



"Sectarian Identity and Political Marginalization: A Comparative Study of Sunni and Shia Minorities in Middle Eastern States"

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Abstract

The Sunni-Shia schism has its origins in early Islamic history and has been affecting the socio-political orientation of most nations in the Middle East. The paper will explore how the Sunni and Shia minorities are treated and their political position in the states that are controlled by the other sect, especially Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Bahrain. Based on historical background, laws, and the present political rhetoric, the study critically approaches understanding how the sectarian identity affects policies, resource access, representation, and civil liberties. The study provides an analysis of systemic marginalization, institutional discrimination, and social exclusion of these sectarian minorities through a comparative prism. In Iran, where Shiism is the basis of the ideological foundations of the state, Sunni populations often face religious limitations and political underrepresentation. On the other hand, Shia minority in the Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia and Bahrain can be routinely disadvantaged in gaining employment, restricted in spiritual practices, and subjected to extensive surveillance in the name of national security. Iraq is a notable example because the government led by the Shia after 2003 has been alleged to marginalize Sunni communities in both political and military administration, creating a circle of insurgency and instability.

The research incorporates qualitative analysis of policy documents, human rights reports, and interviews, alongside secondary data from academic literature and international organizations. It further explores how regional rivalries, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia, exacerbate sectarian tensions and shape domestic minority policies through proxy dynamics. In the end, the research is expected to show the extent to which the sectarian identity is more than a religious indicator; it is a highly politicized entity that influences how the state is governed, people are united, and the region's geopolitics is shaped. These dynamics must be addressed to comprehend how the intra-Islamic conflict persists and whether inclusive governance is possible in the Middle East.

Keywords: Sunni-Shia divide, sectarian minorities, Middle East politics, political marginalization, religious discrimination, Iran-Saudi rivalry

1. Introduction

The sectarian split between Sunni and Shia Muslims, originating from early disputes over the Prophet Muhammad's succession, has grown into a defining axis of political, social, and cultural divisions across the contemporary Middle East. (Ashraf, 2019) (Hawley, 2018) This enduring division has been institutionalized through state mechanisms in various countries, shaping access to governance, employment, and religious freedom. For instance, in Saudi Arabia—the largest Sunni-majority country—a system rooted in Wahhabism systematically marginalizes its Shia minority, denying them access to critical public-sector roles and subjecting them to biased religious and legal instruction in schools. (Hanau Santini, 2017) (Roberts, 2025) (Walton, 2017) This marginalization is not confined to abstract policy; it manifests in real-world constraints, such as exclusion from judicial positions and restrictions on Shia religious practices. (Malek, 2022) (Carter et al., 2023) (Javed & Li, 2025).

Similarly, although Shias are the majority in Bahrain, the country is ruled by the Sunni monarchy. The government has passed rules limiting Shia's right to participate in public life. (Hawley, 2018) (Ali et al., 2020) (Ashraf, 2019) For example, Shia religious leaders are not allowed to give Friday sermons, and many Shias have been removed from important government and military jobs. This shows a pattern of unfair treatment similar to that of apartheid. During the 2011 uprising, over 40 Shia religious sites were destroyed, showing how deeply rooted discrimination was. (Ali et al., 2020) (Osei-Tutu et al., 2021) (McCarthy, 2015) (Majeed et al., 2021).

The Sunni population is minor in Iran and often faces exclusion. They are not well represented in the government and do not have many channels to express their issues, leading to pent-up anger and demonstrations. This is not the case in post-2003 Iraq. Despite having a Shia-led government in power, Sunni Arabs were continuously politically marginalized, something that led to insurgency and mutual suspicions in the military and the bureaucracy. Haddad (2020), Isakhan and Gonzalez Zarandona (2017), Hashim (2019). These cross-national issues highlight a broader institutionalization of sectarian identity, where religious affiliation becomes a matter of belief and a significant factor in determining citizenship rights, security, and state inclusion. (Corstange & York, 2018) (Brett, 1995) (Hashim, 2019) (Haddad, 2020) This research examines the experiences of Sunni and Shia minorities across ethnically and politically diverse regimes, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iran, and Iraq, to investigate how their affiliations affect political inclusion or exclusion. Such an analysis is essential for understanding regional stability and conflict and the broader implications for inclusive governance in deeply divided societies. (Hashim, 2019) (Sajir, 2023) (Nishina et al., 2019).

2. Literature Review

Sectarian identities in the Middle East cannot be described as mere theological concepts but are rather deeply rooted in political and social authority in the region. Academicians assert that sectarian discrimination tends to be engineered by state parties to maintain the legitimacy of power and control the opposition. Instead of being brought up by primeval religious unfriendliness, sectarian divisions are strategically controlled and institutionalized, particularly in states such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain.

Sectarianization Theory is the first theoretical framework that underlines the idea that sectarianism is a tool of political and power play, continually exploited by the elites to avoid criticism and unite their powers. This implies that creating religious differences is a significant challenge to national identity, making the discrimination of minorities valid. For example, the Shia community is included in the list of those accused of foreign influence, which debilitates their right to equal citizenship in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

Another way to understand the dynamics of governmental framing of minority sects as existential threats is by using the Securitization Theory, which the Copenhagen School developed. After being declared a security menace, the groups are exposed to extraordinary actions, such as observation, arrest, and exclusion. Disparaging Shias or Sunnis is done through the institution of securitization on the other hand, which excuses repressive state policies and promotes the exclusion of populations.

The third framework, State Identity Politics, deals with national identities built on dominant sectarian norms. The Shia Theological School has become part of state identity in Iran, marginalizing Sunni citizens. In turn, Sunni states confuse national belonging in terms of Sunni orthodoxy and interpret Shia calls to equity as subversive actions.

Sectarian marginalization is combined with regional rivalries around the region that are primarily based on the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the area. This geopolitical rivalry usually appears as proxy discourses that escalate domestic sectarianism. Such a comprehension of the Sunni and Shia minorities presupposes the examination of the ways of exclusion engineering imposed by the states to safeguard regime benefits and influence national unity.

3. Methodology

In this paper, the author will use a qualitative comparative case study to discuss the treatment of Sunni and Shia minorities in four central states in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain. The methodology aims to unearth tendencies of political exclusion, legal discrimination, and sectarian bias enshrined in state structures.

1. Research Design

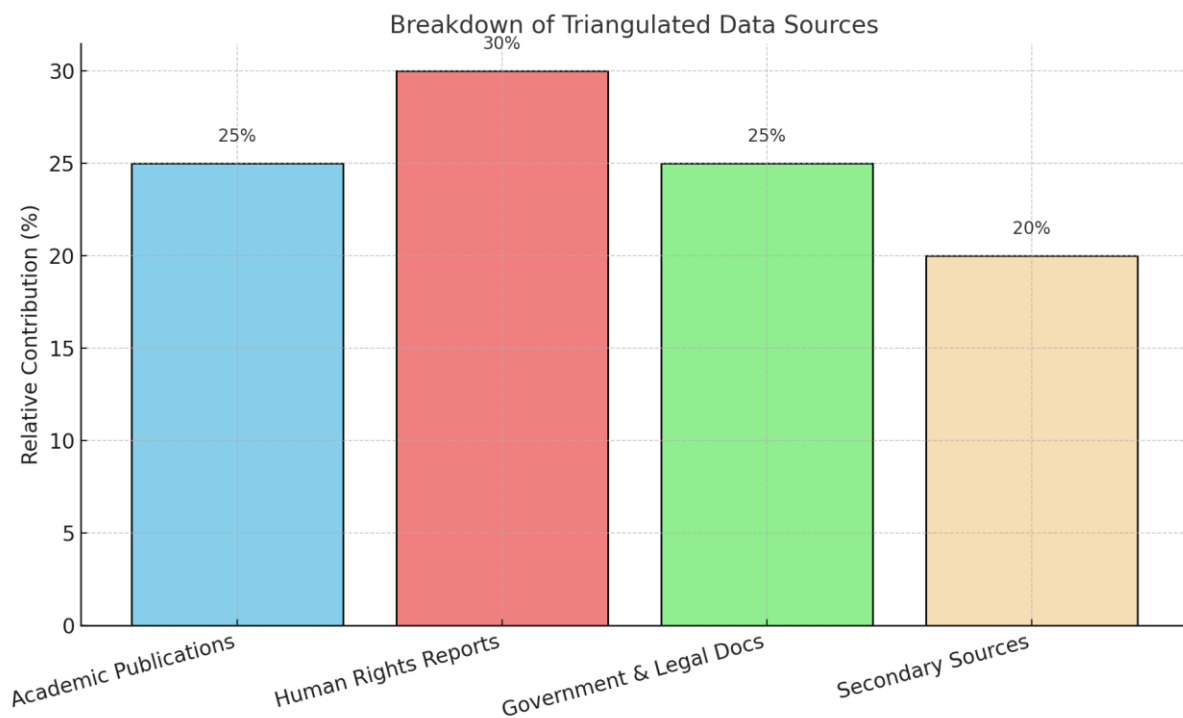
A comparative case study allows us to finely investigate the varied outbursts of identical sectarian dynamics based on the different state ideologies, the regime's character, and the region's geopolitics. The selected countries are Shia-dominated nations as well as Sunni-dominated nations, thus making it possible to compare the minority status reciprocally.

2. Data Sources

The analysis draws on triangulated data from:

- **Peer-reviewed academic publications** that offer theoretical, factual, and empirical insights on sectarian dynamics;
- **Reports by leading human rights organizations**, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, document patterns and trends in discrimination and abuse.
- **Government and legal documents** related to minority rights, citizenship laws, and freedom of religious and faith practice, providing an official policy perspective; and

- **Secondary sources**, including investigative journalism and authoritative encyclopedic entries, offer contextual and real-time accounts of the relevant developments.



3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data is systematically collected and coded for themes including:

- Legal discrimination (e.g., denial of mosque permits, exclusion from the judiciary)
- Political marginalization (e.g., lack of cabinet representation)
- Social repression (e.g., surveillance, destruction of religious infrastructure)

Thematic content analysis is employed to identify recurring patterns of sectarian exclusion. Within-case and cross-sectional analyses are conducted to compare the treatment of minorities under different sectarian regimes.

4. Ethical Considerations

Given the political sensitivity of sectarian issues, the study avoids primary interviews in conflict zones and relies on secondary data that have been ethically sourced and verified.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a multidimensional theoretical framework that integrates sectarianization theory, securitization theory, and state identity politics to explain how sectarian affiliations are politicized and institutionalized across Middle Eastern states.

Theoretical Framework

1. Whorarguetion Theory

This study's key idea is the sectarianization introduced by Hashemi and Postel (2017), which states that sectarian divisions are not some ancient inevitables but a modern political creation. In this theory, it is believed that the ruling elites instrumentally deploy sectarian identities to entrench power, turn aside dissent, and construct myths of legitimacy. Sectarian identity becomes a tool to exclude "others" from full citizenship

rights, particularly when minority groups are associated with external enemies (e.g., Shias with Iran in Saudi Arabia; Sunnis with ISIS in Iraq).

2. Securitization Theory

Securitization, developed by the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al., 1998), provides an explanatory lens for how states frame religious minorities as existential threats to national security. This theory posits that when political leaders label a group as a security concern, extraordinary measures—such as surveillance, detention, or exclusion—become normalized. This is evident in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, where Shia minorities are depicted as proxies of Iranian expansionism and thus are systematically repressed.

3. State Identity Politics

State identity politics theory (Hall, 1999) suggests that regimes often construct a dominant national identity around majority religious or ethnic affiliations, using it to define the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. In Iran, the state is explicitly defined through Twelver Shiism, marginalizing Sunni populations. In Sunni monarchies, national identity is closely tied to Sunni orthodoxy, reinforcing the subordinate status of Shia citizens.

Synthesis

This paper demonstrates that sectarian discrimination cannot be attributed only to ancient intergroup hate. Instead, it occurs because the state is a primary molder of identity, power source, and security arbiter. Combining all three frameworks gives the study a better perspective on why and how this discrimination is produced.

This theoretical triangulation allows for a deeper understanding of how sectarian identities are weaponized to maintain hegemony and suppress political pluralism in the Middle East.

5. Findings

The comparative investigation across Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain identifies four interrelated patterns in the treatment of Sunni and Shia minorities: legal exclusion, political marginalization, religious repression, and security-based stigmatization. These states are diverse in terms of regime type and sectarian affiliation. However, all of them exhibit the structural forces that govern the sectarian minorities through the practices of exclusion.

1. Legal Exclusion

The sectarian bias is institutionalized in the state through legal codes and bureaucratic practices in Saudi Arabia. Shia citizens are not usually given judgeship appointments, and they are not allowed to teach religion in schools. The state's official Hanbali interpretation of Islam delegitimizes Shia doctrine, branding it as deviant or even apostate (Neo, 2020). In Iran, Sunnis, mainly Kurds and Baluchis, face systematic hindrances regarding the building of mosques, access to religious education, and career progression as clerics. The Iranian constitution grants Sunnis their rights theoretically, whereas the practice is unequal and can be interpreted according to the theology of Shia (Washington Institute, 2022).

2. Political Marginalization

Bahrain's Sunni monarchy has institutionalized the exclusion of its Shia majority. Despite Shias comprising nearly 70% of the population, electoral gerrymandering and disqualification of Shia candidates ensure Sunni dominance in parliament and the military (Louër, 2013). In Iraq, following the U.S. invasion and the fall of

Saddam Hussein, Shia political dominance marginalized Sunni Arabs. Many Sunnis were barred from the security forces under de-Baathification laws and were often profiled as insurgents or extremists, fueling grievances and rebellion (Dodge, 2018).

3. Religious Repression

In Bahrain, the 2011 uprising led to severe repression, including the destruction of more than 40 Shia mosques and religious sites. These actions were not only forms of punishment but also symbolic efforts to suppress Shia identity in public spaces. I(Türkmen, 2021) (Kasri & Ramli, 2019) .In Iran, Sunni Muslims face similar restrictions. In many cities, they are not allowed to hold Friday prayers freely. Sunni religious leaders often experience government monitoring, harassment, and even detention, especially when they speak out against unfair treatment by the authorities (Türkmen, 2021; Nasution et al., 2023).

4. Security-Based Stigmatization

Sectarian minorities are frequently cast as internal threats tied to foreign enemies. In Saudi Arabia, Shia activism is portrayed as a proxy of Iranian expansionism, justifying mass arrests and military crackdowns in the Eastern Province (Legrenzi, 2014). In Iraq, the Sunni population has been subjected to collective suspicion due to its perceived association with the Baathist regime or jihadist groups like ISIS. These narratives legitimize curfews, checkpoints, and arbitrary detentions, further alienating Sunni communities (Haddad, 2014).

Summary Insight

Despite the differences in context, both regimes have made use of sectarian identity as a political technology to control a flexible regime to address all forms of dissent, determine national identity, and justify exclusion. Whether through open legal restrictions or symbolic violence, sectarian minorities are made to be the other of their states.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study affirm the utility of sectarianization theory, securitization theory, and state identity politics in explaining the strategic marginalization of sectarian minorities in the Middle East. Across Saudi Arabia, Iran, Bahrain, and Iraq, sectarian identity is not merely a cultural artifact—it is politically instrumentalized to uphold regime legitimacy, suppress dissent, and reinforce dominant ideological narratives.

1. Sectarianization in Practice

The evidence supports Hashemi and Postel's (2017) argument that sectarian conflict is not inherent but manufactured through top-down political processes. The case of the Shia citizens in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia is not excluded based on their unchangeable theological divergences, but due to the politically constructed subversive nature of their identity. This solidifies a two-narrative: the loyal Sunni citizen and the unloyal Shia menace. This reasoning is inverted in Iran, where the Sunni community is portrayed as a possible fifth column connected to foreign Salafi or Wahhabi thought.

2. Securitization and Threat Construction

Securitization theory provides a critical lens for understanding how states justify exceptional measures against minorities. In all four cases, regimes have cast sectarian minorities as existential threats, enabling coercive actions beyond usual legal constraints (Buzan et al., 1998). This is notably in the case of Saudi Arabia, which has framed the Shia protest movement as an actual Iranian plot and is monitoring Sunni majority towns as possible insurgent hotbeds. With these securitized discourses, actual socio-economic grievances are concealed, and state violence is justified.

3. State Identity and the Politics of Exclusion

Using Hall's (1999) concept of state identity politics, the findings show that each regime defines "national belonging" in sectarian terms. In Saudi Arabia, Sunni-Wahhabi identity is the ideological cornerstone of the state, rendering Shias semi-citizens. Bahrain similarly fuses the Sunni monarchy with national identity, excluding Shias from the military and government. In Iran, Twelver Shiism is not only the state religion but also the state identity, marginalizing Sunnis from the public sphere. Iraq illustrates how the inverse can also function, where a formerly dominant Sunni identity is now seen as a threat to Shia-majority rule.

4. Transnational Dynamics and Proxy Narratives

Similarly, although Shias are the majority in Bahrain, the country is ruled by a Sunni monarchy. The government has passed rules limiting Shia's rights to participate in public life. (Ali et al., 2020) (Majeed et al., 2021) (Zalnieriute et al., 2019) For example, Shia religious leaders are not allowed to give Friday sermons, and many Shias are removed from important government and military jobs. This shows a pattern of unfair treatment, similar to apartheid. During the 2011 uprising, over 40 Shia religious sites were destroyed, showing how deeply rooted the discrimination is. (Louër, 2013)

Interpretive Insight

A sectarian culture of statecraft turns local, whereby a minority position is no longer addressed under the values of democracy, and through incorporation into the pluralist society, but rather through regime royalty, danger, threat calculations. These tendencies are mostly quite similar in various political regimes, whether they belong to a monarchy, a theocracy, or even young democracies, and that informs us that sectarianism has nothing to do with religion, but rather everything to do with politics.

7. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the treatment of Sunni and Shia minorities in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain highlights one crucial point: sectarian identity is not a fixed religious separator, but a flexible political instrument, which is defined by state politics, historic grudges, and local competitions. Whether the minority is Sunni or Shia, the pattern is consistent—marginalization is state-structured, identity-based, and reinforced through legal, institutional, and symbolic means.

In Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Shia citizens are systematically excluded from full participation in political and civic life. Their religion is restricted, their political allegiance is suspected, and their identities are viewed through the securitized perspective that equates them with Iran. These narratives are what the state uses to

legitimize surveillance, legal discrimination, and symbolic erasure, including mosque destruction and clerical silencing.

In contrast, Iran and Iraq reflect the reverse logic. In Iran, the Sunni minority—especially among ethnic groups like the Baluch and Kurds— is constrained by both ideological rigidity and national security paranoia. Their marginalization reveals how even states governed by religious minorities can replicate the logic of exclusion. In post-2003 Iraq, the displacement of Sunni political dominance gave rise to Shia-majority rule, yet this transition did not usher in pluralistic governance. This paper applies sectarianization theory to show that Sunnis were purged from the civil service and securitized as potential insurgents.

This paper applies sectarianization theory to show that political elites actively construct and deploy sectarian identity to protect the state. Securitization theory explains how these identities are framed as security threats, legitimizing extraordinary measures. State identity politics highlights how national belonging is built around dominant sectarian norms that exclude "others" from full citizenship.

These insights point to a broader phenomenon of sectarian statecraft—a governance model where exclusion is encoded into national identity, and sectarian difference is weaponized for political ends. Addressing sectarianism in the Middle than interfaith dialogu national identities; it demands institutional rThe following policy strategies are proposed toorm, narrative reengineering, and a reimagining of national identities that are inclusive and pluralistinstitutionalized sectarian marginaliza of Sunni and Shia minorities in the Middle East, the following policy strategies are proposed.

1. Constitutional and Legal Reform

Governments ought to alter constitutions and laws to eliminate sectarian and unjust regulations. For example, ensuring that religion is not required in courts or government employment would give all groups equal opportunities.

2. De-Sectarianization of Public Institutions

The most important state institutions, such as the judiciary, military, education, and media, were secularized. This includes:

- Designing merit-based hiring quotas free from sectarian bias
- Observation of hate speech in textbooks and sermons.
- Having equal representation in the judiciary and the parliament

3. Protection of Religious Rights

The states should ensure that they allow freedom of worship, building of religious places, and autonomy of clergy to all sectarian groups. They should also establish independent religious councils, which must have inter-sect representation to mediate disputes and embrace inclusivity.

4. End to Securitization of Sectarian Identity

Security policies should decouple religious identity from state surveillance and policing. Minority groups should not be profiled based on presumed foreign allegiances. Independent human rights commissions should review and investigate violations tied to religion. To mitigate proxy dynamics, confidence-building

5. Regional De-Escalation and Dialogue

Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry continues to inflame domestic sectarian tensions. Confidence as cross-border clerical exchanges, joint security pacts, and regional truth commissions should be pursued to mitigate proxy dynamics.

6. Inclusive National Narratives

Education and media campaigns should actively challenge sectarian Sunni and Shia contributions to state-building and respect diversity. National history curricula must include balanced narratives of Sunni and Shia state-building contributions.

This research highlights that sectarian identity in the Middle East is not just a leftover from religious divisions but a politically engineered concept, deliberately used by ruling elites to retain power, suppress opposition, and mold national identity. By applying the combined perspectives of sectarianization theory, securitization theory, and state identity politics, the study demonstrates that both Sunni and Shia minorities face systemic exclusion and marginalization, irrespective of whether they are numerical majorities or minorities in their respective countries. These identities are not only politicized but also portrayed as security threats, which justifies oppressive actions and denies them full citizenship and civic engagement. (Ilbiz & Kaunert, 2023) (Haddad, 2017)

The study calls for dismantling this model of sectarian governance to progress towards inclusive governance. It suggests structural reforms such as constitutional de-sectarianization, safeguarding religious rights, ending profiling based on religious identity, and developing inclusive national narratives. The study emphasizes that real change must extend beyond interfaith dialogue and symbolic actions; it requires profound institutional transformation and reimagining citizenship based on equality and pluralism. Only through such comprehensive efforts can the Middle East overcome its sectarian divisions and establish stable, inclusive states. (Aldoughli, 2023) (Dodge & Mansour, 2020) (Hashemi & Postel, 2017)

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