Engaging Sectarian De-Escalation

Proceedings of the Symposium on Islam and Sectarian De-Escalation at Harvard Kennedy School
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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

In mainstream analysis of the Middle East, the sectarian bifurcation dividing the world of Islam into a political conflict between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims is ubiquitous. The war in Yemen, the civil strife in Syria, and the devastation in Iraq and beyond are all framed as a geopolitical contest between a “Shi’a Crescent” led by Iran and Sunni groups in the region supported mainly by Saudi Arabia. Although sectarian delineations between Shi’as and Sunnis may serve as convenient and easy explanations to understand the religious unrest and political turmoil afflicting the Middle East, the purpose of the international Symposium on Islam and Sectarian De-Escalation at the Harvard Kennedy School, held on April 14-15, 2018, is to cast doubt upon these neat dichotomies. By sectarian de-escalation we refer to the theoretical and practical means of re-conceptualizing sectarianism – a phenomenon in which individuals in the Muslim World and in particular the Middle East are increasingly affiliating along sectarian or denominational religious identities. As part of a larger project on sectarian de-escalation aimed at decreasing the exclusionary and violent aspects of sectarianism, we explore interlinked factors and different pathways in the pursuit of reducing the grounds of conflict.

Scholars, journalists, and community leaders have participated in this symposium to disentangle multiple competing narratives and causal factors behind the rise of sectarian violence in the Middle East. Our contributors have attempted to trace the political, theological, and socio-cultural genealogies of competing narratives so as to nuance our conception of sectarianism and pave a tenable path towards greater unity and conflict de-escalation.

During a time in which conflict is often ascribed to sectarianism as a fait accompli, our speakers in the symposium refer us to the civilizational, metaphysical, and intellectual resources of the Qur’an, the Persian and Arab literary traditions, annals of political history, and a breadth of personal experience to paint a less intractable and more nuanced picture of sectarian divide, framing the contemplation of sectarianism from the perspective of actors both intrinsic and extrinsic to Islam. Embedded within the insights of our diverse set of
speakers – from imams, to scholars, policymakers, and diplomats – are a series of important takeaways to inform further discussions and practices aimed at sectarian de-escalation and peace building in the Middle East. In particular, three main themes emerged in approaching sectarianism: the importance of geopolitical literacy; the importance of religious and historical literacy and precedents for peace and diversity; and, recalling vehicles of culture and literature.

**Geopolitical Literacy**

Sectarian dynamics cannot be understood without an appreciation of the dynamics of geopolitics and how state rivalries in practice impact sectarianism. This is not a reductionist claim to equate sectarianism as a direct “political” phenomenon, or to say sectarianism is exclusively or even mainly driven by geopolitics. Rather, geopolitics is an important factor that impacts sectarianism, sometimes more (and sometimes less) than doctrinal or theological disagreements between Muslim denominations. If we exclude or ignore geopolitics from the debate on sectarianism in the Muslim world, then we have a very incomplete picture for what is an important driving factor behind sectarianism as a phenomenon in historical as well as contemporary periods. Likewise, if religious or community leaders lack a strong grasp of geopolitics in an objective fashion, they may incorrectly ascribe greater weight to religious doctrinal factors as to the cause of conflict than would otherwise be warranted.

Whereas the Sunni-Shi’a divide is often constructed as an ancient religious struggle engrained within Islam itself, the salience of politics in determining the strength and nature of the sectarian divide is a recurrent theme throughout the speakers’ addresses. As such, rather than conceiving of the sectarian struggle as exclusively derivate of the theological question of Prophet Muhammad’s rightful successor, our panelists exhort us to view elements of sectarian tensions as (at least in part) products of realpolitik, geopolitics, and practical necessity. For example, as one speaker argued, the House of Saud’s pivot to Wahhabism – recalling regional tribal historical alliances from the 18th century – arose from a design to nation-build from disparate communities and to confer legitimacy upon monarchical rule.
More recently, the U.S. toppling of Iraq’s Ba’athist regime in 2003 and the widespread geopolitical volatility instantiated by the Arab Spring of 2010-11 solidified the political impulse of Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf monarchies towards increasing sectarian animus as a bulwark against the rise of Iran in the context Arab power vacuums.

Just as sectarian difference was emphasized along state lines for regimes to maintain a grasp on and expand power, so too were they wielded as an internal mechanism to circumvent domestic unrest, as is manifest in the al-Khalifah royal family’s portrayal of Bahrain’s massive pro-democratic demonstrations as an Iranian conspiracy, Erdogan’s “Sunni Islamist” state-building project in the wake of the secular Kamalists, or Lebanon’s power-sharing agreement reached in the Taif Accords. Exogenous to the Middle East, U.S. policy to entrench amenable dictators who largely belong to the Sunni denomination willfully amplified sectarian identities and gave rise to narratives of growing Iranian power. While Iranians themselves frame their objectives and ideology largely in anti-imperial and Third-Worldist terms, outside powers often frame the rise of Iranian strength in the region as the ascension of Shi’a power threatening Sunni hegemony in the Middle East.

The point here is that as opposed to proceeding theological contestations, enduring sectarian divides seem to have emerged in no small part from political interests both internal and external to powerful state actors, before being justified by state-sanctioned religious discourse post facto. Hence, equipped with a sufficient cognizance of political affairs, we may re-contextualize sectarian disputes as entwined with the political incentives which undergird them.

**Religious Literacy, Historical Literacy, and Precedents for Unity**

Despite the widespread insistence for framing sectarianism through a doctrinal or identity lens in mainstream narratives, there is in fact deep-rooted religious illiteracy and lack of knowledge of Islam amongst many analysts and commentators of the Muslim world. Understanding the different legal,
theological, and intellectual currents within Islam is crucial in obtaining an accurate picture of the actual dividing lines amongst Muslims and how divisions as well as ecumenicism and co-existence function in the larger Islamic body politic.

Our panelists do not trivialize the bearing of theology upon the bases of sectarian division. Indeed, the strain on inter-Muslim relations emerging from the successorship of the Prophet Muhammad is characterized as a legitimate one broached sincerely. Nevertheless, it is the countervailing scope for harmony firmly entrenched in the Qur’an, and the Sunnah and Hadith (the lifestyle and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad or other revered early figures respectively) towards which our speakers consistently refer. That is, while there may exist a delicate balance between a reconciliatory interpretation of God’s word and a faithful rendering of one’s sect, a thorough education in the rich theology of Islam erects the foundations for mutual toleration. Sectarianism arises where a multifaceted access to theological resources is found wanting: whether in the besiegement of intellectual narratives of Islam by Western media and Islamic extremist groups, or the flagrant lack of engagement of the traditional seminaries and religious universities with the socio-political and religious quandaries afflicting Muslims across the globe.

Just as importantly, greater religious literacy results in questioning and deconstructing the current sectarian definitions between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims. In recent history, the era of “confessional ambiguity” in which lines between sectarian identities was highly blurred and the high-literature of the Persianate world stretching from the Eastern Mediterranean through the Middle East and South Asia promoted highly ecumenical forms of Islam are useful to keep in mind instead of taking for granted the current status-quo understandings of sectarian divisions within Islam.

Importantly, the symposium highlighted the breadth of historical and contemporary resources and courses of action at our disposal in the project of sectarian de-escalation. Many meaningful attempts have taken place within the Muslim world to bridge sectarian divides. The Amman Message – which sought to do away with takfirism and curtail the liberality with which fatwas on orthodoxy are declared – coupled with the emphases on
non-Muslim rights and religious scholarship, forms a compelling premise upon which to fashion both an internally and externally cohesive Islamic co-existence.

Similarly, the serious Shi’a-Sunni scholarly engagement typified by the taqrib ecumenical movement propounded by towering intellectuals such as Shaykh Mahmoud Shaltut and Ayatollah Hossein Boroujerdi offer alternative religious models by which to moderate intra-faith discourses through a rich high-level regard for toleration. These points emphasize that such a sectarian de-escalation project is not occurring on a blank slate, but we are instead armed with the lessons and schema of past and contemporary efforts at greater ecumenism and peace building. It is this context which calls for the broad dissemination of diverse theological resources which permit both a faith towards one’s own sect and an appreciation of another’s, and a reclamation of an intellectual narrative currently held hostage to the worst excesses of Islamic extremists.

Recalling Vehicles of Culture

A major theme in this symposium entailed the importance of language, poetry, and ascetics which easily transcend doctrinal confines and are universally shared. Literary and ascetic culture spread across the Muslim world and therefore can be thought of as overarching “civilizational” frameworks in which Muslims, Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews, and other equally contribute to in building rich identities and norms for interaction. The fact that the word for ethics and literature, adab, is the same in Islamicate languages is important to note here.

At different points in the symposium, speakers lament our estrangement from the “vehicles” of Islamic culture: from its art, to its literature, and its oral traditions. Here, some speakers viewed the modernization project in the Muslim world as a one of disinheritance, and the conferral upon society of a “monolithic, undifferentiated intellectual protocol.” Stripped of the means of viewing and interpreting its art and history upon its own terms, the Islamic tradition is conformed to modern sovereignty of law which is claimed to be at once intimidating for identity-seeking Islamic youth and
susceptible to radicalization according to many accounts. The tensions between the modern nation-state, rule of law, and the historical norm of Islamic societies is one that should not be easily overlooked when thinking of sectarianism and identity crises.

Pathways to sectarian de-escalation here suggest a concerted effort to recover and explore the rich histories and modes of culture of pluralistic Islamic communities, to engage in educating and propagating these historical precedents, and subsequently to engage in earnest willingness to reckon with the principles of the “Other” on their own terms. The symposium thus reminds us, both as actors intrinsic and extrinsic to Islam, to exercise the principle of charity by taking traditional differences on the socio-cultural terms of the tradition we are analyzing, rather than interpreting and distorting these religious traditions to accord with our own ends.

Moving Forward

The translation of words into actions of substance is assuredly a challenging one, especially on a matter so pressing as sectarianism in the Middle East. There remains, of course, the perennial challenge of stymying those actors for whom sectarianism is a distorting instrument of power and legitimacy.

Nevertheless, the insights of the symposium furnish us with a framework through which to apprehend the possibility of sectarian de-escalation. In a political and media-driven environment which often portrays sectarian conflict as an inevitable attendant of Islam, the understanding that Islam is in fact equipped to treat sectarianism on its own terms – rather than exclusively through some form of secularism or Western humanist framework – is a sincerely valuable one in itself.

The priority of our sectarian dialectic therefore becomes one of scope. How is it that we engage Muslims and non-Muslims across societies in the nuances of the Islamic faith and its political eclecticism? The lessons of this symposium suggest that we first incrementally fill and centralize our coffers with unifying resources – by increasing the frequency of inter-religious
discourse, diversifying its interlocutors, then expanding its physical reach. As such, when the socio-political trappings of reconciliation emerge, we may be prepared to seize upon them and embark upon a well-assessed path towards peace. In the interim, where the alternative has been an unproductive consignment to “immutable tensions,” we should sincerely encourage within our communities (whether religious, scholarly, or policy-making) a belief in the possibility of sectarian de-escalation, and with that instill in the public consciousness the necessary groundwork for reform, revitalization, and renewal.
Five Myths of Sectarianism within Islam in the Contemporary Middle East

Payam Mohseni and Mohammad Sagha

Since the turn of the century and the increased global focus on the Middle East and Muslim world, many scholars have been quick to recognize the wide gap of knowledge and understanding of Islam in the West, including in the United States. While some progress has been made in better understanding the religion, when it comes to cultural and social diversities within Islam, we see the major ongoing recurrence of problematic generalizations and misunderstandings regarding the two major sects of Islam (Sunnism and Shi’ism) as well as sectarianism in the Muslim world. These problematic narratives pervade mainstream analysis on the Middle East and posit, for instance, a rigid and eternal “Shi’a-Sunni” divide that subsequently is behind conflict in the region. This elementary understanding—that there exists different sects and denominations within Islam – thus can and does feed into false and simplistic narratives of ancient sectarian violence within the Islamic world.

Behind these problematic narratives on sectarianism are a series of questionable assumptions or simplified explanations regarding Islam, the Middle East, and religious identity. By “sectarianism” we refer to the privileging of one’s sect or confession within a religious tradition and/or ultimately accepting a particular confessional reading of religion as the true reading of that religious tradition. In this article, we look to address and critique five of the top “myths of sectarianism” within Islam in the Middle East in order to produce analytical clarity and inform debates for scholars, policymakers, and religious leaders concerned with these issues. This is important in order to theorize pathways for sectarian de-escalation and to try to reduce harmful exclusionary sectarian practices and beliefs in the region which have increased dramatically in recent times.
**Myth One: Shi’as and Sunnis have been involved in a millennia-long religious war and are inherently disposed to violent conflict**

The Muslim world is vast, diverse, and has a long history that includes significant experiences in peaceful co-existence between different Muslim denominations. Throughout time, significant sectarian fluidity existed among Muslims in what can be described as “confessional ambiguity,” where Muslims openly combined what are today considered discrete aspects of Shi’a and Sunni doctrine and authority structures. Furthermore, in varying contexts of peace and violence across the centuries, there has been diversity in the sectarian affiliation of ruling Muslim dynasties across the Islamic world with both Shi’as and Sunnis ruling over diverse Muslim (and non-Muslim) denominations that were not necessarily affiliated with the ruling Muslim sect.

Communal relations between Shi’as and Sunnis are therefore dependent on historical context. The nearly 1,400-year history of Islam reflects a history of peaceful relations mixed with violence and the various power dynamics which color relations between different Islamic sects and ruling dynasties. While mainstream narratives portray a war-prone history with politicians like President Barak Obama having stated that in the Middle East, “the only organizing principles are sectarian” – and that these sectarian disputes “date back millennia” – the reality is more complex and context-dependent than broad strokes which portray as ancient and perennial sectarian conflict within Islam. The Sunni-led Ottomans and the Shi’a-led Safavids did engage in several destructive wars in the middle periods (ca. 16th – 18th centuries) when more identifiable sectarian demarcations were institutionalized, but sectarian relations between Sunnis and Shi’as are by no means limited to such bouts of imperial conflicts. All the great Persian poets of the middle periods (Rumi, Hafez, Attar), for example, are claimed by both Shi’as and Sunnis alike due to their confessional ambiguity and are loved across the religious spectrum. Two of the founders of the “Sunni” schools of law, Abu Hanifah and Imam Malik, studied under the sixth “Shi’a” Imam, Ja’far al-Sadiq, and countless other examples demonstrate the fluid and mainly peaceful relations between Muslims of all stripes which was more often than not the norm throughout Islamic history.
Myth Two: Sectarian violence in the Middle East is primarily between Sunnis and Shi’as

While many actors in the Middle East including Sunni and Shi’a majority states and militias use religiously sanctioned violence against their adversaries, the growth in modern sectarian violence cannot be properly understood as a blanket “Suni-Shi’a” dynamic, but is instead largely driven by the significant rise of a separate phenomenon: militant Wahhabism. At its core, the unprecedented spread of takfiri ideology (i.e. to excommunicate or anathematize opponents) found within radical Wahhabism is largely responsible for doctrinally legitimating violence towards the “Other” and has been as problematic within the larger Sunni community as it has been for Shi’as and other minorities in the region. By considering sectarianism fundamentally a product of Sunni-Shi’a disputes, such rhetoric downplays and minimizes the major violence committed against Sunnis by Wahhabis, reifies “Sunni radicalism” as a category, and misidentifies sources of conflict in the Middle East.

The Wahhabi movement is rooted in the Arabian Peninsula, originally emerging in the 18th century and today forming the bedrock of the clerical authority in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Wahhabi radicalism that feeds into groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda – known primarily in mainstream media for terrorism – and confronts Sunnis, Shi’as, Christians, Jews, Yazidis, and others alike, is the most responsible in terms of scale and impact for spreading violent sectarian beliefs and practices such as the enslavement of women (both Muslim and non-Muslim) within the Islamic world. Sectarianism indeed undergirds and goes in hand with radicalization and terrorism. According to analyses utilizing the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database, the vast majority of deaths inflicted by Muslim terrorists since 2001 were undertaken by al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other like-minded groups¹—radical Wahhabis, in other words. It is of course important to note that the pro-monarchical Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia is also threatened by other Wahhabi militant groups such as

ISIS who oppose the Saudi royal family and its ties to the United States, demonstrating some of the fractious internal rivalries within contemporary Wahhabism itself.

Of course, this is not to trivialize other manifestations of sectarianism or to claim that Saudi Arabia or radical Wahhabis are solely responsible for all sectarianism in the Middle East – states such as Iran, Turkey, and the UAE (as well as others) can and do instrumentalize sectarianism for state interests. However militant Wahhabism stands alone in its doctrinal and often genocidal beliefs and actions towards the sectarian Other. In Iran, for example, privileging of contemporary Twelver Shi’a identity and doctrines are enshrined in the constitution through defining the Islamic Republic as a placeholder government for the Twelfth Imam, and the state unofficially prevents sensitive government positions from being occupied by Sunnis or non-Shi’as. Iran’s support for regional Shi’a militias also represents in part a sectarian strategy which at a minimum negatively bolsters sectarian narratives and threat perceptions of a rising Shi’a threat by certain Sunni communities. In Turkey, longstanding state discrimination against Alevi places of worship and civil status laws exist which have created tensions between different religious communities, and the Turkish state has been quite active in supporting various militias with explicit sectarian motives in Syria. In Iraq, sectarian violence has a long history under Saddam Hussein, but violence continued following the 2003 U.S. invasion when the Shi’a “Mahdi Army” affiliated with Muqtada Sadr began a campaign of indiscriminate killings of Sunnis in Baghdad and beyond following al-Qaeda’s devastating 2006 bombing of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra which hosts the tombs of important Imams.

Importantly, although the Wahhabi movement self-identifies as “Sunni” – and Western mainstream analysis commonly frames geopolitical contestation in the Middle East to be between “Sunni Saudi Arabia” and “Shi’a Iran” – Wahhabism’s place within the Sunni community has always been an ongoing source of contestation (and even violent conflict). This is largely due to Wahhabism’s rejection of basic tenets of mainstream Sunni Ash’ari theology, which today largely rejects carte-blanche excommunication and sanctioned violence on practicing Muslims. Looking at some of the major conflict zones in the Middle East, whether in Syria or Yemen, for example,
we observe a “Wahhabi-Shi’a” conflict more so than a “Sunni-Shi’a” one – and in fact we also witness a simultaneously intense “Wahhabi-Sunni” conflict including against Sufi-oriented Sunnis or even secular or mainstream Sunnis in those same places. While sectarian identity of course pervades much of the activities of non-Wahhabi Muslim actors (Sunni and Shi’a alike) in conflict zones in the Middle East, these other actors generally do not aim to wipe out the sectarian Other, systematically target Christians or other minorities and enslave their women and children, or programmatically destroy religious and historical monuments and houses of worship as carried out by radical Wahhabi groups.

This points to the importance of understanding how the single concept of sectarianism can be used and applied differently to various sects and actors within the Islamic community. The importance of the monumental Amman Message of 2004 was a noteworthy affirmation of inclusive orthodox Islam and a clear rebuke of takfiri excommunication ideology. This message, which affirmed diverse Muslim practices and beliefs as acceptable within Islam, was signed by the most high-ranking and popular representatives of nearly the entire Muslim world’s denominations, showcasing mainstream Sunni, Shi’a, and Ibadi solidarity against takfirism as a leading problem in contemporary Islam. It is also important to note that the phenomenon of sectarianism can take on different forms across different regions. In South Asia, for example, there are different layers and dynamics to sectarianism both between Sunnis and Shi’as but just as importantly among different groups of Sunni revivalist movements and Sufi orders (i.e between Deobandis, Ahl-i Hadith, Barelvis, etc.)—especially in a context where Wahhabism has a different foothold than in the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East. Further research can help elucidate these diverse patterns and sub-strands that sectarian identities and sectarian behavior can take across world regions and even in particular localities.
**Myth Three: Sectarianism is really just about politics**

More sophisticated analyses which look to move beyond simplistic religious or sectarian generalizations focus on the primacy of “politics” in driving conflict in the Middle East and tend to downplay or ignore religion altogether as a relevant factor. While it is tempting to attribute sectarian conflict in the Middle East solely on “politics” and discard with the admittedly problematic use of religion and sect-based narratives so dominant today, ignoring the very real and independent role that “religion” plays can itself undermine our understanding and explanations for what is going on in today’s Middle East. In other words, sectarian thought and ideology cannot simply be reduced to tools in the hands of state powers to further their interests. While religious doctrines and beliefs can of course be manipulated by state actors who ascribe to different ideologies, it is only because religious ideology is an important individual driving factor in believers’ lives and has its own idiosyncratic content that can be used in unique ways by state powers who are looking to instrumentalize these beliefs for their own benefit.

For example, it is not possible to boil down contemporary Shi’ism in the Middle East simply as a function of Iranian politics, whether considering diverse Shi’a political parties and movements in the region as seen in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen or beyond, or even considering historical and theological ideas such vilayet-i faqih (the ideational basis of the modern theocratic system in Iran) which is a content-based phenomenon stemming from Shi’a thought and doctrine and cannot be understood as simply an instrumental political action that emerged from state actors. Likewise, it is not sufficient to simply reduce the complex challenge of militant takfirism to the policies of a state and ignore the unique ideological nature of Wahhabism itself. Wahhabism in other words is also a theological issue when it comes to violent sectarianism, just as it is an ideological challenge (not simply political) within mainstream Sunni theology and the broader umbrella of Sunni religious thought.

Furthermore, on a more fundamental level, conceptually disentangling “religion” from “politics” is no easy task and it is an open question in the field whether such a particular division is indeed even useful – especially
given that Islamic political thought generally does not carry such an internal secular vocabulary which clearly demarcates politics and religion. The conceptual line between religion and politics is notoriously blurry and by explaining away the role that religious commitments and ideology can play in driving behaviors on the ground, analysts can misidentify drivers behind phenomena such as sectarianism. Taking seriously the nature, ideology, and impact of religious thought is necessary to broaden our understanding beyond what we may commonly understand as the political. From incorrect analyses which failed to predict the victory of the Iranian Islamic revolution, to post-2003 Iraqi politics which witnessed a resurgence of Islamist mobilization, to the pervasive Islamic revivalism in Turkey and the entrenchment of the ruling AKP, misunderstandings regarding the nexus between religion and politics has led to serious shortcomings in explaining significant contemporary phenomenon and major social trends.

**Myth Four:** The United States is not involved in intra-Islamic disputes in the Middle East

While it is a common refrain of U.S. policymakers across both parties that the United States is not interested in getting involved in an intra-Islamic “sectarian dispute” that supposedly stretches back time immemorial, the United States is in fact deeply involved, directly or indirectly, in sectarian dynamics in the Muslim world. The United States effectively changed the balance of power in the Middle East by toppling Saddam Hussein in 2003, which led to democratic elections bringing to power a Shi’a majority government in Iraq for the first time in centuries in what was a clear boon for the region’s Shi’as and Iran. This points to indirect consequences for sectarianism that U.S. actions hold on issues of foreign policy which may be unrelated to sectarian considerations in the first place. Indeed, as asserted by American diplomat Peter Galbraith, on the eve of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, former President George W. Bush invited three leading Iraqi exile figures to watch the Superbowl with him and in the ensuing conversations was completely unaware about the differences between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims in Iraq.
On the other hand, the United States’ alliance with Saudi Arabia, as its primary Arab ally in the region, has serious consequences for perceptions and realities of U.S. involvement in the larger Middle East. Namely this relationship signifies an uncomfortable acquiescence of the Wahhabi religious establishment that grants the Saudi monarchy its ruling legitimacy, as the very pillars of the Kingdom rest on its centuries-long historical alliance with the Wahhabi clergy. This can become particularly problematic and misrepresent American values given our carte-blanche support to Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy objectives with little to no accountability. Such dynamics negatively shape perceptions on sectarianism and feeds into grievances that the United States is taking sides in intra-Muslim affairs via its alliance with Saudi Arabia which is leading a devastating war in Yemen (with U.S. support), supported a crackdown in Bahrain against the Shi’a majority populace during the Arab Spring, and is involved in discrimination against Shi’a Muslims residing in the Kingdom, among other critical policies in the region.

Negative perceptions regarding the U.S.-Saudi alliance also not only increase anti-American sentiment among mainstream Sunnis and Shi’as who are on the receiving end of violence committed by Wahhabi groups, but also, ironically, further deteriorates the U.S. image among radical Wahhabis who are virulently anti-American (as well as opposed to the Saudi monarchy and its alliance with the United States). Therefore, the special nature of the U.S.-Saudi alliance radicalizes anti-American sentiments across the spectrum while simultaneously harming U.S. relations with other Muslim actors and current and potential partners in the Middle East. The Saudis and Wahhabi establishment are also staunchly opposed to rival Sunni political movements which have pitted them against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Turkey as well as against other forms of Sunni political Islam (especially those combining Islam and elections) which has strained U.S. relations with its other traditional allies in the region. It would be wise if the United States, in pursuit of its strategic objectives and national security interests, pursued a more balanced approach with a multitude of diverse actors in the region instead of relying almost exclusively on Saudi Arabia.
Moreover, this situation can create important challenges for a core U.S. policy objective in the Middle East – combating terrorism – given that Saudi Arabia shares ideological roots with the very groups the United States is committed to eliminating. This is particularly pertinent when considering the intimate relationship between terrorism and sectarianism in which many of the top terror groups (ISIS, different al-Qaeda branches, etc.) are at the forefront of sectarian atrocities and spreading sectarian hate-speech. These implications regarding sectarianism should not be easily ignored by U.S. policymakers and analysts as they deeply influence popular and elite opinion of American actions and policy effectiveness in the Middle East.

Myth Five: Sectarianism is necessarily bad and violent

Sectarianism is the belief or practice of a particular interpretation of religion as the ultimate true interpretation and privileged practice of that religious tradition or identity. By itself as a concept, it thus does not necessarily have to hold positive or negative connotations as commonly perceived. Shi’ism and Sunnism, for example, are two sectarian readings of Islam – that does not make them necessarily violent or destructive. Sectarian readings are an intrinsic part of any religious tradition and reflect the plurality of interpretations that accompany all religions. These readings include different legal methodologies, various theological readings of Islam, and diverse ritual practices within and across Sunnism and Shi’ism. Most of the confessional differences within Islam are negligible and the Muslim world is surprisingly uniform with generally minor variation in its religious beliefs and practices (e.g. daily prayers, core doctrines, pilgrimage to Mecca, etc.).

Our task as scholars and practitioners should be to differentiate between harmful exclusionary sectarian thought and practice rather than the sectarian pluralism that goes hand in hand with religious diversity in the Muslim world. In other words, our goal should not necessarily be to encourage Muslims to eliminate or resolve different sectarian points of view but rather to eliminate those destructive and harmful aspects of sectarianism. This is
relatively a feasible track to undertake, unlike resolving sectarianism writ large. By employing the term “sectarian de-escalation” we mean processes that lead to acknowledgement and respect for diverse interpretations of Islam which are natural to any religious tradition, and eventually to “sectarian appreciation” and the recognition of benefits to diversity. This, we hope can encourage the expansion of pluralistic spaces in which Muslim denominations can peacefully co-exist and grow alongside one another, while identifying and eliminating the harmful sectarian factors that can lead to escalatory violence, persecution, and unjust discrimination.

Conclusion

The main conclusion from the above discussions is to complicate any single “grand sectarian narrative” whether it is the Iran-Saudi Cold War, the Shi’ā-Sunni primordial identity thesis, or other sweeping macro-framings of geopolitical events or religious trends in the Middle East and Islamic world. Instead, each case involving sectarianism must be investigated in its own context which vary according to the specific ideational contents of each religious tradition, historical and social dimensions, regions, legacies of empire and state building, and other relevant factors. As our discussions of sectarianism in the Middle East demonstrate, many of current mainstream analytical narratives problematically approach Muslim politics through the lens of perennial ancient inter-sectarian wars and other anachronistic frameworks of “Shi’a-Sunni” divisions or even “Persians vs. Arabs.”

Such rhetoric was used excessively even by secular Arabist dictators such as Saddam Hussein during his reign in order to brand the Arab Shi’a opposition to him as a Persian threat to true Arab identity (and by extension “orthodox Sunni Islam”) – pointing to the fact that it is not just “religious” actors producing and reinforcing sectarianism in the region. In the Arab world, one of the added complications of using nationalist rhetoric in order to shift emphasis away from religious sectarian identity is the legacy of Arabism which conflates ethnic Arab identity with a national one. This Arabism is usually framed in anti-Persian and anti-Shi’a rhetoric as seen under both Saddam Hussein’s rein as well as some strands of contemporary Iraqi nationalism and the way that many Arab neighboring states
exclusively emphasize shared Arab heritage as the basis of political and
diplomatic cooperation with Iraq as a means to drive a wedge between Iraq
and Iran. The broad applicability of sectarian language and its ubiquity in
the Middle East unfortunately often regularly seeps into the rhetoric of
journalists and policymakers as well.

In reality, sectarianism is a much broader and nuanced phenomenon than
a blanket “Sunni-Shi’a” dichotomy; indeed, there are often more important
intra-denominational dynamics and contestation within sects than
between them which are embedded in complex regional geopolitics and
interstate competition. In the Middle East—the regional focus of this arti-
cle—a more accurate survey of sectarianism would greater emphasize the
impact of Wahhabism on sectarianism, but on a more global scale recognize
regional diversity and the particularity of overlapping yet still distinct
geographic zones across the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia, for
example where sectarian relations do not fit into a uniform analytical mold
and have differing dynamics. Institutional and social variety within Islam
and particularly within the vast umbrella of “Sunnism” is quite vast and
diverse which requires much greater nuance when discussed as a category
within scholarly and journalistic works.

As long as Islam as an identity, generic marker, or practice is relevant in the
lives of Muslims, confessional and sectarian pluralism will continue to be
relevant as well — as is the case for any global religion for that matter. This
is because diversity and sectarian readings of Islam are embedded as norma-
tive practices within the religion itself which can take on both positive
and negative aspects depending on the given socio-political circumstances.
This religious diversity is quite difficult to generalize into easy categoriza-
tions and moves beyond the geography of the Middle East, especially as the
majority of Muslims in the world reside outside this region.

Studying “sectarian violence” in particular requires the use of more accu-
rate terminology and understanding of sectarianism as a concept. As such,
we emphasize the necessity for scholars and analysts to undertake rigorous
interdisciplinary and theoretical engagement with the concept of sectari-
anism in order to explore the best peace-building initiatives moving ahead.
This endeavor should also take seriously the diversity of religious groups
across Muslim denominations to reach a more nuanced and accurate understanding of sectarian dynamics and politics in the Middle East.

In recognizing the complex and varied ways that sectarianism can express itself, the call to “sectarian de-escalation” therefore refers to a project not aimed at diminishing Muslim religious identity or resolving religious disputes but to instead identify and confront those aspects of sectarianism that are negative, exclusionary, or violent. It is therefore important to explore avenues for diverse religious communities to co-exist in a peaceful manner and to provide the space for greater religious pluralism in public spheres. Doing so would acknowledge sectarian identities and differences and explore the legitimate ways in which diversity can exist and be appreciated within the Muslim world.
Panel 1: Regional Geopolitics and the New Sectarianism in the Middle East

Moderator: Sahar Nowrouzzadeh

Panelists: Simon Mabon, Lenore Martin, Payam Mohseni, Hussein Kalout

Summary:

The first panel interrogates the nuanced genealogy of sectarianism in the Middle East, dissolving simplistic “Sunni-Shi’a” historical binaries and instead urges us to see sectarianism as a product of many interlinked factors ranging from the interests of the Saudi ruling family and Turkey’s ruling AKP, to the geopolitical volatility of the Arabic Spring and the Iran-Iraq war, and the strategic isolation of Iran in the larger Middle East. As such, we are encouraged to understand that these supposedly historically-rooted sectarian divides have been amplified, manipulated, and instrumentalized by different actors at different points in time as a response to shifting power dynamics within the region, rather than necessarily being in and of themselves the source of Middle Eastern tensions.
Simon Mabon

What we typically see in the analysis of events across the Middle East, is an effort to reduce both the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and their subsequent geopolitical wrangling in the region to “sectarian difference,” and more specifically, to the “ancient struggle” between Shi’a and Sunni Islam.

Moreover, suggestions that the Middle East is experiencing its own 30-year war, and similarly lazy, damaging, incredibly orientalist tropes are proving both endlessly frustrating and damaging to the nuance required to properly understand the dynamic within the Middle East. As such, in this talk I will consider Saudi Arabia’s behavior across the region by locating it in a political, historical and geopolitical context.

In order to understand where the kingdom is right now, we have to begin by looking at the formation of the Saudi state and the challenges that Abdul Aziz ibn Saud – the kingdom’s founding father – had to overcome in the formative years of the state. These entailed both the tangible challenges of regulating space and unifying disparate communities, but also far more existential challenges. In establishing the state, Ibn Saud had to balance tradition and modernity. That is, he had to reconcile the tensions between the more conservative members of the Wahhabi clerics (the Ikhwan) – the fervent fighting force that was essential in conquering the land – and his own desire to build a nation state, to imbue it with nationalist meaning and advance the technology necessary to help it develop. If we go right back to that point in time, we see a number of serious tensions which have prevailed in the Saudi kingdom until this day.

While tensions with the Ikhwan were easily crushed with the help of the British, the group’s fundamentalist vision about how the kingdom should be run remained latent across the state, puncturing Saudi history with instances of violence; most notably in 1979, with the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Amidst such rampant violence, the strategy put forward by Ibn Saud was to unite tribal loyalty and draw upon normative values found within that tribal history, along with a sense of Islamic legitimacy derived through the alliance with the Wahhabis dating back to the 17th
century. In fact, it was this alliance which simultaneously helped Ibn Saud to overcome a serious legitimacy deficit, but in doing so, bound the al-Saud family to leadership behavior allied to this very strict fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. Therefore, while Wahhabism was not necessarily the manifestation of Islam that Ibn Saud himself followed, it was one which he leveraged instrumentally and which therefore suffused the fabric of the Saudi state with its intolerant form of Islam. Through such claims to Islamic legitimacy, and from their position as the protectors of Mecca and Medina – the guardians of the *hajj* – al-Saud and Saudi Arabia placed themselves at the vanguard of this Islamic world.

With the establishment of an Islamic Republic through the Iranian Revolution in 1979, this legitimacy was challenged and a form of zero-sum position emerged along sectarian lines. If you look at events immediately after the revolution, you see the emergence of a rhetoric in which the Saudis framed events as sectarian in nature, whilst the Iranians were very careful to speak of Islamic unity given their minority status within the *ummah*. That is, in fear of Iran’s burgeoning challenge to one of their main pillars of legitimacy, the al-Saud began to frame Iranian actions as Shi’a, and the revolution as a form of nefarious Persian expansionism – an invidious narrative which continues to resonate with many people within the region.

Furthermore, in the same year as the Revolution, a group of Saudi tribesmen seized the Grand Mosque, revealing the presence of an internal challenge stemming from criticisms that the al-Saud did not properly adhere to the tenets of the Wahhabi faith. At this point, with the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Saudi claims to legitimacy were subverted both from within and by their regional rival.

From this position, we can start to understand the precarious position facing the Kingdom. With its demographic imbalance and military might far inferior to their regional rivals in Iraq and Iran, it is hardly surprising that the al-Saud drew upon their relationship with the United States as a means of guaranteeing security. This relationship is deeply unpopular with many across the Middle East and has led to a range of criticisms of the al-Saud, particularly with regard to the loss of the Kingdom’s autonomy. In this context, a number of issues emerge.
The first, of course, is the toppling of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq. The US-led invasion in 2003 brought about a change in the geopolitical alignment in the region. Many in Riyadh feared what would happen next; they feared increased Iranian involvement in Iraq, and feared what would happen if the Shi’a majority in Iraq were to side with Iran.

And what we begin to see is that with the fragmentation of Iraq, Iranian influence in the region increased. Iran started to take advantage of a number of links to political groups that had been forced out of Iraq under the tenure of Saddam Hussein, and as such their power increased, much to the chagrin of many in Riyadh who feared this “Persian” infiltration into their sphere of influence. In response, senior Saudi officials turned to their American counterparts and urged them to “cut off the head of the snake” by striking against the Iranian regime. This is a deeply-seated Saudi concern about Iranian activity which the Wikileaks cables documented extensively.

Such concerns were expressed not only by the al-Saud, but also by the al-Khalifah in Bahrain and a number of their allies who urged the US to do something about the “Iranian threat.” Here we see that the cause for action is not necessarily sectarian; it emanates from geopolitics, and a preoccupation with the control of the region. This perception came to the fore in 2011 with the Arab uprisings and the separation of regime-society relations, which provided scope for the regimes in Riyadh and Tehran to manipulate events for the sake of their geopolitical interests. These regimes sought to capitalize on the existing schisms by mobilizing memberships of sectarian networks and shared communities, which would rapidly take on politicized meaning. It is this opening up of the state, and the manipulation of the divisions within the state, that provide opportunities for external actors to shape domestic politics and, with it, regional dynamics.

Syria offers perhaps the best example of this, where Saudi efforts to counter Iranian influence resulted in the provision of arms, weapons, and logistical and financial support to various opposition groups. We see it also in Bahrain, in Iraq, in Yemen, and even in Lebanon. This strategy of framing events in a sectarian manner has been picked up by regimes across the region in an attempt to circumvent domestic unrest. For example, in Bahrain, the
al-Khalifah ruling family have been able to frame the pro-democracy move-
ments in sectarian terms by drawing on its long history in which there have
been instances of perceived Iranian involvement and support for revolution-
ary groups such as the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain.

The historical existence of such narratives creates an environment which
supports the cultivation and framing of events in sectarian terms. Thus,
events in Bahrain were framed as a consequence of perfidious Iranian
interference in the domestic affairs of the Kingdom, manipulating sec-
tarian divisions. They were framed in sectarian terms, which start to find
traction amongst members of the Bahraini society. Over time, these mem-
bers start to conceive of everyday events in sectarian terms, with protests
being driven by nefarious Iranian interference. And this becomes the lens
and narrative through which the uprisings are explained. Such narratives
have been driven by al-Saud and al-Khalifah as a way of maintaining con-
trol: capitalizing on sectarian difference and historical political difference,
then framing contemporary events in a particular way as a mechanism to
entrench power. Inevitably, that mode of political consolidation plays out
to a bloody conclusion, as we are seeing in Syria.

In the final segment of this talk, I want to raise a number of domestic chal-
 lenges that the al-Saud is facing. The transition from the sons of Ibn Saud
to the next generation was always going to be a difficult one, and the deci-
sion to position Mohammed bin Salman as crown prince was an attempt to
smooth that out. Yet what Mohammed bin Salman has done is to embark
on a particularly vociferous anti-Iranian agenda within his foreign policy.
He has drawn upon the anti-Iranian sentiment of the past seven or eight
years within the Kingdom, across the Middle East, and in the West as a
mechanism through which he can engender support from Saudis. How-
ever, Mohammad bin Salman is of course facing a number of challenges
himself; namely in implementing “Vision 2030,” weeding out corruption,
and solidifying his position within the kingdom.

Equally, his foreign policy has not been without problems. He has tried
to counter Iranian gains in Yemen by implementing operation “Decisive
Storm,” an incredibly brutal and violent air campaign which has caused a
humanitarian crisis perhaps worse than the one in Syria. The dilapidation
of the Yemeni state was an attempt to prevent Iranian influence, which was there previously, but not to this extent. Ironically, what Mohammad bin Salman's bombing campaign has done is to increase and solidify Iran's presence by pushing a desperate Yemen into the arms of Iran. The result of this action has been a humanitarian catastrophe, and allegations of war crimes not only against Saudi Arabia, but also against the UK and the US in virtue of their supposed complicity. Having sat on a House of Lords panel, I can say that there were serious concerns that the UK was complicit in the sale of arms in Saudi Arabia that were then being used to commit war crimes. Then we turn towards Lebanon, which is, of course, an incredibly complicated case. Last December, when Saad Hariri visited Riyadh as both a Saudi and Lebanese passport holder, he was imprisoned upon stepping foot into Saudi Arabia; whereby he was placed under house arrest and forced to resign in a statement written in non-Lebanese Arabic. It was only upon the intervention of French President Emmanuel Macron, and the Egyptian leader al-Sisi that his release was orchestrated. This was a serious miscalculation from Mohammed Bin Salman, who risked pushing Lebanon into a Civil War, emasculating the Sunni Lebanese community, and empowering Hezbollah – the reason for which Hariri was essentially forced to resign.

His second mistake was Palestine, where he summoned Mohammed Abbas to Riyadh and told him to accept the Riyadh peace plan; Saudi Arabia's plan to end the Palestinian conflict, which involved Abbas giving up the right of return. Given that this is a concession that no Palestinian leader could ever make, Abbas rejected this deal and returned to Palestine. Here we have a young crown prince who finds himself stuck in an intractable war in Yemen with two serious diplomatic mistakes in Lebanon and Palestine.

These errors only embolden Iran in its sphere of influence, historically categorized as the “Shi'a Crescent,” but which is now being viewed as an Iranian land bridge; that is, a bridge from Tehran to the Mediterranean. So Saudi Arabia is facing an existential crisis domestically in trying to transform the kingdom, and its foreign policy has fallen flat with some serious geopolitical mistakes, both of which are redolent of the formation of the Saudi state and its past struggle for supremacy. This is a struggle yet to be resolved, and as such is central in inciting a massive humanitarian crisis across the Middle East.
Lenore Martin

Sectarianism in Turkey is manifest today in the domestic political divide between the Kemalist supporters of secularism and the religious supporters of the ruling Justice and Development Party as well as in the religious divide between the Sunni orthodoxy and the syncretic Alevi community. In foreign policy it is manifest in the government’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world, to the detriment of Turkey’s interests in more flexible Middle East alignments. This sectarianism is rooted in two strongmen coming to power in Turkish politics: Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

When Kemal Ataturk took control of the newly founded Turkish state in 1923 he had two huge goals in mind. One was to build a modern state out of what the military had rescued of the Ottoman Empire. And the second was to integrate the many ethnic and regional groups into a unitary nation called Turkey. These two goals sometimes conflicted. Therefore, though he made Islam the official religion of the new Turkish state in order to help unite its disparate groups, he limited its reach out of concern that it would make modernization more difficult.

When Ataturk spoke of modernizing, he meant moving Turkey towards becoming a European power and away from what he saw as a backward Middle East. Mustafa Kemal’s goal was for Turkey, in his words, to “catch up to contemporary civilization.” This modernization meant abolishing the Caliphate, making religion a matter of conscience and separating it from the state, thereby creating a more secular Turkey. In education, science rather than Islam was emphasized. Religious schools and Sufi religious orders were closed. Arabic script was replaced with Latin script. And a new capital was created, Ankara, replacing Istanbul the former seat of the caliphate.

Many conservative Turks did not accept these radical changes limiting the public practice of religion. It was these very citizens who helped to bring Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party to power in November 2002. Of course, there were many other issues that contributed to the Party’s win at that time, including a dreadful economic situation and
a corrupt and ineffectual governing coalition that had been leading the
government prior to the election. I might also add that there were liberals
who welcomed the coming to power of a new party which painted itself as
democratic – as opposed to the corrupt elite that had been governing the
state.

Over the years that the Justice and Development Party has been in power,
religion in the public sphere has been greatly increased. Large numbers
of mosques have been built. Women are now able to wear the headscarf
in universities, public buildings and in public office. Religious courses
have multiplied in the public schools and Imam Hatip schools, preacher
training schools, have also increased from 63,000 when the Justice and
Development Party came to power to about a million now. This is all part
of President Erdogan’s plan to produce a “pious generation” that will work
for the construction of a “new civilization.”

Families that support the teaching of morality and religion as a responsibil-
ity of the schools are pleased. They support the government’s exclusion of
the teaching of Darwin’s theory of evolution until students reach university
level. President Erdogan is encouraging the teaching of Ottoman Turkish
and the government has doubled the number of required religious educa-
tion classes to two hours a week.

This is all problematic for Turkey’s secularists but it is even more troubling
for Turkey’s Alevi community. Alevi are a religious group of about 15-20
million people, though no one really knows since Turkey’s census does not
include religious beliefs. Alevism includes some aspects of Sufism, Shiism,
Sunnism and other traditions. They have never been truly accepted and have
suffered some terrible massacres going at least as far back as the 16th century
when Ottoman Sultan, Yavuz Sultan Selim, was responsible for the massacre
of tens of thousands of Alevi. To the horror of the Alevi community his
name was given to Istanbul’s third bridge over the Bosphorus in 2016. There
were Alevi massacres in more recent times, with100s massacred in 1970s,
dozens in the 1990s, and even today there are fears of impending attacks with
Alevi houses being marked with red paint in some villages.
This discrimination has extended to issues of education and the lack of support for Alevi prayer and gathering houses called cemevis. Alevis worship in cemevis rather than mosques and as opposed to mosques, men and women worship together. For the Sunni led Directorate of Religious Affairs, Alevis are Muslims and Muslims worship in mosques. Therefore, the state gives no support to building or maintaining cemevis or for the training of Alevi religious experts, though the government does support mosques and imams of the Sunni community. The Alevis have taken the Turkish state to the European Court of Human Rights which ruled in 2014 that Turkey was discriminating against Alevis. Nevertheless, Turkey has not changed its policies towards the community.

The religiosity that has grown in Turkey’s domestic sphere has also expressed itself in Turkey’s foreign policy in the Middle East. Just as we saw President Erdogan supporting the recognition of Ottoman history and culture at home he also used it in his foreign policy as a way of connecting with the Middle East – this is what many scholars referred to as Erdogan’s “Neo-Ottoman” foreign policy. Under this policy Turkey reconnected with the Middle East that Kemal Ataturk sought to leave behind.

Turkey and Syria became very close with Prime Minister Erdogan calling President Bashar al-Assad his cousin/brother, the two first couples going on vacation together and the cabinets of the two states holding combined meetings. Turkey also reached out to the Gulf states, becoming the first non-member strategic dialogue partner of the GCC in 2008. At the UN Turkey tried to help Iran avoid sanctions to the dismay of the United States. But, there were big changes to come once again with the Arab uprisings of 2011. In Egypt, Turkey supported the uprising and the election of a new government led by the Muslim Brother’s Muhammad Morsi. When Morsi lost power at the hands of the Egyptian military, relations between the two countries became extremely strained with a number of Muslim Brothers escaping to Turkey. The relationship remains difficult to this day.

In the Syrian uprising, Turkey did a sharp foreign policy about face. First, Ankara tried pushing Assad to reform, while at the same time hosting a conference of Syrian opposition leaders including Muslim Brothers. According to former Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem, Prime
Minister Erdogan kept pushing for the inclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood into the political process. This came to a head with the uprising and goes a long way in explaining the break between the two countries.

Turkey’s involvement in the GCC rift between Qatar and the UAE and Saudi Arabia also has a Muslim Brother connection, with Qatar being a supporter of the Brothers to the annoyance of the Emirates and Riyadh. Turkey has a small base in Qatar that had about 90 military personnel at the beginning of the Qatar-Saudi-UAE rift. The Turkish parliament has since authorized up to 5,000 more troops to be sent to the base to support the Qatari Emir.

To sum up: There are two threads that sew this short presentation together: One is the role of the authoritarian leadership of both Ataturk and Erdogan, though with their diametrically opposite visions for the state, that has exacerbated the sectarian divide in Turkey between secularists and conservatives and between Alevi and Sunni Turks. The second thread is the extension of religious sectarianism in Turkish domestic policy into Turkish foreign policy in the current Middle East. The Erdogan government’s bias towards the Muslim Brotherhood has limited Turkey’s flexibility in creating alignments that are in its national interest.
Payam Mohseni

My presentation will be on Iran’s geostrategic outlook, and I will try to give a simplified framework for understanding how Iran operates in the region. I think that a key phrase to understand Iran’s strategic behavior is to see Iran as the “center of the periphery.” This periphery can be defined as those geopolitically excluded from the region. These are groups that are disaffected by the Middle Eastern political and security order that was created as a consequence of the post-World War I period and the Sykes-Picot agreement, whereby Western powers carved out a new Middle East. The second part of the center of the periphery is the issue of Shi’ism. Shi’ism is generally understood as the periphery of predominant Sunni Islam. So Iran is the center of the periphery today, both for the excluded of the region and as a protector, or a power, for Shi’a Muslims.

However, this strategy was not the making of Iran. Iran did not necessarily plan to be the center of the periphery; rather, geopolitical factors as well as the historical evolution and failure of the Arab state system basically paved the way for Iran to take on this role. If we go to the notion of the religious or ideological aspect of the Iranian revolution, or of the Iranian political system, Iran espouses deep pan-Islamic sentiments for Shi’a-Sunni unity which minimize differences among sects and call for all Muslims to be united. Of course, one of the reasons it does so is because Iran claims to be the leader of the Islamic world, not just Shi’as. With Shi’as being around 15-20% of the global Muslim population, Iran would not want to be identified as a Shi’a power or as a Shi’a country. It does not want to be identified by sectarian identity. It wants to be an Islamic power and a leading Muslim authority where there are no differences between Shi’as and Sunnis. Iran’s support for the Palestinians in this sense also establishes organic links to the Sunni world and demonstrates Iranian leadership’s capability for a larger pan-Islamic, pan-Muslim Islamic world.

This sentiment is also applicable to other strains of Iranian revolutionary ideology which oppose how Western powers have carved out different zones of influence and state borders that have divided and weakened the Islamic world. You see some of these similar strains of thought within certain Sunni political movements as well, but the most prominent power in the Muslim
world championing anti-imperialism and backing aspirations for Muslim unity is found in Iranian strategic thinking. Yet at the same time, that is not to deny that for Iranians, Shi’ism is a central part of the Iranian political system. Domestically, of course, the notion of the *vilayet-i faqih* ("guardianship of the jurisprudent") is informed by Shi’a political and theological thought. Shi’ism also plays a prominent role regionally for Iran; across the Islamic world, Iran feels natural tendencies or close associations with Shi’a organizations, movements, and social groups across the region. Such natural affinities with co-religionists is important, but it does not mean that Iran wishes to be a Shi’a power – Iran wants to be a pan-Islamic, Muslim power.

What is particularly challenging for Iran is the geostrategic landscape in which the country operates. Despite all the media discussing the rise of a Persian empire and an aggrandizing, expansive Iran, from the Iranian perspective, Iran in reality operates in a framework of strategic vulnerability. It sees itself as a lonely actor excluded from the security architecture of the region and facing serious threats of regime change as well as existential threats to its sovereignty and security. So in such an environment and perspective which saw the victory of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the collapse of US-Iran relations, Iran has forged two main geopolitical strategies. The first is deterrence, and the second “counter containment.” With regards to its deterrence strategy, Iran works in collaboration with other actors in the region, whether it be Hezbollah in Lebanon or Shi’a militias in Iraq and Syria, in part to give it deterrence capability by raising the cost of a potential strike on Iran. This is for Iran’s self-defense. The second strategy, counter-containment, is very important; if the US or Saudi goal is to contain Iran or isolate Iran as a regional power, Iran’s goal is to prove that it cannot be sidelined. Iran is driven to show that anywhere that matters, any source or opportunity to have a voice or say, it will have a voice and presence in that field. This is also called being a veto player. Iran can block attempts to move forward political processes without its inclusion.

In short, Iran’s deterrence strategy is formulated to protect its borders and integrity and to give it a sense of national security. Just as importantly, this strategy allows Iran to have a seat at the table and to have a bargaining position in international negotiations. In part, Iran’s anti-Israeli position fits within this larger strategy, whereby opposing Israel provides
Iran leverage and deterrence against the United States. Without a clear opponent such as Israel, Iran would not be able to cultivate regional partners both from an ideologically pan-Islamic perspective, but also from a geo-strategic perspective as opposition to Israel gives Iran leverage with the US and demonstrates that it is a real regional power to be reckoned with.

But what we need to really understand is why Iran has succeeded in the region. Iran’s success is not just of its own doing. It is in part a consequence of the 2003 Iraq invasion, along with the erosion and fragmentation of the Arab state system. We are seeing vacuums of power forming in the Middle East along with the collapse of ideological legitimacy for secular states in the old order – the same order which was in part constructed to isolate and contain Iran. This provides momentous opportunities for Iran not only to expand its reach, but also increase its influence and be able to work with non-state actors in arenas and a geopolitical space it would otherwise not have sway over. This is also the case with Yemen, which reflects the same trend in that the current Saudi-led war on Yemen had nothing to do with Iran. Iran by no means was close to the Houthi or Ansarullah, but as a consequence of the devastation of the war, of the Saudi attacks on the Houthis, overtime we see how the Ansarallah have gravitated more towards Iran even though they are Zaydi Shi’a and not Twelver Shi’a. From the Iranian perspective, this is a clear geostrategic gain.

Saudi Arabia spends billions in a war against the weakest and poorest country in the world and it loses. Iran spends pennies and it wins. In terms of just the soft psychological power, if a country like Saudi Arabia spends five times as much as Iran on military spending, loses to a country like Yemen and Iran spends pennies and wins, it shows the great strategic power and depth that Iran has and can bring to bear in the region. For Iran, this is more than just a matter of playing its hand adeptly and wisely – it is also due to the relative independence and autonomy it gives to local social movements and actors in the region which gives a perception of heightened Iranian power and capacity. Many of these local Iran-allied groups that have become increasingly Shi’a-oriented in their identity, have done so as a consequence of, I would argue, the role of Saudi Arabia in really bringing out the Shi’a and Iran as an enemy; thereby allowing Iran to situate itself at the center of the periphery in the Middle East.
Hussein Kalout

I want to broach the most complex problem in the Middle East, which in my opinion is Lebanon. For me the level of sectarianism in the Middle East is exemplified by the primacy assigned to one’s name and genealogy in determining one’s sect and religion. Since 1993, I would argue, Lebanon has not experienced a non-sectarian political framework – until just recently. Since 1993, Lebanon has not known how to play politics without major regional or international actors, and, just as importantly, how to not deal with a high level of sectarianism within its politics. The Lebanese became habituated to proxy politics. This is what is called a “sectarian democracy” in Lebanon which is based on 17 religious sects. And everything in the nation is divided into quotas and small pieces in the government, either in the ministerial cabinet or second-tier bureaucrats, or in the parliament. So “x” position belongs to either the Maronites, Orthodox, Shi’a, Sunni, Druze and the list continues. This model has unfortunately been replicated in other countries in the Middle East, like in Iraq where they basically transferred the Lebanese model to Iraqi domestic politics.

The one important development that has changed the scale of sectarianism after the fifteen years of civil war in Lebanon was the Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006. That literally split the country into pieces and organized two main political groups with deep polarization between the so-called March 8 and March 14 alliances. The March 8 Alliance was led by the majority of Christian Maronites, Hezbollah allies, and some Druze forces. The other side was led by Sunnis, with some small Christian groups, and other marginal groups. This basically inflicted on the country a deep social and political cleavage which caused serious impediments to the formation of a stable political atmosphere and the formation of a plausible political cabinet to provide the minimum necessary public policy for citizens.

With that in mind, what are the main divergences between the two groups? The March 14 Coalition, which is led by Saad Hariri and the Future Party, believes that the progress, wealth, and development of Lebanon depend on the organization of an alliance leaning towards Western powers, ending resistance against the Israeli occupation, and cutting ties with Iran. On the other hand, the March 8th Coalition believes that the development of the
country, its national security, and its self-determination depend on continuing the resistance against Israel and maintaining safe distance from the Western powers.

These divisions have defined Lebanese politics basically since 2006, eroding the political and electoral system. The last parliamentary election in Lebanon happened in 2009. Since then, there have been no parliamentary elections. The next one will take place on May 6th. So basically, Lebanese deputies had a nine year mandate. Why did that happen? Due to deep sectarian cleavages, they were incapable of achieving the minimum level of consensus regarding how the electoral code would rule the future elections and who would become Prime Minister, President, and Speaker of the House. So this confessional model paralyzed the country from 2006 until 2016 when they decided, after the Syrian experience and the creation and proliferation of such groups as Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra, to seek out political consensus – especially after they realized the infiltration of these groups along the northern border of Lebanon and the successful terrorist attacks made inside Lebanon by some radicals. They realized that this minimum level of political consensus was needed, and if unaddressed, the influence of regional and great powers would lead to a second civil war in Lebanon.

The Lebanese elite reached this understanding to the distaste of both Saudi Arabia and Iran. They decided to install Hariri as the Prime Minister and Michel Aoun as the President. The de facto detention of Hariri in Saudi in effect created the atmosphere to make the Lebanese politicians deescalate the internal sectarian tension and negotiate the new elections. Since then, that forced the government to set an election in May 6th, 2018. The “Hariri effect” hence basically integrated Lebanon and de-escalated the sectarian atmosphere.

Of course, Lebanon will continue to face several challenges. It is very well known that in Lebanon each piece of the political terrain belongs to or has allegiances to some regional or world power. These alliances are based either on an economic dependency or an ideological conviction, and to properly appreciate what the political future of Lebanon will look like, we must keep a keen eye on how these complex interdependencies will unfold and change.
Panel 2: 
**Clergy & Religious Authority in Sectarian De-Escalation**

Moderator: **Payam Mohseni**

Panelists: **Fadhel Al-Sahlani, Khalid Nasr, Seyed Ammar Nakhjavani, Yasir Fahmy**

**Summary:**

These four panelists focus on the role that clergy and religious Islamic authorities ought to provide to promote sectarian de-escalation based on insights from their experiences as religious leaders, their historical knowledge, and the sentiments of international Muslim communities. Each speaker discusses the means through which each would personally address the topic of de-escalation in their particular context. The intent and limitations of religious scholars are debated in regards to political intervention and the duty of state and governmental leaders. The panel addresses the consequences and benefits of financial support in promoting religious causes, as well as cultural and geophysical barriers that prevent sectarianism from being effectively undermined.

In his address, Fadhel Al-Sahlani discussed the importance of the independence of the Muslim clerical class in acting as a genuine source of ethics and legislation. He proposed practical steps in order to reduce sectarian tensions, advocating that in order to move beyond the sectarian divide, each side must accept perceived “losses” they have suffered and work towards the greater goals and the good of larger society. As an example, Al-Sahlani pointed to the constructive role that Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani played in Iraq especially in the fight against ISIS and his strong intra-faith steps in preventing larger Shi’a-Sunni violence from taking place despite the indiscriminate violence which was and is targeting the Shi’a community in Iraq. Al-Sahlani also emphasized how scholars and policymakers must take on true costs, including financial expenditures, in order
to truly signal the importance of sectarian de-escalation and not be content with issuing verbal statements alone.

The second speaker, Khalid Nasr, focused on the historical context behind sectarian identity within Islam and the role that ethnic and religious identities play in general perceptions of sectarian identity particularly focusing on how ethnic markers can be used to denote sectarian affiliation. He emphasized the fluid nature of the formation of law schools in Islamic history and how “Shi’a” and “Sunni” figures freely learned from one another, but also referenced the difficulties in moving beyond the association of Shi’ism with Persian or Iranian beliefs.

Seyed Nakhjavani spoke to the relevant challenges for Muslim scholars to balance the commitments to their denominational and sectarian affiliation and their wider responsibilities for interfaith dialogue and to attempt to move beyond the positions which divide sects in the first place. Nakhjavani also discussed the difficulties in defining “sectarianism” and how scholars expressing their genuine belief in their true interpretation of religion is a different form of sectarianism from sectarian expressions which are discriminatory, exclusionary, and prevent true interfaith discussions from taking place.

Finally, Yasir Fahmy emphasized how scholars and clergy carry a responsibility to lead believers in difficult and practical day-to-day issues which impact their lives and are particular to their localized social and cultural contexts. One avenue of sectarian de-escalation therefore is to contextualize divisive issues in other parts of the world which bear less on American Muslim life such as contemporary politics in the Middle East, for example, and to focus more broadly on the rich depth of the Islamic tradition which transcends the political situation of any one specific divisive case. Fahmy also problematized creating generalized categories of Shi’a and Sunni Muslims and pointed to the extraordinary diversity within both strands of Islam which should discourage creating antagonistic stereotypes of any sect. Finally, he emphasized the importance of treating one another as respectful human beings regardless of theological or doctrinal differences which should be discussed respectfully even if there is genuine disagreement.
Panel 3: Religious Pluralism and Muslim Identity in the West and Islamic World

Moderator: Diana Eck

Panelists: Wasif Rizvi, Syed Meesam Razvi, Mohamad Bashar Arafat, Sajjad Rizvi

Summary:

Panel Three explores what it means to enable a pluralistic conception of Islam in the West. This is in a context where the language in mainstream Western media and parts of academia has often been monolithic, insensitive to an intellectual tradition outside of its own, and has in the process reinforced a vision of Islam synonymous with “Islamist extremism.” Equally, many speakers raised the need for the cultural integration and immersion of Muslims – especially imams – moving to America from the Middle East, portraying the pursuit of pluralism as a challenge which exists on both sides of the discourse. The plurality of voices intrinsic in the Muslim world fully committed to pluralism on its own terms as had been historically the case is also highlighted and commented upon.
You might be wondering “What’s she doing here?” Well, for one reason because I have a long heritage of singing *Kumbaya* as a Christian. I grew up as a Methodist in the state of Montana and ended up studying religion quite extensively in India. Over the last 20 years I have studied the new religious landscape of the United States in light of the last 50 years of immigration. That has proved an eye-opener both for me and my fellow citizens, as well as certainly for the students who have been part of the pluralism project. It’s really through my students that I discovered the Al-Khoei Foundation, the various mosques and the Islamic centers in the United States, and more specifically here in Boston.

This raises the question of what it means for America to be a pluralistic country. That is to say, a country characterized not simply by our diversity, but by the engagement with that diversity in the context of a society needing to be forged out of these many religious traditions. Here we are with this question of religious pluralism, and that question applies not only across religious traditions but also within them. It is a question which has shaped the early history of the United States, a country where people fled the Catholic-Protestant wars which ravaged Europe for several centuries, in pursuit of what they called “religious freedom.” However, it wasn’t really universal “religious freedom” as much as it was the freedom to practice one’s own faith. For example, if you were an early immigrant to Boston of the Puritan persuasion, you would have participated in a Commonwealth that ran Jews and Catholics out of town. Boston was not seen to be a platform of religious flourishing for everyone. That only emerged later and gives rise to the question: How do we live together with these differences? What kind of society can we create out of these differences? What kind of support do governments and educational institutions in civil society need to lend to the creation of pluralistic societies? As Aga Khan often says, “Pluralistic societies don’t just happen by themselves. They need to be created and constructed and supported.”
Wasif Rizvi

The question of religious freedom and pluralism is somewhat neglected in the context of Pakistan, despite its salience. Purely on sectarian grounds – though admittedly without the horrors of civil wars like those in Iraq or Syria - Pakistan has lost about 50,000 lives in the past 25 or 30 years, most of whom are Shi’as given the emergence of this conflict in our region. What is particularly ironic is that the subcontinent prides itself so much on religious pluralism that al-Biruni wrote a book entitled “Religions of India.” Perhaps the most pluralistic society from the perspective of religion that existed was on the Indian subcontinent. Nowhere can I think of a sharper and more sobering contrast between what we purported to be true, and what it has come down to today.

What, then, is the crisis in pluralism? It is somewhat provocative to talk about that here at Harvard, which is perhaps at the helm of the emergence of the “modern world,” and the academic protocol that is spearheading Anglo-Saxon academia. Moderns are very weird people, in that their grand project is one of disinheritance. We are supposedly the only people in the history of humanity – in an arbitrary number of half a million years of human civilization – which have had the audacity to theorize over our identity. Suddenly the entire human race is attributed to a time in history that obviously did not exist – in that it was not a part of the conceptual universe of humanity. Just 600 years ago, people didn't wake up and say “We are medieval,” or the equivalent for whichever epoque they lived in. What does that mean? That subconsciously, and sometimes very overtly, there is something fundamentally different about us this time as opposed to anything that has happened in the past. That in this impoverished time that we live in – culturally, spiritually and intellectually – we are cleaved from our history, because we have disconnected and discarded and demeaned everything that has preexisted us. The idea of progress is closely tied to it, as is the idea of the modern identity. Why then does the evaporation of pluralism around the world come as a surprise to us?

As a matter of fact, human societies have shown greater resilience to this, which gives us an insight as to the fundamental crisis at the heart of pluralism. Moreover, there is this monolithic, undifferentiated, intellectual
protocol that exists around the world, through which lens we are all condemned to view ourselves. How can any civilization, any alternative view survive if it is not allowed, or does not have the means to view its own history, its own identity, its own art, its own culture from its own point-of-view? And how has that now become academically or intellectually acceptable? It’s not part of the intellectual protocol which exists here. This is a fundamental intellectual crime that continues to get committed time and time again; most revered by a university like this, but also perpetuated by every other university that is trying to mimic this. Essentially, this is a complete disavowal of any other form of knowledge, understanding, and intellectual viewpoint except for that which has been shoved down our throat many times through the means of genocide around the world; the Western or Eurocentric viewpoint. That’s not an abstraction in a place like Pakistan, it is a reality.

Now, from this point, the only means by which religions are able to justify their legitimacy is from this very materialistic, secular view that if you are politically active, if there is a political agency to you, then you are a somewhat respectable faith. We had Seyed Vali Nasr come to speak at Habib University. Someone asked him about a similar topic: “What happened, what do we do to heal ourselves?” He said, especially in the subcontinent, remember to look at yourself a hundred and fifty years ago. Every major city in the subcontinent had at least thirty distinct communities who coexisted, and loved and cared for each other. These were distinct religious communities. What has happened, is that John Stuart Mill’s protocol of demeaning what he called customs, and elevating what he called law, was bought by almost all of the intellectual elite of other societies. So much so, in fact, that I heard an interview of Mohammad Khatami – a recent President of Iran – who proclaimed that John Stuart Mill was his favorite intellectual. That’s a serious problem.

So why were those societies using this paradigm? There were no differences between customs and a spiritual identity, were there? For instance, in Urdu, there are no two different words for good manners and literature. It’s the same. It’s called adab. So the vehicle of, for instance, Shi’a practice was completely cultural. It was literature, it was poetry, it was the art of doing no harm, or even singing what we call songs, and a variety of other
rhetorical expressions. The external vehicles were participation, food, and taking care of each other; creating beautiful ornaments and art. The same was true for every other community that existed. There were portals for people to feel a sense of togetherness with a great sense of respect for each other’s distinctions. Now those vehicles are gone. Everyone wants to paddle up the radical narrative or a legal narrative, which is bizarre. This is a sovereignty of the rule of law that has extended beyond John Stuart Mill’s obsession and has been internalized by every European society and then exported to every other society in the world, destroying the ecosystem of pluralism. Pluralism will not happen with this tyranny of the rule of law; or the constitution; or the nation state. Is it something that people live and breathe and express and participate in, and from which they can create themselves? If this agency is taken away from societies and people, then we are essentially rendered disenfranchised and disempowered, left at the behest of the forces which are killing us to the tune of 50,000 people over 20 years.
Syed Meesam Razvi

I will examine the issue of religious pluralism and Muslim identity in the West and the Muslim world in three different phases. First, we’ll try to look at it from the point of view of the religion of Islam, and see what we can learn about dialogue and sectarian de-escalation from the history of Islam and the Muslims. We will particularly interrogate what the Qur’an, the Hadith, and the Sunnah of the Prophet have to proffer on the subject. Second, we will examine the linkages between the lack of religious pluralism within the Islamic context, and the modern Muslim identity of Muslims living in the West and the world at large. Third, we will look at the possible solutions to any problems that may come up in that discussion during the first two phases. Let’s start by examining how the holy book of Islam, the Qur’an, looks at pluralism. One of the most famous verses quoted is “Oh mankind, indeed we have created you from male and female, and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, Allah is knowing and acquainted."

Notice here that the Book is saying that pluralism is the default state of affairs. He has created us different from one another. The Book has said something along the lines that we have created you as one nation, and you have divided yourselves into many. The diverse and pluralistic world which consists here in this verse is how He – the Creator – intended us to be. Let us now take a look at the Hadith of the Prophet, which essentially validates the same concept and further underscores it. The Prophet proclaims that no man is superior to one another on account of race or color. *Taqwa* (piety) is the sole distinction, which means wisdom and pride. So again here, there is an acknowledgement that there is race and color present.

Usually when we record this saying, we do it to express that there is equality within Islam, that everyone is equal. However, I want to look at this verse and these sayings of the Prophet a little differently, as an acknowledgment that we are divided into colors and races and nations and tribes. Embedded within the history of Islam is a famous event in which a letter was written to the Christians of Najran inviting them to go see the Prophet and opening communication with them. As such, the Christians decided to
send a delegation to the Prophet, to confront him and get into a dialogue with him. Not only did the Prophet welcome them, although they were there to confront him, but he provided them with a space, allowed them to practice their faith as they would like, and engaged with them in the most cordial of manners. Herein are three examples from looking at the holiest of the texts, which is the Qur’an; looking at the Hadith of the Prophet; and exemplifying religious pluralism in terms of practice, of what the Prophet actually did when he was dealing with someone of another faith. Through his actions, the Prophet showed respect, acceptance, and tolerance for the other. That is the spirit with which some look at pluralism.

So now we move onto stage two and try to dissect how all of this affects the contemporary Muslim identity. That is, the Muslim identity as an individual, which is directly tied to the identity of Muslims as a global community. To understand religious identity, one first has to understand what it means. The word religion, for example, comes from a Latin word means to bind, or group together, meaning that if there is a discrepancy between how Muslims view the larger Muslim community and how it is portrayed, or as opposed to how the individual identifies him or herself, one of the two things will happen. Either that Muslim will adapt to how the larger Muslim community is being projected, which in this particular case, is an association with terms like “Islamism” and “Islamic Extremism” and so on and so forth. Or, that individual may simply stop identifying himself or herself with the larger community. This is the predicament that the Muslim faces today.

On the one hand, we are facing both in the media as well as in academia the scholars who are expounding on the state of Islam and Muslims, and are using terms like “Islamism” and “Islamic extremism” in a particularly disparaging context. On the other hand, you have the advent of ISIS, of al-Qaida, you have the Taliban, who have essentially stolen the show from the real scholars of Islam, and have reinforced the usage of these terms by validating the constructs behind them. Just last week I was posting a delegation in which there were about twenty-two senior to mid-senior level people from the Department of Defense. During that discussion, one of those individuals from the Department of Defense was talking about how he wrote his thesis, in which he quoted Ibn al-Qayyim, one of
the 12th century scholars. Ibn al-Qayyim, just to give you context, was a student of Ibn al-Taymiyyah, and one of the ideologues behind ISIS and al-Qaeda. That’s how permuted this sort of narrative has become in that we are using these scholars, who are ideologues of some of the most extreme movements that humankind has known as mortals for Islam and the Muslims. In other words, this leaves Muslims with only two choices: either to associate or identify with an image of Islam that is intolerant, violent, and extremist, or to stop identifying altogether with the Islamic community.

There is evidence that both phenomena are in fact taking place. Not so long ago in the Punjab, which is the biggest province of Pakistan, the governor of the province, Salmaan Taseer, was shot and killed by his own guard because of the Governor’s position against the blasphemy laws in the country. This guard was made out to be a hero after he killed him, and millions of Pakistanis turned out to his funeral to pay homage to this man who had just assassinated the governor of the biggest province of Pakistan. Pakistan, by the way, is a country that is home to about 200 million people.

And we see the same thing here in the West: in order to conform to this intolerant image that is being projected, mosques in the United States, for example, are stocking their shelves, as well as in Europe, with literature of dogmatic, violent ideologues such as Muhammad Abdul Wahhab, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim, and similarly radical Islamic scholars. As a result, individuals are following suit and committing crimes in the name of Islam and Muslims. This problem, needless to say, creates a divide within the ranks of Islam and Muslims, but also creates conflict with faiths outside of Islam.

Now that we have identified the problem, let us take a look at possible solutions. One of the most effective ways to address this predicament or the identity crisis of the Muslim community is facing, is probably not the easiest, and that is to regain control of the intellectual narrative of Islam and Muslims. To do that, Muslim leadership would need to bring to the fore seminal contributions from mainstream Muslim scholars both past as well as present, and to cultivate them as icons within the imagination and minds of the common Muslim. The Muslim leadership has to take its rich intellectual heritage and make it part of the civic discourses. So, Imam Ali,
for example, wrote this letter to Malik al-Ashtar, in which he exemplified the principles of governance and rules of our time. As a matter of fact, the United Nations Arab Human Development Report in 2002 quoted six sayings of Imam Ali as advice for leaders. Another figure with whom hardly anyone disagrees in the spectrum of faiths that we have in Islam is the figure of Imam Hussein, and the sacrifice that he had given, the voice that he had raised against despotism, and against tyranny. These are the kind of figures that we need to embrace in the discourse on human lives.

We said that the Magna Carta 700 years ago was the founding document of human rights. Guess what? 1400 years ago, someone by the name of Ali ibn al-Hussain authored a document called the Treatise on Rights (Risalat al-Huquq). And if you look at it, it is far superior than anything the Magna Carta could ever say. There are many examples like that in contemporary Shi’a scholarship, such as Grand Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf, who has delivered pivotal, unifying statements at very critical times, especially since the fall of Saddam in the early 2000s when Iraq was about to descend into chaos. His statements essentially helped to keep Iraq united. He said something to this effect: the Sunnis are not our brothers, but they are ourselves. That’s really the spirit, and I believe that what we need to do is to infuse into our discourse that humanity is like a garden, and those of us who are within this faith, as well as those of us that are outside, are like flowers in that garden. Each one has its own scent, it has its own color that contributes to the beauty and aura of that garden.
Mohamad Bashar Arafat

I am originally from Damascus, Syria. I really feel that I am blessed to have grown up under the mentorship of the late-Grand Mufti of Syria, who passed away in 2004. He became Grand Mufti in 1964, and in 1966 he visited the United States. He used to tell us in the early 1980's that if he “spoke English back then, I would not have had come back to Syria because I have seen that the American people are really searching and looking for truth, but unfortunately I did not speak good English. So, sons, you have to speak good English before you go in qirā‘at [readings of the Qur’an]; master English and then you go to different qirā‘ats, because that’s what the world needs today.” He was always encouraging us to travel. When I came to the United States in 1989, and I was Imam of the Islamic Society of Baltimore, after four years I had to get out of the mosque. The story of imams in America is that you have to have independence. This is a problem, because if I stayed in the mosque, I would not be able to do what I’m doing right now. The Muslim Community who came to the United States had imams who were trained in Pakistan, in the Middle East, or in the Arab world but were not taught how to be an imam in America and how to understand the culture of pluralist America.

You have to balance between the Muslim community and the larger community as well. So, after being the campus Imam at Johns Hopkins and subsequently seeing how everybody was doing a lot of exchange programs, I said “What about us as Muslims in America? Where are our exchange programs?” That is something that nobody taught us at Shari’ah universities: how to start exchange programs. And after coming to the United States, I was close to Washington, and nobody told me if you are an imam in the Washington area, you are different than imams in other states in the United States because you are close to 176 embassies.

Nobody teaches you at the Shari’ah universities that being close to Washington entails being close to the State Department, the ECA, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs – and that there are opportunities to start programs and approach the cultural mission of different U.S. embassies because all 294 embassies and consulates open up to you if you propose a
“cultural program.” You cannot call it Islamic or Christian or Jewish, but we as Americans are nevertheless entitled to a lot of cultural programs. However, we did not study how to initiate cultural programs at the Shari‘ah universities.

So, let us consider religious pluralism and Muslim identity in the West and Islamic World. I first need to add one more point, and that is raising global imams and leaders in order to talk about pluralism, because for the first time in the history of Islam, there is this entity called the United States of America. Millions of Muslims are migrating to America. Yet the curriculum of those imams did not have anything about how to become an American citizen until recently.

In order to understand what the Muslim community is going through, we should start with Mohammad bin Salman’s recent declaration to The Washington Post, that “Wahhabism was requested from the Saudis during the Cold War.” When I was reading this I thought “Now who is going to clean the mess of some of the problems of Wahhabism?” Many imams in the 80s and the 90s would issue fatwas stating that it is haram to live in America. As a result, people would wonder “Is it halal or haram to live in America? Is it halal or haram to have an American citizenship?” For me, as a Syrian American who has been in America for more than 27 years, I can do certain things here in America, which I would not be able to do in Syria, Egypt, nor anywhere in the Arab world.

So where is this ideology that you are the only one who is “right” and “everybody else is wrong” coming from? It is because in our curriculums we study al-firaq, different sects, or “al-Milal wa-l Nihal” and what happened in the past, and then we came to the conclusion that we are the only right group and everybody else is wrong. What we don’t study in the universities from where many imams are graduating is how to work with these firaq or Muslim denominations. They might be wrong from your perspective, but from their perspective they are right; and like you, they are American citizens, or British citizens, or European citizens. I grew up in an environment which engendered the idea that everybody is wrong and you are the only one in the right. This is a big impediment for pluralism living in America.
The other thing that we really have to talk about is this ideology of radicalization, not only in Europe but also in Africa and in other places, which led me to the creation of the programs which I will be speaking about today. Let us consider being close to Washington, and accepting invitations from different Embassies to speak about Muslim life in America without anyone telling you what to say or what not to say. You are an American citizen of Middle Eastern, or Pakistani, or Indian descent; can you go and speak about your programs in the United States? I ask this question, because then the Muslim Community – if you are an imam of this community – no longer wants you as an imam, because you are supposedly an FBI or CIA agent. Equally, in travelling to other countries having come from America, people presuppose my support for certain American foreign policy decisions without engaging me in a discussion. This is really a problem when you travel to other countries.

I would like to talk, furthermore, about my story of those thousands of people who went to the airport to protest Trump’s Muslim ban last year. People in other countries do not know that there are a lot of people who agree with me 100% and are against a lot of aspects of the current foreign policy. So, as an imam, how am I going to implement these programs? Firstly, I need to share what I am doing in the United States with imams and Muslim communities around the world, and that is where I started this program that is part of imam training. For me, that kind of imam training about pluralism, about our identity as Muslims’ living in America, about my identity as an American who was empowered by the American people and the American Constitution, is pivotal. It is an embrace of the fact that you can do whatever you want as an American citizen. How am I going to teach the imams in America that it is your duty to empower your youth here in America, to be a bridge between them and the Muslims in Europe? Last year I did a project through my organization to meet with the Syrians who ended up in Germany and Austria, and in other different European countries. They didn’t have imams who could guide them to success in their new life. This is the importance of this kind of imam training program on pluralism, for me as a Muslim living in America. It is my responsibility as an American citizen, proud to be of Syrian descent, Pakistani descent, African descent, or wherever else. This is not only for me, but also for the benefit of America. This is for the benefit of American interests around the world, to empower the
concept of pluralism within the Muslim community, and the imams have to understand their role in this schema as well.

So such are some of the programs that we have been conducting since 2011. Here are just some of the things which happened a few months ago, as well as the training that is happening in Europe as well as in East Africa. One of the most important things was that when imams come, I try to introduce them to Shi’a mosques and the communities in the United States. I also find it very important to take them to the Supreme Court to see how the American Constitution was written, and the museum there demonstrates how the American Constitution also borrowed from the spirit of the Qur’an and Islam. So, that demonstrates a sample of the kind of the imams training that we do. It is really my responsibility today in addition to training priests because a lot of Christian seminaries – I am talking about the Maryland area in Washington – when you go and look at the world religions and the study of Islam in particular for Catholics and Protestants and different denominations, you will see also they really need some help from the imams. How do you train the imams locally to do some programs?

And, finally, and I am glad to be working with the ECA and getting involved with the cultural exchange programs which include almost more than 3,000 high school students chosen from the best of their countries coming to America, staying with host families one year and they go back. We as imams, we have no clue how that works, how to invite them, how to create programs for them. These kind of curriculums need to be updated in order to empower the imam to talk about pluralism.
I will make a few normative claims and then I will say a few things about a couple of projects that I’ve been involved in. First, I would like to pick up on something that was talked about earlier. One way you can talk about pluralism is to say that we all live in nice secular liberal societies, and so long as people have certain basic assumptions about a commonality overlapping, like notions of civility, rationality and public reason, then they can pretty much profess what they want. Their faith should ideally be restricted to certain context, which can be primarily private. Everyone can just get on with it, and it’s really good that people aren’t killing each other.

Of course, I think pluralism requires a lot more than that. And one of the questions I am interested in is how it is that religious traditions can engage fruitfully with each other far beyond the simple design that they don’t kill each other, and they don’t anathematize each other, but also how they do that with certain core beliefs being authentic to themselves in so far as they are aware, as religious people, of the presence of the Divine. Why do they act in certain ways as believers, as those who are tied to certain types of metaphysical claims – about why the cosmos exist, and how we exist? How do they bring that to bear on that intersubjective relations, and the effective reasons for which we behave with each other? So, one of the problems that we sometimes debate about pluralism is precisely the absence of spirituality. Religious people, I think, should be interested in spirituality, and should be interested in the presence of the Divine. It would be really nice if they shared that with each other even if they don’t necessarily come from the same tradition that this comes from.

The three basic normative claims I would make about what pluralism should be, which arise from that spiritual foundation, are all fairly straightforward, and fairly uncontroversial. The first one would be recognizing the other as oneself. That is, being able to enact empathy in a realistically meaningful manner. Realize that everyone is human, and insofar as everyone is human, everyone is a certain creation that is a manifestation, an act, a sign of the Divine, presence of the Divine even. And so we need to take each other seriously, we need to care for each other on those terms. Not necessarily on the minimal position in which we sanctify based on location.
The second one is to take difference in traditions seriously on their own terms. Perhaps the greatest Qur’anic exegete of Islamic history is Fakhr al-Din Razi, and in his instruction to his *tafsir* (exegesis) he has a wonderful section where he discusses why it is that you have to take claims of others seriously before you can engage and critique them. So, in some ways there’s a wonderful little model of how you do this critique. You understand and rehearse, you present the opponent’s positions in the best possible manner, recognizing that we all share a certain irrational commitment to understanding the faith, which is common. Thus, irrationality is a potentially a common ground.

And the third claim, is that the reason why we should do this is because we all have interests in the common good. The common good is something which is scripturally posited in many different traditions. It is one which is very much about human flourishing. We are all interested in the very ease of our own flourishing, and so it is not entirely controversial to think that our flourishing will also be very much a part of another person’s flourishing, that life is not the way geopoliticians see it. It is not a zero-sum game. That your pursuit of the good is also something which will be someone else’s pursuit of the good, and you can work towards common strategies and ends with respect to that.

Now, beyond the normative examples of the projects in which I have been involved in both intra and interfaith contexts, one is a project, which I ran with a colleague at the original Cambridge, which was called “Contextualizing Islam and Britain.” It was a very interesting project – which had to be funded by the government because you couldn’t possibly get someone else to fund it – and is probably the only example I can think of where you are sitting around a table for a number of meetings over two, three years almost, with people from practically every Muslim persuasion imaginable. We had different types of Salafis, we had different tribes of Sunnis, we had different types of Shi’a, including Zaydis and Ismailis around the table. We had more traditional positions reflected, as well as ones which were new types of Islamic feminism. We had all sorts of interesting perspectives there, and what it showed was that it was actually possible to do that because the ground was the university, which allows for the possibility of commonality. Sometimes people like being invited to places like
Cambridge to discuss what their views are. There was a lot of massaging of the egos involved. When you are dealing with people with turbans in particular, unfortunately you have to do that sometimes. This includes realizing that there are certain costs or questions that we need to discuss which affect people as citizens, but also affect people as they are people of faith within a society, which are at once secular and simultaneously not entirely secular at all. Out of that a couple of reports came. And, of course, after the reports came out, everyone had denied that they had signed up to this. So there are statements about the nature of citizenship, and belonging, and sexuality embedded within these reports, then people sitting around saying “I don’t remember writing that!”

Myself and my colleague basically ran it and had to take the flack for that because we were at least willing to stand up for what was written in it. What it did show was that there was a certain space for this sort of critique, and the possibility of thinking about Islam in a particular context, but also of thinking about Islam in the plural way to recognize that there would be different perspectives within it, which would come to the foreground from different philosophical and theological foundations.

The other project is “Building Bridges”, which began with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. It actually started with George Carey, but he was never terribly interested in it; it began with Rowan Williams, and then it was taken over by Georgetown. It’s a project in which you have a number of Muslim and Christian theologians sitting around doing what you call scriptural reasoning – discussing texts. One of the interesting things is that despite the fact that this is run by Georgetown, if you ask the coordinators and organizers at Georgetown, they will say that they like to keep the certain Anglican ethos about the project, however you may interpret that. So in one sentence, it began as sort of Anglican-Sunni discussion, but has now developed into something much more substantial than that. What’s come out of that project for me in particular is not just learning about all sorts of traditions across Islam and Christianity, and what the Christian friends would call “the long tradition,” but also to see the sorts of connections and similarities which exist outside of that framework. For example, I have had a number of interesting discussions with an Orthodox theologian about the overlap...
between Orthodoxy and the Orthodox messages in spiritual philosophy, and of course Shi’a mysticism and spirituality as well.

As an academic, I quite like running academic events, and I quite like the give and take of academic intellectual argument, and that is something which I think is really important, particularly for religious leaders to engage with. Beyond that, spirituality also has to be about the return of religion, in a sense, to the public sphere. If it’s just about dress and food and music and a fairly bland, unrooted series of things, that doesn’t really tell you much. What is more interesting is analyzing a certain public ritual: why do people do that? What does it mean for them? How does it affect and change their world and the life that they live? Why do they do certain types of things – not just out of obligation but also out of love? Because the only reason for professing a faith, is love.
Special Interview with Jassim Qabazard

**Question:** In general, there are two mainstream sentiments for those who want to see better relations between Shi‘as and Sunnis in the Middle East: (a) either those who believe in promoting higher tolerance and coexistence between sects, or (b) those who would like to take it a step further and argue for greater dialogue and scholarly efforts to narrow doctrinal or sectarian disagreements (“taqrib”). Do you think taqrib is viable as a project? What are potential roadblocks, or alternatively, benefits to such an approach?

**Answer:** I strongly believe that dialogue should support and advocate the peaceful coexistence between all religions and religious sects. The concept of “taqrib” is basically already present between all Muslim denominations. I mean by that that there are a vast majority of holy doctrines, ritual practice, and common civil laws and bylaws that are shared by all Muslims. Due to the close existing proximity between Muslim sects, narrowing the remaining differences will likely prove to be difficult and perhaps unnecessary and will lead to favor one position over the other, or unify or attempt to generate a merger which would minimize the pluralism which is inherent and healthy within Islam.

I would categorize any outstanding areas of differences between Muslims as subjects that need understanding, appreciation, tolerance and coexistence between them based on their own merits – as long as these doctrines and the Muslims who believe in them do not advocate hatred or call for the extinction of the other party. These peaceful discrepancies in thought and ideology between Muslims make room for complex jurisprudence in applications that are diverse and rapidly developing in our fast-changing world.

I believe the main roadblocks as well as the way forward to greater peaceful relations rests in the hands of governments, clergymen and the media. This triangle could result in the real chance for a peaceful form of coexistence.
between believers from the disputing sects and religions especially if led by clergymen who can genuinely decide to de-escalate the focus on discrepancies and preach with guidance, awareness and sincerity the genuine need for peaceful dialogue. Governments in turn need to be genuinely interested to create a healthy environment for the people through politics, economics and education and to provide, protect, nurse and advocate these policies through progressive medias which can result ultimately in a real peaceful coexistence between the people.

Q: What role do you believe that media and cultural productions can play in re-framing contemporary sectarianism in the Middle East? How important is mass media and popular culture in shaping perceptions and biases in the region?

A: Mass media and cultural productions are fast and effective tools in shaping not only public opinion, but also government policies including on sectarianism and Shi’a-Sunni relations. As long as individuals receive constant media through smart phones, tablets and computers they are alert and dedicated to take in the transmitted information which is now flowing constantly and in high volume. However, due to the enormous influx and exchange of data between recipients, it is difficult to believe in the degree of truth in the transmitted information. In most cases, individuals instantly react and display a response to the media they consume and this can have potentially negative influences on sectarian biases or framing of politics in the region. Nonetheless, in many cases a comparative exercise between different sources of information may lead to an acceptable result in which individuals can formulate balanced opinions – given that they balance and diversify their sources of information. This is why having balanced and responsible news outlets is important. Media can play a key role in informing citizens of the Middle East and can contribute to de-escalation of sectarian tensions through their information. Today’s mass media has the power of asserting or negating its intended effect on public opinion and we should be aware of these larger dynamics and how they can impact sectarianism for better or worse on the ground.
Q: What are some ways in which you believe civil society in the Middle East can contribute to moving beyond current sectarian tensions?

A: If civil societies coordinate their goals and actions harmoniously, the result can have direct impact on decision makers since civil society represents different disciplines and professions of the masses of peoples in a country to which the governments are responsive to. The more the diversity found within civil societies the better representation of the mass public involvement shall become. Hence, peaceful nonviolent demands or criticism whether expressed in writing or public appearance or rallies or via the social media can have a forceful impact on their targets. The coordination between them can effectively overlook sectarian tensions. Civil societies can therefore focus on more popular demands that benefits the society as a whole rather than particular subgroups or sects.

Q: Are you optimistic about the future of peaceful relations in the Middle East? Now that ISIS any many similar groups have been defeated in Iraq and Syria, do you think the region is entering a new chapter or are there still serious threats of resurgence of sectarianism?

A: Yes, I am optimistic about the future of peaceful relations in the Middle East relatively speaking. It appears that the conflicting parties, representatives and agents have been identified and their strengths tested – regrettably at the high cost of human life and wealth. However, it seems that a slowing down of war activities are taking place and a reconstruction and rehabilitation phase is taking shape. Scars left behind from the conflicts will need a long time to heal. But sectarianism shall not be easily diminished, since it requires various treatments as mentioned above.
Panel 4: 
**Religion & Civic Activism in the North American Muslim Diaspora Community**

Moderator: **Hassan Abbas**

Panelists: **Daisy Khan, Hasnain Walji, Arif Asaria, Rahat Husain**

**Summary:**

In Panel Four, the topic of Muslim civic participation and sectarianism in North America are examined, contextualized, and compared to that of Middle Eastern countries. The pluralism and lack of Muslim sectarian tensions in the United States is presented by some commentators as a case study, marking how a lack of sectarian bias in the creation and implementation of policy and law is a key metric for a more peaceful society. Pathways to de-escalation of sectarianism are also highlighted by community activists, modeling how small, local projects can grow to have formidable, alleviating impacts across the globe.
Hassan Abbas

This panel is entitled “Religion & Civic Activism in the North American Muslim Diaspora Community.” Islam is not new to America. We often hear about Thomas Jefferson’s Qur’an. A significant population of African American slaves were Muslim. This new lens of security, whether caused by geopolitics or the tragedy of 9/11, has forced all of us to view Islam in a different sense. But Islam is more than just a security threat. It has artistic, cultural, and academic contributions. In this panel, we’ll hear from Muslims who represent diverse communities across the United States and Canada. We’ll hear about some of the activities at the ground level. When Prophet Muhammad was in his final days, walking from Medina to Mecca, he continuously repeated three sentences. Spread peace. Feed the Hungry. In all that matters, approach God as the most merciful. He was not saying, “Feed the hungry Muslim,” but simply, “Feed the hungry.”
Daisy Khan

When I was two and a half years old, I was standing in my front yard as a little girl wearing boy shorts. I remember my father giving me a pair of boxing gloves that were as big as me. Years later, I asked my dad why he gave me them. He said that he knew that I, the youngest of three daughters, would be bullied. He wanted me to learn how to protect myself. That’s the world I came into. I was born in Kashmir, the predominant Muslim state in India. I was empowered by all the men in my family. Education was so important to my family that I was sent to the United States at the age of sixteen to pursue a degree in architectural design. But God has his plan, and my reality changed after 9/11.

I was married to an imam whose mosque was very close to Ground Zero. When Americans became curious about Islam, some of the most frequent questions was, “Explain the status of Muslim women. Where are your leaders? Why don’t you speak out? Why do you treat your women so badly?” Even though I explained that Muslim women had been entitled to great rights that western women hadn’t even dreamed of before the 7th century, it was falling on deaf ears. The images they were seeing around the world did not match what I was saying. My surrounding community asked what I intended to do about international issues, even though I, a 25 year-old architectural designer, was the least qualified candidate to mandate such work. What most people did not know at the time when they were asking these questions was that extremists had hijacked an entire world religion. They had defined a global agenda for all of us, and normal Muslims were feeling the consequences whether we liked it or not.

I realized that the only way to combat injustice was to construct religiously grounded arguments to lift the truth of Islam. I knew that there was a truth of Islam that had inspired 1400 years of great civilizations that was now lost in translation. If I did nothing, I was allowing the extremists to consolidate power, spread their influence, and subjugate women. My reality as an empowered, Muslim woman was going to be a minority view. Millions of women were being subjugated, and I was not going to stand for that. My father had given me boxing gloves for this exact purpose. I was always going to be carrying those invisible gloves with me.
We Americans have tried to defeat terrorists. Bombs have not worked. Drones have not stopped them. Sanctions have not helped. I know from experience that giving voice to women is our best chance to combat extremism. With the world witnessing a religious revival, Muslim women increasingly wanted to reclaim their God-given rights through a faith-based movement. Muslim women today are adding a very unique and critical voice. I know thousands of other women who are doing the kind of work that I’m doing in different pockets of global communities.

In 2006, I launched an effort called W.I.S.E. We created a global network of Muslim women who were change makers in their communities, and we brought them together. I canvassed the entire community and formed a Shura Council. The first Muslim woman Shura council was created in 2008, and we began to interpret our scripture. We found that our scripture was giving us the freedom that we had craved so badly.

Today, we are struggling all over the globe to combat extremism, and for decades, we have watched extremists unjustly take away innocent lives, destroy property, poison the minds of newer generations, and stifle critical thinking. I don’t care what you are, or whether you are a Shi’a or Sunni. We all believe the same thing, and our religion is being marred. The voices of the extremists on one side and the voices of the Islamophobes on the other have clogged the public opinion. There is an essential misunderstanding in the middle where we all stand.

We must first understand that conflating Islam with terrorism is very dangerous. It makes it harder for Muslims like myself to speak the truth about our religion and identity. You may be wondering why me, a professional woman? I am a professional, but I’m also very passionate about these causes. It just so happens that I’m a woman and a Muslim. I firmly believe that every religion, every race, everyone is impacted by extremism.

I am from Kashmir, a disputed territory since 1947. I know what it is like to flee for your life. There is a vacuum in leadership on these issues. It is because everyone seems to be analyzing the problem of terrorism, but very few are willing to do anything about it or cooperate with Muslims. There are conferences going on, yet I’m not invited. The stakes are way too high.
for this invitation to be enough. The time is right for a fresh approach. This will require people of all faiths to work together. It must be done by peaceful means, for peace is the underlying spirit of all of our faiths. Only through educational awareness can we create long, lasting social change. My hope as a Muslim woman is that by using a different kind of force – the force of knowledge – we can clear misunderstanding. Knowledge can help us understand and deal with the roots of extremism that lead to violence. Correct knowledge of Islam will diminish injustice and discrimination. It will empower people to overcome their conditional biases and prejudices. For how many years has this issue continued? We have spent so much money on military and intelligence. We have even spent money on curbing finances. Not a single resource has been put at the disposal of Muslims to fight the ideology that is separating the Shi’a from the Sunni.

Then I set out to start my organization, we collaborated with seventy-two Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. I carefully looked at the diverse Muslim community that we have in the United States, and I listened to everybody. I made sure everybody’s voice was heard. There was a Shi’a person who mentioned that we ought to make sure I didn’t have any Ismailis here. He mentioned that my project would be disregarded if I did. A Sunni hoped that I didn’t have any Shi’as. I listened to everybody in an effort to work together. Everyone was so eager to participate in this research. It took us twenty thousand hours, two full time staff members, ten bright interns, and five volunteers to assemble the document. It is authentic. It is evidence-based. It is my way of contributing to peace. It has graphics. It’s easy. It’s fun. And we put it together for you. Part one gives voice to American Muslims: who they are, what their history is, when they came to this country. Part two will provide the reader with a very clear distinction between Islamic theology and extremist ideology. In conclusion, it’s an easily accessible pool of knowledge about Islam. It’s a blueprint for positive change.
Hasnain Walji

Sectarian de-escalation conjures up three key words: serenity, courage and wisdom. To navigate in this turbulent sea of strife, these words can become beacons to guide us on this journey. Inspired by the Serenity Prayer, they can provide a roadmap to sectarian de-escalation:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*

*Courage to change the things I can,*

*And wisdom to know the difference.*

The task ahead is gigantic and well-meaning activists feel dwarfed and often times feel powerless. But then wisdom prevails and we can muster enough courage to act to make a difference by changing things that we can.

With particular reference to grassroots engagement and civic activism, I wish to share some practical endeavors can and have yielded dividends. As evidenced by this very symposium, some critically constructive work is being done in academia and by religious leaders. Thought leadership from theological schools and academia can and does play a role in managing sectarian issues in communities.

However this thinking does not always filter down to the public square. This disconnect continues to exacerbate sectarian tensions in our local communities, fueled by geopolitical issues especially the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran amongst others. Hence, the important role of civic activism is to close the gap between academia and the public square. Numerous ways and means of peace building and intrafaith deliberations need to be popularized to ensure such discussions take place at all levels of society.

This requires a framework to launch and sustain intrafaith platforms to move Muslim communities from tolerating each other to understanding each other. Amongst others, two key components of such a framework could be:
1. Capacity building programs for the *khateeb* (preachers) and imams towards more empathetic expressions from the pulpit using the established methodology of Emotional Intelligence (EQ), and other personal development tools. Additionally organizing focus groups and workshops to bring together like minded imams, *khateeb* and other religious leaders can help foster positive communication and discourage polemics and theatrics used by some to rile up audiences. These models exist and have had impact. This group has the greatest potential of making it or breaking it. Especially now that every *minbar* and podium has become a broadcast channel and pervades social media.

2. A more holistic and inclusive curriculum accompanied by teacher development initiatives, at Sunday schools and other institutions that impart religious instruction to children and young people are a critical need with the greatest potential. The focus needs to be shifted on learning about a compassionate God rather than teaching about just do’s and don’ts.

The overall goal for the above initiatives is to foster an environment that emphasizes essence over form, which in turn can help mitigate many issues relating to the form of worship or cultural norms. Thought leaders can help generate peacebuilding conversations and help frame narratives that lead to the empathetic realization in the public square that ultimately we all seek His Pleasure and that one key value to earn His pleasure is to please His creatures.

In this day and age the Millenials do not have time or inclination for sectarian gymnastics and may well decide to throw the baby with the bath water and join the ranks of thousands if not millions of those who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” who having been disenchanted with the trappings of the Christian faith moved away from faith altogether. North America has great potential in impacting the de-escalation process in the geopolitical arena. It needs to start within the Muslim Community at local and national levels. Both above programs have been implemented by NASIMCO and can be used as effective models in more diverse contexts.
I represent NASIMCO as Secretary General. NASIMCO stands for North American Shi’a Islam Muslim Communities Organization. We’re based out of Toronto and Minnesota and we have 22 centers that we represent. NASIMCO is an umbrella organization existing to serve and guide its constituent members to foster unity and promote religious education and social-economic advancement of the communities. It seeks to achieve this unity of purpose by coordinating resources, policies, and functions. That is, by facilitating the exchange of ideas and experiences, by channeling resources in support of individual member initiatives, and by liaising with Muslim and non-Muslim organizations, primarily within North America.

First of all I’m surprised to find myself in a lecture hall. When I was attending university, I was trying to avoid them as much as I could. I immigrated to Canada when I was twelve in 1977, and I became an Oreo: brown on the outside and white on the inside. I had no care for religion. As life went on, I met a beautiful woman and married her. I did not ask her religion. She happened to be Sunni. In university I studied philosophy and economics, and I found a way to make money. Everything was going well.

All of a sudden September 11th 2001 erupted onto the scene. All of a sudden things changed for me because of the color of my skin and my name. I was forced to rediscover myself within a community I could participate in. In 2007 I was blessed to be elected as a Secretary General of the local mosque. We were building a community center, and it was mired in problems. I didn’t need to know everything. Instead, we just started working. Eventually, we had a big, beautiful community center.

Even with this new facility, my community ousted me before I could change our ethos. My thought process was different to those around me. I was born here. I have actually lived here. I am not thinking in terms of Shi’a or Sunni, I am looking for ideas. I love people everywhere. When a hurricane hit Houston, everyone helped. No one asked the other if they were white or black, conservative or liberal. All were human. We want to help, and we feel better about ourselves when we help others. There’s no difference between a Sunni and a Shi’a. We are all here to help humanity.
As the new Secretary General of the NASIMCO I made sure to promote such a goal within my work. Islam is not only in the mosque. Let’s learn from each other so we can make a better world for all of us.

**Rahat Husain**

I want to start my talk with a discussion about sectarian violence between the Sunni and Shi’a that resulted in multiple deaths in the early 90s. There were two groups in the Atlanta region that were local gangs. One of the gangs subscribed to Sunni ideology and the other gang to Shi’a ideology. They stated the reasons for their violence were religious, but they truly weren’t. The police didn’t classify it that way, the media didn’t classify it that way. Like other gangs in other cities, they engaged in violence, deaths resulted, and it wasn’t really an Islamic incident of sectarian violence even though the gangs might have thought of it that way.

Now, here in 2018 that seems absurd for a number of good reasons. None of us have a realistic fear or expectation of sectarian violence amongst Sunni and Shi’a. I think the United States is one of the model communities that the world should look at for relations between Muslims in their countries. What are the characteristics that allow this to be a model? Here in the United States, I work with UMAA as the advocacy director, and that involves working with the major Sunni organizations in the United States – Islamic Relief, ISNA, CAIR, NPACK, Concordia, and Engaged. They have been very much focused on having Sunni and Shi’a work together.

But the relationship of Sunnis and Shi’as in other countries bears a lot of similarities to political polarization. There is an identity issue associated with certain political topics. For example, the Democrats and Republicans disagree on a great deal of issues: abortion and prayers in schools to name a few. But are these truly the ideas that the Democratic and Republican parties were founded with? Or are they later causes that were picked up and associated with these parties? The same things happen with Sunni and Shi’a. They adopt political ideologies and preferences and viewpoints, and then internalize them as part of their religious view-point.
We have disagreements here in America. We have them here at this conference. But there's no feeling that Sunnis and Shi‘as hate each other in America. I think this can be attributed to the fact that Sunnis and Shi‘as are politically equal in power. American Muslims are equivalent to each other in their ability to change the law. They are equivalent in India. They are equivalent in South America. It is not just peaceful in the sense that there is no violence, but there is also intermarriage. I think political power plays an important role. In some countries like Pakistan or Saudi Arabia, the legislative inequality in enacting economic or social policies results in resentment and hatred.

That's not to say that just because there is disparate political power there has to be sectarianism. In fact, there are many interesting examples of countries where there are significant sectarian issues. In some cases, there is even violence or oppression. In 2014 the Shi‘a community of Medina had a meeting with the self-referential Salafi governor of the city. The governor said, and I quote, “It is an honor to visit this tribe.” About a month or two later a Saudi newspaper said they appreciated Shi‘a attitudes on nonviolence. In Pakistan in one of the regional tribal areas, several village elders held meetings on how they can prevent violence from occurring to Shi‘as during their Muharram processions. Here in the United States, UMAA collaborated with ISNA, MPAC, CAIR, and other organizations to sign an interfaith code of honor in which these organizations not only pledged to work together but to accept each others’ identities in holding religious beliefs and with the commitment of mutual respect and collaboration.

Even in Iraq where the rise of ISIS has caused significant sectarianism, you still see opportunities for Sunnis and Shi‘as to come together in a very positive way. There was an example about two years ago where Ayatollah Sistani invited internally displaced peoples of Iraq to a common residence in the cities of Najaf and Karbala and other cities to stay at the shrine, and provided free housing to them. You can see other examples of Sunni communities doing the same, where they provide assistance to Shi‘as who are in need throughout Iraq and other regions. The take-away from my message is that there are absolutely sectarian issues in so many places; but more interestingly, and more shockingly, and more inspiringly, there are incidents where sectarianism has been abated to such a significant degree that it is an inspiration. This is the narrative that should be promulgated in the media and amongst our communities.
Panel 5:
Fireside Chat – U.S. Policymakers and Sectarian Geopolitics in the Middle East

Moderator: Gary Samore

Panelists: Hassan Abbas and Farah Pandith

Summary:

Panel Five sheds light on the emergence of a sectarian discourse pervading states stretching from the Middle East and South Asia to the United States. Hassan Abbas speaks to the ambiguity and misinformation which has manifested in the wake of this discourse, both in the U.S. perception of conflict in the Middle East, and in the inconsistent perceptions of U.S. policymaking among the people of the region. He then proposes a series of models which he believes would better guide the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle Eastern than the current status quo. Farah Pandith evokes the “identity crisis” confronting Islamic youth in feeling pressure to associate with a single sect, and presents a counterfactual in which the U.S. government embraces the pluralism of the Muslim identity by focusing on education and the preservation of Muslim cultural heritage rather than affirming divisions or imposed identities through correct policy and language.
Hassan Abbas

What I hope to do is to communicate a story which I thought was the only way I could give you an idea of the things I want to talk about, namely with regard to some questions that are on my mind about U.S. policy as it relates to sectarianism. I don’t necessarily have the answers, but I can frame the questions. Then I want to talk about three models that I think the U.S. can pursue as it deals with sectarianism in the Middle East.

I also wanted to pose some of the questions here which motivated the writing of my book on the Taliban. We know very clearly that the modern sectarianism in Pakistan is a product of the dictatorship of general Zia-ul-Haq. This is a sectarianism that has been forced upon Pakistan and is also attested to both by Shi’as as well as Sunni scholars in their analysis of developments in Pakistan. Growing up, no one had ever asked me whether I was a Shi’a or a Sunni, or whether my name is Sunni sounding or not. Now, conversations in the policy arena begin with the question, “Are you a Shi’a or a Sunni?” People want to place you in a certain box so that they can then discredit you. In this case, they would speculate, “Who do you think is perpetuating sectarianism? Is it Saudi funding?” The typical response would be, “Yes, you know the Americans want the Shi’a and Sunni to fight.”

My question is: how can we have clarity on this issue? In my humble analysis, many in the world, including in Middle East and South Asia, shift the blame to one actor. I’m not saying U.S. policies have not in some way fed into the sectarianism in the region. But, there is this tendency to shift all the blame onto the United States, which I think is a very flawed lens. This does mean we should not place blame where blame is due, or to take away this whole notion that there were serious mistakes committed by the United States.

This leaves me with some questions. Number one: where are these views coming from regarding sectarianism and U.S. foreign policy that you see in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq? I did research on the Hashd al-Sha’a’bi (PMF) in Iraq and spoke extensively with them. When I asked the Sunnis in Iraq, they thought it was the Iraqi campaign that brought sectarianism to the Middle East. When I asked the Shi’a leaders in Iraq the same question, they responded:
“Why are the Americans doing this – why are they supporting ISIS?” There is such a huge gap when it comes to understanding US policy and its impacts and what is actually happening in the region. This is devastating because many people genuinely think that U.S. policies are the direct cause of creating sectarianism. So, the question is: are these objective views? How can we figure out the answers to these questions? And why is the United States so challenged in understanding the sectarian crisis in the Muslim world?

A few days ago, a senior government official asked me, “Hassan, these Palestinians are Shi’a right?” I said “No, they are not Shi’as. They are Sunnis.” He responded, “So then why are Iranians helping them?” We should not assume that people who are working in the U.S. government on different issues are all experts on Sunnis and Shi’as. They are not. So here is where the academies and universities – and the best universities in the world are in this country – can play an important role. Undoubtedly, there is a connection between universities and policy. Nevertheless, many people at junior levels who are dealing with these issues in government do not get the full spectrum of understanding that they should. For them, it is a tribal crisis. There is also a wrong assumption in Muslim countries as well as amidst the Muslims in America that somehow U.S. policies can repair all the historic challenges, rifts, and rivalries within the Muslim world. This expectation and this estimation is flawed. Academics and scholars should help others understand, from an objective point of view, how to approach and distinguish between the role of politics and tribalism; rivalries and elitism; and authoritarianism and monarchies. How come we expect the United States to come out of the blue and resolve all these complex issues?

The United States needs to deal with its own national security issues and economic interests. At times it has gone about doing so well, and at others very badly. So, I have three models to propose. Current U.S. policy is at times problematic in that it more or less entails talking to the military dictator in Pakistan because he supposedly stabilizes the country and is a “progressive” who is going to “push back extremists” – this is a “dictatorship” policy model. This is not to say that the United States will directly implant a dictator; the dictator might come out of Pakistan’s old civil-military rift, but then the United States will talk to them in the hope that they will deal with the issue. We seek hope in authoritarianism and monarchies,
figures like Mohammed Bin Salman – and if he is the hope, then we are in a hopeless situation. We are expecting that one person will be able to just reverse the whole stream, the entirety of Wahhabi funding, and its related processes and extremists. We forget that Mohammed bin Salman’s incentives are all about power. He wants to be in the good books because he thinks that is the route to becoming the next king.

Whatever views we have politically about President Trump, I think he is convinced – and there are people around him who are very well meaning who have convinced him – that increasing ties with MBS is a great opportunity. The idea is: “let’s talk to him, let’s force him to change religious curriculum in the country,” and this may seem to be a smart move. These figures are telling MBS to make changes in Saudi Arabia. The argument is that unless we want revolution, chaos, and crisis, it is better to have MBS undertake domestic reforms. I understand why people are saying this and why this administration is looking at its relations with the Crown Prince in this manner. It may work out in some limited fashion, but I must emphasize that the scope of this policy is limited.

So rather than this model, I proffer three other models which already exist and are not idealistic or out of reach. Firstly, I propose the Amman message. For those of you who are not aware of it, ten years ago, the leadership in Jordan invited Ayatollah Sistani, the Head of the al-Azhar University, Salafi leaders, and Sunni leaders to a conference in Amman. They all congregated in 2005 and came out with an outstanding document through which the Muslim world could harmonize its purpose – this being the Amman message. They set forth three principles. First, they urged that we do away with takfirism (i.e. the act of excommunicating or anathematizing). No one has the authority to say you are not a Muslim. Secondly, they said that every manifestation of Islam – whether it be Sufism, Salafism, Wahhabism, Shi’ism, Sunnism – is legitimate, and its followers are Muslim. Thirdly, they said that the trivialization of issuing fatwa should be curtailed. They said that there are certain religious qualifications to issue a fatwa, and they ought to be followed. I think that this is a fantastic model which the United States should support, particularly since Jordan is a very close, well-meaning U.S. ally. In supporting the Amman message, I posit that we would positively contribute to helping solve sectarianism.
Secondly, I propose that we follow the Marrakesh message; a new document addressing the rights of non-Muslims in Muslim societies. Here, we heard about the grace of Prophet Muhammad, and about other instances where Muslim leadership of the early years reached out and provided as many rights to non-Muslims in Muslim states. The Marrakesh declaration is branching out and using this principle of toleration as a counter-extremism model as well.

Last but not the least, I propose the Najaf model. The Najaf model asks that we respect religious scholarship and piety. That is to say, there is nothing wrong with piety and being religious – we take pride in Muslim heritage, and in the shrine of Imam Ali and all the other shrines – however, the religious clerics have to stay away from politics. Politics and religion are two different matters. That’s a model we can support. So these three models – the Amman message, the Marrakesh message, and the Najaf model – which are the future for U.S. policy.
Farah Pandith

I want to put a few things on the table from my perspective in working with civil society, and also outside of government, around the world. It is very important to talk about both what is happening outside of government and inside of government around the issue of what it means to be a Muslim, which is really at the heart of all of these dynamics. What does it mean to be a Muslim? What is a Muslim? I have to tell you that I have not heard a single definition that has been consistent all around the world. I have had the great honor of serving for three different administrations, so I am neither speaking to you as a Republican or a Democrat. I am speaking to you as an American, as a Muslim, and as somebody who has been fortunate enough to be able to travel around the world on behalf of our country talking about Muslim youth. The question remains for millennials: what does it mean to be a Muslim? What is the difference between culture and religion?

The identity crisis that young Muslims are experiencing is really where I want to start. For if we as government don't understand that one fourth of the planet is Muslim; that one billion Muslims are under the age of 30 today; that these youth are digital natives and are asking questions about their identity, where the vast majority of voices out there are telling them how to be Muslim, this poses a problem. So much of what we have heard about “who are we” to tell people how to be Sunni, Shi’a, or whatever else it might be, is problematic. What I have heard around the world from young Muslims is “I’m confused about this whole thing about being Muslim anyway. I don't really get what that means anymore.” While the way I live my religion is different from my parents and grandparents, that I'm constantly hearing from countries like the US is a very definite, distinct narrative about Islam. I hear the Americans talk about this amorphous “struggle for the soul of Islam.”

I remember early on in the Obama administration, being in the office of someone really important, with whom I was discussing the importance of finding better ways to listen to the voices of Muslims around the world, because our finger was not on the pulse of what the young generation was saying. This person’s response was “You are talking about all those
problems when in reality there is a struggle for the soul of Islam going on.” So, I replied that this struggle has been around for a really long time, as has the religion, and we are not going to resolve that “struggle” right now. Rather, what we can do is to deliberately understand that there is no role for any government in the world to set up an “us versus them” dichotomy. The moment we begin to define what a Muslim is and is not as government, we are in trouble, and we aid the extremists in the process. Secondly, as the American government, we do not have the right just in virtue of the U.S. Constitution to declare whether you are really Christian, really Hindu, really Buddhist, or really Muslim. That is not our role as a government.

The complications that are plaguing the conversations in nation-states are also plaguing civil societies in a very extreme way. Equally, non-nation-states are grappling with these issues of who is and is not a Muslim, which distils to the issue of what a Sunni or a Shi’a is, and of proving your legitimacy as a Muslim. In the midst of all of this push and pull, we have found ourselves in a really complicated situation to deal with because soft power – which I have been working on since 9/11 – is not something we give a lot of attention to.

Part of soft power is the stuff that you can’t really feel. It is the stuff that the government representatives say and how they say it. It is the talking points that are distributed. It is the polishing of rhetoric. It is the decision to do one cultural program over a different kind of program. Herein lies the opportunity to consider where we are putting our efforts to actually move the behavior, and the emotion around these gushy matters. Government does not do that very well. So, when we are talking about identity and culture, and about what it means to be a Muslim on the planet in the 21st century, how do we answer the question of what U.S policy should be?

First and foremost, we need to withdraw from the conversation about who is and is not a Muslim. Secondly, the language in which we discuss this is important; lexicon matters. For example, I do not know what the Muslim world is, and I really wish somebody would tell me what that is because apparently it is some special little place where Muslims live. I don't like the “us and them” mentality in any way shape or form. It may take more words,
and it may be very complicated, but we need to spend our time talking about the value of honoring every single person, irrespective of whether they are a Muslim in a Muslim majority country, or they are a Muslim living as a minority. If the American government can do that, it means that we can get to the heart of some of this discursive issue. Otherwise, this is what happens in policy circles: when we are talking in the hallways about nation-states, it becomes a sequence of, “Is that a Sunni country? Is that a Shi’ia country? Is that a Muslim? What are they? Who are they?” Does it matter? Why does it matter? The signal we are sending to everyone is that these sectarian divides matter, and this signal forces people to question how they identify themselves. It makes it seem as if you have a little Mao book that says that because I am a Sunni, or a Shi’a, or any other sect, here are all the things that I need to believe.

One of the things I did that drove people crazy at the State Department when I was Special Representative as that when I went to other countries, I would make us do more than we had ever done before to apprehend the Islam’s diversity. When I was given an opportunity to meet with people, I would say to the embassy, “Talk to me about the diversity of the community here.” I was met with, “Well we have a majority this…”, which I do not care about. We should simply put everybody who self-identifies as being Muslim on that invitation list, whether or not we might think they are Muslim. I don’t care about the man with the longest beard and the highest hat. Nor do I care about the woman that is covered, uncovered, wearing a long skirt, or a short skirt. That is not my business. It is, however, my responsibility as Special Representation to engage with Muslims around the world, and that is what we have to do.

So why am I saying all of this? Because language matters, soft power matters, and the way we think about these issues matters. It comes from the Oval Office, all the way down to the Cultural Affairs Officers in the embassies, and that recalibration is not happening the way it needs to happen. The “us and them” mentality is oscillating back and forth. What can and should we do, then? I have advocated for the need to alter our lexicon. Every single person ought to reflect on their language in their daily life, as well as on how they conceive of broad questions like what it means to be a Muslim, and what the difference is between culture and religion.
But, as Americans, and as the American government, we have to do far more to make sure that the diversity of Islam is honored. Part of that obligation very clearly is, in my view, the preservation of cultural heritage. If you are eradicating history, you are eradicating memory, and you are eradicating for the next generation what it means to be a part of a community that identifies as being Islamic – whatever that might mean. If you destroy cultural heritage sites, if you scrub away hundreds of years of history from a mosque or from a cemetery or from a piece of art, you are telling the next generation that not only do we not value this, but we are never going to let your children remember that there were Sunni, Shi’a, Bohra, or whichever other Muslims living around here too. We as the United States have not done enough on that issue, just as I would argue that not enough has been done globally on the issue of cultural heritage; not just because it is human history about which everybody should care, but because of the issue we are talking about currently, which is that of what it means to live in a place that has all of these semiotics around us that remind us of the diversity of Islam.

What do we know about the diversity of Islam in America? I hear a lot about how different we are in America, and we are in fact the most diverse group of Muslims anywhere in the world. But what do we know about the history of Islam in America? What do you know about the way in which fifty states across America talk about our American history with an integration of Islam. Are any of us doing more as citizens in our communities to make sure this history is taught? That it is part of curriculums that we are teaching our children? In the absence of this, where are kids going as they learn about who they are, beyond the Sunni-Shi’a binary?

Thus, cultural heritage, education and history, and the language that we use in order to erase the “us and them” narrative are paramount. Finally, and most importantly because we are talking about “digital natives,” is the question of what we are doing with technology to make sure that we are not driving people into the rabbit holes that only allow them to see who they want to see. I don't think we've thought about this issue of interaction from the perspective of what is happening to Muslim kids in our country, and what is happening to Muslim kids around the world who have it reinforced that their identity is a bunch of conditions imposed by others and designated the term “Muslim.”
I will end with this. I feel so fortunate that in travelling to nearly one hundred countries, I have had all kinds of stories and experiences with amazing young people. But there is a specific story which remains with me. I remember right after the Danish cartoon crisis, I was in Copenhagen as part of something called the Citizen Dialogue. I had four other Americans who were Muslims with me, one of whom was my imam from Quincy, Massachusetts. We were in a room with 50 or so young people who said that they were Muslim, and that is why they were there. We were doing a question-answer, and a girl raised her hand to say, “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do because my imam tells me that I’m not a Muslim.” I looked at her and I wasn’t quite sure I understood what she meant. And I said, “I’m so sorry, I don’t think I know what you mean.” And she persisted, “Well he says I’m not a Muslim.” Again, she said this to me and I still had no idea what she meant. So I replied, “I’m really sorry, I don’t know what you mean.” She said, “Look at me.” At this point, I’m looking at her, as is everyone else. And so she continued, “Look at me”, referring to her jeans and a t-shirt. She said, “My mom tells me that I’m not a real Muslim because I’m dressed like this.” We all understand the impact of that from a 17-year-old girl, and what it means to grow up in a country that is predominantly not Muslim. That question, of “Who am I” requires answers that are nuanced and multifaceted. It does not require an answer that says you are a Sunni, or you are a Shi’a, and this is what you mean.
Panel 6: Geopolitics in Iran and Iraq

Moderator: José Antonio Sabadell

Panelists: Heidi E. Lane, Muhamed H. Almaliky, Hassan Ahmadian, Lukman Faily

Summary:

Panel Six specifically examines the evolution of the geopolitical relationship between Iran and Iraq in addition to the nature of the Middle East dialogue between the United States, Iran, and Iraq. Here, panelists question the impact of Iranian and U.S. policy towards Iraq in the context of the burgeoning demand for development, outreach, and democracy in the post-2003 era of governance. The comparative strategies of Iran and United States are analyzed reflecting on Iran’s deft ability to react to rapid developments triggered by the U.S. invasion and ability forge deep alliances with multiple actors, while reflection is provided on the factional and inconsistent nature of Iraqi foreign policy coupled with often misguided U.S. policies in post-2003 war relations. Furthermore, panelists examine the motives underlying Iran’s relationship with Iraq in order to better understand the United States’ role in this nexus given its past intervention in Iraq. Policy recommendations for the trilateral relations between Iran, Iraq, and the United States are also put forward.
José Antonio Sabadell

Allow us to zoom in on Iran and Iraq, which can be considered the “Ground Zero” of modern sectarianism. I have two premises to propose. Until now, we have studied the strategic issues and diverging interests underlying sectarian tensions in the region; that is to say, the rational part of the struggle as distinct from issues predicated on identity and religiosity, which is probably the most analytical way to scrutinize sectarianism. My first proposition is thus that we need to see how these factors interact in terms of state and non-state actors, to understand that this new sectarianism is not an essentialist phenomenon deriving from hundreds of years of history, but rather a result of political decisions and calculations taken in the last fifteen or forty years (from 2003 or 1979), depending on your perspective.

My second proposition is that although we are trying to limit ourselves to Iran and Iraq in this session, we must also make reference to the rest of the region and the intersecting conflicts playing out as we speak. This intersectionality is addressed in a recent paper by the International Crisis Group that speaks of the need to address conflicts in the Middle East in clusters and concentric circles, rather than treating individual conflicts in a vacuum, which risks missing what really lies behind them.

In any case, this is a very interesting time. We are continuing our project to defeat ISIS, not knowing whether it will be final or the threat will persist as a web-based insurgency. The situation in Syria is still developing in the last days and hours. Then there are the elections in Iraq on the 12th of May, the transformation of Hashd (PMF), and related political movements. There is the new relationship between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and the role that Moqtada al-Sadr can play in Iraqi politics given this new relationship. There is the weakness of the Kurds in the field of Independence, not to mention the situation in Kirkuk.
Heidi Lane

As a government employee, I have to caveat that this is all my own opinion, and I’m not saying anything this morning that is reflective of the views of the Navy or the Department of Defense. I’m going to spend a lot of time discussing my work with the Naval War College, because my interface with the subject of sectarianism has primarily been through the Naval War College.

Firstly, let us begin with a few background notes on what the War College actually does, because people mostly react rather poorly to the name “The War College,” which is very understandable. To clarify, it is a Navy institution, and we train U.S. and international officers, and other government agents through a Master’s Degree in Strategic Studies. It is a part of a joint professional military education and emerges from an appreciation particularly characteristic of American military professionals that once you’re a member of the Armed Forces you ought to not stop thinking and writing critically throughout your career. My particular department at the Naval War College is an outgrowth of a problem that arose from not being able to sustain a discourse after the Vietnam War. That is to say, American officers were going through an education system without realizing that they were able to actually talk, speak, or write about Vietnam critically; not only because it was so divisive, but because they had all gone through the experience.

And so the institution’s mission now is to specifically address the issues with which people are uncomfortable, stimulating them to write and think on a regular basis. That actually provides a very sound context for talking about sectarianism and the de-escalation of sectarian attitudes, which might prove problematic. Usually, about six hundred people come through the college as people either in their thirties, or early forties, and mid-career. They are not young undergraduates; rather, they have led forces and flown planes, and given the length of our engagement after 9/11 and the Iraq invasion in 2003, almost everybody in the cohort that I deal with was very new to the military when they first came in, meaning all they know is the post-9/11 and post-Operation Iraqi Freedom military. That alters the way
we want to engage on the question of sectarianism and the de-escalation of concepts or narratives that are not particularly productive.

I want to contextualize my remarks in three ways. I want to say that there are both inhibitors and openings in this environment. That is, it is not the case that you can’t talk about things. Nor is it the case that these subjects are poorly treated. Rather, there are some predominantly institutional barriers to making this dialogue an enduring and comprehensive one. One of them constitutes time and capacity; when we have our officers come to the War College or whichever agency they are at, they are not there to be experts on Islam nor the Middle East. They are there to pursue whatever job they do in the military, while taking a break from it to obtain a Master’s degree. That limits the exposure I have as Director of the Middle East group there, and it poses for me a certain number of challenges on how I can bring to them what I believe to be the most important issues. I’m certainly not the only person who confronts this quandary in the system of joint professional military education. Time, and exposure to an environment when you’re not driving a ship or flying a plane is extremely tight.

Institutional norms present another impediment, and this is something that, as an academic coming into this environment, I did not face until I was a government employee: no one talks about religious affiliation. It is fundamentally against the norms of the institution in government service to go about the halls talking about who you are in a religious or political sense. In fact, it is expressly forbidden to go around talking about your political beliefs. This doesn’t mean that you can’t talk about them in private, but that while you’re in your uniform or suit at work, you’re not walking around talking about how much you dislike the latest activities undertaken by the U.S. government or any other actor. This policy makes it automatically an uncomfortable beginning to broaching sectarianism in anybody else’s context. If you’re not talking about your own religious affiliation, then you are by definition not really inclined to jump into the classroom and query about the difference between Shi’a and Sunni attitudes to the schools of law, or the disparity between religiously and politically embedded attitudes in Iran. That this is not a common conversation to have is a notion ingrained in most of the professionals with whom I work, so you have to intersperse this material carefully through curricular content; and
this certainly extends to political issues, because if there's anything true of government service, it is that you are there not to make policy, but to help think it through and then facilitate implementation. The political imperative is guided by politicians, Congress, and the American people, and then you carry that out as a professional. For me as an academic, it is a little different.

The third barrier, or perhaps opening, is the international exposure – and here in my microcosm I’m talking about the roughly sixty countries that come to the War College, typically sending naval officers. We really don’t receive many army officers like my colleague at the National Defense University, Hassan Abbas. We don’t really receive Air Force officers from other countries, just Navy officers. They are, however, very high-ranking Naval officers, and very often when they return to their home countries, within a couple years or more, many of them become Heads of Navies. That is particularly true of our officers from Middle Eastern countries.

So, what is the interface there? The limitation I see in that environment, and have experienced over fifteen years, is that most of our officers come from Middle Eastern countries which have two features. One is that their military in general has not been apolitical. In other words, it sometimes has a very political role in that state’s development, whether it’s through a coup, or perhaps through a certain ideological perspective that is not religious, with Turkey being a good example. They have an identity that is in some way formed on the basis of being either religiously, socially, or politically identified. And they therefore tend to reflect the norms of their institution. They are also very often Sunni countries at the moment – except for some of our Asian counterparts – because most of the Middle Eastern countries with whom we do business in a combined and multinational environment happen to also have a Sunni-dominant leadership at this point. That does not mean that some of our officers are not from Shi’a communities in their own home countries, but it does mean that their institutional environment is perhaps not conducive to going to the United States and claiming as an international officer, “Well I actually don't reflect any part of my military. I want to talk to you about sectarianism.”
So that is an inhibitor. The plus about that cohort and the mixing in coalition environments is that our domestic and international students are constantly engaging on this issue informally. This is the aspect in which my job has sometimes been very interesting, and sometimes a little tense; that is, in encountering attitudes that someone has been exposed to as an officer from a Gulf country, and bearing witness to their explanation to U.S. officers of Sunni-Shi’a tensions from a very particular context. This is something that has to be untangled before you can access the actual meat of the sectarian issue. Thus institutionally, these are the three structural inhibitors.

I also want to propose a couple of points about the way in which geopolitics interact in this environment. Over the past fifteen years, I’ve seen two very distinct trends play out. There was the first from 2007 to about the time that the Joint Agreement – “the Iran Agreement” – was solidified and signed, in what was a very tense time on this issue of sectarianism and Iranian politics. There was a lot of interest on the part of our officers, and there was subsequently a lot of education taking place on the matter. And there are numerous places in U.S. governmental circles, and elsewhere on the outside, where there exist swathes of information going back and forth. However that issue never was something that was disconnected from geopolitics in Iran with the United States and with the wider region.

The second period, which is perhaps even more interesting, and in a way overlaps very much with the period that was certainly bilateral with Iran, even in normative terms, was the period that we term the “Arab Spring.” Because during this time the officers who came from the Middle East were faced with representing their country in the same day that their country was falling apart. This is the experience across the board. Yemeni officers sitting in Newport were watching the breakdown of their militaries. Egyptian officers – one of whom was lecturing with me to some young surface-warfare officers about the Middle East – were here in the midst of the deposition of Mubarak. This places an enormous amount of pressure on these issues of discussion, and it also places a lot of pressure and expectation on these relationships.
It can, however, be very good. Yesterday, a couple of people, for example, talked about the Amman message out of Jordan. The good news story here is that attitudes can sometimes travel, borne along by narratives – which some of you here don’t agree with – and pervading even military circles. The good news is that the officers are not like the senior officers of fifteen years ago. There is a new generation, just as there is a youth bulge in the Middle East in civil society, which has transferred into the demographic of the Armed Forces, and rendered them indistinct from the rest of society. I personally have found – for example in the Jordanian military – that in the last few years the officers have become much more willing to discuss very difficult political, social, and religious issues. Thus, the good news is that promising new trends find themselves coalescing with the more hardline kind of concerns you might expect of the military.

**Muhamed Almaliky**

In 1979, two political events bearing the scale of earthquakes occurred. One was the Iranian Revolution with Khomeini’s arrival to Tehran. Then there was Saddam Hussein’s ascension to power in July 1979. The Islamic revolution immediately constituted an existential threat for the Ba’ath regime in Iraq, and Saddam reacted by doing two things.

One, he cracked down on the Shi’a political dissidence in Iraq, exemplified by a movement led by the religious scholar Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, who started a political opposition party in 1959 called Hizb al-Dawa (the Dawa party). This party sought to organize the Shi’a community in Iraq both socially and politically. So, Saddam reacted to the possible collaboration and sympathy between the Shi’a groups of Iraq and Iran by executing Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr in April 1980. Five months later in September, he invaded Iran.

I have a personal story to tell about the objective of the war. My brother joined the Iraqi Military Academy in 1978, and graduated in 1980. When he joined the academy, there was no Khomeini, nor was there an Islamic Revolution. Since he did not really have a good GPA in high school, that was the only school for which he could qualify. When he graduated, he
was part of the Iraqi special forces, and was among the first units to be sent to Iran. The message from Saddam Hussein was that you’re going to go through Khuzistan and shoot all the way to Tehran, topple the regime, and return in one month.

As we now know, the war actually lasted eight years. It all started by Saddam capturing the Shatt al-Arab, most of Khuzistan, Abadan, and Khorramshahr, and Mehran in the middle, and then other Iranian cities which were weakly defended at that time in light of the Revolution. Every Friday there was a new bombing in Tehran, with Ayatollah Beheshti and Muhammad Ali Rajaee dying. The Iranians were really busy organizing their revolution, which offered a very opportune moment for Saddam to attack and weaken the regime. The Iranians were able to recapture most of the territories by 1982, and then ensued six more years of a war of attrition: the Iraqis would capture some lands, the Iranians would attack and reclaim it, and thus continued the same pattern until 1988, when the war ended.

During the war, some of the captured Iraqi soldiers who were very unhappy with Saddam’s waging of the war formed a group in Iran and named themselves al-Tawwabun – the penitents, meaning those people who repented from fighting Iran, and now organized themselves in Iran by forming the Badr Brigade. Some of its function was really to help the Iranian troops attack Iraq, and they were functioning under a political umbrella that was built by a man named Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim – the son of Seyed Muhsin al-Hakim, the Grand Ayatollah and Marja’ of the 1960s and 70s. Most of his family was executed by Saddam, and as one of the survivors he went to Iran and became an initial member of the Dawa party, before eventually establishing in Iran an umbrella-position party called the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. This party started swiftly expanding and rose to a few thousand members.

Fast forward to 2003, when the American forces imposed themselves upon Iraq and toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein. The new government were the opposition, so the Islamic Council in Iraq had now splintered and gone to Europe and Syria for some sort of dispute with the Iranian government, and henceforth it all devolved. So the Americans rallied this group together – the same group now – as an assortment of random
political groups which came to rule in Iraq from 2003 onwards, along with a remnant of the Sunni opposition and the Iraq-Islam party comprising of the Muslim Brotherhood and some tribal leaders. People came coursing from various parts of the world to form a government. And that became the reality of our new world political class from 2003 onwards. That fragmentation led to a system we call al-muhasisa – a form of appropriation in which each group would control a portion of the government, receiving in the process a portion of its resources.

This is what the political structure came to entail, and continued to be so from 2003 onwards, despite the effort invested in building political institutions. The overall picture is really this sort of fragmentation. As such, Iraqi foreign policy has become an image of the fragmented political picture within Iraq. We don't have a political consensus inside Iraq, within the actors, and we thus don't have coherent foreign policy. Iraq does not have foreign policy as much as it has a set of foreign relations; meaning the al-Sadr political group would have different political attitudes towards their neighbors and the world from the al-Maliki group, and Hizb al-Da’wa from the Sunni group and so on. There are different affiliations defined by their own sort of internal political and religious convictions, and by their external support base.

Iran, which is the most important foreign policy actor in the region, became more proactive in response to the significant changes in Iraq in 2003. From the Iraqi perspective, the Iranians had four goals. First, they welcomed the change of the regime. Second, they defended the integrity and unity of Iraq. They did not want Iraq to disintegrate and fragment along Sunni-Kurdish-Shi’a fault lines. Third, they really wanted to empower the Shi’a of Iraq. As such, they worked with various parties, organizing and empowering them to maintain the predominance of Shi’a power within the new system in Iraq. Fourth, that somehow worked against the other three, was their hostility towards the U.S. presence. They essentially sought to undermine the U.S. presence in Iraq by working with the central government, or with other particular groups - by financing them, training them, some of which came to be known as militias.
And so, from the Iraqi perspective, Iranian foreign policy towards us entailed somewhat of a dual blessing. At some point, the Iraqis needed the U.S. support to maintain security and help with reconstruction – a goal for which the Iranian policy was a bit counterproductive. However, all other goals were sufficiently in alignment with the U.S. objectives, and they have managed to manipulate certain groups against the other because the focus wasn’t entirely the well-being of the Shi’a of Iraq, but the Iranians acted first to defend their national security interests and what would work for Iran. Even if the Shi’a of Iraq were somehow affected negatively, we are now witnessing a change - especially after Abadi took over. Maliki definitely did not really help the aforementioned cause, so thereby Abadi started reaching out to the Arabs to balance the Iranian effect and trying to bring the Americans back after they were alienated during the Maliki regime. And we might be witnessing an era where the Iraqi foreign policy is becoming a bit more clear and more assertive even though we remain sort of a lonely actor in the region where we don’t sort of typically belong to anywhere: we are Arabs so we belong to the majority Arab world, but we are Shi’as so we are counted alongside Iran. The majority Sunnis are very suspicious of the Shi’a of Iraq and they don’t understand us so there is a lot of work left to do to bridge these gaps.

Hassan Ahmadian

In this presentation, I won’t delve deeply into historical issues but will rather have a general look at Iran’s contemporary policy in Iraq. I’ll then make some specific points on the goals, the vision and finally the challenges facing Iran’s policy in Iraq. My first general thesis is that Iran, as it sees itself, is an isolated country. It is isolated religiously, as a Shi’a majority country. It is isolated linguistically, as a Persian speaking country among an Arabic-dominated region. Only parts of Afghanistan in Tajikistan currently speak Persian.

This isolation is historical in Iran’s strategic thinking. Most important, however, is Iran’s strategic isolation, which came to the fore after the Islamic revolution of 1979. Iranians basically believe that the United States and its allies wanted Iran to be isolated strategically. The second perception
was that they supposedly wanted Iran to seem like an abnormal country in the region. There is a debate which I have read about in Western publications on Iran's policy during the Iraq War. There are many people talking and publishing about the “Shi'a crescent;” but there is another debate in Iran that says they have tried to create a form of “Sunni circle” around Iran so as to isolate it. They basically point to the subversion by Saudi Arabia and the United States; and it is that debate which is missing in Arab and Western media publications.

Around 2003, however, something very important happened. Iran discarded part of its strategic isolation policy by toppling the Afghanistan government and the Taliban in Afghanistan, and subsequently the Ba'ath regime in Iraq. The United States having provided Iran with that opportunity, Iran relinquished much of its strategic isolation in the region. Iraq was and remains one of the most important scenes for Iran to surmount its isolation policy – historically and strategically – and to access a seat on the table with the United States and big powers. One of the first Iran-American debates or dialogues happened over Iraq in Baghdad. There were three rounds of Iran-U.S. discussions. So, Iraq played a key role in that regard.

In general, Iran's strategic outlook towards Iraq is that it has to work with everybody in order to maintain its position there. Iran saw that the Shi'a would be empowered in any case, and so extended a hand to everybody to make sure that Iraq would not be a hostile country towards Iran. So, the strategic calculus was that you have to work with everybody to have your vision crystalized in Iraq, and you don't need to be a Shi'a to be included in Iran's outreach, or to be perceived as a potential ally in Iraq.

Iran's establishment of broad Islamic relations has constituted a form of pattern in Iran's outreach to Iraq. Nevertheless, Iran's main allies remain the Shi'a given the fact that they are the ones who go to Iran, who know Iran's bureaucracy very well, who have leverage and contacts there, and thus have the capacity to do much in Tehran. Indeed, this cooptation of Iranian leverage has been positive.

Needless to say, this is a mutually beneficial arrangement, in which Iran benefits from the complaints harbored by the Shi'a of Iraq. Saudi Arabia's
refusal to acknowledge the new status quo following the overthrow of Hussein in Iraq gifted Iran with a mechanism through which they could harmonize the Shi’a of Iraq and legitimate their own political process. Equally, the ISIS advance in Iraq also united the Shi’a, from which Iran benefited immensely. These were unintended but ultimately extremely beneficial consequences from the Saudi and ISIS policy for Iran.

So then, how are we to understand Iran’s own policy patterns, separate from how other states have created space for them? Here I argue that Iran’s policies are determined on three basic principles. The first, from my understanding, is that Iran does not initiate anything in Iraq, but solely reacts. The second, is that it has coped with the swift developments of the Iraqi situation. The third component is that it only engages in what it does best; that is, working with people who accept its outreach. For example, when the Iraqi political process began in 2003, Iran was not the initiator of the invasion but reacted to it, tried to cope with it, came to terms with the United States and the new set of political elites in Iraq, and also did what it was best at; which is working with the people who basically constituted the opposition in Iran and elsewhere within the world.

Similarly, when the United States reacted to ISIS, Iran also came to terms with the reality that the United States was a form of necessary political alliance. Without directly allying themselves to the United States, Iran contributed to the mutual project of defeating ISIS by crucially mobilizing parts of Iraqi PMFs. Another further example is one in which ISIS advanced, at which point Iran basically had three options. The first was to absolve themselves of responsibility for staving off ISIS; a logic which wilted as soon as ISIS approached within fifteen miles of Iran’s border. The second was to intervene militarily, an option which Iran didn’t really like because it required being an occupier in one way or another. The third was to organize Iraqis, the option upon which they eventually settled. What remains constant, is that the intention of Iran’s intervention was to quell any hostility in Iraq, and perhaps to even find within them an ally. We must therefore differentiate between the inherent vision and value associated with Iraq, and the instrumental means to achieve that inherent end. The inherent end is simply a non-hostile Iraq as the minimum. For Iran, there
is much instrumental value attached to Iraq, hence why Iran has taken steps beyond the immediate scope of its inherent vision.

There are two challenges facing Iran's policy in Iraq. The first is that Iran doesn't really have public diplomacy in Iraq, or in the region in general. Iran's public diplomacy in the region is a failure, for it has lost its soft power. It is very weak publicly. As a result, there is a huge disparity between Iran's perception of itself in Iraq and the region at large, and its external perception. Iranians are not particularly engaged in rectifying or dealing with this challenge. The second challenge, which is a huge one, is that Iraqis, in some crucial cases, have been misusing Iran's name and misappropriating their support; allying with it or working against it for their own internal debates in their own internal politics, elevating some people, bodies, parties or factions and attacking others under the auspices of Iran. That is, Iraq's internal policy is now embedded in Iran's policy in Iraq, and that's a significant impediment for Iran that they ought tackle lest they face a multitude of challenges stemming from this.

Lukman Faily

On the matter of Iranian isolationism: if Iraq is a partner of Iran, which is the ultimate objective, and Iran keeps having diplomatic problems in reaching out to the world writ large, that subsumes Iraq in the same isolationism, which becomes a form of a curse for the Iraqi state. Geopolitically, it is worth noting that Iraq is the Achilles heel of Iran strategically, and has been for a while now. The ideas which transformed Iran primarily came from Iraq. Its ability to sustain its economy is primarily contingent on the Iraqi region, or at least regions proximate to Iraq. Here, I am referring to petroleum and other resources of value to Iran, so Iranian interest in Iraq was strategic pre-1979, and even more so afterwards – given the Shi’a orientation of the state, not to mention the fact that the ground zero of Shi’ism is Iraq. From a Shi’a perspective, the ground zero in Iraq has been Shi’ism for in excess of a thousand years. Najaf has been there for more than a thousand years. That historical dimension means that the interdependencies between the two states’ peoples and religious ideologies are crucial for us to understand.
First of all, the most prominent problem regarding the region – which I would suggest that the United States in spite of its large institutions and the might of the Navy, has had particular difficulty with – has been managing the complexity of the region. One of the core problems of the U.S. paradigm has been the proclivity to pigeonhole everything into a neat, “MBA 2*2 Matrix” in an attempt to simplify what is realistically a complicated problem. That comes at the cost of much of the nuance and key characteristics underpinning the tensions. We want de-escalation, but to de-escalate you need to better understand the nuances of the problem, or otherwise not be associated with its resolution. If the United States doesn’t want to be a superpower or monolith, then good luck to them. But if they do want to be, then there exists that prerequisite of analytical rigor.

Second – and this is in relation to Iraq – is the attempt to be democratic. The Iraqi people are not necessarily “visionary,” but they have a strong vision of striving towards a form of governance antithetical to the dictatorship of the past. So the embrace of democracy, multilateralism, and coexistence are what they are aspiring towards. Nevertheless, they haven’t had the mentorship for it. The United States wasn’t able to properly establish democracy, even with the formation of the Iraqi constitution and other similar projects. Nor is Iraq in an especially democratic region of the world. They are primarily Shi’a in a primarily Sunni region.

To invoke Huntington, he talked about the Iranian viewpoint. He said it resembles the “Brazil and South America” perspective. That is to say, people in South America don’t view Brazil as “normal,” but rather perceive it as different. People in the Middle East still don’t view Iran in that manner. Post-2003, Iraqis were branded by their allegiance to Iran.

With all of the legacy associated with Iranian geopolitics, we Iraqis have certainly not played the game particularly well. We have not developed the outreach of democracy, diplomacy, or any other facet necessary for broader integration. I believe Dr. Almaliky was right when he claimed that there is a lack of a foreign policy. Imagine me as an ambassador in Washington, with ISIS bearing upon us, trying to represent the foreign policy where there really is none. These challenges threaten to become intractable.
So why have these issues manifested? Firstly, despite our ambition for a
democratic system, we still don't have the body, nor the efficiency for it. On
the one hand, from a geopolitical perspective, I agree with Dr. Ahmadian's
analysis. I would, however, disagree on one point. Iran has tried to be as
efficient as possible, and so efficiency has become their key aptitude since
they’re not rich enough to sustain anything else. They certainly are lacking
in their resources and outreach, which has galvanized them to develop
this efficiency. Part of that efficiency has been in striving to maximize the
rewards from any mistakes made by conflicting actors. Here they have
developed a risk assessment, or risk mitigation, plan. That has become
their key theme, so far unparalleled by other actors. There has been talk
about Mohammad bin Salman’s deficiencies in enabling understanding
and comprehending problems, which the Iranians have maximized from.
It’s difficult for me to comprehend that the Iranians were innocent in all
of this, but I also know that at the end of the day, if mistakes are made by
large bodies such as the United States, others will inevitably take advantage
of it. That is a U.S. and not Iranian problem in my view.

When I analyze the geopolitics of the region, there are certain expecta-
tions of Iraq, particularly in the light of their impending elections. From
a geopolitical perspective, there are four or five objectives which the Iraqi
government needs to focus on. The first is for it to get its act together in
relation the Baghdad-KRG (the Kurdish Regional Government) rela-
tionship. That is very important to the geopolitics of the region, in that it
involves Turkey, Iran, United States, and other powerful actors. So that is
one key obligation incumbent upon the next government.

Secondly, we must resist corruption to fully be able to engage in the
de-escalation perspective. And the corruption in Iraq is the deep state; it
has nothing to do with Shi’ism, nor does it have anything to do with Ira-
nian control. The deep state in Iraq is ridden with corruption. It has its
own dynamics, perpetuating a form of corruption which extends beyond
embezzlement and implicates the entire society; that is, in its failure to
establish the right moral values and virtues, and to sustain itself and
become a point of pride rather than our shameful status quo.
Thirdly, the problem of minority groups must be addressed, and diversity accommodated for. One of the key themes which I think is worth highlighting, is that the promotion of democracy and other methods for coexistence ought be at the center of the push for the de-escalation of the region. For us Iraqis, we need to still focus on that and continue to pursue understanding of it.

Fourthly, in relation to our economic development from being a former rentier economy, is the matter of oil production. The hazard posed by the PMFs or militias remains problematic, because we still feel insecure and feel that we cannot completely depend on anyone. We cannot depend on the United States to back us up, because they didn’t when we needed them, primarily in summer of 2014. Nor did Iran. There’s a hefty price tag associated with any support we receive from the Iranians geopolitically as well as economically, which constitutes another aspect of it. So we, as Iraqis, still feel isolated; still feel like we do not have our act together; and yet we have this expansive vision for democracy and everything else. We still don’t know what it takes to be democratic. The bigger, unnecessary legacy, however, is that of Saddam Hussein’s which entailed two decades of militarization, a culture of war, and other pernicious impacts from everybody else involved. We still have to pay five or six billion dollars of standing debt to Kuwait, not to mention the other debts formed in the wake of Saddam’s egregious mistakes. We still have not, ironically, established an agreement with Iran in relation to the borders – an issue which has remained unresolved since 1975, despite everybody’s speculation that we are still in the pocket of Iran. This lethargy indicates to you that there’s a big problem.

Importantly, Iraq will remain a ground zero more than just for Iran because of its diversity and position as a gateway to Iran, to the region, and to the globe in some ways. I recently encountered an American diplomat and queried when we talked about Iraq about whether Iraq had become a “Checkpoint Charlie.” His response was a firm yes. Checkpoint Charlie refers to the East-Berlin, West-Berlin key points of contention in relation to the Cold War; as with North Korea’s 38th parallel. So Iraq is a Checkpoint Charlie, and will continue carrying on as a Checkpoint Charlie where everybody changes their spies, and everything else associated with Checkpoint Charlie continues to stay there for posterity.
That’s a big problem for us, in that we need to have the body, the mind, the institutions, and the societal cohesiveness to be able to deal with such an important expectation incumbent on us, albeit one dictated by our geography. We cannot run away from this fact. Iraqis want to be the Switzerland of the region. Unfortunately, we don’t produce chocolates, nor watches, and we are most certainly not a cool enough environment to be the Switzerland of the region. Even so, those are the expectations of the Iraqis. It’s important for us to understand the exigences imposed upon us in virtue of being a “ground zero.”

My final point refers to the high hopes of the populace for the election. It still will not be transformative enough to fulfill the aspirations of the Iraqis. But is it in the right direction? Yes. Does it also require a lot of mentoring? Yes. In that way, the United States needs to have a more comprehensive view of Iraq and not simply view us as a pawn of the next Cold War battle against the Iranians. Unfortunately, that’s our ultimate sphere, in that we are devolving more into something resembling a Cold War – which is problematic, given how Washington dichotomized between sympathizers of the Soviets and people of the Free World at the height of the Cold War. The Iraqis do not want to be reduced to such a binary.
دوش دیدم که ملائهک در میخانه زندند
ساکنان حرم ستر و عفاف ملکوت
قرعه کار به نام من دیوانه زندند
آسمان بار امانت نتوانست کشید
جنگ هفتاد و دو ملت همه را عذر بنه
ظرفیان رقص کنان ساغر شکرانه زندند
شکر ایزد که میان من و او صلح افتاد
آتش آن است که در خرم پریونه زندند
کس چو حافظ نگشاد از رخ اندیشه نقاب
گل ادم بسرشند و به پیمانه زندند
با من راه نشین باده مستانه زندند
قرعه کار به نام من دیوانه زندند
چون ندیدند حقیقت ره افسانه زندند
شکر ایزد که میان من و او صلح افتاد
آتش آن است که در خرم پریونه زندند
تا سر زلف سخن را به قلم شانه زندند

The Seventy-Two Sects, 
by Hafez-i Shirazi

Persian original:
English translation:

Last night I saw the angels knocking on the tavern door
measuring out the clay of Adam and giving it form.

The dwellers of the celestial precinct of seclusion and holy purity came
and downed intoxicating wine with me, and a vagabond.

The heavens could not bear the burden of the Divine Trust,
so the lot of this lofty work fell to me; and I’m crazy!

The war of the seventy-two sects? Come now, forgive them all.

Since they haven’t seen the truth, they’ve set out on fantasies.

Thank God, that between me and him peace has been established.

The dancing Sufis have taken up the goblet of thanksgiving.

Fire is not that by which the candle-flame comes to laugh.

Fire is that which has been struck into the haystack of the moth.

As long as they have been combing the locks of speech with the pen,

no one has ever lifted the veil from the Face of consciousness like Hafez.”

Translation by Nicholas Boylston
Panel 7: Resources for Engaging with Difference: Theology, Literature and the Arts

Moderator: Ali Asani

Panelists: Nicholas Boylston, Mohd Faizal Musa, Sheneila Khoja-Moolji, Mohammad Sagha

Summary:

Panel Seven recalls and analyses the resources which emphasize peace and toleration within internal Islamic traditions; from the notion of taqrib (striving for sincere doctrinal dialogue between Muslim sects), to the nondenominational economic and cultural projects of the Aga Khan Development Network, and to the ethic of introspection and self-improvement embedded within the transregional Persian literary tradition. From these resources, our panel forms a culturally, religiously, and historically-couched basis from which to deconstruct sectarianism, and debunks the myth of the inherent oppositional nature of Islamic sects.
Nicholas Boylston

“Last night I saw the angels knocking on the tavern door, measuring out the clay of Adam and giving it form. The dwellers of the celestial precinct of seclusion and holy purity came and downed intoxicating wine with me, and a vagabond. The heavens could not bear the burden of the Divine Trust, so the lot of this lofty work fell to me; and I’m crazy! The war of the seventy-two sects? Come now, forgive them all. Since they haven’t seen the truth, they’ve set out on fantasies. Thank God, that between me and him peace has been established. The dancing Sufis have taken up the goblet of thanksgiving. Fire is not that by which the candle-flame comes to laugh. Fire is that which has been struck into the haystack of the moth. As long as they have been combing the locks of speech with the pen, no one has ever lifted the veil from the face of consciousness like Hafez.”

I thought I would start from this cut of Hafez to set the mood for what we are discussing. The more I contemplated this icon, the more I realized this excerpt says exactly what I want it to say. I believe that the humanities are undervalued both in the United States, particularly in very recent history, but also widely in the Islamic world. This was not always the case. There is an extremely rich and profound history of over a millennium for us to draw upon and rethink. I firmly believe that in order to give life back into the humanities here in the Western academia, we need to be able to draw on the global resources of all the world’s humanities and resources, to present them and look at them on their own terms.

My own work is on the Islamic tradition, and more specifically, the Persian tradition. I will begin by simply explaining why we should take literature seriously, and specifically why we should take Persian and Persian classical history seriously. A lot of the comments I will be making are equally true for Arabic traditions, Urdu traditions, Malay traditions, and Turkish traditions. But, in the interest of focus, I’m going to pick off my examples from the Persian tradition, and also Persian classical literature, which is a millennium long, covering both the Sunni and Shi’a world. As we know, there is a myth going around that the Sunni-Shi’a conflict is the fault of the Persians, but of course Iran and the Persian region has only been Shi’a for the last five hundred years. So, the Persian tradition bridges these boundaries, and
this in itself is something ecumenical. That we could use the same language and see the same language across sectarian divisions says a lot about the communal nature of the long Persian tradition.

We really do not take our literature seriously enough. In terms of actual “readership” in the Islamic World, there is an argument to be made that the second most read text in Islamic civilization is in fact a work of Persian literature; the work of Sādī’s *Gulistan*. Furthermore, when you include the fact that the vast majority of people in pre-modern civilizations have been illiterate and have been engaged in oral cultures, it is poetry that bears the most importance. Poetry is what you can memorize, what you can recite to each other, and what you can dance to. It is therefore very easy to establish that these Persian literary texts, and not just the side course which is represented on the syllabi we have today, were really the core of a vast amount of how Muslims thought about themselves and their traditions.

An allusion has already been made to the word *adab*, which is something akin to what we might term literature today, but also means ethics and proper conduct. There is a message in this that literature has a fundamental role in ethical formation. The Islamic *adab* tradition comprises of over a millennium and spreads over multiple languages, so I don’t want to oversimplify it. But in general they are deeply rooted in the Sunnah of the Prophet. In fact, if you talk to many Muslims, the word *adab* means the behavior of the Prophet, and basically in some ways can be equivalent to the Sunnah. But the *adab* traditions – while being rooted in the Sunnah and purposed to convey its deepest sense – are also deeply cosmopolitan in the literary sense. So, the Muslim literary luminary would draw on world traditions, Hindu stories, and Buddhist stories, for the material they would work with. After all, most of the human problems, and the ethical challenges we face, are shared and thus universal. Furthermore, the scope of inquiry of Islamic and particularly Persian literary texts is remarkable. As they say in the Persian, they cover the “‘arsh to the farsh,” from the Divine throne to the carpet. Hence you can see in literary texts the most refined discussions of metaphysics and divine unity, to the very most simple matters of the particular bodily functions of the steeds you may be riding in a particularly sensitive scenario… And they are expressed in the most beautiful of forms.
In many ways, most of the Islamic sciences start with an argument about why their science is the best. There are very good arguments to say why the literary tradition is in fact the supreme science of Islamic civilization. The importance of this is that literature is actually crafted as an ethical subject, in the days when people actually read or heard literature. The *adab* tradition is one rooted in the cultivation of virtues, the most important of which are generosity, humility and veracity. While you could write a whole work about each of these, they tend to be intertwined and dealt with in tandem. First of all, there exists the discourse of bestowing dignity upon the other – whomever that may happen to be – as intrinsically worthy of respect by being a human being, and of humbling yourself, realizing that one must first start with one’s own faults and address them before addressing anything else.

These discourses are rooted in the contrasts and contradictions of the human state, as explored in that Hafez poem replete with such contradictions. He is expressing himself as a vagabond, and in doing so is expressing his humility. But he is seeing the angels descend and they want to drink wine with him, which is forbidden. Thus, there are all these contradictions and contrasts, which is to say that the human condition contains many diverse aspects and it is really a challenge to integrate them. Now, Sana’i, who is one of the forefathers of this tradition, will put it as: all of us contain Christ within us, but we also contain the donkey within us. Put simply, if Christ is riding the donkey – the spiritual nature of the donkey being your carnal egoist nature – you are in a good situation. If it is the other way around, you’ve got a problem. So the tradition depicts norms. It is not relativistic and free for all. It is rooted in obligation.

Many of these figures will talk about the importance of following the rituals, in a variety of Islam following the Sunnah of the Prophet, and other moral norms that I can’t encompass in a single statement. But, it is a tradition which simultaneously questions superficial adherence. The tradition throughout is going to both set up norms, and also undermine them, and particularly undermine the superficial adherence to certain norms and labels where they in fact become a means of oppressing others. And the root of this tradition, which is so important in this subject of de-escalation, is the ability to laugh at one’s self. It is very difficult to have a polemical
discussion with someone when you are laughing at yourself, and you realize your own faults.

So then, let us explore a teaser of all the very interesting things the Persian literary tradition has to say about sectarianism. We have already seen Hafez talking about the 72 sects, and this is a theme that comes out throughout the tradition, and which almost everybody addresses. It refers to a Prophetic Hadith, of which there are two versions, that the combination of religions in the past has divided into different sects. The Islamic tradition will divide into 72 or 73 sects, and there are two versions of this narrative. Either one of them is saved and the rest are in the fire, or one of them is in the fire and the others are saved. Hafez is basically saying, to quote the Persians, “Forget about it.” He is saying the 72 sects are all fighting each other and are just getting it wrong.

Embedded here is this deep criticism in the Persian tradition of ta‘assub, of partisanship and of thinking the tradition you were born into is intrinsically just better than all the others, leading to a group dynamic in which you are supposedly the “good guys” and everybody else is bad. There are really subtle investigations of this in Persian literature. It might be along Shafi‘i-Hanafi lines, which were important in the 11th to 12th century. It might be on Sunni-Shi‘a lines. But, Hafez again delves into these contradictions, by making a skeptical remark that all these 72 sects are on the wrong path, have not seen the truth and are therefore creating these myths. But we remember that there are 73 sects in most of the Hadiths. Hafeez also starts with this mystical experience of seeing the angels at the tavern door. He is challenging you to consider whether we should just forget the whole thing, or whether there is another way of approaching these matters and eluding some deliberate contradictions. Hafez is challenging you so that you have to really engage with what he is saying.

Therefore, there is a really powerful psychologization of sectarian conflict in classical Persian literature. The literature critiques from beginning to end how escalating sectarianism is in fact a means of worldly gain for the people involved. They were engaging with the same problem hundreds of years ago. There is a psychology of polemics, which I will give an example of in a moment. But they also discern the deeper good intentions behind
diversity and really point the readers and their listeners towards finding the deeper intentions behind things, and finding unity through the inward good intentions that underlie this diversity.

To give you an example, as I teach my students in Shi’ism 101, there is a way polemics always work. You read the other person’s texts, you find the most outrageous claim, and then you claim, “Oh these people believe in this absolutely,” thereby painting a people entirely by this claim. Now your opponents become absurd because they’ve been reduced to absurdity, while you stick by that stigmatization and don’t listen to any interpretations of how they actually deal with these problematic texts. Sana’i deals with Shafi’is and Hanafis. The Shafi’is through these means were claimed by their opponents to be anthropomorphist, and the Hanafis to be rationalists. So he says, “If someone has become an ill-willed anthropomorphist (jismi), what sin is there to be attributed to Shafi’i for that? And if some donkey sports a predilection for rationalism, to Abu Hanifah he’s not got a barley grain’s worth.” Here we once again see the importance of donkeys in the wider tradition.

This next point leads me to my final point. That is, Sana’i and the other poets rooted in this tradition of ethical cultivation want to point us to where the root of the problem is. He will say, “Both are true, falsehood is from you and me, falsehood is from the filth of your heart and mine. Otherwise, in the garden of faith, by the light of certainty, there are hyacinth of tradition and the lily of the region.” It is in some fact of our egoistic nature that we find the roots of this diversity. Whether Sunni or Shi’a, Muslims are rooted in the Sufi tradition; this is not a relativistic pluralism, but an affirmative orientation towards a transcendent goal. Duality and difference are rooted in the ego as such, yet the human here contains the capacity to transcend this duality. This is a deeper unity most often expressed with the simple, single last word of Attar: “Know with certainty that the religion of Love, is here beyond the seventy-two sects.”
Mohd Faizal Musa

Thousands of miles from here, thousands of years ago; about four years after the tragic murder of Prophet Muhammad’s grandson in Karbala, in a region which was enjoying human rights in Sriwijaya, Buddhism had taken root. The ancient Sriwijaya government was considered to be the centre of propagation of Buddhism in the East. Hundreds of years later, Islam was introduced and swept the archipelago. The Islam that I mean was Shi’a Islam. Not long afterwards, the Ahlul Sunnah Wal Jamaah sect also arrived and started to erode Shi’a Islam’s influence in the Malay world. However, Islam at the time was influenced by Sufism, which was still tolerant of Shi’a Islam. Yet, when Islam arrived in Malacca, at the time when Raja Kechil Besar was the ruler, everything changed. Raja Kechil Besar was sleeping when he dreamed that the Prophet appeared and told him to accept the faith of Sheikh Ahmad who would arrive from Jeddah. According to The Malay Annals, when Raja Kechil Besar woke up from his sleep, he realized that he had been circumcised. This was supposedly the proof that his dream was true. The same afternoon, a trading caravan arrived from Jeddah, and the sultan of Malacca welcomed the Arab traders with great pump. As soon as they converted to Islam, the first thing that the Arabs taught the sultan was how to perform the prayers. There were no discussions on comportment, moral, humanity, or more importantly, on theology.

The arrival of Islam in Malacca only brought one phenomenon – the emphasis on “fikah” [fiqh] – which is a problematic approach because it classifies every action in life into halal or haram, what is permitted and what is forbidden. This approach spread when the Wahhabi teachings reached the Malay world as early as 1803. It witnessed the killing of traditionalists by the Wahhabis in Minangkabau. Then, strict laws forbade Malay people from exchanging pantuns (traditional poetry) or playing the lute during the rule of the young Sultan Ali in Johor Riau in 1845. Although they belonged to the Shafi’i mazhab [madhhab], the Malays who practiced the “fikah” (jurisprudential) type of Islam were stirred by the rashness of laws resembling the Hanbali school of thought. For the very first time, the Malays were exposed to religious extremism.
After the arrival of the British, sectarianism started to be recorded. It must be emphasized that the Sunni Malays – who had once been Shi’as – practiced various cultural rituals which were clearly Shi’a in nature. Remnants of the Malays’ Shi’ism can be seen in the *Dondang Siti Fatimah*, a lullaby, the *Hikayat Hasan Husin* (Tale of Hassan and Hussein) and the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyyah* (the Tale of Muhammad Hanafiyyah) which are part of Malay literature, the acceptance of the concept of the Imam Mahdi in the classical text ‘*Al-Mukhtasar fi’ Alamah al-Mahdi al Muntazar*’ by Syeikh Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari, praises of Imam Ali and many other traces of Shi’ism that cannot be denied.

Sectarianism started at the turn of the 20th century. At least two vestiges of sectarianism can be traced in Malaya (before the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965), namely the riots in Singapore in 1907; and the opinions of Burhanuddin al Helmy and Za’ba, two highly-regarded Malay figures, about the dissensions between the different sect (*mazhab*) in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1934, the Kadhi of Johor allowed the marriage of a Shi’a man with a Sunni woman and the Mufti of Johor, Sheikh Habib Alawi (1934-1961) gave permission to transmit Hadiths to Ayatullah Mar’ashi Najafi. Meanwhile the Ismaili Bohra (Sevener) society was allowed to function in the state of Selangor in 1981.

The *fatwa* issued in 1996 changed everything. In Malaysia, gazetted *fatwas* became law. Within the following decade, *fatwas* prohibiting Shi’ism spread throughout Malaysia, turning sectarianism into something *halal*, while discrimination against Shi’a Muslims was sanctified and protected by law. You have never heard about this because you have been indoctrinated by the fantasy of the beauty of Malaysia, the exoticism of Asia, and the tourism slogan of “Malaysia Truly Asia.”

Under Mohd Najib Abdul Razak’s government, discrimination against the Shi’as and the violation of their human rights has become rife. As a writer who is more than a story-teller, I believe that this situation has to be stopped. I started refuting sectarian ideas in my writings. I fear that the symptoms of sectarianism are increasingly severe in Malaysia, and can become a fire burning throughout South-East Asia. I propose the following formula: “appreciate Ahlu Kitab (Christians and Jews), respect and adopt
Ahlus Sunnah, while loving and admiring Ahlul Bait (the household of Prophet Muhammad saw).”

Therefore, I started to study in great depth the tradition of Malay writing, which is different from the Western tradition of writing which gives precedence to the plot or to causality (cause and effect). The Malay tradition is always based on discourses, and for the purpose of refuting or supporting an idea, which is what I do in my writings, the traditional Malay approach to writing is very effective. For this reason, I started writing creative works and essays about the ideas of renowned figures who were “supra mazhab” or who rejected narrow interpretations of the concept of mazhab.

I believe that such an approach is what caused seven of my books to be banned. Yes, seven books. One of them was even banned right after it had been launched by the Prime Minister of Malaysia himself. But this unconventional approach also caused me to be scorned by the literary elite who place story, narrative components, narrative strategy and plot above all else, although I do not disregard these elements. Perhaps I am seen as a post-colonial radical in literature. My efforts to get the attention of the literary elite in the West, such as literary agents, publishers and translators have reached a dead end. So I remain, trampled many times over and gasping for air, reaching out for a hand to grab.

Perhaps having been invited here will change all that. I hope that my struggle will become a legacy, and evidence of the history of fighting against sectarianism, when I am no longer here.
The symposium thus far has been very generative in terms of thinking along some of the lines of alliances we can build. As Dr. Asani mentioned, most of my work focuses on Muslim girls and the construction of masculinity. I’m particularly focused on examining how some subjects are pushed to the periphery of society, to the edges of livability due to global capital, conflict, work, colonialism, contemporary humanitarianism, and politics. I will focus specifically on thinking about the endeavors of the Shi’a Ismaili Imamat and those Muslim brothers and sisters who are pushed to the edges of livability. Here, we are thinking about extremely poor populations – people who are marginalized and discriminated against. By focusing on such populations and reworking our analytics, we will glean a new way to think about sectarianism. I’m using the Ismaili Imamate endeavors particularly in Pakistan – because that is where most of my fieldwork is – as a case study of sorts. I will share a few of the cases and zoom out to think about what the affordances are of that work for the theme of the symposium.

As I’m sure people here are aware, his Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan is the 49th hereditary Imam of Shi’a Ismaili Imami Muslims. He traces direct descent to Prophet Mohammad through his daughter Fatima and son in law Imam Ali, the first Shi’a Imam. The responsibilities of the Shi’a Imam - the main deed of the Ismaili Imam - is to provide religious interpretation in the spiritual search of Muslims. But at the same time they are entrusted with giving a practical expression to the ethics of Islam. In the case of his Highness, the Aga Khan Development Network, which is a development institution, is an institutional manifestation of this mandate. The institution operates in 30 different countries and is composed of a broad range of agencies whose work spans all the way through education, healthcare, economic development, cultural revitalization and preservation, and architecture – a broad range of spaces – in ways that tangibly affect the wellbeing and quality of life of Muslims. The institution is also non-denominational, which is one of the reasons why it might help us to consider, if we focus on the quality of life angle, what it might do to impact intra-Muslim collaborations.
Within the broader umbrella of the Aga Khan Development Network, we have the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, which also has a Historical Cities Program. The aim of this Historical Cities Program is to initiate cultural revitalization, to preserve Muslim heritage, but most significantly to regenerate the populations that might live around those material, spatial places. For example, in Pakistan, one such project not only regenerated Muslim heritage sites, but also Muslim communities. This refers to a particular site in Northern Pakistan, where Shi’as and Sunnis live side by side. This particular fort is the altered fort in the village. It is 900 years old and it had gone into disuse, with its residents having left. The villagers who used to live around the fort had also started abandoning their homes. Because the Northern areas of Pakistan are extremely beautiful, there is a lot of potential there for tourism as well, and so a lot of corporations and local residents were starting to build in a way that would leave the land in disuse after constructing tourist sites or hotels.

So at that point, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture intervened and started to rehabilitate the villages first, before restoring the fort itself. The idea was to rebuild the community and then the fort to transform the location into a tourist sight, thus providing income to the people who live around it, while also to preserving their Muslim heritage. In relation to this particular project, I wanted to note that when it went into this particular site to rehabilitate it, it started to invite local folks, particularly young girls and boys, to actually help with the reconstruction process, creating a lot of employment opportunities for young girls. Similarly, there was a lot of training and survey mapping techniques that were made available.

After the official project was done, the girls were still interested in actually being a part of this project, and so began Women Social Enterprise, which is now called CIQAM. This particular enterprise now trains women in non-traditional professions. So, you will see women working in carpentry, woodworking, stitching etc.; professions often reserved for men. Women in the community then saw an exponential increase in their income generation ability. Moreover, these projects are cross-denominational, so that they are not just for the benefit of Shi’as and Ismailis, but for the people who live in these areas as well. Since I work on gender, this project has been really interesting for me to think about how women who normally
would be working in feminized professions such as teaching and nursing – which often also have lower wages – can begin to access income generation opportunities in male dominated professions in the context of Pakistan. Currently, this particular project employs 90 women.

Thinking back to the kinds of alliances that can be created through cultural exchanges, the Aga Khan Music Initiative is another example where there has been a concerted effort to preserve Muslim aesthetic traditions; as Dr. Asani mentioned, Islam is an experiential faith as well, and that is one of the spaces that can actually bring us together in the shared mutuality of that embodied knowledge. Music and dance, as embodied expressions of faith, are spaces in which Aga Khan therefore also works.

Education is also high on the agenda of a lot of non-profit and development organizations. However, I want to point out that in relation to the Aga Khan Development Network, there is this sort of multi-pronged approach where you are not just thinking about educational delivery in terms of creating schools, but you are also thinking about what constitutes as knowledge, and pushing back against the secular and religious binary that is rearticulated through school systems. The network not only provides educational institutions – with a history extending to the British colonial past of providing educational access to girls in particular – but also engages at the state level with curriculum and examination boards, doing teacher preparation, and then providing social assistance to those populations that cannot otherwise afford or partake in education.

I want to end by zooming out and thinking about what focusing on the everyday Muslim might afford us in terms of thinking about the effects of geopolitics, sectarianism, and wars? How will our intra-Muslim politics change if we direct our attention to these populations who are pushed to these margins? And finally, can we arrive at a place where we can hold our respective truth claims, our respective ideologies, while still working on improving the quality of life of all Muslims across all denominations of Muslims brothers and sisters?
Mohammad Sagha

The topic that I’d like to discuss is the legacy of taqrib in the Muslim world. When we think about ecumenism or sectarian de-escalation, this is one of the key terms that generally comes to mind for a lot of Muslims, especially the older generation of Muslims that directly experienced this notion of taqrib in the not-so-distant past. What is taqrib? It is a concept and a framing that emerged in the Muslim world in the mid-20th century; taqrib in Arabic means togetherness, closeness. It was a notion that advocated for bringing about greater togetherness and closeness between Islamic sects or different schools of thought. This project was established in the mid-20th century by a key number of leading Muslim scholars across the Middle East. The institution, Dar al Taqrib bayn al-Madhahib al-Islamiya, i.e “the Center for Bringing Together the Schools of Islam,” bears the namesake of the project. Some of the prominent figures involved in this project which was launched in Cairo, Egypt included famous heads of al-Azhar including Shaykhs Mohammad Mustafa al-Maraqi, Mustafa Abd al-Razzaq, Abd al-Majid Salim, and Mahmud Shaltut as well as the Shi’a scholar Mohammad Taqi Qumi in conjunction with the leading Grand Ayatollah Seyed Hossein Boroujerdi, the highest-ranking Twelver Shi’a scholar of time who was based in Iran.

In this period, a series of high-profile dialogues between leading Muslim scholars across confessional divide were published in prominent outlets in Egypt, Lebanon, Iran and Iraq. Most famously, Sheikh Shaltut, in his position as one of the highest-ranking scholars of the Sunni Muslim world, issued a fatwa recognizing Shi’a Ja’afari law as the fifth madhhab, or school of Islam. A wave of prominent scholars across the Shi’a and Sunni confessional divides partook in these types of sentiments in the mid-20th century, and equally the notion of ecumenism and of bridging Shi’a and Sunni intellectual divides was quite widespread among the Muslim elite. These were theological conversations, which laid the intellectual groundwork for formally recognizing one another as Muslims and included initiatives to teach comparative Sunni and Shi’a law and theology next to one another in seminary institutions for learning, such as Al-Azhar in Cairo. Sheikh Shaltut, for example, would explicitly reference how he would use the legal reasoning of prominent Shi’a thinkers, and under his contemporaries
many Shi’a Qur’anic commentaries were published and analyzed in great scholarly depth in Egypt. Abd al-Majid Salim, for example, engaged with the Qur’anic commentary Majma’ al-Bayan written in the twelfth century by Shi’a scholar Hasssan b. Fadl al-Tabarsi whose commentary was later published in Cairo in 1958. One of the primary mediums for this intellectual project of taqrib was its flagship journal, Risalat al-Islam, established in 1949 which published serious and prestigious scholarly exchange from across Twelver, Zaydi, and Sunni lines.

The emergence of the taqrib movement had somewhat deeper roots in the pan-Islamic sentiments that were found in the modern Middle East. As such, we must contextualize the Middle East of the early 20th century; this is a Middle East which saw the fragmentation of the Ottoman Empire, an emergence of new notions of secular ethno-national identity; and, the early experience of Muslims with the phenomenon that we call modernity and the nation state. Feelings of disempowerment by Muslims who saw their political and military strength sapped by Western powers were widespread and was one of the impetuses for the spread of Pan-Islamic unity in order to confront the political malaise that their societies faced. Under this larger pan-Islamic umbrella, the famous reformist Grand Mufti of Egypt, Muhammad Abduh, edited publications of Imam Ali’s Nahj al-Balagha (a compendium of his most eloquent speeches) in the late 19th century, and had very close ties with Jamal Al-Din al-Afghani, one of the founders of pan-Islamist thought who most likely came from a Shi’a Iranian background, but was someone who preached a more universal message about Islamic civilization as an organizing social concept.

What then makes taqrib a resource for engaging with difference? Perhaps an example would greater reflect how the project of taqrib was used as a resource for sectarian de-escalation. One of the drivers for the fatwa of Sheikh Shaltut, which recognized Shi’a Ja’afari law school (madhhab) as the fifth madhhab alongside the Sunni law schools, was the person of Sheikh Mohamad Jawad Chirri, a Lebanese scholar residing in the United States who was the founder of the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn, Michigan. Sheikh Chirri had a personal relationship with Shaltut and likely with Gamal Abdel Nasser as well. In his personal memoirs, Sheikh Cherri recounts how he approached Sheikh Shaltut and his son in Egypt,
which eventually resulted in this fatwa, recognizing the Twelver Shi'a as a fifth madhab alongside the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali schools. By many accounts, the Egyptian president Gamal al-Nasser even helped provide the seed money to establish this large and still flourishing mosque. So, the leader of the largest Sunni Arab country was involved in lending his support for the establishment of a place of worship for a Shi'a majority congregation in America which happened to also be the largest Muslim concentration in the United States.

In this instance, taqrib allowed for a Lebanese clergyman based in the United States to be an intimate partner in larger theological moves centered in the Arab world. Therefore, this initiative had a global impact, which is still nostalgically invoked until today. The point that I would like to make is to show that when a state provides the space for theological ecumenism, this can have a long-lasting impact. Indeed, when more than one state is involved not as the sole driver and determiner of ecumenism, but as a partner in larger efforts towards religious pluralism, the effects can have even greater impact. More recent developments, in the spirit of taqrib, also include the Amman Message, which included basically all the leading scholars in the Muslim world including from al-Azhar as well as Ayatollah Sistani, Ayatollah Khamenei, and representatives from the Zaydi and Ibadi schools. Iran also has the cross-confessional university which teaches Islamic theology in a comparative context, not just within Shi'ism.

One of the takeaways from these examples is to say that the main developments in ecumenism and taqrib in the 20th century have been either explicitly backed or tolerated by state powers in the Middle East. The problem, however, is that some of these same states have remained inconsistent with their policies, and once these states move against these policies we see these projects face serious constraints and barriers. This is not totally surprising. Although there is a widespread assumption that religion should be separate from the state for it to be effective and legitimate, it is hard to imagine how larger ecumenism can take place if proper space is not provided for this interplay. As such, it is hard to remove the role of the state from the very history of Islamic thought, given that they have historically been inextricably linked. If we think of the translation movement and the Abbasids’ various policies, to cite one historical example, the state or ruling
authorities have always had a role to play in the development of theology. Equally, it is not just theocratic states who claim to have religious authority which becomes embroiled in theology, but it is also secular states such as Iran under the Shah, Turkey under Ataturk, and Egypt, which in the seizing of the awqaf properties (religious endowments) clearly regulated religion. Of course, this means that projects such as taqrib can have political motivations. When Iran and Egypt created established their attempt at taqrib in the mid-20th century, they faced the threat of Communism and therefore incorporated many clergy who also faced an ideological and spiritual threat from Communism. But despite the political context and limitations, can taqrib itself work as a particular concept? What is the future of this project?

Personally, I see no barriers to taqrib playing a positive role in sectarian de-escalation. Taqrib is not just about theology and law. It is also about the authority to decide who is in and out of the category of Islam. So, this is a controversial but a multi-faceted process involving diverse actors from civil societies that can help pave the way for greater tolerance and ecumenism. The point of taqrib, if we look at it in a favorable light, is to bring closeness and unity between Muslim sects; not as a project to demolish different schools of thought, but to show that different schools can exist through the uncertainties of Islamic law and thought while appreciating and learning from one another in a comparative context. To do this, we need both social movement from below, but also space at the top in order to succeed.
Panel 8:
Does Theology Matter?
Politics and the Role of Religion and Sectarianism in the Contemporary Muslim World

Moderator: Elizabeth Prodromou

Panelists: Mehdi Hasan, Jonathan Brown, Mustafa Akyol, Ibrahim Kazerooni

Summary

Panel Eight reflects on the salience of theology in debates on sectarianism in the Middle East. While some causal impact is afforded to theological discrepancies between Sunni and Shi’a interpretations of Islam as a reason for sectarian tensions, our panelists recognize the primary role of political competition for power in amplifying, manipulating, or distorting supposedly inherent – but definitely surmountable – doctrinal qualms between the sects; qualms which would not be destructive for inter-sectarian relations in and of themselves. Panelists encourage more sincere dialogue in which diverse groups take seriously the agency of individuals and scholars to claim and interpret their own traditions instead of engaging in pointed polemics and antagonism and removing interpretive agency from diverse sectarian and denominational traditions.
Mehdi Hasan

We are sitting in one of the most famous centers of learning, academic scholarship, and knowledge in the world. So let me start by making a fundamental point, which affects everything I say on this subject, and my interpretation of this subject. Discussions of Islam and sectarianism outside of academia – at least in the world I inhabit – in media, in the corridors of power in Washington DC, London, and elsewhere, are defined and characterized by a great deal of ignorance rather than knowledge, scholarship, or learning. There is a famous story that a former U.S. diplomat used to tell, on the eve of the Iraq War in 2003. A Kurdish delegation went to the White House to discuss the invasion and what would happen after the invasion with George W. Bush, and they emerged from the conversation shocked that, with only a few weeks before the first bomb would be dropped, the President had no clue of the difference between Iraq’s Shi’as, Sunnis, and Kurds.

Now, you might ask what else one expects from George W. Bush, but it was not just George W. Bush who personified such brazen ignorance as that of the Iraq War. Back in 2006 Jeff Stein, an investigative journalist, conducted a series of interviews with US politicians by asking them one simple question: “Do you know the difference between a Sunni and a Shi’a?” The responses were astonishing. Congressman Sylvester Reyes, when asked whether al-Qaeda was Sunni and Shi’a, answered after a pause, “Probably Shi’a.” Then there was senator Trent Lott, former Republican senate majority leader, who when asked by Stein about the difference between Sunnis and Shi’as, declared “They all look the same to me.”

These are top U.S. politicians in the security field, and these sweeping, ignorant statements about Shi’as and Sunnis, and religion and politics more broadly, come from people who should know better. Nevertheless, such nescient verdicts are widespread in politics and media on both the right and the left. There are conservative journalists like Bill O’Reilly, formerly on Fox News, who asserted that “The Sunni and Shi’a want to kill each other. They want to blow each other up. They have fun doing this. They like this.” You have liberal TV host and comedian Bill Maher, who said that “The Sunnis and Shi’as are going to have this out. We just need to let them
have it out.” Even John Stuart of the Daily Show formerly stated that the last time Sunnis and Shi’as got along in the world was a thousand years ago.

Given this awful level of commentary, media insight, and political opinion, here are the points I want to make today to push back on what I think is a very lazy sectarian narrative that over-exaggerates religion, history, ideology, and theology; all of which I believe have very little to do with the sectarianization that we have seen in the Middle East and across the Muslim-majority world in the recent years. My view of sectarianism and religion is exactly the same as my view on sectarianism and terrorism. Theology is used as an excuse after the event. It is not a motivation: just as it does not drive people towards terrorism, it does not drive people towards sectarianism. It is used as a cloak, a cover, and an excuse.

I’m always reminded of the people from Birmingham, England who went out to join ISIS in Syria. The last two books they bought from Amazon before they departed were Qur’an for Dummies and Islam for Dummies, which kind of sums up the mentality of a lot of people in that sphere. Religion comes very late and expediently in the process.

In no particular order, the points I want to make are to bring us back to where I think this sectarian conflict is coming from. Firstly, I contend that this is not an ancient theological religious conflict. While the theological divide between Sunnis and Shi’as – which is very real, very legitimate, very substantive – goes back 1400 years, to the death of the Prophet himself, the conflicts we are seeing today, particularly in the Middle East, are very modern conflicts which have very little to do with people’s views of who succeeded the prophet in 632 AD. Today, what we call a Sunni-Shi’a conflict in the Middle East is in many ways a Saudi-Iran conflict. It is a regional cold (and sometimes hot) war between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi’a Iran, which has been raging for forty years rather than 1400. We recall that before sectarianism came along, Arab nationalism and several related political ideologies dominated the scene.

My second point is that even this whole Saudi-Iran conflict is overblown in my view. There have been ups and downs in their relations. However, the way you read about it in the media these days is that from 1979 onwards
the two nations have just been at each other’s throats on religious grounds, which is completely ahistorical. We forget that back in 1999, President Khatami of Iran went to Riyadh and met the crown prince of Saudi Arabia on the runway, before they hugged each other. Not long after, President Ahmadinejad was photographed in Qatar at the GCC summit holding hands with King Abdullah. Can you imagine that today? This history is all conveniently forgotten as the politics have moved on.

Thirdly, if Shi’a Iran and the Sunni Gulf states are so hostile towards each other for theological reasons, and if the whole region is so neatly divided along sectarian lines, how do you explain the constantly shifting cross-sectarian alliances which have nothing to do with theology or religious literacy? How do you explain Shi’a Iran’s longstanding support of Sunni Hamas? Or Sunni Qatar turning to Shi’a Iran for help last year, and cozying up with Iran in the face of fellow Salafi Sunni Saudi Arabia’s blockade of Qatar? What happened to ancient sectarian cleavages? Suddenly they don’t matter when you are in the middle of a massive geopolitical route in the region.

Fourthly, on the matter of Iraq and Syria: you cannot overstate the role that these two conflicts – the Iraq war in 2003 and subsequently the Syrian uprisings from 2011 onwards – have played in sectarianizing the region and the wider world. You can go as far afield as Indonesia or Malaysia, or even to the United States and UK, to witness the fallout from that vicious sectarian genie that was allowed out of the bottle in 2003. And it is no coincidence that the most sectarian force in the Muslim world, ISIS, was created in Iraq and moved to Syria. It wasn’t created in Saudi Arabia, despite all my criticisms of Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Arabia does disseminate Wahhabi ideology, which is very similar to ISIS in many ways, the interest in ISIS was not born in Saudi Arabia. Rather, it was borne from war-torn countries beholden to horrible dictatorships, which for all their horribleness had a relatively secular history.

So do not be deceived. When sectarianism emerges, it does not come from the most religious of people. Sectarianism, I find in my own experience, often comes from the most irreligious of people. These are people who have found religion at convenient times to justify their preexisting political, social, or economic agendas. Sectarianism comes, political scientists
tell us, from where states have collapsed and produced political and social
vacuums; where governments have lost capacity and lost legitimacy. Iraq is
a classic example of this theory. Paul Bremer, who was sent to Iraq to run
it as the viceroy for the Bush administration, divided up power in Iraq. He
set up an Iraqi governing council, and the seats were set partially for Shi’as,
partially for Sunnis, and partially for the Kurds. This was an explicitly
ethnic and sectarian conflict.

The role of outside powers in sectarianizing regions is often overlooked
or underplayed. We need only look at the U.S. embassy memo released by
Wikileaks in 2006, transmitted to DC from Damascus under the headline
“Play on Sunni fears of Iranian influence.” I’m not saying that the United
States is the cause of all sectarianism, but we ought not overlook the med-
dling of outside powers in sectarianism in a manner which is not rooted
in theology. I don't believe that the U.S. embassy or the Israeli government
give a damn about who succeeded the prophet in 632 AD. Yet Naftali Ben-
nett, Israel’s most right-wing minister, came on my show a few months ago,
and proffered that “If the Sunni Arab countries don't want to be butchered
by their Shi’a neighbor, they ought to cooperate with us, and work together
against the Big Menace.”

Fifthly, and finally, Yemen is a conflict often framed in sectarian terms.
Tom Friedman wrote that “the main issue today is the 7th century struggle
over who is the rightful heir of the Prophet Muhammad.” This religious
question is what Tom Friedman believes is what the Yemenis are fighting
over. Many people are not aware that in the 1960s Saudi Arabia backed the
Shi’a king of Yemen at the time and Egypt backed the secular forces of the
opposition, demonstrating the extent to which the sectarian prescription is
contrived. What was happening in the 1960s when people were taking dif-
ferent sides in Yemen?

Thus, the sectarian narrative is not just lazy and ahistorical, but it is also
dangerous. If you frame sectarianism in the Middle East as a theological
or religious conflict, it basically means you can’t resolve it, because it is
supposedly a Godly struggle. This approach absolves local politicians and
outside powers from their deliberate and transparent role in sectarianiz-
ing the region, and avoids us confronting these uncomfortable truths of
political machinations in public discourse. Unless we have these discussions about politics, politicians, and outside powers, we are not going to bear witness to any better results in the near future. We will resign ourselves denial about the real causes of sectarianism in the Muslim world, and by extension in the Middle East. Ali ibn Abi Taleb, the first Imam of the Shi‘as and fourth caliph for the Sunnis, once aptly said in his letter to his campaigner Malik al-Ashtar, “Oh Malik, know that there are only two types of people. There are either your brothers in religion, or your equals in humanity.”

Jonathan Brown

For me, it is the first principle that Sunni and Shi‘a Muslims are both Muslims and are bound up in one community. They have the same beliefs and objectives, and thus sectarianism is a vile poison that cannot be allowed into the Muslim body politic. Rather, it must be actively combated and should not be tolerated even for a moment.

I’ll also agree with Mehdi, in that these are political issues. Having said that, let us consider theology. Often, when we consider Sunni-Shi‘a reconciliation, we talk about ignoring or glossing over differences. I don’t think it helps to pretend that there are no differences between the Sunni and the Shi‘a. I think it is important to know how to manage differences and to keep perspective.

My first point will be that the Sunnis and Shi‘a have a rich heritage at their disposal, which can be invoked in the pursuit of rapprochement. My second point will be that politics is a driver of sectarianism. Theology is really important, but even when we are talking about theology, politics is always right around the corner. My final principle will be that we ought never relitigate the past and its outrages.

Onto my first point, as to the shared depth of the Sunni and Shi‘a tradition. With heritage, one can construct either a nasty road of conflict, pain, agony, and hatred, or one can contribute to communal harmony, coexistence, and mutual respect. As an example, let us consider the epitome
of the Ahl al-Sunna wa’l Jama’ah, Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal. Attributed to Ahmad ibn Hanbal is a statement insinuating that the Shi’a are not Muslims at all. I believe this to be a completely false attribution. Counterfactually, we could accept the position attributed to Ahmad ibn Hanbal’s teacher Imam al-Shafi’i, that a Sunni can pray behind a Shi’a because of the Prophet’s Hadith. We are hence presented with a choice: we can either take the first attribution to Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, or the second. Provided we are being fair and historically accurate, I would urge us in such cases to take the path of reconciliation.

Similarly, we could follow the tradition of Sheikh al-Azhar, who said in his series of correspondences with the famous Lebanese Shi’a scholar Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Din al-Musawi, that Sunnis and Shi’a converge in their doctrine much more than they diverge. We could take the path of Mahmud Shaltut, who in 1959 declared that the Ja’afari School of law is one of the schools of law accepted in Islam, along with the four schools of law. We could follow the tradition of Imam Khomeini, who stated that Sunnis and Shi’as have much more in common than they have different between them.

The point here is that we could disinter all of the material in the Sunni or Shi’a heritage that vilifies the other sect, but this is a choice. From this, we can apprehend the importance of religious literacy. That is, everybody has the right to define their own tradition, and we ought not sift through someone else’s scripture or heritage and subsequently impose a belief upon them. We could delve into the Sunni tradition and selectively find all sorts of poison to vilify the Shi’a. Equally, we could delve into the Shi’a tradition and find all sorts of poison to vilify the Sunni. In such contexts, let people speak for themselves rather than prescribe their allegiances.

My second point is that politics drive sectarianism. Even where theology is very important, politics are skulking around. For example, the most influential and virulently anti-Shi’a theological texts were always written in moments of political tension with the Shi’a. Let us take the *Tuhfa Ithna Ashariyya*, written by the eminent North-Indian scholar Shaykh Shah Abdul Aziz Dehlavi. Any declaration that the Shi’as are *kufr* emanates from this text, yet the piece was written in a context in which Shah Abdul Aziz fears a Shi’a political takeover in North India.
If we cast ourselves back to Ibn Taymiyyah – the famous scholar of Damascus who proved the other major source of anti-Shi’a material – his invective derives from major fears that the Sultan had converted to Shi’ism. With the Mongols conquering Northern Syria and Iraq, he was trepid about the enforcement of Shi’a convictions upon the Sunnis.

Theological discussions of Shi’ism don’t just emerge in a vacuum. They emerge amidst political anxiety about Shi’a power. I want to dovetail to my last point, which is that we ought not to relitigate disagreements of the past. Here I will give an example. There are sometimes Shi’a scholars who are recorded disparaging the Prophet’s wife Aisha, Omar the second Caliph, or Othman. As a Sunni, we can either get upset year after year about the judgements of Imami Shi’as, or we can understand and accept that there exists a disagreement between our traditions, without trivializing it.

The logic of theology is important in Islamic history, but the precedent of coexistence is even more important. In the Ash’ari School of theology, if you say that God is above you, you point up at God, which is technically *kufr* because you are confining the residence of God. That may be theoretically problematic, yet we do not declare such people who gesture upwards towards God unbelievers, since the early Muslims pointed up at God. The very fact of that precedent means that no matter how much theological logic would exhort our condemnation of this practice, the early Islamic community composed of our forefathers and foremothers is respected. Similarly, the Sunni-Shi’a split is an archaic one. Nevertheless, they were all considered Muslims, and that precedent of coexistence and mutual acceptance means much more than any theological argument we can array.
Mustafa Akyol

Just as Muslims are burdened by this sectarian predicament, so too have the Christians suffered through a more enduring sectarian conflict, as evidenced in the decade of Catholic-Protestant tensions which once roiled in Northern Ireland.

As Mehdi posited, these tensions were not about theology as much as they were a dispute over who would dominate and rule Northern Ireland. This exemplifies that sectarian conflict is not between theologies, but between identities. When we say that we are Catholic, or Protestant, or Sunni, or Shi’a, we are saying that we belong to a group which demarcates our identity. How much we believe in the accompanying theological beliefs is a secondary consideration.

I agree that the wars in Iraq and Syria are wars over identity. The question then becomes how we can make different identities share power instead of trying to dominate the system in so autocratic a manner. Indeed, politics are the very reason for which our sects were created in the beginning. Early Muslims were divided not on the nature of the Qur’an, nor on the nature of Christ, but about who would rule after Prophet Muhammad: a question of governance, and therefore politics.

Even so, theology remains important in my opinion. When we hold a certain theological disposition or belief, it might exacerbate political problems. Two powers fighting each other for land constitutes a temporary political tension, but if you see the other side as the incarnation of Yazid, the problem immediately becomes more intractable. Therefore, theology can play a role in aggravating – or perhaps healing – the tensions bearing upon us today.

That is why I very much believe in reverting to Islamic traditions and extracting ideas which help us advance a more pluralistic, tolerant, and even liberal comprehension of Islam.

Sectarianism initially emerged from the First Fitna, an early Islamic civil war. There were the partisans of Caliph Uthman, and the supporters of the
fourth Caliph Ali. Uthman was killed, and though Ali did not orchestrate or support this, some people insisted on claiming his blood. In the midst of this war, a fanatical group arose which condemned both sides as *kafirun* (infidels) and resolved to kill them. This group embodies the most dangerous tendency in Islam to declare a group *kafir* because of their ideas, and subsequently justify attacking them. This tendency has been revived in the *takfiri* tradition, of which ISIS is the worst case.

We know that this belligerent mindset poses problems. There exists, however, an antidote embedded within the teachings of the Murji‘ah; a school of thought which originated in Syria before developing in Iraq. On the issue of whether Uthman is above Ali, or Ali above Uthman, they simply concluded that only God can truly preside over the matter. As such, they postponed this dispute to our afterlife, so that it may be resolved by God. They refrained from giving any judgment on this seething question of religious primacy.

Moreover, they believed that faith is not something we can detect from the outside by looking at our acts. They thus declared that anybody who says that they are a Muslim and believes in God is incontrovertibly Muslim, and it should be left to God to decide upon them and their sinful deeds. They used the term *Ahl al-Qiblah* – people who turn towards Mecca to pray – and in so doing unified all Sunnis, Shi‘as, Salafis, and Ahmadiyyas, for we are all *Ahl al-Qiblah*. Thus in the midst of the Fitna, the Murji‘ah conceived of an idea for pluralism which pivoted on the humility of deferring judgement to God.

John Locke makes a very similar argument in a letter concerning toleration and why heretics should not be punished. We have traditions of toleration in Islam, and even the Western world more broadly, which ought to be revived today through education. We should see that it is arrogance which lies behind the declaration of ourselves as the only “right” Muslims.

I end with the notion that although secularism has been maligned for good reason – as in the case of Turkey’s enlightenment-inspired ban on the headscarf – we should accept that there does exist a delineation between issues which are directly religious, and those which are not. We should leave better issues for God to resolve than those we often do, and in so doing should tend towards a doctrine of living and let live.
Ibrahim Kazerooni

The theme of this symposium probes the interface between politics and theology in an attempt to find a solution for de-escalating the sectarian conflict in the Middle East. Of course religion has a role to play in overcoming sectarian divides but to understand how to heal these wounds, it is necessary to get to the roots of these conflicts, which more often than not are very complex. A cursory look at the coverage of the western media of these events, leads one to think that the conflicts in the Middle East are all sectarian – they are fights between competing religions or between sects within the same religion.

While sectarian feelings have been rising since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, this is not the whole story. Sectarianism is usually the result, not the cause, of a wide variety of tensions. There are plenty of examples of civil conflict in the Arab world with no sectarian divide. Libya is being torn apart by fighting between the armed groups that toppled Muammar Qaddafi over who controls the oil resources. Egypt has been in crisis due to a political struggle for control of the state between the army and its backers on the one side and proponents of al-Qaida on the other. There are many political and economic interests involved, but no sects.

I would like to propose that while the effects of sectarianism in the Middle East have been manifested in religious tensions and conflict, the root causes of this sectarianism are found elsewhere and it is these root causes which need to be addressed in order to heal the religious dimensions of the conflicts. The current confrontations appear to have an important sectarian element, but it cannot be accurately understood simply as a “Sunni versus Shi’a” fight. Applying such a framework can distort analytical focus and oversimplify regional dynamics. This dynamic is clearly seen in the case of Iraq and Syria before their total destruction by the U.S. invading army, and by mercenaries in Syria respectively. Syria was multi-ethnic society, with communities enjoying integration and diversity based first on being Syrian, and then on their respective religious and ethnic identities, long before the conflict began. Intermarriage and sociopolitical exchanges were common, and only since 2011 has ethnic and religious tensions begun to expose fault
lines within communities based solely on fear created and perpetuated by foreign-backed terrorist organizations like Al Nusra and the Islamic State.

Understanding the dynamics of the Middle East conflict requires an examination of some of the alternative frameworks that have been put forward to explain the current phase of regional politics. “Sunni versus Shi’a” makes for a simple headline, but does not do justice to the complexities of the new Middle East crisis. Since 9/11, every country in the region touched by major U.S. interference has collapsed into civil war as their social fabric has been irreversibly shattered: Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Libya. The ensuing arc of sectarian warfare bears uncanny resemblance to scenarios explored in a little-known study by an influential Washington D.C. defense contractor. The 2008 RAND Corporation report on the “Future of the Long War” was sponsored by the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command’s Army Capability Integration Centre. It set out U.S. government policy options for prosecuting what it described as “the long war” against “adversaries” in “the Muslim world,” who are “bent on forming a unified Islamic world to supplant Western dominance.” Among the strategies explored by the U.S. Army-sponsored report is “Divide and Rule,” which calls for “exploiting fault lines between the various groups to turn them against each other and dissipate their energy on internal conflicts.”

While the first usage of “Divide and Rule” in the English language began circa 1600, through the centuries, the commonly understood meaning is unmistakable: The retention of power by utilizing a deliberate strategy of causing those in subordinate positions to engage in conflicts with each other that weaken and keep them from any unified effort to remove the status quo force from power. The policy of maintaining control over subordinates or potential opponents by encouraging or causing dissent between them, thereby preventing them from uniting in opposition to pose any serious threat to the existing power structure is a very familiar story throughout history. It’s an age-old formula used to maintain imperial rule. As a mechanism it rests on identifying pre-existing ethno-religious division in society and then manipulating them in order to prevent subject people’s unified challenge to the rule by the outsiders. It has multiple applications, most commonly used in the political arena but also in the military, sociological and economic realm as well. The aim of divide and rule is to
create dysfunctional states and destabilize a delicate balance reached over centuries that leads to permanent divisions needed for control.

While I do not intend to evaluate the disadvantages of such policy at this stage, nevertheless I would like to pose the following question: once sectarianism becomes part of foreign policy portfolio actively supported and financed for its political capital by foreign forces and part of the divide and rule strategy, can theology have any role beyond directing the resistance to the colonial project? In another words if sectarianism is to be the birth pang of military control and its deliberate strategy of divide and rule; as Cavanaugh asserts for the war of religion of the 16th and 17th centuries, how should theologians behave?
Remarks on the Role of Muslim Scholars in the Contemporary Period

Yasir Fahmy

As an imam in the U.S who leads a very large Islamic center in the New England area, I want to think about this subject in the terms of the people who come to my mosque looking for guidance, understanding, and navigation in this complex life. This world is not easy. It is riddled with all sorts of philosophical, social, and political challenges. We as religious clergy have a very sensitive role to play. Undoubtedly, I believe our tradition – deep, historical, and formidable – has the capability to navigate any particular time and place. Allah does not burden a people with more than we can handle.

If we’re going to have a conversation about sectarianism, we must address and depolarize the history and obvious tensions which accompany it. If we are going to bring up what is happening in Iran, Saudi Arabia, or Syria every time we talk about the Sunnis and Shi’a, we are not going to get anywhere. Such toxic political situations cannot frame our discussions of theology and spirituality. Our traditions are far richer and deeper than these particularities. As religious leaders we will not progress if we are stuck in this mindset. That is not to say that we mindlessly ignore pressing issues, but rather go about addressing objective wrongs in a more civilized manner.

There is a way to discuss things that is not rooted in a Shi’a view against a Sunni view. These monoliths are problematic. There is no singular Shi’a or Sunni category, these are complex denominations with various representatives. In my daily work, I deal with both sects, and I do not have people remarking “You, as a Sunni” or “You, as a Shi’a” – it is not practical for the Muslim community at large. The real daily conversations which occur start with: “How are you? What is your name? How beautiful! I’m happy to meet you.” There is no sense of inherent skepticism in these interactions.
Venues like this, on the other hand, elevate the discourse. We must teach the deeper theological and spiritual values in such spaces instead of magnifying these impractical differences. We have to learn how to disagree. I may disagree vehemently on a theological point with someone else, but there should be no problem with that. No one has to embody a singular nature. I do not understand why we keep trying to insist that there is a single right answer and become tense in the air of disagreement.

I went to Catholic school, and I had a full year of bible study on the Trinity. I disagree with the concept, but should that change my opinions of Catholics and how I coexist with them? Just because I don't identify with their theology, does that mean I am going to seek this group's harm? Absolutely not. I don't reject them as human beings. Instead, we must learn a language of real disagreement. We can agree that there are objective truths and apply our rich intellectual tradition to arrive at those truths. Consequently, we can identify that there are challenging political topics and issues and histories we are going to have to negotiate and investigate sincerely.

I do not wish to cover over genuine political grievances, but I believe that the Islamic tradition is a profoundly rich tradition that cannot be beholden to simple political narratives. If your discourse is relying on a political narrative, then you have a problem. You have a problem because when you will talk about religion, you will forget to talk about the spiritual dimension.

Unfortunately, politics has become the world religion. When we open up our Facebook streams, it is all about politics. When we open up the media, it is all about politics. How often is your average Muslim, Sunni or Shi'ia, exposed to real spiritual discourse? This is a matter of methodology and discipline. How often do we regurgitate our histories in our spaces of learning? How often do we teach history through an objective lens? When we talk about Syria, Iran, or Saudi Arabia, how often are we biased to stoke the flames of our own and others' emotions? People are listening and they are taking in our guidance because what we think and say matters. We must elevate the discourse to a more principled, objective, and spiritual level. Otherwise, we are not going to help people process issues that are very nuanced and complex.
My congregation does not come to me identifying as Shi’a or Sunni. They come with ideas of liberalism, individualism, capitalism, and consumerism. There are a thousand “isms” that we are trying to navigate. Our tradition as an intellectual tradition has a profound amount of guidance to offer to the fabric of our current discourse. I hope and pray that we can elevate our collective discourse, that we can dig deeper into our tradition to realize what our essential purpose is. May Allah help us and guide us in that.

Seyed Ammar Nakhjavani

No doubt this is a difficult time for the clergy in the world when we look at Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. In these difficult times, many of the communities look towards the clergy for guidance. They look towards the clergy for theological as well as political statements which can help make sense of difficult circumstances. And therefore, our scholars today have a very difficult task of trying to provide that vision for our communities at large. Methodologically for the clergy and religious authorities, there are a number of things that we have to juggle in trying to ensure that we do not exasperate the tense situation as it stands regarding sectarianism and other divisive issues.

On the first level, scholars have to juggle various Qur’anic ordinances. On the one hand, the Qur’an is constantly telling the clergy and constantly telling the Muslims at large that one has to speak out against any form of injustice. For example, in the Harvard Law School there is a verse of the Holy Qur’an (verse 135 of chapter 4 of the Holy Qur’an) where God makes it clear that “all mankind be maintainers of justice; witnesses to God, even if it is against your own self and family members.” So, there is this Qur’anic ordinance, which is telling believers that they have to maintain justice, including as a member of the clergy. One cannot remain silent against any injustice that takes place. If you remain silent, then you are like those participating in that form of oppression.

Therefore, on the one hand there is this responsibility one has as a clergyman or a clergywomen to speak out against injustice. However this responsibility has to be balanced with the Qur’anic ordinance that the
believers are brethren of one and another which is found in chapter 49 the famous verse, which says “surely the believers are brethren from one another, so try to find the means of conciliation amongst each other.” I have got the Qur’an on the one hand telling me that I have got to try to remember that everyone in the community are my brethren, and that I should always seek a means of reconciliation. But then the Qur’an is also telling me that when you are seeing the injustices take place, then you have got to speak out against those injustices. Methodologically speaking, the clergy have got to try to somehow find halfway house regarding this issue.

A second methodological problem is that the clergy and scholars have to identity with their sect. It is their responsibility while they are living, for example, in New York or in Boston, that they represent their religion but also give a voice to their sect. We have to give these representations of the narratives of our schools, whether they are Hanafi, Shafi’i or Shi’a, but somehow have to draw a fine line on not escalating sectarianism in terms of what we are discussing, which takes me to my next point: What is sectarian when it comes to clergy lectures or clergy discussions? Who defines the boundaries of what is sectarian? Who has made the parameters of what’s sectarian? I find it interesting that we are discussing how to solve the issue, but what I am more intrigued by is what is the definition of a sectarian clergyman or clergywoman? If, for example, I discuss a certain event in Islamic history, and others may find it sensitive to discuss that event, am I now a sectarian clergyman? If, for example, I want to discuss a certain legal text that is sold around the world which may encourage Muslims to kill other Muslims who may not believe in what they believe… Am I sectarian for discussing that sect? If you are looking at all of the methodological issues involved in this discussion, I have to be peaceful but speak out against injustice. I have got to represent my sect but also make sure that I am not sectarian.

As a scholar, I have to delicately draw a line between being reconciliatory but speaking about certain points which are said in mainstream discourse about certain religious beliefs which I feel are a bit unjust, but simultaneously I also represent my sect and also face a community that could easily call me sectarian because I have discussed an area where I feel I have been unjustly treated. In other words, there can exist a vicious cycle. A
particularly common trope is the association of Shi’ism with Iran. This is particularly ironic given that Imams Bukhari, Muslim, al-Tirmidhi, and all of the authors of the six canonical Sunni Hadith compilations all have an Iranian heritage.

However, I think we should look to historical examples to help us envision ways to move forward today. We can look at the life of the Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him and his family, and the willingness he had to engage in dialogue with the Quraysh at the Hudaybiyah treaty. One can look at his grandson Imam al-Hassan and the willingness he had to engage in dialogue with Mu’awiya. One could look at the great-great grandson, Ali al-Rida’s willingness to try and look out for the religion of Islam by moving to Iran and working with the Caliph of the time by the name of al-Ma’mun. So there are many instances where there is aim to bring about a conflict resolution within our own history.

Looking at more contemporary examples, when I was living in the United States, I saw some wonderful examples of Shi’a-Sunni unity and wonderful examples of people who recognized that we may not necessarily accept or agree on everything, but we can certainly tolerate a difference of opinion. Many of us came from different boats but now we are all on the same ship. I remember in New Jersey, for example – that there is a particular day – the Prophet Muhammad day – where the members of the Muslim community all come together, and try to learn lessons from the life of the prophet Muhammad – peace be upon him and his family – I think that’s a wonderful type of event to organize. There is another called Qur’an day where Muslims sit together and talk about the heritage and the lessons from the Qur’an that can be seen in many great works of the exegetes before us; and there is also an Imam Hussein day that was established along similar lines.

I believe there are a number of key areas and great visionary pieces of work that have been done by members of the American Shi’a-Sunni community. In my position as a representative of the Universal Muslim Association of America (UMAA), there were Shi’a and Sunni scholars who sat on the same panel to discuss pressing issues. And I believe that when other Sunni organizations have had conferences, they have invited Sunni and Shi’a scholars to all sit on the same panel. So let us not make the situation too
bleak and believe that there is no way we can solve things. On the contrary, we should try and look for a positive future. We should try and build bridges with one another. I think that with the participation of the community there in the United States and elsewhere, the future is bright. And if there is no de-escalation of sectarianism in the Middle East, then maybe they can take a leaf from our book in the West, and perhaps try and take some of our lessons and we can learn from one another.
Speakers and Bios

As of April, 2018

**Hassan Abbas**

Hassan Abbas is Professor and Chair of the Department of Regional and Analytical Studies at National Defense University’s College of International Security Affairs in Washington, DC. He is also a senior adviser at the Asia Society. Previously, he served as the distinguished Quaid i Azam chair professor at Columbia University and a senior adviser at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. He holds a PhD from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, an LLM in International Law from the Nottingham University, UK and MA in Political Science from Punjab University, Pakistan. He regularly appears as an analyst on international media and writes pieces for various leading international newspapers and academic publications. His latest book, The Taliban Revival (Yale University Press, June 2014) chronicles the Taliban’s survival and resurgence after 2001, through firsthand research and interviews in the area.

**Hassan Ahmadian**

Dr. Hassan Ahmadian is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Iran Project, Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Dr. Ahmadian is an Assistant Professor of Middle East and North Africa studies at the University of Tehran, and is also a Middle East security and politics fellow at the Center for Strategic Research, Tehran. He received his PhD in Area Studies from the University of Tehran. His research and teaching work is mainly focused on Iran’s foreign policy and relations, political change,
civil-military relations and Islamist movements in the Middle East. His research and analyses have appeared in peer-reviewed journals as well as prestigious Persian, English and Arabic outlets.

Mustafa Akyol

Mustafa Akyol is a Turkish journalist and author with acclaimed books such as Islam without Extremes (2011) and The Islamic Jesus (2017). He is a monthly contributing opinion writer for The New York Times, and a weekly columnist for Al-Monitor.com: The Pulse of the Middle East. Since January 2017, he is also a senior visiting fellow at the Freedom Project at Wellesley College based in Massachusetts, USA.

Mohamad Bashar Arafat

Born and raised in Damascus, Syria, Imam Arafat attended Damascus University and graduated with a degree in Islamic Studies and Arabic Language in 1987 and a degree in Islamic Law in 1988. From 1975 to 1989 under the guidance and mentorship of the late Grand Mufti of Syria, Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro, he studied Qur’anic interpretation, wisdom of the “Shari’ah” and the Islamic spiritual teachings. From 1989 to 1997, he accompanied the Grand Mufti during most of his international programs and conferences. He served as Imam in Damascus from 1981 to 1989 and was then invited to the United States to lecture in various Islamic Centers. He was Imam of the Islamic Society of Baltimore in Maryland from 1989 to 1993, founded An-Nur Institute for Islamic Studies and Arabic Language in Baltimore in 1993, co-founded An-Nur Mosque in Carney, Maryland and was the Imam from 1995 to 1997. Currently he is President of the Islamic Affairs Council
of Maryland, based in Baltimore. He taught courses on Islamic Studies at the Ecumenical Institute of Theology at St. Mary’s Seminary & University, the University of Maryland in Baltimore County (UMBC), Johns Hopkins University, Goucher College, the Renaissance Institute, as well as Comparative Religions at Potomac College in Washington, DC. Currently he is teaching at Notre Dame of Maryland University.

Ali Asani

Ali Asani is Professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic Religion and Cultures at Harvard and former Director of the university’s Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Islamic Studies Program. After completing his high school education in Kenya, he attended Harvard receiving his undergraduate degree in the Comparative Study of Religion. After being awarded his doctorate in Indo-Muslim Culture from Harvard’s Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (NELC) he joined the faculty. Prof. Asani holds a joint appointment between the Committee on the Study of Religion and NELC. He also serves on the faculty of the Departments of South Asian Studies and African and African-American Studies. He offers instruction in a variety of South Asian and African languages and literatures as well as courses on various aspects of the Islamic A specialist of Islam in South Asia, Professor Asani’s research focuses on Shi’a and Sufi devotional traditions in the region. In addition, he studies popular or folk forms of Muslim devotional life, and Muslim communities in the West.

His books include The Bujh Niranjan: An Ismaili Mystical Poem; The Harvard Collection of Ismaili Literature in Indic Languages: A Descriptive Catalog and Finding Aid; Celebrating Muhammad: Images of the Prophet in Muslim Devotional Poetry (co-author); Ecstasy and Enlightenment: The Ismaili Devotional Literatures of South Asia. In addition, he has published numerous articles in journals and encyclopedias.
Professor Asani has been particularly active post-Sept 11 in improving the understanding of Islam and its role in Muslim societies by conducting workshops for high school and college educators as well as making presentations at various public forums. He is particularly interested in the arts, broadly defined, as the primary means by which Muslims have experienced their faith and their potential as pedagogic bridges to foster a better understandings of the Islamic tradition. He has been involved in the Islamic Cultural Studies Initiative, an international professional development program for high school teachers in Kenya, Pakistan and Texas intended to promote a culturally and historically based approach to the study of Islam and Muslim societies. He has also served on the American Academy of Religion's Task Force on the teaching of religion in schools and as a consultant for the National Endowment for the Humanities Bridging Cultures Muslim Journeys Bookshelf Project. He is a member of the Harvard's Presidential Task Force on Inclusion and Belonging. Professor Asani is recipient of the Harvard Foundation medal for his outstanding contributions to improving intercultural and race relations through a better understanding of Islam. More recently he was awarded the Petra C. Shattuck prize for excellence in teaching.

Arif Asaria

Arif Asaria (CEO, Asaria Developments Inc.) has combined a highly successful business career with a lifetime of volunteering. His business interests have stretched across Canada, the United States and Central America, while his work with the Toronto Jamaat has helped it become a role model for Khoja communities around the world. Moving as a child from his birthplace of Nampula, Mozambique, to Canada, he went on to study Economics and Philosophy in Toronto. He worked for various multinationals as a supply chain management consultant before starting his own business in 2001. Asaria soon built a distribution network across Canada, the US and Central America, and replicated that success in 2006, when he established a fine paper merchant distribution business. This was again based in Toronto and again international in its scope, serving more than 500 customers throughout Canada and the US. Asaria is fluent in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Hindi and Gujarati.
In 2007, Asaria was elected Honorary Secretary of the ISIJ of Toronto for the term 2007-2009, and his tenure was so successful that he was re-elected for the term 2009-2011. He augmented his Secretarial duties by taking on the very challenging role as Honorary Project Manager of Jaffari Village, which also included the Jaffari Community Centre. The Jaffari Community Centre today is the beacon of all the activities of the Toronto Jamaat, and stands as a model amongst all the Khoja Ithnasheri Jamaats around the world, serving over 6,000 congregants. In 2017, Asaria was appointed as Secretary General by the newly elected President of NASIMCO, Br. Razak Damani. Asaria is also involved in philanthropic efforts as a director of the Asaria Family Foundation, whose mission is the “eradication of poverty through education.” Established in 2009, the Foundation has contributed to various World Federation and Africa Federation sponsored projects around the world, focusing on education, outreach, economic uplift, health and welfare, and supporting the building of mosques. The Foundation works with local churches and ministries to get the maximum impact in these Costa Rican communities. This work will continue as an ongoing legacy on behalf of the beloved matriarch of the family, Marhuma Fatima bai Asaria binte Najarali (Al Fateha).

**Nicholas Boylston**

Dr. Nicholas Boylston studies Islamic intellectual history, Persian literature and Shi’i Islam through the lenses of religious, intellectual and literary pluralism. He is particularly interested in the way 12th century Persian authors created texts that are discursively pluralistic - drawing on multiple sources and espousing multiple intellectual and ethical perspectives - whilst also maintaining both narrative and intellectual consistency. He also researches the role of literature as a means of negotiating multiple religious identities in late Qajar Iran, focusing on the versified commentary and translation of the Quran by the Shi’i-Sufi, Safi ‘Ali-Shah. These projects are part of a wider concern for understanding how Muslim authors have come to terms with the diversity of their own tradition.
and understood the religious other in differing cultural contexts. He is currently working on a book manuscript entitled *The Kaleidoscope of Reality: Perspectivism and the Integration of Diversity in 12th Century Persian Metaphysical Literature*, and is continuing his work on the complex relationships between Shi’ism and Sufism through history.

### Jonathan Brown

Jonathan Brown is the Alwaleed bin Talal Chair of Islamic Civilization in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, and he is the Director of the Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim Christian Understanding. He received his BA in History from Georgetown University in 2000 and his doctorate in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from the University of Chicago in 2006. Dr. Brown has studied and conducted research in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, South Africa, India, Indonesia and Iran. His book publications include *The Canonization of al-Bukhari and Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunni Hadith Canon* (Brill, 2007), *Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oneworld, 2009) and *Muhammad: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011), which was selected for the National Endowment for the Humanities’ Bridging Cultures Muslim Journeys Bookshelf. His most recent book, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenges and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet’s Legacy* (Oneworld, 2014), was named one of the top books on religion in 2014 by the Independent. He has published articles in the fields of Hadith, Islamic law, Salafism, Sufism, Arabic lexical theory and Pre-Islamic poetry and is the editor in chief of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Law*. Dr. Brown’s current research interests include Islamic legal reform and a translation of Sahih al-Bukhari.
Diana L. Eck

Diana L. Eck is Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University and Director of the Pluralism Project. As a scholar of India, she has published Banaras, City of Light; Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India; and India: A Sacred Geography. With the Pluralism Project, she has turned her attention to the U.S. and has produced a most extensive web-based resource for basic religious literacy, On Common Ground: World Religions in America. She has written A New Religious America: How A 'Christian' Country Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation. In 1998, she received the National Humanities Medal from President Clinton for her work on religious pluralism in America.

Yasir F. Fahmy

Shaykh Yasir F. Fahmy joined the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC) community Imam on September 1, 2015 from New Jersey, where he was born and raised. Before the ISBCC, he served as Scholar-in-Residence at Islamic Center of Passaic County in New Jersey from 2013-2015.

Shaykh Yasir began the study of Arabic and Islamic Sciences in his high school years under the guidance of local teachers. At the age of seventeen, he traveled to Amman, where he spent a year studying at the Islamic University of Jordan. He returned to America and completed a Bachelor’s of Science from Rutgers University. After working in corporate America for three years in finance, he decided to return to his real passion of learning and teaching Islam. He traveled to the Middle East and enrolled in the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo.

After seven years of intensive study, Shaykh Yasir received a degree in Islamic Studies from Al-Azhar and attained numerous ‘ijazas (independent certifications) in the subjects of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), the Islamic
oral tradition (hadith), theology (aqida), principles of jurisprudence (usul al-fiqh), life of the Prophet (sirah), self-purification (tazkiyyah), logic (mantiq), Arabic grammar (nahu), morphology (sarf) and rhetoric (balagha). In 2013, Shaykh Yasir Fahmy became the first American Azhari to teach in the renowned Al-Azhar Mosque.

Lukman Faily

Lukman Faily served as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Iraq to the United States from 2013-2016. In that capacity, he was a high-profile spokesperson for his government, engaging with members of Congress, academia and think tank communities. Ambassador Faily makes regular appearances on TV and radio news and is particularly active on social media. He frequently speaks at public events in Washington and across the United States and United Kingdom. He served previously as Iraq’s ambassador to Japan for three years.

Ambassador Faily represents a rising generation of professionals, business leaders and civic activists who have returned to Iraq to help build the country’s fledgling a free-market democracy. He brings to his position extensive experience in diplomacy, leadership, negotiation, stakeholder management, crisis management, political analysis, policy recommendations, strategic planning, communication, business organization management and development, marketing, information technology and civic activism, as well as familiarity with Middle Eastern, oriental and Anglo-American traditions and institutions.

Ambassador Faily lived in the United Kingdom for 20 years and held management and leadership roles in the British affiliates of two American companies for over a decade. An active leader in the large Iraqi diaspora community, Ambassador Faily served as a trustee of several Iraqi NGOs while in the UK. He was an outspoken opponent of Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship and advocated for democracy, dialogue, development and rule of law in Iraq. Fluent in English, Arabic and Kurdish, Ambassador Faily was
born in Baghdad on February 6, 1966. He is married to Lameis Faily and is the father of four boys. An avid runner, Ambassador Faily participated in marathons in Tokyo in 2012 and 2013, and in the Boston and New York Marathons in 2014.

Mehdi Hasan

Mehdi Hasan is an award-winning British columnist, broadcaster, and author based in Washington, D.C. He hosts UpFront on Al Jazeera English and has interviewed, among others, Edward Snowden, Hamid Karzai, Ehud Olmert, and Gen. Michael Flynn. In March, he began hosting a new weekly podcast called Deconstructed for The Intercept magazine in New York, where he is also a columnist and senior contributor. He is also the author of two books – a biography of former U.K. Labor Party leader Ed Miliband and an e-book on the financial crisis and austerity economics. Mehdi has written for the New York Times, the Washington Post, The Guardian, and the Times of London, among others, and is the former political director of the Huffington Post U.K. and a contributing editor to the New Statesman. He has been included in the annual list of the 500 most influential Muslims in the world and named as one of the 100 most influential Britons on Twitter.

Rahat Husain

Rahat Husain is the Advocacy Director at the Universal Muslim Association of America (UMAA). Mr. Husain has met with President Obama, the Dalai Lama, and many other key decision makers in the course of his work to promote advancement for Shi'a Muslims around the world. Mr. Husain is also an attorney and a renowned columnist with the Washington Times and with CDN News.
With an interest in America and Islam, Rahat is a prolific writer on contemporary and international issues.

Mr. Husain previously served as the Executive Director of the Islamic Information Center, while managing its American Leadership Initiative for Muslims and the Honors Gemstone Internship Program. For the past six years, Mr. Husain has worked with Congressmen, Senators, federal agencies, think tanks, NGOs, policy institutes, and academic experts to advocate on behalf of Shi’a Muslim issues, both political and humanitarian. He holds a Juris Doctorate from the University of Maryland School of Law, a Master’s of Science from Georgetown University, and a Bachelor’s of Science with General Honors from the University of Maryland Baltimore County.

**Hussein Kalout**

Hussein Kalout is Special Secretary for Strategic Affairs of the Brazilian government, Associate at the Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center’s Iran Project, Research Scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University, Member of the Advisory Board of the Harvard International Review, and Senior Associate Fellow (non-resident) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington-DC, Senior Columnist on International Politics in the most influential Brazilian daily Folha de São Paulo, and Co-President of the Kalout-Degaut Institute for Politics and Strategy. In 2016, Mr. Kalout was short-listed by the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva for the UN position as Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967. Previously, Mr. Kalout has occupied prominent positions in the Brazilian public administration and he advised the Brazilian government on Iran foreign policy and the Iranian nuclear negotiations. Mr. Kalout worked as senior consultant at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as the Head of International Affairs of the Brazilian Supreme Court, and as the Director-General of the Department for International legal Cooperation at the Prosecutor-General of the Republic Office. As a specialist on Brazilian foreign policy and Middle Eastern affairs, Mr. Kalout collaborates as a
special counselor with the Brazil’s Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and with the Ministry of Defense on the Brazilian Maritime Task Force (MTF) of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Additionally, Mr. Kalout is the director of the Program on Middle Eastern and Islamic studies at the Brazilian Diplomatic Academy. Furthermore, Mr. Kalout was also Secretary-General of the Latin American and European Union Joint Commission on International Legal Cooperation and acted as senior consultant of the UN Development Program (UNDP). He directed several programs related to international cooperation with countries in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East on matters concerning democratization, nation building, modernization, and legal public policies. He has authored numerous op-eds, articles, and papers in scientific journals including the Foreign Affairs, Harvard International Review, and the Brazilian Journal on Foreign Policy. As a research scholar at Harvard University, his field of interest and expertise includes Middle Eastern geopolitics, decision making in foreign policy, international security, sectarianism, national fragmentation, international law of armed conflict, and armed movements and terrorism in the Islamic world. Mr. Kalout is fluent in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Arabic.

**Ibrahim Kazerooni**

Ibrahim Kazerooni was born in 1958 in the city of Al-Najaf in southern Iraq into a family of theologians. The paternal side of his family has been prominent Shiite clerics. Ibrahim began his religious studies at an early age and continued with his studies until his life took an unexpected turn. In 1974, he was arrested by Saddam Hussein’s regime and imprisoned for more than 5 months. After being released, he left Iraq and spent few years in the Middle East traveling to Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. While in Iran, he completed his theological studies. Fearful of Iraq’s secret police, he fled to England and began his secular education.

Ibrahim has taught Comparative Mysticism, Introduction to Islamic Law & Theology, Qur’anic Exegetes, The History of Hadith, Islamic History, Islam
for beginners (introduction), Reading comparative scriptures (Torah and Qur’an), and Christian/Muslim dialogue: Methodology and Practice; and the foundation of Islamic law and Human Rights.

Ibrahim has traveled to many countries in pastoral capacity as an Imam. He has been to several cities in the U.S and internationally on lecture tours. He currently resides in Detroit. He is former board member of the Housing Justice, Interfaith Alliance, Stapleton Interfaith, the religious advisory to the University of Denver Bridges to the Future Program and We Believe Colorado as well as a former member of the Board of Religious Advisers to the Denver Police Chief. He is the former Director of the Abrahamic Initiative Program at St. John Cathedral in Denver. He worked with the Rocky Mountain Peace and Justice Community in Boulder. He is a regular contributor and Middle East commentator to the KGNU Radio. He has received a number of awards for his bridge building and peace initiative, including, Faith to Faith Award for interfaith works. (2005), Martin Luther King Award for services in peace building (2007), the “Iliff/D.U Joint Ph.D. Award for Community Service (2007), and Honored with Congressional Record for working to end the war in Iraq (2004).

In addition to Islamic Theological studies in both Najaf (Iraq) and Qum (Iran), Ibrahim holds BEng., Mining/Petroleum Eng., MBA in Management, Master’s in Global Studies (DU), and Master’s of Theological Studies (Iliff School of Theology). He gained his Ph.D from the University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology. He is a Fellow at the Center for the Study of Human Trafficking (Korbel School of International Studies, DU). Currently he is an adjunct faculty at the University of Detroit Mercy and Imam of the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn.
Daisy Khan

Daisy Khan is Founder and Executive Director of the Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE), a women-led organization committed to peacebuilding, equality, and justice for Muslims around the globe. Khan has dedicated her life to promoting an expression of Islam based on cultural and religious harmony. A frequent speaker and media commentator, she lectures across the U.S. and internationally at conferences and academic and religious institutions on various issues, including Islam in America, Women’s Rights within Islam, and Violent Extremism. She is the recipient of numerous awards, most notably the Edinburgh Peace Award, the Clinton Global Initiative Commitment to Action Award, and Women’s E-News “21 leaders for the 21st Century.”

Through WISE, Ms. Khan recently hit a major milestone. With the help of 72 contributors (academics, scholars, imams, activists and specialists), WISE published a 375-page research and evidence-based report, WISE Up: Knowledge Ends Extremism. Launched in October 2017, WISE Up is a movement for knowledge aimed at fighting extremism and Islamophobia with experience, knowledge and good judgment, and to show that the American Muslim community is collectively speaking out against all forms of hate, including terrorism and Islamophobia.

Shenila Khoja-Moolji

Dr. Shenila Khoja-Moolji is a Visiting Scholar in the University of Pennsylvania’s Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies program. She researches and writes about the interplay of gender, race, religion, and power in transnational contexts. She explores this theme particularly in relation to Muslim populations. Dr. Khoja-Moolji is the author of Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia (University of California Press). The book combines historical and cultural studies analyses with
ethnographic work to examine the construction of the figure of the ‘educated girl’ in colonial India and postcolonial Pakistan. Dr. Khoja-Moolji is working on her second book, which examines the intersections of militarism, biopolitics, and masculinism.

**Heidi E. Lane**

Heidi E. Lane is Associate Professor of Strategy and Policy and Director of the Greater Middle East Research Study Group at the Naval War College. She specializes in Comparative Politics and International Relations of the Middle East with a focus on security sector development, ethnic and religious nationalism, and rule of law in transitioning societies. Her co-edited book Building Rule of Law in the Arab World and Beyond was published in 2016. She is currently completing research on a book manuscript about counterterrorism and state liberalization in the Middle East. Dr. Lane has served as a visiting research affiliate with the Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a U.S. Fulbright scholar in Syria, and as a research fellow with the International Security Program at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University. She is currently a senior associate at the Center for Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups (CIWAG) at the Naval War College. She holds an M.A and Ph.D. in Islamic Studies from the Center for Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Los Angeles and a B.A. from the University of Chicago and is trained in Arabic, Hebrew, and Persian and is proficient in German.
Simon Mabon

Dr. Simon Mabon is Lecturer in International Relations and Director of the Richardson Institute. He is the author of Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), Houses Built on Sand (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming) and The Struggle for Supremacy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). He is the co-author of The Origins of ISIS (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), Hezbollah: From Islamic Resistance to Government (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015), and British Foreign Policy Since 1945 (London: Routledge, 2017). Dr Mabon has also written articles for journals including The Middle East Journal; British Journal of Middle East Studies; Middle East Policy; Third World Quarterly; Politics, Religion and Ideology; Global Discourse amongst others. He served as academic advisor to the House of Lords International Relations Committee and works with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Ministry of Defence. He is regularly found on international media outlets including the BBC, CNN, CNBC, Al Jazeera, Sky and many others.

Lenore G. Martin

Lenore G. Martin is Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science and International Studies, at Emmanuel College in Boston, and an Associate of both the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University. She co-chairs the Middle East Seminar, at Harvard. She has received three Fulbright awards, the last one in 2010 as a Senior Fulbright Researcher at Middle East Technical University, working on Turkey and the Middle East. She has written books and numerous articles analyzing national security in the Gulf, the larger Middle East and Turkey, including: The Unstable Gulf: Threats from Within, Lexington Books 1984, New Frontiers in Middle East Security, edited, St. Martin's/Palgrave 1999 and 2001, and The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy, co-edited with Dimitris Keridis, MIT 2004. In 2010, as a member of the
Boston Study Group on Middle East Peace she co-authored, Israel and Palestine-Two States for Two Peoples: If Not Now, When? an on-line book with the Foreign Policy Association. From 1999-2017 she co-chaired the Seminar on Turkey in the Modern World at Harvard University. In 2012 and 2016 she spent the Trinity Term at St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford as a Senior Associate Member and Visiting Academic respectively.

**Muhamed H. Almaliky**

Dr. Muhamed H. Almaliky is Associate of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University and practicing physician in cardiology at the University of Pennsylvania Health System in Philadelphia. While at the Weatherhead, he researches post-2003 Iraq’s democratization: elections, political party formation, constitutional processes security, as well as Iraq’s foreign policy. He has taught, lectures and written on Iraq including a course titled: Iraq, a State in Flux that covers a century-long struggle to consolidate the Iraqi state. He has also lectured on political Islam, terrorism and ISIS at the University and beyond. His latest articles Mending Iraq, Foreign Affairs 2015, and Is There Hope for Iraq, Cairo Review 2017 address governance challenges in post-Saddam Iraq. His latest endeavor, the Iraqi American Institute is aiming at offering a platform for Iraq’s social scientists to interact and present their research. He also runs the “Politics of Disease” study group for Harvard College students that explores how political structures and processes shape health outcomes. He holds an MD degree from Basra University, Iraq; post-graduate medical training at Temple University, Philadelphia, in addition to MPH and MPA from Harvard University.
Payam Mohseni

Dr. Payam Mohseni is the Director of the Iran Project at the Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. He is also a Lecturer in the Department of Government at Harvard University and a Lecturer on Islamic Studies at the Harvard Divinity School where he teaches Iranian and Middle East politics and is a multiple recipient of the Harvard Excellence in Teaching award. Dr. Mohseni serves as a scholar and member of Harvard’s Iran Working Group, which he co-chairs with Professor Graham Allison, and manages the Belfer Center’s Special Initiative Iran Matters, a premier outlet for policy analysis on all aspects of contemporary Iranian affairs. Dr. Mohseni is also a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) in New York.

Dr. Mohseni’s research focuses on Iranian foreign and domestic politics, Shi’a thought and identity, Islam and sectarian conflict in the Middle East, and the politics of authoritarianism and hybrid regimes. Dr. Mohseni is fluent in Persian and travels frequently to Iran and the region. Previously, Dr. Mohseni co-chaired Harvard’s Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies Study Group on the Eastern Mediterranean and Europe. He holds a Ph.D. in Government from Georgetown University, an M.A. in Conflict, Security, and Development from the Department of War Studies at King’s College London, and a B.A. in Development Studies from the University of California, Berkeley.

Mohd Faizal Musa

Dr. Mohd Faizal Musa (also known as Faisal Tehrani) is a Research Fellow at the Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (ATMA), National University of Malaysia (UKM). The Jakarta Post dated 28 August 2017 called him ‘Malaysia’s Rebel Author.’ Andrew Fowler, a famous Australian journalist and the author of “The Most Dangerous Man in the World” stated that Faisal’s translated works
into English, ‘The Nurse’ (Misi), and ‘Crises’ (Kegawatan) were ‘great narratives on the battle for ideas and freedom in Malaysia.’ Meanwhile ASEAN (South East Asian) Literary Festival’s official page 2017 named him as ‘one of Malaysia’s and Southeast Asia’s important writers.’ Seven of Faisal’s literary works have been banned by the Malaysian government. His best remembered novels are ‘1515’, ‘Profesor’, and ‘Bagaimana Anyss Naik Ke Langit’ translated into English by Brigitte Bresson as ‘How Anyss Went to Heaven.’ Among his key academic publications are ‘The Malaysian Shi’a: A Preliminary Study of Their History, Oppression, and Denied Rights’ (2013, Journal of Shi’a Islamic Studies), and ‘The Axiology of Pilgrimage: The Malaysian Shi’ites Ziyarat to Iran and Iraq’ (2013, International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology), ‘Religious Freedom in Malaysia: The Reading of the Qur’an 2:256’ (2016, The Qur’an in the Malay-Indonesian World, Routledge Studies in the Qur’an), and ‘State-backed discrimination against Shi’a Muslims in Malaysia’ (2016, Critical Asian Studies 49: 3).

**Seyed Ammar Nakhjavani**

Dr. Seyed Ammar Nakhjavani is an Associate of the Iran Project at Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs where he focuses on Islamic political and intellectual thought as well as sectarian conflict and peace building in the Middle East. Dr. Nakhjavani is a historian and specialist of Islamic intellectual history and was the Inaugural Imam Ali Chair in Shi’a Studies and Dialogue among Islamic Legal Schools at Hartford Seminar and a Visiting Scholar at Columbia University’s Middle East Institute. Prior to joining Hartford, Dr. Nakhjavani served as a Visiting Scholar of Islamic Studies at the University of Cambridge. He obtained his doctorate from the University of Exeter and his MA from Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran. Dr. Nakhjavani serves as a Special Representative to the United Nations where he promotes women’s rights initiatives, social development, and religious tolerance and was listed as one the top 500 most influential Muslims.
Khalid Nasr

Imam Dr. Khalid Nasr (born in 1971) is an Imam of Egyptian origin, who although knowledgeable in several disciplines, specializes in the various styles of Qiraat (recitation of the Quran, or the Islamic Holy Scripture). Most of his life was spent living and learning in Egypt, although he moved to the United States in 2000 where he has since stayed and worked as an Imam (Islamic religious leader).

Imam Khalid was always interested in learning Quran, and this interest led him to eventually memorizing the whole Quran, reciting it with full authenticity, and qualifying as a teacher of it, with the help of an experienced shaykh. He then went on to study the Ten Quranic Recitation Styles along with Quranic Sciences and Islamic Jurispudence (according to the teachings of Imam Abu Hanifah) at Al-Azhar (the most famous Islamic Academic Institute). As he continued to pursue his Quran studies under some of Egypt’s well-known scholars, his recitation ability improved until he obtained certification (Ijaazah) as a reciter and teacher of the Ten Authentic Recitation Styles.

Additionally, Imam Khalid studied Arabic and Islam at the Dar-ul-Uloom College, where he later completed his Master’s Degree, and at al-Azhar, where he obtained a Qiraat certificate. His post-graduation work includes teaching and researching Islamic Studies in Egypt, as well as preparing Islamic radio programs and leading congregational prayers there. His other achievements include winning several Quran competitions and reciting Quran at public gatherings. He completed his work on his PhD in Hanafi Fiqh (Jurispudence) through Cairo University, although he lives with his family in the United States.
Sahar Nowrouzzadeh

Sahar Nowrouzzadeh is a joint research fellow with the Iran Project and Project on Managing the Atom at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Her research focuses on Iran’s leadership decision-making and nuclear program. Beginning her tenure as a career civil servant within the U.S. government in 2005, she has focused on Iran under three U.S. administrations. She was charged with covering the Iran portfolio on the Secretary of State’s Policy Planning Staff between 2016 and 2017 and served as a Director for Iran and Iran Nuclear Implementation on the White House National Security Council (NSC) Staff from 2014 to 2016. At the NSC, she was part of President Obama’s team responsible for supporting the negotiation and implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) reached between the P5+1, the European Union and Iran in 2015. She also previously served as a Team Chief and Senior Analyst at the U.S. Department of Defense and a Foreign Affairs Officer and Persian Language Spokesperson at the U.S. Department of State. She is the recipient of such awards as the State Department Superior Honor Award, a National Intelligence Meritorious Unit Citation and the Secretary of Defense Medal for the Global War on Terrorism.

Sahar earned her Bachelor’s Degree in International Affairs with a double concentration in International Economics and Middle East Studies from the Elliott School of International Affairs at the George Washington University in 2005. She earned her Master’s Degree in Persian Studies from the University of Maryland-College Park in 2007. Sahar knows several languages, including Persian, Spanish and Arabic. She was born and raised in Connecticut.
Farah Pandith

Farah Pandith is a diplomatic entrepreneur, foreign policy strategist and author. She is a world-leading expert and pioneer on how to halt extremist recruitment of Muslim youth. Appointed the first-ever special representative to Muslim communities in 2009, she served under both Secretary Clinton and Secretary John Kerry. In this role, she was responsible for engagement with Muslims around the world. She served as a political appointee in the George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush, and Barack H. Obama administrations at the National Security Council, US Agency for International Development and US Department of State. She believes we can win the war on terror, “but only if we have the courage to rethink, reinvent, reimagine.” Her book is How We Win: How Cutting-Edge Entrepreneurs, Political Visionaries, Enlightened Business Leaders and Social Media Mavens Can Defeat the Extremist Threat.

Since leaving government in 2014, Ms. Pandith has been advising governments and building innovative global programs and organizations dedicated to mobilizing youth against extremist ideologies. Ms. Pandith served on the Homeland Security Advisory Council from 2015-2017. Prior to re-entering government in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Ms. Pandith was Vice President of International Business at ML Strategies, LLC in Boston, Massachusetts. She is a frequent media commentator and public speaker and an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a senior fellow at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government.
Dr. Elizabeth H. Prodromou is Visiting Associate Professor of Conflict Resolution at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. She is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom (Washington, DC) and a non-resident Fellow at The Hedayah International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism (Abu Dhabi). She has been a Senior Fellow in National Security and International Policy at the Center for American Progress (Washington, DC). Prodromou served as Vice Chair and Commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (2004-2012), and was a member of the U.S. Secretary of State’s Religion & Foreign Policy Working Group (2011-2015). Her research focuses on the intersection of religion and geopolitics, with particular focus on the relationship between religion, democracy, and security in the Middle East and Balkans. She is currently leading a research project at The Fletcher School, with international partners, on migration, religion, and security in Eurasia. Published widely in scholarly and policy journals, she is a frequent commentator and contributor on matters of religion and geopolitics in US and international media. She has been involved in research and advisory work for international and non-governmental organizations on religious freedom and human rights, and has been active in inter-faith and ecumenical peacebuilding initiatives in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. She is co-editor and contributor to Eastern Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education and Thinking Through Faith: New Perspectives from Orthodox Christian Scholars. She holds a Ph.D. and an S. M. in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), an M.A.L.D. in international relations from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and is a Phi Beta Kappa recipient and summa cum laude graduate with a B.A. in history and international relations from Tufts University.
Jassim Qabazard

Mr. Qabazard’s professional career extends back to the year 1970 where he joined the Ministry of Public Works, Roads Department as an Engineer in Training, then 1972-73 he attended one year program sponsored by International Road Federation consequently at Ohio State University where he acquired intensive courses in construction management / strength of material and material quality control management all mainly relating to road design and construction. Mr. Qabazard ultimately compiled 7 years of extensive experience (1973 - 1977) with the Ministry of Public Works and Road Department. This experience started from a Site Engineer and ended as the Head of Construction Section (Road and Drainage Dept) where he performed numerous task covered design, planning, construction and material testing of road and ancillaries throughout the State of Kuwait.

Ultimately, Mr. Qabazard proceeded to establish the consulting firm of (Archicentre) 1977 in partnership with another professional where he acted a partner and general manager. During his 13 years of experience Archicentre concluded a group of very prestigious multi-disciplinary projects covering all areas of planning, architectural and engineering specialties. Archicenter was dissolved due to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. In 1991 Mr. Jassim Qabazard established JQEC as a professional continuation of (Archicenter) and since then Mr. Qabazard acted as Chairman and Managing Director and has been able to lead the firm to become one of the few well recognized consultancy firm in the State of Kuwait.
Syed Meesam Razvi

Syed Meesam Razvi is an entrepreneur and the Director of International Affairs at Al-Khoei Foundation, New York where he represents the Foundation at the United Nations Headquarters. He is also a Founding Trustee of the Global Initiative, an organization dedicated to promoting just, peaceful and inclusive societies. Syed Meesam has directed several development, democracy and governance initiatives, specifically addressing International Religious Freedom, Media Transparency and Human Rights, IDPs and refugees in Iraq, Pakistan and Syria. He has a Master’s degree in International Relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in Boston and an Undergraduate Degree in Business from the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Sajjad Rizvi

Dr. Sajjad Rizvi is Senior Lecturer in Islamic Studies at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter. He is also Director of the Centre for the Study of Islam at Exeter. He read History and Middle East studies at Oxford University and completed his doctoral dissertation on the philosophy of Mulla Sadra Shirazi. He is the author of Mulla Sadra Shirazi (2007) and Mulla Sadra and Metaphysics (2009) and is co-editor of An Anthology of Qur’anic Commentaries, co-edited with Dr. Feras Hamza and Farhana Mayer. He has three main research interests in Qur’anic Studies (tafsir and hermeneutics), contemporary Islamic thought, and Shi’ism.
Wasif Rizvi

Wasif Rizvi is the founding President of Habib University. Wasif has led the vision of the first liberal arts institution of higher learning in Pakistan. Under his leadership, Habib University, has become a globally recognized and appreciated university with established collaborations with leading institutions including Carnegie Mellon University and Texas A&M University at Qatar, Stanford University, University of Michigan and the Claremont consortium of liberal arts colleges. His achievements are visible by Habib University’s unmatched global partnerships, distinguished faculty, well recognized curriculum, exponentially growing number of student applications and an innovative campus design that received accolade and international awards of excellence in planning for a new campus. Wasif has been involved in various areas of education development in the developing world for the last two decades. Prior to initiating the Habib University project, Wasif had led Aga Khan Education Service in Pakistan and many other development projects in Asia and Africa. Wasif holds twin graduate degrees from Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard School of Education.

José Antonio Sabadell

José Antonio Sabadell has been a Spanish diplomat since 1993. He served as Ambassador and Head of the European Union Delegation to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania until August 2017. Prior to this post, he was Head of Division North Africa, Deputy Chief of Staff at the Cabinet of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation and Technical Counsellor in the area of Arms Control.

He has served in a number of other capacities including in Afghanistan, OSCE (in charge of politico-military affairs), Guatemala, Ecuador and Riyadh. Sabadell attained both his Bachelor’s Degree in Law and his Certificate for Legal Business Advising from Universidad Pontificia Comillas (ICADE) in June, 1991. He completed his Certificate of Advanced Studies
on Political Science and Sociology in the Department of Social History and History of Political Thought from Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia in November, 2002, with a paper on the Political Control of Military Actions.

His current research focuses on Islamic Extremism, in particular the perception of the West by radical Islamic groups. He is also following issues related to Security, the Sahel and Migration.

**Fadhel Al-Sahlani**

Sheikh Fadhel Al-Sahlani is one of the most senior Shi’a Muslim clerics in North America and is the Representative of the Grand Marja’ Ayatollah Ali Al-Hussaini Al-Sistani in the region. He attended Bahth al-Khārij (advanced stage of Shi‘a religious studies) and completed graduation in Kulliyat al-Fiqh from the Holy City of Najaf Al-Ashraf. He also has a Master’s degree in Islamic Studies from Cairo University. He was born in Iraq but left the country in 1979 due to threats to his life from Saddam Hussain. He eventually immigrated to the United States where he is currently the Director of Imam Al-Khoei Foundation in New York.

**Mohammad Sagha**

Mohammad Sagha is the Iran Project Coordinator at the Belfer Center. He is concurrently undertaking his PhD studies in Islamic History and Civilization at the University of Chicago where he is also Co-Director of the Shi‘i Studies Group and facilitates the university’s annual Shi‘i Studies Symposium. He is additionally an editor for SHARIAsource at the Islamic Legal Studies Program at Harvard Law School. Sagha’s research focuses on the origins of Muslim sectarian identity and political institutions, early Islamic transregional religious movements and military organization, and the
historical development of Islamic political thought. In particular, he studies early Shi’i underground social networks and the foundation of Shi’i dynastic power under the Buyids and their contemporaries. Sagha also studies modern Islamic political thought and the geopolitics of the Middle East with a focus on Islamist movements, Iran, and the Shi’i Arab Middle East.

Previously, Sagha was a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard, working under the supervision of Professor Roy Mottahedeh on early Islamic dynastic military politics, and has received an MA in Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago. Mohammad travels frequently to the region and has studied extensively in Iran, including as a researcher at the University of Tehran. He is fluent in Persian, has advanced command of Arabic, and reading knowledge of German and French.

**Gary Samore**

Gary Samore is Executive Director for Research at Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Dr. Samore served for four years as President Obama’s White House Coordinator for Arms Control and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), including as U.S. Sherpa for the 2010 Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, DC and the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul, Korea. From 2006 to 2009, Dr. Samore was Vice President for Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) in New York, where he held the Maurice R. Greenberg chair and directed the David Rockefeller Studies Program. Before joining CFR, Dr. Samore was vice president for global security and sustainability at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in Chicago, and from 2001 to 2005, he was Director of Studies and Senior Fellow for Nonproliferation at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London. At IISS, he produced three “strategic dossiers” on Iran (2005), North Korea (2004), and Iraq (2002), which are considered authoritative and exemplary assessments of nuclear, biological, chemical, and missile programs in those countries.
Dr. Samore was Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Nonproliferation and Export controls under President Clinton from 1995 to 2000. Before the National Security Council, Dr. Samore worked on nonproliferation issues at the State Department. In 1995, he received the Secretary of Defense Medal for Meritorious Civilian Service for his role in negotiating the 1994 North Korea nuclear agreement. Prior to the State Department, he worked at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and the Rand Corporation.

Dr. Samore was a National Science Foundation Fellow at Harvard University, where he received his MA and PhD in government in 1984. While at Harvard, he was a pre-doctoral fellow at what was then the Harvard Center for Science and International Affairs, later to become the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

Hasnain Walji

Dr. Hasnain Walji is an educator, historian, author, and scientist in the field of nutrition. He has penned 26 books on Nutrition and Natural Medicine. From an early age to his golden years he has been on a quest to learn and observe the trajectory of history and social trends to help address evolving issues in the Muslim Community. The hallmark of his service is to empower our communities to remain relevant and progressive as we confront new realities and challenges, yet remain true to our faith and traditions.

Born and raised in Tanzania, at the foothills of Kilimanjaro, Hasnain's institutional work for the Muslim community spans four continents and four decades. In 1976, he was appointed as the Secretary-General and ultimately succeeded to the presidency of the London based, World Federation of Khoja Shi’a IthnAsheri Muslim Communities. His pioneering establishments of various institutions, reflect his progressive vision of addressing emerging needs of our communities. They range from the founding director of the Mulla Asghar Resource Center in Toronto, Director of religious affairs of Institute of Islamic Learning (IILM) in Dallas, Vice President of
the Interfaith Peace Ministry of Orange County, Vice President of the Shi'a Muslim Council of Southern California, Chair of the Center For Islamic Learning of NASIMCO, and of late, as the Executive Director of the United Global Initiative, in Houston where he now resides and serves as the Executive Director.

As a dedicated oral historian of the Khoja communities he has directed and produced a groundbreaking anthropological documentary “The Khojas – A Journey of Faith” that spans the past 600 years of its history, and currently serves as the Chair of the Khoja Heritage Project of the World Federation of KSIMC.