for **political and military mobilization**. Sunni Islamic movements played influential roles in both Iraq and Syria. Their discourse ranged from **reformist** to **extremist**, encompassing:

- **Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan)**: Advocated for Islamic governance while participating in democratic processes.
- **Traditional Salafism**: Focused on religious purity and non-political preaching.
- **Jihadi Salafism**: Promoted armed struggle and rejection of state institutions.

In **Syria**, Sunni movements such as the **Muslim Brotherhood** and **Jabhat al-Nuṣrah** (later **Hayʾat Tahrir al-Shām**) called for the overthrow of the **Alawite-led Baʻth regime**, combining religious rhetoric with revolutionary language.

Although sometimes blending nationalist discourse, their core messaging advanced a **Sunni political identity** in opposition to the **Alawite-Shi'i identity** of the state.

In **Iraq**, Sunni discourse took a more radical turn with the rise of **ISIS (Daesh)** from 2013 to 2017. ISIS instrumentalized Sunni theology in service of its **transnational caliphate project**, with slogans such as *"Remaining and Expanding"* (bāqiyah wa tatamaddad). It branded Shi'is as **Safavids** and **apostates**, targeting them through religious justifications for violence. Meanwhile, more moderate Sunni actors—such as certain Brotherhood-aligned groups—lost influence to militant jihadist rhetoric.

Sunni discourse fluctuated between **territorial state-building** and **militant rejection of Shi'i dominance**, especially in response to the **post-2003 political order** in Iraq and the **Iran–Hezbollah intervention** in Syria.

9.2 Shi'i Religious Thought and Political Identity

Shi'i religious thought is a foundational pillar in shaping the **political identity** of Shi'i Islamic movements. It centers on the dual concepts of **wilāyah** (guardianship) and **imāmah** (divinely ordained leadership), which serve as both **spiritual** and **political legitimizing forces**.

This section is divided into two parts:

9.2.1 Development of Shi'i Thought and Its Political Role

Shi'i thought emphasizes the **religious authority of clerics**, particularly through the doctrine of **Wilāyat al-Faqīh** (Guardianship of the Jurist), which took political form following the **Iranian Revolution of 1979**. In this model, religious scholars are not just spiritual guides but **custodians of the state**.

In **Iraq**, the fall of the Ba'th regime in 2003 enabled Shi'i parties to enter the political sphere, using religious ideology to **justify power-sharing structures** and claim their historical role as **victims of marginalization**. This redefined the Shi'i identity as a **dominant political force** after decades of repression.

In **Syria**, despite the **Alawite** regime of Bashar al-Assad not being traditionally Shi'i, its alliance with **Iran** and **Hezbollah** added a strong **sectarian dimension** to the conflict. Shi'i identity became intertwined with narratives of **protecting holy shrines** and fighting **takfīrī (extremist Sunni) threats**, especially through the involvement of Iranian-backed militias like **Hezbollah**, **Zainabiyoun**, and **Fatimiyoun**.

The **post-2011 transformation** of Shi'i discourse was both ideological and strategic. In Iraq, parties like **the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq** and **al-Da'wah Party** employed religious credentials to legitimize participation in a **sectarian consociational government**. Their messaging was rooted in **religious martyrdom**, **representation**, and **historical injustice**, which shaped a new political identity for Iraqi Shi'is as power holders.

In Syria, the Shi'i discourse revolved around **defending the "axis of resistance"** and countering **Sunni radicalism**, often presented as a religious duty to safeguard Islamic heritage. This reframing transformed traditional religious loyalty into a **politico-military narrative**, tying regional Shi'i movements to Iran's **strategic ambitions** in the Middle East.

This strategic transformation of Shi'i religious thought from a theological base to a **politicized security doctrine** has elevated sectarian identity, deepening the geopolitical cleavage between the **Sunni bloc (e.g., Gulf states, Turkey)** and the **Shi'i bloc (Iran, allied militias)**.

9.2.2 Discourse of Shi'i Movements in Iraq and Syria

In both Iraq and Syria, Shi'i movements have used religious discourse to promote **sectarian solidarity**, **political entitlement**, and **regional expansion**.

In **Iraq**, Shi'i political parties emphasized **historical grievance**, portraying themselves as guardians of Iraq's true religious identity. They aligned with Iran and adopted **Wilāyat al-Faqīh** as a source of legitimacy. This produced a discourse centered on **Shi'i rights**, **representation**, and **resistance to Sunni oppression**, which in turn **marginalized other communities** and fragmented national identity.

Heavily influenced by religious authorities in **Najaf** and **Qom**, especially **Grand Ayatollah Sistani**, these movements justified their presence in government under the **sectarian quota system**, institutionalized in Iraq's new

constitution. The **fight against ISIS** also allowed these groups to project a narrative of **protection and religious obligation**, further consolidating their position.

In **Syria**, the Shi'i discourse was heavily shaped by military support for the Assad regime. Backed by **Iran** and implemented by **Hezbollah**, **Iraqi Shi'i militias**, and other foreign fighters, the discourse was constructed around **defending shrines**, **fighting Sunni extremism**, and **preserving the resistance axis**. This justified foreign intervention as a sacred duty, transforming local religious identity into a **transnational Shi'i political project**.

Movements like Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and 'Asaib Ahl al-Ḥaq utilized religious rhetoric to frame their operations as part of a **divine mandate**. Their influence extended beyond Syria and Iraq into a broader strategy of **regional alignment** under Iranian supervision.

The researcher concludes that both Sunni and Shi'i Islamic movements have strategically employed **religious thought to shape political identity**, mobilize support, and legitimize political and military action. This has exacerbated **sectarian divides** and hindered the formation of inclusive national identities.

10. Conclusion

This study examined the complex relationship between **religious thought and political identity** in the context of **regional crises**, through a comparative analysis of **Sunni and Shi'i Islamic movements** in Iraq and Syria from 2011 to 2024. The research was organized into two primary chapters: the first discussed the theoretical foundations of religious thought and political identity, while the second analyzed the evolving discourse of these Islamic movements following the Arab Spring. The study produced several key findings and actionable recommendations.

10.1 Key Findings

1. **Politicization of Religious Discourse:**
   Both Sunni and Shi'i discourses converged in **politicizing religion**, using it as a tool for **military and political mobilization**. Religious authorities were instrumentalized to serve national and regional agendas, escalating sectarian divisions.

2. **Shi'i Discourse and the Doctrine of Wilāyat al-Faqīh:**
   Shi'i movements, especially those in Iraq and Syria aligned with Iran, derived legitimacy from the doctrine of **Wilāyat al-Faqīh**, advocating religiously sanctioned jihad as a response to perceived threats. This provided ideological support for their roles in governance and military operations.

3. **Sunni Discourse and the Concepts of Caliphate and Allegiance:**
   Sunni movements—particularly **jihadist Salafi groups** such as Jabhat al-Nuṣrah and ISIS—relied on concepts of **caliphate**, **bay'ah (allegiance)**, and rejection of nationalism. Their narratives emphasized reviving an Islamic political order and resisting what they viewed as **Shi'i domination**.

4. **Narratives of Resistance vs. Revolution:**
   Shi'i movements, particularly **Hezbollah** and allied militias, framed their involvement through the lens of **resistance to Zionist-American projects**. In contrast, Sunni groups—especially in Syria—initially embraced rhetoric focused on **revolution and liberation**, though these discourses later splintered into moderate and radical currents.

5. **External Influence and Regional Polarization:**
   Shi'i factions received comprehensive support from **Iran**—military, political, and media-based—while Sunni groups were variably supported by **Gulf states** and **Turkey**. This **external backing** contributed to the **sectarianization of geopolitical competition** and prolonged conflict.

6. **Sectarian Identity as a Political Project:**
   Both Sunni and Shi'i movements prioritized **sectarian identity** over **national unity**, leading to the emergence of parallel political projects. In Iraq, groups like the **Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)** represented Shi'i political identity, while in Syria, **Hay'at Tahrir al-Shām** symbolized radical Sunni identity.

10.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study offers the following recommendations:

1. **Promote Inclusive Religious Discourse:**
   Encourage the dissemination of **non-sectarian religious narratives** that affirm **citizenship, pluralism, and national identity**, both in **educational curricula** and **mass media**.

2. **Reevaluate State–Religion Relations:**
   Reassess the boundaries between **religious authority and political power**, ensuring religion is not exploited in **sectarian political conflicts**, especially in **multi-sectarian societies**.

3. **Facilitate Intra-Sectarian Dialogue:**
   Establish platforms for **Sunni–Shi'i scholarly dialogue** under regional or international sponsorship to build **shared religious and humanitarian ground** and reduce ideological tensions.

4. **Implement Ethical Media Oversight:**
   Develop professional and ethical standards to monitor **religious media content**, especially on satellite networks and digital platforms, to prevent sectarian incitement.

5. **Support Peace-Oriented Academic Programs:**
   Invest in academic initiatives and training programs focused on **"post-sectarianism"**, **reconciliation**, and **social peace-building** in divided societies.

Regulate Foreign Military and Financial Support:

Adopt a regional strategy—led by institutions such as the **Arab League** and the **Organization of Islamic Cooperation**—to monitor and restrict **external funding and armament** of sectarian militias, thereby limiting the manipulation of religion for geopolitical ends.

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