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Dr. Carool Kersten
WORLD VIEW

Shia - Sunni - Schisms



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INDIA



Dr. Chiara Formichi
INDONESIA



Dr. Ali Usman Qasmi
PAKISTAN



Huma Yusuf
NOREF REPORT



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“Wisdom, or understanding, is not to be got at by holding on to things; holding on to your beliefs or ideas. Wisdom is born when you are really moving, not anchored to any particular form of belief.”

- Jiddu Krishnamurti

Soliloquy

2014 will be the fifth year on the road meeting people, confabulating with the spirits and watching the dance of life and death play through the shadows every time one blinks.

Each year that passes is unnatural, unnatural in Time. For all these days, months and years have been created by us. We have yet to understand Universal Time. We live by this unnatural Time and write our histories by it... histories that defy the truth because many among us write history to appease our own and not necessarily a truthful rendition of past events. One supposes that the Great French General Napoleon Bonaparte was right when he said, *‘History is a set of lies agreed upon’*. Generations upon generations have been and continue to be fed lies. These lies infect all who believe them thus creating schisms between countries and peoples.

Schisms within a religion and between religions have been crafted to ‘manage the masses of illiterates’. These illiterates are preyed upon by self appointed gendarmes of faith who put the fear of God and everlasting damnation into the hearts of the faithful. Furthermore, for their own narrow vested interests, they deliberately create schisms so as to perpetuate a fraud on the unsuspecting masses – *us and them* has become the mantra fuelled by hate.

And while the blade rises and falls on the expendables (faithful slaughtered by other faithful) people watch dispassionately as newsreaders belt out the deadly digits of senseless killings, day in and day out. The litany of bloodlust appears to be flowing unabated. Life is now disposable, particularly those of others. It would appear that a sense of *exceptionalism* has engulfed our senses. Our dead are better than their dead. Our country is greater than their country. Our religion is the only true religion.

Where have we gone wrong?

Recently, I had the opportunity to discuss these issues with a wandering Sufi, who summed this distortion of humanity in one sentence – ‘We have lost our *insanyat* (humanity)’ we lost it a long time ago and now, as the Hindus say, we live in Kaliyug – the end times.”

So who decides these end times? When was it decided and if it was written in the scriptures of a religion/s – who wrote these scriptures? And why should we believe what has been written? Could it be that these scriptures too had been written by people with vested interests to promote

one religion or another? How can they prove that it came from God? And does God exist? Who can prove this? Who can disapprove this?

According to Swami, a Shiva Bhakt, indeed we have lost our *insanyat*. People have become more self centred, the me-me factor has become synonymous with the Self. Social media has brought us closer and yet alienated us all by deleting the human touch and in its place introduced the touch pad, ipad et al on one side, while on the other side it has further divided the haves from the great unwashed millions who live off the refuse of the priveleged.

A Catholic priest once told me – “One day at a time sweet Jesus – go out and share, love and forgive. Then return home. And the next day do it again. And again. And again. And you will discover after sometime that people will reciprocate in the same manner. This is how you can make the world a little bit better. Your actions should be your words.”

In this day and age to follow his advice is scary and this is where, I suppose, the strength and depth of one’s faith is truly tested. For what is the purpose of one’s faith if not to serve those in distress – the hungry, homeless and the weak, and without harming others?

In my travels I have met people from many faiths who were kind and generous without a hint of ill will towards those who were not of their faith. Their religious charities help all with food, shelter and education without bias towards religion, caste or gender. It is these people who have not lost their *insanyat*. It is through their humanity that their faith speaks. And this is comforting to know that there are people of faith out there who are not aroused by rabid religious preachers nor moved by the machinations of those seeking to create schisms in a faith or between faiths. May their numbers grow in 2014.

I shall leave you now with this quote from Mahatma Gandhi –

“To give pleasure to a single heart by a single act is better than a thousand heads bowing in prayer.”

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

01 January 2014



Shia-Sunni Schisms - World View

Dr. Carool Kersten

Carool Kersten is a scholar of Islam with interests in the intellectual history of the modern Muslim world and Islam in Southeast Asia. He currently is a Senior Lecturer in the Study of Islam and the Muslim World at King's College London and a Research Associate with the Centre for South East Asian Studies at School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). www.kcl.academia.edu www.hurstpublications.com



Shia-Sunni Relations in Indonesia

Dr. Chiara Formichi

Chiara Formichi is a scholar of Islam whose research addresses different aspects of the history of Islam in Southeast Asia, with a strong interest in cross-border dynamics. She is currently Assistant Professor at City University of Hong Kong, and will soon join Cornell University. Her recent publications cover the relationship between Islam and the state ([KITLV 2012](#); [Hurst 2013](#)), and its impact on Asia's diverse societies ([Routledge 2013](#); [Hurst 2014](#)).



Shia-Sunni Schisms in Pakistan

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Ali Usman Qasmi is Assistant Professor (History) at the School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law of Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) with a PhD from the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University in March 2009. Prior to LUMS, he was a Newton Fellow for Post Doctoral research at Royal Holloway College, University of London. He has published extensively in reputed academic journals; Modern Asian Studies, The Muslim World, The Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies and a monograph titled *Questioning the Authority of the Past: The Ahl al-Qur'an Movements in the Punjab*.



Shia-Sunni Relations in India

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Sectarian violence: Pakistan's greatest security threat?

Huma Yusuf *Reprinted by permission of* [NOREF](#)

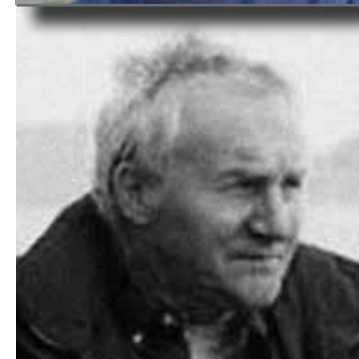
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Spirituality and Religion

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Some Never Left

Terry McDonagh

Irish poet and dramatist, Terry McDonagh, taught creative writing at the University of Hamburg and was Drama Director at the Int. School Hamburg for 15 years. He now works freelance; has been writer in residence in Europe, Asia, Australia; published seven poetry collections, book of letters, prose and poetry for young people translated into Indonesian and German, distributed internationally by Syracuse Uni. Press; latest poetry collection *Ripple Effect* due for publication in May/June 2013, Arlen House; next children's story, *Michel the Merman*, illustrated by Marc Barnes (NZ) to be published in September 2013. He lives in Hamburg and Ireland. www.terry-mcdonagh.com



Love Without Women

Natalie Wood

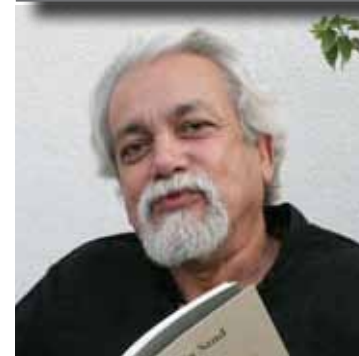
Born in Birmingham, England, U.K., Natalie Wood began working in journalism a month prior to outbreak of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. She remained in regional Jewish journalism for over 20 years, leaving full-time writing to help run a family business and then completed a range of general office work. Wood and her husband, Brian Fink emigrated from Manchester to Israel in March 2010 and live in Karmiel, Galilee where she continues to work, concentrating on creative writing. She features in *Smith Magazine's new Six Word Memoirs On Jewish Life* and contributes to *Technorati*, *Blogcritics* and *Live Encounters* magazine. Her stories - [Website](#) and journalism - [Website](#)



The Ugly Duckling

Dr. Candess M. Campbell

Candess M. Campbell, PhD is an internationally known Intuitive Life Coach, Licensed Mental Health Counselor, Seminar leader, Hypnotherapist and Author. She specializes in assisting others to gain their own personal power and to live a life of abundance, happiness and joy. Early 2012 she will be releasing her book *12 Weeks to Self-Healing: Transforming Pain through Energy Medicine*. www.12weekstoselfhealing.com



Late Fruiting

Randhir Khare

Khare is an award winning author of twenty one volumes of non-fiction, fiction, translation and poetry. Executive Editor of *Heritage India*, the *International Culture Journal*, a Director of The Rewachand Bhojwani Academy and Visiting Professor to the Dept Of English, Pune University. Recently he was given The Residency Award by The Sahitya Akademi (India's National Academy of Letters) for his contribution to Indian Literature and the Human Rights Award for his efforts to preserve and celebrate marginal and minority cultures. www.randhirkhare.in



Dr. Carool Kersten

Senior Lecturer in the Study of Islam & the Muslim World

KING'S College LONDON

speaks to Mark Ulyseas on

Shia-Sunni Schisms

"I think that the narrative I have sketched demonstrates that much of the supposed tensions between Sunnis and Shi'is is fed by rivalries between political elites who cynically manipulate and amplify existing differences in outlook, practice, and belief between Sunnis and Shi'is.

However, these are not necessarily of such a nature that they prevent a way of living together in what is after all an increasingly interconnected world, bringing not only Muslims from different stripes together, but putting Muslims also into close contact with non-Muslims on a unprecedented scale, both numerically and in terms of the intensity of such engagements.

Differences between Sunnis and Shi'is pale in comparison to such encounters."

- Kersten

Although the basic beliefs of both Sunnis and Shi'is have remained very much the same, over time this split has also resulted in the development of two distinct Islamic traditions, affecting not only the political, but also certain doctrinal, intellectual and spiritual aspects of the religion. But it is important to remind oneself that these religious overtones come on the back of what originally were different views on who should be in charge of the Muslim community when the Prophet himself was no longer there.

What is the historical background of the differences between Shia and Sunni Islam?

Ultimately, the split of the Muslim community into Sunnis and Shi'is can be attributed to a leadership issue that began dividing the early Muslim community immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632CE. So the origins of this schism can be traced back to the very beginning when Islam was just a nascent religion in Arabia. Because this split occurred so early on, what started out as a political dispute set the opposing camps on their respective separate ways when Islam had only just entered its formative period.

Although the basic beliefs of both Sunnis and Shi'is have remained very much the same, over time this split has also resulted in the development of two distinct Islamic traditions, affecting not only the political, but also certain doctrinal, intellectual and spiritual aspects of the religion. But it is important to remind oneself that these religious overtones come on the back of what originally were different views on who should be in charge of the Muslim community when the Prophet himself was no longer there. By implication this also means two versions of Islamic soteriology or 'salvation history' (which is very different from conventional history in terms of recording 'what really happened' in the past).

After the Prophet's death, the still embryonic Muslim community was left with the matter to decide who should become its leader. While there was consensus over the fact that with the passing of Muhammad, prophecy -- and with that the revelations which became embodied in the Qur'an -- had come to an end, in his capacity as community leader or statesman there was a very pertinent succession question. Sunnis and Shi'is have different interpretations of what transpired around the time of Muhammad's death. It is important to realize that these readings were only formulated and documented much later on, after which they have been projected back onto the period during which these events are supposed to have occurred.

A crucial episode in the Shi'i narrative is said to have taken place not long before the Prophet's death, during his so-called 'Farewell Pilgrimage' to Mecca. To back up their version, the Shi'is invoke a particular *hadith* or report from a vast body of stories about the sayings and actions of Muhammad transmitted over time and forming the so-called 'Traditions of the Prophet' -- which constitutes the most authoritative source for Islam's teachings and doctrines after the Qur'an.

According to the Shi'i reading of this *hadith*, while halting at the oasis of Ghadir Khumm during the return journey from Mecca to Medina, the Prophet is supposed to have anointed as his successor one

The Sunnis insist that Muhammad did not leave any clear instructions as to what should happen in the event of his demise. For that reason, following the Prophet's death, the most senior companions came together in order to find a solution and agree on a suitable successor for Muhammad in his capacity as a statesman. They resolved to follow a practice from Arab tribal custom (*sunna* in Arabic, from which also the designation 'Sunni' is taken) and elect one of the most senior members of the Muslim community -- and also a close confidante of the Prophet.

of his closest surviving relatives and earliest converts to Islam; his cousin and son-in-law Ali. This reading is disputed by what are now referred to as the Sunni Muslims, either by calling into the question the veracity of this report altogether, or by challenging the meaning of Muhammad's words, arguing that he had not implied to designate Ali as his successor, but merely singled him out as one of his closest and most loyal followers.

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The supporters of Ali, who eventually banded together as the *Shi'a Ali*, or Party of Ali (hence the term Shi'i), rejected this procedure. According to the historical chronicles, they not only objected on grounds of what had supposedly occurred at Ghadir Khumm, but also because these deliberations had taken place in the absence of Ali, who had been occupied with preparing the Prophet's body for burial. On account of his prominence among Muhammad's closest companions, he should have been present at such a crucial occasion as the selection of the new community leader.

Other factors came into play as well, which give us a very good sense of the realities in the early Muslim community and the humanity of the main players. Probably, this is one of the main lessons to be learned from the history of religions, because it can also help us understand how religious differences and sectarianism continue to be manipulated for the purpose of agendas that are not at all religious in nature.

For instance, there were personal tensions between Ali and Aisha -- Abu Bakr's daughter and youngest wife of the Prophet. These dated back to an earlier incident when Aisha had been separated from Muhammad's caravan or travelling party, only to be brought back by a strapping young Bedouin. Suspicious of what may or may not have happened during that absence, Ali advised the Prophet to divorce Aisha, so as to protect his own honour. It is alleged that Aisha and Abu Bakr never forgave Ali for his sanctimony and that this formed an additional motivation for blocking Ali's ascension to political power.

Things came to a full-blown crisis after Ali was murdered too in 661. This set the Shi'a Ali, now rallying around Ali's sons Hasan and Husayn, on a collision course with the supporters of the governor of Damascus who had claimed the Caliphate for himself. The outcome of this clash was a virtual civil war ripping the already divided community apart. The final showdown came at Karbala in Southern Iraq, in 680, when Husayn -- heavily outnumbered by the Caliph's army under the command of his son Yazid -- was killed near Karbala in southern Iraq.

What is the historical background of the differences between Shia and Sunni Islam? (Contd...)

Ali's own disposition has been characterized as 'quietist' -- as he was primarily concerned with piety and spiritual matters and not all that interested in politics and power. This would explain why, ultimately, he did not contest Abu Bakr's succession. Eventually, Ali would be passed over two more times. When Abu Bakr died after a Caliphate of only two years, another older figure, but relatively late convert, Umar ibn al-Khattab was elected Caliph. After him power passed on to the controversial Uthman ibn Affan -- a member of one of Mecca's most notable families which had initially vehemently opposed Muhammad in the past, denying his Prophethood and even chasing him out of Mecca into exile in Medina. For the supporters of Ali this was extremely frustrating as they regarded this sequence of events as a deviation from the way things were supposed to be according to the Prophet's own words.

Only after the assassination of Uthman in 656 was Ali acknowledged as the fourth and last of the so-called 'Righteous Caliphs'. However, even then his succession was not unopposed. Uthman's relatives, who held very powerful positions in the now rapidly expanding Muslim realm thanks to the late Caliph's nepotism, insinuated that Ali was implicated in the murder. Led by Mu'awiyya, the influential governor of Damascus, they refused to acknowledge the new caliph. In the ensuing years it came to armed altercations and tense standoffs which tore at the seams of the still very young community. Although Ali was in name the last generally recognized and unifying leader of the Muslims, in effect the community had already begun to fragment.

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From then on, the Sunni part of the Muslim community was first led by the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus and then the Abbasid Caliphate based in Baghdad, until the sacking of the city by the Mongols in 1256. Shi'is went their own way, rejecting the Sunni Caliphs and recognizing the descendants of Husayn as their leaders, who were not called Caliphs, but Imams. Because of their descent from the Prophet, the position of Shi'i Imams differs from that of the Caliphs in the sense that they do not only hold worldly authority but also fulfil a religious function.

elaborate understanding of martyrdom combined with a sense of political disenfranchisement helps sustain that experience.

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Because of this particular status of the Imams, the Shi'i outlook on religious authority is very different from that of the Sunnis, and this in turn has shaped their spiritual and intellectual traditions as well. Over time, the Shi'i camp was broken up in sub-sects, depending on how many Imams were recognized as legitimate and authoritative. The largest group recognizes twelve Imams and is therefore referred to as the 'twelvers', they are found in present-day Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Lebanon, and Bahrain, with further pockets in Eastern Arabia and elsewhere. Another group recognizes only seven Imams and are therefore called 'Seveners' and, alternatively, Ismailis. They are or have been present in the Persian-speaking parts of the Muslim world, as well as Syria, Southern Arabia, North Africa, South Asia, and East Africa. Finally, there are the Zaidis, who only recognize five Imams and whose current presence is largely confined to Yemen. What these different Shi'i subgroups continue to share is this belief in infallible Imams who continued to receive divine guidance, as well as the conviction that the last Imam did not die but went into 'occultation' only to reappear at the End of Times. This gives the Shi'i notion of communal leadership and religious authority a messianic dimension which is very different from that of the Sunnis. In the absence of the Imams, religious authority fell to a Shi'i clergy which is organized along more stringent hierarchical lines than the Sunni Ulama. Its senior leaders tend to exercise far-reaching influence over the Shi'i community. Throughout history, such differences have not only led to recurring religious disputes, but have also been conveniently exploited for political reasons.

South Asia has witnessed the simultaneous presence of Sunni Mughal Sultans in Delhi and their semi-autonomous Shi'i vassals in nearby Lucknow. In fact, the second largest Shi'i population in the world is still found in what is now Pakistan. Until modern times and the recent flaring up of sectarian tensions Sunnis and Shi'is, there and elsewhere, were able to peacefully coexist for lengthy periods of time. So there are evidently instances of Shi'i and Sunni interaction that provided a fertile soil for Muslim culture to flourish.

Why is there continued conflict between these two the Shia and Sunni bloc within the Muslim world? Can this violence be primarily attributed to political scheming/power mongering by local religious leaders and not so much as religious differences, or is it a portent mix of both? Or is it, as some proclaim, indeed the continuation of the 1400 year war between Shia and Sunni?

As I noted earlier, differences between Sunnis and Shi'is have been part and parcel of the history of the Muslim world almost from the inception of its religion. It has led to conflict before, but at the same time it is important to recognize that there are also many instances of a modus vivendi or even symbiosis of the two traditions. In the tenth century a Shi'i dynasty called the Fatimids (named after the Prophet's daughter Fatima) came to power in North Africa, ruling a majority Sunni population. After taking control of Cairo, the Fatimids founded al-Azhar mosque which eventually became the most important centre of Sunni Islamic learning after Mecca and Medina. During the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, there have been episodes when the Sunni Caliphs were assisted by Shi'i viziers or ministers, such as the Buwayhid family, who were important patrons and sponsors of learning and culture at the court, including a tradition of literary and philosophic activity which one historian of Islam has referred to as a form of 'Islamic humanism'. Also South Asia has witnessed the simultaneous presence of Sunni Mughal Sultans in Delhi and their semi-autonomous Shi'i vassals in nearby Lucknow. In fact, the second largest Shi'i population in the world is still found in what is now Pakistan. Until modern times and the recent flaring up of sectarian tensions, Sunnis and Shi'is, there and elsewhere, were able to peacefully coexist for lengthy periods of time. So there are evidently instances of Shi'i and Sunni interaction that provided a fertile soil for Muslim culture to flourish.

It is claimed that the rise in Shia-Sunni conflict can be traced to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the perceived global influence of Wahhabis using their petro dollars to ferment discord. Have religious differences been turned into rigid ideological positions promoted by Muslim states?

In the contemporary Muslim world, differences between Shi'is and Sunnis have received new political impetus, which to my mind can indeed be qualified as the ideological manipulation of these differences, turning power rivalries into sectarian strife. First, this became visible in the Persian Gulf region in the direct aftermath of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. However, this must be seen in the context of an older power struggle, one that can historically even been traced back to Arab-Persian rivalry that predates not just the Sunni-Shia schism but even the arrival of Islam. So once the Islam factor comes in, there is actually a conflation of ethnic-linguistic and religious differences.

A few centuries later, a particular austere and reactionary interpretation of Islam emerged in Central Arabia, when a religious scholar named Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab presented himself as a religious reformer intent on rooting out the, in his eyes, decadent and heretical practices associated with Shi'ism and Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, which he had encountered on his travels in southern Iraq and to Medina. After teaming with the regional chieftain Muhammad ibn Saud, in the course of the eighteenth century this duo and their respective successors were highly successful in using what came to be known as Wahhabism for the expansion of the House of Saud's political power.

But this also shows that it is not just a matter of different religious views, but also of historically much deeper cultural differences and political rivalry between Arabs and Persians that are coming into play time and again in the region's history.

Actually, the Shi'a-Sunni divide in that particular part of the Muslim world, with the current Islamic Republic of Iran and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia acting as the main actors in what is in fact more a power play than anything else, can only be traced back to the 16th and 18th centuries respectively, that is, a millennium after the original split between Sunnis and Shi'is. In 1500, a new dynasty known as the Safavids took power in the Persian world, encompassing what is now Iran, part of Iraq, the Caucasus, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It was only then that the new ruler or Shah declared Shi'a Islam the state religion of the empire.

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Outright political rivalry between Shi'i Iran and the Sunni Kingdom of Saudi Arabia only became more pronounced in the later part of the twentieth century. Initially this manifested itself in the competition between the last Shah of Iran and the Saudi monarchs as they vied for American support in acting as the US's 'policeman' in the Persian Gulf – responsible for securing the steady flow of oil to the industrialized countries in Europe, the Americas and the Far East.

The sectarian dimension did not really emerge until 1979, when the ousting of the Shah in the Iranian Revolution and the rise to political power of the country's Shi'i religious establishment led by the Ayatollah Khomeini rang the alarm bells in Riyadh. The Sunni-Shi'i divide became even more manifest when Iraq, then controlled by Saddam Hussein and his Arab nationalist Baath party, invaded Iran over a border dispute just a year later. The Gulf States (and many Western countries) quickly sided with Saddam Hussein (in name a Sunni Muslim), expecting he would quickly wipe out the infant Islamic Republic of Iran. This was not to be the case, as Iran proved a much more formidable opponent than anticipated. In a very vicious and bloody war that lasted eight years, both sides began exploiting the religious symbolism and imagery associated with the Sunni-Shi'i schism.

In the final years of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium, this competition for political influence and power has shifted to other areas, including Iraq, Lebanon, and now also Syria. Although the rivalry is increasingly coined in sectarian terms, it is important to keep in mind that the formation of strategic and tactical alliances continues to be primarily dictated by pragmatic considerations rather than religious affiliation. Such partnerships appear to be forged on the basis of the cynical observation that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. An illustrative earlier example of this is the Saudi support for the Zaidi (Shi'i) rulers against a republican bloc supported by Egypt during the 1960s civil war in Yemen.

It is claimed that the rise in Shia-Sunni conflict can be traced to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the perceived global influence of Wahhabis using their petro dollars to ferment discord. Have religious differences been turned into rigid ideological positions promoted by Muslim states? (Contd...)

In the face of a well-financed Sunni enemy, Iran presented the war as a re-run of the Battle of Karbala with its warriors in the same role as the martyred Husayn. They even began calling Saddam Hussein the new 'Yazid' – a reference to the Caliph's son responsible for the Imam's death in 680. The Iraqi regime meanwhile named their crucial offensive 'Qadisiya' – after the battle that heralded the Muslim conquest of Persia in 636.

The competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia took further shape in the 1980s and 1990s. It led to incidents during the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca in which Sunni and Shi'i Muslims jointly take part, when Iranians used the occasion to carry portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini with them in an evident attempt to irk their Saudi hosts. Aside from such incidents, which carry symbolic importance, there was also a more serious rivalry unfolding for real political influence. This was no longer restricted to the Persian Gulf, where both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain were becoming very wary of the influence of Iran among its Shi'i communities. In Saudi Arabia they form a small minority, where they are found in communities dispersed throughout the strategically important and oil-rich Eastern Province, but in Bahrain a Sunni monarchy faces a vast Shi'i majority population who feels severely disfranchised.

In the final years of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium, this competition for political influence and power has shifted to other areas, including Iraq, Lebanon, and now also Syria. Although the rivalry is increasingly coined in sectarian terms, it is important to keep in mind that the formation of strategic and tactical alliances continues to be primarily dictated by pragmatic considerations rather than religious affiliation. Such partnerships appear to be forged on the basis of the cynical observation that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. An illustrative earlier example of this is the Saudi support for the Zaidi (Shi'i) rulers against a republican bloc supported by Egypt during the 1960s civil war in Yemen.

On grounds of the same adage, Iran gave sanctuary to scores of prominent Shi'i religious and political opposition leaders from Iraq during the Saddam Hussein years (1979-2003), while in the Lebanese civil war, Tehran played a key role in the formation of a new Shi'i political organization – Hezbollah, which rapidly overtook the other Shi'i party, Amal. The situation in Syria is even more complicated. For decades both Syria and Iraq have been ruled by rivalling branches of the pan-Arab nationalist

This Tehran-Damascus axis also led to an Iranian-Syrian tandem operating in Lebanon. Here, it is important to add that the Shi'is in both Iran and Lebanon belong to the 'Twelver Sect', but the Syrian regime is controlled by the Alawis, who are not even considered 'proper Shi'is' by the other branches. Neighbouring countries with Sunni majorities cannot be bothered with such details and are eager to promote the menacing spectre of a 'Shi'i Crescent' connecting Tehran via Baghdad and Damascus to the Mediterranean in order to serve their own political plans. This is why Syria's neighbours, Jordan and Turkey, but especially Saudi Arabia are so intent on undermining the teetering Asad regime by supporting an array of obscure and murky Sunni militias.

Baath party. Not surprisingly therefore that the relations between Damascus and Tehran go back to the days that Iran was fighting against Iraq between 1980 and 1988 – leaving Baghdad very uncomfortably squeezed between two hostile states: One intent on undermining the rivalling Iraqi Baath party, the other responding to an invasion of its territory. A further irony is that, while the Iraqi regime was mainly composed of Sunnis, the vast majority of the country's population is Shi'i, which was thus also put in a very awkward position as its loyalties were called into question by the regime.

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Looking in from the outside, it is all in all a pretty confusing picture, but I am afraid that human history -- in particular when the religion factor is brought into politics – generally offers a pretty messy spectacle, in that regard the Middle East and other parts of the Muslim world are not so different from episodes in European history when different Christian churches were at each other's throats.

Is the Shia-Sunni schism hyped up to be more than what it is... while in reality there are millions of Shias and Sunnis living peacefully side by side and even inter marrying and doing business with one another without the septicaemia of religious fundamentalism interrupting or disturbing their way of life?

I think that the narrative I have sketched demonstrates that much of the supposed tensions between Sunnis and Shi'is is fed by rivalries between political elites who cynically manipulate and amplify existing differences in outlook, practice, and belief between Sunnis and Shi'is. However, these are not necessarily of such a nature that they prevent a way of living together in what is after all an increasingly interconnected world, bringing not only Muslims from different stripes together, but putting Muslims also into close contact with non-Muslims on a unprecedented scale, both numerically and in terms of the intensity of such engagements. Differences between Sunnis and Shi'is pale in comparison to such encounters.

"In 1989 Abdurrahman Wahid, chairman of the largest (Sunni) Muslim organization in Indonesia, declared: "to be honest, NU itself is a reincarnation of Shi'a culture." ("Semangat Qom Imam muda", EDITOR, 16 September 1989, p. 44; reprinted in "Syiah disekitar kita", TIRAS, 15 February 1996, p. 19) Reflecting on the fact that Indonesia's students religious *halaqa* groups in the 1980s-1990s read Hasan al-Banna, Abu al-'Ala Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb alongside Murtadha Muthahhari and 'Ali Shari'ati, Azyumardi Azra commented that an "intense rapprochement between the Sunni and Shi'a tradition [was taking] place through intellectual debates." (Azyumardi Azra *Islam reformis: dinamika intelektual dan gerakan*, Jakarta: RajaGrafindo, 1999, p. 20.)

Yet, as in the last decade Indonesia experienced a gradual narrowing of what religious authorities have considered "acceptable Islamic understanding", Shi'is have come under attack as "deviant" and "blasphemous" Muslims. Against this backdrop, it is important to reaffirm the multiple historical, social and political trajectories that contributed to the shaping of Shi'i communities in the archipelago, and to their relations with the country's Sunni establishment."

Dr. Chiara Formichi

Associate Director of the Southeast Asia Research Centre (SEARC)
and Assistant Professor in History and Religions,
City University of Hong Kong

in an interview with Mark Ulyseas on

Shia-Sunni Relations in Indonesia

What is the ratio between Shia and Sunni in Indonesia?

The Indonesian census does not include denominational distinctions for Muslims, hence there are no official statistics and we can find much disagreement between government and *ormas* figures. Keeping in mind that Indonesia counts about 200 million Muslims, a year ago the government suggested a figure of 500.000 Shi'is, versus a much higher estimate suggesting 5 million. Neither of these two figures is realistic, and Jalaluddin Rakhmat (chairman of IJABI) **has recently suggested that there should be about 2.5 million Shi'is** in the archipelago (just over 1% of the total Muslim population).

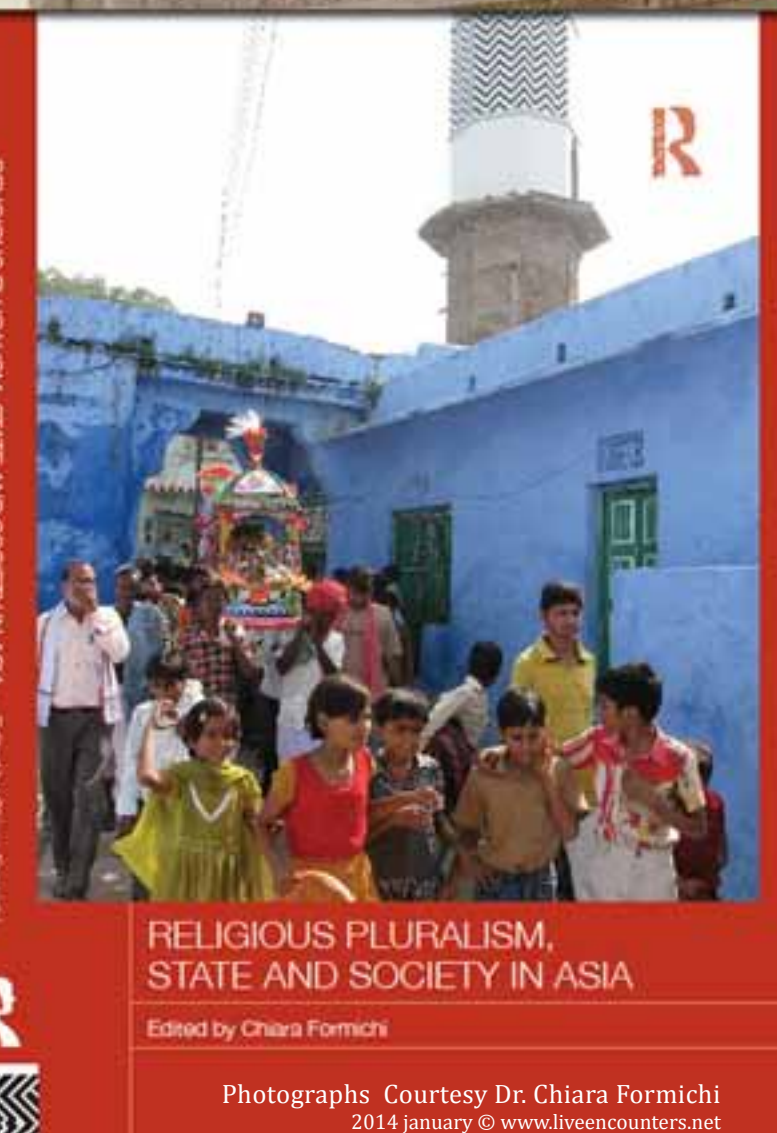
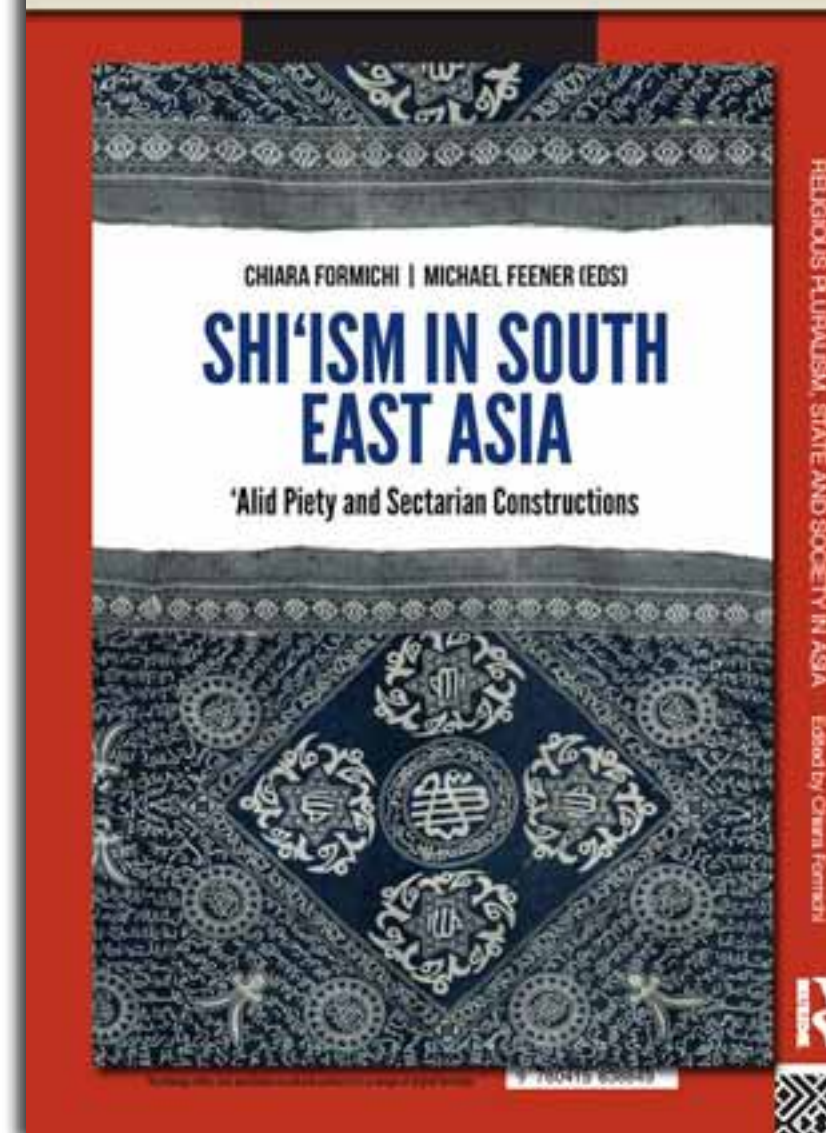
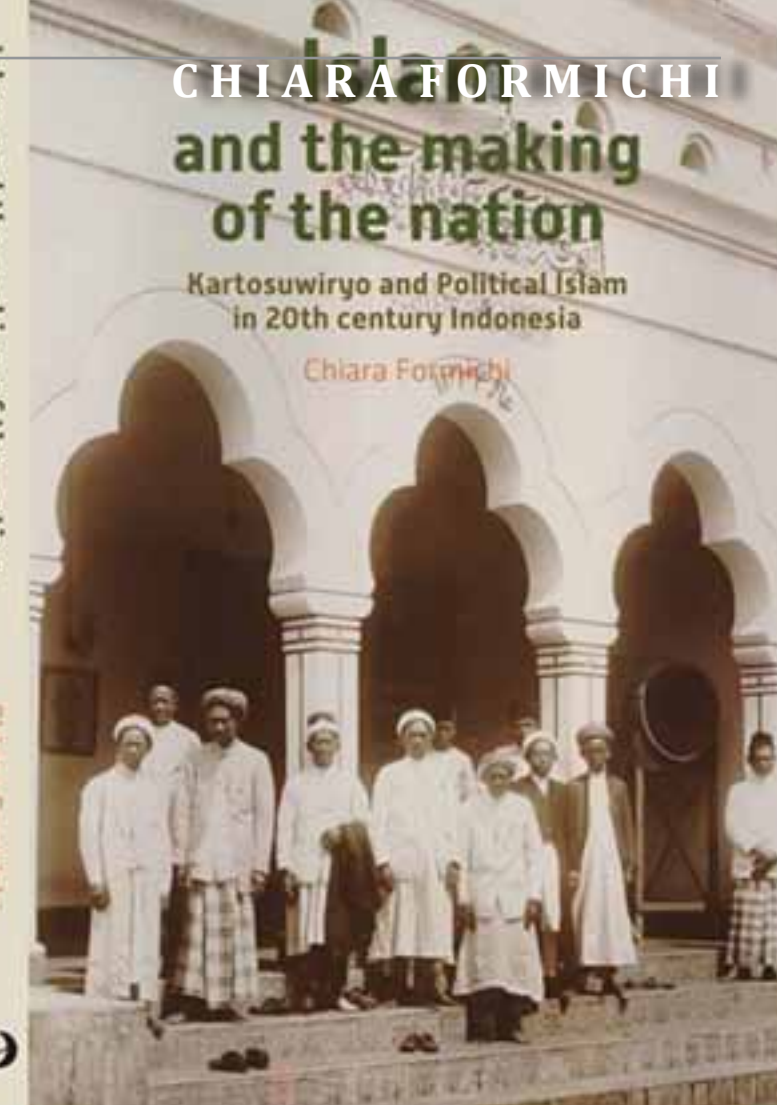
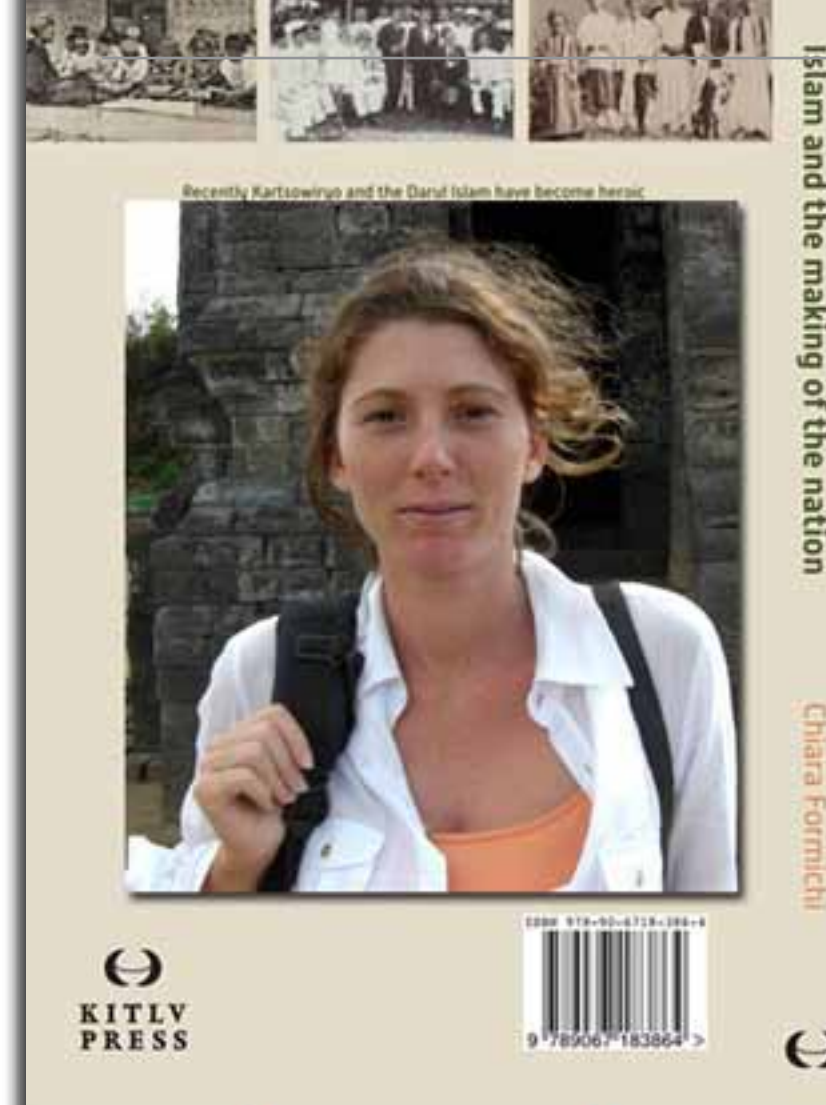
Why does there exist a schism between these two groups in Indonesia?

The "schism" does not pertain to Indonesia alone of course. The origins of the split between Sunnis and Shi'is lay in 7th century politics, as the Muslim community debated over the issue of who should succeed to the Prophet Muhammad; what had first manifested itself as political factionalism, in the following centuries evolved into theological and juridical distinctions. That said, this is a "programmatic" (legalistic and systematic) understanding of the Sunni/Shi'i distinction, and one that leads to constructions of "sectarian" identities.

The Indonesian case, historically, is not a matter of exclusive affiliation to one group or the other; what we see as prevalent here is what Gus Dur and other Nahdlatul Ulama leaders have for decades called *Syiah kultural* (and which Islamic Studies scholars define as Alid piety). This refers to a diffused devotion towards the prophet Muhammad, his daughter, Fatimah, her husband, Ali ibn Abu Thalib, and their sons, Hasan and Husayn.

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In the early 1980s the Indonesian government accused the Embassy of the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran of “exporting the revolution” by distributing “revolutionary literature” for free; by 1984 the Majelis Ulama Indonesia had issued a first “recommendation” to Indonesia’s Muslims to be wary of Shi’i thought, as its spread would bring social disharmony. Since the fall of the Suharto regime, Shi’i institutions (mostly *pesantrens* and *yayasans*) have mushroomed across the country, but it is important to acknowledge that this is mostly a domestic phenomenon, with hardly any foreign influence.

Why does there exist a schism between these two groups in Indonesia? (Contd...)

They are the primary line of descent from the prophet and thus hold a powerful aura for all Muslims, regardless of denominational affiliation; the *wali songgo*’s genealogies, for example, as well as many *Sufi tariqat*, often make references to Hasan and Husayn as chains of transmission of spiritual knowledge.

There are many traceable manifestations of devotion for the family of the prophet in the (not so distant) history of the Indo-Malay world, from manuscripts to residual rituals and do’a prayers. What we are witnessing today in terms of anti-Shi’a attitudes is the result of very recent developments that have more to do with politics and ahistorical analyses than theology or doctrine. That is why together with Michael Feener and other scholars we decided to publish [a volume](#) that investigates these dimensions of Islam in Southeast Asia, at the juncture between “Sunni” and “Shi’i” traditions.

How has Iran been directly involved in the formation of Shia communities in Indonesia? And does it fund this community and if so, why?

The Iranian revolution of 1979 was, undoubtedly, a milestone in the spread of Shi’i Islam beyond its historical centres in the greater Middle Eastern region. Although, as mentioned above, forms of Alid devotion had been present in Indonesia for centuries, something entirely new took hold, largely due to the shockwaves of the revolution: alongside an intellectually-driven interest in Shi’i philosophy and religious thought (interestingly spearheaded by Islamist circles in the 1980s), a juridically-informed (*fiqhi*) stream of Shi’i Islam started taking root throughout the 1980s-1990s, in spite of the openly anti-Shi’i approach of Suharto’s New Order regime.

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Since the fall of the Suharto regime, Shi’i institutions (mostly *pesantrens* and *yayasans*) have mushroomed across the country, but it is important to acknowledge that this is mostly a domestic phenomenon, with hardly any foreign influence. Even though the Islamic Republic has been actively sponsoring Shi’i religious events in Indonesia during the past decade, and several Universities’ libraries feature an “Iran Corner” alongside the “Canada Corner” and the “America Corner” (all funded by their respective embassies), most religious schools and rural centres often complain that they lack the means to provide

The Wahhabi school (*madhhab*) is a sub-group of the Hanbali legal school - one of the four Sunni schools which include Hanafi, Shafi’i, Maliki and Hanbali - inspired by the teaching of the eighteenth century scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. In the specific, their anti-Shi’a attitude is rooted in the conviction that all those who follow alternative interpretations of the scriptures are infidels (*kuffar*). This practice of *takfeer* becomes dangerous when doctrinal debates are taken further and combined with violent actions.

their constituencies with enough support, directly accusing the Iranian embassy of not supplying enough materials. An important - yet indirect - channel for the spreading of Shi’i Islam is to provide scholarship to Indonesian students to pursue further studies in Iran, and not just to attend religious schools in Qom, but more importantly to enrol in Political Sciences, Philosophy, Persian Studies, and even Medicine in Iran’s best universities.

The reason for Iran’s commitment to spreading Shi’i Islam is clear, as it is an Islamic state rooted in the Shi’i tradition, and this is part of its mission; as Saudi Arabia spreads a Wahhabi understanding of Islam, and the Catholic Church missionary efforts are coordinated by the Vatican.

What is the relationship between anti-Shia groups, Wahhabism, and Saudi Arabia? And are there any other anti-Shia groups in Indonesia which are as venomous? And do these groups have political affiliations?

Although this is a generalization, Wahhabi groups (in Indonesia as elsewhere) take an anti-Shi’a stand, declaring Shi’i Islam a “deviation” from “the straight path”. Yet, a group doesn’t need to be “Wahhabi” to be anti-Shi’i.

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A second generalization, which holds true with its due exceptions, is that a large proportion of these Wahhabi groups receive support from Saudi Arabia - whether in the form of direct financial contributions or by sending teachers and books, or by offering scholarships. A trend that has been in place since the early 1980s during the New Order period, when most anti-Shi’a books and pamphlets, and the noisiest of *yayasans* had open links with Saudi Arabia.

As far as I understand it, anti-Shi’i propaganda and (threatened) attacks belong to the sphere of grassroots society. And in this matter Indonesia differs greatly from Pakistan and some Middle Eastern countries, where political parties might instead endorse sectarianism. This however doesn’t mean that politicians - or government officials - refrain from expressing their opinions on such matters.

But in the aftermath to the 2012-2013 Sampang incidents - in which a Shi'i religious school and several houses were burnt, causing over a hundred Shiites to flee from Madura to Java - high ranking government officials have openly suggested that Shi'a villagers would be safe to return to Sampang only after "enlightenment" and "returning to the true teaching of Islam". Officials denied that they were hinting at "forced conversions", but in substance that is exactly what the plan entailed. This is not just a major breach of international human rights, but it is also at odds with the Indonesian Constitution.

In the attempt to solve the tensions in Sampang, there have been accusations of 'forced conversions' of Shias to Sunni Islam; is this true? And what has been the role of politicians in this process?

Forced conversion is a very important issue, especially since it has emerged in a post-conflict context, and it is more likely to stir more confrontation than to solve the problem. Let me explain. Throughout the 1980s-1990s, anti-Shi'i attitudes were limited to government and religious organizations' statements, requesting for the Indonesian *ummah* to hold on to their Sunni traditions and "stay away" from Shi'i Islam; no physical confrontation ever took place. Even when the first attacks occurred in the early and mid-2000s, these were minor incidents which were dealt with locally and exploring the relevant social, economic, and political rationales, with no suggestion that tensions could be eased by Shi'is "reverting" to the Sunna.

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What does the constitution of Indonesia say about religious freedom? And how have Shias fared compared to other religious minorities in this regard?

The 1945 Constitution (and amendments) sanctions freedom of religion and belief and nowhere in the Indonesian legislation is Sunni Islam enshrined as the official religion or as the only form of Islam allowed. Yet, Muslim minorities often face far harsher discrimination than non-Muslims. It is worth exploring the legal framework: in the aftermath to the alleged communist coup of 1965, a Presidential decree established religious affiliation as a key component of Indonesian citizens' identity, and listed five officially recognised religions (i.e. Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism), creating a form of "limited pluralism", from which also atheism is excluded; at the same time, the government also established the crime of "blasphemy", "desecration", and "staining" of religion. Although the political climate has since dramatically changed, these regulations are still in place (with the addition of Confucianism); what is important to highlight here, is that if in the realm of Christianity we see the separate mention of Catholicism and Protestantism, Islam appears as one single "denomination".

Across the country there is no shortage of religious leaders who are committed to deepening their constituencies' religious understanding without getting involved with "sectarian" concerns and focussing instead on fostering a climate of inter-religious tolerance and mutual understanding. And the recent instances of violence should not obscure the fact that many religious leaders, public intellectuals, and teachers across the country work hard to maintain a peaceful climate and relations amongst religious groups.

In the absence of a state-endorsed "form" of Islam, in theory this framework should translate in wider tolerance of multiple interpretations of the scriptures - and this was indeed the case for many decades; but as in recent years (Sunni "orthodox") Islam has been gaining much political currency, the accusation of "blasphemy" and "deviation" has been applied quite liberally to Muslim minorities, causing a narrowing of the space for alternative interpretations; however it is also important to acknowledge that this is not the doing of a single political party, or individual politicians. Many scholars and observers have pointed to the increased weight carried by MUI's "advice" since 2005, and its role in shaping a well delimited form of "acceptable Muslim behaviour" moulded on a Sunni paradigm has become evident with the anti-Ahmadiyah attacks first, and the anti-Shi'a violence now.

Is Indonesia the battle ground for Iran and Saudi Arabia – Shia vs. Sunni? And do Indonesian religious leaders from both sides exist who are not influenced by outside vested interests; who are working to bring about an understanding and mutual respect between the two groups of followers?

I am sure some perceive it as such; however, I think that overemphasising the geo-political connotations of religious affiliation can be misleading, and cause even more damage. The numbers of Shi'is in Indonesia have been rising since 1979, as the number of Wahhabis has too, but in both cases we are talking of a very small proportion of the Indonesian Muslim population. Even if a battle for conquering the hearts of the *abangan* Muslims, or "Nominal Muslims", were underway in Indonesia, the impact would be minimal.

Across the country there is no shortage of religious leaders who are committed to deepening their constituencies' religious understanding without getting involved with "sectarian" concerns and focussing instead on fostering a climate of inter-religious tolerance and mutual understanding. And the recent instances of violence should not obscure the fact that many religious leaders, public intellectuals, and teachers across the country work hard to maintain a peaceful climate and relations amongst religious groups.

Nonetheless, such occurrences of violence that Indonesia is experiencing do deserve much attention from scholars, religious leaders, and government officials. The focus of such analysis ought to be two-fold: on the one hand there is the need to go beyond the appearances, and understand the underlying reasons for the tensions, which one might suggest usually point to socio-economic factors rather than religious doctrine (as the more recent scholarship on the communal violence in Poso indicates); on the other, there is also the necessity to guarantee the applicability of the Pancasila spirit to all Indonesian citizens, regardless of their religious orientation.

The question of how to pursue a pluralistic society is not a problem exclusive to Indonesia, and it does not have one single answer, but surely it does require government intervention, whether it is translated in a stronger curriculum for citizenship studies in primary and secondary schools, or implementing sanctions for government officials and politicians who publicly go against the “unity in diversity” Pancasila ideal, for example.

What is the role of the government in maintaining peace or discord between Shia and Sunni? Can and should the Indonesian government prevent outside influence (Iran/ Saudi Arabia) being exerted on Shias and Sunnis?

It is the government's - and its branches' - ultimate responsibility to prevent violence and maintain peaceful relations between Sunnis and Shi'is, as between members of all other religious groups.

We tend to think of globalization as a recent phenomenon but in fact “outside influences” have been playing an important role in the politics of religion for centuries. The Dutch failed to limit outside influence at the turn of the 20th century, the New Order regime failed in the 1980s, and there is very little scope for the government to try stop Iranian and Saudi influences now.

Plus, that wouldn't solve the problem. It would be more important - and this is my personal opinion - for the political establishment to focus its energy on strengthening the country's framework and practices of religious freedoms. This past November [2013], for example, the Sultan (and Governor) of Yogyakarta has intervened in the case of a “radical group” threatening to attack a local *yayasan* which since the 1990s has been teaching Shi'i thought; the Sultan invoked - and made sure the police enforced - the civil duty to respect others' opinions and democratic principles in general. And this is the role the government should undertake.

The question of how to pursue a pluralistic society is not a problem exclusive to Indonesia, and it does not have one single answer, but surely it does require government intervention, whether it is translated in a stronger curriculum for citizenship studies in primary and secondary schools, or implementing sanctions for government officials and politicians who publicly go against the “unity in diversity” Pancasila ideal, for example.

In the immediate present, however, the commitment to preventing more occurrences of “religious” violence should operate at two levels, in the field and in the courtroom. The way that the anti-Ahmadiyyah attacks have been handled by the police in the past few years, for example, should be more strongly condemned, as police officers should first and foremost protect the lives of endangered citizens; even if they believe those under attack to be “offenders” of some law (in this case the blasphemy law), their duty is to allow a fair trial, not street justice. The second issue is of course that a “fair” trial would require a legislation truly committed to religious freedom and pluralism; for this to be set in place, legislators would need to acknowledge the fact that as multiple interpretations of Christianity can peacefully coexist in Indonesia, so could multiple interpretations of Islam.

A rediscovery of the gray zone - which is not exclusive to Indonesia, as it has been identified in Egypt, India and Pakistan's Islamic cultural legacies as well - combined with a stronger legal protection of religious freedoms is possibly the most effective solution to a lasting peace.

What is your overall assessment of the prevailing tensions between Shia and Sunni and will there ever be a common meeting ground/lasting peace between the two groups?

First of all I would like to re-iterate that although Sunni-Shi'a tensions exist, this is not the prevailing pattern of relations. That said, it would be naïve to ignore the fact that some groups are taking advantage of the government's and political parties' difficulties in condemning and repressing radicalism and thus advancing an “orthodoxizing” agenda that leaves little space for alternative interpretations of Islam.

As a historian, my analysis leads to encouraging a self-reflection on Indonesia's own past. I am not suggesting that we should pretend nothing has changed, but it is important to remember that not too long ago - most notably until the 1960s, but also well into the 1980s - there was no sense of being “Sunni” or “Shi'a”; many Muslims across the archipelago would recognise Imam Husayn's readiness to self-sacrifice as a role model, take the marriage of Fatimah and 'Ali as an example of perfect Islamic union, or read the writings of Ali Shariati along side Sayyid Qutb without reflecting on their respective “sectarian” connotations. It is only since the 2000s that Indonesia has experienced a growing phenomenon of sectarian identities' construction in which the blurred lines of *Syiah kultural* have been more clearly defined along Sunni-Shi'a standards.

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The Ahmadis and the Politics of Religious Exclusion in Pakistan

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Shia-Sunni Schisms in Pakistan

The Shiite Communities of Pakistan – Brief Overview

Writing about 'the Shiites' of Pakistan is a difficult task for multiple reasons; To begin with, the dearth of academic literature on the history of Shiite Islam in South Asia is an impediment. An exception is the magnum opus of Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi's two volume work titled *A Socio-intellectual History of the Isna Ashari Shi'is in India*. It traces the historical evolution of Shiite communities in various parts of South Asia and maps the growth of their power and influence institutionalized in the form of political authority at different periods. The critique of this work – which is part of the second problem about academic writings on Shiite Islam – is the monolithic identity ascribed to 'the Shiites'. It approaches the history of Shiite Islam as a linear progress towards certain ends. It gives 'the Shiite' a false sense of cohesive identity overlooking the fact that not only were there internal differences along class lines, the Shiites groups were devoid of necessary camaraderie, which is considered vital for any self-contained religious group. Lack of unanimity in religious ideals and doctrines had been quite tangible among Shiite.

Another problem which has been added to the corpus of writings on Shiite Islam in general is the influence of Iranian revolution since 1979. The abruptness in the fruition of the revolution propelled the Western need to make sense of the 'Shi'i version' of Islam with Iran being its epicentre. Therefore, most of these studies were specific to Iran and its politics underpinned by Shiite Islam, which had been played up constantly by the leaders of the revolution as a distinct feature of Iranian polity. Outside Iran where Shiite Islam did not pose a political threat, the nature of academic studies has been markedly different. For example, in case of India and Pakistan numerous studies on the ritualistic aspects of Shiite Islam were carried out by anthropologists like David Pinault and Vernon Schubel, among many others. Only recently some historians have begun to bring the historical aspects of Shiite Islam into focus with South Asian perspective. In this regard, the path breaking study by Justin Jones' on the politics of Shiite Islam in colonial North India is noteworthy. This will soon be followed by publication of a book by Andreas Rieck on the Shiite community in Pakistan. Peter Wolfgang Fuchs, a brilliant young scholar at Princeton University is working on the history of Shiite community in Pakistan, which will soon be published. Other than anthropological interest in rituals, the origin and dynamics of sectarian violence in Pakistan particularly from 1980s onwards have drawn attention of many a scholar. In this regard the works of Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Vali Reza Nasr, Mariam Abou Zahab and Tahir Kamran are significant contributions.

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Constitutionally speaking, Gilgit-Baltistan does not form a part of Pakistan as a province. For decades its legal status remained ambivalent and some constitutional rights were extended to the region as it would have, first, influenced Pakistan's stance over Kashmir to which these areas owed nominal allegiance at the time of partition in 1947. Secondly, if the constitutional rights are fully accorded to the people inhabiting that region it will imply authorizing 'Shiites' to govern, a proposition not acceptable to Sunni factions.

After furnishing this brief overview of recent trends in the study of Shiite Islam, I will now shift my focus to different aspects of history and politics of various Shiite communities in Pakistan.

Situating Shiite Communities (within the Pakistani context)

To begin with, I find sectarian difference along Shiite-Sunni lines as arbitrary and highly problematic. In Pakistan, existence of any *singular sectarian identity* whether Shi'i or Sunni is a misnomer for a majority of Muslims. Both sects are riddled with internal fissures and sub-sects, punctuated at times with loyalties of class and ethnicity. Such communities exist in different locales with a distinct historical background and social ethos. But one must not lose sight of the recurrent violence against Shi'is which has brought divergent factions within the community together. The persecution has also sensitised them to the vulnerable position they are in *vis a vis* Sunni majority.

The Shiite communities (estimated at 15-20% of Pakistani population) are spread all across Pakistan and their social interactions with other communities and daily lives are impacted by a variety of factors. The majority of Shiites in Pakistan are Isna Ashari (or the Twelvers) with paltry number of Ismailis, Bohras and Nurbakhshi living in some parts of Pakistan. In the Gilgit-Baltistan region, the followers of Shiite Islam have an absolute majority. Interestingly in such areas as Hunza-Nagar, they are in competition with the Ismaili denomination of Shiite Islam. In Skardu and Gance in Baltistan, approximately 25% of the population follows Nurbakhshi variant of Shiite Islam which the orthodox Shiite Ulema are reluctant to accept as a legitimate Shiite sect. The nature of violence and conflict in Gilgit-Baltistan stems from the fact that it is the only part of Pakistan where Shiite communities are in a decisive majority.

Constitutionally speaking, Gilgit-Baltistan does not form a part of Pakistan as a province. For decades its legal status remained ambivalent and some constitutional rights were extended to the region as it would have, first, influenced Pakistan's stance over Kashmir to which these areas owed nominal allegiance at the time of partition in 1947. Secondly, if the constitutional rights are fully accorded to the people inhabiting that region it will imply authorizing 'Shiites' to govern, a proposition not acceptable to Sunni factions. The Sunni community has strong presence in Gilgit, the commercial and administrative centre of the entire region. Sectarian violence leading to imposition of curfew has been a recurrent phenomenon since 1980s. For example an incident centring on the issue of textbooks in Gilgit-Baltistan published by Punjab Textbook Board led to large scale violence. Nosheen Ali's article reveals that in Grade 7 textbook for art and drawing students were required to sketch and colour calligraphic illustrations of the names of four caliphs. This was resented by the Shi'i majority which holds a divergent view about the first three caliphs and does not accept them as legitimate inheritors of Prophet's political authority.

Hazaras have been subjected to the most atrocious violence in which thousands of their men women and children have been exterminated. In 2012, the Hazaras registered a powerful protest in Quetta by organizing a sit-in in freezing temperatures with un-buried dead bodies of those killed in a massive bomb blast. It was only after this protest that the provincial government was dismissed and governor rule imposed in the province.

The introduction of self rule in 2009 through Gilgit Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order has led to new forms of sectarian violence and insecurities. Even though this Order allows self rule, legislation and executive authority but on a limited number of issues only, it has been perceived by some radical Sunni groups as grant of power to 'the Shiites' to rule in a Sunni-majority country. This would imply that 'the Shiites' will have the authority to disallow any textbook which is contrary to the belief system of 'the great majority' (*sawad-i-azam* as some certain Sunni groups like to say in order to boast about their numbers) and implement policies in accordance with their particular belief system and liking. Such a perception has led to an increase in the scale of violence in this region. In one particular incident in 2012, a bus on route to Gilgit was intercepted at Chilas and passengers identified on the basis of 'Shiite sounding names' were taken off the bus and then shot dead.

In Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa the Shiites communities are concentrated in some pockets of the province and have a sizeable number in the Kurram Agency, especially among Turi and Bangash tribes. Here, Shi'i-Sunni conflict is a constant feature for many decades and is further aggravated by tribal rivalry and attempts for greater control over water and other natural resources as the region has limited sources for livelihood.

In Balochistan, Shiites are less significant in terms of numbers. Some commentators have tried to essentialise this on the basis of historical rivalry between Iranians and Baloch. The poetry about mythical origins of Baloch suggests that the Baloch clans lent support to Imam Husain in Karbala and were consequently punished for this support. The result was the mass exodus of Baloch from Halab or Aleppo (currently in Syria). A Baloch nationalist historian, Inayatullah Baloch, maintains that the Baloch people embraced Sunni Islam in reaction to Safawid Iran's acceptance of Shiism. In present day Balochistan, the Shiite communities like Hazaras, who migrated from Afghanistan, are mostly settled in Quetta.

In recent years, Hazaras have been subjected to the most atrocious violence in which thousands of their men women and children have been exterminated. In 2012, the Hazaras registered a powerful protest in Quetta by organizing a sit-in in freezing temperatures with un-buried dead bodies of those killed in a massive bomb blast. It was only after this protest that the provincial government was dismissed and governor rule imposed in the province.

Some commentators have suggested that Hazara carnage was not just sectarian in nature but it also had ethnic dimension in which non-Pashtun and non-Baloch groups were being targeted. Some have also alluded to the involvement of property dealers of Quetta who benefit from forced or panic eviction of 'non-residents' of Quetta as they sell off their properties at reduced prices to escape violence.

The number of madrassas continued to multiply after 1947. It acquired a steep growth gradient during 1980s as petro-dollars from Saudi Arabia and Sheikhdoms started pouring in. The petro dollars were funnelled into, first, to strengthen the political and religious influence of a more 'Arabized' Islam in Pakistan and, second, to provide finance for a proxy war against a resurgent Iran, who itself was bent on spreading its version of revolutionary Islam in the region.

Situating Shiite Communities (within the Pakistani context) (Contd...)

In Punjab and Sindh, the Shiite communities are not concentrated in any particular area but spread across the region. The local culture emblematic of the spiritual bonds and connections with Sufi shrines spread throughout the region, present a highly syncretic picture. The Sufi shrines serve as pluralistic sites of interaction between people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. In the case of present day South Punjab and Sindh, the Ismaili missionaries remained active for hundreds of years and even managed to establish their rule for some time. The effects of that resonate even to this day in centrality of the figure of 'Ali' as a spiritual fountainhead. Reverence for Ali and Ahl-e-Bait holds the sway with majority of inhabitants in the region maintaining allegiance to Sunni Islam.

However, it will be too simplistic to presume an idyllic co-existence between the sect(s), devoid of any conflict in this sprawling region. Since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, this area underwent a revivalist streak which profoundly influenced some of the Sufi orders; Chishtis in Punjab being a case in point. Another influence has been spawning of the reformist Islam from late nineteenth century onwards, which professed and upheld unequivocally the puritan version of Islam, devoid of any local cultural influences. The legacy of the reformist Islam was sustained through the mushrooming of **madrassas**.

The number of madrassas continued to multiply after 1947. It acquired a steep growth gradient during 1980s as petro-dollars from Saudi Arabia and Sheikhdoms started pouring in. The petro dollars were funnelled into, first, to strengthen the political and religious influence of a more 'Arabized' Islam in Pakistan and, second, to provide finance for a proxy war against a resurgent Iran, who itself was bent on spreading its version of revolutionary Islam in the region. These madrassas not only provided education but also food and shelter to some of the most deprived segments of the population. Equipped with the power to speak authoritatively about Islam, passionately invoke rhetoric and provided with funds to acquire sophisticated weaponry, some of these madrassa trained students laid the basis for wholly new brand of radical religious violence in Pakistan. Previously, there had always been disputes on such issues as *tazia* processions and polemics about the veracity of one's sect over the other leading to occasional skirmishes and even limited scale violence as well. But what Pakistan witnessed from 1980s onwards was unprecedented.

In his influential essay on the origins of sectarian violence in Jhang – which became the epicentre of such trends in the entire Pakistan for decades to come – **Tahir Kamran** has done an excellent social profiling of **Haq Nawaz Jhangawi**, the founder of rabid anti-Shiite militant group called **Sipah Sahaba Pakistan** (The Army of the Companions of the Prophet). Jhangawi came from a poor tenant family working for a local landlord who was a Shiite.

Most of the Shiite communities of Isna Ashari persuasion came to the city as migrants from United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh in India) in 1947 and brought with them various regional varieties and traditions pertaining to Muharram rituals. Consequently Karachi came to be the most important centre of *azadari* in South Asia where different traditions and rituals are devoutly observed during Muharram. As an upshot to the Shii concentration there, Karachi became a centre of sectarian violence for many decades. From 1990s onwards *targeted killing* has become the norm; hundreds killed have been identified as 'Shiite doctors'. In addition, *Imambargahs* and *tazia* processions are at times sabotaged by suicide bombers.

Once Jhangawi had been madrassa trained, he became a fiery speaker equipped with the ability to inspire and enthrall his audience with hateful speech against local Shiites. With his financial resources expanding, Jhangawi inverted the power relations between him and the Shiite feudals. This subsequently served as a model not just for Jhang but for several parts of South Punjab where there were numerous 'Shiite landlords' and 'Sunni tenants' who could find similar inspiration and finances from madrassas.

Karachi represents an interesting medley of various Shiite communities. Not all of these communities are followers of Isna Ashari variant of Shiite Islam. Various Bohra and Isamili communities also wield considerable influence because of their entrenched prowess in industrial and financial sectors. Most of the Shiite communities of Isna Ashari persuasion came to the city as migrants from United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh in India) in 1947 and brought with them various regional varieties and traditions pertaining to Muharram rituals. Consequently Karachi came to be the most important centre of *azadari* in South Asia where different traditions and rituals are devoutly observed during Muharram. As an upshot to the Shii concentration there, Karachi became a centre of sectarian violence for many decades. From 1990s onwards *targeted killing* has become the norm; hundreds killed have been identified as 'Shiite doctors'. In addition, *Imambargahs* and *tazia* processions are at times sabotaged by suicide bombers.

The Interests of the Shiite Communities

At the time of partition, the Shiite communities of the areas which constituted Pakistan in 1947 were less significant. Their numbers and influence was greatly enhanced by the influx of migrants from United Provinces. These migrants were more affluent and educated than most in the existing communities. During the early decades of Pakistan's history, various Shiite organizations that cropped up attempted to impose an 'all Pakistan' tag and petition the government on the behalf of 'the Shiites'. Their demands were mainly focused on issue of permits for *tazia* processions, recognition of the right of Shiite communities to practice *azadari* and, later, demand for the inclusion of 'Shiite Islamiyat' at school level.

While Shiite rituals and their practice was a recognized feature even during the colonial period and hence continued in Pakistan as well without any hiccup, the demand for 'Shiite Islamiyat' however was a new one. Various Shiite organizations complained about their children being instructed in a version of Islam which was completely at odds with Shiite beliefs. Hence they demanded that Shiite students should have the option to study Islamiyat as approved by Shiite scholars. This demand finally got the nod of approval during Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's government in 1974. But Shiite Islamiyat was introduced at high school level only.

In his important article on this theme, Hussain Arif Naqwi points out growing differences in Shiite communities. Many in Shiite communities have resisted this Iranian version of Shiite Islam. But the influence of Iran has continued to wax because of its generous financial support for the construction of madrassas and scholarship awards to potential candidates for pursuing higher studies in the prestigious centre in Qom. The dialectics of this struggle – which is partly played out in competing understandings about the *trope of Karbala* – continues to unfold and will have an important bearing on Shiite communities across Pakistan.

The Interests of the Shiite Communities (Contd...)

It never became popular with students as, in many cases, government schools did not have qualified teachers to teach it. Also, students were not too keen to distinguish themselves along sectarian lines by opting for Shiite Islamiyat and, hence, make themselves prominent or subject to discrimination and even violence. A wholly new dimension was added to the politics of Shiite organizations by the Iranian revolution of 1979. Iran became a Shiite republic. It was all the more eager to export its brand of revolution in the region. It also championed the rights of Shiite communities around the world. For this purpose, various Shiite organizations were supported and financed by Iranian government. The Iranian version of Shiite Islam – including the concept of *vilayat-i-faqih* – was widely propagated. The main interest of this new brand of Shiite organizations was to transform Shiite communities from a quietest group of mourners to a politically charged one. For them Karbala did not simply have a moral, pietistic and spiritual significance rather it represented a clarion call for political action. They, therefore, sought to go beyond rituals like self flagellation or *matam*. This was argued on the ground that it makes Shiite Islam ‘look bad’ to an outsider. Alternatively, they suggested setting up blood banks where mourners could donate blood on the **10th day of Muharram** instead of ‘wasting’ it by self flagellation.

It is difficult to estimate the strength and impact of these new groups and organizations. In his important article on this theme, Hussain Arif Naqwi points out growing differences in Shiite communities. Many in Shiite communities have resisted this Iranian version of Shiite Islam. But the influence of Iran has continued to wax because of its generous financial support for the construction of madrassas and scholarship awards to potential candidates for pursuing higher studies in the prestigious centre in **Qom**. The dialectics of this struggle – which is partly played out in competing understandings about the *trope of Karbala* – continues to unfold and will have an important bearing on Shiite communities across Pakistan.

Lastly, the issue of security is deemed extremely vital, given the spate of violence against Shiites in Pakistan. For extremist Sunni groups, every Shiite is a potential target. In many cases the Shiite as a target can be identified on the basis of his/her name and artefacts of religious symbols carried by them. The Shiite communities all over Pakistan bear the brunt of this indiscriminate violence. In places like Parachinar, there is no let up in the violence against Shiites for years. Killings in Dera Ismail Khan go unnoticed because of lack of media reporting and general lack of security in the region. A lull in the bombings of Hazara residential areas in Quetta is temporary as those perpetrating violence are not brought to justice. Gilgit remains prone to violence throughout the year. ‘Target killing’ of members of the Shiite community is ubiquitous in Karachi too. More recently, disturbing trends have emerged in Punjab and rural Sindh as well. In case of latter, mushrooming of madrassas belonging

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to more radical Sunni groups has heightened the sectarian tensions in areas like Sukkhur and Nawab Shah. Large scale target killing of Shiites used to be a common phenomenon in Punjab during 1990s. The fact that the once defunct **Sipah Sahaba Pakistan** has become active and been allowed to operate – at least in South Punjab – there is a growing sense of fear that the saga of 1990s will be repeated.

Some commentators have suggested that there is a silent agreement between Pakistan’s Punjab-centric military establishment and sectarian militants whereby the militants have been allowed to keep their presence in the marginalized South Punjab which also serves as a happy recruiting ground (for Lashkars) in the most impoverished areas and carry out their actual operations elsewhere in Pakistan. Such an ‘arrangement’ can quickly go out of control as was evident in a recent incident of violence in Rawalpindi on Muharram 10th during the *tazia* procession. In that incident, a mosque and madrasa with links to a radical Sunni group was torched and students lynched. This led to massive unrest in the city and curfew was imposed for a couple of days. Other cities in Punjab also experienced hyper sectarian tensions. This incident calls for a more nuanced understanding, an understanding that may help us get to the root of the violence which rocked Rawalpindi rather than simply analyzing it along essentialized Sunni and Shiite identities. **This is what I have tried to achieve in this article by advocating a move away from singularity of identity and emphasizing the variations within the Shiite communities, coupled with a focus on socio-economic milieu to explain factors that contribute to sectarian violence.**

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Ali Khan Mahmudabad

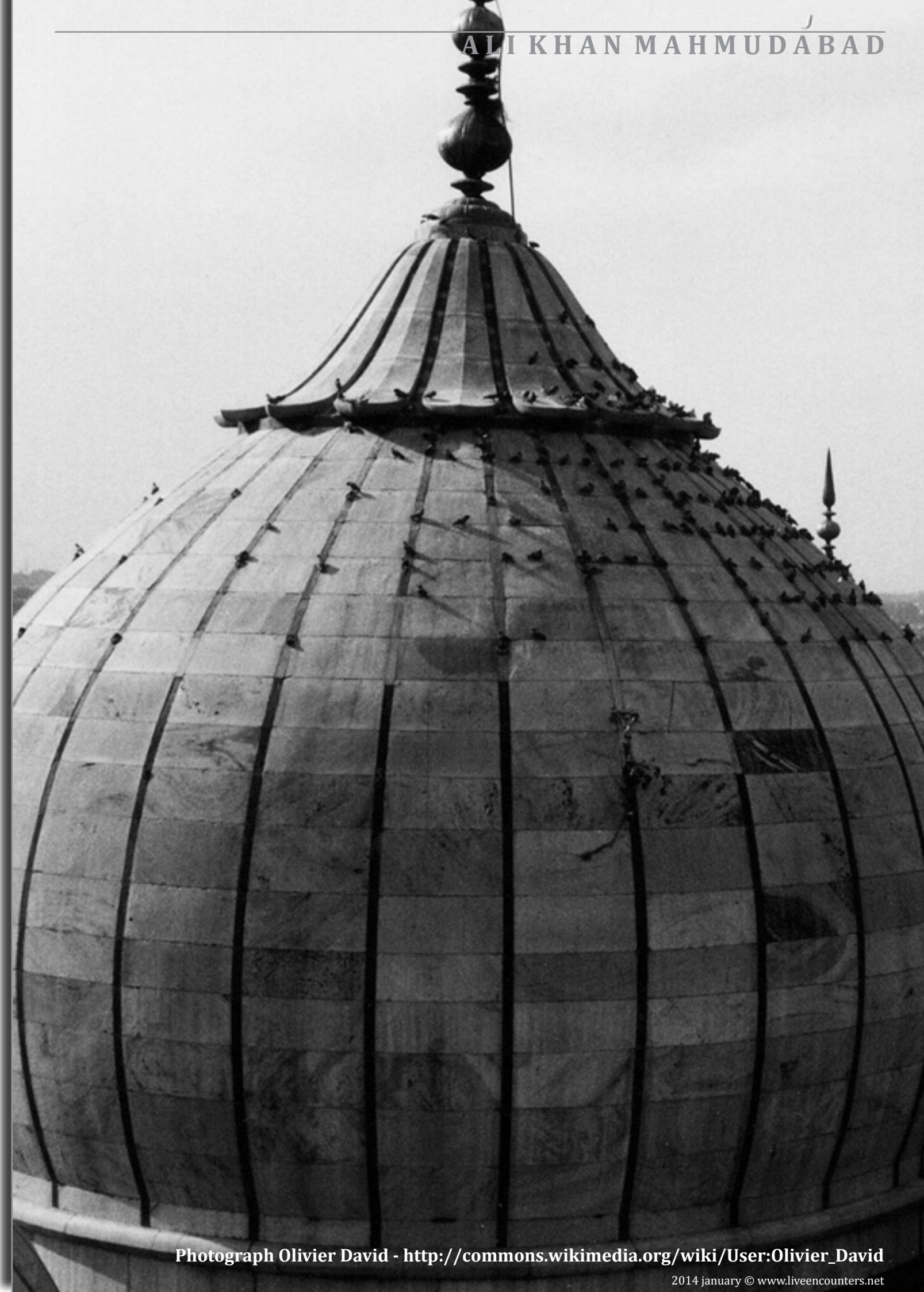
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Shia-Sunni Relations in India

Recent analyses of Shia-Sunni relations have tended to place these two groups in an intractable, binary and black and white opposition. Although a theological and later jurisprudential divide has existed virtually since the inception of Islam, the use of these overarching labels as homogenous categories reflects current political and social exigencies more than historical reality. As a survey of recent news from around the world would illustrate violent confrontations in countries such as **Pakistan, Bahrain, Iraq** are increasing and in other countries, like **Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Malaysia** and **Egypt** where the Shia are in smaller minority, there are often the victim of draconian state policies. There are very few places in the world where Sunnis are ruled by a Shia majority and Iran is an exception where, despite a constitution the rights of Sunnis to freedom of worship amongst other things, there are reports that there is active effort by **the state apparatus of preventing Sunnis** from acting on these rights.

Although some scholars, especially those who have religious or political pre-commitments, tend towards a teleological analysis of the Shia-Sunni 'divide,' as it is often simplistically called, this form of enquiry does less to try and understand the differences and more to exacerbate tensions. The relationship between Shias and Sunnis in India is one that cannot be addressed in these absolute terms as on their own these categories have little meaning. It is important to state here that the term Shi'a, for the purposes of this paper will refer to *ithna'ashari* or twelver Shias as appose to Ismailis, Zaidis and other sub-sects. Similarly, the term Sunni will be used judiciously because popularly speaking many Sunnis categorise themselves as Deobandis, Barelvīs, Sufis, Hanafis, Ahl-e Hadith, Wahabis and Salafis which in turn determines their view of Shias. Furthermore, for various historical reasons that shall be discussed the paper shall focus mostly on Northern India and particularly on the state of Uttar Pradesh.

Before embarking on a discussion of the present situation, it is necessary to provide a brief historical overview of the context in which tensions emerged, existed and were exacerbated.



It was in the 19th century that a seminary was set up in a sleepy town of Northern India called Deoband. Amongst the prominent founders of the Madrassa were Qasim Nanotwi (1833-1880) and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (1829-1905). The school, founded in the wake of decline of the Mughal Empire, increasing British control and a perceived threat to an 'authentic Islam,' has been variously described as following various Sufi schools and was originally an apolitical way of catering to the everyday needs of Muslims.

A troubled past

For the purposes of our paper it is perhaps best to begin in the nineteenth century in North India as it was around this period that many of the ideas, which are still found in Madrassa or seminary curriculums today were articulated and formed. Although many tracts have been written against the Shia [1] and counters have also been written by the Shia, one of the most famous polemical works was written by Shah Abdul Aziz Dehlavi (1745-1823) called *Tuhfa-e Ithnashariyya*. The book aimed at providing a theological refutation of what it perceived to be Shia beliefs and practices. An in depth critique of the book was later written by Sayyed Hamid Hussain Musavi (1830-1880) called *Abaqat al-Anwaar fi Imamat al-Aimmat al-Athaar*.

Dehlavi was the son of Shah Walilullah (1703-1762), regarded as a great reformer of the eighteenth century, who spent 14 years studying the Islamic sciences in Medina. One of his students was Sheikh Abu Tahir Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Kurani al-Madani who taught him amongst other things the works of Taqiuddin ibn Taimiyya (1263-1328) who was a vociferous critic of the Shia. [2] Around the same time Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, the ideological progenitor of what is now popularly referred to as Wahabism, studied the Islamic sciences in Medina with a Sindhi (North Indian) Naqshbandi [3] scholar who belonged to the Shafi school of jurisprudence, Mohmmad Hayat al-Sindi. He was also a student of ibn Ibrahim al-Kurani and a great admirer of ibn Taimiyya's works. Wahabism [4] as it developed adopted an inflexible and extreme position against all those who did not agree with its teaching including Sufis and of course the Shia who became one of its main targets.

It was in the 19th century that a seminary was set up in a sleepy town of Northern India called Deoband. Amongst the prominent founders of the Madrassa were Qasim Nanotwi (1833-1880) and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (1829-1905). The school, founded in the wake of decline of the Mughal Empire, increasing British control and a perceived threat to an 'authentic Islam,' has been variously described as following various Sufi schools and was originally an apolitical way of catering to the everyday needs of Muslims. One of the first *fatwas* given by the seminary was about the *takfir* of Shia in other words declaring them to be non-Muslim. *Takfir*, which as we shall see continues to be a problem today, is from the root of the Arabic word K-F-R which literally means to cover or hide something, thus implying that although someone might not be ostensibly a believer they do nonetheless have truth albeit hidden within them. Normally the word kafir is translated as infidel or non-believer and is used as such in popular usage. During this initial years theological debates or munazaras were very common amongst 'Sunni' and 'Shia' scholars and indeed Gangohi wrote and published a book called *Hidayatush Shia* in 1871, replying to an advertisement and ten questions which were originally intended for such a debate.

Educated Shias and Sunnis would be found at the courts of various Muslim rulers and while the Mughal court and the Nizam's court in Hyderabad had many leading Shia ministers, the court of the Shia Nawabs of Awadh had high-ranking Sunnis. This of course did not mean that theological differences were not highlighted and debated but the logic of politics and power often meant that these issues had dimensions that were not driven solely by a sectarian logic.

With the onset of new technologies, especially those of printing and communication, debates between Shias and Sunnis tended to become more public and arguments and counter-arguments were often carried in journals and magazines. Although there was much shared culture amongst the Shias, Sunnis and even Hindus and this was even commented upon by Abdul Halim Sharar who wrote that no one could tell the difference between Shias and Sunnis in Lucknow at the end of the nineteenth century, sectarian fissures were always in the background. Much of the shared culture revolved around ritual practices of Muharram, which was the annual commemoration of the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson at the battle of Karbala. For instance the Sunni Raja of Naanpara patronised Muharram and especially the reading of elegies in Memory of Imam Hussain. This patronage was often also offered by many Hindu rulers, most famously the Maharajas of Baroda and Gwalior. At a more popular level, Sunnis participated in Muharram ceremonies and in a town like Allahabad 122 of the 220 *tazias*, or replicas of the shrine of Imam Hussain in Karbala (Iraq), were built and carried in the processions by Sunnis.

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Trans-national Unity and local fissure

Towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century many prominent members of the ulama or scholars and many Sufi spiritual leaders did not take an antagonistic stand against the Shia and indeed in many instances there was active support and cooperation between the two. Allamah Shibli Nomani, Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi, Maulana Hasrat Mohani and many others are prominent examples. Interestingly, often the unity, however temporary, arose from events taking place outside India. The Italian invasion of Libya, the Balkan wars, the Russian invasion of Iran, the Cawnpore Mosque controversy, and then the 1st World War and Turkey's position in it, all led to a political atmosphere in India which indirectly led to solidarity between Sunnis and Shias. As a British government intelligence briefing put it, a worldview was being shaped amongst Muslims that these matters were a contest between 'Muhammedans and non-Muhammedans.'

In response to the destruction of the various mausoleums, shrines and other religious sites by the Saudi ruler Abdul Aziz ibn Mohammad ibn Saud, a relative of Mohammad ibn Abdul Wahhab's descendents through marriage, Maulana Abdul Bari, and a prominent participant in national politics in India, Maulana Hasrat Mohani and many others formed an organisation called the *Anjuman-e Khuddam-e Haramain* or the organisation of the servants of the two shrines. Wahabi sponsored destruction of holy sites, which were not only sacred for the Shia but for many Sufis too, started much earlier and the 1802 destruction of Karbala and the slaughter of many of its inhabitants was one such event.

Trans-national Unity and local fissure (Contd...)

So for instance in 1912 in a meeting in the wake of the bombing of Imam Reza's shrine in Mashad by the Russian, Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi, a prominent Sunni scholar, Maulana Nasir Hussain, a eminent Shia scholar and many other notable Shias and Sunnis came together at Victoria Park in Lucknow in order to register their protest against this assault on Islam. This show of unity however momentary was noticed and commented upon by Director of Criminal Intelligence and warranted an urgent letter sent to the Home Office in London.

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Interestingly, Karbala, as a symbol for Muslims of a powerful tyranny being opposed by a small yet righteous minority, became a very popular feature of the writings of Sunnis who were participating in the struggle against the colonial powers. For example Maulana Mohammad Ali 'Jauhar' composed a number of poems, elegies and dirges [7] in memory of Imam Hussain and in his autobiography wrote of Karbala as "the greatest tragedy in Islamic history...mourned to this day throughout the Islamic world by Sunni no less than Shiah, the 'partisan' of Ali." Other scholars, politicians, journalists and poets like Shibli Nomani, Zafar Ali Khan and Allamah Muhammad Iqbal amongst many others also utilised Karbala as a way to galvanise Muslims against the colonial government. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Shias and Sunnis often came together to create political and literary organisations and indeed united in their defense of preserving the status of the Urdu language. Indeed the first deputation of Indian Muslims who wanted to convey Muslim grievances to the British government went to Simla in 1906 and was a mixture of both Shias and Sunnis and was headed by the Agha Khan, an Ismaili.

Despite acts of unity in the face of what was viewed as trans-national injustice against all 'Muslims', a somewhat different situation existed on the ground as far as local issues were concerned. The nineteenth century already saw the outbreak of Sunni-Shia riots in urban and semi-urban areas. In one of the early openly sectarian acts in Lucknow, some Sunnis decided to create their own distinct Karbala in Lucknow in 1906 opposite the existing one. [8] The Sunnis then stepped up the practice

The instances of Sunni-Shia agitations and riots are too numerous to recount in detail but the 1930s saw a particularly vicious round of fighting. 1938-39 saw widespread riots in Lucknow which had been initially catalysed by official suggestion to ban Madh-e Sahabah processions in 1935. Following the elections in 1937, many parts of the United Provinces in North India saw sectarian violence and this was in large part fanned by people like Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani (1879-1957), principal of the Deoband seminary and an ardent 'nationalist,' Maulvi Abdul Shakoor Lucknawi, Maulvi Zafarul Mulk, Allamah Mahriqi and many others.

of Madh-e Sahabah, or praise of the companions of the Prophets companions, some of who have traditionally been regarded by Shias as having usurped the place of Ali as the rightful inheritor of the Caliphate after the Prophets death. The Shias responded by public tabarra, or the cursing of the first three Caliphs and other figures that are venerated by the Sunnis. In response to this the secretary of the Madh-e Sahabah Committee Zafarul Mulk, decided to label the Muharram processions as bidat or innovations that must be countered. Thus, in this period an theological divide was further deepened by the fact that Karbala, a shared symbol of unity in the face of colonial oppression, became a the very object of contention.

Although the world of high politics continued to see the cooperation of Shias and Sunnis, the first quarter of the twentieth century also saw the mushrooming of sectarian organisations. [9] Although there has been persecution, reprisal, theological debate and even animosity, the scale of Shia-Sunni violence on a popular level increased exponentially in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Interestingly in this period as well as all the way up to partition many of the stalwarts of the Muslim League were Shias. Indeed the president of the League and eventually the 'founding father' of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, was a Twelver Khoja. [10] However, despite this many Shia organisations saw the League as a 'Sunni junta.' Meanwhile the Congress drew support from the Deoband and Nadwatul Ulama and although many people have attempted to explain these two organisation's support for the Congress as proof of their nationalism, it would perhaps be equally correct that their support was driven by their desire to propagate their message trans-nationally and to consolidate support in India so as not to lose the power of numbers. [11]

The instances of Sunni-Shia agitations and riots are too numerous to recount in detail but the 1930s saw a particularly vicious round of fighting. 1938-39 saw widespread riots in Lucknow which had been initially catalysed by official suggestion to ban *Madh-e Sahabah* processions in 1935. Following the elections in 1937, many parts of the United Provinces in North India saw sectarian violence and this was in large part fanned by people like Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani (1879-1957), principal of the Deoband seminary and an ardent 'nationalist,' Maulvi Abdul Shakoor Lucknawi, Maulvi Zafarul Mulk, Allamah Mahriqi and many others. Around this time, the Sunni press also produced a huge amount of material about the heresies surrounding Shia practice and although polemical literature has been part of the Shia-Sunni dynamic for many centuries, a renewed emphasis was placed on not only the flawed theology of the Shia but also the un-Islamic bodily practices and rituals that they ascribed to.

This was met by an equally forceful response by Shia scholars who wrote books, pamphlets and tracts repudiating these allegations. Maulana Syed Ali Naqvi, a member of the Ghufuranmaab family of Lucknow and leading Shia scholar wrote a number of works in defense of azadari, the ritual remembrance of

The period after partition also led to the consolidation of the power of Deoband and the Nadwatul Ulama as many Sufi khanqaahs and institutions suffered either because of the lack economic means or, as was the case of Firangi Mahal in Lucknow, the spiritual heads moved to Pakistan. Although it is important to state that there is no consolidated Muslim political front in India, there are certain national apex bodies that claim to be representative of all Muslims, regardless of sect.

Trans-national Unity and local fissure (Contd...)

Karbala, in the 1930s. Despite this polemical divide, some Barelvis and many Sufis, because of their veneration of the Prophets family and their ideological affinity to Ali ibn Abi Talib continued to act as balancing forces and the *khaanqaahs*, religious seats and *dargahs*, shrines, of the Sufis contributed to this trend particularly in rural areas.

Although leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad from the Congress tried to resolve these differences, most of the time a divide and rule policy was adopted whereby concession were given to one group and then the other. The renewed push for Muslim Nationalism by the League after the 1940s meant that for a short time sectarian differences were set aside but as became increasingly obvious in the aftermath of partition, this was a fleeting moment.

Deepening Divides

After independence and the abolition of the zamindari [12] system in the United Provinces, the Muslims and in particular the Shias were deeply affected. Suddenly older forms of patronage disappeared and a relatively prosperous and powerful group lost influence. The 1960s and 1970s saw a huge spike in Shia-Sunni violence and most of this centered on the public acts of *tabarra* and *Madh-e Sahabah*. In response to public agitations the government would often ban public processions of both groups. Interestingly, often these riots took place before or immediately after elections and various political parties, in particular the Congress, Jan Sangh and the Janata Party have.

The period after partition also led to the consolidation of the power of Deoband and the Nadwatul Ulama as many Sufi khanqaahs and institutions suffered either because of the lack economic means or, as was the case of Firangi Mahal in Lucknow, the spiritual heads moved to Pakistan. Although it is important to state that there is no consolidated Muslim political front in India, there are certain national apex bodies that claim to be representative of all Muslims, regardless of sect. The **All India Muslim Personal Law Board** (AIMPLB) and the **All India Muslim Majlis-e Mushawarat** (AIM-MM) have both Shia and Sunni members. Recently in 2005 the **All India Shia Personal Law Board** (AISPB) was created in an effort to be truly representative of Shias but this move seems to not only represent a move against the Deobandi dominance of the AIMPLB but partly is also reflective of the political divisions amongst Shia leaders.

Importantly whereas trans-national issues had once acted as unifiers, in the period after 1947 the rise of the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia led to an increase in their **influence in India** and the 1979

The rituals and bodily practices of Shias continue to also be the focus of much of the criticism and often many points actually represent perceived beliefs rather than those that the Shia actually prescribe to. Much of this material is as much against Shias as those Sunnis who are seen to have been corrupted by Shia practice. Thus these fatawa are also given against those Sunnis who are not in line with the Deoband position.

revolution of Iran, especially given the rise of the Ba'athists in Iraq and the waning of Shia power there, led to new power dynamics and in turn led to a blurring between sectarian difference and the competing vested political interests of various countries. The only exception to this has been a united opposition to Israel by both Shias and Sunnis. The flow of labour between India and many Arab countries not only led to the slow creation of a middle class in India but also meant that many Sunnis carried back with them ideologies that exacerbate sectarian divides as well as the financial means to put these into practice. This is true not only at the individual level but also institutionally where many seminaries and mosques are either being taken over by Wahabis and Deobandis.

Although there are serious theological differences between the Deobandis and Barelvis, the latter have slowly also become anti-Shia in their outlook. Certain Sufi groups continue to act as buffers and their **scared spaces** continue to act as binding forces of harmony and toleration. In recent times because of ease of communication and access to information preachers from outside India like Tahirul Qadri, a Pakistani Sufi, have been able to act as bulwarks against the perceived rise in influence of the Deoband. On the other hand, the Internet has also facilitated access to information and the rise of sectarian and confessional websites, YouTube videos and Facebook groups have not only led to the exacerbation of further divides but has also facilitated the propagation of many false stereotypes which in turn have entrenched prejudice. Older seminaries and theological schools have also taken advantage of the Internet and now Deoband has an online department for giving *fatwas* called **Darul Itfa**.

As was mentioned earlier, one of the first *fatwas* declaring Shias to be *kafir* was propagated by the Deoband in the 19th century and this fatwa has been re-issued a number of times since. The website of the **Darul Itfa** contains a number of pronouncements in which Shias are denounced as heretical, albeit with enough **theological caveats** to render a technical reading of the fatwa as non-inflammatory.

However, at a popular level when inciting public opinion or perpetuating stereotypes, caveats and nuances are of course useless in the face of blind bigotry. The **rituals** and **bodily practices** of Shias continue to also be the focus of much of the criticism and often many points actually represent perceived beliefs rather than those that the Shia actually prescribe to. Much of this material is as much against Shias as those Sunnis who are seen to have been corrupted by Shia practice. Thus these fatawa are also **given against those Sunnis** who are not in line with the Deoband position. Amongst the Shias, there are also a number of **factions and divisions** that are nearly always caused by political reasons though unlike the Sunni divisions they do not represent any theological and religious divide.

Today India has a population of about 180 million Muslims of which about 15-20% are Shia. The fact that the Muslims are already a minority, and therefore the Shias a double-minority, has meant that many of the sectarian problems that have taken root in Pakistan have been avoided in India so far. The kind of targeted killings and assassinations of Shias that have become a marker of Sunni-Shia relations in Pakistan have not taken place in India although the ideological influence of seminaries like Deoband have meant that its influence spreads beyond India.

Trans-national Unity and local fissure (Contd...)

Just like in the period before partition most of the Shia-Sunni violence has focused on the contestation of using **public spaces** for religious ritual and these occur all over India but tend to be particularly focused around the area of Uttar Pradesh and more recently **Kashmir**. Of course sporadic fighting has also taken place in other places like Bombay and Hyderabad. This violence is not only political in its nature, where various political parties want to divide the Muslim vote, but often also has **economic and business rivalry** at its core. Of course there is always a religious undertone and one of the more interesting facts of the Shia-Sunni divide is the way in which often there is a conscious effort by the Sunnis to either outright condemn Shia rituals and belief or to incorporate them within its own frameworks and therefore claim ownership.

Thus one of the ways in which Muharram has been countered by certain Sunni groups is by having an annual commemoration of the *Shuhadaye Islam* or martyrs of Islam which include figures which the Sunnis venerate and which is held to coincide with the dates of Muharram.

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However these practices are also being slowly countered as trans-national and local religious authorities seek to consolidate their power and draw clear-cut distinctions between those they deem to be real Muslims and those who fall beyond the pale of Islam. The division then is not just amongst Shias and Sunnis but also within Sunnis as they struggle to determine who represents the most authentic form of Islam.

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Foot Notes

[1] Sheikh Ahmed Sirhindi, one of stalwarts of the Naqshbandi silsilah of Sufis, wrote a famous tract against the Shia in the 16th century.

[2] Over the course of time the terms used to describe the Shia have varied and amongst others rawafid (pl. of rafidi) and ghulaat have been often used and more recently in the sub-continent ahl-e tashee is used by many non-Shias, perhaps as a counter to Ahl-e Sunnah which is used to describe the Sunnis.

[3] The Naqshbandi Sufis trace their spiritual lineage to Abu Bakr unlike most other Sufis who trace their spiritual lineage to Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, who is regarded as the first Imam by the Shia.

[4] Wahabism in India is often thought to have arrived with Syed Ahmad of Rae Bareilly (1786-1931), followers of whom would later call themselves Bareilvis, who also went to the Arabian peninsula but he had already been preceded by Ghulam Rasool of Benares, later known as Maulvi Abdul Haq, who had spent many years in the Najd as oppose to Medina and Mecca before returning to India and was a teacher of Syed Ahmad's disciple Wilayat Ali. Syed Ahmad was also a student of Abdul Aziz Dehlavi. Abdul Aziz was the first person to declare India as *dar-ul harb*, the abode of war, and Delhi as a bastion of *kufr* or disbelief and paganism.

[5] A Sufi scholar from the famous Firangi Mahal family and founder of the *Madrassay-e Nizamia* in 1908.

[6] An Indian Shia, Mirza Abu Talib Khan traveled from India to Asia, Africa and Europe between 1799 and 1803 and described in great detail the sacking of Karbala and details of the city at that time. The original Persian travelogue has been translated into English.

[7] For examples see, Syed Hashim Raza, 'Gems of Jauhar' in S. M., Haq (ed.), *Mohamed Ali: life and words* (Pakistan Historical Society, Karachi, 1978), pp. 154-161.

[8] Karbalas were and continue to be places where processions would culminate and the *tazias*, replicas of shrines and the papier-mâché *tabuts*, replicas of the bodies of martyrs, would be buried there.

[9] The *Anjuman-e Sadr-us Sudoor*, the Shia Conference, The *Anjuman-e Tanzimul Momineen*, the *Madrassatul Waizeen*, founded by the Raja of Mahmudabad, the *Imamia Mission* set up by Maulana Ali Naqi and the *Anjuman-e Jafariya* were some examples of the Shia organisations and institutions. Some like the *Tanzimul Momineen* were set up in response to Sunni organisations, in this case the *Anjuman-e Tahaffuz-e Millat*.

[10] The term *khoja* denotes someone who is ethnically from the state of Gujarat. There is a large population of both Twelver and Ismaili *khojas* both in India and around the world.

[11] The activities and works of Ubaidullah Sindhi, a Deobandi alumnus, bear particular testament to the trans-national vision that the seminary aspired to.

[12] Small and large landholdings by feudal and semi-feudal families.

[13] Plural of *Fatwa*.

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[LINK](#)



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Sectarian violence: Pakistan's greatest security threat?

Executive summary

Pakistan is experiencing a sharp resurgence in sectarian violence. Most frequently, such violence involves clashes between members of the two main sects of Islam – Sunnis and Shias – but violent incidents between the Barelvi and Deobandi sub-sects of Sunni Islam are also on the rise. The heightened frequency and brutality of Sunni-Shia clashes threaten national security – Pakistan's is the second-largest Shia population in the world after Iran – as well as bilateral relations with Iran and the regional power dynamic vis-à-vis Saudi Arabian influence.

The current resurgence of sectarian violence can be traced to the rise of the Pakistani Taliban in the mid-2000s and this organisation's growing ties with militant sectarian organisations such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi; as such, sectarian violence is arguably the most dangerous fallout for Pakistan of the U.S.-led war against terrorism in neighbouring Afghanistan. Sectarian violence has spread across the country and is increasingly directed at disenfranchised targets such as Balochistan's Hazaras (an ethnic minority) and worshippers at Sufi shrines. The government's continuing failure to dismantle militant groups, enforce bans on hate speech and sectarian propaganda, improve the criminal justice system, and reform the madrassas has allowed sectarianism to thrive. In the absence of a comprehensive state crackdown, sectarian violence threatens to worsen Pakistan's fragile security situation.

Introduction

Violations of the universal right to practise religion are systematic and widespread in Pakistan. Religious minorities face political, social, and economic marginalisation, and are formally persecuted by the state through discriminatory legislation such as blasphemy laws. Prejudiced public school curricula describe minority beliefs and practices as heretical, while extremist organisations issue edicts against religious minorities and circulate pamphlets maligning their beliefs with impunity. These and similar practices foster an atmosphere of intolerance in which religiously motivated violence is endemic. There are two categories of such violence in Pakistan: inter-faith and sectarian. The former involves attacks against members of non-Muslim faiths, particularly Ahmadis, Hindus and Christians, who along with Parsis, Sikhs and Buddhists account for fewer than 4% of the 180 million-strong population. Interfaith violence largely comprises vigilante attacks by individuals or mobs in the wake of unsubstantiated accusations against members of non-Muslim minorities of their blaspheming against Islam.

Pakistan's is the second-largest Shia community in the world after Iran, widespread sectarian violence threatens to destabilise the country and the region. Because sectarian affiliations are ubiquitous and deeply felt, this kind of violence has the potential to involve large swathes of the population and spur radicalisation. Sectarian strife is also likely to further fragment Pakistan's polity, already divided by language and ethnicity.

Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Shia Muslims, including those in Pakistan, felt empowered. At the same time, Pakistan-based Deobandi Sunni organisations and madrassas began to receive weapons and funding from Saudi Arabia and the U.S. in order to provide support and training for Sunni Afghan fighters in the context of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, these fighters formed anti-Shia militant groups based in the southern districts of Pakistan's Punjab province.

Sectarian violence, on the other hand, unfolds between members of different Islamic sects. Most-frequently, such violence involves clashes between members of the two main sects of Islam, Sunnis and Shias. Pakistan is a Sunni majority country, but Shias account for between 15% and 20% of the population. **[1]** Violent incidents are also common between the Barelvi and Deobandi sub-sects of Sunni Islam. Approximately 50% of Pakistanis identify as Barelvis, but Deobandis – who account for approximately 20% of the population, follow a more orthodox version of Islam and consider certain Barelvi practices un-Islamic – exert a significant influence over Pakistan's security situation. **[2]** This is because most extremist militant organisations in Pakistan are Deobandi and more are run by Deobandis. Sectarian violence in Pakistan manifests variously as tit-for-tat targeted killings of members of rival sects; suicide bombings or gun attacks against another sect's mosques, funerals or religious processions; and attacks against sectarian targets using explosives.

Since Pakistan's is the second-largest Shia community in the world after Iran, widespread sectarian violence threatens to destabilise the country and the region. Because sectarian affiliations are ubiquitous and deeply felt, this kind of violence has the potential to involve large swathes of the population and spur radicalisation. Sectarian strife is also likely to further fragment Pakistan's polity, already divided by language and ethnicity. Moreover, the growing power, networks and resources of sectarian organisations will lead to an overall deterioration of Pakistan's already fragile security situation. Given this destabilising potential, this report focuses on the resurgence of sectarian violence in Pakistan and interrogates whether this kind of violence poses one of the greatest threats to the stability of present-day Pakistan.

Background

Sectarian violence was rife in Pakistan in the 1980s and early 1990s. Former military dictator General Ziaul Haq's (governed 1977-1988) policies and legislation aimed at 'Islamising' Pakistan were formulated in accordance with an orthodox version of Sunni Islam, to the exclusion of Sunni Barelvis and Shia Muslims. For example, in 1980 Zia imposed a zakat (wealth tax) and ushr (farming tax) ordinance that contradicted Shia practice and mobilised Pakistan's Shia population for the first time: 100,000 Shias marched on the federal secretariat in Islamabad, forcing the general to repeal the ordinance as it pertained to Shias, but also provoking the ire of hard-line Sunni organisations. Concerned by the Shia show of force, Sunni groups used the Shia refusal to pay an Islamic tax as an opportunity to brand members of the minority grouping as heretics and apostates, a narrative that still persists among extremist Deobandi Sunni groups.

These emerging sectarian tensions within Pakistan were exacerbated by geopolitical trends. Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Shia Muslims, including those in Pakistan, felt empowered. At the same time, Pakistan-based Deobandi Sunni organisations and madrassas began to receive weapons and funding from Saudi Arabia and the U.S. in order to provide support and training for Sunni Afghan fighters in the context of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, these fighters formed anti-Shia militant groups based in the southern districts of Pakistan's Punjab province. The region's poverty and chronic underdevelopment, political marginalisation, and stark contrast between wealthy Shia landlords and landless Sunni peasants made it the perfect recruiting ground for extremist sectarian groups.

Owing to these parallel developments, Pakistan witnessed soaring Sunni-Shia sectarian clashes between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s, when up to 4,000 people are estimated to have died in sectarian fighting. **[3]** The country became a battleground in a proxy sectarian war between Saudi Arabia and Iran as the two countries offered financial and logistical support to Sunni and Shia groups, respectively, as part of a wider tussle for influence in the Muslim world. Tough policing in the late-1990s, especially in the urban centres of Karachi and Lahore, led to the collapse of many sectarian organisations. President Pervez Musharraf's decision in 2001-2002 to ban both Sunni and Shia militant groups also temporarily curtailed sectarian violence in Pakistan.

Resurgence of sectarian violence

Since 2007 there has been a sharp resurgence of sectarian violence in Pakistan. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, an online database, there were 631 sectarian incidents in Pakistan between 2007 and 2011 that led to the deaths of over 1,649 people. In 2010, 509 people were killed and 1,170 injured in 57 incidents of sectarian violence. In 2011 the incidence of sectarian violence decreased (203 killed and 297 injured in 30 incidents), only to soar in the first five months of 2012: between January and May 177 people were killed in 51 incidents. **[4]** In keeping with historical trends, the majority of recent violence has occurred between Sunnis and Shias (Shias accounted for 70% of all sectarian deaths between 1985 and 2005). **[5]** That said, intra-sectarian violence between Deobandi and Barelvi Sunnis is also on the rise: hundreds of Barelvi (Sufi) worshippers were killed in more than 70 suicide attacks at shrines between 2005 and 2010. Moreover, two prominent Barelvi leaders were targeted by Deobandi militants in 2009: in June, Mufti Sarfraz Ahmed Naeemi, a senior Barelvi cleric who had repeatedly spoken against the Pakistani Taliban, was killed in a suicide bombing in Lahore; in September, Hamid Saeed Kazmi, then Pakistan's minister for

The current resurgence of sectarian violence – particularly Sunni-Shia clashes – can be traced back to the mid-2000s and is arguably the most dangerous fallout for Pakistan of the U.S.-led war against terrorism in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Resurgence of sectarian violence (Contd...)

religious affairs, was shot by two gunmen. In Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and commercial capital, clashes between extremist Sunni organisations are common – one exchange of fire in the city's Godhra area in September 2011 left eight people dead.

The current resurgence of sectarian violence – particularly Sunni-Shia clashes – can be traced back to the mid-2000s and is arguably the most dangerous fallout for Pakistan of the U.S.-led war against terrorism in neighbouring Afghanistan.

In 2006 Taliban fighters seeking sanctuary in Pakistan's north-western tribal belt exploited decades-old sectarian tensions in the Kurram tribal region and launched attacks against the Parachinar-based Shia tribes. The hardline Deobandi Taliban were ideologically anti-Shia, but their sectarianism had a pragmatic element as well: they needed to access routes into Afghanistan via Kurram that were under the control of local Shias. The Taliban's sustained anti-Shia campaign in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) led to the reconsolidation in north-western Pakistan of Shia extremist groups seeking to defend their community. The resurgence of Shia groups in turn remobilised extremist Sunni organisations that, with support from the Taliban, revived their sectarian mandate across the country.

Main actors

Unlike inter-faith violence, where ordinary members of congregations have been known to mobilise against religious minorities on the prompting of extremist clerics or groups, sectarian violence is largely carried out by members of extremist militant organisations. The following are the main actors currently engaging in sectarian violence in Pakistan:

- **Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ):** The ASWJ is the new name of the banned sectarian group Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). The SSP is an extremist Sunni (Deobandi) militant organisation and has carried out attacks against Shias, whom it believes to be infidels, since 1985. In recent years the SSP has also clashed with Barelvi groups. The group has also developed strong ties with the Pakistani Taliban and sends its recruits to Pakistan's tribal belt for training. The SSP also operates as a political party and its members have been elected to the Pakistani parliament or offered key support to politicians from main stream political parties, especially in the Punjab province. Responding to the recent rise in sectarian violence, the Pakistan government banned the ASWJ in March 2012, although the group remains operational.

The Taliban's sustained anti-Shia campaign in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) led to the reconsolidation in north-western Pakistan of Shia extremist groups seeking to defend their community. The resurgence of Shia groups in turn remobilised extremist Sunni organisations that, with support from the Taliban, revived their sectarian mandate across the country.

- **Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ):** LeJ, an offshoot of the SSP, is an extremist Sunni group that regards Shia Muslims as infidels and is active in sectarian warfare in Karachi, Balochistan and southern Punjab. In 2012 LeJ has focused its sectarian attacks against the ethnically distinct Shia Hazaras of Balochistan. In recent years it has also diversified from its original anti-Shia focus and allied itself with other militant groups in attacks against the Pakistani state and Western interests in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The outlawed group has developed close linkages with the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda, and provides them with weapons, finances and recruits. Intelligence reports have linked LeJ to the assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto in 2007. The group is also accused of a previous assassination attempt against former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and his brother, Shahbaz Sharif, in 1999.

- **Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban):** The Pakistani Taliban is a coalition of FATA based militant groups that seeks to overthrow the Pakistani state and impose Islamic law. The grouping has been waging a campaign of suicide bombings against state security and civilian targets since 2007. In recent years it has provided funding, logistical support, training and sanctuary to militants involved with Deobandi sectarian organisations such as LeJ and the ASWJ, and can thus be credited with the current resurgence in sectarian violence.

- **Sipah-e-Mohamadi Pakistan (SMP):** The SMP was founded in 1993 in an effort to protect Pakistan's Shia community from extremist Sunni militant groups. The group resurfaced in 2008-2009 and is most active in the urban centres of Karachi and Lahore. In addition to engaging in tit-for-tat sectarian killings of LeJ and ASWJ members, the SMP has been recently accused of killing prominent Sunni doctors. Reportedly, the group has previously received support and funding from Iran. Last year, four militants affiliated with the SMP were arrested in connection with a grenade attack against the Saudi Arabian consulate in Karachi in May 2011.

- **Tehrik-e-Jafria Pakistan (TJP):** The TJP is an offshoot of the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqah Jafria, a Shia political party founded in 1979 with the aim of protecting Pakistan's Shia community from General Ziaul Haq's Sunnioriented interpretations of Islamic law and widespread discrimination within army ranks and government departments. The TJP has been banned twice, but continues to operate under different names. Its members primarily organise Shia resistance to Sunni extremism, but have also been involved in sectarian violence.

- **Sunni Tehrik (ST):** The ST sees itself as a political organisation working to defend Barelvi Sunnis against sectarian attacks by Deobandi groups. It is one of the largest and best organised among 4,000 Sunni Barelvi organisations in Karachi, many of which operate within a single neighbourhood.

But resurgent Sunni- Shia violence has a broader geographic base: in recent years, fighting has spread beyond the FATA to include the urban centres of Karachi and Lahore, the south-western Balochistan province (particularly the city of Quetta and Mastung district) and the northern Gilgit-Baltistan region. Owing to the social, ethnic and linguistic diversity of Pakistan's Shia population, sectarian violence has varying dynamics in different parts of the country.

- *Sunni Tehrik (ST):* (Contd...) The ST's militant wing retaliates against sectarian attacks launched primarily by the ASWJ and engages in turf wars to gain control of the mosques of rival sects through land acquisition.
- *Jundullah:* This is a newly formed anti-Shia militant group with ties to the Pakistani Taliban, LeJ and the ASWJ. Jundullah militants have been arrested in connection with a blast at a Shia procession in Karachi in December 2009 that killed 40 people. Because of its ties with the Pakistani Taliban, Jundullah has also launched attacks against state security forces.

Pakistan's current sectarian landscape

Owing to sectarian and class divides among the population, Sunni and Shia extremist groups have traditionally been active in the southern regions of Pakistan's largest province, Punjab. In the mid-2000s many sectarian organisations regrouped with Taliban help in the tribal region along the Pakistani-Afghan border. But resurgent Sunni- Shia violence has a broader geographic base: in recent years, fighting has spread beyond the FATA to include the urban centres of Karachi and Lahore, the south-western Balochistan province (particularly the city of Quetta and Mastung district) and the northern Gilgit-Baltistan region. Owing to the social, ethnic and linguistic diversity of Pakistan's Shia population, sectarian violence has varying dynamics in different parts of the country. The following examples of sectarian violence should be seen as illustrative of the scope, variety and intensity of sectarian dynamics rather than as a comprehensive listing of sectarian incidents.

Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and financial hub, was the worst hit by sectarian violence in 2011, with 36 attacks – roughly 32% of all sectarian incidents recorded in Pakistan – claiming 58 lives.^[6] According to a report by the Criminal Investigation Department, an anti-terrorist police unit, more than half of the 246 terrorists arrested in Karachi between 2001 and 2010 were affiliated with sectarian groups.^[7] The growing presence of sectarian militants in the city led to attacks against Shia religious processions on December 28th 2009 and February 5th 2010 that killed 40 and 25 people, respectively. Tit-for-tat sectarian killings continue on an ongoing basis between extremist Sunni organisations, including the ASWJ, LeJ and Jundullah, and Shia groups such as the SMP. In 2012 militant groups targeted lawyers representing activists of rival sectarian groups – in January alone three Shia lawyers and four lawyers representing members of the ASWJ were assassinated in different shooting incidents. In Balochistan sectarian attacks are directed against the minority Hazara community, whose members are Shia. In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the targeting of Hazaras, starting with the killing of the chairman of the Hazara Democratic Party in January 2009 (in the prior decade,

Sectarian killings in Balochistan rarely target prominent individuals such as doctors, lawyers or leaders of religiopolitical organisations. Instead, the Hazara victims, who have Asian features and are thus easier to identify and target as Shias, hail from lower socioeconomic strata and are primarily targeted while in transit when gunmen open fire on their vehicles. As such, the sectarian violence in Balochistan has an ethnic dimension.

from 1998 onwards up to 700 Hazaras were killed in Balochistan for sectarian reasons).^[8] Last year LeJ claimed responsibility for several brutal attacks against Hazaras: on October 4th, 13 Shia Hazara were dragged off a bus and shot dead; on September 23rd, three Hazara men working at a coalmine outside Quetta were killed; on September 20th, 26 Shia pilgrims travelling to Iran were forced off a bus in Mastung and shot dead in front of their families. The trend of targeting Shia Hazaras has continued unabated in 2012 and 46 people have fallen victim to sectarian killings in the provincial capital of Quetta, primarily in the months of April and May.^[9] On June 28th a bomb attack near Quetta on a bus transporting Shia pilgrims killed 15 people.

The surge in LeJ violence against Hazaras is related to the growing presence of Afghan and Pakistani Taliban militants in Balochistan: the extremist Sunni Taliban have historically been anti-Shia and anti-Hazara, and their financial and operational links with LeJ have bolstered sectarian violence in the province. Unlike in other parts of Pakistan, sectarian killings in Balochistan rarely target prominent individuals such as doctors, lawyers or leaders of religiopolitical organisations. Instead, the Hazara victims, who have Asian features and are thus easier to identify and target as Shias, hail from lower socioeconomic strata and are primarily targeted while in transit when gunmen open fire on their vehicles. As such, the sectarian violence in Balochistan has an ethnic dimension.

In the north of the country the semi-autonomous Gilgit-Baltistan region is also plagued by soaring sectarian violence – nine people died in 21 sectarian incidents in 2011. Sectarian clashes flared there on February 28th 2012 after Jundullah militants forced 18 Shia residents of Gilgit-Baltistan returning from pilgrimage in Iran off their bus and shot them to death. The attack sparked riots in which 22 people were killed, forcing authorities to enforce a three-week curfew. Weeks later, on April 2nd 2012, 14 more people were killed when a grenade attack against an ASWJ protest rally in Chilas sparked sectarian clashes, including the murder of ten Shia bus passengers. The authorities once again responded by imposing a curfew, closing schools and offices, jamming mobile phones, and barring entry to the two main mosques in the area. Gilgit-Baltistan is notable for the fact that sectarian violence is continuing to spread in the region despite strong and prompt responses from local law enforcers government officials and religious leaders.

Meanwhile, intra-sectarian violence between Sunni Deobandis and Barelvis is also geographically scattered. Attacks by Deobandi Taliban militants against Barelvi (Sufi) shrines have been prevalent in – but not limited to – the north-western Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province: in July 2010 suicide bombers attacked Lahore's famous Data Darbar shrine, killing 42 people; in October of the same year suicide bombers also attacked Abdullah Shah Ghazi's shrine in Karachi. Deobandis and Barelvis also engage in gun battles and tit-for-tat targeted killings in Karachi and Lahore.

According to Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs, there are over 18,000 registered madrassas in the country, although the actual number of Islamic schools could be as high as 40,000. Madrassas are run on a strictly sectarian basis and, thanks to the inflow of Saudi funding in the 1980s, the network of Deobandi madrassas has expanded most rapidly...

Why sectarian violence thrives

Although Pakistan's sectarian landscape is growing and linkages among extremist organisations continue to evolve, the main causes underlying sectarian violence have remained consistent since the 1980s:

- *Continuing support for sectarian organisations:* Previously, militant sectarian groups enjoyed financial and operational support from Pakistan's security establishment in the context of asymmetric warfare against India. They also received funding from foreign governments – primarily Iran and Saudi Arabia – as proxies in a regional tussle for political and ideological dominance. In recent years the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda have provided extremist Sunni organisations such as LeJ and the ASWJ with funding, sanctuary, logistical support and training. The current resurgence of sectarian violence can be largely attributed to the growing nexus between the Taliban and sectarian militants.
- *Failings of the criminal justice system:* Sectarian violence thrives owing to the persistent failure to arrest and prosecute militants involved with sectarian organisations. Pakistan's criminal justice system has dismal conviction rates: 75% of alleged terrorists are acquitted by the anti-terrorism courts. [10] There are many reasons for this low conviction rate: the politicisation of Pakistan's police force; poor evidence-gathering and investigation techniques, especially pertaining to forensic evidence; and a chronic backlog of cases in the criminal justice system, which delays trials and leads to the mismanagement of police investigations. Poor security provisions for judges, public prosecutors and eyewitnesses also lead to acquittals, because people are intimidated by militant organisations into delivering favourable verdicts on behalf of these organisations' activists. In a particularly egregious case, the Supreme Court failed to find evidence of LeJ leader Malik Ishaq's involvement in the murders of dozens of Shias. He was released from jail in July 2011 and has since participated in several public rallies, where he has incited violence against Shias.
- *Lack of madrassa reform:* According to Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs, there are over 18,000 registered madrassas in the country, although the actual number of Islamic schools could be as high as 40,000. Madrassas are run on a strictly sectarian basis and, thanks to the inflow of Saudi funding in the 1980s, the network of Deobandi madrassas has expanded most rapidly: in 2002, out of a registered total of 10,000 madrassas, 7,000 were Deobandi, 1,585 Bareilvi and 419 Shia. [11] In 2002 the government launched a voluntary madrassa registration programme that sought to improve the state's oversight of madrassa curricula and activities, but according to the International Centre for Religion and Diplomacy, only 10% of previously unregistered madrassas have complied. [12]

It is also likely that future sectarian violence, much like current violence in Balochistan, will increasingly be directed at ordinary citizens who are not members of militant groups – as cycles of violence escalate, tit-for-tat killings will be less discriminatory in their targets. Judges, lawyers and others in the criminal justice system who are in a position to prosecute sectarian militants will also remain at high risk.

Mushrooming madrassas intensify sectarian divisions by highlighting theological differences, denouncing the beliefs and practices of rival sects, and disseminating propaganda materials that fuel cycles of sectarian violence. Beyond the state's purview, madrassas also collect funds on behalf of militant sectarian groups under the guise of charitable donations and provide key venues for sectarian militants to network and coordinate attacks.

- *Political clout of sectarian organisations:* Since the 1980s the state's use of extremist organisations as proxies to execute foreign policy goals vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan has promoted aggressive competition among different Muslim sects for official patronage in the form of government hand-outs and political favours. To better position themselves to access state resources, sectarian leaders have strived to make inroads into political constituencies and cultivate political candidates. As a result, civilian politicians are held hostage by the political clout of sectarian organisations, which have become key to winning constituencies, particularly in the Punjab. Throughout the 1990s the ASWJ (then the SSP) supported candidates fielded by the mainstream Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN). In 1995 an SSP leader was appointed as a provincial minister in Punjab because the PPP needed SSP support to achieve a majority. More recently, in 2010 Punjab's provincial law minister and PMLN representative Rana Sanaullah campaigned for a local election in Punjab's Jhang district alongside Maulana Muhammad Ahmed Ludhianvi, the leader of the ASWJ. Politicians consistently fail to clamp down on militant sectarian organisations for fear of losing the essential political support such organisations guarantee.

Conclusion and future scenarios

Sectarian violence poses a grave threat to Pakistan's security and stability, primarily because conflict between mainstream religious communities threatens to involve and radicalise greater swathes of the Pakistani population than any other kind of militancy. This development would be in keeping with historical trends, whereby Shias and Bareilvi Sunnis have responded to the attacks of extremist Deobandi groups by organising armed resistance. In the absence of a comprehensive state crackdown on militant sectarian groups, senior police officers in major cities such as Karachi, Lahore and Peshawar expect sectarian tensions to escalate across Pakistan. It is also likely that future sectarian violence, much like current violence in Balochistan, will increasingly be directed at ordinary citizens who are not members of militant groups – as cycles of violence escalate, tit-for-tat killings will be less discriminatory in their targets. Judges, lawyers and others in the criminal justice system who are in a position to prosecute sectarian militants will also remain at high risk. In addition to the widening scope of sectarian violence, Pakistan is likely to see sectarian organisations embrace broader mandates and launch attacks against

Further reading

Hassan Abbas, “Shiism and sectarian conflict in Pakistan: identity politics, Iranian influence and tit-for-tat violence”, Occasional Paper Series, Washington, DC, Combating Terrorism Center, 2010.

Khaled Ahmed, Sectarian War: Pakistan’s Sunni-Shia Violence and Its Links to the Middle East, London, Oxford University Press, 2011.

Conclusion and future scenarios (Contd...)

the Pakistani government, state security forces and Western targets. As described above, LeJ has already extended its anti-Shia mandate to participate in ‘global jihad’ as a result of its growing ties to the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda. Such a trend could seriously threaten Pakistan’s overall security situation and destabilise the country to dangerous levels.

Sectarian violence in Pakistan could also affect regional stability. Closer cooperation between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani LeJ in an effort to target Shia Hazaras could facilitate militant cooperation across the Durand Line and, in turn, complicate Pakistani-Indian ties, which are already threatened by the prospect of proxy warfare in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops in 2014.

Continued attacks against Pakistan’s Shia population could stoke tensions between Pakistan and Iran, threatening bilateral cooperation on a gas pipeline project and various counter-terrorism initiatives. There is also a danger of Pakistan once again becoming the battleground in a proxy clash between Saudi Arabia and Iran, particularly if Tehran continues to pursue a nuclear weapons programme. There is already evidence of a regional dimension to Pakistan’s sectarian crisis: the grenade attack against Karachi’s Saudi Arabian consulate in May 2011 was seen as an attempt to spark Sunni-Shia strife across the Middle East.

Recommendations

Given the destabilising potential of sectarian violence, the Pakistani government should implement the following recommendations with immediate effect:

- strictly enforce existing bans on militantsectarian organisations;
- train and equip special police force units to track, investigate and arrest members of sectarian organisations;
- provide special security for judges and public prosecutors involved in the trials of suspected sectarian militants;
- track and eliminate sources of funding for sectarian organisations, especially those originating outside Pakistan;

Suroosh Irfani, “Pakistan’s sectarian violence: between the ‘Arabist shift’ and Indo-Persian culture”, Satu Limaye, Robert Wirsing & Mohan Malik, eds, Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia, Honolulu, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004.

Raza Rumi, “The rise of violent sectarianism”, *Extremism Watch: Mapping Conflict Trends in Pakistan, 2010-11*, Islamabad, Jinnah Institute, 2011.

- introduce specific legislation outlawing sectarianism, e.g. Gilgit-Baltistan’s Code of Conduct (May 2012), which bans religious leaders from promoting sectarianism and supporting sectarian organisations, offers a sound model;**[13]**
- strictly enforce all laws against hate speech, prevent religious leaders from using mosque loud-speakers for any purpose other than to deliver the call to prayer, and suspend the licences of publications and pamphlets of sectarian organisations that promote sectarian agendas;
- pursue the policy of madrassa registration and curricula reform, including purging madrassas’ curricula and public school textbooks of all sectarian material, especially content that maligns the beliefs and practices of specific sects; and
- investigate all government officials and politicians accused of maintaining links with sectarian organisations, and disqualify political parties and politicians found guilty of such associations from participating in elections.

Foot Notes

[1] ICG (International Crisis Group), The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan, Asia Report no. 95, April 18th 2005, **[2]** GlobalSecurity.org, “Barelvi Islam”, n.d., accessed June 19th 2012, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-barelvi.htm>. **[3]** David Montero, “Shiite-Sunni conflict rises in Pakistan”, Christian Science Monitor, February 2nd 2007, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0202/p01s02-wosc.html>. **[4]** South Asia Terrorism Portal, “Sectarian violence in Pakistan: 1989-2012”, n.d., accessed June 2nd 2012, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/sect-killing.htm>. There are significant discrepancies in the records of sectarian violence maintained by different institutions owing to varying methodologies and definitions of sectarianism. For example, the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan documents 389 killings in incidents of violence against various Muslim sects in 2011 and 420 killings in 2010 (see Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, “Freedom of thought, conscience and religion”, n.d., accessed May 28th 2012, <http://www.hrcpweb.org/pdf/AR2011/Freedom%20of%20thought.pdf>). For its part, the Pak Institute for Peace Studies, an Islamabadbased think tank, documents 397 killings in 139 incidents of sectarian violence in 2011 and 662 killings in 152 incidents in 2010 (see PIPS (Pak Institute for Peace Studies), Pakistan Security Report 2011, Islamabad, January 2012). **[5]** ICG, The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan, 2005. **[6]** PIPS, Pakistan Security Report 2011, 2012. **[7]** Express Tribune, “Changing face of militancy in Karachi”, May 8th 2010, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/11626/changing-face-of-militancyin-karachi/>. **[8]** World Socialist, “Pakistan’s Hazaras targeted by campaign of ethnic-communal killings”, May 22nd 2012, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2012/may2012/paki-m22.shtml> **[9]** Bari Baloch, “Four Hazaras among 6 dead”, The Nation, June 4th 2012, <http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-dailyenglish-online/national/04-Jun-2012/four-hazaras-among-6-dead>. **[10]** Jason Overdorf, “Dismal conviction rate for Pakistan terrorists”, Global Post, August 31st 2011, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/the-rice-bowl/dismal-conviction-rate-pakistanterrorists> **[11]** Tariq Rahman, “Madrassas: the potential for violence in Pakistan?”, Jamal Malik, ed., Madrassas in South Asia: Teaching Terror?, New Delhi, Routledge, 2008. **[12]** Nosheen Abbas, “Pakistan’s madrasa reform stalls”, The Guardian, October 11th 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/oct/11/pakistan-stalls-madrassa-reforms-english>. **[13]** Shabbir Mir, “Pakistan’s first: GBLA passes law to curb sectarianism”, Express Tribune, May 29th 2012, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/385520/pakistans-first-gbla-passes-law-to-curb-sectarianism/>.



Spirituality And Religion

Can one be spiritual and not religious? The obvious answer is, of course one can. But is the idea of 'spiritual and not religious' consistent? That is quite another question.

I must say that I have flirted with the idea of 'spiritual and not religious.' In a sense, it was impossible not to flirt with the idea, given that our backdoor neighbor was Bhagavan Shree Rajneesh, later Osho, in Koregaon Park, Pune, and that Tony De Mello was very much alive and active in those years (the eighties of the last century), and that I actually did a paper on Krishnamurti for the master's in philosophy at Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune. A number of Salesian priests were reading these things in those years, and there was this kind of atmosphere among the priests and young seminarians, with plenty of exciting insights and sharing, and of course passionate debates and high emotion. Even apart from his sexual shenanigans, Rajneesh was exciting. The one time we obtained permission from the seminary director to attend one of his talks was quite memorable: he was certainly a marvelous and even hypnotic speaker.

When the whole set up of the Ashram was being dismantled, and Rajneesh's huge personal library was put up for sale, I picked up a large number of his books at throwaway prices. Rajneesh was convincing, and was a great communicator and writer. Some of the things he said still stick in my mind. And then there was Krishnamurti, with his challenging of all received traditions as betrayals of the path to Truth. Rajneesh of course used to laugh at Krishnamurti: "Krishnamurti is Rajneesh without a body," he would say, and was not far from the truth. Both were pure New Age phenomena, each one attractive in his own right.

When I began teaching philosophy as a young priest, I ran a seminar on Krishnamurti's idea of education. The experience was electrifying. Imagine reading Krishnamurti deeply in a Catholic seminary. Some of the young seminarians took matters to their logical conclusion: they wanted to stop attending Mass, reciting the Breviary, and so on. My job was to help them be consistent. I remember telling one of them: you are free to believe what you wish; but be totally consistent.

Being totally consistent meant making the radical choice: leaving the seminary. I myself had gotten into a tight spot with all my reading of Rajneesh, Krishnamurti and Tony De Mello. Be free, all of them were telling me.

So I did become free: my freedom consisted in deciding not to follow them.

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Photograph Mark Ulyseas

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Religion is not just a matter of fulfilling certain external obligations, or meeting certain requirements – though I would not also subscribe to the idea that the four C's – *creeds, codes, cults and community* – are merely the shabby external shell of religion, the real and vital core being religious experience. I think religion is an intricate weaving of inner and outer.

Since then I have been trying to find my way (back) into Catholicism, and I believe, by God's grace, that the way has been opened to me, though there is certainly far that I have still to go. And here I am, reflecting on the interface between spirituality and religion. Can one be spiritual without being religious, without subscribing to any religion? Surely there are people like this. Very recently one of my good friends, a nun, was speaking to me about her brother, and said exactly the same thing: he is not religious, but he is certainly spiritual. I understood what she was trying to tell me. We have all of us come across that kind of person: a good person, one in whom a Catholic like me might say are manifested the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control (see Galatians 5:22) – but does not subscribe to any religion, and is not a church-goer. So yes, one can well be spiritual without being religious – just as one can also be religious without being spiritual. Once again all of us have come across people who are daily church-goers, but who on the other hand can be nasty, mean-spirited, quite narrow in their outlooks, and even bigoted and hate-filled.

Religion is not just a matter of fulfilling certain external obligations, or meeting certain requirements – though I would not also subscribe to the idea that the four C's – creeds, codes, cults and community – are merely the shabby external shell of religion, the real and vital core being religious experience. I think religion is an intricate weaving of inner and outer. Theologians who tend to advocate pure forms of spirituality, downplaying the externals as superficial and superfluous, are probably going in the direction of an angelicism which does poor justice to our incarnate selves. We do after all celebrate our birthdays, and give gifts, and engage in a thousand little ceremonies and rituals. These are not merely 'externals'. The human being is a symbolic animal, meaning is constitutive of us, and cannot not be incarnate in rituals, symbols, words, gestures and a thousand other things.

So my personal choice is to be spiritual by being religious, and that too in a tradition and a religion that takes the word very seriously indeed, to the point of holding that God has made use of human words to communicate to us, and that in the end he has made the unfathomable choice to form part of the human history of which he is creator. But that does not mean that I would rule out of court the possibility of good people who are spiritual while not being religious. I have too many friends of this kind, and too much respect for them to do that. I probably believe deep down that they are missing something, that their position is not in the ultimate analysis totally consistent, but this is something I would have to work out better and more profoundly. I say this because in the last week I have been grappling with John Milbank's "The Midwinter Sacrifice." John Milbank is, with Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, the originator of a new trend in Christian theology called Radical Orthodoxy. Milbank and his friends work from within the Anglican tradition, their work finds a place in anthologies of postmodern theology (see, for example, *The Blackwell Companion to Post-modern Theology*), but they constitute quite a particular variety of such theology, going back to find

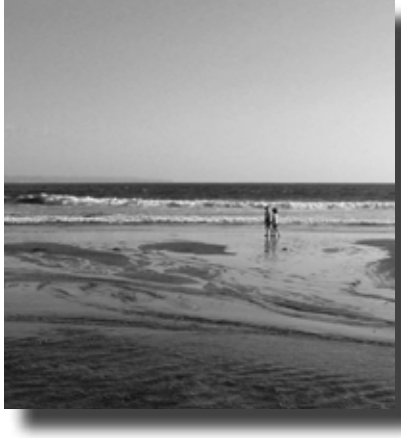
So I remain fascinated to this day by my friends *Rajneesh, Krishnamurti and Tony De Mello*, while at the same time finding myself a quite conservative Catholic Christian. Maybe some day I will find the time and the leisure, or take the trouble to see how all this might still flow together in some way. For surely there are great kernels of truth in each, and surely we can be friends even if we do not in the end agree on everything.

support in a re-reading of Thomas Aquinas and Plato, and forward to find their questions and sparring partners in people like Jan Patocka, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion. Milbank's capacity for expression can be described as penetrating and pungent, with an ability to state the most intricate arguments with enviable clarity and verve. In the piece just mentioned, for example, he deliberately opposes a recent consensus "which would try to understand the ethical as primarily self-sacrifice for the other, without any necessary 'return' issuing from the other back to oneself," proposing in its place the daring thesis that it is not possible to be truly ethical without believing in the resurrection. I know this will sound outrageous, and I am still trying to get to grips with his argument. I mention it only to say, first, that, despite Milbank, I am still convinced one can be ethical without being Christian or even religious, but that, in the second place, Milbank makes me pause and ask: is the idea of a secularized ethics totally consistent with itself in the final analysis? For an analogous question could be asked w.r.t. spirituality and religion.

I believe, as I have been saying again and again, that it is possible to be spiritual without being religious; but I am not convinced that the idea of spirituality without religion is, in the final analysis, totally consistent. As my friend Bernard Lonergan would say, conversion (read religious experience) is not so personal as to be solitary, that we each one of us needs all the help we can get not only to help us grow and keep growing, but even, in the first place, to recognize and name the experience for what it is. The alternative is probably rooted in the now much-maligned Cartesian isolated subjectivity, and in the atomic individualism which was one of the marks of modernity.

But, someone might say, granted, the externals of religion, especially the religious community, are needed; might they not be cast away, like the ladder after one has climbed to the top, like the boat once one has reached the other shore? And here I go back to an argument I have probably rehearsed before. There are certainly religions and religious traditions which not only contemplate but even advocate such letting go, but there are also those which will not and cannot, for the possibility that God has spoken and entered into the world mediated and constituted by meaning is itself constitutive of such traditions and even central to them. Should one rule such possibilities out of court? Can one rule them out? These are questions that I have been asking myself, and I am not sure I can answer them quite simply in the affirmative.

So I remain fascinated to this day by my friends *Rajneesh, Krishnamurti and Tony De Mello*, while at the same time finding myself a quite conservative Catholic Christian. Maybe some day I will find the time and the leisure, or take the trouble to see how all this might still flow together in some way. For surely there are great kernels of truth in each, and surely we can be friends even if we do not in the end agree on everything.



My poem refers to the past and to the present: emigration is sadly an ongoing feature of Irish life. The recent recession has taken a lot of young people to Australia and Canada as well as USA and England.

Because of recent workshops I was doing on Clare Island - off the County Mayo coast, I was confronted with the perils of the Atlantic and the fact that a lot of youth is being drained from the countryside...hence my poem. Perhaps I am trying to make the point that life along the seashore is not always as glamorous as is sometimes portrayed. Factory ships 'clean' the seas of fish and small family boats have to work so much harder to make a living.

Emigration has always been a feature of Irish life and I'm not really sure if it is always economic or, simply, the fact that there is a tradition of 'leaving' the island. We have lots of songs and tears-in-the-beer about the plight of those having to live in exile.

Some people are short of cash; quite a few have emigrated and some have lost a lot in the recession, but when I think of real poverty and hunger there is no comparison.

In a recession there is a spiritual poverty; a feeling of helplessness; even despair... it's a feeling of loss of access to 'things', not having 'things'.

There are voices that are saying we needed a wakeup call...we had strayed from reality in the Celtic Tiger years. This is true and my poem is true as well. Lots of little shops, pubs and small businesses have had to close in the villages in rural Ireland.

I feel things are beginning to change, especially in Dublin...I hope for the better and not to return to the madness of the Celtic Tiger.



Some Never Left

Some never left. They didn't need to. They cut and saved turf, did the hay, stacked oats and barley and let sheep up and down the hills.

Sheep were free in summer and people knew enough of the world to want to stay at home.

When sons and fathers went fishing, mothers prayed behind rocks in the screaming wind. They could tell of wind changing by the flight of gulls.

A fisherman's wife looked hard at her husband and sons, for she never knew what way the sea would bring them home.



Love Without Women

Introduction

Love without Women, a story in letter form, has been prompted by a true contemporary tale about a man who wrote to his daughter, rebuking her for disowning her son - his grandson – because he was gay. My version is also modern, but a fantasy based on the biblical accounts of the final days of King Saul and his relationship with Jonathan and David. I intend it to be a chapter in a much longer work.

As is my custom when story-telling, I mix fact and fiction along with real and imaginary people. Here I also weave Jewish and non-Jewish sources with secular scholarship and folklore to give a fresh slant on a story which has forever gripped popular imagination because it studies kingship and its link to holiness, melding them with a glimpse of the paranormal via the much maligned 'Witch of Endor'.

The reign of King Saul has eternally fascinated writers, musicians and painters, a phenomenon I shall discuss elsewhere.



Photograph of Cassandra the bencong (girly boy) by Mark Ulyseas

Kfar Shoftim
Nr. Gibeah
Israel
06 January 2014

Shaul -

As you won't pick up the phone I've decided to write, not something I do often or find easy. So as you read this letter, picture the floor beneath my desk covered in balls of crumpled paper, much like Yonni looked when he slumped on our terrace late last night, whimpering to be let in.

Trembling and incoherent, he barely managed to describe how you threw him out of King's Villa after he told you that he and David Judah are in love and intend getting married next year.

Yonni came to us seeking refuge, because David's fled to Ziklag and he felt too fragile to spend even one night in their apartment alone. Yonni said that you yelled, "There are no gays in my family!" and announced that you'd disowned him even as you shoved him through your door.

How is this sound parenting? It looks like oafish bullying to me. By abandoning your eldest son you've not only robbed him of his moral birthright and self-esteem but have broken the chord which has bound an Israeli family for hundreds of years. It feels like the very heart of the Benjamins has been pierced and your mother and I are forced to watch and wait while its pulse slows, then finally fades away.

The disgust and shame you displayed on learning that your son is gay is nothing compared to the outrage I feel on discovering that mine is narrow-minded and dogmatic. But your recent behaviour has been increasingly bizarre and this terrible episode is but a symptom, not the cause. Believe me, I'm not the only one to think that you are gravely ill and in desperate need of help.

Let's examine the facts: First, Yonni and David can no more alter their sexuality than they chose to be born left-handed and auburn-haired. We're all aware they've been inseparable since childhood and I relished watching their mutual affection flower as they grew ever taller and more vital. Perhaps I guessed what was happening ahead of them. Why else, I had to acknowledge, would they prefer their own company to that of the pretty girls who surround them, even now?

Yonni told me they enjoy being with women and both have slept with them. But, he said, it's never been for love. So our Yonni and his David have somehow developed nothing short of a unique covenantal bond.

During the harrowing hours since he arrived here, Yonni's tried to explain that their intense physical relationship is almost incidental and that by some circuitous route that my limited, humdrum experience renders baffling, their involvement has become somehow selfless, artless - a thing apart - 'more wonderful than the love of women'. My own belief is that one must encounter such emotions first-hand even to begin to appreciate them.

But Shaul, while I struggle to plumb the well of Yonni's grief, you airily dismiss his love for David as corrupt. This leaves me to ask what you are hiding from. What do you seek? As your father, I don't believe you begrudge David his outstanding military record. You, too, were a much decorated combatant in '73.

Nor do I think you're vexed by his growing reputation as a musician and poet, as you often find solace in his songs. No. What you envy, and in spades, is that David has lured Yonni away from you, and to a secret garden for whose door you'll never have the key.

This may explain what happened at Caesarea where you were invited to help Cousin Avner coach the local team for the monthly Royal and Ancient Archery Tournament at Gilboa. You had refused to go. So it was fortunate that only Avner had noticed your tailing the party on the road up there and only he knew you were perched in the fortress ruins, glowering at them like a demented hawk through an arrow loop in the ramparts, hour on hour. What was your game, Shaul - stalking - spying on - your adult son?

Perhaps your terrible mood pervaded the atmosphere below. It seems the team was so badly off-form that David and Yonni, much preoccupied with their own concerns, halted their round and threw their gear down in disgust. They then embraced and kissed before David turned and stumbled away without a backward glance. Avner said, "I don't know how David ever made his way back to his car. I've never seen a man cry as passionately as he did that afternoon. It was as if Yonni and he would never meet again. Their pain was so evident that my own eyes watered watching them". Later, as the other squad members also packed to leave, you joined the crowd but insisted that Avner travel towards Gilboa with you instead of returning home.

It was too late to find a hotel when you reached Mount Tabor so he suggested visiting his mother, Zephaniah at Ein Dor. She was very hospitable but you abused her kindness, growing unpleasant about her alleged powers as a psychic medium. Then laughing, you pestered her to conduct a séance so you could contact your old mentor, Shmuel Dayan.

Zephie fears no-one but as you grew more agitated she worried that you may become violent, so pretended to enter a trance. Avner heard her intone "abra k'dvarcha - I have created as You have spoken" and saw you mutter into empty space.

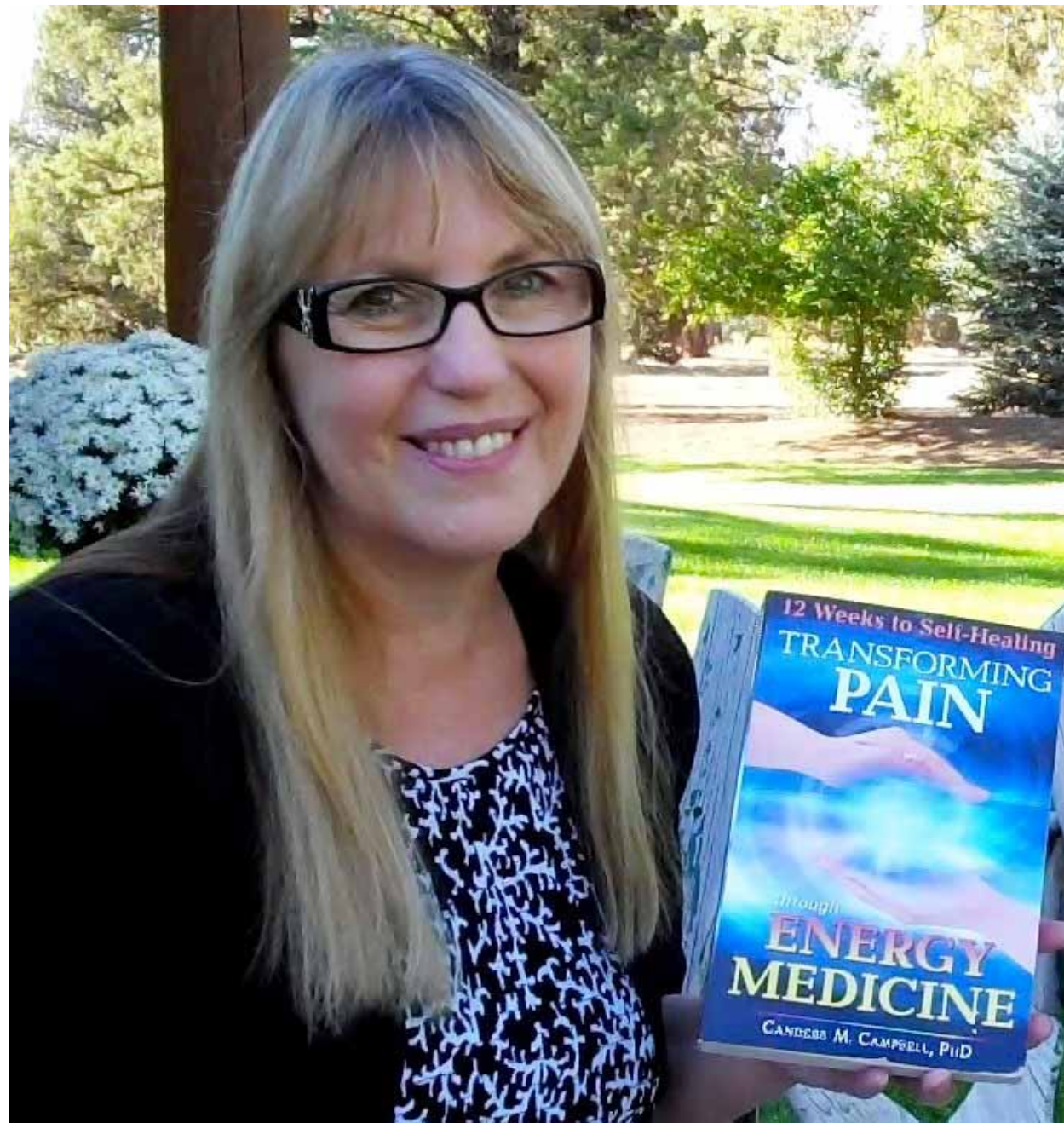
God knows - indeed, only the Almighty could confirm - what really happened next. You claimed that Shmuel did appear, but grumbled that you'd disturbed his eternal rest and instructed you not to trouble him again. This must be a warning from above, Shaul. Pull back from the brink. Do not fall on your own sword. Instead, look inward and look hard. See yourself in Yonni and him in you. This battle of wills - with yourself - is the one you cannot win.

So I close now, but more in dread than love.

Your despairing father

Kish

“A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.” — *Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities*



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The Ugly Duckling

November 1843, Hans Christian Andersen's story, The Ugly Duckling was published in Copenhagen, Denmark. This amazing fairy tale has been read and re-read by adults and children alike, all over the world.

The story, as you probably know, is about a baby bird raised by a mother duck in a flock of other ducklings. The bird was teased and bullied unmercifully throughout his life, because he looked different and behaved differently. As an adult, the bird sought out and joined a flock of swans finding them to be beautiful birds. Although he expected the same abuse, the swans were open to his joining with them and they accept him. One day this ugly duck saw his reflection in the water and realized he was not an ugly duck at all, but really was a beautiful swan. He found his flock and fit right in. He was transformed.

Common to all of us is the desire to be heard, seen and understood. Many of us can relate to this archetypal story of not fitting in and finding ourselves teased, attacked or excluded. We continued to look for and hoped to find “our people”, our flock or our tribe. In the journey of doing so, we often changed our opinions or beliefs. Sometimes we gave up our voice and became silent, all in an attempt to fit in. So often I hear someone telling another person what “the truth” is and insist on what they “should” be doing or thinking. Communication becomes about what is right or wrong. Opinions become polarized and those who do not agree with either the loudest voice or the group voice can be intimidated, shamed or alienated.

Over the years, the precious beliefs developed as young people get lost in the mass of voices and one's self-esteem takes a hit. So often when working with clients, the undercurrent of their situation is a feeling of being unworthy or undeserving. How others have treated them guides their beliefs about themselves.

What would happen if, instead of stating your opinion and telling someone what you think, you asked the person to explain more about what they were saying? Wouldn't it be interesting to see how your relationships change if you went into conversations with the sole purpose of understanding their point of view. How would your posture change if you were there just to receive, to just hear the story?

My focus is on Relationship for the New Year and is the topic for my 2014 contribution to Live Encounters Magazine. I challenge you in the month of January, and hopefully throughout the year, to practice “just listening.”

Now, there will be times to share your opinion and have debates of course, and to enjoy the fun and creativity of a dispute, but let's change it up a bit. Think about a few people in your life that are important to you. Make a conscious choice to have a couple conversations with them where you just “hold the space” for their musings, for their sharing, for how they see the world. Experience them deeply. Look into their eyes and be present to them. Give them the gift of being heard, seen, and understood. Bring them into your fold and see them as the swan they truly are. Allow your loved ones to be transformed by the incredible generosity of your listening.

Late Fruiting

Randhir Khare's series of new poems and photographs celebrate the mountainous region of Himachal Pradesh, using motifs of nature to express deeply felt life experiences.

Late Fruiting

Hard green flesh swelling
Heavy,
Leaf-bound
Glowing;

October blue dripping
Through trees -
Drowning dead fruit,
Earth - juice-sucking;

Wind, forest-walking,
Sun dissolving,
River belly-rubbing,
Mountains, fire-edged;

This hard green flesh
Like mine -
Poem swelling,
Singing;

Late fruiting -
Pure
Sweet
Succulent with life-juice.

I Listened To The Night

I listened to night's breath
Honeycombed with dog barks,
Freedom songs,
Footfalls of old lore trudging into the mountains,
The music of prayer beads;

I listened to night's story of foreverness -
Spoken like love-words,
Like stream flow,
Like birth cries,
Like snow touch,
Like green wood smoke;

Crypted in stone, steel, wood,
Crypted in bone and flesh,
Crypted in dreams, fears, yesterdays, tomorrows,
Crypted in a heart that does not know why,
Crypted in a silkworm's weave of waiting,
I listened to the night.

Winged Seeds

They rode the wind
Alone,
In pairs,
Flocks,
Buoyant in light,
Earth searching,
Noiseless dreams driven out of sleep,
Fugitives -
Memory bundled,
Fleeing into the future,
New homes,
New families,
New languages,
Landing strips of tomorrow
Waiting with fireflies.



A wandering path in Naggar.

Among The Deodhars

Among the Deodhars
Speared by light,
Feet wet in shadow-pools,
Worshipping drums rise from the valley,
Hadimba Devi has gone visiting,
Someone has invited her home for the night;

A zamanis bore her away,
Karnals ransinghas, nagaras, bhanas,
Drums, thalis, shouts, prayers,
Incense, footfalls,
Shoulder high she sailed down the mountain -
Blessing slate rooftops;

Among the Deodhars
Speared by light,
Her home lies open to the wind
Dancing with shadows.

The Wind Came Up The Valley

The wind came up the valley -
Fluttering prayer flags,
Trailing chimney smoke from home to home,
Rattling rooftop slate,
Crashing through trees,
Shedding cones, leaves, old fruit,
Lisping a song I did not understand;

Time to turn in to burning wood, I said
Raising my collar to the cold tongue wind,
Time to feed flames with memories,
Time to cinder old books,
Time to sink deep in and sleep;

Nothing matters now but this ark
Of bone flesh hair skin blood,
Nothing matters now but its belly
Sweating laboring, singing,
And outside
The wind driving me
Towards the high tide of winter.



The Beas

She Sang

She sang a song to the night,
Was it a prayer?
A message to a departed one?
Words for the stars, the sky,
The sleeping mountains wreathed in mist?
I do not know,
All I know is that the sound of her voice
Helped me sleep, dream, remember, become.

This Is Not

This is not my life,
I said,
Looking at the velvet pads of my palms
Burnt with lines,
Each with the certainty
Of a river running seawards;

Inside me are drifting continents,
Nameless countries, people, languages -
Mutating every moment,
Merging, separating, becoming,
Streets full of people,
Rain, snowfall,
The greenness of wild fields,
Mountains in mist,
I change with the seasons;

This is not my life,
I said,
Looking at the cold paths of my everydayness,
I am not me,
I am we.

Sparrow Time

Skeleton tree
Draped in mauve mist,
Breeze wisps,
Morning wetness,
Night scales spread among dry leaves,
Roots reaching rock earth
Sleeping with dung feathers, lizards,
Yesterday's hopes;

Skeleton tree
Alive with sparrows,
Avian fruit,
Warm heart seeds,
Throbbing with now,
Blessing autumn
With voices of tomorrow;

I stand here
Waiting,
The past now gone,
Seasons wandering into my arms
With the blessings of strangers -
Touched by newness
And the breath of dawn.

Once Again

Once again Dhauladhar
Appears above the tree line -
Flesh bare as a new born
Blue caul fallen away
Mother sky, paps soft with snow milk,
Waiting for mouths;

Once again I gather my scattered self
In my dream bag of autumn,
Walk tree-wards and beyond,
Wait for sky milk to bathe me
With the blessings of peace;



The mountains burned with light.

The Mountains Burned

The mountains burned all evening,
The mountains burned,
Great lines of fire
Climbing ridges,
Whirling wind-wards,
Dark ash drifting valley-wards,
Scattering, settling layer on layer
And I, hidden among the Deodhars
Wait for night;

There is in waiting a quiet healing,
Wounds close their mouths
Fuse lips,
Blood stills,
Breath curls in nests in my lungs,
Peace;
Across the valley mountains sink in ash
Under an embering sky.

Here

Here
Where mist rolls down streets
Brushing with damp fingertips -
Sleeping homes,
Discarded chains,
Restless mountain dog Hope
Baying the dark;

Here
Where rains dances
To thunder drums
Beating rooftops,
Feet sore with joy,
Breath hoarse with singing,
Sky spirit speaking;

Here
Where the night glows
In an epiphany of acceptance
Embracing all that is
And all that was -
I lie awake,
Lightning in my blood.



Slate light

It Was

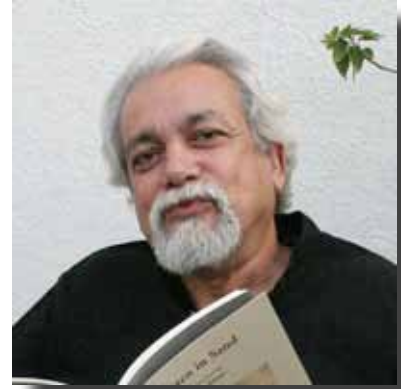
It was the morning of my life
Watery with wonder,
Birds wings feathering light,
Churning joy-songs –
And the dark, sacred as sepulchres,
Rested its cheek on my belly
I slept;

Today, treading the mani walk
I am born again,
Watering sparrows fill the afternoon
With the fragrance of wet feathers
Tingling with birth songs;

Between two joys -
The struggle of becoming,
Between two births -
The cycle of dying,
Between two dawns -
Dancing darkness,
Between two forevers -
The eternal now.

Swallow Light

Curving, spinning, spiraling,
Straight lining,
Free-falling,
Light moving on wings,
Lofting into crystals.



Tell Me

Tell me sister wind
Where does this road end?

All day I have walked
With friends,
Strangers,
Lovers,
My shadow,
In the company of ravens and magpies,
Lofting swifts,
Water voices,
The past like a swarm of bees
Hiving my heart;

Tell me sister wind
Where does this road end?

All night I have walked
With wolves,
Dreams,
Moon shadow,
In the company of my many selves,
Broken promises,
Snow song;

Tell me sister wind
Where does this road end?

Over the edge of the last mountain
Floating through ice knife air,
Crashing on snow rocks,
Scattering,
Each particle sinking to rest
Somewhere below,
Finally liberated -
From the long journey,
The hoping,
The loving,
The waiting,

The dreaming,
The remembering?

Does the road
Wander into towns,
Villages, cities, fields,
Over journeying rivers,
In and out of dark tunnels
Shot through mountain sides;
Bleeding visions of endless roads
And wolves and broken promises
And beehived hearts
And caravans of longing,
Until one day -
I am walking again
In the company of strangers,
Lovers,
Ravens, magpies,
And my many selves?

Am I dreaming the road I walk on sister wind,
Fragrant with seasons,
Lover of freedom,
Unable to move?

Tell me sister wind
Where does this road end?



Hadimba Devi out visiting.

I Left My Offering

I left my offering for you my Lord -
Where the mountain climbed from the old forest
Drenched in green,
Where a family of boulders were in attendance,
Where the fragrance of devotion breathed from flowers,
Where the grass was so sweet that bees were drunk on them,
Where silence stilled the voice of the morning,
Where a spring emerged crystal as truth,
Where you were – present in heartbeats;

I am here again my Lord at your sacred place -
Where the mountain once climbed from the old forest,
To place my offering in your presence,
To remind you that I have returned from my wandering,
To feel once more the strength of your wisdom,
To be touched once more by your compassion,
To be alive with your heartbeats,
To be myself again;

I cannot find your space my Lord -
Lost in the alleyways of this village,
Lost in the voices of strangers,
Lost in smoke and fumes and bartered beings,
Lost in droves of pilgrims,
Lost among streets full of packaged offerings,
Lost in the sanctum of an alien god,
Walled in by mantras.



Sunset over the mountains..

Quietly Into The Afternoon

Quietly into the afternoon
The empty path walks among the trees
Drowsy with longing -
For the mountains beyond,
For the snowline,
For the high passes creased with history,
For the valley of summer beyond the ice,
For the towns, villages and hamlets beyond the valley,
For the highlands and great rifts,
For the place where land met land and heaved sky-
wards,
For memory of the sea sunk like a seed in stone
Waiting to sprout,
Waiting to spread roots,
Waiting to split rock,
Waiting to separate land from land,
Waiting to let in the sea again,
Waiting to see it spread,
Land floating from land;
Quietly into the afternoon
The drowsy path
Walks towards tomorrow
And the drifting highlands,
Remembering an ancient sea.

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