



# Islam and Sectarianism: The Major Split and Its Manifestations

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## Abstract

Sectarianism constitutes a major challenge to cultural diversity in today's Middle East. It arises at the core of the crises that hit various parts of the region over the recent years. While the roots of the sectarian divide, as tackled in the context of this article, originate in the early history of Islam, its manifestations appear to take various forms and continue to re-emerge as one of the defining dimensions of the rifts and conflicts that persist to afflict the region today. Given the fact that the sectarian narrative has become a defining feature of major crises striking the Middle East, this article tackles the notion of sectarianism, delves into its evolution throughout the Islamic history, and analyses the associated threat it poses to cultural diversity today.

**Keywords:** Sectarianism, Cultural Diversity, Middle East, Islam, Extremism.

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## 1. Introduction

Sectarianism is believed to have played an essential role in the mounting rivalries and confrontations between key players in the Middle East, coupled with the formation of different alliances in response to the surrounding developments. Meanwhile, the rise of various Islamist organizations across crisis-afflicted parts of the region raised questions about Jihadism-related doctrinal tenets to which such organizations claim attachment. Above all, the potentially devastating consequences of such developments on the populations inhabiting the region increase the interest in gaining a better understanding of the origins of the multifaceted crisis storming the Middle East.

The cultural diversity that once enriched the Middle East on various levels, and the historic coexistence among the region's different communities, have been threatened and jeopardized by a few sectarian extremist groups whose atrocities reached every single social

component with distinct religious, doctrinal or ideological tenets. Ethnic and religious minorities have become a target to radical groups, and sedition has been ignited and reinforced by the extremist discourse of sectarian organizations in the region, amid considerable failures by political leaderships. Sectarianism forms one of the major challenges facing the Middle East, frequently arising in debates about geopolitical rifts and tensions throughout the region. Given the fact that the sectarian narrative has become one of the main features of the crises that continue to beset the region, delving into the notion of sectarianism, its evolution throughout the history of the region, and the associated conceptions, interpretations and developments, appears inescapable if one tries to understand the background of the contemporary Middle Eastern landscape.

In order to rise and establish itself, extremism undoubtedly requires a fertile ground. As two of the major hotspots of the Middle East, Iraq and Syria emerged in the first two decades of the 21st century

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as main incubators to extremist Islamist groups in the region. In the aftermath of the 2003 war, Iraq suffered from a widespread chaos and security vacuum, coupled with intensifying sectarian rifts, which erupted at a governmental level and later reached the very core of the society. These were key factors that led to the rise of sectarian Shia militias such as al-Hashd al-Shaabi and the radical Sunni ISIS group. Meanwhile, as the Syrian uprising of 2011 descended into a civil war, extremist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS found a sufficient foothold and joined the conflict under the pretext of protecting fellow Muslims. The rise of religious extremism considerably deprived the people of the region of their legitimate aspirations in establishing a pluralistic form of government based on democratic principles and willing to demonstrate respect to basic human rights. Thus, this anti-tyranny revolutionary age has been largely infiltrated and hijacked by some radical movements that tirelessly sought to forcibly impose their extremist agenda on exhausted populations, particularly in war-ravaged areas.

## 2. Sectarianism: A Multifaceted Notion

Although the concept of sectarianism remains largely undertheorized, several definitions of the term and explanations of its characteristics have been produced over the years.<sup>2</sup> Sectarianism is defined by Liechty and Clegg as a system of “attitudes, actions, beliefs and structures, which arises as a distorted expression of positive, human needs especially for belonging, identity and the free expression of difference and is expressed in destructive patterns of relating.”<sup>3</sup> It is believed to function at personal, communal and institutional levels, constantly involving a religious element as well as a negative mixture of politics and religion.<sup>4</sup> According to Brewer, sectarianism can be considered as “the determination of actions, attitudes and practices by practices about religious difference, which results in them invoked as the boundary marker to represent social stratification and conflict.”<sup>5</sup> The term thus refers to a bunch of beliefs, ideas and myths about religious difference mainly used to turn religion into a social marker and make disdainful comments and statements about other groups. In tensions between Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims, or between one religious group and another like between Muslims and Christians, each group tends to identify itself with the religious and political features displayed in

the discourse of its leadership, separating it from other communities in the area they inhabit and leading to some discriminatory statements about the alleged ‘other’. Sectarianism is further deemed to be a set of prejudiced attitudes, policies and types of treatment based on religious difference, occurring at the levels of ideas, individual action and social structure.<sup>6</sup> In its modern context, sectarianism implies reference to the deployment of religious heritage as a key marker of modern political identity. It is ultimately “an act of interpretation that shapes as well as is shaped by religious mobilizations and violence in the modern world.”<sup>7</sup> Sectarianism is described by Makdisi in his *The Culture of Sectarianism* as “a disease that prevents modernization.”<sup>8</sup>

The academic discussion around the notion of sectarianism in the recent years has been increasingly driven by the rise and development of intra-religious strife, leading many scholars to study and explore the nature and origins of sectarian rifts and struggle. One of the key aspects of sectarianism is the growth of in-group sentiments and an extreme attachment to a certain set of values and beliefs that emerge in contrast with that of other groups within the same society. Despite the various disagreements within the scholarly discussion of sectarianism, there is a relevant degree of agreement on what defines belongingness to a particular sect, which implicates “being a member of a group that has a shared identity, belief or ideology that defines them from the rest of the society.”<sup>9</sup> While the term is basically employed in the context of discussing differences among religious communities with negative connotations involved, the concept of sectarianism has further expanded to include political as well as ethnic minorities. In order to understand the fundamental dynamics of sectarianism, it is of great importance to consider Ibn Khaldun’s idea of *‘aşabiyya* or group feeling, which entails a process of developing group relations and ties as a key factor for empowering a community and ensuring the survival of its identity and basic values against any outside danger.<sup>10</sup> Hence, attributing negative connotations to the perceived “others” and subsequently excluding other groups for not sharing similar values, beliefs and ideological tenets emerge at the core of the notion of sectarianism. Its discriminative nature often leads to social divide that may eventually manifest itself in the form of violent strife aimed at the survival

<sup>2</sup> “It is a common complaint that sectarianism is an undertheorised concept, although there have been attempts to define its features.” (Higgins and Brewer 2003: 2).

<sup>3</sup> Liechty and Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism*. 102.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, 103.

<sup>5</sup> Brewer, *Sectarianism and racism, and their parallels and differences*. 359.

<sup>6</sup> Higgins and Brewer, *The Roots of Sectarianism in Northern Ireland*. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*. 7.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Mabon and Royle, *The Origins of ISIS: The Collapse of Nations and Revolution in the Middle East*. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom: Saudi Arabia and the Momentum of Reform*. 64.

and prevalence of one's own sectarian identity over others.

Although the term is basically used in reference to animosity, grudge and prejudice toward individuals or groups with different beliefs, sectarianism also holds a political dimension. Mabon and Royle strongly disagree with the narrative that suggests that sectarianism is inherently violent, arguing that violence only occurs when the sectarian differences or identities are politicized.<sup>11</sup> The notion of sectarianism is widely used in describing a country's social and political divisions with religious implications involved. The Middle East has witnessed numerous of such examples. Saudi Arabia, the major Sunni power in the region, has repeatedly witnessed suppression of predominantly-Shia movements in the Kingdom, where the authorities accused Iran, the major Shia power in the Middle East, of supporting such movements to destabilize the region. In Syria, rebel groups fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising were mainly characterized by their Sunni-based struggle, striving to overthrow the Alawites from power. In Iraq and Bahrain, tensions and struggle for power are mainly based on the deep Sunni-Shia cleavage. Another example of the political dimension of the concept of sectarianism is Lebanon, where the entire political system is formally based on the distribution of power between Maronite Christians, Shia and Sunni Muslims. In this context, competitive or hostile political relationships between communities defined by their religious characteristics and traits are expressed through a sectarian discourse. This basically applies to tensions and conflicts between groups adhering to a broad faith community such as the Muslims, where widespread disputes and clashes between Sunnis and Shiites have been taking place, similar to tensions between Protestants and Catholics in Europe, and also between completely different faiths like between Muslims and Christians.<sup>12</sup> Hence, a religious identity is employed as a marker of difference among diverse communities, leading to rifts and tensions over power and political matters, where questions of marginalization, discrimination and exclusion on the basis of religious affiliation are raised. Illustrative cases are to be found in different parts of the Middle East, taking various forms and bearing multiple consequences. As a minority religious group in northern Iraq, the Yezidi Kurds were exposed to socio-economic marginalization by Sunni Kurds in the Kurdistan Region. This led many Yezidis to deny

the ethnic and cultural ties they share with the Kurds and claim to constitute a unique ethno-religious community with own history, culture, religious customs and traditions. Under Saddam Hussein, the Shia suffered exclusion and suppression by the Sunni-led regime, and in post-2003 Iraq the situation reversed as the Shia took power and pursued oppressive and exclusionary policies against the Sunnis. In Syria, the Alawite regime of Assad excluded Sunnis from power circles for decades. The Lebanese suffered over fifteen years from a sectarian-based civil war that exhausted the country and devastated its people.

### 3. Islamic Sectarianism: Rise and Development

In the Islamic world, sectarianism has for long played a defining role with regard to key rifts and differences that have emerged and surfaced within the Muslim society over centuries in the aftermath of the major Sunni-Shia split. Issues of rightful religious authority and eligible political leadership arise at the heart of intra-Islamic sectarianism. In the early history of Islam, strong disagreements erupted between the Islamic elite regarding grave issues affecting the 'umma. One of the most bitter and definitely the longest lasting issues was the rift that occurred over the political succession to the Prophet Muhammad. A Sunni-Shia split emerged as a consequence of the different claims to the leadership of political Islam. Other political disputes occurred between those who had been the earliest converts and companions of the Prophet (Ṣaḥāba) and those who had joined Islam much later on, mainly the elders of the Quraysh tribe. These disagreements threatened to tear the community apart.<sup>13</sup>

Subsequent to the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D., a split within the Muslim community occurred, mainly due to political disagreements. Two major branches of Islam emerged, the largest of which was the Sunni, the followers of Sunna or tradition and known as 'Ahl al-Sunna or the People of the Tradition, and the second was the Shi'a or Shi'ites, a name derived from the Arabic Shi'at 'Ali or the party of 'Ali. Controversy and dispute arose at the Saqīfa<sup>14</sup> assembly following Muhammad's death over the required qualifications and the precise functions and duties of his successors to lead the Muslim community. Hence, the question of the succession of the Prophet Muhammad was a central issue that divided the Muslim community between those who favored allegiance to successors from the Prophet's household and those

<sup>11</sup> Mabon and Royle, *The Origins of ISIS: The Collapse of Nations and Revolution in the Middle East*. 54.

<sup>12</sup> Jarman, *Defining Sectarianism and Sectarian Hate Crime*. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Fattah and Caso, *A Brief History of Iraq*. 68.

<sup>14</sup> The Saqīfa is derived from the name of a place known at the time as Saqīfat Bani-Sa'idah, where the Anṣar gathered subsequent to the Prophet's death to discuss his succession. In Arabic, the term Saqīfa means roof, ceiling or arch under which issues of general communal concern were discussed.

who considered the political leaders of the pre-Islamic era as the more eligible candidates.<sup>15</sup>

The Shi'ites stressed the spiritual function of the Prophet's Caliph or successor, referred to as 'Imām, who reflects the Prophetic Light.<sup>16</sup> According to the Shia, Imāms are divinely safeguarded against error and sin and possess an impeccable and infallible knowledge and understanding of the Qur'ān. They considered members of the Prophet's family or 'Ahl al-Bayt, basically descendants of his daughter Fatima and her husband 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (the prophet's cousin and son-in-law), as the only ones qualified to become Imāms. The Shia insisted that Muhammad had on several occasions referred to 'Ali and his male descendants as the righteous successors of the Prophet. One of these occasions, which has been mentioned in authentic and authoritative Shia and Sunni sources, has been interpreted by the Shia as a formal approval and authorization of 'Ali's right to succession by the Prophet. While on his way back from his last pilgrimage to Mecca, on the eighteenth day of the month Dhul-ḥijja of the eleventh year of his Hijra in 632 A.D., at a place called Ghadīr of Khumm, the Prophet Muhammad reportedly made a crucial declaration, stating: "He for whom I was the master, should hence have 'Ali as his master (fa-hādha 'Alīyun mawlāh man kuntu mawlāh)." <sup>16</sup> For the Shia, the alleged circumstances that took place at the Ghadīr of Khumm, referred to as Waṣīyyat 'Ali, constituted the single significant piece of evidence on the basis of which they legitimized the succession of 'Ali and his descendants.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Sunni Muslims recognize the authenticity of the Ghadīr of Khumm story, they have interpreted the Prophet's use of the term 'master' differently. According to the Sunnis, the term 'master' (mawlāh) as used by the Prophet Muhammad on that occasion should be understood as 'patron' or 'friend' rather than leader. The event of Ghadīr of Khumm was included in the Ibn Ḥanbal's collection of Ḥadīth (narratives of the Prophet's words and actions). Nevertheless, most Sunnis who accepted the event as a historical fact largely denied the Shi'ite interpretation of it. The Sunnis believe that the Prophet had left the issue of succession open on purpose, in a bid to provide the Muslim community ('umma) with an opportunity to elect the most qualified person to lead them. In response to the succession crisis, the Sunnis developed a doctrine implicating that the Caliphs were all legitimate successors of the Prophet. They were elected through a political process and were considered as both temporal and religious leaders. However, the Caliphs were not given the same

degree of religious authority as the Shi'ites attributed to the Imāms.<sup>18</sup>

Regardless of the true intention of the Prophet Muhammad in his proclamation, the Sunni perspective prevailed at the Saqīfa assembly at the time. Subsequently, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, a distinguished and prominent member of the community and Muhammad's father-in-law, was chosen as the first Caliph (successor) of the Prophet. 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, also a close companion of Muhammad and his father-in-law, succeeded al-Siddiq as the second Caliph after being nominated by the latter on his deathbed, followed by 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, a member of the prominent Umayyad clan at Mecca and the Prophet's son-in-law, who was elected by a council (majlis). 'Affan was murdered by a rebel group in 656, and 'Ali ibn Abi Talib received a huge popular support to assume leadership as the last of the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs ('al-Khulafā' 'al-Rāshidūn). Hence, the Rightly-Guided Caliphs or the Rāshidūn include the first four Caliphs who succeeded the Prophet, namely, Abu Bakr (632-4), 'Umar (634-44), 'Uthman (644-56) and 'Ali (656-661). The expression Rightly-Guided signifies their actions as being accepted by all Muslims as the closest to the Prophet's example. After the Prophet Muhammad, the words and actions of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs were deemed to be the most authoritative source on Muslim behavior.<sup>19</sup>

However, by the time 'Ali took charge, the rapidly growing Muslim community had witnessed remarkable changes. The expansion of the Islamic territory brought about greater resources and wealth, where some families and clans assumed new power-contenders and had little sympathy with 'Ali's insistence on accountability and transparency in the management of the affairs of the Muslim community, and they refused to respond to his call to return to the firm and strict regime applied at the time of the Prophet. 'Ali ibn Abi Talib was murdered in 661 after a five-year Caliphate that was largely marred by civil war, famously known as fitna. Interestingly, during the Prophet's lifetime, intercommunal conflicts were remarkably contained. The first civil war within the Muslim community erupted during 'Ali's reign as the fourth Caliph, namely the Battle of the Camel that broke out on the background of the killing of 'Uthman, the third Caliph. The battle took place in Basra, Iraq, in November 656. 'Aisha bint Abu Bakir, Muhammad's widow, heard about 'Uthman's death while she was on a pilgrimage to Mecca. During her journey, she decided to head to Kufa in order to discuss the incident with 'Ali, but the situation then

<sup>15</sup> El-Hirbi, *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History: The Rashidun Caliphs*. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought: The Response of the Shi'i and Sunni Muslims to the Twentieth Century*. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Sanders, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*. 122.

<sup>18</sup> Cornell, *Voices of Islam*. 114.

<sup>19</sup> Sardar and Davies, *The No-nonsense Guide to Islam*. 52.

developed into an armed battle, as ‘Ali asked for time to punish ‘Uthman’s murderers. The Battle of the Camel was led by ‘Aisha against ‘Ali, but she was eventually defeated. The battle became known as the First Fitna or Muslim civil war. ‘Ali was later involved in a second, larger, civil war that put him in confrontation with the Umayyads. The tension developed into a major battle known as the Battle of the Şifīn, where ‘Ali’s supporters fought against the supporters of Mo‘awiya ibn Abi Sufian, the founder of the Umayyad dynasty. ‘Ali was eventually assassinated by a Khārijite, known as Abdur Rahman ibn Muljam, in January 661 in Kufa. The Khawārij (deviants) were a rebellious sect that emerged during the First Fitna, operating in accordance with the belief that any authority they considered as illegitimate and not abiding by God’s dominion had to be overthrown for “judgement belongs to God alone.”<sup>20</sup>

Following ‘Ali’s death, Mo‘awiya ibn Abu Sufyan, a close relative of ‘Uthman and governor of Syria during ‘Uthman’s rule who had been involved in tensions with ‘Ali over the Caliphate, announced himself as Caliph in Damascus and established the Umayyad dynasty. However, the Shi‘ites refused to recognize Mo‘awiya’s declaration and showed support to ‘Ali’s sons Hasan and Hussein, considering them the only rightful Caliphs of the community and the sole legitimate successors of the Prophet.<sup>21</sup> Hasan, the eldest son of ‘Ali, was then forced to sign a peace settlement with Mo‘awiya, but despite his weaker position he managed to include an article in the agreement that guarantees the return of the Caliphate to him after the death of Mo‘awiya.<sup>22</sup> However, Hasan died mysteriously circa 669,<sup>23</sup> and his younger brother Hussein, who opposed the appointment of Mo‘awiya’s son Yazid as the next Caliph, was killed by Umayyad forces in Iraq’s Karbala in the year 680. Afterwards, the Shi‘ites were excluded from power, and their Imāms, descendants of Hussein ibn ‘Ali, were banned from practicing political activities, kept under strict surveillance, arrested or killed by the Caliphs of the two powerful dynasties of Umayyad and Abbasid. The Umayyad Caliphate (661-750) emerged after the collapse of the Rāshidūn Caliphate. It took Damascus as its capital and it was characterized by heredity elections and territorial expansion. It became one of the largest unitary

states in history. After overthrowing the Umayyad dynasty, the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258) became the third Islamic Caliphate to succeed the Prophet, took Baghdad as its capital and ruled over a large empire for nearly three centuries. Furthermore, in 909, the Fatimid dynasty broke away from the Abbasids and formed a separate line of Caliphs until its decline and eventual collapse in 1171.

In the sixteenth century, with the establishment of the Safavid Dynasty in Iran, the Shi‘ites were able for the first time to live under the rule of fellow Shia leaders. Nevertheless, according to the principle of ‘Imāmah (Imamate) or the leadership of the infallible Shia Imāms, the rulers won’t enjoy an absolute political legitimacy in the course of waiting for the return of the Twelfth Imām al-Mahdi who, according to the Shi‘ite’s belief, has disappeared in the ninth century and will return at the end of time to bring justice to the world. The Awaited Imām al-Mahdi (al-Mahdi al-Muntaẓar) is deemed a kind of Messiah, called al-qā’im or the one who will be raised up by God. His name is Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-‘Askari, and he was born in the city of Samarra’ in Iraq. Al-Mahdi, according to the Shia, had disappeared at the age of four or eight and he is allegedly still alive. He has several nicknames, including al-Ḥujja (the proof), al-qā’im al-Muntaẓar (the alive and the awaited), and ṣaḥīb al-zamān (the owner of the time).<sup>24</sup> Thus, until the return of al-Mahdi, the Mujtahids (religious guides) and Fuqahā’ (jurists) of the Shia community would be responsible for the interpretation of all legal issues and doctrines. This strict commitment has continued until the mid-twentieth century, when Iranian religious leader Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini initiated a radical interpretation of this doctrine, allowing what became known as the Absolute Guardianship of the Faqīh (the jurist), considering him a deputy of the Prophet and the Imāms in not only interpreting the Islamic laws, but also running the state’s affairs on behalf of the Awaited Imām.<sup>25</sup> Today, the principle of the Faqīh’s Absolute Guardianship constitutes a crucial part of the current constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The victory of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the setting up of the Islamic government by Imām Khomeini paved the ground for Shia fuqahā’ to exercise comprehensive authority, and the Imām Khomeini was given power

<sup>20</sup> Fadl, Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari‘a in the Modern Age. 421.

<sup>21</sup> Legitimate in the sense of being the grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad (descendants of his daughter Fatima and her husband ‘Ali) and thus of the direct bloodline of the Prophet. According to the Shia, Allah has ordained that the spiritual leader of Islam and the Muslim community must be of the direct bloodline of the Prophet.

<sup>22</sup> Redha, Al-Hasan and Al-Hussein: The Two Grandsons of the Messenger of Allah. 45.

<sup>23</sup> Hasan ibn ‘Ali passed away in Medina in the year 49 Hijra, ten years after Mo‘awiya’s Caliphate, and he was buried in al-Baqe’.

According to several historical accounts, Hasan was poisoned by his wife Ja‘ada, and died after forty days of sickness. The poisoning of Hasan reportedly took place within the framework of an alleged conspiracy by Mo‘awiya or his son Yazid to keep the Caliphate for himself. However, the story remained unconfirmed (Redha, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Abdul-Raof, Theological Approaches to Qur’anic Exegesis: A Practical Comparative-Contrastive Analysis. 38.

<sup>25</sup> Badamchi, Post-Islamist Political Theory: Iranian Intellectuals and Political Liberalism in Dialogue. 188.

as the faqih at the highest post in the government to practice his authority in everything that falls within the jurisdiction of the walī al-faqih. The concept of the Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist implies that by occupying the highest post of government the faqih enjoys all the prerogatives and rights required for governing and there is no difference between him and the infallible Imāms in this case. Furthermore, the Iranian Constitution clearly specifies three powers within the state; the legislative power, the executive power, and the judicial power. Nevertheless, Article 57 of the constitution states that these three powers are set to function under the supervision of the religious absolute guardianship.<sup>26</sup>

The Caliphate, as a political and religious institution, declined after the thirteenth century, despite the fact that the title Caliph continued to be used by some leaders of the Muslim community through the late stages of the Ottoman Empire, until its formal abolition in 1924 by Mustafa Kamal Atatürk, the first President of the Turkish Republic. After its elimination, the Caliphate turned into a significant religious and political symbol for some Islamist activists, particularly the Sunnis, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who argued that by undermining the Caliphate, leaders in the Islamic world had abandoned the true path of Islam. This argument has remarkably inspired contemporary orthodox Sunnis to seek a restoration of the Caliphate institution as a way to return to the basic Islamic principles and values. However, the cultural diversity across the Muslim world, which is home to various groups with ethnic, religious, linguistic, socio-economic and political affiliations, constitutes a considerably serious challenge to the re-emergence of any pan-sectarian and centralized Islamic religious leadership.<sup>27</sup>

The Sunnis, who constitute the vast majority within the Muslim community today, endorse and approve the first four Caliphs, including 'Ali, as 'al-Khulafā' 'al-Rāshidūn or the Rightly-Guided successors of the Prophet. This while the Shi'ites insist on the idea that 'Ali and his descendants were the sole rightful successors instead. Taking such a position with respect to the succession of the Prophet has resulted in branding them as Rāfiḍa or rejectionists, which has become a pejorative term for Shia.<sup>28</sup> Despite the subtle differences in conducting obligatory prayers, both Sunnis and Shi'ites share a considerably analogous understanding of essential

Islamic tenets. In terms of Islamic law, Sunni Islam includes four schools of jurisprudence (madhāhib) that present alternative interpretations with regard to legislative and judicial resolutions that affect Muslims' lives. Founded by Abu Hanifa in 767 A.D. in Iraq, the Ḥanafī (al-Madhhab al-Ḥanafī) is deemed the oldest school of Islamic law, and it is mainly prevalent in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. It was followed by the establishment of the Mālikī school (al-Madhhab al-Mālikī), founded by Mālik ibn Anas in 795 in the Arabian Peninsula, and it is widespread in Bahrain, Kuwait and North Africa. The third Sunni school of Islamic law is the Shāfī (al-Madhhab al-Shāfī), founded by Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shāfī in 819, and it is common among the Sunnis of Egypt, Sudan and parts of Yemen. The fourth Islamic legal school is the Ḥanbalī (al-Madhhab al-Ḥanbalī), founded by Imām Ahmed ibn Ḥanbal in 855, and it is prevalent in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and parts of Oman, among others.<sup>29</sup> Sunni legal schools generally place reliance on analogy in formulating verdicts and judgements, incorporating narrations and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, known as the Ḥadīth, into their jurisprudential interpretations and verdicts differently. This illustrates that while the earliest split within Islam was political, the disagreements later on developed to eventually acquire theological and jurisprudential dimensions. Each of these schools has strived to develop practical and effective applications of Sunna as an ultimate objective of their efforts.

Shia Islam mainly spread and gained great following in Iraq, Iran and Yemen, and it is practiced among approximately 15 per cent of the world's Muslim population today, according to some estimates.<sup>30</sup> The Shi'ites consider 'Ali ibn Abi Talib as the first true leader of the Muslim people. He is referred to as the Imām, a title that, according to the Shia, indicates leadership and signifies blood relation to the Prophet. 'Ali's descendants (Imāms) undertook the leadership of the Shia community. Serving as a political and spiritual leader, each Imām appointed a successor and passed down spiritual knowledge to the following leader, according to the Shia doctrine.<sup>31</sup> Amid the Shia decline after losing the political conflict with the Sunni leaders, the Imāms centered their efforts on the development of a spirituality that would

<sup>26</sup> Arjomand and Brown, *The Rule of Law, Islam, and Constitutional Politics in Egypt and Iran*. 105.

<sup>27</sup> This was demonstrated through the joint efforts by several Muslim-majority countries to condemn the emergence of ISIS and combat its alleged Caliphate. Nevertheless, this does not undermine the fact that some undeclared policies with sectarian overtone have been for long pursued by certain Muslim states in the Middle East, such as that of Saudi Arabia –as a Sunni power– and Iran –as a Shia power. Thus, although pan-sectarian powers

remain to exist in the region, the extremely radical forms of sectarianism are being condemned at an official level.

<sup>28</sup> Hassan, *The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Conflict*. 51.

<sup>29</sup> Blanchard, *Islam: Sunnis and Shi'ites*. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Brunner, *Sunnis and Shi'ites in Modern Islam: Politics, Rapprochement and the Role of Al-Azhar*. 25.

<sup>31</sup> Malbouisson, *Focus on Islamic Issues*. 16.

constitute the essence of the Shia religious beliefs and practices. According to some of its foundational sources, Shi'ism defines itself as an essentially esoteric and initiatory doctrine that does not uncover itself easily. In a tradition traced back to several Shi'i Imāms, it is stated, "Our teaching is secret, it is a secret about a secret. It includes an exoteric (zāhir), esoteric (bāṭin), and esoteric of the esoteric (bāṭin al-bāṭin) dimension."<sup>32</sup> The Shia spirituality is deemed to be complex, yet its practices and beliefs reveal some consistency and coherence in the essential role of knowledge and initiation, in the ambivalence of the Imām's figure as the alpha and omega of Shi'ism. With the end of the line of Imāms descended from 'Ali, the Mujtahids or religious guides and leaders earned the right to explicate religious, mystical and statutory knowledge to the community, and those with the highest level of knowledge and understanding are known among the Shi'ites as ayatollahs (the signs of God). The most popular yearly ritual revived by the Shi'ites worldwide is the 'Ashurā', a ritualistic remembrance of the death of 'Ali's younger son Hussein, who was murdered during a battle with Sunni forces in Iraq's Karbala in 680. The Shi'ites believe that the tale of Hussein's martyrdom holds moral lessons for the community, and it considerably reinforced and strengthened Shia religious beliefs and practices.

Shia Islam is divided into three main branches. The Twelver Shi'ism (Ithna 'Asharis) is the largest sect of Shi'ites, and its followers believe that the Prophet's spiritual authority and religious leadership were passed on to twelve of his descendants, beginning with 'Ali, Hasan and Hussein. The Twelvers believe that the 12<sup>th</sup> Imām, Muhammad al-Mahdi, known as the Awaited Imām or Hidden Imām, has disappeared from a cave below a mosque in 874 and will reappear at the end of time to bring absolute justice and peace to the world. The second largest Shia sect is the Sevener Shi'ism, also known as Ismaili ('Ismā'īli), which emerged in the eighth century and its followers only recognize the first seven Imāms. The seventh Imām was named Ismail, thus the sect derived its name from his (Ismailis) and his position in the sequence of 'Ali's successors (Sevener). The Ismailis are historically known for pursuing territorial and military power and have founded strong states that took an active part in the Islamic history's development.<sup>33</sup> Shi'ism also includes the Zaydis, who form a minority sect of Shia Islam. The Zaydis only recognize the first five Imāms and differ

about the identity of the fifth. The first five Imāms of the orthodox Shia include 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, his sons Hasan and Hussein, Hussein's son 'Ali Zayn al-Abidin and the latter's son Muhammad al-Baqir. However, the Zaydis, also known as Zaydiyyah, preferred the younger son of Zayn al-Abidin, Zayd, over his brother al-Baqir, as their Imām. This came after Zayd led a revolt against Caliph Hisham and was massacred, while his older brother al-Baqir didn't show any interest in politics.<sup>34</sup> The Zaydis reject the idea of the infallibility of Imāms and deny the concept of the Awaited Imām.<sup>35</sup> The Alawite sect is also derived from Shia Islam, and its followers consider the duties of Islam as symbolic rather than applied obligations. The deification of 'Ali is the basic doctrine of the Alawite faith. The Alawites interpret the Pillars of Islam (the five duties required of every Muslim) as symbols and therefore do not practice these Islamic duties, and many of their practices are secret. They consider themselves as moderate Shi'ites. As the roots of Alawism lie in the teachings of Muhammad ibn Nusayr an-Numairi, who was a Basran contemporary of the tenth Shi'ite Imām, the group is frequently referred to as Nuṣayriyya or Numairiyya. Another sect that originally falls under Shi'ism is the Druze. The Druzes are deemed an eleventh-century offshoot of Ismaili Shi'ism, but the community's essential beliefs are significantly different from those of mainstream Shia Islam.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, the political system developed by the Sunni Muslims holds different concepts than those developed by the Shi'ite 'ulamā'. The Sunnis embraced and promoted concepts deemed pragmatic in nature, such as *ijmā'* (consensus), *'ahl al-ḥall wal-'aql* (elite scholars who loose and bind), *Khilāfah* (Caliphate), *Khalīfah* (Caliph), and *bay'a* (swearing allegiance to the Caliph). The Sunnis, or *'Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jamā'a*, believe that the Prophet did not designate anyone as his successor and that the Muslims would find a leader for themselves after his death. The pragmatic nature of the Sunni political practices stems from this belief. Therefore, a consensus among the Muslims and the role of *'ahl al-ḥall wal-'aql* are deemed crucial is electing a Caliph to run the Caliphate after receiving *bay'a*. The Shi'ites, on the other hand, distinguished themselves by promoting concepts like *'Imāmah* (imamate), *wilāya* (guardianship), and *'iṣma* (faultlessness and infallibility of the Imām), arguing that it was extremely unlikely that God with his *luṭf* (benevolence) and *'adl* (justice) have left a crucial matter like the *imamate* (leadership) undecided.

<sup>32</sup> Moezzi, *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam*. xiv.

<sup>33</sup> The Ismailis founded states, cities and institutions, and had reportedly contributed to the traditions of scholarship in Islam and were known as elite members of the educational and arts communities with intellectual achievements throughout the

Islamic history. Today, they live as a religious minority in the region.

<sup>34</sup> Malbouisson, *Focus on Islamic Issues*. 19.

<sup>35</sup> Blanchard, *Islam: Sunnis and Shi'ites*. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Moaddel and Karabenick, *Religious Fundamentalism in the Middle East*. 94.

This is a basic argument by the Shia to legitimize 'Ali's succession. It was also emphasized through their interpretation of the event of Ghadīr of Khumm, in contrast to the Sunni interpretation of the same event, as illustrated earlier. Thus, this argument demonstrates a key point of difference between the Shia and the Sunnis. The Shi'ites emphasized the importance of Imāms in the wilāya (guardianship) of the community in the absence of God's messenger. From a doctrinal perspective, both Sunnis and Shi'ites share the basic religious principles of Tawḥīd (monotheism), Nubuwwa (Muhammad's Messengership), and Ma'ād (Judgement Day). However, the Shi'ites included two additional principles to the ranks of doctrinal principles, namely, 'Imāmah and 'adl (divine justice). As a minority group among the Muslims, the Shi'ites historically sought a distinct identity as a strategy for survival.

The Sunnis, especially the strict traditionalists, are considered as a part of Islamic orthodoxy and they segregate the Shia as heterodox or even heretical sect. The orthodoxy of Sunni Muslims is mainly marked by an emphasis on the views and customs of the majority of the community ('umma), as distinguished from the views of peripheral groups. By developing an institution of consensus, the Sunnis were able to incorporate different customs and usages throughout history, although these had no roots in the Qur'ān. In Shi'ism, numerous Qur'ānic verses are explained in a hermeneutic way with reference to the primacy of 'Ali and the household of the Prophet, known as 'Ahl al-Bayt. This exemplifies the reasons why the Sunnis consider the Shia to be heterodoxical or heretical.<sup>37</sup> Such interpretations reveal more about the ideological and intellectual climate within which these sects emerged than about the tension they claim to depict and symbolize.<sup>38</sup> The Sunni-Shia tension is thus viewed as a political quarrel about the course of history, with Sunnis advocating the status quo and the Shi'ites representing those who mainly contest such conformism. According to many contemporary world leaders, politicians, intellectuals and media commentators, the ongoing tensions and instability across the Middle East are attributed to ancient rancor and hostility between Sunnis and Shi'ites that emerged and developed since the dawn of Islam.<sup>39</sup>

#### 4. The Melting-Pot: Linguistic, Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Local languages are deemed essential for mapping and understanding the multiple identities of the

Middle East. As the linguistic boundaries do not comply with the national borderlines in the region, it is of an extreme importance to grasp the linguistic map in order to obtain an image of the cultural diversity in the Middle East, given the key relation between language and identity. Identity is deeply bound up with the linguistic interaction among people. Group identities are deemed ways of conceiving the relationship of people to one another, and the same may be said of the individual identities that represent, in part at least, repertoires of these group belongings.<sup>40</sup> Languages provide more knowledge about histories than recently-drawn and colonially-imposed national borders.

The numerous languages that coexist in the Middle East mainly belong to three linguistic categories: Semitic, Iranian and Ural-Altai. The Semitic Languages include Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic/Syriac, among others. The Iranian (Indo-European) linguistic category includes Persian, Pashto, Kurdish, Baluchi and others. Under the Ural-Altai category fall the Turkish and other Turkic languages like Azeri and Uzbek.

The Semitic languages derive their significance from being part of the identity of some ancient Semitic civilizations, including Sumeria, Aramaic-speaking communities,<sup>41</sup> Hebrew and Arab communities. Today, Arabic is the most common spoken language in the Middle East, with over 300 million speakers, yet with various Arabic dialects.<sup>42</sup> Being the Qur'ān's formal language has given Arabic a prestigious and elite position across the Muslim world. The Qur'ān describes itself as being 'arabiyyun (Arabic) and mubīnun (clear). These two attributes, according to Versteegh, are intimately connected.<sup>43</sup> In Q43:2-3, we read, "wa-l-kitābi l-mubīni: 'innā ja'alnāhu qur'ānan 'arabiyyan la'allakum ta'qalūn" (By the clear Book: We have made it an Arabic recitation in order that you may understand).

Persian or Farsi also occupies an important position among Middle Eastern languages, with an estimated 80 million speakers, mainly based in Iran. Turkish is another key language in the region, with more than 70 million speakers. However, the speakers of these three major languages in the Middle East are not all native-speakers. This includes, but not limited to, ethnic minorities such as the Armenians, Kurds, Amazigh, Assyrians, among others. The Kurds, who historically inhabit parts of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, have Kurdish as their native tongue beside speaking the prevalent or official languages within the

<sup>37</sup> Stefon, *Islamic Beliefs and Practices*. 134.

<sup>38</sup> Brunner, *Sunnis and Shi'ites in Modern Islam: Politics, Rapprochement and the Role of Al-Azhar*. 26.

<sup>39</sup> Hashemi and Postel, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Joseph, *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious*. 16.

<sup>41</sup> Aramaic was the native tongue of Jesus Christ.

<sup>42</sup> See 'Approaches to Arabic Dialects' by Manfred Woidich (2004).

<sup>43</sup> Versteegh, *The Arabic Language, Second Edition*. 42.

borderlines of each of these countries. The Kurdish language unifies over 35 million Kurds and constitutes a key part of their cultural identity. Language constitutes a key instrument for the Kurds in their struggle for recognition as a people. Kreyenbroek and Sperl maintain that the Kurdish language "is both proof and symbol of the separate identity of the Kurds," and the significance of language in the struggle for maintaining identity was constantly emphasized by the advocates of the Kurdish rights in the Middle East.<sup>44</sup> Another prominent language of Semitic origins is the Hebrew. Hebrew is the main spoken language among Middle Eastern Jews, with approximately 5 million speakers, mainly in Israel. Other main languages spoken by Middle Eastern communities are Aramaic, Syriac, Baluch, Amazigh, Azeri and Armenian, beside numerous dialects and sub-dialects.<sup>45</sup>

This linguistic mosaic can be seen as a reflection of the diversity that characterizes the region and its populations, and is hoped to draw the reader's attention to the melting-pot of identities historically embraced by this region. The deep roots of the linguistic identities that enrich the Middle East have remained intact to a certain level, in spite of the challenges encountered by the populations of the region over the past and present centuries.

The world's three major religions –Judaism, Christianity, and Islam– have originated in the Middle East, a fact that reflects the significant role this region has played in the historical development of human civilization.<sup>46</sup> Today, the Muslims constitute a majority in the Middle East, the Christians live as minority groups across the region, and the Jews form a majority in Israel beside smaller Jewish communities residing in other countries. Interestingly, the term minority ('aqalliyya) was introduced to the Middle East by European powers during the second half of the nineteenth century with reference to the protection of Christians in the Ottoman Empire. According to some accounts, while the region was still under Ottoman rule, the concept of minorization was used as a pretext to justify European intervention into the Ottoman internal affairs.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Kreyenbroek and Sperl, *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*. 53.

<sup>45</sup> The statistics mentioned are based on a comparative research across multiple sources, since none provides an officially certified or academically reliable statistics on the speakers of each of these languages. Several sources were used in order to provide this brief mapping of the linguistic diversity in the Middle East, including the Middle East Studies Center at the Ohio State University, Yasir Suleiman's *Language and Identity in the Middle East and North Africa* (2013), *Bilingualism in the Middle East and North Africa* by Judith Rosenhouse and Mira Goral (2004), among others.

<sup>46</sup> Gunderson, *Religions of the Middle East*. 5.

The Muslim community includes two major sects, namely, the Sunni, which forms the largest Islamic branch and is in power in most of Middle Eastern countries; and the Shia, the second powerful group of Muslims which in its turn is divided into subjects, including Twelvers, Seveners, Zaydis, Alawites, among others. Countries in the region with a great proportion of Sunni Muslims are Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, UAE, Qatar, Yemen and Palestine, and form a smaller community in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon. The Shia constitute a majority in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain, and live as a minority in countries like Syria, UAE, Yemen, among others.<sup>48</sup>

Christianity, on the other hand, is practiced by several communities in the Middle East, the largest of which is the Coptic community. The Coptic Orthodox Christian population consists of approximately 11 million people, most of whom reside in Egypt, and a part of the community exists in smaller numbers in Sudan, Libya, Israel and Jordan. The Maronites form another prominent Christian community in the region, with an estimated population of over 1 million, and are mainly based in Lebanon. The Middle East is also home for Syriac and Assyrian Christians who constitute a part of the historical social mosaic in Syria, Iraq, southeastern Turkey and northwestern Iran. The Armenians also form a main part of the Middle Eastern Christian community, and are mainly concentrated in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iran and Palestine. It is worth mentioning that the Christian communities in the Middle East were exposed to persecution, genocide and mass displacement. The Armenian Genocide is the most memorable example in this regard, when the Ottomans during the late phase of the empire (1915-1917) systematically exterminated approximately 1.5 million Armenians.<sup>49</sup> In conjunction with the Armenian Genocide, the Assyrian Christians were also exposed to mass killings by the Ottoman troops during WWI, and the death toll reached approximately 300,000 people. Such massacres were coupled with waves of mass displacement among the Christians in search of a safe haven in the region and abroad. Furthermore, the emergence of radical Islamist groups in the

<sup>47</sup> Longva, and Roald, *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation*. 4.

<sup>48</sup> This mapping is based on a comparative research throughout several sources, including a demographic study by the Pew Research Center (Retrieved from: <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/middle-east-north-africa/>); socio-political charts on Middle Eastern populations by the WGBH Educational Foundation (Retrieved from: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/maps/demotext.html>); and a demographic study by the Center for Educational Technologies at the Wheeling Jesuit University (Retrieved from: <http://www.cotf.edu/earthinfo/meast/mepeo.html>).

<sup>49</sup> Balakian, Raphael Lemkin, *Cultural Destruction, and the Armenian Genocide*. 57.

early 21<sup>st</sup> century led to terror attacks and military campaigns against Christian towns and villages in various countries in the region, the destruction of numerous churches, forced disappearance of many Christians and the emigration of a large proportion of the population toward the West. Today, the Christians are believed to have become a threatened minority in the Middle East.

Judaism constitutes the main religion in Israel, where Jews form over 73 per cent of the population. Although the Jews used to reside in most of today's Middle Eastern countries, most of the Jewish communities gradually emigrated their countries of origin in the mid-twentieth century amid a growing antisemitism movement and with the rise of the Arab-Israeli tension that followed the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. However, some Jews still reside in Middle Eastern areas outside Israel, but in smaller numbers and as scattered communities.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, the religious diversity of the Middle East goes beyond these three religions and finds its origins deep in the history of the region. Zoroastrianism, founded around 3400 years ago, is considered one of the oldest monotheistic religions, including two deities: Ahura Mazda (struggle for human goodness) and Ahriman (pushing toward evilness), and the Avesta is the Zoroastrians' sacred text. According to Zoroastrianism, as maintained in the Avesta, Ahura Mazda was the creator of life, light and all good things, and Ahriman was responsible for darkness, death and destruction.<sup>51</sup> Today's Middle Eastern Zoroastrian community includes approximately 20,000 members who are mainly concentrated in central Iran.

The Yezidis also represent one of the oldest Middle Eastern religious communities, with some Zoroastrian elements, worshipping a main divinity known as Tāwsê Malak or Peacock Angel. The Tāwsê Malak, also known as Malak-Tāwūs, is deemed to be the most important theological figure within the Yezidi triad and is considered the essence of the Yezidi religion. In the Yezidi Statement of Faith, Tāwsê Malak is featured directly after God.<sup>52</sup> The Yezidis today number around 100,000 and are mainly found in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. Noteworthy, the Yezidis have been exposed to brutal acts of mass executions, forced displacement and sex slavery at the hands of extremist Islamists of ISIS during the group's expansion and invasion of Yezidi towns and villages in northern Iraq in 2014-2015. Religious minorities

like the Yezidis are viewed by radical Islamists as heretical and Satanists, which has led the Yezidis to suffer heavy suppressive practices and encounter an existential threat represented by groups such as ISIS. Many Yezidi villages in northern Iraq remained deserted even after the collapse of ISIS, as mounting numbers of Yezidi survivors headed to the West in search of a safe haven.

Shabakism is another Middle Eastern religion and it shares some elements with the Yezidis. The Shabaks now number approximately 60,000 and are concentrated in northern Iraq. There are several other religious groups to be found in the region, including Mandaeans, Baha'is, Druze, Ishikis, Samaritans, among others, beside a limited and scattered number of nonbelievers.

Thus, the Middle East constitutes an incubator to various religious groups and identities, which have contributed to the rise and development of diverse civilizations and cultures. Despite the multiple challenges various religious communities, particularly the minorities, have encountered throughout the modern history of the region, the diverse values, principles, customs, and beliefs introduced by such communities remain undeniable elements and characteristics of the comprehensive identity of the contemporary Middle East.

The term ethnicity is used to refer to a group of people who identify with each other based on similar characteristics, such as common culture, descent, society, language or nation, with a sense of belonging and affiliation involved.<sup>53</sup> Thus, an ethnic group is mainly defined by shared cultural heritage, history, language, homeland or customs among its members.

The Middle East is home to several ethnic groups and cultural communities, with only few groups forming the majority of the total population and numerous others living as minorities across the region. The Arabs constitute the largest ethnic group in most of Middle Eastern states, except Turkey, Iran, and Israel. The term Arab originally refers to the peoples of northern and central Arabian Peninsula, and subsequent to the historical expansion of Arab-Islamic empires the term became synonymous with Arabic speakers.<sup>54</sup> Today, the Arabs primarily inhabit 22 Middle Eastern countries –with a total population of over 300 million– that together form the Arab League.<sup>55</sup> The Turkic people are the second largest ethnic group in the Middle East. They primarily inhabit

<sup>50</sup> Shoup, *Ethnic Groups of Africa and the Middle East: An Encyclopedia*. 133.

<sup>51</sup> Kia, *The Persian Empire: A Historical Encyclopedia*. 185.

<sup>52</sup> This is uttered in the Yezidi Statement of Faith, "Min sha'datīya 'imānā xwa, Bi nāvē xwadē ū Tāwūsē Malak dāya – I attest that my faith is given, In the names of god and Tāwsê Malak." See Asatrian, G. and Arakelova, V. (2014). *The Religion of the Peacock Angel: The Yezidis and their Spirit World*. 10.

<sup>53</sup> Croucher, *Global Perspectives on Intercultural Communication*. 359.

<sup>54</sup> Hitti, *The Arabs: A Short History*. 5.

<sup>55</sup> The Arab League was founded in Cairo in 1945 by Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Lebanon, Transjordan and Yemen. The membership increased during the second half of the twentieth century to include 22 member states in total.

Turkey, where they constitute approximately 80 per cent of the population that numbers some 70 million. The Turkic people share common historical background and language.<sup>56</sup> Another major ethnic group in the region is the Persian. Making up about 50 per cent of the population of Iran, the Persians share common cultural heritage, customs and traditions, and are native speakers of the Persian language. Beside the Persians, Iran is also home to several other ethnic communities such as the Kurds, Arabs, Lurs, Tats, Ballochs, Gilakis, Talshis, Azerbaijanis, Turkmen, Circassians, Armenians, among others. According to Lambton, the cultural diversity in Iran prevented the rise of nationalism, as the sense of being a Persian did not provide an adequate basis for nationalism in the modern sense, and the common feeling among the people as a whole was religious, not national. They shared a common religious background.<sup>57</sup>

The Kurds constitute the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, with a population estimated at 35-40 million. The Kurdish people, deemed to be one of the largest stateless nations in the world, mostly inhabit contiguous areas stretching from southeastern Turkey (Northern Kurdistan) to northern Iraq (Southern Kurdistan), and from northern Syria (Western Kurdistan) to northwestern Iran (Eastern Kurdistan).<sup>58</sup> The common cultural, linguistic and historical heritage compose the basis for a shared identity among the Kurds.

Furthermore, there are dozens of other ethnic communities that inhabit the MENA region, some of which have played a key role in the development of the region throughout history and contributed to the establishment of its ancient civilizations. These include the Assyrians, Arameans, Armenians, among others. Today, many of these groups live as minorities across the region and have encountered and survived considerable hardships. The long list of ethnically-diverse communities of the Middle East stretches to include Lurs, Mandeans, Copts, Amazighs, Ballochs, Samaritans, Mhallamis, Turkmen, Circassians, Tats, Talishis, and others.<sup>59</sup>

## 5. Manifestations: A Jeopardized Cultural Diversity

The cultural diversity that once enriched the Middle East on multiple levels, and the historical

coexistence among the region's various communities, have been threatened and jeopardized by a few sectarian extremist groups whose atrocities reached every single social component with different religious, doctrinal or ideological tenets.<sup>60</sup> Ethnic and religious minorities have become a target to radical groups, and sedition was ignited and reinforced by the extremist discourse of sectarian organizations in the region. In addition, people from different social components were suppressed for their critical position toward radical groups – whose oppressive practices and atrocities undermined public liberties and deprived people of their basic civil rights.

The sectarian narrative has remarkably become a crucial explanatory feature of conflict in today's Middle East.<sup>61</sup> This narrative basically involves considering the seventh century Sunni-Shia split and struggle over the succession of the Prophet as responsible for the region's recent descent into unrest and, in certain cases, civil war. This millennium-and-a-half-old conflict has been reproduced over and over throughout the history of the region, and is currently one of the key factors of instability in Iraq, Syria and other parts of the region, nourished and reinforced by the rise and expansion of extremist groups. The Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 led to the emergence of an extremist Shia agenda in the Middle East, challenged by conservative Sunni regimes. Over the past four decades, Iran has provided a remarkable support to Shia parties and militias in several countries, including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. On the other hand, some Sunni-led states established relations with Sunni movements and developed an anti-Iranian discourse to confront Tehran's growing influence in the region. Today, multiple tensions in the region have a fierce sectarian overtone. Iranian troops and Iran-backed Lebanese Shia militia of Hezbollah have been involved in the Syrian war for years, defending the (Shia-affiliated) Alawite regime there against the Sunni-dominated opposition forces. Meanwhile, radical Sunni jihadist groups have repeatedly targeted Shia-controlled areas and their places of worship in Iraq and Syria.<sup>62</sup> Such conflicts have considerably contributed to the severity of sectarian divide between Middle Eastern

<sup>56</sup> Stokes et al., *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Africa and the Middle East*. 616.

<sup>57</sup> Lambton, *Social Change in Persia in the Nineteenth Century*. 150.

<sup>58</sup> These four parts together form the so-called Great Kurdistan, the unattained independent Kurdish state. Chaliand, *A People without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Mapping the Middle Eastern communities undoubtedly requires an in-depth research into such a broad domain, which, however, goes beyond the framework of this volume. Any shortage in mentioning or elaborating on a specific group or community should thus be seen within the framework of

relevance to the topic at hand and the limits demarcated by the core objective of this study.

<sup>60</sup> Abdulmajid, *Religious Diversity and Conflict in the Middle East*. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Dixon, *Beyond Sectarianism in the Middle East: Comparative Perspectives on Group Conflict*. 11.

<sup>62</sup> These developments also ignited Shia-led attacks on Sunni areas in Iraq, where ethnic cleansing campaigns at the hands of al-Hashd al-Shaabi militiamen were reported. See Human Rights Watch's report on abuses by Shia militiamen in Sunni areas near Mosul: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/16/iraq-looting-destruction-forces-fighting-isis>.

communities, in some cases forcing the people to take sides as a condition for survival.

Crisis-stricken parts of the Middle East, particularly Syria and Iraq, reflect the dark outcome of a long chain of events and developments that have hit the region over decades on socio-political and religio-sectarian levels. Religionized and sectarianized policies by governing authorities in various parts of the region, and the associated practices of marginalization, discrimination, exclusion, misrepresentation and othering, ultimately produce and feed radicalism, incite rancor and hostility among different components of the society, and allow sectarian-guided extremist groups a sufficient foothold to rise and thrive. The recent multifaceted developments in the Middle East, hold serious implications for the future of the region and its populations, and the world as a whole in this age of globalization. The arduous journey of searching for efficient approaches to dismantle the extremist sectarian-guided ideology of radical Islamist groups, and methods to deter its threat, begins with understanding and comprehending the fundamental elements of such an ideology, the conditions that led to its emergence in the first place, and the agenda its adherents tend to realize.

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