Islamic Identity Conflict:
The Symbiotic Sectarianism of Sunni and Shia as Seen through Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

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Abstract

The divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims is rooted in divergent opinions about the succession of Islamic leadership, how some parts of the Qur'an are to be interpreted, and different understandings of how to be a Muslim. These differences are magnified in a long-standing and intense struggle among nations and ethnic groups for political power in the Middle East and beyond. Although most Muslims reject sectarianism, some have debased Sunni and Shia identities to justify their pursuit of power and influence. This article employs four of Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions to better understand the social and political aspects of the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims: (1) exclusion in an inclusive culture; (2) uncertainty avoidance; (3) short-term orientation; and (4) power distance.

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Introduction

Despite regular news reports that suggest the contrary, Sunni and Shia Muslims have lived together in the Middle East for many centuries (Pew, 2012; Pew, 2013). Although religious differences exist between them, Sunnis and Shias maintain core beliefs in Islam, perform similar prayers, live side by side, and some intermarry (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). Sadly, Sunni and Shia identity has become increasingly politicized over the last few decades (Trofimov, 2015). Differences between them are magnified with rhetoric, destruction, and violence aimed less at theology and more at political and territorial rewards for the countries they inhabit, the ethnicities they represent, and the histories they remember (Trofimov, 2015).

Sectarianism highlights religious differences between Sunni and Shia in order to create an enemy, an evil "other" (Black, 2015), which works well to divide people, recruit fighters, and attract resources (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). Attacking one's religion and sanctity generates a reaction more powerful than asking people to "fight for [mere] regional or international influence" (Trofimov, 2015). As George Bernard Shaw (1922) observed, "Man . . . will fight for an idea like a hero. He may be abject as a citizen; but he is dangerous as a fanatic" (p. 111). The sectarian divide between Sunni-Shia Islam is a fanatical struggle for social identity and political power.

This paper will compare and contrast a number of Sunni and Shia cultural attributes in order to understand why and how Islamic sectarianism persists. The analysis focuses on sectarianism in the Middle East, primarily between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and Persians and Arabs, to highlight the roles that nationality and ethnicity play in the dynamic. Featured throughout this article is the work of Geert Hofstede, who analyzed employee personnel survey data when he was employed by IBM and wrote a popular book entitled *Culture's Consequences* (Hofstede, 2001). Hofstede is considered a pioneer in the field of cross-cultural understanding (Lewis, 2006). He developed a paradigm, or cultural dimensions, through which one can understand and distinguish world cultures (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 29-32). This paper will analyze Sunni-Shia sectarianism through the four dimensions developed by Hofstede: group inclusion, uncertainty avoidance, temporal orientation, and power distance.

Basic Differences Between Sunni and Shia

The split between Sunni and Shia Muslims started when the Prophet Muhammad died in 632 A.D. and disagreements developed over who should lead the faith (National Public Radio, 2007). This disagreement has deeply and irrevocably divided Muslims (Madelung, 1997, p.1). Some wanted to choose a new leader by consensus, but others wanted to limit leadership to the Prophet's descendants (Harney, 2016). The advocates for consensus prevailed, elevating Abu Bakr, a trusted aid to the Prophet Muhammad, but not without objection from the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law Ali and his supporters (Madelung, 1997, p. 43). After Bakr's two successors were killed – an unfortunate early sign of violence - Ali eventually became caliph, or successor and the first imam for Shias (BBC News, 2016). But by then, Islam deepened its internal division with an early civil war (Madelung, 1997, p. 135).

Ali was assassinated, as were Ali's sons, Hassan and Hussein (Hilal, 2012). Hassan is thought to have been poisoned, perhaps by the caliph of the Umayyad dynasty (BBC News, 2016). Hussein and a number of his relatives were executed in Karbala, Iraq, in 680 when he refused to pledge allegiance

to Yazid, son of Muawiya, a Umayyad caliph (Battle of Karbala). Hussein's death became an important religious and political event to Shia Muslims, since they believe Ali should have been the first to succeed the Prophet, with either or both his sons, Hassan and Hussein, following thereafter (Harney, 2016). Others, who believe Bakr and his two successors are the true adherents to the Prophet's tradition, became the Sunnis (Harney, 2016). More than 85 percent of the world's Muslims are Sunni and comprise majority populations in Middle-Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt (BBC News, 2016).

Theologically speaking, Sunni and Shia agree on many aspects of the Islamic faith. Both have a wide spectrum of believers from liberal to conservative, secular to fundamentalist (Harney, 2016). Both believe in one God, Allah, whose final Prophet is Muhammad, and whose final book is the Qur'an (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). Most Shia believe in a line of 12 Imams (spiritual successors or leaders) connecting back to Ali (Harney, 2016). The Imams are afforded an amount of "spiritual significance" that may blur the line between human and divine, sin and salvation (National Public Radio, 2007).

The succession rift has led to theological and legal differences within Islam. For instance, Sunni and Shia disagree over which source of authority to consult when the Qur'an is unclear (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). Legitimate interpretive and practice differences exist between competing legal schools of Islamic thought (Crow & Mousssavi, 2005, p.31). The split between Sunni and Shia has endured and intensified because it is a struggle for political power not just between Sunni and Shia, but between Arabs and Persians, and superpowers such as the United States and Russia over influence in the region and the world (National Public Radio, 2007). The cultural attributes of Sunni and Shia presented in this paper are analyzed against this wider political power-struggle.

Exclusion in a Collective Culture

Cultures that value group affiliation define themselves by excluding "outsiders from the circle" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 98). Collective roots run deep in the Middle East region (Hofstede, et al., 2010, pp. 94-95). Since the early developments of Islam, Muslims have fought themselves in the pursuit of "purity and truth" in the name of the Qur'an and the succession of the Prophet Muhammad (Marechal and Zemni, 2013, p. 227). Those who betray the faith, or the tribe, are "apostates" (a popular term in the sectarian arsenal (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014)), and are worse than outsiders (Rubin, 2014). But political divisions produce the sectarian divisions (Marechal and Zemni, 2013, p. 227). Although sectarians may focus on a name, residence location, or how one prays, etc., the rhetoric aims for political manipulation (Cholov, 2015).

For centuries, Sunni and Shia have tolerated each other's differences without resorting to violence (Pew, 2012). The "confessional identity" of Arabs and individual Muslims was a private concern (Black, 2015). Tolerance and acceptance of ethnic and religious outsiders allowed Arabs to see themselves as part of a larger homogeneous collection (Black, 2015), although opinions vary as to whether Arab countries can be treated as one unit (Obeidat et al., 2012, pp. 512-522). Ironically, according to Hofstede's findings on group orientation, only individuals (i.e., those at the in-group "negative pole") tolerate and respect everyone, including outsiders (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 98). Those at the "positive pole" of in-group identification, who try to appeal to strong in-group preference through sectarianism are themselves outsiders of Islam's mainstream (Kirdar, 2011). Forces that divide Sunni and Shia do not act for all

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Sunni or Shia (Cole, 2015). What religious orators proclaim is not what the "flock" believes (Sen, 2006, p. 77). Sunni and Shia are often grouped into Arab and Persian ethnic bands, respectively. As Arabs, Sunnis often distrust (in some cases despise) Shias on account of their Persian ethnicity (Luomi, 2008, p. 10, 17). Iran, a Persian country that is mostly Shia, does not identify with Arab culture (Lewis, 2006, p. 396). Since Iraq is the only Arab state with majority Shia population, and now that Sunni leader Saddam Hussein is out of power, Iraqi Shias look to Iran to support their efforts to lead the country, while Iraqi Sunnis get support from Saudi Arabia to regain control (Lewis, 2006, p. 425).

As the sectarian divisions deepen and intensify, the distinctions between Arab-Persian, even Sunni-Shia narrow, splinter and swell in number. Numerous divisions exist within ethnic and sectarian groups in Iraq, for example (Blaydes and Crenshaw, 2015). Before its civil war, Syria was home to diverse ethnic and religious groups (Polk, 2013). Now, the fighting in Syria has grown to include so many "mutually hostile" groups that prospects for a negotiated solution or military victory seem next to impossible (Polk, 2013; al-Assisl, 2017).

A Shia revival – the rising power of Iran, the prominence of Shia politicians in Iraq, and other Shia responses to Sunni scrutiny of Shia political pursuits - is one rationale posited for the increase in sectarianism (Haddad, 2013, p. 2; Vali, 2007). According to this view, sectarian rhetoric is employed to contain Iranian political objectives (Luomi, 2008, p. 28). According to Marechal and Zemni (2013), however, this explanation does not account for long periods of relatively peaceful cohabitation and interaction between Sunni and Shia (pp. 226-227). Instead of Shias reacting to Sunni opposition, perhaps, as Marechal and Zemni (2013) state, the tension is "between a dream of unity and the reality of internal divisions" where a complex, historical narrative denotes different understandings of how to be a Muslim. (pp. 226-227).

Anxieties and Opportunities in Uncertainty

Cultures are fashioned, in part, to create the illusion that events and outcomes can be controlled (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 188-198). Laws are created, in part, to inject stability and predictability in human affairs. Religion relieves anxieties about unknowable outcomes in this life and beyond (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 188-198).

The Middle East is a region of high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 193-194). When it comes to ideas and religion, high uncertainty avoidance cultures are likely to "harbor extremist minorities," have "more native terrorists," believe in "only one truth," exert lethal penalties against those they deem wrong, and maintain intolerant political ideologies (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 221, 227, 229). As Hofstede points out, within Islam there is a "visible conflict between more and less uncertainty-avoiding factions" where both sides can be "dogmatic, intolerant, fanatical, and fundamentalist" (2010, p. 229).

The arch-rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a good example of Sunni – Shia conflict in the context of a region of high uncertainty avoidance. The two countries share a history of hostilities and accusations of supporting extremists (BBC News, 2016). Iran is more tolerant of uncertainty than Saudi Arabia (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 193-194). With its revolution still fairly fresh, Iran sees a measure of opportunity in instability and expresses less anxiety about unknown future events (Black, 2015). Saudi

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Arabia, which is more conservative, prefers the status quo (Terrill, 2011, p. ix.). This reinforces Iran's reputation as an aggressor who meddles in the region, stoking Saudi suspicion and fear about what it will do next (BBC News, 2016).

Saudi Arabia and Iran are involved in many, if not most of the regions' conflicts (Sen, 2006, p. 72). No less than six different Arab countries are "proxy battlefields" for the Iranian-Saudi conflict, including battles in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and elsewhere (Khouri, 2016). As long as Iranian Shias and Saudi Sunnis harbor deep mistrust of each other as they compete for political influence, the region will remain unstable. The use of religion as a political weapon may delude extremists on both sides into thinking that they are avoiding uncertainty but, ironically, they are creating it.

Short-Term Orientation

When the past is highly valued, attention is diverted from the future. Short-term orientation is evident when traditions become "sacrosanct" and important events occur now or in the past (Hofstede, 2011, p. 15). According to Hofstede (2010), Sunni and Shia both place great value on tradition (p. 270). As explained earlier, Sunni and Shia identity came into being centuries ago as each one claimed it was more pure and true than the other. Moral foundations such as authority/respect and purity/sanctity generally support religious beliefs but fundamentalists and sectarians twist Islam's mandates for "purity" to fit their own purposes (Graham and Haidt, 2010, p. 144).

Intense short-term orientation supports a fundamentalist perspective and justifies acts of terrorism and violence as it places the future "in the hands of God" (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 275-276). When Sunni-Shia or Islamic identity is attacked, it can radicalize the person who has a short-term fixation, perhaps due to humiliation and poor economic prospects (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 269-270). Thus, access to power and resources is a key factor that can deescalate radicalization and terrorism-related violence.

Power Distance: Might Makes Right

Hofstede (2010) defines power distance as the degree to which less powerful members of society "expect and accept" power to be "distributed unequally" (p. 61). He defines this dimension from the perspective of the less powerful because leaders need followers; authority needs obedience (Hofstede, 2010, pp. 61-62). High power distance societies tend to value authority, tradition, religion, and military force where "might makes right" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 77). Leaders are expected to look as powerful as possible; political opinions and parties, if allowed, are extreme and disputes turn violent (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 77). Societal change usually comes through revolution, and new leaders revert back to the same violent governing tactics practiced by their authoritarian predecessors. Paradoxically, citizens of high power distance societies find some security in the arrangement (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 77).

Saudi Arabia is a high power distance country and Sunnis tend to experience greater high power distance than Shia (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 57-58). Saudi Arabia is a monarchy and a strict Islamic state (Aftandilian, 2015, p. 22). As for Shia power distance, Iranian democracy reduces power distance to some degree despite ultimate authority residing in an unelected supreme leader, the ayatollah (Fisher, 2013). Iran experiences cycles of high and low power distance. The Iranian Revolution in 1979 was a low

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power distance backlash against the Shah's totalitarian rule, followed by a high power distance struggle with Iraq and clerics who had assumed control (Wood, 2011, pp. 405, 408). Low power distance returned after the war with Iraq when public opposition to authoritative clerics led to the election of moderate President Khatami who warmed relations with Sunnis in Saudi Arabia and others followed by high power distance when conservative President Ahmadinejad "crushed" a 2009 movement protesting his "re-election" (BBC News, 2016). Low power distance returned again when voters gave current President Hassan Rouhani a decisive victory for a second term (Dehghan, 2017). For Rouhani, democracy is not a "gift" from the west; rather it is heritage to Ali, "who became caliph only when people showed him support" (Dehghan, 2017). Uncertainty over succession of Ayatollah Khamenei is also a factor that contributes to the variability of power distance in Iran (Dehghan, 2017).

For Middle Eastern Sunni and Shia, power distance is a cultural dimension that can extend far beyond localized or regionalized conflict. The ever-present forces of Iran and Saudi Arabia and their global allies, including the United States and Russia, are sources of power distances in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere (Aftandilian, 2015, p. 10). Efforts to control oil and gas resources in Iran and Iraq have escalated power distance (and uncertainty avoidance) to global levels. Large Shia populations reside in oil rich zones located in strategically important Persian Gulf coastal areas where access by sea is critical (Luomi, 2008, p. 27). All other oil resources in the Persian Gulf region are controlled by Arab governments that are allied with the United States (Luomi, 2008, p. 27). Understandably, some Muslims do not trust the United States (Rashid, 2012). Perhaps this issue – power distance and uncertainty over oil – is the central driver of conflict between Sunni and Shia as "economic uncertainty and humiliation" trigger an intense level of sectarian destruction (Kirdar, 2011, p. 7).

Whether Power Sharing Can Reduce Sectarianism and Violence

Power-sharing among Sunni and Shia seems to be a direct, obvious, and reasonable response to sectarian violence. In theory, power-sharing agreements intend to provide warring groups representation in government (Lavinder, 2016). Adjustments to the economic interests of Sunni and Shia could have the beneficial effect of shortening power distances and balancing power. Aftandilian (2015) suggests sharing national power with some Sunnis or at least "an equitable share of national wealth from oil revenues, to address . . . concerns about living under a Shia-dominated regime" (pp. 41-42).

The primary problem, in this author's opinion, is leverage. Often, there is no compelling interest that will motivate a tribe or governing authority to share power or resources. In Syria, for example, UN member states could not agree on preconditions to the negotiation and its objective – regime-change or a power-sharing arrangement (Mancini & Vericat, 2016, pp. 8-9). Syrian opposition forces were not strong enough to force the Assad regime to make concessions (Mancini & Vericat, 2016, p. 10). No one represented the Syrian citizens, so humanitarian appeals were ignored (Mancini & Vericat, 2016, p. 10).

Had UN mediators focused their efforts on making deals at the local level, the result may have been different (Mancini & Vericat, 2016, pp. 10, 16). Tribes and militias tend to be opportunistic and entrepreneurial, and therefore, their loyalties can be manipulated. State functions such as crime prevention, "economic development, and infrastructure maintenance" can be, and sometimes are transferred to "community-based militias" (Rosiny, 2013). If some degree of normalcy and predictability can be established within smaller communities to improve everyday quality-of-life, while empowering local

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tribes that are organized under a federal or territorially-based governmental structure, perhaps a measure of security can take hold so that radical views would not find fertile ground. For example, following the first Gulf War with Iraq, Saddam Hussein granted wider autonomy to Sunni clerics in exchange for fewer challenges to his regime (Kirdar, 2011, pp. 12-13). The Shia-led government in Iraq must find a way to include the Kurdistan Regional Government and Iraq's Arab Sunnis in an equitable, long-range power-sharing agreement to prevent further instability and sectarian violence (Alaaldin, 2017).

In this author's opinion, effective power-sharing initiatives must be sensitive to historical narratives and encompass all interests fairly. To be durable, power-sharing agreements have to transcend preferential treatment that governing authorities give to allies (Blaydes & Crenshaw, 2015). Governments need to form inclusively as in Kuwait, where Sunni – Shia "polarization" does not exist to the same degree compared to kingdoms born from conquest such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia (Louer, 2012).

Conclusion

A strong, symbiotic interrelationship exists between Sunnis and Shias. Both sides have developed deep attachments to the identity they find in comparing themselves to each other. Cultural forces such as security within groups, controlling the future, and access to resources can be strong and influential in the struggle for legitimacy and meaning for Muslims and people of all religious and ethnic identities. Unfortunately, in the midst of the struggle, appeals to our baser instincts are common and motivational.

By sowing seeds of sectarian divide and religious hate, destabilization grows faster and larger than anticipated (Polk, 2013). The territorial and political aims behind sectarianism are diverted into never ending cycles of tit-for-tat violence that extend the historical memory of all concerned and inhibit the creation of a secure and prosperous future.

Moderate Muslims are making their voices heard in Western countries, Europe, and Indonesia (Muslim Reform Movement). Among other things, moderate Muslims renounce violence, support human rights and the separation of Mosque and state. A world-wide publicity campaign makes the case for original "in-group" and that radical Islam is not Islam (Boston Globe, 2015).

Even though most Muslims reject extremism and violence from the wider Islamic culture, the opposite perception persists among many Westerners and non-Muslims. Whether negative stereotypes can change on a regional or global level may depend on future generations who are raised to value moderation and peace. When enough Muslims develop the will to change, sectarianism will no longer be relevant. As Irish politician David Trimble observes: "The dark shadow we seem to see in the distance is not really a mountain ahead, but the shadow of a mountain behind – a shadow from the past thrown forward into our future. It is the dark sludge of historical sectarianism. We can leave it behind us if we wish" (as cited in Shakdam, 2015).

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Journal of Living Together (2018) Volume 4-5, Issue 1

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