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Understanding the Complexities of Contemporary Sunni-Shia Relations and Their Prospects Post-Beijing Reconciliation 2023

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Abstract. The relationship between Sunni and Shia communities in the Islamic world has long been a global concern due to its historical, cultural, and political complexities. The purpose of this study is to classify the complexity of contemporary relations between Sunnis and Shias. Furthermore, this study is expected to describe the prospects for Sunni-Shia relations after the Beijing reconciliation agreement. The content analysis research method was chosen based on the instrument used by the researcher, namely the literature on Sunni and Shia developments. The results show that Sunnis, who mostly live in Saudi Arabia, and Shias, who mostly live in Iran, have different perspectives on religious understanding, especially regarding life principles. Shias are known as fanatical worshipers of Muhammad's grandson (Husain) and believe that only his descendants are worthy of becoming the next caliph. Meanwhile, Sunnis believe that the caliph can be chosen through consensus. This difference has become a conflict over the years and has developed into a conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Relations between the two can be strengthened in the Middle East if the Beijing reconciliation agreement is implemented and adhered to together for the advancement of the Arabian Peninsula in the eyes of the world.

Keywords: Sunni; Shia; Beijing Reconciliation; Complexities

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INTRODUCTION

On April 6, 2023, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud met in Beijing, China, to announce an agreement to resume diplomatic relations and reopen embassies in their respective countries' capitals (Lischinsky, 2023). This meeting was the result of mediation by China, which has good relations with both countries and has economic and strategic interests in the Middle East (Nawaz et al., 2023). The agreement also includes a shared agenda for resuming economic relations and pursuing regional stability.

Saudi-Iran are two countries that have great influence in the Middle East region, but also have differences in ideology, religion and interests (Ardovini, 2022). Saudi is a Sunni country allied with the United States and other Sunni Arab countries, while Iran is a Shiite country allied with Russia and countries like Syria and Lebanon. These two countries often compete for influence and power in the region, either directly or indirectly through support for armed groups or rebels in neighboring countries.

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The Saudi-Iranian conflict reached its peak in 2016, when Saudi executed Iranian Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who was accused of being involved in anti-government protests in Saudi (Mabon, 2019). Iran condemned the executions as a violation of human rights and called for retaliation. Iranian demonstrators then attacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the consulate in Mashhad, sparking anger from the Saudi side. Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations with Iran in January 2016 and invited other Arab countries to follow its steps (Mirtorabi, 2019). Diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran continue to deteriorate due to a rebellion allegedly led by a religious leader, which angered Iran and led to attacks on Saudi Arabia. This demonstrates that ideological differences are the cause of conflict between the two countries. While ideological differences typically arise within a single country, this unique situation demonstrates the complexities of ideology that can drive these two countries apart in the Middle East. Consequently, this conflict has created unnecessary divisions and harmed countries seeking investment from other regions.

This severance of diplomatic relations worsened the situation in the Middle East (Tukur et al., 2021) which was already hit by conflicts and crises in various countries such as Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Palestine. Saudi and Iran are involved in proxy wars in some of these countries by supporting opposing parties. For example, in Yemen, Saudi leads a military coalition supporting the internationally recognized government against Houthi rebels backed by Iran. In Syria, Iran supports the Bashar al-Assad regime which is fighting against rebels supported by Saudi and Western countries. The Saudi-Iranian conflict also affected relations between the Gulf state, which were divided into two camps: pro-Saudi states such as the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt, and pro-Iranian states such as Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait.

The dynamics and complexity of the relationship between the two are closely related to the Sunni and Shia divisions that have developed deep since the beginning of Islam (Kováčiková, 2019). Although both are rooted in the same history, deep divisions in theological beliefs and political views have formed a complicated history. This history, which often accompanies armed conflict and ideological disagreement, provides the basis for long-standing tensions between Sunnis and Shiites. In the contemporary era, the Sunni-Shia challenge not only affects the Muslim world, but also has a global impact (Kalim et al., n.d.).

Extremism and regional conflict continue to generate tensions that impact peace and stability. Efforts to achieve reconciliation and peace within the framework of dialogue between Sunnis and Shiites remain difficult, especially with recent developments such as the civil wars in Syria and Iraq. With a long history of division and complex contemporary challenges, Sunni-Shia

continues to be a critical issue in the Islamic world and global geopolitics. There is still hope to reach a better understanding and find a path towards peace and reconciliation between them. This is a key point that shows that all hope is not lost, and there are steps that can be taken to ease Sunni-Shia tensions. Peace and reconciliation remain highly desirable goals, despite the enormous challenges that need to be overcome. Efforts for dialogue and deeper mutual understanding between these two factions are an important first step towards the potential for a more peaceful and harmonious future.

Historically, this split began after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD (Usman et al., 2021). The conflict began regarding who should be the next leader of the Muslim community. Sunnis (from the words "Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah") support the leadership of Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman, while Shiites (from the words "Shi'atu Ali" or followers of Ali) believe that Imam Ali, his cousin and son-in-law The Prophet, is the legal heir. After the Prophet's death, the Muslim community entered a period of controversial leadership. Sunnis believe that Abu Bakr was the first caliph, while Shiites believe that Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, should be the successor. The conflict reached its peak at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD when Husein Bin Ali was killed by Umayyad troops (Shikoh, 2019). This event became the center of respect and sadness for the Shiite community.

Period 1929-1979: Relatively harmonious and pragmatic relations (Mohsin et al., 2020). In this period, Saudi and Iran emerged as modern countries with monarchical systems. Both countries have close ties with the West, especially the United States, and share an interest in maintaining stability and the status quo in the Middle East. The two countries also cooperate on several regional issues, such as the Palestine-Israel conflict, the Suez crisis and the Cold War. Despite some differences and rivalries, especially regarding roles and influence in the region, Saudi and Iran are able to maintain good relations and mutual respect.

Period 1979-2016: Strained and confrontational relations (Mohsin et al., 2020). In this period, Saudi and Iranian relations underwent drastic changes as a result of Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979, which overthrew the Western-backed Iranian monarchy and established a revolutionary and anti-Western Islamic republic. The Iranian revolution raised concerns for the Saudis, who felt threatened by Iran's ideology, religion, and ambitions to export revolution and lead the Islamic world. The two countries began to compete and conflict on various regional issues, such as the Iran-Iraq war, the Gulf war, the Iranian nuclear issue, the Syrian civil war, the Yemeni civil war, and the Iran-Saudi Arabia proxy conflict. Saudi and Iranian relations reached their lowest point in 2016, when the Saudis executed Iranian Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, triggering

an attack by Iranian protesters on the Saudi diplomatic mission in Tehran. Saudi Arabia also cut diplomatic relations with Iran, and invited other Arab countries to follow its steps.

2016-present period: Relationships seeking reconciliation (Mabon et al., 2021). In this period, Saudi and Iranian relations began to show signs of improvement, although they were still characterized by tensions and challenges. Factors driving reconciliation include changes in United States foreign policy, which has begun to reduce its involvement in the Middle East and pressure Saudi to end the war in Yemen; the role of China, which mediates between Saudi and Iran, and offers itself as a platform for dialogue and cooperation; and the awareness of both countries that their conflicts and disputes only harm both parties and threaten peace and stability in the region. In 2023, Saudi and Iran managed to reach an agreement to restore diplomatic relations and reopen embassies in each country's capital. The agreement also includes a shared agenda for resuming economic relations and pursuing regional stability.

METHODS

The method used in this research is content analysis. This method was used because of the limitations of the researcher in conducting observations in the area in question. So that, the researchers dig up information from books and journals which are relevant to the research title. Krippendorf (2013) explains that research on texts is qualitative: "Ultimately, all reading texts is qualitative, even when certain characteristics of a text are later converted into numbers." The use of numbers in creating content analysis methods will relate to numbers, but everything related to text is qualitative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Saudi adheres to the ideology of Sunni Wahhabism, a conservative, literalist and puritanical sect of Islam, which emphasizes loyalty to the teachings of the Koran and Hadith, and rejects all forms of heresy, shirk and takfir. Saudi also considers itself the leader of the Islamic world, because it is the custodian of the two holy cities, Mecca and Medina. On the other hand, Iran adheres to the ideology of Shia Khomeinism, a revolutionary, political and anti-imperialist sect of Islam, which emphasizes the concept of wilayat al-faqih, namely government by a cleric who is considered to be God's guardian on earth. Iran also considers itself the leader of the Shia world, because it has a rich history and traditions, and is a center of Shia science and culture.

The ideologies of Wahhabism and Khomeinism adopted by Saudi and Iran have had a major influence on the foreign policies of the two countries (Ansari & Aarabi, 2019). Broadly speaking, the influence of this ideology can be seen from several aspects, namely: Relations with the West: Saudi tends to be pro-Western, especially the United States, which is Saudi's main ally and guarantor of security in the region. Saudi also tries to maintain good relations with European

countries, especially in terms of trade and investment. Iran, on the other hand, tends to be anti-Western, especially the United States, which is considered the main enemy and source of injustice in the world. Iran is also trying to reduce dependence on the West, and is looking for alternative partners, such as Russia, China and non-aligned countries. Relations with Islamic countries: Saudi claims to be the leader of the Islamic world, being the custodian of the two holy cities, Mecca and Medina. Saudi Arabia is also trying to unite Islamic countries, especially Sunni ones, under the banner of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Saudi Arabia also provides aid and support to Islamist groups that are in line with Wahhabism ideology, such as the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS. Iran, on the other hand, claims to be the leader of the Shia world, because it has a rich history and traditions, and is a center of Shia science and culture. Iran is also trying to expand its influence among Shia countries and groups, such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain and Yemen. Iran also provides aid and support to Shia groups that are in line with the ideology of Khomeinism, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis.

Relations with Israel: The Saudis do not officially recognize the existence of Israel, and support the Palestinian people's rights to an independent state. However, secretly, Saudi has secret relations with Israel, especially in terms of intelligence and security, to face mutual threats from Iran (Gul et al., 2021). Saudi Arabia is also willing to make peace with Israel, as long as Israel withdraws from the territories it has occupied since 1967 and recognizes the two-state solution. Iran, on the other hand, openly rejects Israel's existence, considering it an illegal entity and a cancer in the Middle East. Iran also supports armed resistance against Israel, and provides aid and support to anti-Israel groups, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. Iran also insists that the only solution to the Palestinian problem is to wipe Israel off the map.

Saudi and Iranian ideologies often conflict and compete in influencing countries and groups in the Middle East, reflecting the differences between Sunni and Shia, the two main currents in Islam. Theological differences between Sunnis and Shiites can create significant obstacles. For example, differences in the understanding of leadership succession and the emphasis on the figure of the imam in Shia Islam. Saudi Arabia and Iran, as Sunni and Shiite leaders, compete for influence at regional and global levels. This rivalry reflects their differences in ideology and views on the role of Islam in world affairs. In Iran, the Supreme Religious Leader (Supreme Leader) has a key role in shaping state policy (Golmohammadi, 2019). The position of religious leaders influences the views and steps taken in regional and international contexts. Despite the continued influence of religious leaders, there are differences in the views of ulama within the country, which can influence foreign policy dynamics. The existence of inter-religious dialogue efforts involving

ulama and religious figures from both parties could be the first step towards reconciliation. These meetings and conferences create forums for discussion and shared understanding. Religious institutions, such as Islamic universities and religious institutions, can provide support or organize reconciliation initiatives involving religious leaders (Miichi & Kayane, 2020).

Fatwas or religious statements supporting reconciliation can pave the way for better understanding between Sunnis and Shiites. These efforts created a foundation of religious legitimacy for peace. Religious leaders who reject extremism and promote religious tolerance can play an important role in easing tensions and building an environment of reconciliation. External factors influencing the Sunni and Shia religious dimensions in the Middle East involve regional and global dynamics that impact perceptions, tensions and relations between the two sects (Minhajuddin & Umam, 2023). Support from foreign countries for Sunni or Shiite groups in regional conflicts can deepen religious polarization. This may include financial, military, or political support. Military intervention by foreign powers in regional conflicts can create proxy wars and increase tensions between Sunni and Shiite communities. Rivalries between regional countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, can manifest themselves in the form of support for groups with particular religious affiliations, deepening divisions. Conflict in one region can trigger tension or instability in other regions, creating a cycle of negative impacts.

The influence of mass media and propaganda can shape public opinion towards certain religious groups, strengthening stereotypes or negative perceptions (Quaranto & Stanley, 2021). The use of social media to spread detrimental narratives and worsen the atmosphere between religions can deepen divisions. The fight against terrorism at the global level can fuel religious tensions and identify groups or countries as security threats based on religious affiliation. Polarity in global politics, especially between great powers, can create a context that influences religious dynamics in the Middle East.

Countries and Groups that Support Shiites, for example Hezbollah, which is based in Lebanon and has Shiite affiliations, has supported Shiite groups in the region (Winter & Guzansky, 2020). Since the post-invasion regime change, Iraq, which has a majority Shiite population, has been able to support Shiite groups in regional conflicts. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy often reflects its support for Sunni groups in various regional conflicts. This creates tensions with Iran, which supports Shia groups (Winter & Guzansky, 2020). Iran's foreign policy reflects the country's role as protector of Shia interests in the region. Iran's support for Shiite groups in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon creates tensions with Saudi Arabia.

This effort was mediated by China, which has good relations with both countries and has economic and strategic interests in the Middle East (Nawaz et al., 2023). This reconciliation effort was announced in March 2023, after seven years of severing diplomatic relations due to the attack by Iranian demonstrators on the Saudi diplomatic mission in Tehran in 2016 (Mabon, 2019). This reconciliation effort includes several points, including reopening diplomatic missions, restarting direct flights, increasing economic, trade and investment cooperation, establishing political and security consultation mechanisms, and establishing dialogue between religious, cultural and civil society figures. It is hoped that this reconciliation effort will have a positive impact on peace, stability and cooperation in the Middle East region, which has been hit by conflicts and crises in various countries such as Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Palestine.

China is a country that has good relations with both Iran and Saudi, and has economic and strategic interests in the Middle East region. China is one of the largest consumers of crude oil from Iran and Saudi, and also one of the two countries' largest trading partners (Nawaz et al., 2023). China also has the Belt and Road initiative, which aims to build infrastructure and connectivity along the ancient trade route between Asia and Europe, which runs through the Middle East. China also has security interests in the region, as it is concerned about the impact of conflict and terrorism on its stability and national interests.

Impact and Challenges of Iran-Saudi Reconciliation: (1) Iran-Saudi reconciliation is a positive step that can have a good impact on both countries, the Middle East region and the world; (2) Reducing tensions and military escalation between the two countries, which could threaten regional and global peace and security; (3) Resolve conflicts and crises in countries such as Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Palestine, by encouraging political solutions that are inclusive and based on dialogue; (4) Increase economic cooperation and integration between Middle Eastern countries, which can increase growth, development and people's welfare; (5) Building trust and mutual understanding between Muslim countries, which can overcome sectarian and ideological divisions, and strengthen Islamic solidarity; (6) Increase China's role and influence in the Middle East region, which can become a reliable and neutral partner for countries in the region.

However, Iran-Saudi reconciliation also faces quite a few challenges and obstacles. There are interests and interference from other countries, especially the United States and Israel (Yenigun et al., 2023), who may not want to see improvements in relations between Iran and Saudi, and may try to thwart or disrupt the reconciliation process. Deep differences and disputes

between Iran and Saudi, which cannot be resolved in a short time, and could reignite tensions and confrontation if any incident or provocation occurs.

In addition, suspicion exists between the people and governments of the two countries, which can hinder cooperation and dialogue (Fraihat, 2020) and requires great efforts to build trust and mutual understanding. Religious involvement in interreligious dialogue is also a challenge, especially when religious leaders have strong views regarding religious differences. Rising tensions create difficulty in initiating constructive dialogue. The prospect of reconciliation becomes a complex challenge when religious conflict takes on an international dimension. Building understanding and mutual understanding amidst religious tension requires creative steps and political determination. If Sunnis and Shiites led by Saudi Arabia and Iran unite and cooperate in all aspects, the potential benefits include: (1) Regional Stability; (2) Handling Humanitarian Crisis; (3) Economic and Social Development; (4) Peace and Conflict Resolution; (5) Security Cooperation; (6) Education and Cultural Exchange; (7) Environmental Protection..

CONCLUSION

Iran-Saudi reconciliation is a historic breakthrough and has the potential to change the dynamics and direction of the Middle East. Combining efforts between Sunnis and Shiites in these areas can create a strong foundation for cooperation, reconciliation and building peace in the region. By achieving regional security, bilateral and regional relations can be established, including cooperation in economic and development projects that can increase investment, create jobs and increase economic growth in the Middle East region. Building mutually beneficial economic dependence between Saudi and Iran can create stability and prosperity for the two countries in particular and the Middle East region in general.

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