

## Issues/Discussion Forum

### Sunnis, Shias and Sufis - Disunity in Muslim Ummah

-Syed Asad

The world's 1.6 billion Muslims are united in their belief in God and the Prophet Muhammad. However, Muslims have widely differing views about many aspects of their faith. Raising the question of how important religion is to their lives, who counts as a Muslim, and what is acceptable in Islam, according to a worldwide survey by the Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion & Public Life.



*[Quranic Reference: Surah Al-Imran, 103]*

The survey finds many Muslims worldwide share other faith articles, including belief in angels, heaven, hell, and fate (or predestination). While there is broad agreement on Islam's core tenets, Muslims across the 39 countries and territories surveyed differ significantly in their religious commitment levels, openness to multiple interpretations of their faith, and acceptance of various sects and movements.

There are three major well-recognized sects, Sunnies, Shias, and Sufis. The survey asked Muslims whether they identify with various sects of Islam and their attitudes toward other sects and subgroups. The survey suggests that many Muslims worldwide either do not know or do not care about them.

Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa tend to be most keenly aware of the distinction between the two main branches of Islam, Sunni, and Shias. In most countries surveyed in the region, at least 40% of Sunnis do not accept Shias as fellow Muslims. Only in Lebanon and Iraq – nations where sizable populations of Sunnis and Shias live side by side – do large majorities of Sunnis recognize Shias as fellow Muslims and accept their distinctive practices as part of Islam. In 32 of the 39 countries surveyed, half or more Muslims say there is only one correct way to understand Islam's teachings. By contrast, in the United States, 57% of Muslims say Islam is open to multiple interpretations.

Sectarianism is the primary source of disunity and conflict among Muslim society, particularly in the Middle East and Pakistan. The political context of the Middle East necessitates the political mobilization and manipulation of sectarian identities to survive. Authoritarianism is the political context that allows sectarianism to flourish. In the last two

decades, we have witnessed the rise of Shiite power all over the Middle East. Sunni rulers have viewed with much anxiety the new Shiite crescent that extends from Iran to Lebanon. Consequently, the Syrian crisis became more of a regional problem than a local and seen as an opportunity to weaken the Shiites and replace them with a Sunni government.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have been the two main actors of conflict in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia overwhelmingly represents Salafism's ideology, and the country historically sees itself as the Muslim world leader since its territory includes the birthplace of Islam. On the other hand, Iran is directed by Shiite policies, especially since 1979 when the Islamic revolution of Iran took place, forming a theocracy that aims to spread its ideology to the outside world.

The Ummah is broadly divided against itself, torn up and fragmented into nearly fifty nation-states separated by artificial boundaries designed to create and ensure continued tension and confrontation, especially among neighbouring states. None of these states has had the chance to attain the outright freedom and stability, or social integration that would enable it to concentrate its energies on construction and development. Sectarianism, factionalism, and nationalism, all of which cause disharmony, have dominated affairs and have led to a continual state of instability, allowing foreign powers to manipulate at the time of their choosing. Such a situation only leads to more turmoil and anarchy. The lack of individual freedom prevents the people from pursuing their intellectual and cultural, and natural psychological development.



Muslims continue to live under the shadow of poverty, oppression, and terror, from military dictators who seize power and set their own frivolous, arbitrary, and whimsical policies through force, torture, and intimidation. In such dictatorships, political and administrative bodies and institutions' roles prevent and destroy all of the people's qualities and artistic potential. The few Muslim states that have followed the industrialization path have not attained complete self-sufficiency because they still depend on foreign sources for most of the equipment and the capital needed to develop their industries. As a result, these foreign sources can control the nascent industries and direct them according to their own political and economic interests.

The overwhelming majority of the Ummah is illiterate. The people's needs far outweigh the goods, materials, and services they can provide. Even in the critical and vital necessities of life, almost no Muslim state is self-sufficient. This deficiency is usually made up by imports,

which only increases dependency on foreign powers. What makes the situation even more intolerable is that raw materials are bought from Muslim states at the lowest prices, or even taken for nothing, and are returned to them as manufactured goods at the highest prices.

In most cases, "Muslim industry" was not designed to meet the Muslim world's desperate, immediate, and vital needs but to meet only its inhabitants' tangential and secondary needs and satisfy and cater to the consumeristic desires. Unfortunately, the Muslim world has developed the habit of consuming new non-Islamic civilization products and has adopted many of its outer aspects, such as "modern" roads, buildings, and entertainment places in its capitals. It has also established some political and economic institutions based on the western model. Unfortunately, such measures have failed to bring about the desired transformation.

The Muslim world's current education system has failed to instil fundamental beliefs, sound vision, standards, or motives. Materialism has become widespread among the educated classes, which have lost any sense of a clear purpose in life. Academic syllabi have failed to establish a useful purpose in the Muslim conscience. In contrast, despite their secularism, the West's secondary schools teach students about western heritage, cultural history, and traditions in an integrated and comprehensive manner. It gives the students a sense of belonging and instils their nation's primary goals and strategy. They grow up with this feeling and carry their nation's vision and concepts of life, the universe, humanity, other cultures, as well as other aspects of its worldview.

In the USA, we have mosques and Islamic centres in all major cities and suburban areas. They are predominantly Sunni centres, and few are Shia and others. A majority of them are ethnically centred and have no cross-links between them. Unlike Churches and Synagogues, the Mosques lack centralization in education, which has created a power vacuum. In house *Fitna*, power politics and tribalism have hampered progress. The clergy is not inclined to adapt to modernity, tolerance, and pluralism, leading to chaos and isolation.

In light of the above, the first step toward formulating an Islamic cultural strategy is to redefine knowledge in terms of Islamic epistemology and in a way that will be acceptable to Muslims everywhere. In this context, we need to emphasize that all knowledge is derived from revelation, reason, perception, or experiment. Religious pluralism, interreligious dialogue, democracy, and a good functioning secular state are essential tools to overcome sectarianism within the Muslim community.

**Annotation:**

*"Toward an Islamic Alternative in Thought and Knowledge." Issues in Contemporary Islamic Thought, by Shaykh Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, International Institute of Islamic Thought, London; Washington, 2005, pp. 9–20. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvk8w1ww.6](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvk8w1ww.6). Accessed 12 Feb. 2021.*

*Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. "Islamic Unity — The Ideal And Obstacles In The Way Of Its Realization." Islamic Studies, vol. 36, no. 4, 1997, pp. 657–662. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/23076035](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23076035). Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.*

(Courtesy: New Age Islam)