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INTER-SECT COOPERATION AND CONFLICT IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

Kinza Hameed

Assistant Professor of Islamiyat Head of Islamic Studies Department GPGC for Women Haripur

Shaheen Gul

M Phil Scholar Department of Seerat Studies, University of Peshawar

Dr. Khanzada Muhammad Waqar

Lecturer, Department of Seerat Studies, University of Peshawar

ABSTRACT

Inter-sect cooperation and conflict have significantly shaped contemporary Islamic movements, influencing religious, political, and socio-cultural dynamics across the Muslim world. While sectarian divisions, particularly between Sunni and Shia communities, have historical roots, modern geopolitical factors, socio-economic conditions, and ideological shifts continue to fuel both collaboration and discord. This paper explores the complex interplay between religious identity, political movements, and transnational influences, examining how sectarian affiliations impact global and regional conflicts. Through case studies of inter-sect cooperation and conflict in various regions, the study highlights the role of historical grievances, external interventions, and doctrinal differences in shaping modern sectarian relations. The findings underscore the importance of dialogue, educational initiatives, and policy frameworks in fostering mutual understanding and mitigating sectarian tensions. By critically analyzing the factors that drive both unity and division among Islamic movements, this paper contributes to a broader discourse on conflict resolution and interfaith harmony in contemporary Muslim societies.

Keywords: Islamic Movements, Sectarianism, Sunni-Shia Relations, Inter-Sect Cooperation, Religious Conflict, Political Islam, Global Geopolitics, Religious Identity, Islamic Unity, Conflict Resolution.

Introduction

Sectarian animosities have increasingly come to play a profoundly significant and influential role in the ongoing formation of the contemporary Islamic world, as well as in the intricate and often tangled web of global politics that intricately pass through this rich and diverse landscape. Various religious movements that have emerged in recent years are particularly concerned with the vital aspects of moral reform, spiritual purity, and ethical living, and they are deeply and intricately entangled in the broader landscape of complex religious politics. (Abidi, 2021) These movements compete vigorously and assertively for theological leadership, social and religious influence, political power, and the coveted prestige that comes along with it, as well as for the simple yet profound answers to humankind's personal and collective search for the "nth" level of religious, social, and political fulfillment that resonates with the aspirations of many. This evolving situation is not merely a throwback to the historical

Islamic dynamics and politics of yesteryear; rather, it serves as a vivid reflection of the complex world we find ourselves navigating during the early 21st century, where the interplay of various identities and ideologies continually shapes our reality. (Setiawan et al.2024) Anyone who has even a fleeting interest in the ongoing developments of contemporary global politics and the numerous religious movements would undoubtedly have heard of the various extensive networks and influential movements mentioned above. Through this heightened awareness, one may come to appreciate their significant relevance and wide-reaching impact, recognizing how these dynamics intricately shape not only the Islamic world but also the vast realm of international relations as a whole, influencing the course of events across continents and cultures, and thereby inviting deeper engagement and understanding.

These diverse and multifaceted religious movements and networks have developed and evolved over a considerable span of time, a process deeply shaped not only by the ongoing internal reform debates among their devoted practitioners but also significantly influenced by a wide variety of external forces operating in the socio-cultural landscape. (Saud et al.2021)These external forces include the substantial and often enduring impact of colonial legacies that have left indelible marks on societies around the globe, the intricate dynamics of post-colonial developments that over the years have led to changing and evolving landscapes of belief and practice, and the fluctuating religious contexts that have arisen and transformed over time. Complex socio-political circumstances, intertwined with a haphazard range of varying economic conditions, can profoundly affect religious practice, community engagement, and the overall expression of faith that is evident within diverse communities. As these movements continue to evolve and adapt in response to both internal and external pressures, they consistently exhibit robust national identities that are deeply rooted in local histories and cultural contexts, often accompanied by intricate and sometimes contentious transnational connections that play a vital role in their identity formation and maintenance. These networks are frequently entangled in complex scenarios of civil strife, social unrest, and internal political contestations, which further complicate their growth, development, and evolution within the broader global landscape where myriad forces are in play.

In recent times, these movements have increasingly become notable and high-profile targets of counter-terrorism operations carried out on multiple fronts across the globe, driven by concerns for national security and public safety. Such developments shed light on the profound and multifaceted complex interplay of religion and politics that distinctly characterizes contemporary society, revealing multiple layers of tension and conflict. Within the richly varied context of Muslim histories and traditions, the term "sect" is commonly understood to refer to distinct groups or categories of individuals who identify with the same overarching religion yet have experienced significant divisions or fragmentation within it over time (Hayes & Miletzky, 2024). This fragmentation is particularly pronounced and evident concerning divergent beliefs, practices, and dogma that manifest among their ranks, often leading to varied expressions of faith. More restrictive definitions delineate a sect distinctly in contrast

to a church. While a church represents a state of advanced differentiation characterized by well-established ecclesiastical structures, formal claims to authority, and a standardized, sanctioned, and widely accepted dogma that governs its practices and rituals, a sect, conversely, lacks such institutionalization and formal recognition. It operates without a dominant governing authority and typically possesses beliefs that diverge in numerous significant ways from the established, mainstream dogma of the religion as a whole. Thus, a sect can be distinctly defined as a specific type of religious organization that has undergone a break or rupture from its parent body, resulting in a new formation that often asserts its identity in direct opposition to established norms and traditions prevalent within the broader community of believers.

A term frequently employed in contemporary Islamic studies, as will be thoroughly addressed in this ongoing discussion, emphasizes a crucial point worth noting: there exists an immense and profound diversity within the broader tradition of Islam. To such an extent, it is commonplace for its followers, even when holding only minor variations in their belief systems, to actively engage in crucial differentiation based on these distinctions and nuances (Haque et al., 2022). This differentiation leads to categorizing themselves, and often others, into good or true and bad or false segments of faith, which complicates the notion of unity within the tradition, adding additional layers of complexity to their communal and individual identities. This dynamic not only enriches the religious landscape of Islam but also poses significant challenges for social cohesion and interfaith dialogue, making it essential to navigate the intricate tapestry of beliefs, practices, and communal affiliations that comprise the modern Muslim experience. The interactions that arise from such diversity can lead to misunderstandings, divisions, and conflict, yet they also hold the potential for deeper dialogue, mutual respect, and a broader understanding of faith and belief in a contemporary, globalized world where dialogue is increasingly necessary to foster peace and cooperation among diverse faith traditions. (Jailani et al.2023).

Historical Background of Islamic Sects

The modern Islamic world exists as a complex and multifaceted entity, heavily segmented into various sects and sub-sects, each of which possesses distinctive differences in religious laws, ideological beliefs, doctrinal perspectives, or even political alignments. Among all these divisions, the most significant and, regrettably, the most harmful one lies in the division between Sunnis and Shias (Haddad, 2021). This divide has had extensive and far-reaching consequences that resonate throughout the entirety of the Islamic world. Although the Shi'i-Sunni divide traces its roots back to the immediate aftermath of the passing of the Holy Prophet in 632 AD, the historical narrative regarding Islam indicates that various forms of intra-religious conflicts began to surface prominently following the death of the Holy Prophet. In particular, notable events such as the Battle of Siffin and the Battle of Karbala in 661 AD further exacerbated these sectarian tensions. Scholars and historians have proposed a multitude of theories regarding the reasons behind the emergence of these disputes, yet it is clear that the initial sparks of disagreement were ignited soon after the demise of the Holy Prophet. In scholarly and juristic terminology, Shias and Sunnis are

identified as Imamiyyah and Ahl al-Sunnah, respectively. The term "Imamiyyah" translates to "sect" and reflects the concept of "sectarianism," while "Ahl al-Sunnah" refers to the "people of the tradition or custom," highlighting the cultural and religious practices that have developed over centuries among the Sunni majority (Hassan, 2023). During the life of the Holy Prophet, despite the existence of local differences that arose in religious matters, particularly those concerning various religious laws and the conduct pertaining to the Hypocrites, the Muslims were, in essence, united as one cohesive nation when it came to their fundamental beliefs and shared faith (Choudhary, 2021). This profound sense of unity, however, faced a significant and disruptive challenge almost immediately following his death, as a pressing crisis of direction emerged concerning who should rightfully wield the wilayah, or leadership, over the entire Muslim state during such a pivotal moment in history. This particular situation arose in direct contrast to the generally accepted norms and processes that would have typically guided the selection of the most qualified individual available at that moment, a person specifically appointed for the crucial task of leading and guiding the community as a new president to steer the nation. Such a role was traditionally considered the privilege and responsibility of the Asharat al-Mubash-Sharah, who were the ten illustrious early emigrants closely associated with the Prophet and esteemed for their knowledge and experience. Thus, this bewildering crisis ultimately gave rise to the two earliest and most significant splits within Islam, which fundamentally altered the dynamics of the Muslim community. This schism marked the advent of what can be aptly referred to as the very first political division within the larger Muslim community. Following this, two further chapters will delve deeper into the pivotal and consequential events that not only perpetuated but also served to deepen the divide and contention between these two sects. These historical events eventually unfolded to give rise to a myriad of other sects within the broader spectrum of Islam, significantly shaping its diverse, intricate, and multifaceted landscape that we see today.

Key Contemporary Islamic Movements

When one engages in the in-depth analysis of contemporary Islamic movements, it becomes abundantly clear that one inevitably encounters a diverse and rich plethora of initiatives and a wide array of various groups that are characterized by quite distinct ideological frameworks as well as unique strategies that set them apart from one another. With that said, for the singular and focused purpose of this analysis, we shall categorize the contemporary Islamic movements into three overarching groups: fundamentalist, reformist, and political Islam (Faiq, 2021). Furthermore, we will also explore a number of strands and subgroups that fall within each of these larger categories of movements. The compelling ideas that inform the overarching goals and distinct strategies of these groups, in addition to the significant global events and phenomena that shape, influence, and impact them, are precisely what will be discussed in detail and depth here, providing a comprehensive overview and understanding of their complexities and interconnected dynamics (Makai et al.2024).

The relatively recent rise of Islamist movements over the past couple of decades has been significantly influenced by two major global events that have reshaped their trajectories – the Arab Spring, which enabled various groups to become more actively engaged in Islamic activism, leading to an increase in their support; and the emergence of violent extremist groups, which has dramatically widened the spectrum of participants in Islamic activism. This expansion has profoundly influenced many local populations, often supporting their shift towards more violent methods of expressing their grievances and aspirations. A new arena for the expansion and intensification of various strains of Islamism was also created with the formation and growth of transnational organizations that increasingly engulf local organizations, altering the dynamics of Islamic activism. Although the specific agenda of some of these movements may not be clearly defined or uniformly agreed upon, an overwhelming majority of them is deeply engaged with the myriad of pressing issues affecting global geopolitics (Ismail, 2021). These issues include the persistent threats of terrorism, ongoing political instability across various regions, and the ever-growing transnational refugee crises that result from conflict and persecution. As these movements evolve, understanding their complex interplay with global events becomes crucial to addressing the challenges they present and the wider implications on international relations.

Contemporary Islamic movements engage with or belong in various ways to local sectarian dynamics. It has been noted that between a few movements engaging one another lie vast grey areas that blur the divides of companionship and opposition (Kadri, 2021). A great deal of cooperation in the Lebanese example was observed between Kaumeya and regional movements in the 1970s at a time when those three movements were part of resistance factions against Israel. In parallel, there is a great deal of mutual recognition of the sovereign aims of other movements also operating in the same theater or on the same or similar issues. For instance, among the major political Islamic movements in Pakistan, TTP does not spare a single jihadi or Islamist movement despite the sectarian or ideological commonalities. The present Salafi-Jihadi tendency, which is referred to as Takfiri Jihad, has engaged in declaring all the various shades of jihadi and peaceful insurgencies as illegitimate “national” resistance in both countries – that is the Shura Jamaat process in Pakistan and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, thus proclaiming the obligatory “jihad” as proscribed by the classical and institutionalized scholars who have been vetted by the Global Jihad via their own scholarly tools. Those movements that cross these fuzzy boundaries are marked as extremely hostile and are almost always in a state of open conflict, leading to internal confrontations in which the leadership of members of a rival religion is eliminated, often based on transnational edicts.

Factors Influencing Inter-Sect Cooperation and Conflict

The existence and intensity of cooperation and conflict between various Islamic sects arise from the complex interplay of diverse contexts and necessitate a thorough explanation that takes into account the local history and specific circumstances of each setting (Ali & Lawal, 2024). To further understand this intricate phenomenon, this

article delves into existing literature that discusses the dilemma of sectarian relations, offering a comprehensive overview of eight distinct factors that may have significantly influenced the dynamics of cooperation and/or conflict between different Islamic sects. These identified general factors are systematically categorized into three analytical dimensions for clarity and depth of analysis.

Firstly, we consider the political factors that play an essential role, encompassing aspects such as state power, legislative frameworks, and the nature of sectarian governance. The intricate relationship between political authority and sect relations cannot be underestimated, as changes in state power dynamics may directly affect the interactions and tensions between sects.

Next, we examine the social factors that contribute to this complex landscape. These include elements related to religion itself, communal identity, rich cultural narratives, and prevailing public perceptions. Each of these social dimensions adds layers of understanding to how sects view each other and operate within the fabric of society. Lastly, economic factors will be discussed, as they also hold considerable weight in influencing sectarian interactions. Access to resources and various opportunities can easily determine the level of cooperation or conflict that may arise among different Islamic sects, as economic disparities often exacerbate existing tensions or foster alliances. Each of these dimensions provides a framework for analyzing the nuanced relationships among Islamic sects and highlights the multifaceted nature of their interactions.

Studies examining various settings illustrate the role of each factor to a differing and significant extent. For example, comprehensive studies conducted in Saudi Arabia provide compelling empirical evidence on the significant ways in which state power, the legal framework, and the intricate internal structure of sect relations profoundly impact the dynamics of both conflict and cooperation within the region. The level of cooperation among different sects can vary widely, ranging from forms of alliance and collaborative joint activity in response to the demand for single political representation to stark and total independence where sects operate in isolation from one another (Alam and Mohanty2023). However, the Saudi case also poignantly demonstrates that the establishment of the Saudi legal system has proven incapable of effectively ending the hostilities that persist between Wahhabism and other varied Islamic sects. Everywhere that sects are active, they consistently emerge as an important and influential source of conflict and competition, reflecting deep-rooted doctrinal differences, appealing to a variety of different symbols, and fostering emotional loyalties that serve to divide the members of each sect from one another. This complex interplay of factors affects every social and political setting within which the sects operate, projecting its multifaceted consequences onto individual attitudes, behaviors, and the various relational organizations that are influenced by these dynamics. Ultimately, the interactions between sects contribute significantly to the socio-political landscape, shaping relations and tensions that can have lasting impacts on the broader community.

Case Studies of Inter-Sect Cooperation and Conflict

The notion that sectarian tensions, alongside instances of cooperation at the local level, will invariably reflect the same characteristics that we observe within the local legitimacy struggles prevalent in jihadi movements is a hypothesis that can certainly be subjected to empirical testing across a diverse array of cases (Hamrah2023). Throughout the subsequent pages, we aim to meticulously present three distinct yet critically significant case studies that shine a light on both inter-sect cooperation and inter-sect conflict, as observed in various contexts throughout the Muslim world.

In the intricate landscape of the Middle East, we will catalog the complex forms of inter-sect cooperation manifested among factions like the Islamic State in Iraq, carefully examining the various dimensions, intricacies, and far-reaching implications of such collaborations. This exploration will offer a comprehensive understanding of how these cooperative endeavors function, the motivations behind them, and the eventual impact they hold for both local communities and wider geopolitical dynamics. In South Asia we will apply a good level of attention to one ongoing and very contentious conflict, between the Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban; plunging into the origins, historical backgrounds, and the large weight of consequences of this fight (Masera & Yousaf, 2022). It will help to better understand the delight of factors behind their discord aside from perception and power but also local grievances and aspirations which get a vital job in framing the war atmosphere. Finally, we shall end our excursion to Southeast Asia, presenting a vivid account of what happens when, in spite of local cooperative undertakings, they devolve into violent cleavages that rapidly escalate to destabilizing the whole community. We will introduce this transformation and examine the conditions that have brought about these circumstances in the region and the implications on security and social cohesion.

An initial, in depth analysis of principal actors related to any given case study will be defined in order to explain why each has particular religious and ideological bearing to their respective communities. In addition, we will go through the subtleties influencing cooperation or contention among the specific circumstance, offering important bits of knowledge into the inspirations and dreams that push these groups. With a careful attention to details devoted to each of these illuminating case studies, the theoretical excursions that have gone prior provide a systematic empirical background, helping us enrich our understanding of these complex and multidimensional interactions in many different forms. But through an understanding of these dynamics, we can use this knowledge to inform and broaden the debate about cooperation and conflict within the Muslim world today.

A large number of analysts, who specialized in the intricacies of the Iraq war, expressed concerns in the years of 2005 and 2006 that a civil war in the form of a sectarian conflict stood at the brink of the outbreak (Erkmen and Erendor, 2024). Following this catastrophic event, there was a relentless and brutal spree of Shia militia violence that took place with aggression against Iraqi Sunnis. This sequence of retaliatory actions was believed to have sown the seeds for a form of enduring ethno sectarian warfare; as the following two years unfolded, the grim reality of revenge killings began to

mount, while a supposedly ancient and deep-seated hatred between the factions was reignited. By the end of 2006, troubling reports indicated that a staggering 83 percent of the terrorism that had taken place in Iraq over the preceding six months stemmed from Sunni assaults against Shia individuals and communities.

As the landscape of conflict evolved into 2011 and beyond, strikingly similar dynamics continued to pervade the situation—ISIS proclaimed its view of Shia Muslims as *kufr* (infidels) and made a fervent vow to exterminate them, while various sectarian militias actively pledged to annihilate individuals of the Sunni faith. The nation of Iraq found itself devoid of traditional military front lines; however, it effectively became a patchwork of regions demarcated by prevailing sectarian allegiances. The locally entrenched security dilemma that existed between the Islamic State and its Shia neighbors starkly contrasted with the sectarian cooperation that could be fostered through joint humanitarian efforts, which would be championed by local and collaborative Islamic movements. In this particular light, the dynamics of local relationships often mirrored the broader interactions within the jihadi movement, leading to the idea that the attraction and aversion exhibited by fighters toward different warring factions were at least partially rooted in these local circumstances and conditions.

This section of the analysis delves into the myriad consequences and implications of local situations, scrutinizing several rich case studies that consistently arrive at similar conclusions regarding the nature of warfare at the local level. The initial part of the section is devoted to exploring instances of inter-sect cooperation that manifest at the grassroots level within Islamic movements. The subsequent part engages in a critical discussion of the restrictions and limitations faced by this cooperation, elucidating the reasons behind the failure or dissolution of such collaborative efforts. The analysis culminates with a comprehensive examination of how Salafist/jihadi ideology propagates within local contexts. The empirical research underpinning this study is grounded in rigorous fieldwork and firsthand interviews, complemented by extensive interactions with both currently active jihadis and those who have previously participated in the conflict. All names of individuals interviewed in the course of this study are altered and presented as pseudonyms, except in instances where the individuals are recognized public figures.

Conclusion

Through this insightful investigation an exploration into the pressing questions concerning the complex nature of inter-sect cooperation and conflict among contemporary Islamic movements has been provided. Based on our carefully selected cases, the empirical evidence indicates that the transformation in sectarian relations tends in most cases to be contingent and highly variable, caused by an enormously complicated interplay of a varied range of historical, cultural, political, and, socio-economic factors that are capable of reshaping these relationships. These factors included size preference policies that were prominently initiated by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, diversity's effect on recruiting quotas within the Lebanese Hizbullah

framework and the continuing theoretical and conceptual development within Salafism.

In addition, this analysis identifies several conclusions at the macro level as the diverse actors are not only willing, but have long histories of cooperation and coalition building across sectarian divisions. As we investigate these material dynamics so meticulously in relation to their foundational preconditions, we end up in a much more dynamic place to think about the future potential of such dynamics given the way that these dynamics might unfold in the context of ongoing transformations to the larger socio political landscape. Context is examined and a need for future research in order to fully understand the nuances of inter-sect relationships is explained. A number of highly respected experts in the field look forward into the near future, discussing the ways that carefully noted socio political changes, aspects of globalization, technological breakthroughs and new forms of identification may radically redraw the face of movements in the future. The same essential inquiry is also posed by the persistent and continuing difficulty in arranging inter-sect harmony and cooperation: how can the culture of inter-sect dialogue be effectively promoted on the much wider scale that it deserves? Innovative strategies aimed at improving social contact and enhancing protection are highly recommended, such as the promotion of social sector markets, which would be supported by initiatives including comprehensive educational schemes.

This reinforces the vital importance of both religion and education as critical vehicles to facilitate the cultivation of a fertile ground in which cooperation is not just possible, but indeed, a much more likely outcome than the exacerbation of conflict. This is especially true among individuals who are open to discussing and innovating through various interfaith initiatives that serve to enhance mutual understanding regarding different religions or perhaps even the more philanthropic side of human conduct. Moreover, as this insightful information demonstrates, the most recent research of this type must be expansive and vast in order to encompass and adequately assess both the current and future shapes of sectarian dynamics. It is suggested that further in-depth research be conducted and profound reflection is required, however, to develop more effective strategies that may help in making inter-sect harmony and cooperation more probable in an era characterized by globalization, rising intolerance, and the pervasive nature of populist politics. Through this combined effort, we may hope to forge a path toward more effective intercultural dialogue and understanding.

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