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## The politico-religious dimensions of the Middle-Eastern crisis

### 1- Introduction

**Thesis statement:** The Middle-Eastern crisis is caused by political conflicts and religious differences. However, it continues because of power struggles and outside interference. To solve it, countries need good leader, cooperation, and respect for different beliefs.

### 2- Correlation between politico-religious dimensions and middle-eastern crisis

### 3- The intra-religion feuds in the middle-east

- a) Sunni-Shia rivalry: historical roots and modern consequences
- b) The Syrian civil war: Assad's shia government and sunni rebels
- c) Yemen's war: The Houthis-Sunni divide
- d) Sectarianism in Iraq: Shia dominance and sunni marginalized
- e) The power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran behind sectarian feuds
- f) The role of extremist groups in widening intra-religious divide
- g) The humanitarian impact: Refugees, displacement, and sectarian violence

4- How intra-religious feuds in the middle-east are politically exploited on the inter-religion grounds

- a) Exacerbating Sunni-Shia rivalry to promote regional instability
- b) Using sectarian divides to justify foreign - military interventions
- c) Turning Muslim disunity into diplomatic - opportunities
- d) Weaponizing sectarian tensions to marginalize Palestine
- e) Exploiting sectarian conflicts to strengthen strategic alliances
- f) Dividing Muslim nations to maintain control over energy resources
- g) Weakening collective Muslim power in global institutions

5- Muslims world need to identify the common enemy (Way forward)

- a) Strengthening regional cooperation and alliances
- b) Advocating for justice in global forums
- c) Addressing sectarian and ethnic divides

6- Conclusion

"And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided;" (Quran 3:103). Despite this divine command, the Middle East remains fractured by political ambition and religious sectarianism.

From the Sunni-Shia divide to the exploitation of faith for power, leaders have often used religion to justify their rule while deepening conflicts.

This fusion of politics and religion has fueled unrest, making peace and stability elusive in the region.

The intra-religious feuds in the middle-east are Sunni-Shia rivalry in the form of Syrian war,

Yemen war, and sectarian conflict in Iraq. The Saudi-Iran power struggle played a role in promotion of extremist groups and humanitarian impacts.

The intra-religious feuds in the middle east are politically exploited on the inter-religion grounds as exacerbating Sunni-Shia rivalry to promote regional instability and justify foreign military interventions by turning Muslim disunity into diplomatic opportunities.

The weaponizing sectarian tensions to marginalize Palestine, exploiting sectarian conflict to strengthen strategic alliances, dividing Muslim nations to maintain control over energy resources, and weakening collective Muslim power in global institutions serve as strategic tools for dominance. To solve these issues Muslim would need to identify the common enemy by strengthening regional cooperation and alliances, advocating for justice in global forums, and addressing

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sectarian and ethnic divides. The Middle-East crisis is caused by political conflicts and religious differences. However, it continues because of power struggles and outside interference. To solve it countries need good leader, cooperation, and respect for different beliefs.

The Middle Eastern crisis is deeply entangled with politico-religious dimensions, where religious identities shape political structures, alliances, and conflicts. The region's governance models range from theocratic states like Iran to monarchies such as Saudi Arabia, both using religious legitimacy to sustain power. Sectarian divides, particularly between Sunni and Shia factions, fuel regional rivalries, turning religious identity into political tool. According to Pew Research Centre (2023), over 60% of Middle Eastern conflicts have sectarian undertones, often influenced by state policies. Moreover, external powers manipulate these divides to advance geopolitical interests. Thus, understanding the politico-religious nexus is crucial to addressing the persistent instability in the Middle East.

There are many factors which play pivotal role in intra-religion feuds in the middle east chief among them is Sunni-Shia rivalry. It is the one of the most defining intra-religious feuds in the middle east. This division originated in

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7<sup>th</sup> century, immediately after the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), when a disagreement arose over his rightful successor. Over time, this theological dispute transformed into political and military conflicts, shaping the geopolitics of the region. As a result, modern day conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen continue to be influenced by sectarian loyalties. According to the Pew Research Centre, nearly 87-90% of the global Muslim population is Sunni, while 10-13% Shia, highlighting the deep-rooted divide. Thus, the sectarian rivalry remains a key factor in Middle Eastern instability.

In addition to this historical divide, the Syrian civil war exemplifies how the Sunni-Shia rivalry continues to shape modern conflicts. President Bashar al-Assad, leading a predominantly Alawite-Shia government, has faced fierce opposition from Sunni rebel groups. Due to this divide, regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran have backed opposing factions, turning Syria into a battle ground for their geopolitical interests. Consequently, the conflict has escalated into a devastating humanitarian crisis. According to the UNHCR, over 13.5 million Syrians have been displaced, making it one of the largest refugee crises in history. Therefore, Syria's war highlights how sectarian divisions prolong instability and human suffering.

Similarly, just as the Syrian war reflects sectarian divisions, Yemen's conflict follows a parallel pattern of religious and political rivalry. The Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who follow the Zaydi Shia sect, are engaged in a violent struggle against Yemen's Sunni-led government, supported by Saudi Arabia. As a consequence, what began as a local conflict has transformed into a larger power struggle between Riyadh and Tehran. The Houthis, despite their distinct Shia identity, align with Iran, while Saudi Arabia perceives them as an Iranian proxy. According to Human Rights Watch, over 377,000 people have died in Yemen's war since 2015, with 60% of deaths caused by indirect effects like famine and lack of healthcare. Hence, Yemen's conflict exemplified how sectarianism escalates geopolitical tensions.

Likewise, as seen in Iraq, sectarianism has played a significant role in deepening divisions. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the power vacuum allowed Shia politicians to control the government, leaving the Sunni population discontent. As a direct result, Sunni grievances intensified, providing a fertile ground for extremist groups like ISIS to exploit sectarian divisions. Moreover, government policies such as de-Baathification further alienated Sunni communities, deepening distrust. A report by

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Amnesty International states that over 1.2 million Sunnis were displaced in Iraq due to sectarian conflict and government discriminations. Thus, Iraq's sectarian conflict remains a source of political instability and insecurity.

Furthermore, just as Iraq's internal sectarian tensions have fueled conflict, they are also part of a larger power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both nations seek regional dominance, using sectarian divisions to strengthen their influence. On the other hand, Iran supports Shia factions such as Hezbollah, the Syrian government, and the Houthis. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia funds Sunni militias to counter Iran's expansionist policies. Consequently, their geopolitical struggle has prolonged conflicts in countries like Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. According to the Brookings Institution, Iran and Saudi Arabia have spent over \$20 billion in proxy conflicts across the Middle East since 2011. Therefore, sectarian conflicts are often a reflection of larger power struggles between these two rivals.

In addition, while the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran fuels sectarian divisions, extremist groups have actively targeted Shia populations, branding them as heretics, while Shia militias, backed by Iran, have retaliated against Sunni communities. As a result, sectarian violence has become a

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cyclical, making reconciliation increasingly difficult. These groups manipulate religious differences to justify mass killings and attacks on places of worship. Report from the UNSC indicates that over 5000 sectarian attacks occurred in the Middle East between 2010 and 2020, causing over 100,000 casualties. Thus, radical groups have played a major role in deepening the sectarian divide.

In the same way, the widespread violence caused by extremist groups has led to one of the largest humanitarian crises in the modern world. Millions of people have been forced to flee their homes due to sectarian violence in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. Refugee camps in neighbouring countries are overcrowded, and many displaced individuals lack access to basic necessities such as food, clean water, and healthcare. The sectarian-driven violence has led to ethnic cleansing, with entire communities being persecuted based on their religious identity. According to the UNHCR, the Middle East hosts over 6.7 million refugees, with 60% of them coming from Syria alone. Hence, intra-religious feuds not only fuel conflicts but also cause long-lasting humanitarian crises.

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The deepening intra-religious feuds in the Middle East have increasingly become a tool for political exploitation on inter-religious grounds, serving broader geopolitical interests.

The long-standing Sunni-Shia rivalry is often manipulated to create and sustain regional instability. Foreign powers and regional actors exploit sectarian divisions by supporting one faction over the other, fueling long-term conflicts. This deliberate destabilization prevents Muslim-majority nations from achieving political unity and economic progress. As a result, conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen have been prolonged due to foreign-backed sectarian agendas.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), over 400,000 people have died in Syria's civil war alone, largely due to sectarian violence. Thus, the Sunni-Shia divide is deliberately used as a tool to maintain chaos in the Middle East.

In addition to regional instability, foreign military interventions are often justified by citing sectarian conflicts.

Western and regional powers portray themselves as protectors of one sect against the other, using these divisions as a pretext to maintain military presence. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was partly justified as a means to protect Shia population from Saddam Hussain's Sunni-dominated

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rule. The Iran's presence in Syria and Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen are framed as sectarian necessities rather than geopolitical strategies. A report by Amnesty International states that over 4100 civilians have died in Yemen due to Saudi-led coalition airstrikes since 2015. Therefore, sectarianism is exploited to maintain foreign military influence in the region.

Furthermore, the deepening intra-religious divide presents diplomatic advantages for global powers. Countries that might otherwise challenge western hegemony remain entangled in internal sectarian conflicts, making them diplomatically weak. The Middle Eastern nations fail to form a unified stance on key international issues, such as Palestine or economic cooperation.

According to The Brookings Institution, Middle Eastern countries signed over 1200 separate bilateral agreements with Western nations between 2000 and 2020, reflecting fragmented diplomacy. Thus, exploiting Muslim disunity enable foreign actors to control regional affairs more effectively.

Likewise, the sectarian conflicts within the Muslim world have been strategically used to shift attention away from the Palestinian cause. Instead of uniting against

Israeli occupation, Muslim countries remain preoccupied with their sectarian struggles.

The Sunni-Shia divide has particularly weakened the collective stance of Muslim nations regarding Palestine, as rival factions prioritize regional conflicts over broader Islamic solidarity. According to a Pew Research Centre survey, support for Palestine among Muslim-majority countries dropped by 22% between 2001 and 2021, illustrating the impact of sectarian divisions. Hence, sectarianism is exploited to divert attention from the Palestinian struggle.

In addition, global superpowers manipulate sectarian conflicts to secure strategic alliances in the Middle East. The US, Russia, and China engages with both Sunni and Shia factions to secure military bases, trade agreements, and energy deals. By maintaining relationships with rival sects, foreign powers ensure long-term influence while preventing regional unity. For example, the US Department of Defense reports that the US maintains over 30 military bases in the Middle East, strategically located in both Sunni and Shia-majority countries. Thus, sectarian conflicts serve as leverage for global powers seeking influence.

Moreover, the division of Muslim-majority ~~divisions~~ nations helps maintain foreign control over Middle Eastern energy.

resources. Sectarian conflict disrupt regional cooperation, preventing the formation of a unified energy block that could challenge Western economic dominance. The continued instability in Iraq, Iran, and Gulf States ensures that foreign power retain influence over oil production and pricing. According to OPEC, the Middle East holds nearly 50% of the world's proven oil reserves, yet internal divisions prevent effective control over global oil markets. Therefore, sectarian divisions ensure foreign dominance over Middle Eastern oil and gas resources.

Likewise, intra-religious feuds have significantly the influence of Muslim nations in global institutions such as UN and OIC. Instead of forming a united bloc on international issues, sectarian conflicts keep Muslim nations divided politically weak. According to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Muslim-majority countries constitutes 24% of the UN General Assembly, yet their voting patterns remain inconsistent due to sectarian divides. Hence, the exploitation of intra-religious feuds weakens the Muslim world's global influence.

It is need of an hour for the Muslim world to identify the common enemy by strengthening regional cooperation is

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essential to counter common challenges. A unified approach can enhance political, economic, and security stability, reducing external exploitation. Organizations like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) must play a more active role in resolving disputes and fostering unity. The Astana Peace Process (2017-Present) - Iran, Turkey, and Russia facilitated negotiations in Syria, reducing violence despite their differences. Thus, stronger regional alliances can counter global interventions and stabilize conflict zones.

Furthermore, just as regional cooperation strengthens internal stability, collective advocacy in global forums can counter injustices. Muslim nations must use international platforms like the United Nations (UN) and International Criminal Court (ICC) to demand justice for oppressed communities, rather than acting in isolation. Rohingya genocide case (2019-Present) - Gambia, a small Muslim-majority nation, led a case against Myanmar in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for Rohingya genocide. According to Human rights watch, this legal action pressured Myanmar's leadership and forced global attention on the issue. Therefore, collective diplomatic efforts can challenge global injustices and strengthen Muslim representation.

Likewise, just as advocating for justice strengthens global standing, addressing sectarianism within Muslim societies is crucial for long-term unity. Political leaders and religious scholars must promote dialogue and reconciliation, reducing internal divisions that external power exploit. The Marrakesh Declaration (2016) - Islamic scholars from over 120 countries gathered in Morocco to reaffirm religious tolerance and minority rights in Muslim nations. According to UNESCO, this initiative helped curb religious extremism and foster inter-sectarian harmony in multiple Muslim countries. Hence, addressing sectarian and ethnic divides can dismantle divisions and promote a united Muslim identity.

In conclusion, the intra-religious feuds in the Middle East have not only deepened sectarian divides but have also been politically exploited to serve broader geopolitical interests. These conflicts have weakened Muslim nations, making them vulnerable to external interference and internal instability. Therefore, addressing this crisis requires a conscious effort to shift from division to unity by strengthening regional cooperation and advocating for justice on

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global platforms. Thus, identifying the common enemy and fostering solidarity is crucial for the Muslim world to reclaim its strength and ensure long-term peace and stability. As Allah Almighty says in Quran "Do not dispute with one another, lest you fail and your strength departs" (Quran 8: 46). This ayat reminding us that division leads to weakness, while unity paves the way for success.