

Saudi-Iran Rivalry and Conflict Management- Implying Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) Inter- Muslim Political Conciliation Policies in 21st Century

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KEYWORDS:

CONFLICT;
MUSLIM SECTS;
RELIGIOUS
TOLERANCE;
SAUDI-IRAN; SHIA;
SUNNI;



Date of Publication:
31-12-2020

ABSTRACT

Despite standing on strong identical religious beliefs, political estrangement of two major Muslim sects i.e., Sunni and Shia, has been affecting collective Islamic political causes since many centuries. In global world, unanimous and united Muslim representation is crucial for Islamic voice to be heard and valued internationally. Colliding interests and opposing alliances of the two representative states; Saudi Arab and Iran have brought many bloodshed wars and intellectual deprivations within Muslim world. Contemporary Iranian associations with India and Saudi dependency on America and Europe have become threatening for geopolitical situations of Asia. To resolve political differences between the two States, Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) inter-Muslim conciliation policies can provide durable solutions in realms of politics and religious tolerance.

Introduction

There have been aroused wars and conflicts having numerous reasons, such as political, geographical, economic, ethnical, sectarian and getting domination over others. Inter-religious or inter-sectarian wars have a long history. In such type of wars reasons and objectives may be the same as of the common wars. Inter Muslim conflicts and wars between and among many countries such as Syria, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Qatar, Turkey, Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan etc. are burning for the last many decades. These wars and conflicts within the various dominations of Islam resulted in dire consequences of diverse types of losses.

Many political analysts consider sectarianism as root cause of Saudi-Iran rivalry. Both representative States proclaimed themselves to be actual "Islamic State" by considering their societies, polities, regimes, and normative cultural values standing on divine code of law. Famous socio-political analyst, Professor Hussain Nasr recognized Shia-Sunni factions as reformations within the religion, not the defection. To him, both sects are integral part of Islamic law and its interpretation because both are united on fundamentals of faith; the holy Quran, sayings of Prophet Muhammad PBUH, and eschatology. Unlike schism of Judaism and Christianity, the diversity created by Shia-Sunni schools of thought embrace variety of Islamic social and spiritual dimensions¹. For centuries, Muslims of both sects coexist in provinces of central importance which overlap each other geographically in regions from North Africa to Southeast Asia². The competitiveness of two ideologies; resulted in competitiveness, between two states got severe after fall of Pahlavi dynasty and Iranian Revolution 1979.

In the present paper, the present situation of Inter-Muslim wars with special context of Saudi-Iran conflict in 21st century would by

analyzed. Moreover its resolution in the light of Quranic and Prophetic model will also be discussed.

Discussion An Insight into Religious and Political Context of Saudi-Iran Rivalry

The ingredients of Iranian revolutionary version of Islamisation included clerical rule, empowerment of *Ulema*, supremacy of Islamic jurisprudence (*Wilayat-e faqih*) and *Shia Mujtahids* which were added to formulate Islamic revivalism and leadership of Iran throughout Muslim world³. The new foreign policy focused on anti-American and anti-Israel agenda. At first Saudi-Iran foreign relations remained friendly⁴ until Iran targeted Saudi Arab by considering it merely an extension of American influence. To outline single Muslim authority it became essential for Iran to overcome centre of Sunni representative State thus it was claimed that Saudi government is illegitimate and non-Islamic⁵. Such offensive policy was dismissed even by Islamist movements like *Ikhwan Al-Muslimun* which once congratulate *Khomeini* for his successful Islamic revolution. As both States knew well that demonstrating hard power wouldn't be sufficient to claim supremacy for either of the States thus they began to promote sectarianism with more profound identities⁶.

Being custodian of two holy sites, host of pilgrimage, and with provision of material resources Saudi Arab continues to propagate Islam throughout Muslim World, Europe and North America⁷. Demonstration of such soft power strategy solidified Saudi politics⁸ and charity institutions like *Rabita Alam-e-Islami* accelerated Saudi ideological expansions⁹.

To counter possible Iranian ideological influence and its geopolitical interests in Middle East, Saudi Arab and its alliances including, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt and other smaller gulf states provided Ba'athist regime of Iraq with advanced weapons and heavy financial support during Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) despite of their own issues with Saddam government¹⁰. Also, by establishing GCC (Gulf

Cooperation Council) Saudi Arab and GCC member states incorporated the West to stable the Saudi position in the region.¹¹

On the other end, Iran kept on supporting military movements like *Hizbullah* and *Hamas*. Moreover, Hafez al- Assad's inclination towards *Alawite* minority and campaigns against Sunni majority brought Syria and Iran closer¹². Collective geopolitical interests of Iran and Syria, i.e. policies against Zionism and Western imperialism and desires of supremacy on Muslim World, facilitated them to build strong political relationships by means of cultural agreements¹³. During Iran-Iraq War, Syria emerged as strong ally of Iran through which Iran attained access to Shia community of Lebanon for arming them against Israel in form of a militant movement, *Hizbullah*.

The divergence between foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and Iran were also demonstrated in Soviet-Afghan battlefield. Despite Khomeini's estrangement with USA and multiple domestic and international issues, Iran demanded Russia's immediate withdrawal. However, to counterbalance America's influence, for coping with Pakistan-Saudi-USA axis in Afghanistan and prevailing its revisionist ideology against Saudi Arabia, Iran continued its relations with Soviet Union and also supported *Hazara Shiate* minority of Afghanistan¹⁴. Saudi Arabia backed Islamic movements like *Hizb-e-Islami*, *Pashtun Mujahideen* etc. in Afghanistan. In 1996 when Pashtun group, *Taliban*, descended Rabbani from presidency, Iran launched *Uzbek*, *Hazara*, and *Tajik* armed people as anti-*Taliban* coalition who were defeated by Pak-Saudi alliance with *Taliban* in 1998 after fall of their central town, Mazar Sharif.¹⁵

New Century and New Battlefields: Saudi-Iran Schism in Scenario of 21st Century

Sectarianism has potential to influence regional and global loyalties and affiliations¹⁶. The scenario of post 9/11 consequences is important to be analyzed. In beginning of 21st century, USA invaded Iraq

which provided Saudi Arab and Iran with another proxy-war battlefield. To counterbalance decades long Sunni political influence, America inclined towards Shias for formation of new regime¹⁷. While availing the opportunity Iran invested about 8 billion dollars per annum in trade with Iraq moreover, funded Shia military groups like *Sadar Mehdi Army*, *Asaib-ul-Haq*, *Kataeb Hizbullah*, and IRGC Quds force¹⁸. On the other hand, Saudi Arab provided financial and political support Dr Ayaz Alwai's campaign and tribal leaders of "awakening movement"¹⁹. Perceiving the formation of Pro-Iran predominant Government, Saudi Arab refuted the restoration of its embassy in Baghdad²⁰. In July 2015, USA and other prominent powers negotiated nuclear deal with Iran. For sake of bridging gap, Saudi Arab announced its own nuclear program to deter Iranian Nuclear programme.²¹

Yemen and Saudi Arabia share a 700 miles penetrable border which is often used by criminals and insurgents²². To ensure their authority in Yemen turf, Iran backs Houthis (*Ansar Allah*), a fraction of Zaidi Sect, whereas Saudi Arabia supports Yemeni Government. In 2003 a separated group of *Ansar Allah* (supporters of Allah) radicalized themselves and armed eruption was raised against the government in 2004 which ended in a cease fire agreement of 2010. Saudi Arabia and Saleh Government accused Iran for arming Houthis with weapons and ideological lectures which were often delivered by Hassan Nasrullah of *Hizbullah*²³. Thus, with permission of local government, Saudi Arab launched heavy air strikes and artillery to destroy centers of Houthis²⁴. Again, in September 2014, Houthis forces intervened Yemen's capital San'a and withdrew with another ineffective peace agreement (Peace and National Partnership Agreement). Deterioration of cease fire led towards resignation of President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi in January 2015. Reports say that there are main causes by which *Huthis* became successful in their military objectives; demand of reforms against corruption, their own presentation

as eligible politicians against old failed elites, and collapse of the Yemeni military institution²⁵.

Attitudes of sabotaging each other in proxy wars by destroying regions of Muslim World and weakening the Muslim opponent in its International military and foreign strategies overall damaged the Muslim strength, brotherhood, and collective noble causes. Confrontation of both crucial States and their support to rivalry forces; Iranian favored *Hizbullah* and Saudi favored local Government, bought nothing but “political, sectarian and security turmoil in Lebanon”.²⁶

Suggestion and Implementation of Prophetic Model PBUH

This rivalry situation between the two Muslim states has not ended and is exceeding with the passage of time. Some Muslim states like Turkey and Pakistan try to calm down the situation and play their role as moderator.

Unity of culture and practicing guidelines provided by Quran can minimize the potential of conflict. When a conflict occurs, resolution is not taken for the favor of any party because one party has a potential place or authority in community. It refers to first to Quran, as stated in Surah Al-Nisa:59; Surah Al-Shurah:10 and Surah Al-Nisa:83 as follows:

And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger...

And in anything over which you disagree, its rulings are to be referred to Allah

But if they had referred it back to the Messenger or to those of authority among them, then the ones who can draw correct conclusions from it...

Islam provides a clear and consistent roadmap to help them get back to the track.

In *Surah Al-Hujrāt*, it is said that “If two groups of the believers fight each other, seek reconciliation between them. And if one of them commits aggression against the other, fight the one that commits

aggression until it comes back to *Allah*'s command. So, if it comes back, seek reconciliation between them with fairness, and maintain justice. Surely *Allah* loves those who maintain justice”²⁷

According to the commentators of the Qur'an, it is compulsory for common Muslims to bring about an understanding between the Muslim groups and try to stop the mutual fighting. All enmity and hostilities will thus cease, and an atmosphere of brotherhood may prevail for all times to come. Since these people have fought against the Muslim ruler, it was possible that they would not be treated by him equitably. Therefore, the Qur'an lays stress on setting things right between them equitably and justly, so that the rights of no one are violated²⁸

Muftī Muhammad Shāf'ī, a renowned scholar of sub-continent and commentator of the Quran, has stated a number of rulings, while explaining the Qur'ānic verse *Al-Hujrāt:9*. According to him:

1. If a very powerful group of Muslims revolts against the Muslim ruler, then it is necessary for the ruler to first hear out their complaint or cause of their dissatisfaction. If a doubt or a misunderstanding has arisen in their mind about some matter, it should be removed. If they show such cause on the basis of which it is permissible in *Shari'ah* to oppose a Muslim leader or ruler, like unjust behavior on the part of the government, it is essential for the general body of Muslims to assist the group, so that the leader or ruler may refrain from his tyranny, provided that his tyranny is proved beyond any shadow of doubt. If they cannot show any clearly legitimate reason for their dissatisfaction, revolt, disobedience, and waging war against the Muslim ruler, it is permitted for Muslims to wage war against the rebels. *Imām Shāf'ī* held that the Muslims should not initiate fight against the rebels unless they first start the fight. This law applies when it is positively and unquestionably clear that the group is rebellious.
2. However, if it is difficult to determine which group is rebellious and which is just, because each party has a valid *Shari* argument to justify its

course of action, then the pros and cons of both parties may be weighed to determine the party that is "just" on the principle of probability.

3. If the juristic argument of one party seems to someone more convincing, it is permitted for him to assist such a group. If someone cannot prefer the standpoint of any one of them, he should remain neutral, as it happened in the civil wars of the Battle of Camel and the Battle of *Ṣiffeīn* when many noble Companions remained aloof.

The ayah explains that if previous personal remedies do not work, conflict may escalate and lead to the worst results, that's why intervention from external parties must take place to stop the situation from escalation. The interference work gradually by first starting a reconciliation process using referential or charismatic power to smooth the situation between the conflicted parties, to relieve the congestion and motivate for better communication until reconciliation achieved. Keeping in mind that any oppressive reconciliation is not accepted in Islam as the same ayah indicates "make settlement between them in justice and act justly."

If intervention do not work and, and one party unfairly overwhelmed by the other, the invader party must be forced coercively to retreat from their aggression. Forcing the invader party to retreat is not the final step because hard feelings, emotional scars, and negative attitude may come again in the future in worse forms. That's why Quran directs to attach this stage with another reconciliation stage to spread understanding and to emphasize reached results.

The Qur'an constantly uses the word *Sulha* in resolving all types of conflicts. It means seeking peace, reconciliation, compromise and settlement.

As such, during the early Islamic history Muslim jurists developed a number of legal structures and institutions, using a variety of techniques to resolve conflicts amicably, and achieve peace. Among these are the following:

1. Appointment of a Justice of Peace (*Qadi as Sulh*) to oversee the processes of mediation, arbitration, and reconciliation to achieve settlement and peace.
2. Parties in conflict have the option of resolving their dispute through a *Wasta* or third-party mediator who would ensure that all parties were satisfied with the outcome.
3. Other practices could use *tahkeem* or using intermediaries to represent the parties. These intermediaries should be able to represent the parties' position as clearly as possible to negotiate on their behalf and guarantee that the parties receive a fair settlement.

These procedures and relevant structures need be revived and further developed utilizing all possible modern techniques. It is worth mentioning that within Islamic societies there exists a great diversity of traditions, cultures, and opinions that could be used to enrich the possibilities for pursuing peace-building efforts and resolving all existing conflicts.

Lessons can be learned from the exemplary conduct of the Prophet... who was a politically righteous person with highest moral and ethical values. To this day, Muslims use the Prophet's advisement on resolving conflict. Although the *Quran* states that the Prophet had "to be a judge in all disputes". So, it means that Muslims now seeking his advice and judgement on various matters while looking into his *sunnah* and the *shariah*. He was a man of compassion who felt deeply troubled for his fallen society. As for his early peaceful character and dealings with situations of conflict and conflict resolution, historical accounts describe Muhammad as having always been trusted by the people, as a mediator between two conflicting parties in his hometown, Makkah. Prophet's famous fair decision of placing the Black stone on his place in his life at Makkah that stopped the fighting between the tribes.

The Prophet was invited from the people of Yathrib and he straightened the affairs of the city and established peace in the disunited tribes. The people of Madinah (the city of Prophet) gave their pledge of allegiance to the Prophet, and the Prophet established the first seat of Islamic governance.

The Prophet's instruction: "Shall I inform you of a better act than fasting, alms and prayers? Make peace between one another: enmity and malice tear up heavenly rewards by roots". The holy Prophet was a man of great character with a forgiving and merciful nature, always in pursuit of peace, which is why the Quran refers to him as "a mercy to the worlds."²⁹

Having a good character is easier to resolve conflict and make peace, and according to Muslim thought, the Prophet had the best character, so he is seen the peacemaker in Muslim tradition.

Forgiveness is an important factor in building peace and reconciliation among people. Forgiveness is to forsake revenge when one is capable of exacting revenge. War was the Prophet's last resort and he did fight when he was left with no other option. During his life time he made a number of peace treaties with the Makkan pagans, neighboring Christians, Jews of Madinah and many Arab tribes. Significantly, he never broke treaty made with his neighbors or enemies, knowing that Islam strictly forbids the breaking of any agreement or covenant.³⁰

It should be kept in consideration that the Quranic directives and Prophetic samples mentioned above relates to a situation when there is a central power of the Muslims which has the authority to intervene between two such factions or groups. In this age, the complex situation has arisen that many small and large Muslim states have been set up. So, practical intervention depends on the situation which relates to the practical needs of the time. If the situation allows, use of force against the transgressing faction to make it submit to the truth will be totally justified. But if this is liable to cause further complexities in the international situation, then

practical intervention should be abstained from; however, there can be no abstention from the efforts to make the two reconcile through diplomatic means.

Conclusions:

It can be concluded that using sectarianism as a tool for political influences and ideology is worse in results. The afore-mentioned conflict resulted in destruction and killing of thousands of Muslims. The rival groups can be united on non-harming the Muslims and propagation of their ideologies through one channel in each target country not people. Other Muslims should not remain indifferent to this state of affairs and should not think that this matter does not concern them. Similarly, it is improper to support a group merely on the basis of familial or tribal bias without finding out which of the two is right. They must support the group which in their opinion is right, and, in no way, let biases from the basis of their support or otherwise. They must try to fully comprehend the situation, and then try to reconcile the two groups.

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